

Londoner 86

Chapter 86. A Fishy Trade

"Everything is fine with him and he is providing us with tools every day," Duvas answered. "However not everyone is suited for blacksmithing work. By now Cedoron has found two men who are able to do the work properly, and he has now taken them as regular apprentices. But I did have to send a few new workers to him a few days ago, since some of the earlier workers were clumsy, and kept getting injured."

"It's true enough that blacksmithing is a risky work, and you can't have someone close to the forge who is clumsy," Kivamus said.

Remembering about the caravan, he added, "Hopefully, the caravan won't have any problems on the road, and they will reach Cinran tonight."

Duvas nodded. "Pydaso told us earlier that they were pushing the horses very hard to make this journey in two days, since it is normally a three day journey for wagons. I hope no horses get injured on the road, otherwise even this caravan might get stuck on the way, in case snow has already started on that road. Even if it doesn't seem likely that we would be able to send the caravan on a third trip, we still need all the grain they will bring back on this trip." He continued, "Also, for now I have kept providing the free meals to the villagers - the children and the elderly - just twice a day, instead of the three times a day we promised them earlier."

Kivamus frowned. In the winter weather people needed more calories than normal, not less. But it was also true that providing them three meals a day until the middle of winter, and then being unable to provide them even a single meal because they ran out of grain by then wasn't a good idea either. He said, "I don't like it, but it seems necessary. We might be able to provide them three meals if the caravan is able to go on a third trip, but for now, let's keep it at two meals a day."

Duvas nodded. "Like Madam Helga told us, if she is able to cultivate those mushrooms successfully, then those mushrooms will be helpful to add to the villagers' diets by the end of winter. But even so, we still need enough wheat as seeds to start planting in the spring, so we are not going to get an abundance of foodgrains this winter for sure, even if the caravan is able to go for a third trip. Some meal rationing would still be necessary by the end of winter in any case."

"Hmm... Rationing meals is certainly better than having people starve late in the winter, but we should have been able to do better," Kivamus muttered. "Isn't there any other way to feed them?"

Duvas thought about it for a moment, and said, "Well the northern stream does have a small amount of fish, which are sold regularly in the market square in the village. And that stream doesn't usually freeze in the winter, so that does provide a steady but small source of food. Other than that, a lot would depend on how successful are the hunting groups we make after the caravan returns."

Hudan said, "I will do my best to make sure it goes well, even though I certainly cannot guarantee anything. Yufim and Nurobo are very good archers, and an escort of swordsmen like we talked earlier, should allow them to bring some meat regularly. But there is always a chance that they are not able to find much in the snow, which would still leave us short on food."

Kivamus thought about the problem for a while, and remembered that they didn't buy anything from the only other nearby village.

"You told me that the road to Kirnos is open even in the winter, so couldn't we still buy something from there?" Kivamus asked. "Even a small amount of extra grain would be helpful to us."

"It is still not really feasible, my Lord," Duvas answered. "Like I told you earlier, I did send a guard there before you arrived here, but the prices he mentioned for wheat were astronomical. And even then, Kirnos is a small village - only a little larger than Tiranat - so it wouldn't have enough surplus grain to feed our village as well. The few farms that are located close to the coast near Kirnos are only enough to provide wheat to Kirnos itself. They don't get enough surplus of grain to sell to us even in the years of good harvest. So they certainly wouldn't have much these days when the harvest has been bad everywhere."

"I remember that, but isn't Kirnos located on the coast?" Kivamus asked. Seeing Duvas nod in reply, he said, "Then can't we buy fish from them? They should have fishermen there, right?"

"Of course they do, but they only catch enough to feed their own village," Duvas answered. "There has never been any trade of fish between Tiranat and Kirnos, since transporting a large amount of fish is very difficult between the two villages. Any merchant has to keep those fish in buckets of water on his wagon, which limits the amount of fish he can bring, and it also takes around a day and a half for a wagon to travel between the villages. Apart from that, it doesn't help that the baron of Kirnos has always been a greedy person."

Kivamus gave a laugh. "Isn't it the same with all nobles?"

Duvas gave a grin, "I never said anything like that, my Lord!" He added, "But there must be some truth in it, if you are saying so yourself."

Kivamus laughed loudly in reply.

Hudan gave a laugh as well. "Never mind that, Mr Duvas. Lord Kivamus knows we mean no disrespect. And it is certainly the truth." He asked, "So did our previous Baron never try to buy fish from Kirnos?"

"It wasn't exactly like that," Duvas replied. "Baron of Kirnos' taxes on any merchant coming to sell anything to us are just as high as our previous baron's taxes on any merchant coming here to sell anything. Overall it added up, and the prices became too high. As you can guess, our previous baron didn't care about the village as long as his own meals were plentiful. As for the rest of the village, there is a merchant in Kirnos who occasionally comes here with a wagon to transport coal back to Kirnos. And often, he brings a small amount of fish on his wagon, although he hasn't come here even once since our previous Baron died in that ambush."

He continued, "However, it's never a large amount, since that merchant only has a single wagon, and the villagers here cannot afford to buy such costly fish anyway. Also, just like the grain the merchants brought from Cinran, those fish also cost much higher than they should have because of the taxes which the baron of Kirnos as well as the previous baron of Tiranat put on every trade. That's why, usually a few villagers go to the northern stream to catch some fish, and sell them in the market square. It's never enough, but it did provide a small variety to the diet of the villagers."

"That makes sense," Kivamus replied. "However, now our situation is not great in terms of the availability of grain, so we really need every other source of food that we can get. While we can be reasonably sure that the villagers won't starve over this winter, but the amount of grains we have would only allow them to barely survive, and it would never be enough to make them feel full, especially if they have to keep working hard over the winter - which we certainly need them to do."

He added, "So what I am thinking about is, can't we start a regular fish trade between the two villages? Since the road to Kirnos stays open throughout the winter, it would help us a lot in feeding our village if we were able to buy even a small amount of fish regularly. What do you think it would cost us? I know we are already getting short on coin, but if it's even somewhat feasible, I would like to do it."

Duvas thought for a moment before he replied. "I really cannot give you an estimate on how much it would cost us, since just like the prices of grains have gone up, it would be similar for fish as well. Even though you are not levying any taxes on it since we would have to send a wagon there ourselves, Baron Kirnos' taxes would still add further to the already high costs. There is also the fact that we cannot transport as much fish on a single wagon compared to the number of grain sacks we could carry."

"How is that?" Hudan asked.

Duvas explained, "See it this way. When we carry grain sacks, the weight of the sacks used to carry the grain is nearly nothing compared to the grain itself, which means nearly the whole load of cargo that the horses are pulling is of the grain itself. However, in case of fish, we would have to keep a lot of water buckets on the wagon to allow those fish to survive the journey, and the weight of the water and the buckets would add up to a lot, which means the actual amount of fish we would be able to transport in a wagon would be very small - when compared to the amount of grain we can transport in it. That's why it costs too much to transport even a small amount of fish from there, even before the taxes."

Hudan nodded. "It does make sense. If we could just put the fish directly into the wagons like coal, we would be able to carry a much larger amount, but even in this weather those fish would become rotten soon enough if we transport them without any water."

Duvas added, "We also don't have a place here to store even the live fish, so unless we are going to eat those fish immediately after receiving them, buying a large amount of those fish would be a waste anyway."

Kivamus nodded. "In that case, can't we buy salted fish from Kirnos?"

"Salted fish...?" Duvas asked with his eyebrows raised. "I know that they are a delicacy for nobles, but preparing them requires a very large amount of salt - which doesn't come cheap at all! While it may be fine to buy salted fish in a very small amount if you want it just for yourself, we cannot possibly afford to buy enough salted fish to feed the whole village. It would just cost too much... Also, Kirnos simply doesn't have a need to salt those fish anyway, since it is located on the coast, and they can just catch more fresh fish whenever they need."

"Okay, but what if..." Kivamus asked, "What if we bought even that small amount of live fish in a wagon inside those buckets, and then stored them in water here until we need to use them as food?"