

Londoner 31

Chapter 31. Housing The Homeless

Thinking about how to explain without mentioning Earth, Kivamus said, "I read about those in the library, back in Ulriga Palace."

He looked at Gorsazo, and remembering the vague memories of the original Kivamus, he said, "You know well how I used to spend a lot of time in the library there, every time after my brothers found a new way to mock or ridicule me, and when I didn't want to face others for some time."

Gorsazo nodded. "That's certainly true, my Lord. Many times, I had to search for you in the library for your lessons."

"Indeed." Kivamus continued, "That's where I read about these longhouses that people used to make in the past, in some other countries. Basically," he elaborated while pointing at the barns inside the manor, "they are similar to those barns we have here, but they are only around ten feet high, and much longer than the barns."

Seeing the others listening intently, he continued, "This way, we can put two bunks for sleeping on each side of the longhouse, the lower one only around say, two feet high, while the upper bunk can be around five or six feet high. This would allow us to house two people on one side and two on the other side, that is, a total of four people for every two meters of the length of the longhouses."

Hudan interrupted again, "What is a meter, my Lord?"

"Uh... that book had the units of length in terms of meters," he tried to explain without giving away too much. "A meter is around, uh..." He looked around for something that had the same length, but not finding anything suitable, he just spread both of his hands to what he guessed would be the length of around a meter, and said, "This long. Or a little longer than a pace."

He continued, trying to remember the length of a normal person's step, "I'd say the length of around four paces is the same as three meters. Many of those books I read used a meter as a unit of length, so I am used to thinking in those terms."

"Of course, my Lord." Hudan nodded.

Duvas added, "By keeping each bunk to a length of uh... two meters, even a full-grown adult can comfortably sleep in it."

"Indeed," Kivamus agreed. "And I think, we could keep the width of the longhouse around five or six meters, which would give enough walking space between the bunks, which would be located next to the walls on both sides, while still leaving enough space for a fireplace in the middle. That would keep the long house warm in the winter, as well as be useful for cooking meals there. As for the length, we could keep it around say, twenty-five meters, which would be enough for a dozen bunks next to each other. That way, we could house forty-eight people in a single longhouse easily."

He conceded, "Of course, these are just rough estimates, and we will need to talk with a carpenter who will give us the exact numbers."

"True enough, my Lord," Duvas said. "Those seem like reasonable numbers though. I will still send for the carpenters we have in the village, to talk over the details with them."

Gorsazo commented, "Making these longhouses seems more practical than building individual houses for now. And even with just two new longhouses, we should be able to shelter all the homeless people in the village."

"Indeed," Kivamus nodded. "But instead of making two longhouses simultaneously, we will prioritize building only one of them at first, so that the homeless villagers can have at least some place to live. The temperature is going down every day, and even if it won't be very comfortable to house nearly twice as many people inside a longhouse compared to what it was designed for, it will still be much better for the villagers than sleeping outside in the open."

"That's a good idea, my Lord," Hudan commented.

"There are also many other villagers, who do have a shack in which to live, but those flimsy walls don't hold the cold outside at all," Duvas added. "If possible, once we have finished building those two longhouses, we should construct more of them, so that any of the villagers who want to live in those instead of their own huts can move there. Every winter, there are at least a few deaths from the cold in those shacks and huts."

Thinking about living in such cold temperatures in those huts, made Kivamus feel a shiver, even though it was noontime now. And once the snowfall started in around a month, it would indeed be difficult to survive in those huts. "Good idea. We will do that as well, once the first two longhouses are ready. But we can still house more people than their capacity in the first two longhouses, so people don't have to stay in those huts until more longhouses are ready."

Duvas began, "My Lord, we can certainly utilize the miners to clear the surrounding land and start farming in the spring. However," he cautioned, "paying them for their labor would put a significant strain on our already depleted treasury."

"Unlike the coal mines," he elaborated, "where we get a product to sell and recoup the wages we'd be paying the miners, clearing the land wouldn't yield any immediate revenue stream."

The weight of Duvas' words hung heavy in the air. The potential benefits of clearing the land were undeniable - increased food production, improved security, and a chance to put their unemployed workforce to good use. But the financial burden of paying the miners loomed large, threatening to derail their plans before they even began. The path forward required careful consideration, a delicate balancing act between ambition and fiscal responsibility.

Kivamus knew their financial challenges, but the rewards were too significant to ignore. Perhaps, he thought, there was a way to bridge this gap. The gears in his mind began to turn, formulating a plan to address this obstacle and propel Tiranat towards a more secure and prosperous future.

Acknowledging the constraints Duvas had outlined, he offered a counterpoint. "True," he conceded, "but we should consider it as an investment. And a necessary one at that."

His voice firmed with conviction as he elaborated on his vision. "If we can cultivate the land successfully," he argued, "and grow a significant portion of the grain we need to buy every year, our reliance on Cinran for grain would diminish significantly, if not entirely. That, in turn, will lead to substantial cost savings."

He tempered his optimism with a touch of reality. "I understand it won't be easy at all," he admitted. "But even if we manage to grow just half of what we require in the first year of farming, it would still represent a significant reduction in our reliance on Cinran for food and that would lead to a considerable amount of money saved."

Kivamus shifted his focus to the immediate challenges. "Thankfully," he said with relief, "we will have all the grain we bought from Pydas arriving within the next two weeks or so. But selling that grain to the local merchants isn't an option," he explained, "since Pydas already tried that without any success."

"So, here's what I propose," he declared. "What if we adopted a similar approach to the one we're using with the new guards - a system of payment in kind?"

Duvas, his brow furrowed in curiosity, leaned forward. "Payment in kind, my Lord?" he queried, seeking clarification.

"We're only hiring a small group of guards, only a dozen for now," Kivamus explained. "For them, paying their wages in coin might still have been manageable. However," he pointed out, "the sheer number of people required to clear the land and prepare the fields for farming, not to mention the other projects like constructing new longhouses, would make paying them in coin entirely impractical, with the limited amount of hard currency we have remaining."

"So," he continued, "I propose offering grain as a form of payment to anyone willing to contribute to this effort. This includes felling trees, preparing the land, and any other manual labor required. Just like the new guards we are hiring, we could provide them with a set amount of grain and coal, enough to sustain their families for each day or perhaps each week of work they complete. We'll have to pay it in advance though, so they'll have enough to eat after they start working."

"By doing so," he explained, "we achieve two crucial objectives. We conserve our limited coin reserves, which are essential for future needs, while simultaneously ensuring that the villagers have enough food to feed their families and enough coal to heat their homes."

He acknowledged another looming concern. "Also, as Duvas mentioned earlier," he added, his voice tinged with a hint of worry, "we need to be prepared for the possibility of Count Cinran sending someone to collect the taxes owed to him."

Duvas offered a curt nod, "If not now, my Lord, then he'll surely send someone after the snow melts and the road to Cinran opens again."

Kivamus pressed on. "Whether it happens now or after the winter," he continued, "we need to have enough coin on hand to pay those taxes," he declared, "especially if negotiating a tax waiver is unsuccessful."

"Of course," he added, "we only bought enough grain to last us till the end of winter, that's just another four months. Hopefully, the traders will start coming by then, and we will earn more coin by selling the coal we have stockpiled. However," he added, "just in case the traders take more time to start coming, and we are not able to raise coin by selling coal, then we need enough coin in hand to buy more grain immediately."

"Indeed, my Lord," Duvas said. "And the wheat we will plant in spring won't be ready for around... four or five months, I think. Even if we harvest a good crop later on, we will still need to buy grain for those months."

"Of course. And this grain-based payment system isn't going to be a long-term solution," Kivamus admitted. "However, it should serve us well for the upcoming winter. Once spring arrives, we can reopen the coal mines after we have sold our existing stock, and return to a coin-based system for compensating the villagers, the guards, and the manor staff."

"That is a good idea, my Lord," Gorsazo commented.

Duvas nodded as well. "It would be helpful to start giving wages to the manor staff, if not now, then at least after the winter. Not paying the wages may be fine in the short term, but if continued for too long, it may give rise to all kinds of problems."

"Indeed," Kivamus nodded. Not paying wages to workers while still making them work could easily lead to a rebellion against him. And he had no intention to be deposed from his position as a baron any time soon. At least they will be able to provide food and coal for the villagers, which means this temporary solution should be fine for the winter at least.

The door to the roof opened again, and Sryne walked towards them.

"Food is ready, my Lord," she announced.

Kivamus nodded. "We'll be there in a few minutes."

He craned his neck upwards, squinting at the sun. It hovered near its zenith, casting the roof of the manor house in a warm glow, which was very much welcome after the chill in the morning. Gazing out from the vantage point of the manor rooftop, he surveyed the scene below. The transfer of grain from Pydas' wagons to the grain barns had nearly reached completion.

A team of servants, their movements efficient and practiced, were loading coal onto the emptied wagons now. Pydas, who had left with a single wagon earlier to make the grain deliveries to the merchants in the village, had also returned by now and was directing the loading process of coal into all the wagons.

With a satisfied nod, Kivamus addressed his advisors, his voice carrying a hint of finality.

"Hudan, after we have eaten," he instructed, "head down to the village square and see if any good recruits have arrived for the guard positions." With a glance towards the majordomo, he added, "And Duvas, you should accompany him. Together, you both can assess the candidates and select the most reliable individuals for the job."

He continued, "For hiring workers for cutting trees and clearing the fields, it doesn't matter when that person moved to Tiranat. But for hiring new guards, we need loyal men, people you've known for a long time within Tiranat and for whom you can vouch for their character. We cannot take the risk of a traitor within the new guards we hire."

He added, "While you are there, you should also announce that we will be clearing the forest surrounding the village for farming and that we will also start constructing shelters for housing the homeless villagers. So anyone who wants to do manual work should report outside the manor gates from tomorrow. Tell them that they will get the same deal as the new guards, that is, manual work in exchange for a fixed quota of grain and coal."