

## Londoner 231

### Chapter 231 Papermaking - Part I

Kivamus nodded and took the frame in his hands, looking at it from all sides. Truthfully, while its quality was far from what could be made on modern earth, he wasn't expecting even this quality from a completely handmade frame of mould and mesh. "This will work well enough."

Putting the frame down on the table, he looked at the carpenter. "Come back here tomorrow evening so you can nail the rest of the meshes on the remaining frames. Cedoron should be able to make most of the meshes by then. For the rest of your time, you should keep working on the third crossbow."

Darora gave a nod. "As you wish. In that case I'll take my leave now so I can get some more work done before it gets dark."

"I should go as well," Cedoron said. "I think I should be able to finish another mesh by sunset."

"Alright," Kivamus nodded and waved them away. "Duvass, let's go and see how other things are going."

The majordomo nodded, and they started walking to the eastern gate of the manor while passing near the training grounds in the southeast of the manor. Once they reached closer they saw the guard captain engaged in a mock fight with two guards at the same time. They waited for a while for them to finish the fight - which basically meant seeing Hudan beating up the two guards while they tried to defend futilely - before Kivamus beckoned him over when the two guards yielded.

Hudan jogged towards them, and Kivamus told him to bring a couple of more guards with him. Once he and Duvass were accompanied by the guard captain and two more guards, they exited the eastern gates of the manor and saw the village walls around a hundred meters away from them. However, they didn't need to walk that far. Nearly halfway there, he saw two sites where servants were engaged in work, so they started walking towards them. This content was first released on MV\_LEMPYR.

Reaching closer to the first site, he saw that there was a servant keeping an eye on a ceramic pot that had a small hole on the bottom side as well. They had taken this pot from the kitchen and made a small hole on the bottom side and tied a thick cloth on it. Using a makeshift stand from three wooden sticks, that pot had been suspended above another normal pot, and then the double sided pot was filled around halfway with wood ashes, before pouring some hot water in it to completely cover the ashes.

The water had slowly passed through the ashes and started coming out from the bottom of the double sided pot through the cloth tied on it, before it had started to collect in the normal pot on the bottom.

It had taken until the afternoon for all the water to pass through the ashes from the double sided pot, and as it passed through the ashes, it collected the lye, which meant the water flowing from the fabric had collected some of the lye in it, but the ashes were prevented by the cloth from passing through it. Eventually, a servant had reported to him in the afternoon that the bottom pot had collected all the water that had dripped, so he had told them to take the bottom pot which had collected the mixture of water and lye, and dump it through the double sided pot again, this time going through a fresh pile of ashes. This way, that same water would get a higher concentration of lye, since it would collect even more lye from the new batch of ashes.

Right now it seemed like the water had again stopped dripping from the double sided pot, so he ordered the servants to repeat the process once again. Giving a nod, the servant emptied the double sided pot of the used ashes and put a fresh batch of ashes in it from an earthen container nearby, and hung the pot in that makeshift stand of the wooden sticks. Then he took the pot from the bottom, and poured all of the liquid it had into the double sided pot, before quickly putting it on the bottom again so it could start collecting the mixture of water and lye.

Once that was done, the servant checked the other similar arrangements nearby, where more such double sided pots having ash and water in it, were dripping into other containers on the bottom.

Calling over the servant, he explained, "Leave these pots here overnight, since concentrating it three times will be more than enough for our purposes. Tomorrow morning we will pour all the water and lye mixture in a big container and boil it to get a stronger solution of lye. Make sure not to touch this lye even by mistake, since it will burn you severely." Once the servant nodded, he left him to keep an eye on the process, and moved to the second site.

Here, a servant was pouring hot water in a container which had a lot of animal hairs in it, while repeatedly agitating and compressing the mixture. That would cause the fibres to hook together and weave into a single piece of fabric, since every single hair had tiny scales, and heat, motion and moisture caused the scales to open, while agitating the mixture caused them to latch onto each other, creating felt.

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Close to him, another servant had taken a container which had the process already complete, and after pouring out the water, he had wrapped the resulting mixture over a burlap cloth which was itself wrapped around a branch, before being covered by another piece of burlap cloth tied around it. This would make it easier for the fibres to settle and dry, and would speed up the felting process.

Waiting until both of the servants were free, he called them over. "It seems to be going well. Leave the felt wrapped overnight, and by tomorrow we should be able to take out the newly created felt."

"Of course, milord," the servants nodded, before returning to their work.

"It still doesn't seem like we are close to making paper," Duvas commented. "Are you sure you have made paper in the past?"

Kivamus couldn't stop a laugh from coming out. "I never said that I had made paper myself, but I have read about the process in some books, and I know how it works. Don't worry, this is only the first part. We will come here tomorrow for the next step."

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It was late afternoon of the next day and Kivamus was visiting the east of the manor once again, along with Duvas, Hudan and a few other guards. Truthfully, the paper simply couldn't be made in a good quality until they had the trip hammer ready, but he had already started the papermaking process, and he wanted to see it to completion, even if the final result left something to be desired. Once they had the trip hammer ready in the future, they would be able to do it at a larger scale, but for now manual power would still be able to make paper here.

Looking around, he saw that by this time they had a good amount of lye gathered in a big container, so they were ready for the next step. While the lye had already been concentrated by evaporating the water from the diluted mixture of lye and water in the morning, he had told the servants not to dry it completely - which would create crystals of lye - since then they would need to make a solution of it again anyway.

Nearby, in the empty space east of the manor, there were a few sheets of felt ready as well, which were hung on a piece of rope to dry more. The newly crafted wooden tub was also kept on one side, which

Darora had delivered earlier in the morning, along with a few wooden beaters. A servant had also brought a few loads of sawdust using a wheelbarrow, and dumped it on one side.

A few barrels of water were kept nearby for use where needed. By now most of the moulds and deckles were also ready with the wire mesh nailed on the mould frames. He had also ordered them to bring a couple of wooden benches here, since he knew that today's process would take some time, and they would need to take rest in the middle.

Finally, he looked at the small gathering of servants, guards as well as a few labourers from the village and clapped loudly. "Okay, let's begin! Now one of you, take a basket and start putting the sawdust in the big wooden tub. You," he pointed at another labourer, "bring some water and start filling the tub so the sawdust is barely submerged."

Once that was done, he told the labourers to use wooden sticks to start blending the mixture together so it would get into a more even consistency. The process took a while and the labourers looked tired by now, so he told them to get some rest.

"Now the fun part." he looked at Hudan and the guards. "Time to use your muscles. Pick up the beaters and start beating that slush."

"Uh..." Hudan frowned. "We are supposed to beat this... slurry of sawdust?"

"That's what I said," Kivamus grinned. "Consider it a new type of training until the labourers have rested a little."

Hudan looked at the other guards. "Well, come on lads! Let's show what we are made of!"

With that, the guards started beating the slurry enthusiastically, while one of them kept mixing the slurry once in a while. After more than an hour - where the guards took turns to rest and continue beating the slurry - Kivamus held up his hand. "Okay, that's enough for now." Immediately there were sighs of relief, and the guards stepped back, some of them sitting on the bench to rest.

Gesturing the servants to come over, he began, "Now drain the excess water from this mixture and put the remaining slurry into the cauldron. Then start a fire under it, and then pour some of the lye into it. Be careful that none of its splatters on any of you."

The servants carried out the order cautiously, and soon there were a few wooden branches burning under the cauldron, making the mixture start to boil. They continued to boil it for some time while stirring it once in a while, so the sawdust would get an even more uniform consistency, while the lye would make the wood fibres even more pliable.

After a while, when most of the water had evaporated, he decided that it was enough. "Okay, now remove the branches from the bottom of the cauldron, so this slurry can start cooling down." The servants carried out the order, while the rest of the people waited with anticipation.

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"Alright," Kivamus said after enough time had passed that the slurry had cooled down. "Now bring up the moulds and deckles here, and put them one above the other in pairs." The servants carried out the order immediately, with two of them being smaller sized moulds, and the other two being larger sized.

The majordomo was watching everything curiously, while also asking small questions once in a while. By now they had four such pairs ready - with the remaining two being promised to be completed by tomorrow by the blacksmith - with the mould including its attached mesh on the bottom, and the frame of the deckle kept on the top.

"Start pouring the slurry onto the frames, one by one." He explained, "The frame of the deckle will allow the pulp to stay in place while the water drains away."

The servants followed the order, and started pouring the slurry on the first pair of mould and deckle, before repeating the process on the other pairs. Once again there was a period of waiting, and then it looked like most of the water had drained off.

"Okay," he began. "Now bring the pieces of felt here." Two of the servants ran off to the felts hanging on a rope nearby, and soon returned with them.

He continued, "Now remove the deckle from the top, since it is no longer necessary to hold the slurry of wood pulp together, and flip that semi-solid sheet of mush onto the felts." The servants did as asked, and soon there were four pieces of felt on which a semi dry sheet of mush was kept. He ordered them to

cover it with another piece of felt - which was larger than the sheet of mush so that the mush would be pressed by the felt from both sides."

"Alright, our work here is done, so let's take these felts to the wood press machine in the south." The servants and guards picked up the felts which were covering the sheet of mush carefully, and they began walking around the manor walls to the south.

Soon they reached the south-eastern gates of the village, before they started walking towards the south. It still wasn't snowing, even though there was a layer of snow gathered on the ground. It was nearly evening now, and soon they saw the two labourers assigned to the wood press machine hard at work. Reaching there, Kivamus waited until the current batch of sawdust briquettes was ready, before he told them to stop.

He looked at the labourers. "Did Darora give you the second plank I asked him for?"

One of them nodded, and walked around the other side of the machine, and picked up a rectangular piece of thick wooden plank, which was exactly the same size as the upper surface of the wood press machine.

"Good," Kivamus nodded. "Now put the plank above the briquette molds on the stump." The labourer set it up carefully above the stump with the help of the other man, and soon the wood press machine had exactly the same types of plank as its newly installed base, as well as the upper plank which was already there and movable by screw.

"Let's put one of the felts here," he told the servants who had come with him. The servants put the pair of felts containing the smaller sized sheet of mush between them on the newly created base of the wood press machine. Finally he ordered the labourers to start turning the screw of the machine just as they always did. These men were curious about this new concept, but followed the order, and soon the screw began to lower the upper plank, before it reached the lower plank and started to press the sheets of felt between them with a groan.

Soon, he decided that it was enough, and told them to turn around the screw in reverse. "Okay, let's see what we have here." He walked to the machine himself after the upper plank was moved higher and picked up the top layer of felt, and gave it to a servant, before he got his first look at the first sheet of primitive paper created in Tiranat.

He gently removed the sheet of paper from the lower felt, and looked at it in the evening light of the late winter sun. It was quite a bit thicker than the fine quality of paper he was used to on earth, while its surface was still uneven and it was also a little wet, although that was to be expected. While the lye had bleached off some of the colours, there was still a mix and match of brownish yellow colours on the sheet. However, as soggy, rough and scratchy as it was right now, it was still paper!

"I don't believe it..." the majordomo muttered with wide eyes. "You really did it..."

Kivamus grinned and looked at him and Hudan who had been crowding around him in curiosity. Handing over the sheet of soggy paper to the majordomo, he looked at their faces. Duvas was looking at the sheet in his hands in wonder, while the guard captain's eyebrows seemed like they would vanish inside his hairline. The nearby servants, guards and the labourers were still looking at them in curiosity, probably not even realising how significant this newly manufactured stuff was, since none of them were literate and hadn't used or probably even seen paper in their lives.

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"This is really paper..." the majordomo mumbled. "Amazing..."

Hudan took the opportunity to touch the soggy paper as well, and while he was hardly literate, even he gave a huge grin. "I have never been interested in reading or writing, but looking at this paper, even I want to draw a few squiggles on it!"

Immediately, Kivamus and Duvas began to guffaw at that suggestion, with the guard captain joining them in the laughter. The nearby guards and servants were still looking at them in curiosity when suddenly, Hudan began to clap loudly, with the other others joining him. "All hail Lord Kivamus!"

The nearby servants and labourers repeated it a few times, before Kivamus raised a hand to stop them and looked at them. "Making paper is a really big deal, and it wouldn't have been possible without the hard work of you all. Let's have another round of cheers once again for you all as well!"

The labourers looked surprised for a moment, before they grinned, and this time there were even louder cheers and clapping, along with a few roars of Glory of Tiranat mixed in between.

It took a while for everyone to quiet down, before Kivamus looked at the servants. "Now let's repeat the process for the remaining three felts as well, and then we will take the papers to the manor so we can hang them on a rope overnight to dry."

Giving an enthusiastic nod, the servants followed out the order before the labourers who worked at the wood press repeated the process of turning the huge screw. Soon, the servants had four sheets of paper in their hands, two of them in small size and two in larger size, before they all began to return towards the manor along with the felt.

Kivamus looked at Duvas who seemed to be lost in thought. "What is it?"

The majordomo shook his head. "It's nothing, my lord. I was just thinking about what it would have been like if you hadn't arrived in this village a few months ago." He snorted, "Well, nothing good for sure, and I'd rather not imagine it. Anyway, I can't wait to show Gorsazo these papers. Being a teacher he would be the most enthusiastic about it, even though we only have just four sheets right now."

Kivamus nodded. "Today was only a trial run, and while it still turned out to be a success, it's true that it won't really be feasible to produce enough paper like this by hand. That's why I designed and ordered Darora to make the trip hammer in the future near the dam on the eastern stream. Today it took nearly a dozen people working all day to create just four sheets of this rough and uneven paper, but with the trip hammer we can perform the mixing process of the sawdust and wood pulp much faster, with only a single worker to keep an eye on it, while it can also be used to even out the paper sheet much faster and better before it is finalised in this press."

He continued, "Once the trip hammer is ready, we should easily be able to make a lot more paper, and more importantly it would be of a much better quality than this. Right now its texture is uneven, the colour is haphazard, and it is way too rough, but by using a trip hammer, many of those problems can be solved easily. Still, I think we should continue the current process at the current small scale until then."

Duvas nodded. "That's true. Once the dam and the trip hammer are ready, we might be able to improve both the quality and quantity even more, but having even this quality of paper produced in Tiranat is something I never imagined in my dreams. Our stack of empty parchments is nearly gone now, so you need a way to keep sketching your blueprints as well. So producing even this quality of paper will be helpful in that."

"That's certainly true," Kivamus nodded.

As they entered the south eastern gates, Duvas looked at him again. "I think once this paper is dry by tomorrow, we should give one of these sheets to Lucem and Clarisa since they are the only two kids living in the manor, so that they can squiggle whatever they want on it, and then we can keep it securely as a keepsake of the first time when paper was made in Tiranat. We can even hang it on a wall in the manor hall. While it would be far from the ornate paintings hung in the halls of the richer nobles, this is still an important event for our village, so it would be good to have a memory of this day."

"That's a very good idea," Kivamus agreed with a nod, while wishing they had a way to capture a photograph of this day. Well, he wasn't on earth anymore, so it was probably better to make do with the things available here.

He continued, "In that case, I think we should do the same for the remaining three sheets of paper as well. I will make a simple sketch of the paper making process on one sheet, while Sryne can use another one to draw a few leaves of losuvil as well as the final reddish powder on it. As for the last one, I think we can write the names of everyone who was present for the process today, including you, Hudan, as well as all the guards, servants and labourers. It might seem like a waste of precious paper today, but in the future, when Tiranat has grown and become much larger and prosperous, these will be our precious memories of the very early beginnings."

"That is very much true, my lord," Duvas agreed. "Just a few months ago, I would have laughed at anyone who went to say that Tiranat would grow and become prosperous in the future, but today, I have no doubt that you will make it come true somehow." He smiled while looking at him. "I'm glad the Duke sent you to our village, no matter the reasons behind it."

Kivamus smiled as well. "I would never have accepted that I would be happy to be here when I arrived in Tiranat, but right now, I'm glad that I am here!"

#### Chapter 233 Winter's Fading Breath

The next day in the evening Kivamus was standing inside the manor hall with the others, while looking at the newly framed pieces of paper which they had hung inside the hall on a wall. On one of the two smaller papers, Lucem and Clarisa had written their names in huge letters along with some sketches while trying to imitate him, since being children learning in school, they would be the ones to benefit the most from paper in the future. Lucem did have to use Clarisa's help to guide him, but Kivamus was happy that the children would hopefully have real paper to write in the future.

The second paper denoted leaves on a vine on one side and a powdery substance on the other. This had been drawn by Syryne, and she was more than glad to see her contribution being hailed openly. They had still decided not to write any name on that, just to maintain security of that process in the future.

In the third one, he had drawn a very basic diagram about the process of making this paper, while the fourth one had names of everyone who had contributed to it. Most of the servants and labourers still couldn't write yet, but Gorsazo had shown them how to write their names using the plank and charcoal which used to teach in the longhouse block, and they had just copied it. This way it was still written by their own hands, and the workers and the guards couldn't have been prouder.

With the paper so thick because they had made it without using a trip hammer, there was no real danger of it being torn easily. It would have been better if they could afford glass to secure it better, but the wooden frame around them which Darora had provided in the morning would have to do for now.

"This was a good idea," Gorsazo remarked while looking at the newly adorned wall. "I wonder what any visitors to the manor will think about it in the future."

Kivamus snorted. "As it stands, there is hardly any other noble in the kingdom who would want to visit our village."

Duvas nodded. "You are right, but no other noble would ever keep something portraying commoners or written by them in their own living place."

Kivamus laughed. "That was one of the reasons I did it! People are just people, whether they were born as a rich noble or a poor labourer. We are all the same in the end."

Duvas shook his head while looking at him. "You really have a very unorthodox way of looking at things which are taken for granted by everyone. Even though I was born in a noble's house, I have lived most of my life as a commoner after leaving my home, so I do understand your sentiment, and support it."

The outer door of the manor hall opened at that moment and Taniok walked inside along with Hudan.

"It is done, milord!" the bald carpenter reported with a proud smile. "I finally finished the south-western gate!"

"That's amazing, Taniok!" Kivamus praised, and looked at Duvas. "It is time to make the announcement then."

The majordomo nodded. "By chance, today is the day when we provide the weekly grain rations to the villagers, so I'll make the announcement at the same time that Tiranat is a fortified village now."

"This means I can finally give some much-needed rest to the guards," Hudan began, "and move their duties to an eight hour shift again by closing all three village gates in the nights. Still, we really need those watch towers soon, not to mention as many crossbows as we can get. The snow will start melting in a few weeks - including in the forests around the village - and that means it would become much easier for bandits to raid Tiranat. That's why we need to be ready to defend against them by then."

Kivamus grimaced thinking about it. Winter had basically isolated their small village, which meant they had been safe from any raids or greedy tax collectors, but it wouldn't be long before they would have to come out of their isolation, whether they wanted to or not. He looked at the carpenter. "How long will it take for you to make the barn for mushroom farming?"

Taniok shrugged. "Depends on how big you want to make the building. If it is going to be the same size as the barns inside the manor, it would take less than a week, since we have a big stock of logs ready for construction now, and the workers have good experience in this by now. You have already told me that you don't want to make any new buildings with planks - which would take much, much longer. Still, if you want to make this new barn the same size as the longhouse blocks, then it will take longer than making a smaller building."

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"I don't think there is really a need to make it as big as a longhouse block," Kivamus muttered. "Even so, I think it would be a good idea to make it a little larger than the barns, since we don't have any shortage of space in the south of the village. It should still be tall enough that we can make a second floor inside it, which will double the area which can be used for growing mushrooms. How long will that take?"

Taniok seemed to be thinking about it for a moment. "With the help of the wheelbarrows, the log-movers, and the groma for designing the size of the foundation, I can make the outer part of the building within a week. Adding a second floor..." he scratched his small beard. "Hmm... tell you what, if you give me enough workers, I can do that in another three to four days after making the building. That

means everything should be completed in around ten days." Your support at MV^LEMP^YR keeps the series going.

"It's slower than I wanted, but it will have to do, I guess," Kivamus commented. "Alright then. You should start on it tomorrow. Duvas will show you the location. Since there aren't going to be any people living inside, you don't need to worry about how the building looks from the outside. Just make sure that the building is sturdy enough."

"As you wish, milord," taniok nodded, before he took his leave and exited the hall.

"Ten days, huh..." Kivamus muttered as he and the other took seats near the fireplace. "We will have to put him on the construction of the watchtowers right after that." He looked at the majordomo. "How long do you think it will take before the surrounding areas are good enough to travel, especially the northern road?"

Duvas glanced at the windows which were still closed at the time. "This is a fairly normal winter, so I think after the mushroom barn is completed in ten days, we should have around one more week before the snow starts to melt, and at least another week before it has melted completely, although the nearby areas will still be muddy and difficult to travel for a while. So, perhaps around a month before we can expect the tax collector to come from the north."

"Along with any bandits who must be foaming at the mouths to raid our village," Hudan snorted. "Not that they would ever expect that we are far more prepared than we were in the last raid!"

Kivamus smirked. "Yup. Either way, I think that should be just enough time for the carpenter to make watchtowers at all four corners of the village wall. We had planned to make more, but even having these four watchtowers just inside our walls, with trained crossbowmen - or women - on top of them will make any bandit group regret deciding to attack us."

He looked at the majordomo. "Melting of snow reminds me, what is the progress of the forest clearing in the south?"

"The southern foreman Pinoto has outdone himself," Duvas replied, "especially since we've put all the available workers of the village to work in the south. The women are doing their best to clear the fields of the small rocks and stones, but the farmlands will still need some final preparations before we can

start sowing." He continued, "As for your question, I think that by now we should be approaching eighty percent of the targeted area we had planned to clear. I think we might even be able to exceed our planned area by the time the ground is ready to start sowing."

"We actually do need to exceed it by a good amount," Kivamus winced, "since we have already gotten nineteen more people from the west, and if everything goes well we should start getting more immigrants around that time. That means we need to do our best to clear as much forest to make way for farmland as we can. That being said, how are those new people from Kirnos settling in?"

"It's never easy to adjust to life in a new place," Duvas shrugged, "especially since they know by now that they are living in a building meant to be a jail. Still, while the children are still reluctant to leave the vicinity of their parents, yesterday the adults talked with me asking how they could contribute, since they know they can't keep getting free meals without working for it. By now, they have had a few days of rest accompanied with good food, so from today, I've put most of them on forest clearing in the south. None of them had any experience in cutting trees, but we need a lot of people just to move around the fallen branches, stones and such. So they are helping in that until we are ready to start sowing, in which their previous expertise will mean they will have to be used as farmers."

"Certainly," Kivamus nodded. "We have to utilize everyone's specialized experience when deciding where to put someone for work. That's why when I had mentioned earlier that having these new people would mean we would be able to mine more coal than we would have done otherwise - but even then we aren't going to put these ex-farmers to do coal mining. Instead, we will use those workers who have experience in coal mining for that, and put these ex-farmers to work in their places - like you have already done by sending them to the south. This would still provide the same result of getting extra coal mined, while still utilising everyone's previous experience."

"I agree with that," the majordomo huffed. "It's not just the craftsmen who are learning the benefits of specialisation!"

Kivamus chuckled. "I'm glad to hear that."

#### Chapter 234 A Good Spot

Duvas continued, "Apart from that, like you had told me yesterday, I have already ordered half a dozen workers to continue making paper at a small rate every day. We have no shortage of sawdust or ashes - which are the main raw materials for making paper - so we don't need to worry about that. Also, it will only take a small time for the wood press machine to compress the finalized pulp into paper, so it wouldn't really slow down the production of sawdust briquettes. The felt is reusable, so that won't be a problem either in producing more paper."

Kivamus nodded, while glancing at the shelf which kept the rolls of parchments near the long dining table. "Yeah, we already used all the paper from yesterday to create the keepsakes, so I do need more of it to continue sketching my blueprints."

"Indeed," the majordomo agreed. "Yesterday we used a dozen workers to get four sheets of paper. From today I am using half that many workers, which should still provide us with two new sheets of paper everyday." He added, "Apart from that, one of the workers who was supervising clearing the mine shafts of water had met with me today, and he told me that five of the mine shafts are now clear of all standing water and are ready to start mining."

"Good," Kivamus nodded. "Let's wait another week to get some more forest area cleared, and then we will start putting some men to begin coal mining once again." He looked at Hudan. "Tomorrow morning, let's go towards the hills to take a look at how the digging of fire clay is going. I think by now we should have just enough clay to start building the dam, which means we will have to start shifting workers from the south for that as well. We will also visit the stream to find a good location for the dam."

"Of course," the guard captain nodded. "I will talk with Feroy to manage the defense of the village while I'm out and I'll be ready with a few guards to leave with you in the morning."

"Perfect," Kivamus smiled. "I sketched a lot of details of the seed drill today - and this is already my third attempt at it to improve the design to make it easier to build at scale - and I think I finally have the design I want, but all that thinking has made me hungry. So, let's ask for Madam Helga to bring us some food, shall we?"

Gorsazo was the first one to stand up. "I'll ask her for it," he said before hurrying around to the inner door which went towards the kitchen.

Hudan grinned looking at the teacher's back, before he looked at Kivamus. "I'll call up Feroy too. His stomach must be growling already from us talking about food here!"

Kivamus and Duvas chuckled at that, before he waved off the guard captain to bring the ex-mercenary. It was time to eat!

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The next morning Kivamus was ready with the other guards to visit the eastern hills after mounting a horse, while waiting for the wagon which went along with the labourers everyday to be loaded up fully. It carried a couple of wheelbarrows, a cart, along with some long wooden branches and a few tree stumps. Once everything was loaded up, he gave a nod to the guard captain, who hollered, "Come on, let's go!"

Their horses along with the wagon moved north through the snow covered dirt path, and soon passed in front of the longhouse blocks. Both of the blocks were as busy as always at this time, with a stream of workers coming out from their gates going for their workplace all around the village. The kids were following their parents as well, with small baskets in their hands so they could gather sawdust and wood shavings to take to the wood press machine in the south. The elderly villagers were staying inside the blocks to keep an eye on the children who were too young to be left unsupervised. There was a plume of smoke coming out from both of the blocks from their kitchens, where the afternoon meal must already be in preparation.

As they moved further ahead, he also saw the smokehouse in the distance near the village walls, where a servant was busy taking out the already smoked meat on a wheelbarrow, while he had a stack of fresh meat waiting in a cart. A guard was also posted there to prevent any theft of the smoked meat by the villagers. While their accumulation of smoked meat had slowed down significantly after taking in the newest arrivals from Kirnos, especially with the help of smoked fish which Feroy had brought from there, but for now their hunting parties were still bringing in more meat than they were using, which meant there was a steady growth in the stack of smoked meat in the storage room of the manor. At this rate, they might very well be able to complete the sowing without needing to buy too much wheat.

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Soon, they reached the northern gate at which two guards were posted, who saluted the guard captain and him, before opening the gates quickly. Coming outside of the walls, it was easy to see that there was a lot more snow gathered out here, since there was nobody to trample over it all day, like it was happening inside the village walls. Their small caravan soon turned on a bend in the road to go towards the east and before long they had reached the hills where seatearth - or fire clay - was being dug.

As they had planned in the beginning, a series of tree stumps were left to burn overnight in a strategic way to prevent the ground from freezing again in the nights. That meant the workers wouldn't have to waste a few hours to thaw the ground in the mornings before they could start digging again. More importantly, it was easy to see the noticeable piles of clay gathered on one side. It would take a lot more

of it to complete the dam, but they still had enough of it stocked by now that they could finally start the construction.

As the labourers tied the horses to a pole they had fixed in the ground and began removing the long branches from the wagon so they could start digging again, Kivamus looked at the guard captain. "Let's go to the eastern stream now to find a good place for the dam. We already have enough clay to start the construction." He added, "Bring the foreman of this group with us, so he can also see the location."

Hudan gave a nod and before long, the foreman was sitting behind a guard on another horse, before they started travelling further to the east. The narrow path between the hills was covered in a deep layer of snow, and it was slow going for the horses to travel through it. That meant it wouldn't be easy for the wagons to travel on this path in the winter if they started coal mining before the snow melted, but it still seemed doable, if a little difficult. That was a good enough reason as to why the previous baron used to stop coal mining every winter.

Soon they passed the area of the coal mines, where he saw a small group of workers entering a mine shaft to continue dewatering the insides. While Kivamus was already planning to start coal mining in a week, he realised that it wouldn't be easy at all for the heavily laden wagons to bring coal from here to the village while travelling on the narrow snow-covered paths. They still had the option to postpone the coal mining until the snow had melted completely, but that might not be feasible this year at the rate they were using coal, even after the reduction in its consumption by using sawdust briquettes. He would have to think more about this.

Soon, they heard the bubbling of water before they turned their horses around a turn in the path and saw the eastern stream. While there was a good amount of snow formed on both its sides, water was still flowing freely in the stream. Good.

Once they reached closer to the stream, he beckoned the guard captain closer. "The hills look like they are getting further and further apart on our right so there is no point in travelling downstream from here to find a good spot for the dam. Let's travel upstream from here and see if we can find a good spot."

Hudan nodded, and took his position ahead of him once again along with another mounted guard, while two more guards followed behind him as well on their horses. However, they didn't have to move too long before Kivamus took a good look around them and called out for everyone to stop.

He gazed around the place from atop his horse, and saw that there was a fairly large hill on the left of the valley, while two medium sized hills were located on the right. The stream was still flowing steadily here, but it was easy to see that there was no other path for the water to go if they made an obstacle here in the form of a dam. That meant the flowing water should form a good reservoir behind the dam, which would be vital in running a water wheel here. Thankfully, the shore on the left side of the stream - which was the side towards their village - was also wide enough that they should be able to build a trip hammer, as well as a grain mill here in the future once they had the waterwheel installed successfully right ahead of the dam.

The slope of the ground was also fairly gentle here, which meant the speed of the water in the stream wouldn't be too fast to wash away the dam in due time. That would normally be a serious concern because this dam would primarily be made of clay even if it would have to be reinforced by rocks and timber, instead of being built from concrete - like in most dams on earth.

"Let's take a look further upstream for a short distance," he announced, "so we can be sure that the surrounding hills will act as a decent embankment on the sides to allow a good quantity of water to stay in the reservoir."

#### Chapter 235 Late Winter

The guards continued moving along with him, and it didn't take long for him to decide that this was indeed a good place for making the dam.

Climbing down from his horse, he called over the supervisor - who used to be a limestone cutter in the past, just like the other clay diggers - and began explaining to him about the location. The man, who seemed to be in his forties, nodded enthusiastically as he explained what would make both of the surfaces of the dam, along with what would be filled in the middle.

Before long, the man gave a nod. "I think it should be doable. It wouldn't be easy to transport all the clay, rocks, and the timber here, but with the help of all our wagons, as well as enough labourers, I think we might just be able to do it before the melting snow starts to increase the flow rate of the stream."

"That's good to hear," Kivamus replied. It is indeed our major concern, and we have to try our best to finish the dam before that. It is still around afternoon, so once we return you should tell the other clay diggers that they need to hurry and dig as much as they can every day so we can finish the dam on time."

"We'll do our best, milord!"

Giving him a nod, Kivamus looked at the surrounding area, before he started to walk and made a mental picture of how the dam should look and where the sluice gate should be built and where the water wheel could be installed. Once he decided that he had a good idea of it, he looked at the guard captain, "Let's take some of the thinner sticks which we have brought and mark the edges of where the dam would be made."

Hudan nodded, and soon the guards began running on Kivamus' orders and planted the sticks in the ground so it would be easy for the workers to start filling the required materials in the middle of the marked area. Two of the guards had to cross the stream to the other side so they could place the sticks on the other bank as well, but thankfully the stream wasn't deep enough so they didn't need to swim. That meant only their trousers had gotten wet, and the small fire which Hudan was building in the meantime would be enough for them to dry up their clothes soon.

Once everything was done, Tesyb took the opportunity to catch some fish again, and luckily he and the other guards were able to catch enough of them that they wouldn't have to use their dried meal which they had brought with them. The fire which was already burning and being used by those guards who had gotten wet was a perfect place to roast the fish, and soon they were having a nice lunch of roasted fish and bread next to the half frozen stream, while surrounded by snow-covered hills in a late winter month of Southern Reslinor.

After an hour or so, once everyone was full and the guards were completely dry, they began their return journey. As they travelled, Kivamus' mind was busy thinking about how exactly the dam should be designed so it would last a long time. While there was still some time before the snow started to melt, they would have to hurry if they wanted to finish that dam on time. The two wagons they had gotten from Nokozal's limestone quarry, along with the four they already had in the village - including the wagon which had been repaired in Cinran before the winter - meant that they had a total of six wagons. That should be more than enough to transport all the rocks, timber and clay to this place.

The former stonecutters were already digging up more than enough clay, and they certainly weren't going to have any shortage of timber in this village for years. That only left the rocks, but he had already seen that near the coal mines between the hills there were many huge man made mounds made from the reject material from the mine shafts - which mainly consisted of rocks of various sizes. That meant they already had all the required materials to build the dam. The only problem was a labour shortage, as always, since the construction workers who would be building the dam would have to be taken from the forest clearing work in the south.

He gave a sigh. There was nothing he could do about that though. Using Feroy, he had already spread news in and around Kirnos that Tiranat was taking in immigrants, and hopefully the labour shortage would get less severe once the winter ended.

He nodded to himself. Yes, he would make sure this dam was built, along with all the other projects, even with the limited number of labourers in the village. For now, he had to finalise the design of the dam in his mind, before he had to make a blueprint of it on one of the two sheets of paper which they had received yesterday from the new papermakers in the east of the village.

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Apart from that, he had decided that making the seed drill had to be their next priority, since they only had around a month before they would have to start sowing seeds and he needed to have removed any kinks in the machine before that. They also needed to have at least a dozen seed drills in stock so that all their horses could be used to complete the sowing in time. That would certainly delay the making of more crossbows by Darora, but at this point there was nothing more important than ensuring their food security in the coming year.

Taniok would also have to finish the mushroom barn before he could start working on the watchtowers, which was another important thing which needed to be built to ensure their fledgling village's safety after the winter. Those were only some of the immediate projects they needed to complete, but there were a lot more things which he needed to get done to ensure the safety and prosperity of Tiranat once their yearly isolation due to the heavy winters of Southern Reslinor ended.

He sighed. There was so much to do, and so little time and so few workers to get it done. Well, they would have to do their best with the resources they had available here. With that resolution in his mind, their journey continued towards the small but growing village of Tiranat.

\*\*\*\*\*

~ Kivamus ~

It had been around two weeks since he had gone to visit the eastern stream to find a good location for the dam. While the weather remained below freezing point even now, it had been nearly a week since it had snowed the last time, and from his conversations with the majordomo, he was fairly sure that that

was probably the last snowfall of this winter. There was still around a foot of snow gathered on the ground outside the village, but that should also start melting within a week, although it would take another week or so to melt completely.

It was afternoon right now and they had just completed their lunch. Hudan and Feroy were sitting next to each other talking about something related to the village's security. Duvas had gone out to solve a dispute in the second longhouse which was out of the hands of the supervisor of the block. Gorsazo had returned with Madam Helga to the kitchen after the lunch along with Lucem and Clarisa, arguably to help her with the dishes. Syryne had also gone back to her so-called laboratory in one of the inner rooms of the manor house after her morning lessons with the teacher.

Thankfully, the losuvil powder they had created early in the winter had been working just as well even now, which meant they had discovered a very good preservation process, and it should allow them to make a lot more of the medicine once the losuvil vines started to get new leaves in the spring.

Yesterday, he had also gotten the news that the tenth mineshaft had been cleared of all standing water, and now they only had the last two shafts remaining, which should also be done in a few more days. The sawdust briquette production had been going well, and it had helped a lot in reducing the consumption of coal, but they had still decided to start coal mining at a small scale since a week ago, and by now, two of the twelve mine shafts were already in use. They did have to take the workers from forest clearing in the south for that, but the new refugees they had gotten from Kirnos had been sent to work in the south, which had helped to keep up the pace of forest clearing there.

The construction of the dam had also been going on at a good pace, and by now they had three-fourths of the primary structure ready with the help of the large number of labourers working there. The bald ex-miner Yeden, who used to be the foreman of forest clearing in the north and had overseen the construction of the longhouses there had a good experience of organising workers, which is why he had been appointed as the foreman for the dam construction as well, and he had been supervising everything quite efficiently. Even so, none of the local villagers were trained engineers, which is why Kivamus had been visiting the dam every couple of days to ensure that there were no problems there.

Apart from that, since the eastern stream was located ahead of the coal mines in the same direction, it meant that their six wagons carrying the rubble, clay, timber and rocks to the dam construction site had to pass near the coal mines every morning on their daily trips to the east. That's why in their return journeys in the evenings when the construction workers sat in some of those wagons to come back to the village, they were able to use the empty wagons to load up the coal which had been mined during the day from those mine shafts which were already in operation, and return to the village with them.

That allowed them to save an extra trip of the wagons, which also allowed them to use all of them to speed up the dam construction. He expected that if everything went well, it would take around another week before the dam was mostly ready, by which time the melting snow from the hills in the east would start to increase the flow of the stream. That should help a lot in filling up the reservoir of the dam.

#### Chapter 236 Parapets

Darora had already provided them with the third crossbow a week ago, and since then he had been working to make as many seed drills as he could, once they had given a trial to the first machine and removed any problems they had found in it. By now they had four seed drills already stored in a barn in the manor, and hopefully they should have more than a dozen of them by the time they would have to start sowing seeds in another two weeks or so.

He glanced at the now growing stack of paper - even as primitive as it was - on the shelf where all the blueprint parchments were stored, and couldn't help but be proud of this accomplishment of Tiranat. While he was still using a sharpened charcoal stick as a pencil, he would have to think of a better solution in the future. But for now, that was more than enough for the primitive quality of paper they were producing here.

There were still only half a dozen labourers working in the east of the village to produce paper, which meant they could only get two or three sheets of paper every day, which was far from the quantity they needed to provide it to every child and adult who was learning from Gorsazo in the evening classes in the longhouse blocks, he had still decided to familiarise them with paper, so every day he gave one of the sheets of paper produced to Gorsazo so that he could let his students use it in his classes, while keeping the other sheet for his own use.

Hopefully, once they had a trip hammer ready - which would require them to buy more iron from Cinran - they should be able to produce enough paper to provide everyone in those classes with it.

While most of the things were going well, there was a setback with the construction of the mushroom barn a few days ago, which had meant they couldn't complete it in the targeted ten days like they had planned originally. One of the labourers who was working there had gotten too drunk in the village alehouse the day before that, by trading in some of his weekly rations to the barkeeper instead of coin, and next morning he had been too hungover to properly tie a rope on a log which was supporting a corner section of the roof. While the logs were meant to be fixed with mortise and tenon joints later on, the workers were using a rope to hold the logs together until then.

However, not realising his mistake, when some other workers went to put the next log of the roof, the whole section of the roof collapsed, and set back the progress of the barn by a few days. The good thing was that nobody was seriously injured in it, however it very well could have led to it. That meant Taniok

had to rebuild that section of the barn from scratch, which had led to the delay in the completion of the building.

Of course, that worker was thoroughly scolded, and despite all his apologies, Duvas had told every foreman at every construction site that he shouldn't be given any work for another week as a punishment, which meant the labour wouldn't get the weekly rations either. Hopefully that warning would be enough for him, and he wouldn't repeat that mistake again. Taniok had also assured him that he would check every such weak point himself before proceeding with the construction of anything.

As he walked to the shelf and picked out a fresh sheet of paper to get started with a blueprint for something he had in his mind for the future, the outer door of the manor hall opened and Duvas walked inside along with the old carpenter Taniok.

"Huh," Kivamus muttered. "I was just thinking about you."

The bald carpenter grinned at that. "Milord, I just put together the door of the mushroom barn. I apologise again for the delay, but that was the last remaining part, and now it is ready for use."

"Oh, that's excellent!" Kivamus looked at the majordomo. "Let madam Helga know about it so she can start transplanting the mushrooms from the temporary shed to this barn."

"Of course," Duvas nodded. "I will also give her a few workers to help with that."

Pausing his conversation with the ex-mercenary, Hudan looked up towards them. "Milord! You really should start the construction of watchtowers now."

Kivamus snorted. "That's exactly what I was going to tell him." He looked back at the carpenter. "That's your next construction project. We have already talked about the height of the watchtowers, and they should be double the height of the village walls which are themselves five meters tall."

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Taniok gave a nod. "So the watchtowers will be ten meters high then. Thankfully you had already ordered us to keep enough logs of that length for this in advance instead of cutting them down shorter for easier storage, so we don't have to spend time in felling new fedarus trees for this." He added, "You said it only needs to have a ladder on the inner side, and a covered platform on the top, right?"

"Kind of," Kivamus said. "I certainly want a horizontal platform for the archers and watchmen to sit on, as well as a roof above them to protect them from the elements, but I also want a parapet on all sides of the watchtowers." Explaining it further, he continued, "It is basically like a guardrail on the sides, but you will have to make them from planks in this case. They should be around chest height, so that the watchmen can still see around the area properly from the platform, but in case of an attack it would give the archers some cover so they can reload their bows or crossbows while hiding behind those parapets, before they stand up and attack the enemies again."

Taniok seemed to be thinking about it. "That... parapet shouldn't be too difficult to add once the watchtower is ready, but I'll still consult with you again about it once I have the platform ready for the first watch tower."

"Of course, feel free to ask about any problems you might have." Kivamus added, "How long will it take to build all four watchtowers on the corners of the village walls? I also want to make two more watchtowers in the middle of the longer walls in the north and south, but that will only come after the first four ones are already completed."

"With the foundations already dug before the winter, and the logs ready in advance, it shouldn't take as long as it would have otherwise." The carpenter continued, "I will take the best labourers who have worked with me in building the longhouse blocks and the barn, and will use them for this. I will also need a pair of horses to raise the logs into the foundations, along with a wheelbarrow to move around the planks and other tools, as well as a lot of rope to keep the logs standing securely before I connect them together with beams. With that, I should be able to finish the first watchtower in four to five days. It should take around the same time or a little less for the other ones as well."

"That's not ideal, but this means we should still be able to complete two or probably even three watchtowers by the time the surrounding area is ready for travel, which also means ripe for bandits to attack." Kivamus gave a sigh. "Alright, carry on then. Talk with one of the servants and he will provide you with all the rope and tools you need."

"Thank you milord." Taniok gave a short bow of his head, before he exited the hall.

Kivamus looked at the guard captain and the ex-mercenary. "With the three crossbows we already have, we should be able to put a crossbowman or woman on the top of the first three watchtowers for every hour of the day and night. We already have more than enough of a stock of bolts, even though most of them are just sharpened fedarus wood, and only a few are iron tipped. Still, in case of an attack the crossbow-women can take out a few bandits by themselves before they even reach the walls."

"It's true that having even three watchtowers would help a lot in the defence of the village," Feroy commented with a shrug, "but it just makes me think that the last side would be the one where any bandits attack from."

"That's what we are here for, aren't we?" Hudan grinned. He looked at Kivamus. "We don't have a gate in the northwest of the village, so we should keep the last watchtower for that side. Having the first three ones built on the remaining sides will help us to cover the gates more effectively."

"That's a good idea," Kivamus agreed, while wondering if they would be able to complete even these three watchtowers before any bandits attacked.

Suddenly remembering what Duvas had gone to do earlier, he asked, "What was the dispute about?"

"Wasn't anything too important," the majordomo waved it off. "Just some squabbles between a group of workers which had worked a lot yesterday and wanted an extra helping of porridge for their lunch, and another group which said that everyone was entitled to the same amount as long as they were living in the longhouse block. Fortunately it didn't lead to a brawl, but these kinds of things will keep happening as long as we keep housing that many people there."

Kivamus nodded thinking about it. "We still have many other important projects which we need the labourers to complete, including the forest clearing, making the farms ready for sowing along with the sowing itself, not to mention the watchtowers and the dam. But once those are done, we should be able to allocate some workers to start tearing down the damaged huts and shacks in the village, although we will still have to put most of them to start coal mining. My savings won't last forever, and we need to start earning money as soon as the roads open, and coal is still our primary source of income."

He continued, "Well, we'll deal with it when the time comes. That reminds me, didn't you also go to ask Pinoto about the status of forest clearing in the morning?"

The majordomo nodded. "I was getting to that. We have already completed the initial planned target of clearing the forests which we wanted to do in the beginning, but we do need to exceed the target because of the new people we have taken in. For that it will take at least one more week."

"Hmm..." Kivamus muttered. "That means we won't be able to start coal mining at a good scale for another week... That will barely leave seven-eight days to mine enough coal to earn some coin so we can buy wheat to feed everyone before we have to move all those workers to the south once again to start sowing. We will still have to put some workers to prepare the fields before that, apart from those who are digging clay and building the dam and the watchtower, so we can't even mine coal at the usual rate of forty wagons per month with that few workers."

"Even with the meat the hunters are bringing in, we barely have enough grain to continue feeding everyone for these two weeks while still keeping enough wheat for sowing," Duvas said. "Taking in those refugees is the main reason for that. Still, it just means we really do need enough coin to buy some wheat when the traders start coming, even after paying the taxes. The traders will only come after two weeks at best, but it might even be three weeks if the snow takes longer to melt on the northern road or if they are late, which means we probably won't have enough food to feed the village in the second week even if we use up all the smoked meat for this because now we are also feeding the new refugees. If the wait stretches to the third week, then we really won't be able to feed the villagers without touching the stored seeds."

Kivamus took a deep breath. "It doesn't really leave us with too many options, does it? I wanted to postpone the next trip to Kirnos for later, but right now it seems like that's the only option for us to buy enough food for the village so we don't starve in the second or third week."

He added, "It's another fact that even without the refugees we still would have had to do it before we started sowing, since we will need all our horses here at the time so they can drag the seed drills, not that it's a good idea to leave buying food for the last moment anyway." He looked at the ex-mercenary. "You should prepare to leave by tomorrow. You told me that the merchant with the smokehouse should probably be willing to give you another two wagons of smoked fish on credit, right?"

"I should be able to negotiate with him for that," Feroy agreed, "but he won't agree to it unless we pay the amount we already owe him."

Duvas winced. "That's nearly ninety gold... and we are already short on gold to pay the tax..."

Kivamus exhaled loudly. "It can't be helped, Duvas. Making sure nobody starves in the village comes before anything else, and those two wagons of smoked fish will be enough to feed the whole village for an extra two weeks, based on what I had calculated the last time. So we'll just have to do some tough negotiations when paying the taxes." Once Duvas gave a reluctant nod, he added, "Give the gold to Feroy before he leaves tomorrow."

He looked at the ex-mercenary again. "We know that by this time Torhan's bandits already know that you might go to Kirnos again, since even if they hadn't scouted you on the road, the news would have easily gotten to them from their sources in the marketplace of Kirnos. So you can't leave with just four guards like the last time, but on the other hand we really are short on guards these days, and we just can't give you extra guards since that would leave Tiranat nearly defenceless."

"There is a hunting group which has been out for nearly a week and should return by this evening," Hudan suggested. "Yufim is also a part of this group. If we don't send them on another hunting trip immediately, that'll be four extra men which we can add to Feroy's caravan without lowering the village's defence. That will give him a total of eight guards to protect the two wagons, including an excellent archer. That has to be enough - especially for such a small target of just two wagons. Also, unlike the trips to Cinran before winter, this time it won't be a facade of protection, since all the guards have gotten good training by now, so those eight guards should be able to take on the bandits without too much difficulty."

Kivamus thought about it. "That might work. This trip will take less than a week, but Feroy should be able to bring enough smoked fish which will easily be many times of what those four men in the hunting group would have brought. Alright, let's do that."

He continued, "But I think we need to do more to protect the caravan. Without getting the smoked fish in time, our village will get close to starvation if we want to preserve all the seeds, and we also have to think about the ninety gold which Feroy will be carrying with him. We just can't afford to lose any of it, or the guards' lives."

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Looking at others' faces for a moment, Kivamus broached a difficult topic. "I think we should add a crossbow-woman as protection for the caravan." Duvas frowned on hearing that, while Hudan was staring hard at him. He continued, "Just hear me out. Hyola is still our best shot with a crossbow, so adding her as protection for the caravan will mean that along with Yufim, they should be able to take out a few bandits before they even reach the wagons in case of an ambush."

"This is cowardice!" Duvas raised his voice. "Adding women as guards as long as they stay safe inside the walls of the village is one thing, but sending them on a journey to another village while passing through dangerous forests, especially when we are already anticipating an ambush is just not right when the men are sitting safe behind walls! What if the bandits capture her? I won't be able to look any woman of Tiranat in the face if something like that happened because you chose to do something stupid like this!"

Hudan was shaking his head as well. "I agree with Sir Duvas. What does it say about us if we have to send women out on such dangerous journeys?"

Taking a deep breath, Kivamus looked at Feroy for his opinion.

"Actually, I think it's a good idea." The ex-mercenary shrugged at the dubious looks of others. "The safety and defence of Tiranat comes before anything else, so wouldn't you agree that sending Hyola to Kirnos would mean having an extra man on watch duty in the village?"

"That's hardly the point!" Duvas scoffed.

"No, that is exactly the point I am making," Feroy said. "If you ask Hyola, Isomi, Savomi or any of the other female guards, all of them would volunteer in a moment to go on this journey, no matter how dangerous it may be. By this point all of the guards - including the women - trust Lord Kivamus with their lives and know that he is always doing his best to ensure Tiranat and his people are safe, even if it means sending women out to protect caravans. If anything, Hyola might just call you out for a bout which she'll win in a heartbeat, to prove that you are wrong and that the Goddess agrees with her."

Kivamus snorted at the image of the old majordomo fighting against the redhead who was nearly as tall and well built as most men.

Duvas rubbed his forehead in frustration, while Hudan's expression made it seem like he was considering the idea by now.

"Anyway," the ex-mercenary continued, "do you really think the rest of us guards going with the caravan are going to just watch idly if any bandit tries to abduct her? Trust me, we will take care of our own even at the cost of our lives. That includes every guard, whether it's a man or a woman." Feroy glanced at the faces of Hudan and Duvas again. "Anyway, you both are still missing the point. Like Lord Kivamus just

pointed out, she is still our best shot with a crossbow, which means having her with the caravan would actually make us safer and would make it less likely for the caravan and her to be taken captive, compared to not having her there."

Hudan had started nodding along by now, and looked at Feroy. "You know what, I think it would be good for her to get the experience of going out from Tiranat." He glanced at Kivamus. "Knowing our baron and his unorthodox views, he will probably suggest sending women out as hunters or even on other caravan protection duties in the future. So we might as well agree to it and decide the best way to carry out his wishes, instead of arguing about something which has already been decided."

Duvas remained quiet for a while, but eventually he gave a reluctant nod as well. "I still don't agree with this, but if you all think it's a good idea, then I won't oppose it anymore."

"Not that there is even any point in trying to win an argument against Feroy," Kivamus commented with a snort.

Hudan guffawed at that while even Duvas gave a chuckle.

Kivamus looked at the mercenary. "I'm glad we decided to make you act as our part-time travelling merchant. I pity those who will be making deals with you in Kirnos."

Feroy laughed loudly on hearing that, and eventually others joined in that laughter as well.

Once everyone had calmed down, Kivamus continued, "Okay. So it's decided that Hyola will accompany the caravan, which will have a total of eight guards including Yufim and Feroy. Coming back to the main topic, now that we have started coal mining again at a small scale, we can afford to sell these two wagons of coal, even though it will leave our coal barns nearly empty. However, we need to buy food immediately so this has to be done."

He looked at others' faces for a moment, and started giving orders. "Duvas, load up two wagons with coal in the evening when they return from the east. Hudan, make sure to tell these returning hunters to rest well tonight since this time they won't get an off day which they get after every hunting trip. Feroy, tomorrow morning you will leave with eight guards including yourself. Half of them are trained hunters, so you should try to hunt any animals you see on the road to Kirnos. I know it's unlikely, but you might

just get lucky and catch a deer or two. Even that small amount of extra food will still help us a lot in the coming weeks."

"I'll make sure to tell the guards about hunting on the road," the ex-mercenary replied, "and I'll keep an eye out for it myself. That being said," he added, "wouldn't taking those two wagons away from Tiranat slow down the building of the dam? You said that we need to complete it before the melting snow increases the water flowing in the eastern stream too much."

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"Not at this point," Kivamus answered. "With three-fourths of the dam already completed, by now our six wagons have already helped in stocking up enough extra material by the eastern stream that the remaining four wagons should be able to bring up the rest of the construction material without too many problems. It's not ideal, but we'll make do somehow."

The guard captain remarked, "This will still leave a short on guards to defend the village. That's why I keep saying that we really should try to dig a trench around the wall as soon as we can and put some sharpened stakes in them. That will at least reduce the number of approaches which any raiding horseman can take to reach the walls."

"I realise that, Hudan, I really do, but you know that we are already short of labourers everywhere. For now you will have to do your best to defend the village with the palisade wall only. Once we get some workers free from other important projects, and it certainly won't happen anytime soon, then I'll put some of them to start digging the trench."

Hudan gave a confident nod. "We'll protect the village. No matter what."

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~ Ustaimo ~

~ Count Ebirtas' Mansion, Cinran ~

Ustaimo blinked his eyes a few times to see what he was writing with a quill more clearly, but it didn't work. Realising that he really should take a break now after taking care of the balances of Count Ebirtas' treasury for the last few hours, he slowly stood up and closed the tax ledger he had been scribbling on

and stretched his arms above him, but it just made his joints creak like they had seen way too much work.

He did realize that he wasn't young anymore, having already seen nearly fifty winters by now, but with his creaking joints along with his blurry eyesight, he might just have to look for a new line of work soon. Well, it wasn't like there was any family who depended on him, so he could just join the temple of the goddess if he was let go, but until then he would still do his best to take care of the accounts, just like he always had.

Ustaimo slowly trudged to the window in the modest second story room which had been his office in the Count's mansion for a few decades by now. The single burning brazier in a corner of the room was already a luxury for someone like him who came from a very low social class, but he still wanted to breathe the fresh air right now so he opened the windows wide to get some fresh air inside. Brought to you by \*.

Even though it was late afternoon right now, a freezing gust of air immediately made him shiver. There was still a thin layer of snow covering everything in sight, but at least it hadn't snowed for nearly ten days by now. The snow should start melting any day now, starting to make the muddy roads going out from Cinran become traversable again. That meant he would soon have to start going on trips to all the baronies in the domain of Count Ebirtas, although he certainly wasn't looking to the upcoming carriage rides for that which made his bones ache, even more so in this cold weather.

That being said, he might just make do with a single trip to the south until the weather had become warmer. Apart from the pitiful barony of Tiranat, all the other barons in the domain of count Cinran had already paid their taxes on time in the previous autumn, but with the previous baron of that village murdered on the road by bandits around that time, the Count had thankfully allowed him to postpone the trip until after the winter. After all, there was no point in taking that much gold from that village as the taxes only to lose it on the way to bandits. Not to mention he might also lose his life if that happened, and he was in no hurry to meet the goddess so soon.

Regardless of how he usually felt about nobles, Ustaimo felt a lot of sympathy for the young son of the Duke of Ulriga who had been made the new baron of Tiranat. His name was uh... Kivamus, if he remembered correctly. Still, surviving in such a poor, desolate village would be a difficult challenge even for a commoner like himself with all the dangerous wild beasts and bandits living in the southern forests of Reslinor - not to mention that newly-made baron wouldn't get anything like the luxury he must be used to when he lived in the Palace of Ulriga. He didn't even want to imagine how such a pampered son of the Duke would survive in such a place.

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Ah, well... From what he knew about nobles, that guy might just give up this adventure before long and return to Ulriga, even though he was the third in line to become the next Duke. That meant life was never going to be easy for him, whether he lived between his power hungry brothers in the palace, or in the wretched village of Tiranat. Not that it really mattered to Ustaimo. He would just keep doing the tasks he was given by the Count, and for now that meant collecting the long overdue taxes from that village.

Now that the snow was going to start melting soon, he couldn't postpone that trip any longer. He knew that it snowed more heavily in Tiranat, especially on the southern road passing near the Arakin Mountains, so it should still be around two weeks before the road going south to that pitiful village became traversable again after remaining blocked for the whole winter due to heavy snow. That meant he had to start preparing for that trip soon, which is why he was spending so long working every day to make sure that all the accounts of the Count were already up-to-date before he left.

Tying the sash around his plain grey robes, he left the room which served as his office, and began walking towards the meeting hall of the Count. Lord Ebirtas should have just finished with today's court, which meant there should be enough time for him to talk to the Count. Hopefully, that money-grubbing fat bastard Zoricus wouldn't be there. Even the simple sight of that greedy glutton made him feel queasy. He had no doubt that Zoricus already had his eyes on the seat of the count, and if he got a chance he wouldn't hesitate to murder Count Ebirtas to take his place.

Ustaimo snorted. It wasn't like the count hadn't probably done that exact same thing to capture power in the past, although no proof was ever found. Well, it probably didn't matter too much to a commoner like Ustaimo anyway. Noble politics would remain just as bloodthirsty as always, no matter how bad or how good the current times were, and he would just keep doing the work he was given and keep his head down. That was the only way for commoners to survive in this harsh world. It was another thing that Zoricus already knew about Ustaimo's dislike for him, and would probably let him go the moment he came into power. Hmm... Perhaps he should resign before it even came to that.

Ustaimo blinked his eyes. What was he even thinking right now... Perhaps he really was too tired today. He shook his head to bring himself to the present, removing the thoughts of cutthroat gluttons and fratricidal counts from his mind.

After walking through a few corridors and down a staircase, he reached an ornately decorated door and gave a nod at the guards flanking the door, one of whom entered the hall to ask if the count was free to meet him. Before long, the guard returned and waved him inside.

Giving him a thankful nod, Ustaimo entered the overly embellished hall. He had visited this hall countless times by now and yet the luxurious room made him stop to take a look every single time, which is exactly what the Count wanted for any visitors. There were a series of ornate paintings hanging on all the walls, some of them depicting Count Ebirtas as an overly fit young man in all his glory, riding a horse with a blazing sword in hand, while others showed the mighty stone walls of Cinran which protected the town even while surrounded by enemies. Even getting a single of these paintings made must have cost a fortune, but there were nearly a dozen of them here by now because of the Count's wishes.

A carafe of what was probably some very expensive wine was kept on the table, with a servant waiting nearby to pour it in anyone's glass which got empty. The rugs on the wooden floor included bears, wolves, and even adzee pelts, the last of which were so costly that he didn't even want to think about the price which the Count must have paid to acquire them. Not that Ustaimo didn't already know all that, having added those expenses into his ledger in the previous years, despite telling the Count repeatedly that they needed to scale down some expenses or they would keep going into debt further and further.

Despite that, the Count had always lived under the shadow of his older brother for most of his life - who was supposed to become the count instead of him after their father's death - so Count Ebirtas had left no stone unturned to acquire all these luxuries after he had become the Count after that incident instead of his brother around two decades ago. That's why the Count kept telling him that all these ornately decorated braziers, the paintings and the rugs, the bowls of freshly cut fruits and cured meats, and the luxurious furnishings should always be there to remind any visitors of the power of the person who owned this mansion, which is why he kept spending so much on these luxuries despite already being in debt.

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However, it had been nearly two decades since the incident through which Count Ebirtas had gained power, and by now, the Count was already old - having seen sixty five winters by now - which is probably why Zoricus must be dreaming of becoming a count in the future.

Coming back to the present, Ustaimo looked ahead and immediately saw the tired visage of the elderly Count Ebirtas, who was sitting at the head of the table while frowning at a map spread on the top. However, much to his annoyance, Baron Zoricus was also sitting on one of the chairs near the elderly count. Unlike Lord Ebirtas who was already old, the fat bastard was still in his mid forties and had more than enough time to snatch power from the Count, whose only heir was a drunkard son who spent more time in the brothels of the town than in this mansion learning the ropes of managing the domain from his father.

Ustaimo got a shiver just trying to imagine what would happen when that imbecile took charge of Cinran after the count died. Not that the alternative was any better, of Zoricus killing both the father and the son to snatch power for himself, and becoming the next Count. He blinked. There he went thinking of the worst case scenarios once again. However, regardless of whether such a thing happened in the future or not, it was still a fact that Baron Zoricus' was someone who only cared about his own interests, and was willing to go to any lengths to achieve them.

For a moment Ustaimo wondered why the Count kept this bastard so close to him, before he remembered that Zoricus' pockets ran very, very deep. The fat bastard had always been close to Ebirtas, but once his old friend had become the Count around two decades ago, Zoricus' fortunes started increasing at an astounding rate, and by now nobody knew just how much gold he earned.

The fat bastard had vast and fertile land holdings which allowed him to sell grain at basically any price he wanted, especially in years of bad harvest like the recent ones. Zoricus also owned various lucrative merchant and craftsmen stores in the town of Cinran - including those of the blacksmiths and the armorers producing spears, swords, bows and armors - not to mention all the underhanded dealings made by Zoricus, which meant he basically had a monopoly in Cinran of selling all kinds of things from lumber, limestone, iron ingots, clothing and so on.

Ustaimo had no doubt that most of those dealings must have been made by the force of the sword since the fat bastard knew that he had the Count's support behind him, but the fact remained that Zoricus had way too many sources of income and a vast treasury, which is why he would never have any shortage of gold, even if the rest of Cinran barely had enough to eat these days. That's why to keep paying for all the luxuries that Count Ebirtas desired in his life, he had kept taking more and more debt from other nobles, most of it from Zoricus, so it stood to reason why the Count had to keep that bastard close to him.

Looking around, Ustaimo saw that on the other side of the table, there was a senior knight wearing his full metal armour, who served as the Knight Commander of Cinran. Being in his mid thirties, he was at the peak of his physical prowess, and right now he was pointing at something on a map spread on the table, while the Count nodded to his words. All the while Zoricus seemed to be sitting back lazily with his chubby arm sprawled on the back of another chair, while munching on some fruits and giving a vague nod once in a while.

Ustaimo waited for a while until Count Ebirtas looked up at him. "Oh, Ustaimo, you are already here. I was just going to send someone to call you. Come on and take a seat."

Ustaimo gave a nod and knowingly walked to the side of the Knight Commander, so he wouldn't have to sit next to the gluttonous bastard who had a knowing smirk on his face. He took a seat before looking towards the count.

"How are our monthly income and expenses looking these days?" Count Ebirtas asked after a moment. "We need every coin we can get to deal with any future incursions from Binpaaz."

Ustaimo frowned. "You know that the answer to your question is very complicated, since we get the taxes from all the baronies under Cinran as a single yearly payment, while the income taxes we charge from the citizens of Cinran are taken quarterly. On the other hand, the sales tax from the merchants in the marketplace are taken every month, while the border taxes are charged on every entry and exit from any visiting traders. At the same time, the income from the farms directly under your name are taken in the form of grain after every harvest, which is once per year, and that income varies with the prevailing grain prices. However, there is also..."

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Ebirtas raised his hand with a grimace. "That's enough. I don't need to hear all those details, that's what you are here for. Just give me a simple answer."

Ustaimo gave a sigh. Nobody understood how difficult it was to manage all the accounts. Bringing out the small accounts ledger he always kept in the pocket of his cloak for such occasions, he began, "I apologise, my lord." He quickly thumbed over some pages in the ledger before he found what he was looking for. "If I prorate all the income we got in the past year over twelve individual months, then we are earning around... 5100 gold per month, after taking into account the grain and other things we get in kind as the taxes."

"See, you can speak in simple terms if you want! That's the answer you should have given me in the first place," Ebirtas said with a nod. "What about our expenses?"

Ustaimo grimaced. "I know you won't like my answer, but on average we are spending above 5600 gold every month including the interest payments on the debt we owe. The last of the gold we had borrowed from Baron Zoricus is nearly gone by now, which is why we need to borrow some gold once again to be able to pay all the knights and the servants of the mansion."

"That's..." Count Ebirtas shook his head in resignation. After a while, he took a deep breath and looked at the fat bastard. "Zoricus, I will have to ask you for some help once again."

Zoricus grinned. "Of course, my lord! I'm always here to help you, and I will lend you as much gold as you want at any time. Obviously, at the usual interest rates."

Ebirtas gave a grimace before he forced a smile. "I am always thankful that you are here on my side. Who knows what would happen to Cinran if you weren't here."

Ustaimo kept his face expressionless on the outside, while cursing the fat bastard. Cinran would only be progressing if that bastard wasn't here to profit from everyone at any cost. He had a chokehold on all the trade in the town, and in the past decade, Count Ebirtas had become more and more of a figurehead of Cinran, while it was Zoricus who wielded all the real power."

Changing the subject, Ustaimo began, "The southern road going to Tiranat would start melting soon, so I would like to leave in around two weeks to get the taxes from them. We have no idea if the new Baron of Tiranat, Kivamus Ralokaar has any interest in coming to Cinran with the taxes like the previous baron liked to do, so it will be better if I go myself to Tiranat and take a look at their accounts. There's still around two weeks before I leave, but I wanted to let you know in advance since I will need a contingent of guards and knights to accompany me. It just wouldn't be safe to carry that much gold from Tiranat through that treacherous forest road without sufficient protection."

Count Ebirtas gave a tired nod and looked at the knight commander. "He's right. Make sure to give him enough guards for this."

"But, with Binpaaz..." the knight commander began to protest before he glanced at the fat bastard for a quick moment, who gave a subtle nod - which went completely unnoticed by the elderly count. The knight looked at the count again. "As you wish, my lord."

Zoricus gave a grin. "We should do our best to protect Ustaimo. After all, who will manage the accounts if he is killed by bandits on that road, just like that idiot who was the previous Baron of Tiranat? It's not a safe road after all." He gave a lazy shrug. "The far more important thing is that while we can hire someone else to take care of the accounts, we just can't lose all that gold, you know?"

Ustaimo grimaced hearing about his death being mentioned as a far lower priority than preserving gold by the fat bastard. He had serious doubts about whether the previous Baron of Tiranat was just killed by some random bandits or if there was a certain fat bastard behind it, who must have also taken all the gold which the previous baron was supposed to come with to pay the yearly taxes of Tiranat. Ustaimo had no proof either way, not that he would ever risk his own neck to bring something like that to light even if he did have proof. His own survival came before anything else while living between this nest of snakes who called themselves nobles.

"Oh, that reminds me," Count Ebirtas interrupted suddenly. "How much gold can we expect from Tiranat this year? Will it be enough to postpone borrowing more from Zoricus?"