

## Londoner 281

### Chapter 281 Designing

Kivamus got up from his chair and started pacing in the room while thinking about possible solutions to improve their defence further. The crossbow which the female guards used here had been designed as a smaller version of how it used to be on medieval earth to make it more handy and easier to reload for them. However it also meant having a reduced range and power. It was still an excellent personal weapon and had been used effectively both in defence against an ambush on the road as well as from the top of a watch tower, but he also wanted something more powerful.

Something which could even kill an enemy wearing full plate armour and from a good distance, just in case one of their neighbours decided that they needed a more hands on approach to get rid of him. Zoricus might already have knights working for him, and even if he might not have enough of them to attack Tiranat, he certainly had the ear of the Count of Cinran, which meant the greedy bastard could still send knights to kill him, probably while disguising it as an accident or something. So he wanted to use this opportunity to make the defence of their village strong enough that even knights wearing plate armour and charging on a warhorse wouldn't be able to do anything to them.

Of course, eventually he planned to make gunpowder weapons here, but the village was not yet close to the technology level required for it, so he needed to think of a usable idea from before the gunpowder age on earth. Feeling glad that he used to read so much about technology in his free time on the internet, he was quite sure that coupled with his background in mechanical engineering, he could come up with something which suited their needs, while still being practical to build using the village craftsmen's skills.

He began to think about what possible defensive weapons he could design which could do the needed task without requiring gunpowder and the precision engineering of barrels and such required for a gun. That meant the weapon had to be powered by either a tension prod like the crossbow, or a torsion spring like a ballista - which had the capability for providing hell of a lot more power, but the complicated mechanism of a torsion spring would make the weapon too big and unwieldy to hold in hand.

Hmm... What if they just fixed the weapon permanently somewhere? Maybe on the parapets of the watchtowers? Yup, that could help a lot in making the weapon easier to handle even if it was too heavy to lift for one person.

In that case, maybe they could just make some bigger sized crossbows and fix them on top of the watchtowers? The current crossbows had already been used effectively from up there, they were still

personal weapons, and didn't have that good a range or power, so a bigger version of it might be good enough for their needs. He thought about it for a moment.

Hmm... It could certainly work, but it probably wouldn't provide enough of an increase in power and range to make the design worth it for Darora to learn crafting a new weapon from scratch, instead of the carpenter just making more of the standard crossbows from their limited budget to buy iron - especially with only a single skilled craftsman available to work on it.

That just meant he needed to think on a bigger scale, which immediately reminded him of siege weapons. Duvas had already mentioned that siege engines were used in the last war over Tolasi Hills between the three major countries of Cilaria, which meant Fort Aragosa must already have powerful mediaeval field artillery like a ballista, an onager or a trebuchet.

That meant the craftsmen of this age already had the knowhow for it, and even if Darora might not have worked on one of them personally since he was too young to have participated in the previous war, he should still have gotten some basic training in the concept from whomever he had learnt carpentry from. Even though Kivamus should be able to make the complete blueprint of any design he finalised, that previous experience of the carpenter would help a lot. Of course, they didn't really need a siege weapon here.

Okay, so it had to be something powered by a torsion spring, and sized somewhere between a handheld weapon like a crossbow and a full sized siege engine like an onager or a trebuchet. He tried to remember the already proven designs on earth he had to work with.

The first thing he thought of was the Greek designed siege weapon called a ballista, which also shot a bolt just like a crossbow, but it was simply way too big to put on top of a wooden watchtower, not to mention that it was a full sized siege engine focused more on offence against a fortified enemy than defence. Usually operated by at least two men, a ballista was certainly a very powerful weapon, and would likely have the range to cover the whole 500 meters of cleared area from the watchtower till the treeline of the forest. However, unless they had a whole army attacking the village in huge numbers, it wouldn't be very useful to them because it simply didn't have the accuracy at that range to target individual attackers, and that is what they needed the most here.

The primary danger to their village right now stemmed from bandits and maybe mercenaries - like the ones who had killed the previous baron. While their numbers could easily be in dozens, they couldn't attack in a number of hundreds or thousands to make it worth designing and building siege weapons. So he needed something smaller - something which had more accuracy.

In that case, on the opposite end of the spectrum in terms of power and range, he could simply design an arbalest, which was basically the same thing as a much bigger crossbow like he had considered earlier. It would have the necessary accuracy which was required here, but it might be difficult for the women to reload. Also, it wouldn't provide enough of an increase in power to increase the effectiveness and range of the watchtowers by a noticeable amount.

Hmm... Those two designs were out then. What else was there?

Thinking more deeply about it, he suddenly remembered an advanced Roman design which they had developed by modifying the design of a Ballista - namely a scorpion. It was quite similar in concept to a ballista, and was powered by a torsion spring just like it, but it was much smaller than the siege engine, which meant they could put it on top of a watchtower easily. Its major benefit was that a single person could operate it, and it was quite accurate up to a good distance. It also packed a good punch in it, and could even take out a man wearing plate armour from a lot more distance than a crossbow bolt could.

He nodded to himself. This design seemed promising. The original design of a scorpion was only meant to shoot in a straight direction like a ballista, so he would have to change the design a little bit so it could be set to pivot over a fixed base, allowing the guards to target an approaching bandit more freely. Of course, this also meant they could also shoot the bolt upwards in a parabola, which would increase its range multiple times, but in that case it would simply be too inaccurate to be of use against anything but a full sized army. No matter. As long as it worked to kill individual bandits from a good range, or even small groups of attackers, it would be worth it.

He would still have to keep the overall design small enough so it could easily fit on the side of a watchtower - perhaps on the top of a parapet - while retaining the advantages of a torsion spring and the improved range and power it provided. He would also have to create some way to make it easier for women to reload it, perhaps by using a simple pair of differently sized gears which would use mechanical advantage to help women to load it easily. Using gears to make it easier to reload was simply not practical in a handheld weapon like a crossbow, but it could be implemented in the design of a bigger and fixed weapon like a scorpion.

This way, even a physically weaker person could rotate the smaller gear more times but with a lesser amount of force, in order to rotate a larger gear - which would move slowly but with a much higher torque - which could then be used to reload the scorpion very easily by them. That should take care of the problem of reloading it easily, even by the women guards.

Yup, a scorpion seemed like the best idea for now. He grinned thinking about it. If they could successfully make some scorpions and mount it on each watch tower, it would allow Hyola and other female guards to target a hell of a lot more distance than now. Of course, they would still keep the crossbow with them, and those would be helpful if an enemy reached too close to target them with the scorpion - since they wouldn't be able to bend down the scorpion to a steep enough angle from the watchtower parapets - or to pick out individual bandits easily if they weren't too far from the watchtower.

But in case the women had spotted an approaching group of enemies from a long enough distance - which is why they had cleared such a big area around the village wall in the first place - they could use the scorpion to take them out long before the bandits even reached close to the wall, even if they were riding horses or using shields in front of them.

Of course, he had a hidden motive here. He wanted a way to allow the guards to even be able to kill enemy knights with this tower mounted scorpion - whether they belonged to an invading army from Girnalica or an over ambitious noble of Reslinor who wanted to capture his village, like the greedy bastard Zoricus - although he didn't plan to mention it to anyone else for now. He nodded to himself. This design was final then.

#### Chapter 282 Neighbourhood

From what Kivamus had been told, Darora should provide the sixth and the last crossbow by tomorrow, and after then he would be free, since all his other projects like crafting all the mould and deckle frames as well as the dozen seed drills were already completed by him. It was true that the carpenter would have to stop making crossbows after the current one anyway because a shortage of iron was preventing the blacksmith from forging the iron parts, which meant Darora wouldn't be able to make scorpions either until they bought more iron.

The scrap iron they had gotten tonight in the form of bandits' rusted swords would simply not be enough for this. Most of the iron which they had left by the time the snow had begun to melt had already been used to make new and improved farming tools like plows and trowels in the past few weeks, for which Pinoto had guided Kivamus, telling him exactly what was needed so that he could design something better. However, it meant that by now, they barely had enough iron to make repairs of all the tools being used in Tiranat until they bought more ingots.

Kivamus winced thinking about explaining their need to buy even more iron to Duvas from their nearly empty strongbox of gold. Ah well, the pennypinching majordomo would have to accept it. Making a scorpion would certainly be worth it in the medium to long term, since as their town kept growing with the arrival of more and more immigrants, it would also increase in prosperity, and that would make it a much bigger target for bandits as well as nearby nobles.

That meant he had to think about keeping their village safe in the long-term, even if it seemed like his methods would be overkill for the current dangers surrounding him. He had no doubt that as word started to get around about the revolutionary medicine they had created from losuivil leaves, Zoricus and other nobles would start salivating at the thought of acquiring that method, as well as kidnapping their budding scientist Syryne who was the one who had created it.

The sheets of paper which the workers were creating in the east of the village were primitive, discoloured, crumbly, and rough, but he had no doubt that he could eventually improve it to make a much better quality of paper which even nobles would pay money to use, apart from the merchants of Reslinor who would love to have a cheaper alternative to parchment for maintaining their accounts and books.

However, the know-how of how to make paper profitably would also be something other nobles would try to forcibly seize from him, not to mention all the gold which Tiranat would inevitably earn from selling the medicine and paper, which were two things they could already manufacture in the village, even if at a small scale for now. That meant it was the right decision to plan to defend the village even from neighbouring nobles.

From what he remembered, despite the sorry state of the village when he arrived here, the previous baron of Tiranat still managed to earn around 50 golds every month in pure profit, although that was before the price of wheat had increased this much. They also had to feed more people now which would cost more gold. Still, Kivamus didn't plan to waste that money wining and dining in taverns of Cinran like that greedy idiot, not to mention whatever else the previous baron of Tiranat did in the town to burn that much gold every month.

That meant they should still be able to earn at least some kind of profit every month once the merchants started coming regularly. No wait. They also had to pay the taxes in autumn once again, and this time they would only have around six months to gather that much gold, instead of the full year which every barony was supposed to get. He sighed. The problems never ended in this village, did they?

No matter. Once they began to manufacture paper and the losuivil medicine at a larger scale, that should provide a good stream of income for them in the coming year. If the farming project went well and their yields were anything like what he expected, they would also have to spend a much lower amount of gold on buying food from Cinran from the coming autumn. They wouldn't be completely independent of food imports any time soon, assuming immigrants kept coming here like he planned, but at least they were on the right track to attain food security for the village.

He nodded to himself. Okay then. Designing and spending the money to make a scorpion was not a waste, despite the limited amount of gold they had. Duvas would have to understand somehow, while Hudan would jump in joy seeing a possibility of improving their defences further. Remembering the scared faces of Lucem and Clarisa a few hours ago when they had found out that the village was being raided once again finalised the decision in his mind. He had to do his best to keep them and the other children safe, as well as all the other villagers who depended on him.

Coming back to the matter at hand, he knew that this scorpion was going to be a much bigger and heavier weapon than the crossbow, and would have a very different design as well, since it needed to be fixed on top of the parapets while being able to pivot easily. It would also incorporate a pair of gears to use mechanical advantage to allow women to reload it. That meant it was going to take a great deal of practice for Darora to be able to craft it, so it was a good idea to let him know about this design as soon as possible even without the availability of iron to make all the parts. There was no shortage of wood anyway, so after a few trials and errors to find the best way to craft the wooden parts, Darora could start stocking up on them immediately, while he could put his apprentices to stock up on the wooden crossbow parts, even though it would take a while to acquire the required amount of iron to finish it. It was better than keeping their talented carpenter sitting idle.

He nodded with determination and moved towards the shelf kept in the corner to bring up a fresh sheet of paper from there. Walking back to the table he took a seat and spread the sheet in front of him, putting the quill and ink on the table as well. A brazier was burning nearby to provide light from up close, while the fireplace also had enough flames in it to make the room bright enough to draw.

If he started now and worked for a few hours before going to sleep, he should be able to make a preliminary design by the next afternoon, and then he could get opinions of Cedoron and Darora on it before finalising the design by the night. The carpenter could start working on it after he had finished the current crossbow.

If they were able to buy a good stock of iron from merchants in the coming weeks, and if everything else went well, then within a month they could have the first pivotable scorpion with gears to reload it installed on a watchtower. It would surely be too late to help their defence in Torhan's raid, but it wasn't like the carpenter could keep making more crossbows without iron anyway.

Eventually, once they had installed a scorpion on every watchtower - which meant on all six of them, after all the towers were constructed by Taniok - it wouldn't be easy for any bandit to dare to attack Tiranat. Any predatory nobles living in their neighbourhood of Southern Reslinor - even if they had a horde of knights to call upon to fulfil their insatiable greed for power, money and land - would also have to think twice before daring to harm his village or his people.

He grinned as he picked up the quill and dipped it in ink. It was time to work.

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It was the afternoon of the next day and it was one of the few times when Kivamus had woken up late in this world, the other times also being on the nights after a raid. Last night, he had only gone to sleep when it was nearing morning, after he had worked on the scorpion sketch for all night, so when he was going to his sleeping room on the upper floor, he had told Madam Helga - who was already up to prepare the breakfast - to not wake him up till noon.

Right now, he was back in the manor hall with the others after having what could only be called a brunch. He had already sketched the preliminary design for the scorpion, and had sent a servant to tell the blacksmith and the carpenter to meet with him in the evening. He had been staring at the same sketch to think of any other improvements, when Feroy entered the manor hall along with the guard captain.

Kivamus looked up at the new arrivals. "Did you find out anything new about the bandits we caught? Are any of them going to be trouble for us in the future?"

Feroy shrugged. "Nobody can predict the future, Milord, but I don't think so. This group only had men here because they had left their families and children in an encampment somewhere in the forests north of us. They had planned to loot food from us and take it back to their families."

"An encampment?" Kivamus repeated with his eyebrows raised. "How many people live there?"

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"They didn't have an exact count," Feroy replied, "but there should be somewhere around twenty of their family members living there in total. Mostly women, children and the elderly, with a few men who had stayed back to protect them from any wild beasts while the rest of them had come to raid us." He shrugged, "When I asked them to tell us their location, they balked at that, thinking we wanted to kill their families in revenge, even though I explained that we would be willing to provide them food and shelter in return for anyone who is physically capable doing a suitable job in the village."

Hudan frowned. "Did they even believe that? I wouldn't trust any noble making promises to feed my family in return for giving them their location like that."

Feroy snorted. "Neither would I, but these men know that without any outside help their families would likely die in the future anyway - either by starvation or by wild beasts attacking their encampment - since most of their able-bodied men are either dead or sitting in our jail. For now they haven't had any chance to talk with the other villagers since they have been kept locked in the jail, but I'm sure they might come around in a couple of days if we allow the recent immigrants to talk to them there."

Kivamus nodded. "Good idea. Tell the farmers who had come from Kirnos as well as the limestone cutters to meet with these people, but don't let any of them leave the jail yet. It's not like we can send out our men to escort their families here anyway, with Torhan's raid coming soon in the future. If they do give us their encampment's location, we'll see what we can do for their families after the raid. Well, you both can return now. Tell the guards who had gone to patrol in the night to take some good rest for today. They deserve it. We have more than enough guards here right now to rotate the watch duties easily to give these men some rest."

"Of course, I'll make sure of it," Hudan replied. "I'm also putting double guards on the watchtowers from today in each shift - one woman guard along with an older village watchman - until we have dealt with Torhan. Last night we were lucky that there was enough moonlight to spot the bandits early, but the moon is in a waning phase right now, and a moonless night will come within a week, so we need all the help we can get to spot any approaching bandits in the nights."

"That's good thinking," Kivamus praised him, when he remembered something and looked at the majordomo. "Has the plowing of the fields been completed by now?"

Duvas nodded. "I met with Pinoto last evening, and he told me that they needed another day to plow the remaining fields. You also haven't told the loggers to stop cutting trees, so they keep expanding the farm area every day, even if by a small amount, which means more land to plow."

"That's true but don't tell them to stop until we complete the sowing to maximise the area we are farming. In any case, I think we can start a trial run of sowing today. Pinoto can leave the remaining plowing to the workers who will know how to finish it by now."

Kivamus gazed at the sunlight coming through the open window. "I think the time is an hour after noon right now, so let's tell some servants to take out a couple of the seed drills and a pair of wheat sacks and take them to the south. Pinoto can select the best farmers after their lunch hour, and we can let them give the seed drills a try and explain to them how it works. We might not get much done today, since they will need to learn how to use it properly, but from tomorrow they can start doing it at a full scale."

Duvas stood up from his chair. "Let me tell them right now so we can leave soon."

Hudan walked to the outer door as well before looking at Kivamus. "I'll get the guards ready to escort you. We just can't take any chances with your safety these days. Who knows if Torhan already has scouts here..."

"Sure," Kivamus nodded, letting both of them leave. He looked at the ex-mercenary. "You should just go and get some sleep now. I know that you aren't going to stop scouting the hills at night, so you need to get rest whenever you can."

Feroy snorted. "Trust me, milord, after living in the forests for more than a decade, my body has adapted to work on very low sleep, so I'll be fine. Still, since a raid might be coming any day, I'll take a short nap for now."

"Good. We need everyone to be at their best to deal with this."

After the ex-mercenary exited the hall, Kivamus stood up and stretched his arms above his head. Finally, it was time to surprise the farmers with the advantages of technology. The seed drills were the only reason they could even continue mining coal at the same time with their limited workforce, otherwise they might have had to stop mining completely to finish the sowing in time. But with a dozen seed drills ready now, they only need enough horses and a couple of men with each drill to lift the sacks and load the drills with seeds. Maybe a few more men to load and drive a wagon to transport the wheat sacks from the manor hall to the farms in the south. This meant they only needed less than thirty men in total at this rate, instead of more than a hundred farmers which they might have needed otherwise if they did it manually, like in the rest of Reslinor Kingdom.

He walked outside the manor hall as well, looking at the servants stacking up two seed drills on a wagon, along with some wheat sacks. There were only a pair of horses remaining in the stable today though. They would be enough to pull the single wagon, but he and the others would have to walk to the farms on foot for today.

Before long, the guard captain walked towards him with a dozen armed men in tow, apart from a pair of crossbow-women. All the guards were wearing well-used leather armour over their tunics along with leather boots and gauntlets. Each of the men had their hands ready near their swords, with their shields

tied behind their backs, while half of them were also holding a spear in their free hand, in case they had to deal with a wild beast like an adzee.

Both of the women had their crossbows hanging on their waist, with their strings already nocked - although without a bolt for now to prevent any accidents, apart from having a long dagger in their sheaths tied on their other waists. By now, nearly all of these guards had seen some combat or blood shed in front of them - both of enemies and friends - and they all looked ready to fight to the death to protect their village.

"Whoa..." Kivamus raised his eyebrows at the guard captain. "You look like you are going to attack a neighbouring kingdom with them."

Hudan laughed heartily. "Better safe than sorry, milord. I wanted to take even more of them, and every single guard had already volunteered for this when they found out that I wanted men to escort you - even those who were supposed to be resting in their off duty time - but Feroy said that too many men could also become a problem if we needed to take you away from the farms in a hurry. Although we can still use a horse to bring you to within the village walls quickly in case there is any danger to your life."

Kivamus grinned. "Well, I don't think even an adzee will want to come close to us today."

Soon, Duvas walked towards them, and pointed at a wagon which was being hitched to the horses. "The servants have already loaded the wagon. We are ready to go."

Kivamus looked up at the gentle sunshine and the mild weather of the early spring. "Looks like a perfect day for a walk. Let's go."

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Kivamus was standing at the area where the newly created fields started, along with Duvas and Pinoto. Hudan was standing nearby with a few other men, while the rest of the guards had spread around to make a loose protective circle around him. A pair of them had also been given horns and told to walk further away to spot any approaching danger quickly as their scouts.

Once the lunch hour was over, most of the ex-farmers - no, current farmers as of today - who had been resting nearby had left to continue plowing the fields but Kivamus had told the southern foremen Pinoto to hold back a few of them. Then he told them to start unloading the seed drills and the wheat sacks from the wagon, and before long, the first seed drill had been put at the start of the plowed area, and the farmers began to hitch a horse to it as pointed out by Kivamus.

Pinoto looked at the machine dubiously. "Is this iron and wood contraption really going to do the task of dozens of farmers? I know that I was present when you gave it a trial in the manor after these were built, but we just checked if the machine moved properly at that time."

Kivamus chuckled. "Don't worry, you will be surprised. I've already checked the seeding mechanism along with the carpenter Darora, and it worked fine - at least in the manor."

Pinoto shook his head in wonder while glancing at the drill, before he looked at the vast amount of plowed land in front of them, at the far end of which some labourers were still plowing the remaining land with the help of horses. It had taken nearly two weeks to plow all that land, which had given enough time to the farmers to do the required irrigating and the initial weeding of the fields.

A small group of people was also visible far ahead of them in the south, being busy in cutting more trees and transporting them away using the log-mover. "This farm is big," the ex-farmer began, "but I have worked on even bigger farms in the past, so I have a good idea of how many people it takes to work a field this size. You had told me that the village needed 110 hectares of farmland to feed the village for the next year, right?"

#### Chapter 284 The Seed Drill

Kivamus nodded at Pinoto. "Yeah, but 110 hectares were needed just for the estimated village population of under 350 residents at that time, which was before we had started taking in immigrants or even those stonecutters. For the current population of Tiranat, which is over 400 already, we will need 130 to 140 hectares of farmland. I also plan to keep taking in more immigrants throughout the year, so we are certainly going to fall short of the amount of wheat we'll need to feed everyone by the time this crop is ready to harvest, but whatever we can grow here is grain that we don't have to spend gold on buying from Cinran."

Duvas nodded, "Still, we haven't stopped clearing the forest even now, and won't stop it until the sowing is complete. It's hard to be sure without measuring it, but I think there should be somewhere around 125 to 130 hectares of land cleared as of today. More by the time we complete the sowing."

"That's still only one part of what we need," Kivamus scratched the back of his head. "It doesn't matter how much cleared land we have if we don't have seeds to sow there. Ah well, let's see what can be done about that."

"Forgive me milord, but how much will that be in terms of acres?" Pinoto asked.

Kivamus did some mental calculations. "Above three hundred acres for sure."

Pinoto looked at the fields which were ready to sow. "Three hundred, huh?"

"If I was working a field this size in the previous farm where I worked in the past," the ex-farmer continued, "then even at a rough estimate we would need more than a hundred farmers just to sow the seeds. But you told me that just around two dozen men would be enough, even if they didn't have any experience in farming?"

Kivamus grinned. "Yup, although we'll still need the farmers for weeding, irrigating the plants and such things. This machine can't do any of that. It will be you and the other farmers who'll have to check how the plants are growing and put in more water or fertiliser... uh, manure as needed. That's why I told you to only bring experienced farmers to learn how to use this machine."

Pinoto nodded. "I'm just glad I already have a few dozen people here who have already done farming near Kirnos. It'd have been too difficult for me to manage everything by myself."

Kivamus nodded. "All those farmers are yours to use wherever needed." He looked at the farmers nearby who had finished hitching the new machine to a horse they'd brought with them. "Now let's give this seed drill a try. You and the other farmers helping here can learn everything about how it works today, so from tomorrow morning you should bring all the dozen seed drills here to start sowing at a larger scale."

Pinoto nodded, and called up one of the farmers. "Bring a sack of wheat and unload it into that... uh..." He glanced at Kivamus. "hopper, right?"

Kivamus nodded and pointed at the hopper. "Yup. Put the seeds in there."

The farmers immediately began doing as ordered, and before long, with the horse already hitched to the machine, they were ready to go.

"That's good," Kivamus said while pointing at a part of the machine. "Now pull that lever to allow the seeds to start dropping from the hopper, then start walking the horse forward."

The farmers did as ordered, and soon the seeding was underway. Looking carefully, it was easy to see that the level of stored seeds in the hopper had started to go down very slowly. The field had already been plowed recently, so the ground was soft enough for the four sharpened iron-made ground openers in the front of the machine to open four narrow furrows, into which four primitive wooden tubes going downwards from the hopper were putting down seeds in a periodic way, before a loose plank tied behind the machine with ropes was flattening the ground once again which covered the seeds.

Once the drill had moved a dozen meters or so away, Pinoto looked dubiously at Kivamus. "Is it really working?"

Kivamus grinned. "Why don't you check it?"

"I better..." Pinoto muttered as he walked towards the start of the field, and used a small trowel to dig at a place where the machine had already passed. He removed the soil from that newly dug hole and peered carefully into it for a while in the afternoon sunlight, while moving his hand around in it. Before long, he seemed to have found what he was looking for, and kept staring at his palm for a while. Eventually, he shook his head and moving a short distance away, he repeated the process and once again he paused to look into the ground for some time. He did it a few more times, before telling another farmer to flatten the ground once again, and walked back to Kivamus and the others.

Duvas was still staring at the drill being pulled by the horse which only needed a single farmer to keep an eye on it, although right now the other farmers had gathered around the machine in curiosity and were moving along with it at the same speed.

Pinoto looked at the seed drill which had moved further away by now, while shaking his head in awe. "This... this is insane! It is even sowing the seeds at the same distance again and again, which would be impossible if broadcasting the seeds by hand! If I still tried to do it by myself, it would have taken me half an hour to do what this machine has done in... in moments! Not to mention all the waste of seeds it is preventing! We usually have to weed out any plants if they have grown too close together, but it just won't happen anymore!"

Kivamus nodded with a grin, "That is just a small example of the kind of wonders which better technology can provide. So what do you think about it? You are the farmer here. The drill is working well enough but is it sowing the seeds properly?"

Pinoto glanced back at the ground where he had just checked it. "The depth at which the machine is putting seeds in, is decent enough. Although I think the seeds are being put a little too far apart. This is the first time any farming is being done on this land, so we can grow more plants per acre here than we could have on a regularly sown field. I just wish we could have tested this earlier, since you don't have time to make new machines to change it now."

Kivamus grinned. "We don't need to build it again at all. I'll show you all the parts and levers when the farmers come back with the drill, but a machine doesn't mean something which is forever fixed in its working. I designed it in a way so we can modify whatever we need to. If you want, you can easily change the depth at which the drill is putting seeds in, for example when you are sowing something other than wheat, and you can just as easily change the distance between the seeds by just moving another lever a little bit."

"You don't have to build a new machine for that?" Pinoto asked in awe. "That's... I didn't expect that! If it can really do that, then I want to change it to sow the seeds a little deeper too."

"Of course, once those farmers return I will tell you how to do everything yourself."

One of the villagers who had helped in loading the seeds into the hopper and had been listening from nearby, hesitantly walked closer. "Milord, this... this drill wouldn't attack us or something, right?"

Kivamus was way too surprised after hearing it to give a proper reply. "Uh, what...?"

The labourer looked uneasily at the machine which was now coming closer to them, while sowing seeds in four rows parallel to the first four ones which were already sown. "I mean... that is a big... machine and it looks powerful. It also has sharp iron points and such. What if it suddenly decided that it didn't want to be tamed anymore and turned on us? And attacked us like an adzee? None of us would survive then!"

Duvas was now frowning at the drill, while Pinoto took a step away from the machine, which had been stopped nearby by the farmers.

"Now that I think about it..." Pinoto muttered, "I am not sure either if these machines are safe enough..."

It was only now that Kivamus understood that for these medieval people who had never seen any real machines in their lives or even heard about it, some weird new contraption which could easily do the work of a man might seem like something which also had a mind and a life of its own. Of course, living in the 21st century on earth, he had heard more than enough stories and seen enough movies of machines turning on humans and taking over the world or something, but he hadn't expected to see a similar reaction here, even though it made sense from the labourers' perspective.

Not wanting to laugh at them, since their ignorance was not their fault in any way, he took a moment to compose himself before explaining, "There is nothing like that. This seed drill - or any other machine which is built in Tiranat - is not dangerous by itself. Just like a knife or a sword can't kill a bandit by themselves. So this seed drill will do exactly what you make it do, and nothing more." He shrugged. "Of course, just like falling on your own knife would kill you just as easily as a bandit stabbing you with it, so you do have to make sure you don't stand in the path of this seed drill when it is being pulled by a horse to prevent any injuries."

Pinoto and the other labourers listened carefully as he continued, "Even so, this machine does not hold a mind of its own, and it simply cannot even move a single step without a horse pulling it. You saw how we had to carry it on a wagon earlier, right? It didn't walk here on its own."

Once others nodded, he added, "You all know the carpenter Darora, don't you? He and his apprentices built this seed drill by their own hands with the help of the parts which the blacksmith Cedoron provided. If we remove the nails holding this machine together, it will become nothing more than a bunch of wooden sticks and some iron. That is all it is. So don't worry, it is never going to attack you."

The labourers looked doubtfully at the machine before they nodded, while some of them started whispering to each other, but now with smiles on their faces.

Pinoto stared at the seed drill for a moment. "I believe you, milord. As little as it makes sense for something like this to be created by human hands, I don't think anything built by you can ever harm the villagers."

The other men and women listening from nearby nodded at that, while some of them spoke openly in support.

"Yes! Lord Kivamus made it. It'll never hurt us!"

"That's true!"

Kivamus smiled at them, pleased that they didn't think the machine was a demon from the hell coming to kill them anymore. He looked at Pinoto and the other farmers. "Well, let me show you all how to adjust the drill to make it sow the seeds at different distances and depths. Other farmers are plowing the fields right now, but you all can explain it to them tomorrow so we can start sowing at full scale."

With that he walked towards the seed drill to describe its primitive but effective controls to the farmers. It was time to show them the marvels of technology.

Chapter 285 A Dangerous Region

~ Ustaimo ~

Damn it, his back was aching so much today... Ustaimo groaned as the wagon jolted on another pothole on the narrow dirt road passing between the dense forests of southern Reslinor. Damn that Zoricus! It was that bastard who had said that the carriage Ustaimo was planning to travel in was suddenly needed for another journey somewhere else, which meant the Count's mansion could only spare an open bed wagon for him - a wagon which was only meant to carry cargo! Not humans! Of course, the other carriages usually present in the mansion had also disappeared at the same time for some reason. No doubt another one of Zoricus' schemes.

As expected, the Count had readily agreed to his financier who had said that they needed that last carriage to fetch some other baron who wanted to visit Cinran. Ustaimo had no doubt that it was only an excuse made by Zoricus to make him travel on a wagon which would be a lot more exhausting and even back-breaking than a carriage - which was supposedly reserved only for those of noble birth. He cursed as the jolt from another pothole on the road made him wish he hadn't come on this journey at all.

Damn that good-for-nothing bastard! May he choke on his wine tonight! He grinned thinking of that vision. Wouldn't that be wonderful news to come back to after this journey?

He looked at the dense forest of Fedarus trees surrounding them on all sides, where new leaves had only recently started to grow again. It had been a few years since he had last travelled on this road, but he didn't remember the journey being so unbearable that time. Or maybe it really was, and it was his memory which was getting weak. Or perhaps he had just gotten older and his body wasn't capable of such long journeys anymore at this age.

He wondered how many such journeys he had taken in the past while working for the Count. Way too many, he decided after a while. Ustaimo sighed. He didn't know how long he could keep doing this...

He looked to the front and saw the single knight which had been given to him to escort the wagon riding easily on his horse in his full plate armour, although his helmet was hanging beside him for now. The young knight's visage didn't show any strains of travelling for nearly two days on such a road. Ustaimo shook his head. Ah, to be so young and fit... Two more guards wearing chainmail armor were sitting on the drivers' bench of the wagon, while another two of them were resting near him on the wagon bed, along with the teenage squire of the knight.

Ustaimo had no idea which of these guards were provided by Zoricus, so he hadn't been able to find himself to trust any of them. When he had left Cinran yesterday morning, the possibility that Zoricus might have planned an ambush on their return journey which of course wouldn't leave any survivors had been making him anxious with worry both for the tax gold as well as for his life. But then he had found out who the knight provided to them was, and that had eased his mind a lot.

This young man had turned out to be a distant relative of Count Ebirtas himself. Ustaimo had known the boy since he was young, and had no doubt of his upstanding character and his loyalty to the Count and the Knight Commander. It was very much possible that this young man was only sent to escort this wagon to keep him away and safe from any Binpaazi raids in the east, where most of the knights of Cinran were being sent these days. Either way, unless Zoricus' men among these guards slit this knight's throat when he was sleeping - which wouldn't end well for anyone - this young man should be able to protect the tax gold as well as Ustaimo's life on this journey. Well, as long as a whole pack of adzees didn't ambush them, or Goddess forbid, a bakkore! Ustaimo shuddered even thinking about those savage creatures.

Still, while this escort of six armed men - including a mounted knight - would easily be daunting for any bandits and wild beasts on the road if he were travelling to any barony in the domain of Count Cinran other than Tiranat and perhaps Kirnos, it simply wouldn't be the case for those two baronies.

In the northern barons' cases, they didn't skip any opportunity to provide the taxes on time to make sure the Count remained happy with them, and that's why Ustaimo rarely needed to travel to their villages. Otherwise, who knew, the Count might find himself a little too busy to provide help on time if another raid from Binpaaz threatened those baron's villages.

Apart from the barony located in the west of that greedy bastard Zoricus - who was probably richer than the Count these days - a barony could rarely afford to hire more than a couple of knights, usually those who weren't good enough even in their prime to have earned a grant of land for themselves, and had been retired from service by the Count or the Duke. Those one or two retired knights were simply not enough to protect a baron's village against even a minor Binpaazi raid - which could consist of at least a dozen mounted knights, if not more. That's why those barons always remained fully deferential to the Count and paid all their taxes before time. But that concept didn't apply in the far south of the kingdom, which consisted of the two most remote baronies in the whole kingdom of Reslinor.

While Kirnos had always been there to provide a good port to import iron ore and some other rare goods from the free cities located in the southern wastelands of Cilaria - at least until the previous war ended - and to trans-ship them north to Ulriga and beyond, Tiranat didn't even exist two decades ago. That region was located in the middle of the vast southern forests of Cilaria, and it had always been considered far too dangerous for humans to live. It was a regular hunting ground of wolves, bears, the terrifying flying monsters called bakkores, as well as other apex predators like adzees.

That meant these forests had always been the refuge of outlaws, bandits and mercenaries from all over the kingdom, making it a far too treacherous place to live. Only the most daring of hunters and mercenaries would take the risk to venture there, whether to hunt for exotic adzee pelts or to catch a runaway outlaw or slave with a particularly high bounty. That's how it had been for most of his life spent living near Cinran, until two decades ago.

Honest people had only started to live in this region when prospectors had basically found a mountain load of coal veins in that area just after the previous war ended, otherwise nobody in their right mind would ever want to live in or even visit the region where this isolated village was founded. That's why he always felt a chill in his bones when he was ordered to go to Tiranat. He just never knew if he would return to Cinran in one piece after any such journey.

Ustaimo shook his head, trying not to think of the image of an adzee snacking on his old bones. There was no point in unnerving himself even more than he already was. The good thing was that he only had to visit this village once in a few years at most.

Even so, he was looking forward to meeting this son of the Duke who had become the new Baron of Tiranat. He had no idea of the circumstances under which the Duke of Ulriga would have sent his own son somewhere so far away from his home and in a place where such pampered nobles wouldn't want to live more than a few hours at a time.

Still, he realized that the relations between this boy Kivamus and his family couldn't be too great if he had been exiled there. If anything, Ustaimo felt sympathy for him. It must not have been easy for this young man to survive the harsh winter near the mountains in this destitute village after living for all his life in the luxury of the Ulriga Palace. Not to mention, Ustaimo had a good idea that Zoricus must already be thinking of a way to get rid of this new baron after he had likely done the same for the previous one. That bastard's greed had no limits.

He gave another sigh. Well, it wasn't like this was anything new. Nobles' politics were always like that. As long as he kept his head low and performed all the tasks given to him by the Count on time, he should live to see another day.

Coming back to the present, he glanced at the tall fedarus trees surrounding them on all sides. The sun was quite low in the sky now, peeking between the trees on his right. That meant sunset wasn't far away and he certainly wasn't looking forward to staying another night in these dangerous forests, not to mention it seemed like his back would kill him if he had to sleep one more night on the bumpy ground under the wagon.

Still, it wasn't like the accommodations were going to be luxurious even in Tiranat, nor was he used to any kind of luxury. He had lived on bare minimum of necessities for most of his life, but after going through the back breaking journey for the past two days, what he wouldn't give to be allowed to sleep for a night in one of the opulent beds where the nobles slept in...

He sighed. Ah, well, it probably didn't matter. He was born a commoner, and would die a commoner. There was no point in wishing for things which the goddess didn't want for him. For now, all he wanted was to reach Tiranat before dark. The howls he had heard when sleeping under the wagon yesterday still scared him, so at least staying inside the walls of the baron's manor in that poor village would mean he should be safe until he had to return.

As a sudden gust of wind made him shiver, although only a little, he felt glad that it wasn't that cold anymore. The winter was already over and while the early spring air often held a chill in it, it was no comparison to the icy gales of the winter.

Suddenly his thoughts were interrupted when he saw the knight craning his neck upwards, while standing up in his stirrups. What was the problem? Was there a wolf pack ahead of them? Or Goddess-forbid, an adzee pack?

Chapter 286 A Weak Memory?

Ustaimo was waiting for the knight to announce what the danger was, when the young man sat back on the horse and looked back with a grin. "Hey, I see walls ahead of us. It must be Tiranat. Hope they have some good wine here!"

One of the guards sitting on the wagon bed perked up on hearing that, and began to look to the front, making Ustaimo chuckle at him. That must surely be one of Zoricus' guards, going by his willingness to get away from dangers of the road, and to perhaps find some ale in the village.

"Let's go inside then," Ustaimo called back, thanking the goddess that he wouldn't have to stay another night in the open.

It didn't take long until he saw open terrain approaching in front of the wagon, with a wooden wall visible in the light of the setting sun further ahead. Huh... shouldn't the trees be overlooking the walls of the manor? From what he remembered from the last time he was here, those fedarus trees easily reached close to the roof of the manor house. Weird. Perhaps a fire had burned the trees on the side?

Soon their sole wagon as well as the knight escorting them had passed the tree line, and he saw hundreds of yards of completely cleared ground from there to the walls. He looked to the other sides, and was surprised to see that a similarly cleared ground was present even on the eastern and the western sides of the walls. So it wasn't just a result of an accidental fire. This looked to be done deliberately. But why?

They kept moving ahead and Ustaimo turned his head to look to the front again, when he suddenly saw something he should have noticed long ago. There was a tall wooden structure located just inside of the walls, very close to the gates which were located next to the eastern end of the walls. Wait... that looked like a watchtower. He had seen similar watchtowers built in many places in the east of Cinran to allow the Count's men to spot any approaching raid or even an army of Binpaaz when he had visited a farm there in the past. So yes, this certainly was a watchtower.

He frowned. Okay, now they were getting into bizarre territory. As weak as his memory may be these days, he was quite sure that there wasn't a watchtower inside the manor the last time he had visited here. Was this really the small and pitiful village of Tiranat?

For a moment he wondered why hadn't the knight commented on these changes, before he realised that this was likely the first time the young man was visiting this village, so he must have had no reference to compare it to. He probably thought the watchtower had always been there.

Ustaimo glanced around, and now that he knew what to look for, he saw another similar structure - most likely another watchtower - under construction near the western end of the wall as well. Okay, so his memory wasn't failing him. This proved that these watchtowers were certainly built recently. This second watchtower was nearly complete with only the roof remaining to be constructed. In fact, he saw a few men working there even at this time. But why would the carpenters be working so late in the day?

Usually the labourer's work hours ended an hour before sunset in every village or town, so they could have the time to buy whatever they needed from the marketplaces and return to their homes before it got completely dark. Was the Duke's boy Kivamus some kind of tyrant, then?

Ustaimo couldn't think of any other reason why any workers would be willing to work till this late. Was the baron using his influence and power as a son of the Duke to scare the workers into working? That had to be it.

He scowled thinking that another newly made baron had started to follow the exact same heartless principles as other nobles. This had already begun to sour his opinion of this new baron. Knowing exactly how difficult it was to live a commoner's life under the boots of a hard taskmaster lord, Ustaimo sympathised with these workers. After the greedy baron of Tiranat had been killed last autumn, then instead of the poor villagers getting some relief for their sufferings under him, they had been given a tyrant to rule over them... He sighed. Why did the goddess not see the plight of the common people in this kingdom...

He craned his neck upwards, trying to look further ahead of the walls, and realized that there were two other similar watchtowers visible in the distance, probably located on the other side of the manor compound. That added up to at least four new watchtowers which didn't exist in the past. Just what was happening here?

At this point Tiranat looked like it was better prepared for a raid from Binpaaz than Cinran was! Of course, that was an exaggeration, since this village didn't have even a single knight to defend them, and these were only wooden walls which wouldn't stand any chance against a barrage of fire arrows often used by Binpaazi armies, but it was still astonishing to see so much change here. In fact, it looked like this destitute village was preparing for war! This didn't make any sense at all...

Ustaimo blinked, noticing that the guards accompanying him as well as the knight in front of them were also turning their heads here and there, trying to look at everything at once. So they were also surprised by it, after all.

Suddenly, he looked at the palisade walls in front of him spanning far from east to west and remembered something, which made him doubt his memory again. Was the baron's manor always this big? Those walls extended for a few hundred yards at least, but wasn't the baron's manor much smaller than that? In fact, where was the rest of the village they were travelling to? Shouldn't he be seeing the huts and shacks of the poor village somewhere in the west of the manor walls by now?

He felt a pang of dread in his heart. What if this tyrant baron had burned down those huts, leaving the villagers to the mercy of the elements in the winter? Is that how he had found the raw materials for making these new watchtowers?

Ustaimo glanced at the tall fedarus logs supporting the base of the tower platform and shook his head. No, none of those huts were built from logs. Most of those were mud houses and had thatched roofs, which meant these towers were made from newly felled trees. But where were all the houses then?

He kept wondering about it as the knight approached the gates, the wagon following close behind him. He glanced up at the watchtower again and from this close, he saw an older man looking at them with keen eyes as well as an archer with his bow ready in his hands, along with a... woman...? She was wearing the usual leather armour commonly used by most baronies' guards while peering down at them from the watchtower platform. But why was a woman up there?

For a moment he grimaced thinking that those disgraceful men had brought her to the watchtower for their pleasure, which meant their new baron must have allowed this - even if implicitly - before he shook his head. No, the look in the eyes of that woman wasn't that of someone who would be cowed by anyone. It seemed like if anyone tried anything crass with her, she would cut them down right where they were standing. That relieved his heart in some way, even though he didn't even know that woman or these men personally. Although he still wasn't sure why there was a woman up there pretending to be a guard.

Wait, she couldn't really be a guard, could she? That didn't make sense at all! He hadn't heard of women being guards in any village at all. In fact, this reminded him of something weird he had seen when he had visited Dorastiz - the capital of the kingdom - years ago. Ah well, that was surely irrelevant here.

Either way, the guards had seen them approaching by now, so hopefully the gates would be opening soon, and some warm food and a comfortable place to sleep would be awaiting for them all. Hopefully.

The young knight stood up in his stirrups after approaching the gates and looking at the watchtower, he announced loudly, "We've been sent by the honourable Count Ebirtas of Cinran to levy the long overdue taxes on this village. Open up!"

The woman standing up there stared at them for a moment before she asked loudly, "I don't recognise you, sir knight, so I can't open the gate for you just yet. Is there a tax collector in your group?"

Ustaimo easily noticed that the knight seemed to be simmering at his orders being denied, although the young man forced a smile on his face anyway.

"As a matter of fact, there is," the knight replied.

The woman standing on the watch tower platform nodded. "Tell me his name then."

The young knight glanced back at Ustaimo for a moment before looking back at the woman. "It's old man Ustaimo. He's sitting back there on the wagon."

Ustaimo raised an arm on his name being called, and nodded at the guards on the watchtower. "That's me."

The woman talked with the other guards in a hushed voice for a moment, before she nodded. "Alright, Sir Duvas told us to expect him."

Then she called out to someone else while leaning from the side of the tower, and the wooden gates of Tiranat finally began to open. The knight escorting them entered inside first while riding his horse slowly, followed by their wagon.

The moment they entered inside, Ustaimo immediately noticed at least four other well armed men in sight who looked ready for anything in case the newcomers tried something, with their hands on their

scabbards and shields tied behind their backs - likely not realising that they didn't even stand a chance against a knight - before one of the guards moved closer to them.

"We've been expecting you, Sir Knight," the burly guard began. "I apologise for the delay, but we needed to confirm who it was before opening the gates. It's a dangerous time for this village, and we have just dealt with a bandit raid recently, so Lord Kivamus asked us to make sure we knew it was the tax collector, before allowing you to enter."

The young knight glared up at the woman standing on the watchtower platform for a moment, before he grunted. "Lead us to the baron's manor. It's been a long journey."

Chapter 287 The Tyrant of Tiranat

The burly guard nodded after hearing the knight's order. "At once! Just give me a moment, then please follow me." The brawny guard had a hushed conversation with another man wearing leather armor, who gave a nod in reply and started running at full pace towards... the village.

Ustaimo gave a sigh of relief only now noticing the usual dilapidated huts and shacks in the distance. Yes, the village of Tiranat was still there, alright. Although... Why did it look like someone had set the village on fire? Most of those huts looked like burnt husks at best, and even the rest of them looked damaged in some way. In fact, he could barely see any movement near those shacks. Where were the villagers anyway?

Maybe he will find out soon. Looking around him, he hadn't expected this many guards standing ready just to defend a single gate. They also didn't look like the usual slobby, plump men guarding other similar villages and baronies like this. All of these men looked extremely fit - probably more than any guards he had ever seen, including those employed by the Count in Cinran - other than the knights and their squires, of course, and it looked like they would easily be able to take on anything coming to attack them. They certainly looked confident enough for that.

Soon, the burly guard walked ahead of them and gestured to them to follow him. The knight nodded, and began riding his horse slowly next to the guard, while their wagon followed behind them.

Ustaimo heard the sound of the gates closing behind them once again, making him exhale in relief. They were safe from adzees, at least for tonight. Then he looked in front of him, and noticed something unexpected. Again.

The huts and shacks were still visible ahead of them maybe a hundred yards away in the light of the setting sun, but there were some new wooden buildings here on the left side of the road which didn't exist the last time he was in Tiranat. And these buildings were... huge.

There was a plume of smoke visible from inside the building, probably from some kind of cooking, while a wide dirt road ran in front of it, with... He squinted for a moment. Were those gutters running parallel to the building...? Yes, they were! Amazing... Tiranat had gutters now! He hadn't heard of any baron's village in the domain of Count Cinran having these drainage gutters! Even Cinran only had them in the affluent section of the town, while the rest of the town still had to deal with some occasional flooding during the rainy season.

Ustaimo shook his head in wonder. He did realise that this new baron had lived in Ulriga for all his life, and that was a big city - which was much, much bigger than Cinran, and had proper drainage gutters running around throughout the city - without which it probably wouldn't be possible to handle the rainwater in such a large city. Maybe this Kivmaus Ralokaar was trying to emulate Ulriga's drainage system here...?

Well, it seemed at least something good came out of the Duke sending his son to Tiranat, even if the new baron seemed to be a tyrant. The Tyrant of Tiranat - the title suited this baron. He scoffed. Even if this village's people starved to death like in all the past winters, at least they wouldn't have to worry about drowning to death under their new baron's rule! He snorted thinking about it, making the other guards in the wagon look at him in curiosity. Perhaps the Goddess' ways really were incomprehensible to mere mortals like him.

As the wagon reached closer to the first huge building, he still wasn't sure what it was, since it kind of looked like it was a small walled compound made of logs, although there was also a roof above it. Soon he saw an open gate in the wall, where a steady stream of villagers were going inside and out. Most of them seem to be men returning after their days' work was done, while there were also many women carrying infants and entering the building. Hmm... this building had to be some kind of living place then.

Although it was weird how so many people could live in such a cramped place. It looked more like a giant barn than a proper house, but none of those people seemed to be dispirited. If anything, most of them looked happy in some way, and were chatting merrily with others walking near them. Weird... This didn't make it feel like their new lord was a tyrant. This was the look of a village with a very benevolent lord. He sighed. It was hard to make sense of anything here.

As their wagon moved ahead, he noticed a small group of kids passing nearby while snickering at something. Feeling glad to see those kids laughing merrily, he strained to hear their conversation,

knowing that most kids didn't know how to lie, which meant they were often the best measure of how a new lord was ruling a village.

One of the kids seemed to be boasting to his friends, "See? I told ya'll, didn't I? Right from the morning I knew that I was going to gather the most sawdust today. I can't wait for the winner's cookie! Once again!"

Ustaimo frowned. To gather sawdust? Why would they even do something like that? He strained his ears trying to hear their conversation and hoping to learn more about the changes in this village.

"Yeah, yeah..." another of the kids grumbled. "We all know you're the winner. It's not like you haven't told us a dozen times already!"

"But how did ya know that in the morning before we even went to gather it?" a girl asked curiously.

The winner seemed to bask in his victory for a moment, before he leaned closer to the others. "What I am telling ya'll is a secret, 'kay? Don't tell anyone else, 'specially you, Elsie! I don't want Lucem and Clarisa's group to find out 'bout this trick and start winning again." Once the other kids nodded enthusiastically, he pointed at something in the distance, "Ya'll see that watchtower? That's where I got the extra sawdust to take to the wood press machine!"

"But how?" The girl frowned. "We pass near that watchtower every morning when going to work! There is no sawdust there... I saw it this morning too!"

"Yeah! You work with us all day in the south anyway."

The winner snickered. "Of course there isn't any of it left in the morning, since I already swipe it every evening. Ya see, some carpenters work with wood there all day, so by evening there is a good stack of sawdust gathered there. So I just go to wait near them before our work time ends, and on the days when there is enough sawdust there, I swipe it from here to take to that machine. It's easy work, and that's why I've been winnin' for the last few days!"

Others in that group oohed and aahed hearing that trick.

"So that's where you disappear every evening!"

Another girl glared at the winner. "But you told us that you were tired and were just going to take some rest!"

The winner shrugged with a grin. "That's how I won, Maisy!"

"Wow..." another boy muttered. "I'm going there too from tomorrow!"

The winner smirked. "Sure you can. But this watchtower will be completed by tomorrow, and there will be no more sawdust to collect after that." He laughed loudly. "Why else do ya'll think I told ya 'bout my secret?"

The other kids grumbled about selfish friends, as their group moved too far away from the wagon for Ustaimo to hear clearly.

Suddenly, something he had heard in the kids' conversation popped in his mind. Work time? These kids had work times?

He exhaled, pitying the villagers and their kids. This new baron really was a tyrant then. Child labour was far from unheard of in Reslinor. In fact, outside of nobles' families and those of some rich merchants, there was hardly any village or town in the kingdom where at least some kids and children didn't have to work. Whether it was to support their families, or just to earn a few coppers to buy some food for themselves if they were orphans, most of the kids often had to do some simple work. But that was always a choice for them. This was the first time he was hearing kids having regular work hours like adults! It felt heart-breaking to hear that. He wondered if he should have a word with the new baron about it.

Then he shook his head in dejection. No, there was no point in that... He was just a commoner doing the work allotted to him by the count. There was no way any noble would hear anything he had to say to them, especially if said noble was a son of the Duke...

Most likely this tyrant would just get angry at him, and might even try to punish him in some way. His old body really couldn't take another round of lashing. He gave a deep sigh. No, as much as he disliked

this, it was probably better to just keep his head down and turn his eyes away from anything like this happening here if he wanted his head to remain attached to his body.

Soon, their wagon moved ahead of this huge building, and they passed another wide dirt road set in a grid layout with the building, ahead of which another similar wooden structure was located. It seemed to be a similar kind of building like the previous one, going by the stream of people entering and exiting it. This time he even saw a weird kind of cart being pushed by a man, but it just had a single wheel! The man had to lift it from the other side to move it, so it made sense that this weird cart didn't just fall over, but how could the baron be this much of a miser? Why couldn't he have just attached another pair of wheels to this cart to make it easier for the villagers!

He sighed once again. It really was hard to make sense of anything here.

Their wagon and the knight's horse kept following the guard when he noticed the beginning of another wooden palisade wall in front of them, this one much smaller than the outer one. Oh, so this was the baron's manor! Finally, he would get to meet this enigmatic Lord Kivamus... Was he a tyrant, forcing workers to work beyond the sunset to fulfil his wishes? Or was he a benevolent leader, doing his best for the villagers by providing housing for them after their huts were burnt? It was time to find out.

Chapter 288 Out of Sight

~ Kivamus ~

It was late evening now, and the sun had nearly set by this time. Right now, he was looking at the blueprint of the scorpion he had sketched, which was spread out on the long table in the manor hall. Duvas was sitting nearby rechecking the tax ledger once again, while Fero and Hudan were discussing something amongst themselves. Gorsazo had gone into another room to give the evening lessons to Syryne after he had returned from the longhouse blocks and given the very basic classes to everyone there.

An hour ago, Kivamus had returned from the farms after explaining all the levers and controls of the seed drills to Pinoto and the other farmers. They had been surprised to see that it was so simple to change the depth of the seeds sown and the distance between them, and by the end of the day, just those two seed drills had been able to sow a decent area of the fields, which was far more than what those farmers could have done manually.

By the time he had left from the farms, all of them had become admirers of the new machine, as well as staunch supporters of new developments like that. That had pleased Kivamus more than anything, since he wouldn't be able to raise Tiranat's progress further just by designing and constructing new machines.

He needed the support of the locals for that, and thankfully they all have been receptive to his new ideas for now, even though one day people would certainly only start to fear the machines replacing their jobs, like it had happened in England during the first industrial revolution, but it would take a while. At least the first step of becoming self dependent in food production had begun well, so Zoricus and other nearby nobles wouldn't have the power to bend Tiranat to their whims just by threatening to starve out the village.

From tomorrow, Pinoto had promised that he would explain the process to the other farmers as well, and they would start using all twelve seed drills to start sowing. The old farmer had given a rough estimate that if there weren't any problems, it should take around two weeks to complete all the sowing, which would also give some extra time to the loggers to clear some more area of the fields in the south.

The best thing about it was that while those two weeks were longer than he had expected with the dozen seed drills, it would still only need less than thirty farmers in total to operate all the seed drills while also doing the necessary weeding and irrigation, which would leave the remaining villagers to keep mining coal as well as to work on the other construction projects. He still needed to find a better solution for irrigating the farms instead of relying on the farmers hauling buckets of water from the village wells to the farms, even though the wheelbarrows would help in that. Hopefully, they would be able to buy enough wheat in those two weeks to use as seeds.

After returning from the farms, he had met with the carpenter Darora and the blacksmith Cedoron and had shown them the preliminary design of the scorpion he had made. Darora had been enthusiastic to try something new - now that he had given the last crossbow to the manor today and didn't have any other pending tasks - especially about the pair of gears which were to be installed on the sides of the scorpion to allow guards to load it easily. On the other hand, Cedoron had grumbled about the shortage of iron ingots, which was preventing him from doing anything more than just simple repairs to the broken and damaged tools being used all around the village.

The coal miners were also having to make do with less than half a dozen safety lamps which had been built until now, which meant there simply weren't enough of them to ensure all the mineshafts could be used safely. That's why they had to revert to using tallow candles again, although that was only done after confirming the mineshafts were safe by checking ahead with the safety lamps, which was better than the past years, at least.

The blacksmith had already used up the iron from all the rusted swords they had gotten from the bandits, so while he had also seemed eager to learn to build something new - particularly something he hadn't even heard of before - but without getting more iron, he could only sit and watch the carpenter at work for now.

Even so, while his preliminary design of the scorpion had seemed good enough to both of the craftsmen, Darora had suggested adding a small wooden board outside the watchtower platform at the same height as the parapet to fix the scorpion's pivot, instead of fixing it directly above the parapet. This would allow the scorpion to be placed a little ahead of the platform, and this way, the guards could even shoot easily to the sides of the watchtower without the corner pillars hindering their sights. Kivamus had grinned seeing the ingenuity of the talented carpenter, and had agreed to make some changes in the design.

Once that was done, he had assured them that he would finish the design as soon as possible, so they could start working on it. Or at least, start familiarising themselves with their design in the blacksmith's case. Eventually, he sent both of them back to their tasks and looked at the guard captain.

"Hey, Hudan! You've made sure that all the crossbows have been put out of sight, right? We can't risk letting the tax collector or anyone else from his escort and guards getting to know about them. They must be reaching here any day now."

Hudan nodded. "Yeah. I took all of them from the watchtowers and put them in a storage room of the servants hall. There is no way any knight worth his salt would ever enter the servants hall for any good reason. Sir Duvas has already told me that the tax collector is nearly as old as him, so he wouldn't be going around too much for walks either."

"I have to say, milord," Feroy interrupted, "I don't like this. The only reason we made those crossbows was to allow the watchtower guards to kill any bandits before they approach the walls or try to set them on fire or something. By hiding the crossbows until however long this tax collector stays here, we are playing with fire here. What if the bandits attack before that, maybe even tonight? What use would the watch towers be in that case?"

The guard captain looked at the ex-mercenary. "I have already arranged the watch shifts so that there is always an archer on watchtower duty at night."

Feroy shook his head. "Other than Yufim and Nurobo, none of our other archers are worth their salt. The crossbow-women are much, much better shots than all of our archers except those two, but without those weapons they can't do anything anyway." He shrugged. "Still, even assuming Yufim and Nurobo are able to pull an extra long duty every night for 12 hours instead of the usual 8, that's still just two good archers we have, but by tomorrow we'll have four watchtowers to post guards at. How's that going to work?"

Kivamus thought about the problem and he couldn't say that he disagreed with Feroy's opinion. It was true that the primary reason for making crossbows was to make the defence of the village easier, but what was the point if they couldn't even use them when needed? That fact was even more true when they were already expecting a raid and from probably the most powerful bandit group in this region. It would have been so much better if they could keep using the new weapons...

He futilely wished that instead of crossbows, they had something smaller like guns here, which could be hidden much more easily on someone's body compared to the crossbows which were much larger. In that case they could have allowed the watchtower guards to keep the guns with them even when the knights and the tax collector were coming, since it wasn't like they were going to do a full body check of the guards to see if they had some new and unique weapon on them.

Wait... that was a good idea, actually. Why couldn't they just hide the crossbows too? There had to be a way for this... He thought about the talented carpenter whom he had just sent back - who was also mostly free these days - and grinned.

"Hudan, I have a good idea. Go and bring the carpenter back. He must still be in the manor."

The guard captain nodded quizzically, and ran outside, and before long, he was back with Darora inside the manor hall.

"What is it, milord?" The young carpenter asked with worry about being called back so soon.

Kivamus smiled at him. "I have a new task for you. This is of utmost importance, so you need to do it as soon as possible."

Once the carpenter nodded, with curiosity easily visible in his eyes for another new challenge, Kivamus continued, "You already know that the tax collector is coming soon with his usual escort of knights, but we can't let them know about the crossbows just yet. For now we have hidden them away from the towers but that's not good for the village's safety, so I need you to make a secret compartment on top of the watchtower platforms. It needs to be big enough that it can easily hide a big quiver of bolts as well as at least one, and preferably two crossbows there - since I don't want you to build it again."

Darora nodded slowly, while gazing into the distance. "I think I see what you mean."

Kivamus continued, "It also needs to be made in such a way that it is not easily apparent that it is actually a hidden compartment." After thinking for a moment, he decided that a cuboidal shape would work here. Then he spread his hands around half a metre wide. "For that, I think you can fix a plank around this wide parallel to the parapets as the vertical side of this compartment on one inner edge of the platform, and then cover it with a removable plank, which should be around one half - no, one third of that width. That should be enough to make a compartment which is as wide as the full side of the platform, while being half a meter high and around 20 centimetres deep."

#### Chapter 289 The Layout

He looked at Darora. "As long as you fix the plank edges cleanly enough to the inner sides of the parapet and the floor of the platform, this compartment will just seem like a part of the design of the watchtower, and any visitors would barely give a second glance to it. This way even if the tax collector or one of the knights climb up there to check the view from the top of the watchtower, they wouldn't find anything suspicious - other than the fact that a tower exists where it didn't before - while allowing the guards to have easy access to the crossbow whenever they need it. When those knights are away from the towers, the woman guards can easily take out the crossbows as needed, while being able to hide it easily in case one of the tax collector's men visits up there again."

Feroy grinned after a moment. "I really like this idea, milord! This is so much better than hiding our most important weapons away from the watchtowers right when we are going to need them the most. That compartment sounds like it will be big enough to hide two, and probably even three crossbows easily, along with a pair of bolt quivers, which will be useful when we are able to permanently post two guards there in the future."

"I agree with him," Hudan nodded. "Whenever the cover of that compartment is closed - with that height it will just seem like a simple bench made for sitting, which serves our purpose of hiding the real use of it."

Kivamus looked at the carpenter, not mentioning openly that that size of a compartment would also be just big enough to allow the guards to hide a pair of guns there - whenever they were able to manufacture them here in the future - in case another such visit happened by nobles from Cinran or other knights. "So what do you think? Can you do it?"

Darora thought for a moment before he grinned. "I always love a new challenge! Of course I can do it!"

"Perfect!" Kivamus smiled. "How long will it take you? I need it made on all the watchtowers as soon as possible."

The carpenter rubbed the back of his neck for a moment. "It's simple enough. I just need to nail a pair of planks of the right size there, which will hardly take any time as long as I have the materials ready. Hmm... I think Taniok should still have some extra planks left tonight, which he must have already cut to finish the roof of the fourth watchtower tomorrow. We'll probably have to saw them off again to cut them in the right size, but if he agrees to give them to me, I'll just need enough nails to make it, although I don't think Cedoron can make more of them right now."

"Taniok must have enough nails as well which he would have saved for building the roof," Kivamus replied. "You can use them. In fact, you should tell him and his apprentices to help you as well. Let him know that I said this is even more important than finishing the watchtower roof, so you both should work together to finish it faster."

"That will make it much easier!" Darora grinned. He glanced at the open window of the manor hall in the west. "It's still not completely dark, so I think we can get that compartment built on at least one watchtower by tonight, and then we'll finish up the remaining of them tomorrow morning as soon as it gets bright enough to work."

"That's excellent," Kivamus praised. "Even if the tax collector comes this evening, he and the others with him would be tired enough after the journey that they wouldn't want to go on any tour of the village or visit the watchtowers before having breakfast tomorrow. That should give you enough time to finish all of them."

"Of course, milord," Darora nodded. "I will do my best to finish them as fast as I can. The good thing is that with the sky already getting dark by now, and all the hustle and bustle from the villagers returning from work, nobody is going to care about a few men doing some simple repair work on the watchtowers, since those are still under construction anyway. Tomorrow morning we will be done with this before the villagers even notice us."

"That's great." Kivamus looked at Hudan. "You go with Darora to convince Taniok to work on this first. The old carpenter is a headstrong man and very proud of his work, so he wouldn't easily agree to stop making the roof or give up his raw materials and help Darora unless you confirm that the order came from me."

Hudan stood up from his chair. "As you wish, milord." He looked at the young carpenter. "Come on!"

With that, the guard captain and Darora exited the manor hall once again.

Kivamus glanced at the majordomo who was still busy peering into the tax ledger, before looking at the ex-mercenary. "I just hope this visit goes well. We already know that we don't have the full amount of the tax, so we just have to hope the tax collector is flexible enough for this. Duvas has been trying to check again and again just to see if he can find something he missed which could reduce our tax liability, but that seems like a lost cause by now, since he would have found it already if there was such a way."

Feroy nodded, before glancing at an inner door which opened at the same time, from which Syryne entered the hall.

Kivamus looked at the young woman. "How was today's lesson? Where is Gorsazo?"

"Oh, he went to talk with Ma in the kitchen. Today I learned about something which is called trigonometry!" Syryne replied enthusiastically. "It seems very complex, and I don't think I have much interest in anything which has too much to do with numbers, but like you told me earlier, learning something new is never a waste, so I'll still try to learn as much as I can."

"Good," Kivamus smiled, knowing that her interests lay more with things to do with nature and biology instead of mathematics and physics, but he was still glad that she was at least giving it a try. He had good hopes for her becoming an excellent biologist in the future, but hopefully they would soon find someone who was interested in other subjects as well.

Gorsazo had already mentioned a few bright prospects in his class in the longhouse blocks, including Clarisa - their young maid, as well as Maisy - who was an adopted daughter of a village merchant named Kigeir, but those kids were only beginning the long journey of education right now, and it would take years before they were ready to learn more advanced topics. Well, laying the foundations of scientific thinking and proper education in the village was still a good start.

The outer door of the manor hall opened once again, and this time it was a guard who entered inside while looking like he had just run a marathon. This didn't look good.

"What is it?" Kivamus asked urgently.

"Milord, the... the tax..." The guard put his hands on his knees to take a few deep breaths before he stood up. "The tax collector is here. Tesyb told me to run here as fast as I could to tell you."

Duvas put down his quill and looked at the guard, while Feroy stood up in anticipation.

"Who else is with him?" Kivamus asked the question which had been floating in his mind.

"There was only a single wagon where four guards were sitting along with an older man - who must be the tax collector from what you've told us in the past. But, there was also an armored knight riding a horse in front of them!"

Duvas frowned. "Only one knight, you mean?"

The guard nodded. "Yeah. We closed the gates after the group entered the village, and there was only one man in plate armor. The rest of the guards were wearing chainmail armor."

"Alright, you can go back to your post now," Kivamus said and waving him away, he looked at the majordomo. "Didn't you say there were at least two knights with the tax collector usually, whenever he visited Tiranat in the past?"

Duvas nodded. "This is the first time I'm hearing Ustaimo visiting with only one knight to accompany him. I can't think of any good reason for Count providing him with just a single knight as an escort on that northern road, especially when he expects to take back such a big amount of gold with him."

"Well, I guess we'll find out soon enough," Kivamus muttered. "Where would these people stay anyway?"

"Usually the knights were each given a full room to themselves here in the manor house," the majordomo explained. "The same goes for Ustaimo. The rest of their guards were sent to the servants' hall to stay with our own guards."

Kivamus nodded, feeling glad for the first time that the manor house had more than enough rooms for this. On the upper floor, apart from where he stayed in what was easily the biggest room of the manor

house, there were three other rooms. One of those was occupied by Madam Helga and the young maid Clarisa, the second one he had given to Syryne, while Lucem had also been lucky enough to get his own room.

On the ground floor there were six rooms in total, apart from the manor hall and the kitchen. One of those was occupied by Duvass, while they had turned another room into a study room for Syryne, who had gladly accepted the couple of books about the history of the kingdom which had been kept in his own room so she could practice some reading.

The makeshift laboratory where Losuvil leaves were processed to make the powdered reddish medicine had used up the biggest room of the ground floor, while Hudan and Feroy had also been allotted a room together - although they were rarely present there these days - which left two rooms empty. That should be just enough for the solitary knight and the tax collector this time.

While Kivamus had been thinking about the layout of the manor house, Feroy seemed to be lost in thoughts as well.

The ex-mercenary looked at the majordomo. "The tax collector sounds old enough and he wouldn't be of any threat to anyone, but I'm not sure if letting an unknown armed man within the manor house and so close to Lord Kivamus is a good idea."

#### Chapter 290 Precautions

Feroy continued, "We have no idea of where the knight's true loyalty lies, and these days there aren't even any other guards who stay in the manor house to protect our lord." He shrugged. "Technically Hudan and I are both supposed to be here, but these days I've been staying out in the forests in the nights to scout any approaching bandits of Torhan, while Hudan keeps going out to check the guards again and again. That means the manor house is usually left without any guards, and if staying here, the knight would basically be free to do whatever he wants with no one to stop him. Are you sure we can't make him stay anywhere else?"

"What? Of course not!" Duvass stared at the ex-mercenary. "It's customary for anyone of noble birth to be given a room in the manor house here. At least that's how it was always done by the previous baron."

"He also didn't have to fear being assassinated by other nobles like Lord Kivamus," Feroy countered. "Even then, look where trusting other nobles got him!"

"We have no proof to say it was some other noble who killed the previous baron," Duvas sighed, "but I see what you mean."

Feroy nodded. "After two assassination attempts of our lord, it would be tempting fate to allow an unknown armoured knight to stay within the manor house, especially in the night."

Kivamus thought about it and he had no reason to disagree. As much as he had trained with Hudan in the basics of sword fighting - and even if he was a lot fitter now than when he had arrived in this world - he simply wouldn't be any match for a knight in full plate armour if that man wanted to kill him. After looking at Syryne who was sitting nearby with a touch of anxiousness visible on her face when she heard about a knight of noble birth being able to visit the upper floor any time at night, Kivamus made his decision. They had to take some precautions here, just in case.

"What can we do about this?" he asked. "Just because the previous baron liked to do things in a certain way is not a good enough reason for me to keep doing the same thing."

The majordomo seemed to be thinking about it. "I agree that it's risky, but we just can't let the knight stay in the same room as our servants and other guards. It would be an easy way to make the knight furious at us, which would eventually mean the Count also gets angry at us, and we simply can't afford to do that right now."

"In that case," Feroy announced, "I will post a couple of other trusted guards here to shadow Lord Kivamus all day, so that he'd never be alone with the knight or any of the count's guards even if Hudan or I are not around for some reason. Right now we have enough guards in the manor to be able to do this easily, and at night, I'll sleep in the manor house as well, along with another guard until the tax collector has left the manor."

"But what about staying in the forests for scouting?" Duvas asked with a frown. "Your room is also too far away from that of Lord Kivamus to help him on time in case he needs it, because you had asked for it to be like that so your coming and going in the night wouldn't disturb him."

"Nothing else would matter if our lord is assassinated," the ex-mercenary said, "so I'll send another guard to the forests to keep an eye there." Feroy snorted. "And I'm not going to have a nice sleep in my room here. I'll post two trusted guards right outside the door of Lord Kivamus' room on the upper floor, which should be good enough since there aren't any other entrances to his room. I'll also make sure the windows are locked properly in his room when he goes to sleep, while I'll stay at the bottom of the stairwell every night." He smirked. "An armored knight or not, there is no way anyone can climb up the

stairs if I don't want him to. I would prefer if Hudan stayed here as well, but one of us will usually have to stay outside the manor house to organise the guards quickly in case of a raid."

Duvas gave a slow nod. "That should work. We can't restrict the knight to his own room by posting a guard outside it, but this works better anyway. Even if the knight wants to go for a stroll or something in the night, he has no reason to go on the upper floor where the women and Lord Kivamus stay, and we'll just tell the knight that the roof is damaged, so that isn't an option either."

"That's good!" Feroy added, "I'll also post another few guards to patrol around the manor house all night, so none of the other guards who have come with the tax collector can try to sneak inside in the cover of the night. We can't afford to provide this kind of security for Lord Kivamus permanently, but these days we have enough guards for it."

Kivamus shook his head after hearing the elaborate preparations being done to protect him, like he was a president or a prime minister of a whole country who was visiting an enemy nation on earth. He sighed. But this place wasn't located on the earth, was it? Even if it did sound a little excessive, it was better to be safe than sorry.

"I agree. Let those guards know that in exchange for pulling this extra duty, they'll get a couple of rest days after the tax collector has returned."

Duvas stared at him. "They are guards working for you and they are already being paid well for this. I don't think they need to be given anything else in exchange for doing what they are meant to do anyway. We can barely afford to pay that many men as it is..." he muttered in the end.

Kivamus shrugged. "I don't deny that, but forcing someone to do something means they are simply not going to perform at their best. But this way, they'll have something to look forward to in exchange for this extra watch duty, and that will give them a good reason to stay awake and alert all night."

"Well, that's true enough I guess," the majordomo agreed.

Kivamus glanced at the door, wondering when those people would arrive, when his eyes went to the shelf near the dining table where all his blueprint parchments were kept. "Shit! We forgot to remove those! We can't let any of them find out about these designs!"

He immediately got up and jogged to the shelf and started to pull all the parchment aside. "Sryne, Feroy, help me here!"

With the three of them working together, it didn't take very long for them to roll up all the parchments and papers which had something drawn on them. Kivamus glanced for a moment at the Tiranat-manufactured papers remaining on the shelf since they were still empty. "Actually, let's pick up those as well. There is no point in risking these people finding out about our capability to manufacture paper."

As he and the others began to roll up the remaining papers as well, he added, "In fact, Duvas, the servants who work to make paper every day should have returned by now, so after we're done here, go and tell them to bring all those sawdust mush buckets, paper moulds and deckles back inside the manor and store them somewhere out of sight. We won't be making any paper as long as the tax collector stays here."

The majordomo nodded in reply as he picked up the last sheet of paper.

"Where do we keep these?" Sryne asked with a bundle of rolls in her hands.

Kivamus immediately thought of offering his own room, since basically nobody else visited there, before he realised that it could be a problem in case he had to bring the tax collector there for them to talk alone and come to a solution about the shortage of gold for the tax.

While he was thinking about where to hide the papers, Sryne looked at him with worry. "Wait, the losuvil processing room is right in front of the empty rooms on the ground floor. Isn't that where the knight and tax collector will be staying? We need to hide it too!"

Being reminded of that room, Kivamus chided himself for not thinking about it earlier, but felt glad that he had others to help him here so he didn't have to do everything himself. Hearing about that room had also given him a solution. "That's true. So let's take all these parchments and papers in that room and lock it from outside. That'll keep all the blueprints and the losuvil medicine safe and away from their eyes. If anyone asks, we'll just say it's a storage room for damaged chairs, tables and such."

Duvas nodded from nearby. "That'll work. I will keep the keys with me at all times, just in case, but calling it a storage room should prevent anyone from getting suspicious. There has to be a storage room in any noble's manor house, after all."

"Good, then let's do this before they arrive."

With that, their small group began to carry all the parchments to that storage room, which could easily turn out to be a secret treasure trove for any visitors who found it. Feeling glad that they had thought of everything in time, they got to work.