

## Londoner 291

### Chapter 291 A Knight in the Manor

Kivamus was sitting in the manor hall once again, finally being glad that they had hidden all the blueprints and the powdered medicine away from sight. Once he had returned back to the hall after locking the room, Feroy had noticed the simple sketch he had made of the paper making process on the very first sheets of paper they had manufactured here being stuck on the walls. That was just in time because as soon as the ex-mercenary removed those sheets of paper and exited the hall to hide them away, the outer doors opened and Tesyb walked inside, looking nervous for probably the very first time.

"Milord," the burly guard reported, "Ustaimo - the tax collector and his escorting knight are here."

"Good. Let them in," Kivamus ordered, while glancing at Duvas who was sitting nearby with the tax ledger in his hands. Feroy had already called up two other guards earlier, who were standing in the corners of the hall now, just in case they were needed.

Tesyb walked out and this time he returned with a wiry old man in tow. The tax collector looked to be around fifty years old - so around a decade younger than Duvas - but it was still quite old for this world's short life expectancy. Deep furrows were etched across his forehead - probably from decades of squinting at a tax ledger in poor lighting - while his slumped shoulders told of a difficult journey on the road for a man of his age. He was wearing the usual drab tunic commonly worn by those not of noble birth, while even those clothes had certainly seen better days.

Following behind him was the first knight Kivamus was seeing from up close in this world. This was a young man, probably in his mid twenties, and his confident gait spoke of a person who was used to his orders being followed. The plate armour he was wearing had been polished to a mirror-like sheen, the metal easily reflecting the flickering light from the fireplace. Ornatly decorated steel plates of what Kivamus had recently found to be called cuirass, pauldrons, vambraces, gauntlets and so on, as well as the helmet held under his arm, showed intricate craftsmanship and designs, which probably wouldn't be easy to afford even for a knight.

Hmm... Kivamus guessed that most likely this young man hailed from a noble family, instead of a commoner who had been elevated to a landed knight for his services. There was no other way this man would be able to afford such an elaborately decorated armour which looked more for showing off instead of being made for practical use.

That being said, he was surprised to see that the polished plate armor looked like steel - instead of the usual wrought iron commonly used everywhere in this world - although it was probably to be expected if this young man was of noble blood. However, the manual process which was used by the blacksmiths and armourers to produce even this small quantity of steel in Reslinor was very complex and time-taking, due to which this plate armor would probably be more valuable than a big tract of land in this world.

He recalled when Cedoron had told him about how his father used to help in making steel plate armour in Ulriga, back when the man was alive and his family lived there - and it was certainly a very long and elaborate process. Starting from iron ore in a bloomery to smelt a red-hot bloom of iron, then hammering it to remove the unwanted slag - although with the help of waterwheel powered trip hammers in Ulriga - and then shaping it into the commonly found wrought iron ingots was only a start.

Only after that could a talented blacksmith start the carburization and quenching of that wrought iron to increase the carbon content and produce mild steel - which usually took days and made it very costly to own this advanced metal in this era. The armourer would then start shaping the metal by beating it repeatedly to forge each piece individually and then shaping and cutting the steel armour - often according to each individual knight's measurement. Suffice it to say, it was a very intricate and difficult process, which meant only the rich nobles could afford to use steel.

Duvas' cleared his throat and stood up to greet the new arrivals, bringing Kivamus' mind to the present. "Ustaimo! My friend! It's been so long since we last met."

"You flatter me, Sir Duvas," the tax collector replied with a short bow, firstly to the majordomo - who was still born in a noble family in the north of the Kingdom - then to Kivamus. "Greetings, my lord. I hope you don't mind our late visit."

Kivamus stood up as well and smiled at Ustaimo. "Not at all. Taxes have to be paid after all."

The tax collector returned the smile and gestured at the knight. "This is Sir Tuilas, nephew of Count Ebirtas of Cinran."

The young knight barely gave any bow to Kivamus, just completing the formality with a nod of his head, while completely ignoring Duvas. He gazed at the wooden walls of the manor house. "So this... is where the Baron of Tiranat lives? Looks like... a hovel."

Kivamus forced a smile, already not liking this knight's ways. "Well, I'm sorry it doesn't meet your noble standards, Tuilas," he riposted, pointedly ignoring the honorific for the name. Even if this knight was a nephew of the Count, technically he did outrank Tuilas, after all.

The young knight glared at him for a moment, before he grunted and took a seat near the fireplace without waiting for an invite.

Ustaimo glanced at both of them anxiously, before he sighed. "Well, it's been a very long day, milord. If it's okay with you, I'd like to have some food before taking some rest for tonight. I don't think I can make any sense of numbers for the tax right now after travelling on that bumpy road for two days."

Kivamus glanced at Duvas, who looked impatient with the tax ledger held tightly in his hands, likely wanting to get it done as soon as possible, before he gestured at another free armchair. "Of course. You can rest here for now."

The majordomo took the cue. "Madam Helga is preparing something delicious for tonight, I believe. Your rooms have already been prepared, so you can sleep in comfort after having supper."

For a moment Kivamus wondered about what Reslinor's custom was regarding him - a baron of noble birth - and a tax collector who was not a noble, as well as a knight, and whether he should be sitting and eating in the same room as them, which would signify them being of equal ranks, before he snorted. He hadn't come to this world by choice, but he had no reason to follow all the customs of Reslinor, nor did he believe in the differences of nobility and commoners.

If anything, that was a custom he would prefer would become obsolete from this kingdom - if not now, then in the future. So he would do what felt right to him. Anyway, since Tiranat was just a small village, and it didn't have a huge castle or a vast residential living place like the Ulriga Palace, it wasn't like he had too many options to find another place to sit and have dinner. So he walked near the fireplace as well to find an empty chair.

Once everyone had taken a seat, Kivamus said curiously, "I've heard that usually two knights were sent to accompany you in the past. The road connecting Cinran to Tiranat is quite dangerous, so I'm surprised to see only a single knight with you."

Ustaimo pointedly glanced at Sir Tuilas, before looking back at Kivamus. "I'm sure the knight commander of Cinran did his best to provide us proper protection."

Kivamus took the hint, and didn't ask anymore. For now. There was a story here, but this seemed like a topic for when the nephew of the Count was not sitting right next to them. He snorted. Well, he was sure they could find some other idle things to talk about even with Sir Tuilas in earshot.

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It was the morning of the next day, and everyone had just finished their breakfast in the manor hall. The night had gone without any incidents, which meant either the knight didn't have any intentions to kill him, or maybe Fero and the other guards being present here had postponed his murderous plans. Only time would tell.

Duvas had gone to bring the tax ledger after he was done eating, while the usual two guards had continuously been standing close to Kivamus, just in case. Fero had also been up for most of the night while guarding the stairwell, so he had been told to take some rest now.

Gorsazo had returned to an inner room to teach Syryne - who had not been present for breakfast today, unlike the usual mealtimes when she and her family usually ate along with the others living in the manor house. The simple reason for that was Sir Tuilas' excessive and completely unwelcome advances on Syryne last evening. While the knight had kept his hands to himself, it had still been bad enough that Kivamus had wanted to put Tuilas in jail for the duration of his stay here, but imprisoning the nephew of the Count wouldn't end well for them, so he had grudgingly told Syryne not to help out in serving the meals and stay out of sight of the knight. So for now, she was helping her mother in the kitchen in her free time, while the maid Clarisa and Madam Helga herself had served breakfast.

"I think I'll take a round of the manor now," Sir Tuilas announced as he stood up.

"Of course," Kivamus said while gesturing to the outer door. "We are going to be quite busy discussing the tax numbers for the next few hours anyway. Feel free to stretch your legs in the meantime. If you want some workout, I'm sure our guard captain Hudan will be willing to accommodate you."

Probably not understanding just how outmatched he would be in a mock fight with the giant, at least without wearing his full plate armour, Tuilas grunted. "We'll see."

Kivamus looked at Tesyb, who was standing nearby. "You go with Tuilas to escort him. Make sure to show him around to the southeast where Hudan must be training the guards around now."

The brawny guard nodded, the twinkle in his eyes showing that he understood Kivamus' intention to keep the knight away from other places where he could cause trouble - such as the servants' hall, where other maids stayed along with the female guards - even though Tesyb didn't say anything out loud.

With that, the knight walked outside the hall along with the guard, leaving Kivamus alone with Ustaimo as well as another guard.

#### Chapter 292 Taxes

Before long, Duvas was back with the tax ledger in his hands. Once the majordomo handed over the ledger to the tax collector of the Count, the wiry old man stood up and walked to a chair kept closer to the open windows, before taking a seat there and opening the ledger. Duvas also sat near Ustaimo to explain any inconsistencies, not that it was likely - with how many times the majordomo had gone over the numbers already.

Not having a chance to work on his blueprints for now in the presence of the visitors, Kivamus settled down nearby as well. This was going to take some time.

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It was nearing noon, with Kivamus sitting in the manor hall for nearly two hours by now with the tax collector going over all the numbers again and again. With each passing minute, the frown lines on Duvas' forehead had been getting deeper and deeper, with the majordomo having to explain in detail why Tiranat hadn't been able to sell any coal in the last few months before the winter, with their previous Baron murdered on the road and no merchants coming to the village to buy it. Once Ustaimo had accepted the explanation, he returned to peer at the ledger once again.

While waiting for the tax collector to complete his scrutiny, Kivamus had met Feroy earlier in the morning, when the ex-mercenary had told him that instead of a carriage, the tax collector had come here on a wagon, which was rare - although not unheard of, according to Duvas. So, some time ago when Ustaimo had taken a break to get a glass of water, Kivamus had asked him about why he had been accompanied by only one knight as well as about the wagon. The tax collector had hesitated for a moment, before giving a sigh and explaining the reasons.

That had led to the revelation that most likely, it was Baron Zoricus behind this - who didn't see eye to eye on anything with Ustaimo - since the tax collector believed that the avaricious baron was draining the treasury of the Count with loans at extremely high interest rates, apart from sending his thugs to take protection money from the merchants of the town to line his own pockets. Ustaimo had even tried to inform the Count about it in the past, but at that time the Count had just shrugged and said he was only imagining things.

Ustaimo's current opinion was that even though Count Ebirtas must certainly have realized the true character of Zoricus by now, he was in such a deep debt to Zoricus today, that he simply couldn't afford to make his primary financial backer unhappy with him by asking such unwanted questions of him. However the word must have gotten out to Zoricus about this, so that gluttonous bastard had been doing his best to get Ustaimo out of his way, including by sending only a single knight to protect him on that dangerous road.

Kivamus had also been told that Zoricus had sent one of his own guards with the wagon - even though Ustaimo didn't know who it was - and that had immediately made him wary of Zoricus' true motives. So he had told Feroy about it in private, so the ex-mercenary could have their own guards shadow him. Only time would tell if that greedy bastard only wanted to protect the gold with his own trusted man to get his interest payments on time from the Count, or if he had some ulterior motive here.

However, this did mean that Baron Zoricus was even more powerful than Kivamus had ever thought, if he had control over the finances of the Count of Cinran, and had such a leverage over him. It wasn't going to be easy dealing with that bastard in the future, one way or the other. On the other hand, it meant that this was a good chance to make their first ally in Cinran.

Ustaimo had been a native of Cinran for nearly all his life so he didn't like what Zoricus was doing to the town, and what he would do in the future if he gained more power. That meant if Kivamus could somehow convince Ustaimo to become supportive to Tiranat, they wouldn't just have an ear in the Count's court, they would also gain someone important who could advise favourably for Tiranat in any of the future decisions of the Count. Who knows, if Ustaimo became their ally, maybe they could even get an extension for paying the full tax.

Ustaimo had also mentioned the recent Binpaazi raids in the east of Cinran, which was a very sobering thought. Although it didn't seem like a war was imminent, since it was just some small and scattered groups of knights harassing the farmers and damaging their crops for now, it still felt like Binpaaz was testing their defences and readiness for a more serious offensive in the future, whenever it may be.

For now, Cinran seemed to have enough knights that they had been able to deal with the Binpaazi raiders, although it had needed them to send a majority of their active knights to the east. Apart from a risk of a war in the future, this meant that unless Binpaaz stopped its raids, most of the knights would be busy in the east and the nearby areas of Cinran town would be patrolled even less than they were right now - which was barely anything - and banditry would be on the rise in that region, and certainly around Tiranat and perhaps even Kirnos.

He exhaled. Nobody knew if and when another war would break out over the vast iron deposits of the Tolasi hills, but he realised that in such a case Tiranat would most likely be left to its own devices, and they would have to manage their own defence by themselves - not that he expected much help from them anyway.

Still, this news proved that he was right to prioritise their safety even at the cost of basically emptying their treasury by hiring so many guards, while also spending his limited time designing new weapons of war and keeping their only two carpenters busy making new crossbows and watchtowers - not that he could afford to skip finding out new ways to increase their revenue in the future. It was going to be a delicate balancing act to make sure he did enough to protect his village, while being able to ensure they could afford it by earning sufficient gold.

Soon, the outer door opened and Tesyb walked inside. Following behind him was Sir Tuilas in his full knightly armor, apart from the helmet. A frown was easily visible on his face as he took a seat, while the guard went to his usual position nearby.

"Aren't you done yet, Ustaimo?" the knight asked with annoyance, before taking a big gulp of water directly from the wooden jug.

The tax collector shook his head. "Not yet, Sir Tuilas. I have to make sure all the numbers are correct. There can't be any mistakes in this."

The knight huffed. "Do it fast, then. I don't want to stay in this useless village any longer than I have to. There aren't even any good taverns here!" He glanced at Kivamus with a disdainful gaze. "Just a pitiful alehouse in that half-burnt marketplace, which barely has any stock left. How do you people even survive here?"

Kivamus ignored the nervous glance Ustaimo threw at him, and tilted his head while looking at the knight. "Oh, did you start drinking already, Tuilas? It isn't even noon right now."

The knight snorted. "There wasn't anything good to drink at that alehouse anyway. How could you not even keep a few bottles of good wine here? Is this little village really as broke as it looks?"

Kivamus wanted nothing more than to throw this self-centred bastard in jail for a night so he would learn his place, but held his anger for now. "Well, Tuilas, I'm not much of a drinker anymore, and us Tiranati people are usually too busy at work these days for any major drinking."

"You people have no idea how to enjoy life then..." Sir Tuilas said with a smirk, before he turned away to stare outside the window.

Kivamus shook his head at the young noble. Someone born as a noble in this world would never understand how hard the villagers had to work just to survive the winter, with barely any food for the people and bandits always ready to loot what little they had.

He glanced at Tesyb and raised his eyebrows, wanting to know if the knight had caused any trouble, but the guard just shook his head. He snorted. Well, there was still time for it. Although as long as the knight kept his hands to himself, he would ignore Tuilas' words as someone who had simply been born too rich to see the harsh realities of life in this world.

The tax collector got busy in his ledger once again, with Duvas ready to explain any discrepancies.

It took quite a bit of time before Ustaimo finally closed the tax ledger, rubbing his tired eyes after that. He looked at Kivamus with nervousness for a moment.

Kivamus didn't know what to make of this man being so tense around him since arriving. Was Ustaimo scared of him? But why?

The tax collector glanced at the majordomo before looking back at him. "Sir Duvas may be getting old, but he never makes any mistakes in accounting. Still, I had to check everything myself, but just as I expected, there were no problems in it. The Count will still be disappointed to see that your revenue was lower because of not selling any coal in the autumn, which means his overdue taxes are also lower accordingly."

Duvas breathed a sigh of relief. "So we have to pay 857 gold and 4 silver, right? That is what the taxes come out to, at 20% of our total revenue."

Kivamus waited to hear the tax collector confirm it. Right now they had just under 700 gold left in their treasury, and that was after they had scrimped on every copper for the last few months. Hopefully the tax collector would give them an extension for the remaining amount.

Ustaimo glanced at him with nervousness easily visible in his eyes, before he hid it and looked at the majordomo with a shake of his head. "No, that is what it would have been if the tax rates had remained the same as the usual 20%."

Kivamus frowned. "What are you even talking about? The tax rate has been the same 20% for nearly two decades now."

The tax collector flinched. "Uh... You already know about the Binpaazi raids which have been increasing since last summer, so the Duke of Ullriga had decided to raise the taxes by 3% late last autumn to arm his men and Fort Aragosa better, just in case a war breaks out. Obviously, the Count needed to raise his own taxes accordingly to pay the Duke, but Lord Ebirtas also has some uh.... interest to pay on his debt, so he has raised his taxes further, and now he requires 25% of your total revenue to be paid to him, starting from the taxes overdue since the last autumn."

Chapter 293 Negotiations - Part I

"What?" Duvas stood up in anger. "This can't be right! You can't just increase the taxes without telling us in advance... This is simply not fair!" The majordomo glanced at Kivamus with worry. "We also have to pay another full year's taxes in just eight more months! This... this is cruel!"

Kivamus tried hard not to show stress on his face. This... this might really bankrupt them. They didn't even have enough wheat to use as seeds, and they had just about used up all the smoked meat they had saved up to feed the villagers. The Rizako mushrooms might be used in a pinch, but ideally they needed to give another month to it so they could be harvested in a sustainable way. They had also captured nearly a dozen rabbits by now, but they needed to preserve them so they could start breeding the animals and find a way to get fur and meat regularly instead of killing them all in an emergency, which would barely feed even the manor residents for a day.

They did have a few chicken and even some sheep along with a couple of cows, but even killing all of them would probably not be enough to feed the whole village a single day, and it would destroy any hopes of finding as a sustainable way to get a variety in their diet, if they couldn't afford to buy more wheat and soon.

He took a deep breath. "Calm down, Duvas." Once the majordomo took his seat again, he looked at Ustaimo, not liking where this conversation was going. "So how much will it be now?"

Ustaimo opened the tax ledger once again to confirm it, before he replied, "At the new rate of taxes, it will be 1071 gold, and 9 silvers."

"1071 gold?" Duvas repeated angrily. "We can't pay anything close to that right now!" It only took a moment for his anger to deflate into depression. "We have gathered a good amount of coal by now, but it wouldn't nearly be enough to pay for the difference..."

Ustaimo shook his head reluctantly. "Count Ebirtas has told me to only take gold this time, since we don't need much coal - now that the winter is over. That's why we only brought a single wagon with us."

"But..." Duvas protested, "you always agreed to take some coal in exchange whenever we were short on gold in the past!"

The tax collector sighed. "It doesn't seem like Binpaaz is going to stop raiding our farms any time soon, so the Count needs that gold to prepare for that future, just in case. Filling our storage barns with coal in the approaching summer isn't going to help us deal with them."

"Our people are going to starve if we can't buy more wheat soon..." Duvas breathed. "We simply can't pay that much right now..."

Sir Tuilas, who had been listening passively until now, looked at them in bewilderment. "Can you really not pay even this much? Don't you have a whole village to tax for this?" He shrugged without waiting for an answer. "Still, it doesn't sound like it's something to worry that much about. Just give us some of your slaves along with what you have in gold, and I think you should be able to fill the shortfall easily."

Kivamus clenched his fists, but kept his mouth shut about his real opinion on this matter. This wasn't the time to let these people know that he didn't keep slaves here.

The knight looked at him with a contemplative eye for a moment. "Actually, I think I might be able to help you here. If you sell me the girl who served supper yesterday... uh, Syrene was her name I think -

then I'll pay you a very good price for her on credit. You can use that credit to pay some of the taxes and I'll pay it in gold to Ustaimo after returning to Cinran. It's a win-win, isn't it?" Tuilas seemed to be lost in his own thoughts at the moment. "Ah, Syrene is a real beauty, isn't she?" He glanced at the inner door. "Where is she anyway? Haven't seen her since yesterday."

This audacious bastard! Kivamus gritted his teeth in silent fury, barely managing to control himself from ordering Tuilas to be thrown in jail immediately, consequences be damned.

Duvas looked at Kivamus with concern, while Ustaimo just looked nervous. "Uh... she's busy... with some personal work," the majordomo replied in a low voice.

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However, Tuilas seemed to have not noticed others' expressions, as he rubbed his smoothly shaven chin. "In fact, I'll go one better for you. I saw another real looker in the manor when I was out for a walk. I didn't approach her today since she was with other maids at the time, but I did ask her name from another servant. She is called Leah, I believe. If you sell both of these women to me, I'll give you a good package deal for them. It won't make you rich, but you'll be able to pay the taxes no doubt."

Kivamus was still just as angry as earlier, but hearing the knight wanting to buy the freed slave girl Leah - who lived with Cedoron now - actually made him pause and consider it for a moment. Not because he wanted to sell her, but because of a morbid curiosity to see what little specks and stains would be left of this brazen knight to send back to Cinran after the hulking blacksmith was done with him for daring to buy his girl.

Imagining that sight improved his mood a little, but he had no good thoughts left for the knight at this point - even if Tuilas' behaviour was likely the norm for this world's nobles, for whom acquiring a pretty slave or two on every trip of theirs was probably an everyday occurrence.

"None of the residents of this manor are for sale," he grunted. "No matter what price you offer. Just give us a few days to think about what to do about the taxes."

Sir Tuilas stared at him for a while. Probably realising that he wouldn't be returning with two new slave girls by his side without resorting to kidnapping them, he glared at Kivamus. "There is nothing to think about! I want to leave tomorrow morning, so you have until then to raise all the gold. I'm not returning

with anything less than what you owe, no matter what." With that, the young knight stood up, and exited the manor hall again through the inner door, likely to rest in his room until lunch. As it had been instructed earlier, Tesyb followed him, so the knight would stay in his room instead of roaming around the manor house unsupervised.

With the infuriating knight out of the hall, Kivamus had to take a few minutes to calm himself, since he wasn't sure when was the last time he had gotten this angry. He would also have to make sure that Tuilas didn't try kidnapping anyone when leaving. He seemed more than capable of doing such a thing.

Trying his best to regain his composure, he looked at the tax collector again. "You have to understand our situation, Ustaimo! After the previous baron lost all the tax gold last autumn when he was killed on the road, we didn't even have enough gold remaining with us to pay the tax even at the older rate, so we had been thinking about asking for an extension just for that." He exhaled loudly. "We won't even have any gold left to buy food for ourselves right now if we pay you all the gold we have. And that was with the older tax rate. With this new rate of 25%... I simply don't see how we can pay you that much by tomorrow..."

Ustaimo shook his head. "There is nothing I can do about this, milord. A few weeks ago Baron Zoricus had suggested charging triple the usual interest rates from Tiranat for the delay in the taxes if you couldn't pay it this time. But he and the Count changed their minds after the latest Binpaazi raid, and now they want the gold immediately, one way or another."

"One way or another, huh...?" Kivamus muttered in a low voice. He didn't know when such a day would come, but there will come a day when nobody will be able to make such merciless demands from Tiranat by threatening them with force. He will make sure of it.

"Isn't there anything you can do to help us?" Duvas pleaded. "We have known each other for what, two decades now? Can't you just give us an extension of just another month? We might be able to sell more coal and raise enough gold by then."

Ustaimo sighed. "I realize that, but like I told you, it's simply not in my hands. I'm just here to verify your revenue ledger and calculate the taxes, and to count the gold we take back with us. Sir Tuilas and his guards are the one who are here to enforce the Count's demands, and they have been ordered to do whatever is necessary to bring back the gold. I simply don't have any power to stop them..."

Kivamus exhaled again, feeling the powerlessness of owning just a small village in front of behemoths like the Count of Cinran and his brothers in Ulriga who ran the duchy, and had whole armies to call upon

to enforce their wills and get the gold they were owed. Zoricus already had pockets deep enough that he was willing to go to any lengths to capture Tiranat, while today just added another knight to the ever-growing list of nobles who wanted to see his village ruined. He sighed. Running and protecting his village wasn't going to get easy anytime soon.

"If you can't give us a month's extension," he asked, "at least give us a few days to think of a way. Don't we deserve that much?"

Chapter 294 Negotiations - Part II

Ustaimo looked at them with reluctance, "I understand your situation..."

"No, you don't understand it!" the majordomo interrupted angrily. "We simply don't have any way to raise that much gold by tomorrow! I told you earlier in the morning that we have been raided three times in the past few months, where the first raid burnt half the village. What little savings the villagers had gathered have already been taken away by bandits in those raids. Even if that hadn't happened, you already know that Tiranat is a dirt poor village, so we can't even raise any emergency tax from the people, when they barely even have enough food to eat every day! How are we supposed to find that much gold by next morning?"

The tax collector just shook his head in resignation. "I feel your pain, more than you can imagine, but I simply don't see any way to help you... The Count simply won't agree to accept any lower than what he's owed." He looked at Kivamus. "Can't you just give us a couple dozen slaves of yourself so we can sell them in Cinran's market to get the remaining gold? That should satisfy the Count and Sir Tuilas."

Kivamus took a deep breath to calm his mind instead of growing angry at Ustaimo or the Count. That wasn't going to help them here. "I'm not going to sell my people as slaves at any cost!"

Ustaimo stared at him for a moment. "You really don't want to sell your people, do you?" He tilted his head. "For some reason, I don't think it's because you want to keep them as your own slaves..."

Kivamus shrugged, not willing to give an answer to that which might lead to unwanted disclosures.

Ustaimo stayed quiet for a while. "It's difficult to understand you, milord. When I arrived at this village yesterday, I saw young kids talking about having regular work hours like adults and carpenters working on that watchtower so close to sunset, which made me think that you were a tyrant, using your status as a son of the Duke to force the people to work for you."

Ustaimo gave a deep sigh. "I know very well how it feels for a commoner to live under the boots of a noble, so I could understand their suffering, and I'd accepted that I was going to deal with another oppressive noble who didn't give a damn about his people. I was even worried that if I said something which offended you, you might take out your anger on me and have me lashed, like the previous Baron of Tiranat did a few times."

Duvas opened his mouth to say something but the tax collector raised his hand. "Let me speak first." He continued while looking at Kivamus, "That is what I thought yesterday. However, you already know that I went for a walk to the village in the morning, where I overheard a lot of the villagers talking about you and the changes you have brought in this village since arriving here - like giving three meals a day to every single person living here, even if by using your own gold! That has to be the reason for hardly any person in the village looking malnourished right now, even though it's so common after the end of winter, whether in Cinran or any other barony I've seen in this part of the kingdom. I even talked to Father Edric, and he only had praises to sing of you, saying this was the very first time in the whole two decades of Tiranat's existence when nobody died of cold or hunger in the winter. I wouldn't even have believed such an outrageous claim if it was someone else saying that, but I can't think of any reason for the village priest to lie in your favor. But it was just so hard to believe..."

Ustaimo continued, "After returning to the manor, I talked with some of those people who live here - including servants, maids and even a few guards - but to my utter surprise, none of those people seemed to hate you, or even disliked you, like it was common when the previous baron ruled here." He snorted. "If anything, most of the manor residents looked ready to worship the ground you walk on, which didn't make sense after what I had seen yesterday about you overworking the villagers. But after talking more with you today, I think I understand you better now - as hard as it is to believe that there is a noble who behaves like you. In fact, this is probably the first time I am seeing a noble - particularly one of very high birth like you - who cares so much for his people."

The tax collector added with a smile, "I won't claim that I understand the reasons behind your behaviour, and I realize that you don't know me well enough for you to share any more than what I've already seen here, but I am glad that Tiranat got you as the new baron." He paused for a moment, while looking at Kivamus carefully. "Although I still don't like kids being forced to work or villagers working even after nightfall on your orders."

Kivamus hadn't expected the tax collector to be so observant, but it seemed like the old man was a lot more perceptive than he seemed at first glance. "None of the kids are being forced to work. I have assigned my former teacher Gorsazo to give all the villagers some basic education, and the kids do that work to learn better counting and get some treats in return, while still being able to contribute to the village in a small way. But none of them are being forced to work in any way."

"You are educating the villagers?" Ustaimo's eyes grew wide. "All the villagers? I've never heard of such a thing before! What will so many people even do after learning to read or write? There would hardly be two or three jobs in a small village like this which require educated people, usually a couple of merchants and maybe a mining foreman. That's all! Wouldn't it be a waste to teach the rest of them?"

"I have my reasons for trying to educate every villager here," Kivamus shrugged, not willing to explain more at this point. "As for the carpenters you saw working so late, you already know that this is a very dangerous region, and Tiranat has been raided many times in the winter and has to regularly deal with wild beasts attacking the villagers - including even adzees. Having said that, we recently got some information that another big bandit group is going to raid us soon. That's why every villager wants to contribute to protect the village however they can, even if they have to work longer hours. Nobody wants to see their homes burning and children running in fear again like it happened last autumn. So trust me, nobody is being forced to do anything in this village. I'll never stand for such a thing here."

"Astonishing... Just astonishing! Housing the homeless, making sure everyone is well fed, building a wall and watch towers to protect the village and even educating everyone..." Ustaimo shook his head in wonder. "I've never met a noble like you, that's for sure. But why are you even doing all this? I thought you were exiled here by your father... Shouldn't you be just passing your time easily until he changes his mind, like basically any other young noble would do in your place?"

Being reminded of his so-called father, as his brothers who had forced the Duke to exile him here left a bad taste in Kivamus' mouth. "I'm not interested in talking about my past right now, but let me just say that I know for sure that the Duke is not going to change his mind for reasons I can't disclose here. Either way, Tiranat is my home now and I'm not going to leave this village for Ulriga or any other place in the future." He shrugged after a moment. "As for sitting lazily like other nobles, I've never been interested in taking it easy, no matter what other nobles like to do. I am just doing what is necessary to protect my people now and in the future."

Ustaimo stared at him in bewilderment, like words had failed him completely, before he shook his head and smiled. "Most commoners in this kingdom have never seen any reason to believe that their Lord would actually consider them as humans and not just work-animals walking on two legs from whom to extract more profits, but somehow, you really do treat them as humans and care about them..." He sighed. "I wish all the nobles were like you..."

The tax collector took a deep breath and muttered, "I guess this is the moment where the goddess is giving me a chance to take a stand for commoners for the first time in my life." He looked at Kivamus. "Fine. If you and Tiranat don't deserve an extension, then nobody does."

"What? An extension?" Duvas asked with hope. "Can you really give us another month to pay the taxes?"

Ustaimo sighed, before glancing at the inner door which was still closed. "I wasn't lying earlier when I said I couldn't extend your tax payment deadline. That's simply not in my hands, like I told you earlier, but I can still give you another day or two to find a way to raise the required gold. That's all I can do."

The tax collector whispered, "I'm risking my job and probably even my life by doing even this much for you if this is found out by the knight, but meeting a noble like you who cares for his people this much is something which will probably never happen again in my life, and the people of Tiranat need you as their lord. That's the only reason I'm willing to risk my own neck to give you an extension. "

"But how?" Kivamus asked impatiently. "You just said it's not in your hands to extend the deadline!"

#### Chapter 295 Risks

Ustaimo smirked. "I'm an accountant, milord. People like me always know of a way or two to delay things - not by much, but holding up any task for a couple of days is certainly in my power." He lowered his voice even more. "I will tell Sir Tuilas that I've noticed some small discrepancies in the tax ledger, so I will need some more time to check the numbers again. Of course, I know the numbers are already correct, but it's a valid enough reason that the knight can't force us to leave tomorrow without risking the Count's wrath. I think... I can hold him up tomorrow for sure, and likely even for another day, but any more and he may get suspicious. So you have to find a way to pay the taxes in the next two days."

"That still wouldn't help us as much as we need," Kivamus said with a thankful nod, "but it's probably all we can ask for right now. Thank you for this, Ustaimo. I won't forget your help."

"I just want to do what I can to help common people," the tax collector shrugged, before he glanced at the inner door again. "My back is going to hate me for this, but now I should probably get busy with the tax ledger again."

Duvas grinned, and handed him the ledger once more.

Kivamus felt glad that the tax collector had eventually turned out to be sympathetic to them. Duvas' old friendship with him must also have helped in this, apart from what Ustaimo had seen and heard in the

village. However, they had been expecting at least one merchant to arrive in the past few days, but so far the northern road had only seen the knight and his group.

Hopefully someone would arrive soon, which would help them a lot in selling the coal and raising some gold. There were also a few other things he could think of which they could try selling to the merchants, and if they didn't buy it, perhaps they could barter for it directly with the tax collector. There were some other considerations to think of before doing something risky like that, but that was still an option.

He stood up from his chair and started to pace in the manor hall. It was time to think of some solutions.

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It was evening now, and Kivamus was strolling near the vegetable patches which were being grown in the northern and eastern side of the manor by the maids, with Duvas walking next to him, and other two guards following nearby. With the snow having melted a couple of weeks ago, the new vegetables which had been planted in the empty spaces in the manor after the ground had thawed were growing well, although they would only provide a very small quantity of fresh greens and such.

Sir Tuilas had taken his squire and some of his other guards and had gone to visit the alehouse again after he had found out that the tax collector needed a couple of more days to recheck the revenue numbers, which is why Ustaimo was still inside the manor hall with the tax ledger so he could continue that pretence of thoroughly confirming the numbers. The guard which Ustaimo had pointed out to be working for Zoricus had initially been told to stay inside the servants' hall along with the other guards who had come here with the knight, but when the knight went out to visit the market place, Feroy had to let him go outside the manor as well, since they couldn't hold back that particular guard without raising suspicion. Still, it shouldn't cause a problem hopefully, since as long as Zoricus' man was outside the manor he couldn't try to assassinate him anyway.

Kivamus looked at Duvas. "How much can we sell our remaining coal for? That is our only major source of raising more gold."

The majordomo glanced at one of the nearby coal barns where a few wagons which had just arrived from the eastern hills were being unloaded by servants. "We started coal mining nearly a month ago, although for the first two weeks only a small number of workers were working in the mines. By now, my estimate is that we have around 20 wagonloads of coal already stored here. That should sell for around 240 gold at the usual rates, although we'd still be short by nearly 200 gold to pay the taxes after that."

"True. The next two days are going to be crucial for us, and hopefully at least one merchant will arrive in that time. It's still unlikely that we can sell all that coal immediately, since a single merchant isn't going to arrive with 20 empty wagons with him. But more importantly, we need even more gold after paying the taxes to buy enough wheat for sowing and as food for the village."

Duvas hesitated for a moment. "What about selling them the losuvil powder? Ustaimo might not want to take back coal, but that won't take much space even on his single wagon, and I'm sure the Count would be more than happy to get a good stock of that medicine. We only have a very small amount of it left, but even that could be exchanged for a good amount of gold right now. We also have some paper stocked up which we wanted to sell to merchants. Why not barter them directly with Ustaimo?"

Kivamus stopped walking and after making sure there was no one else in earshot, he turned to look at the majordomo. "You already know the reason, Duvas. We simply can't risk the Count finding out that we have such a revolutionary medicine here as well as the way to produce more of it. Just look at what he's doing - sending a knight and guards wearing chainmail to threaten us to pay the taxes. What do you think would happen if he finds out that we can make that medicine here?"

He continued without waiting for an answer, "If Ebirtas even gets a wind of it, he will send all his knights here the same day he gets that news to carry off Syryne - who knows how to make it - to Cinran, along with all the remaining stock of the medicine. It will only take a few days of looking around for his men to find out that there are huge growths of losuvil vines in the eastern hills. That wouldn't be a problem normally, since they can't just take it away or the leaves would be useless by the time they reach Cinran. But now? They will make a permanent encampment in those hills and in our village to force us to produce that medicine at swords' point, and with only him keeping all the profits. Most likely we won't even be given enough medicine just for our own people. We would simply be powerless in front of him, if the Count decides to force us to do anything." He muttered, "For now anyway..."

He added with a sigh, "The knowledge to make paper is already present in other places of the kingdom, but even that is going to be very profitable once we can scale up its production, which means we simply can't risk any other noble finding out about either or those things. That's why we need to wait for Pydaso to sell those. He is the only merchant we can trust with that knowledge, and he will be able to fence it in bigger markets like Ulriga without disclosing the real source."

"I understand your point," Duvas said, "but what if he betrays us too? There is a lot of gold at stake here."

"Oh, he will never betray us," Kivamus snorted. "Just think about it. He knows that at the moment he is our most favored merchant because we both helped each other before winter, and right after we tell him about the losuvil powder, he'll immediately realise just how much profit he's going to make by being the only trader selling that revolutionary medicine. But he's not stupid. He knows that the moment he lets anyone know that we can make that medicine or even paper here, other nearby nobles would gang up on us and will take everything away from us by force, and Pydaso would never see another gold coin of profit after that, would he? None of the nobles are going to let a paltry merchant take any profit from something as lucrative as that. Most likely he would be murdered so the knowledge of the source doesn't leak anymore after whoever is the first noble to attack and capture Tiranat."

Duvas sighed. "What is the solution then? You keep saying that you want to scale up the production of the medicine and the manufacturing of paper, and knowing your track record, who knows what else in the future. Just how much of it can a single merchant fence anyway without the buyers getting suspicious about the source?"

Kivamus laughed. "I never said that I wanted to do this forever. You know that Tiranat is surrounded by all kinds of threats around it, which is why I want to use Pydaso as an intermediary for now instead of revealing us as the source of those things and risking an invasion from our greedy neighbours." He added with a grin, "But this is only a stopgap measure to buy more time - so other nobles don't attack us and take everything from Tiranat before we are ready for them."

He smirked. "Why do you think I'm focusing so much on building our defence and enticing more people to move here and increase our workforce? Of course, increasing our production capacity in everything to earn more gold is a major part of it, but I am building up towards the day when Tiranat will be able to repel any attack on it in the future by other nobles who might want to take what we have by force. I don't know how long that will take, but I will get Tiranat there, that's a promise."

Duvas snorted. "If anyone can do it, it would be you. But why do you keep talking like they're going to attack you anyway?" he asked with a frown. "Such a thing has never happened in this village in the whole two decades it has existed."

Kivamus glanced at Duvas, realising that while Gorsazo knew a lot about his real origins, the majordomo didn't, which is why he had no idea of the kind of changes which were coming to Tiranat in the future. For all the majordomo knew at this time, he likely believed that the medicine was made by an accidental trial and error, while the paper wasn't something which would have much of a demand here, since what would illiterate peasants of the kingdom do with it anyway?

However, by now he trusted Duvas enough that he believed he could risk letting him know about the kind of knowledge his mind held in it, but that was a long conversation and would have to wait until they were free of more immediate concerns and any snooping knights in the manor. He pondered about how to make the majordomo understand about his intentions for the future of this village, but without disclosing too much for now.

#### Chapter 296 Dangers

After thinking about it for a moment, Kivamus explained to Duvas, "It's true that other nearby nobles haven't attacked this village in the past, but our situation is also not the same as in the past two decades, is it?"

He continued, "Tiranat is not going to be a poor, starving village any longer than I can help it. That means our immediate neighbours are always going to be jealous of us, and their greed will prevent them from becoming good friends or allies of us - whether it's Baron Farodas of Kirnos, Count Ebirtas of Cinran or that bastard Zoricus. It's the same for my brothers in Ulriga, one of whom is going to become the Duke in the future. None of them want to see me breathing another day if they can do something about it, even if the reasons are different for all of them."

Kivamus shrugged, "Simply said, my brothers would like to remove a possible competitor in their power grab for the duchy, whenever my father - the Duke - dies after his current sickness. Looking closer to our home, Zoricus' greed knows no limits, and most likely he was the one to assassinate the previous baron to capture our coal mines, and he has no reason to stop trying for it now."

He added, "From what Feroy has observed on his last two trips, Kirnos has always remained friendly to Torhan's bandit to continue getting clay at cheap prices to sell to visiting ships and earn gold, and our enmity with Torhan means Baron Farodas is never going to become our ally. As for the Count, he is likely too busy dealing with Binpaaz in the east, but for him we are the same as some lowly work animals, from whom he extorts a thousand gold every year for doing no damned thing to help or protect this village from bandits or wild beasts - simply because we can't afford to do anything about it without all nearby nobles ganging up on us."

Kivamus glanced at the nearby coal miners who were looking exhausted as they unloaded the wagons of what they had mined after working hard all day. They were just normal, ordinary people, who just wanted to go for an honest day's work every morning, with the simple hope that their families would be safe and their children happy when they returned in the evening. That had never happened in the past two decades, but no more. He would make sure every single one of his people remained safe and happy, all the greed of the nearby nobles be damned.

Duvas looked at him. "I guess the same logic applies to crossbows then? Those would have sold for good money too, but just like the paper and the medicine, we can't risk letting people know that we even have them in the village, not to mention us having a craftsman here who's capable of making new ones."

Kivamus nodded. "Of course. If this were a safe and ideal world, we would have been able to sell some crossbows, a few jars of medicine and a stack of paper, and we would easily have been able to earn enough gold to pay all the taxes. But you already know that dangers surround us from everywhere, so we just can't risk it." He snorted. "If the count found out that we could make crossbows, we would have already seen the last of Darora and Cedoron - who would have been taken away from Tiranat to keep producing those weapons for the Count cheaply."

"That doesn't leave us with anything else to sell to raise the gold..." Duvas spoke dejectedly, "although I'll still try to talk to Ustaimo again later today, to see if there isn't some other way he can help us. He seems favourable to us now, even though there isn't much in his power."

"Yeah, do that," Kivamus muttered as he heard the sound of footsteps behind him. He turned around and saw that a servant was running towards him.

Reaching closer, the young man took a moment to catch his breath with his hands on his knees, before standing straight again. "Milord," he reported excitedly, "someone just saw a merchant entering the northeastern gate of the village! Some of the longhouse kids were very excited about it - since this is the first merchant coming to the village after the winter - so they counted his wagons, and they said there are six wagons in his caravan!"

Duvas looked at him with a grin. "It seems the goddess has heard my prayers again!"

Kivamus gestured to the servant to return to his duties, wondering if this was Pydaso. Could they really be so lucky?

He started walking towards the manor gates with Duvas, before recalling that Pydaso was the only merchant to whom they had given permission to park his wagons inside the manor, since they wanted to make sure all that wheat remained safe before the winter. Usually all the travelling merchants who visited Tiranat had to ensure the security of their wagons by themselves, with their wagon-drivers who doubled as guards, staying with the wagons in the nights for it, while the merchant usually went to the alehouse to relax after the journey, and slept there.

For a moment he thought that he should offer this merchant the same benefit as Pydaso, and allow his wagons to be parked within the walls of the manor, but unlike Pydaso - whom they trusted well by now, after doing all that trade with him and Feroys travelling along the portly merchant to Cinran many times - this new merchant could be in anyone's pockets. That meant letting his wagon drivers stay overnight in the manor would only be inviting trouble.

He exhaled. If this merchant really was Pydaso, all would be great, but he couldn't believe that they would be so lucky. He looked around and found another idling servant nearby, who had just finished emptying one of the coal wagons, and called him up. The servant immediately jogged to him, before Kivamus ordered, "There is a new merchant who has just entered the village from the north. Run to him and tell him that the baron wants to meet with him. He can bring only one other guard with him, and no more, and he should come here as soon as he can."

The servant nodded, and ran towards the gates of the manor before turning right towards the north.

Kivamus looked at Duvas. "We don't know who this merchant is, but he has certainly arrived at a good time. Him coming here with six wagons, means he can buy that much coal, which is somewhere above 70 gold at the usual rate of 12 gold per wagonload of coal. That is hardly going to help much, but at least it's a start."

Duvas nodded. "He likely would have brought some wheat with him, but unless he agrees to give us on credit, we have no way to pay for it right now."

Kivamus sighed. "Well, we'll find out soon enough."

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Kivamus was waiting near the manor gates for the new merchant, along with Duvas. The sun had already set and it was nearly dark by now, but the light from the braziers burning nearby was more than enough. A group of guards who had been on gate duty had moved to stand near him, just in case. Before long he saw the servant walking towards them from the north, being followed by a young man in a tunic, along with someone who was wearing leather armour and had to be the merchant's guard. He wasn't yet sure who it was but it certainly wasn't the portly merchant Pydaso.

As the small group came closer, Duvas seemingly recognised him. "Oh, it is Trevalo. He is also regular visitor to Tiranat, and he's a bulk dealer who mainly trades wheat for coal - unlike Pydaso who is more of a speciality trader and has good contacts for buying such stuff in Cinran and even Ulriga, like butter, cheese, ale and soap, as well as iron ingots if we need it."

Soon, the small group had reached close to them, and the servant returned to his tasks. The young man glanced curiously at Kivamus before he looked at the majordomo and bowed. "You called for me, Sir Duvas?"

Duvas nodded, and gestured to Kivamus. "This is the new Baron of Tiranat. Lord Kivamus Ralokaar."

"Ralokaar...?" Trevalo backpedalled hurriedly, and bowed much deeper this time. "Forgive me, milord! I didn't recognise you! I really didn't expect that the new baron would be standing in front of me!"

Kivamus shook his head at his embellished antics. "Stand up, Trevalo. We have important things to discuss right now." Once the young merchant was looking at him again, Kivamus began, "So how many wagons did you bring with you?"

"All six of them, milord!" Trevalo replied. "There is usually enough coal available to buy in Tiranat, but six wagons is all I own. I'll visit once again later this month for another trade, like usual."

"Good," Kivamus said. "Duvas will negotiate an exact price with you later on, and we do have enough coal right now that you can fill all your wagons with it. Tell me, what did you bring with you this time to sell to us?"

"Uh..." Trevalo glanced at Duvas in confusion before looking back. "Just wheat, milord. I have three wagon loads of wheat with me. I couldn't buy any more without knowing if Tiranat would buy it for sure, with the current high prices of it. Anyway, in my experience this village only needs around five to six wagonloads of wheat in a month, which is why I usually bring three wagon loads on both of my trips every month. Sir Duvas rarely buys more of it from me."

"Three wagonloads, huh..." Kivamus muttered. "That's 30 sacks for you too, right?" Once the young trader nodded, he continued, "What are you selling it for?"

"Five gold and two silvers."

Duvas winced. "It's above five gold...? That's insane! We were buying wheat at under four gold just a year ago."

Trevalo shrugged. "Nothing I can do about it. I bought the wheat at just above five gold per sack in Cinran, and I can hardly sell it for any lower without taking a loss."

Kivamus nodded, understanding his situation, not that it helped them any. He remembered Ustaimo saying that the Binpaazi raids had started last summer, which meant the farms they had been burning in the east of Cinran had also contributed to a lower harvest last year, apart from the usual ebb and flow of nature's whims which had already lowered the harvest for the last two years. The situation wasn't going to improve this year either, with Binpaazi knights continuing to damage farms there, which meant the prices would keep increasing for quite a while.

"That is very high," he remarked, "but I'm sure we can negotiate a price which suits both of us."

"I still have to tell you," Trevalo said uncertainly, "I can't give you a good price for coal this time. Most of my usual customers - including the blacksmith and armourers - have reduced their purchases of coal, which means coal is selling for lower than usual right now."

Kivamus shook his head. Coal selling for lower prices and grain for higher prices meant they would be on the losing end in both transactions. "Fine. Duvas will discuss it with you tomorrow to find a compromise which works for both parties." He was going to let the merchant leave, before he remembered something. "Before you go, tell me, are you willing to sell us the wheat on credit?"

Trevalo looked stunned. "On credit? You mean you can't even pay for the wheat?"

Chapter 297 Serendipity

Kivamus took a deep breath, cursing their current financial situation. "Of course we can afford it," he bluffed to the merchant, "but we would prefer to buy it on credit this time, since we have some other important expenses right now. You said you visit Tiranat twice every month, right? So if you agree to this, we can pay you the overdue amount the next time you visit."

"I... I'm not sure if I can risk that, milord," Trevalo muttered. "I need that gold to buy other commodities for my next trading journey to the north of Cinran."

"Well, you will still be staying here for a couple of days at least, right?" Kivamus asked. "Just think about it. If you agree, we will give you a much better deal on coal this time, and you will have a favourable say in our future dealings as well. In fact, we have a lot of coal to sell right now, so you can even return back sooner than usual. Getting a good deal on coal would still mean you'll make good profit on it, doesn't it?"

Trevalo gave a slow nod. "I can't promise anything, milord, but I'll consider it."

"That's good enough," Kivamus replied, hoping for the best. "You must be tired after the journey so you can go and rest now. Make sure to come here on time tomorrow morning to make the trade with Duvas."

"Of course, milord," Trevalo replied, before he left after giving another deep bow.

Once the merchant was out of earshot, Kivamus looked at Duvas. "What do you think? Can we get it on credit?"

Duvas sighed. "I can hardly give an answer to that any more than you can. Although I hadn't thought he would even consider it, since he never compromises on payments. But I think hearing your family name might have led to some calculations in his mind. Getting the favor of someone from the Ralokaar dynasty is something most traders can only dream of."

Kivamus snorted as they began to walk back towards the manor house. "Getting my favour is one thing, but he isn't getting the favour of my brothers for giving a good deal to us, that's for sure. Still, as long as the facade works that I am still an important part of the Duke's family, it's good for us anyway."

Duvas nodded. "If he agrees to this, and that is a big if, it will easily take care of getting all the seeds we need for sowing, and we should still leave some wheat to feed the village for another week or so. That will help a lot until the next merchant arrives."

"That's true," Kivamus agreed, "but we still need to think of a way to pay the tax collector. He won't take coal, and we can't sell him the medicine, the paper or the crossbows. That reminds me, what about the adzee pelt? We still have it, right?"

Duvas gave a nod. "Of course. I've been waiting for Pydaso, since he is the one who would have the necessary contacts to sell a rare item like that. It's not like he can just put it on sale in the market square, since no common person would have the gold to buy it. I even thought of offering it to Ustaimo, but he has already said that he will only take gold and won't take anything else in exchange." He added, "We do have some more furs as well, but again, Trevalo doesn't deal in them. So we have to wait for Pydaso or one of the other merchants I know of who might be willing to buy it."

Kivamus exhaled. "Let's just hope our friendly merchant comes in time to help us..."

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It was early afternoon of the next day, and Kivamus was sitting inside the manor hall, with the young merchant Trevalo negotiating with the majordomo nearby. Ustaimo had kept himself busy with the tax ledger near the open window, with fresh spring breeze coming inside from there. The knight had returned late from the alehouse last night, but thankfully he hadn't caused any incident out there. So far. That's probably why Tuilas hadn't even left his room yet, probably still sleeping off the drinking from last night.

Before long, Trevalo stood up, and walking close to him, he gave a deep bow. "We have reached an agreement, milord. I hope you will keep me in mind for future deals."

Kivamus glanced at the majordomo, who gave him a subtle nod. "Of course, Trevalo." He called up one of the guards standing nearby. "Go with him to the coal barns, and tell the servants to transfer the wheat sacks to our grain storage and start loading up his wagons with coal. Send some other guard here in the meantime."

With that, the young merchant exited the hall along with the guard, before Kivamus walked towards the majordomo and sat next to him, speaking in hushed voices. "Did he really agree then? How much did he give us on credit?"

Duvas gave a relieved nod. "All of it. We will get 30 sacks of wheat today, but I had to agree to sell the coal at a discounted price. For six wagonloads we had expected above 70 gold, but we only received 62 this time, which basically serves as an interest on the wheat he gave us on credit."

Kivamus shook his head. "A merchant will always remain a merchant, calculating his profits before anything else. That discount stings but at least we have 60 more gold to pay Ustaimo, and now we can complete the sowing in the fields. It may hurt us right now to give that discount, but after the first harvest, Tiranat will be in a much stronger position."

"I certainly hope so," Duvas said with a nod. "I still think that we..."

The outer door of the hall opened again and interrupted the majordomo, before a servant walked inside.

"Milord, another merchant has arrived!" He reported excitedly. "I think this is the same guy who visited us before the winter."

"What?" Kivamus stood up in surprise. "Is it really Pydaso?"

"I only heard about it from a guard returning after the end of his watch duty, and he was the one who saw the merchant entering the northeastern gates, but I think so."

Kivamus blinked in amazement. Were the fortunes really turning for this village now? They hadn't gotten a visit from even a single merchant till yesterday, and he had started to get worried that the merchants still considered the northern road too dangerous to travel. But after the arrival of Trevalo last evening, Pydaso was also here today! Awesome!

However, for some reason it felt to him like this was the calm before a storm, since Tiranat had always seemed to attract trouble of one kind or another since the time he had arrived in this world, but he'd take this win for now. Trading with two merchants might just mean they would be able to deal with the taxman after all.

As he glanced at Ustaimo, a wide smile broke out on Kivamus' face before he started laughing loudly in delight, with the majordomo joining him, which made the tax collector look at them in surprise.

Kivamus looked at the servant. "Run to Pydaso and tell him to come here as soon as he can." He paused for a moment. Now that the village had a wall surrounding it, it wouldn't really be that risky for the merchant to park his wagons even in the market square - unlike before the winter - but he wanted to show the portly merchant that he still had their favor. They had a lot of deals to make with him, after all. He added, "Let him know that he can keep his wagon inside the manor again."

The servant nodded before he jogged to the door.

"What was that about?" Ustaimo asked in confusion.

Kivamus wondered how much he could tell the tax collector. By now Ustaimo knew a lot about the village's situation, and had become quite favourable to them, but perhaps it wasn't a good idea to tell everything just yet. "He is just a merchant we know well. His arrival at this time could mean that we really might be able to pay your tax on time. Hopefully."

"Is that so?" Ustaimo asked with a smile. "I am happy for you, milord. And for Tiranat."

Duvas glanced at the inner door, which was still closed at the moment and interrupted Kivamus, before whispering in his ear, "I think we should find a way to get the knight out of the manor house while we talk with Pydaso - maybe along with Ustaimo. We can't let Sir Tuilas stumble into this room while we are talking about the medicine and such things."

"Yeah, that's a good idea," Kivamus whispered back. He thought of sending the pair to the south to visit the farms, which would take long enough that they should be done dealing with Pydaso by that time, but that would also disclose the existence of seed drills, and he wasn't yet ready to tell others about it. While it would be a good idea to eventually spread the knowhow of those machines throughout the kingdom, so that the crop yields could increase and people wouldn't have to starve anymore, but revealing it at this time would make others ask difficult questions about its origin, and he couldn't give those answers without revealing everything. Not to mention, it could also start a thorough scrutiny of everything happening in Tiranat, and at the moment, the village simply wasn't in a position to rebuff that kind of scrutiny if it turned hostile.

For now, it was best to keep the knowledge of the presence of those seed drills limited to the farmers. He recalled that after the first day of usage of seed drills in the farms, he and the southern foreman Pinoto had decided to keep the drills in the fields overnight, since nobody had any reason to steal the

wooden contraptions anyway. This way, the farmers wouldn't have to haul them back back-and-forth from the manor every day, which would have meant carrying less seeds on that single free wagon for sowing, while their wagons were busy hauling coal from the coal mines. That would have led to the farmers making more trips to carry enough seed every day, wasting their valuable sowing time. He snorted at the serendipity of that chance decision, which meant that basically no other villagers knew about the machine to gossip about it and the knight and his other guards also hadn't seen those drills in the manor.

He looked at the tax collector. "Ustaimo, why don't you go and take another round of the village? After reviewing the tax ledger continuously for so long, a good walk to stretch your legs can only be helpful at your age. Perhaps you can visit the market square again, or maybe you can climb on one of the new watchtowers to see the view from there."

"What?" The tax collector looked at him in confusion. "You mean right now?"

Chapter 298 A Sensitive Matter

Kivamus nodded at Ustaimo. "Since you are leaving the manor house, maybe it would be a good idea for you to take the knight along with you for security, just in case."

The tax collector stared at him for a moment. "Is this about that merchant who just arrived?"

Kivamus just grinned, not giving any answer to it. "An hour-long walk would be nice for you, although feel free to take two hours if you want to give some rest to your eyes after squinting so much at the tax numbers. I'm sure Madam Helga would have prepared a good lunch by the time you return."

Ustaimo chuckled as he stood up. "You are a crafty man, my lord. I'll go and find Sir Tuilas. It would be good for him to go on a walk after his drinking yesterday." Once he reached the inner door, he looked back before opening it and smirked. "I'm sure I will like the view from the watchtowers well enough to want to stay there until it's lunch time."

Kivamus chuckled as the tax collector exited the hall, feeling glad that Ustaimo had also come here along with the knight to take the taxes. Who knew how difficult it would be to do anything if it was only Tuilas here.

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Kivamus and the majordomo didn't have to wait long before the outer door opened again, and a guard allowed the portly merchant to enter.

"Pydaso!" He greeted the merchant enthusiastically. "It's been so long since we saw you!"

Pydaso looked surprised for a moment at the warm welcome, before he grinned. "It was difficult to wait for the whole winter to trade again, I agree. In fact, I'd have reached here yesterday, but one of my two wagons got a loose wheel on the northern road so we had to spend another night out there. Still, I'm glad to see that you are well, milord. You too, Sir Duvas."

Kivamus gestured at an empty armchair near the majordomo. "Come on and take a seat. We have a lot to talk about."

Pydaso sat close to them, before he began, "I have to say, milord, after our deals before the winter, I understood you well enough that I expected that there would be some changes in the village by the time I returned here, but I really didn't expect to see what I saw out there. A sturdy new palisade wall surrounding the whole village, watchtowers under construction one after another, a second longhouse block already completed in the north along with new drainage gutters, a new smokehouse in the northeast... while the inside of the manor looks packed with guards. It's simply astonishing. I'm sure there are even more changes which I haven't seen yet."

Kivamus grinned. "Of course there are, and I'm sure we'll have time to talk about them today."

"By the way," Pydaso asked curiously, "I saw a knight exiting the manor with an older man when I arrived. Were you really able to hire a knight for Tiranat? That'd be very helpful for this village."

Kivamus laughed. "No, no. He's just visiting us from Cinran to escort the Count's tax collector. We have no way to afford even a retired knight right now."

"Still," Pydaso shrugged, "with how well protected the village seems to be right now, with archers standing ready on the watch towers, I'm sure you won't even need a knight to protect your village."

Kivamus smirked, keeping the knowledge of the existence of crossbows to himself for now. "Well, it's time for some business talk now. Tell me, what did you bring with you this time? Is it wheat in both of your wagons?"

Pydaso shook his head. "Not this time, milord. I was a little late in my journey from my village near Ulriga to Cinran after the winter, so I knew Trevalo or some other merchant would already have brought enough wheat by now. They are the ones who usually trade the coal for wheat in this village, while I used to bring iron tools and any other specialty items which the previous baron wanted for himself. Why? Did no merchant arrive here yet?"

"Actually, Trevalo reached here just yesterday," Duvas answered. "He has already provided a good amount of wheat, although we'll need more in the future, since we have to use most of it as seeds right now."

"I guess it was a good decision for me not to bring any wheat then," Pydaso laughed, before his eyes became wide. "Wait, you've really started farming here? I had heard rumours about it in the market square the last time I visited here, but I didn't know if it would be really feasible in a village surrounded by such dense forests."

Kivamus grinned. "We made it feasible, and the farmers have already started sowing. So what do you have with you?"

Pydaso smirked, "I think you'll like what I've brought. The wheat prices have already increased to above five gold per sack by now, which means the prices of some other commodities have been decreasing, including iron. So that's what my two wagons contain this time. Perhaps that's why one of the wheels got loose yesterday. Carrying that many iron ingots makes a wagon very heavy for the horses to pull easily on that bumpy road."

"Iron, huh?" Kivamus shook his head in wonder. That's exactly what they needed right now - after wheat, of course. Things really were going well for Tiranat, apart from the increased tax demands.

The merchant frowned. "Do you not want it?"

Duvas glanced at Kivamus before he started to laugh. "Lord Kivamus doesn't need iron for the village?" Then he started laughing even more loudly, with Kivamus joining him. Once the majordomo had calmed

down a little, he shrugged, "With how things are going in this village, I'm sure the sky would fall down sooner than Tiranat has no need of iron."

Pydaso grinned. "I am glad to hear that. Iron prices are quite low these days, so I'm sure you'd like to stock up on it. I'll make sure to bring it again the next time."

Kivamus nodded, not mentioning that with the tensions already increasing with Binpaaz in the east, there seemed to be a war on the horizon. He had no idea how long it would take to break out, since it was very much possible that binpaazi knights were just harassing the farmers in the east of cinran. However, to him it felt like they had already started testing Reslinor's defences since last summer. That meant a new war could start in this summer itself, or it might take another year or two, or maybe longer. Nobody could say for sure, but either way, it meant the demand for arms and armour would certainly grow in the future, which meant iron prices would also start increasing at some point. He had to make sure to buy as much of it as he could while the prices were low.

"That's a good idea," he replied. "We'll always be open to buy iron ingots. What else do you have?"

"Some other sundry items," the portly merchant shrugged. "Mainly salt and some cheese. Some new linen clothing for anyone who needs it. A few coils of sturdy rope as well. I didn't bring any iron tools though, since by now I know you'd want to forge them locally instead of buying them from Cinran."

"That's true, and I think we'll buy all of those things," Kivamus said, before deciding that it was time for some sensitive conversation now. He glanced at the guards standing nearby and decided that it was better to be safe than sorry. He trusted these men, and they already knew most of what he was going to talk about, but they still didn't know everything, and he wanted to keep it that way for now.

Calling them up, he ordered, "One of you go and guard the manor hall door from the outside, and until Pydaso leaves, don't let anyone enter inside, other than those who live in the manor house." Looking at the other guard, he added, "You, go and stand near the main gates of the manor, and keep an eye out for the knight. Come and tell me the moment he returns."

Both of the guards nodded and exited the hall to perform their new duties. This was a valid enough reason that they wouldn't suspect that he just wanted them out of earshot - while finding out in advance about when the knight was returning would help him change the topic with Pydaso if they weren't done dealing with him by then.

He looked back at Pydaso after the doors closed behind the guards. "What I am going to say now is very sensitive and that information shouldn't leave this room. Can I trust you on this?"

The merchant looked surprised for a moment, before he nodded eagerly. "Of course, milord. It's always profitable doing business with you, and I have no reason to betray your trust."

"Good. Make sure it remains so, otherwise you'll have enough nobles going after your life that making profit would be the least of your concerns."

Pydaso looked a little nervous, but gave another nod. "Don't worry, milord. My family and my kids still need me so my life is a lot more precious to me than gold, as much as I love the shiny yellow coins." He looked serious now. "I swear on my life that I won't let another soul know about what you are telling me."

"I'll trust you on that," Kivamus said. "Now, as you have guessed, there are indeed some other changes in the village which you haven't seen yet. We are doing our best to keep this information from the tax collector and the Count's knight, so by telling you about it, I am taking a lot of risk here. Don't make me regret it."

Chapter 299 Dealmaking - I

Once the merchant promised to keep the secret, Kivamus began, "Instead of paying for that iron and other items in gold, we want to barter with you using some other things."

"Of course," Pydaso agreed. "That's just fine with me. What do you have?"

Duvas took over the bartering. "We have some good quality furs our hunters got in the winter, and even an adzee pelt."

"An adzee pelt?" The merchant whispered. "How did you even manage that, especially without a knight here... Actually, let's leave that for later." He scratched his balding head for a moment. "I think I can give you a good price on the furs. Even though it's summer, there is always a demand for it in Cinran, since the local furriers there always try to have some new fur coats ready before the next winter for the local nobles to splurge on in the colder months."

Pydaso frowned. "However, as for the adzee pelt... it would be far more difficult to trade, especially in Cinran. That luxury pelt sells for a lot more than any normal fur, and only the really rich nobles can afford to buy it, either to make a few extraordinary quality fur coats for showing off their wealth, or to use it as a rug to boast to their visitors. That's why unless the Count wants it for himself, I don't think there is anyone else who could buy it in Cinran. Of course, I can still take it back with me to Ulriga, where there are enough rich nobles who can buy it from me."

"Zoricus certainly could buy it..." Kivamus muttered, not that he wanted that bastard to feel rich from something which came from the blood and sweat of Tiranati guards who had fought and killed that beast. "How much would these be worth?"

Pydaso tapped his finger on the arm of the chair as he contemplated. "A normal linen clothing usually costs a month's wages of a labourer in Cinran, which is around two to three silvers. However a fur coat goes for much higher, which is why only the nobles and rich merchants can afford them. Depending on its quality, a single fur coat - which needs maybe four or five good sized furs of a wolf - could sell for around 10 gold, which equals nearly four years wages of a labourer."

The merchant continued, "On the other hand, an adzee pelt is a unique item, and it only comes around once every year or so. An adzee is also much bigger than a wolf, so its pelt is also much larger, allowing for two or even three fur coats to be made from it, unless the buyer wants it as a rug. I think I can sell your adzee pelt for at least eight times the price of a normal fur coat. That means I can buy it from you for uh... 70 gold, so I can try selling it above 80 gold."

Kivamus looked at Duvas, not speaking openly that this 70 gold would go a long way to pay their taxes. "That sounds good, but Duvas will finalize the exact prices of all our deals later today. Let's move on. Now those were the things we could have sold to any merchant, but I preferred to wait so we could trade with you, because of our good relations." Once the merchant gave a grateful nod, he continued, "The next item is a lot more risky to trade in. Let me show you first. Duvas, will you?"

The majordomo nodded, and exited the hall through the inner door. It didn't take long before he was back, with a few sheets of paper in one hand, apart from a very small amount of the reddish powder in a wooden bowl.

Kivamus kept the bowl near him for now, and handed over the paper to Pydaso. "We have a small stock of this paper to sell. I know the quality could be far better, but for now this is what we have. What do you think about it?"

The merchant turned around the sheets of paper this way and that, before looking back. "Whoever sold it to you didn't do the description proper justice. Of course, this is far from the best quality paper I've seen, but most of them are still above average quality. A few of these sheets are even of a pretty good quality, and I'm sure I can find buyers for these in Ulriga. Many noble houses would want to use this to keep their accounts. The same goes for the merchants, who'd love a cheaper writing material than parchment - that's assuming you sell me the paper cheaper than that."

"Wait, this is good quality paper?" Kivamus was quite surprised to hear that. There was no point in comparing the quality of this primitive paper they had made here with any decent grade paper which was easily available on earth, but it still didn't look anything approaching a good quality to him. Remembering something from his past in this world, he remarked, "I am quite sure the paper used in the books I used to read in the library of the Ulriga Palace had much better quality paper than this."

Pydaso snorted. "That's the Duke's personal library! Of course it would have excellent quality paper. Most likely, any personal library owned by the King of Reslinor would have even better quality of paper for his books, but that's hardly a fair comparison. The best quality paper made by the guilds of Plumron would always go to the Dukes of the kingdom as well as the King, but that's hardly something which any lower nobles and other merchants can afford to use."

Kivamus nodded slowly. "That makes sense."

Pydaso continued, "You might already know that most of the merchants and nobles prefer parchment - including you, based on what you bought from me before the winter - since that is cheaper than paper in our kingdom, but if they could get this quality of paper at the same price, I have no doubt all of them would start using this instead."

The merchant shrugged. "That's a pointless thought anyway, since there is no way the guilds of Plumron can make good quality paper in enough quantity to satisfy the needs of all the merchants and nobles in the kingdom, which is why it doesn't sell cheaply and everyone has to use parchments." Pydaso gave a frown. "Wait, I thought I was the last merchant to arrive in Tiranat before the northern road got blocked with snow last winter... Then did you buy it from someone in Kirnos? Perhaps from a reseller there who bought it cheaply from some visiting sea merchant, which is why you want to resell it again to get some profit?"

Kivamus smirked. "This is the secret for which I wanted your silence. We made this paper ourselves. Right here in Tiranat."

Pydaso blinked in confusion, before he started to laugh. "That was a nice jest, milord. But I know that at least in Reslinor, a paper of this quality can only be produced by the guilds of Plumron. Those craftsmen protect their secrets zealously, whether it concerns how to make luxury soaps, or good quality paper or even some other specialty items they make there." He shrugged. "If you didn't buy it from them, the only way you could have gotten it is from some visiting sea merchants in Kirnos." He chuckled. "Don't worry, milord, you don't need to brag about something which is not possible."

Kivamus laughed loudly. "I am sure you will believe me if I show you the whole paper making process we are doing here, but that requires a whole another level of trust between us. So, perhaps in the future. For now, you will just have to trust me on this."

Pydaso shook his head in disbelief. "I'll hold you to that, milord. As a merchant I trust my eyes more than my ears, and I am not going to accept your claim until I see the proof. But that's for later. For now, I can still give you a good price for these sheets of paper, whatever their source may be."

"Good. Duvas will negotiate with you details of the prices later on." Kivamus continued, "However, the reason for which I asked for your promise of secrecy earlier, is that I don't want to disclose Tiranat as its source, whether you believe me right now or not. We are already producing this paper regularly at a rate of around two to three sheets every day, but my plan is to increase its production a lot more in the future. If you can manage to sell these without making any buyers suspicious of its source, I'm willing to make you our exclusive dealer for this. I'm sure you can imagine the profits if you agree."

Pydaso seemed to be thinking before he spoke. "Basically, you want me to fence it... Hmm... If I only sell a few sheets of paper, nobody is going to ask about it, but if you are planning to do it regularly and at a much bigger scale, I will have to make some new contacts." He continued after a moment of thought, "Wait, I think I know I know what to do. I know a trader in Ulriga who regularly imports goods from visiting sea merchants. If I make him a confidential partner for this, I can buy the paper from you and sell it to him, and he can sell it further by making it seem like he bought it from some visiting ship from another country. That shouldn't make anyone suspicious - at least as long as the guilds of Plumron start to get involved when they see their profits decreasing, but that will take a long time, so I think this plan should work until then."

"That sounds like a good idea," Kivamus agreed, glad that this speciality merchant had contacts in many places. "We will sell you all our paper this time, which isn't much, but after around a month or two, we should be able to scale up the production of paper a lot. Although in that case you might need to spend some coin to bring more wagons with you in the future."

Pydaso grinned. "It's every travelling merchant's dream to increase his caravan size and grow his profits through that. I think I can manage it."

Kivamus chuckled. "I'm sure you can." He added, "Finally, I have one last product to show you."

Chapter 300 Dealmaking - II

Kivamus handed over the wooden bowl containing the reddish powder to the merchant. "This is called a medicine - which is like an improved, refined version of a healing herb like losuvil. This medicine works wonders whether you have a small cut on your finger or a large wound accompanied or even a high fever. Although it's not feasible for me to prove its efficacy to you unless you are willing to enter a bout of sparring with my guard captain."

"Wait, what?" Pydaso asked nervously. "I'm not insane! I don't want to fight any of your guards... Certainly not the guard captain - who'd break my bones with a single hand!"

"Don't worry," Kivamus reassured the merchant. "I only meant to say that for us to fully prove that the medicine really works, perhaps the only way for you to believe it would be to apply it on your wound, but that's not feasible unless you already have a wound or a fever. That being said, this medicine can also be ingested along with some water, and it will work even faster. From our tests, I have seen that with a bigger dose of it, this medicine will take away a man's pain completely even if he had his arm cut off." Seeing the merchant's disbelieving expression, he added, "Trust me, we already had a chance to verify that, not that we wanted to."

Pydaso frowned. "You mean this medicine is something like a much better version of losuvil paste? How does this even work?"

Kivamus shrugged. "I can't disclose the inner workings of it at the moment, to you or to anyone else. For now, all I can say is that even a small pinch of this medicine is enough for most minor cuts and injuries, while a double or triple dose can be taken to bring down a fever or for more serious wounds. That's all you need to know for now to sell it. However, the best part is that unlike losuvil leaves, which have to be used within a few hours in the summer and within a few days in the winter, so they don't lose their efficiency, this medicine easily lasts for months. I don't yet know for how long exactly, but it might even be more than a year, or perhaps longer."

The portly merchant looked speechless at this point.

Kivamus continued, "In the future, I plan to make small tablets of this medicine to make it easier to measure and use. For that I'll need you to start bringing some small glass jars in the future - or rather the cheaper ceramic jars - to easily store and transport the tablets. So tell me, will you be able to sell this as well? Without letting anyone know about the source of it? It has to be done in a way so you don't paint a target on your back either."

Pydaso stared at him. "While I'll still have to find some way to check if this really works before I leave this village, I don't think you are lying. But if you have really managed to produce something like this here - which is going to be revolutionary to say the least - simply by the number of lives it is going to save, then I don't think you have any reason to lie about being able to make paper here." He looked at Kivamus for a moment. "Just who are you, milord?"

Kivamus shrugged. "I am just an... unconventional noble who wants to do the best for his people, that's all." He thought to credit Syrene with the discovery of the medicine, but that probably wouldn't be safe for her. For now it would be better to keep her scientific skills hidden from outside eyes. "As for how, well, I've mentioned that I used to read a lot when I lived in the Ulriga palace. I'm just building upon the things I learnt there. So, the point is, can you sell it?"

Pydaso exhaled loudly. "Unlike selling paper, for which we will eventually have to deal with the guilds of Plumron, there is no such guild regulating the supply of a similar medicine like this, simply because it doesn't exist anywhere. The herbalists in every town city cultivate a small patch of losuvil leaves in their gardens, and use it to supply a fresh paste to anyone who needs it at a premium price. That means we won't have to deal with a guild obstructing the sales of this medicine. That's the good news."

The merchant continued, "On the other hand, unlike paper - which is still fairly mundane, if too costly to be used commonly - this medicine is going to be something that is craved by every noble who hears of it - including for their personal use as well as for their retinue, while all the merchants will want it to sell it at extortionate prices to anyone who really needs it to raise their profits. That means they'll do their best to find its real source, which would mean all kinds of trouble for both you and me, which is why we'll really have to make sure that nobody finds the source of it any time soon."

"That is true enough," Kivamus said. "Can't you use that same trader in Ulriga who imports goods from visiting sea merchants? That will disguise the source easily enough, as long as he keeps his mouth shut."

"That's the thing, isn't it?" Pydaso muttered. "I don't know him well enough to be sure if he will keep his mouth shut - especially where such big profits are involved. That's why I think it would be better for me to take some time and form a better trading relationship with him by selling him the paper you make. I would like around a month or so to see if he really is trustworthy enough by asking around through a

third person to see if he is gossiping about the real source of the paper. Assuming he turns out to be reliable, I can then try selling the medicine through him."

Kivamus nodded. "That actually works for us. Our stock of this medicine is nearly used up, and we'd need around a month or so to make more of it. By that time we should be able to make single-use tablets of this medicine and you should also have found out if that trader is trustworthy, and then we can start selling it to him."

Pydaso smiled. "That sounds good to me. The amount of iron ingots I've brought should easily last you long enough for me to travel back to Ulriga to meet with him and try selling him the paper. I think it would take me around a week to reach there, including any stops on the way, and another week to return here. Adding a few more days for any minor problems on the road like another wheel getting loose - my wagons are getting old after all - and some extra time to make a good deal with him, it would mean that I should be back here in around 20 days."

He added, "At that time I'd like to buy a bigger quantity of paper from you, so I can return to Ulriga and sell it to him again and find out if there are any rumours about the real source of the paper. Assuming everything is fine, I should be back again in another 20 days, and by that time you would probably have a stock of this medicine as well. By the time of my third visit to him, I will confirm if that trader is keeping his word, and assuming he is, I will start selling the medicine to him. That reminds me, what do you call this medicine? Does it have a name or something?"

Kivamus glanced at the majordomo. They hadn't had a chance to think about this yet. Taking a moment to consider the options, he got an idea of including the name of Syrene as well as their village in the name of the medicine, since that's who had played the biggest part in creating it and Tiranat is where it was created. But he immediately realized that even if they ignored the security risks of it - since doing that would disclose the real source of the medicine - this was not going to be the last invented product created here. That meant they had to give it a name which would keep it unique even after other new products were made here.

He recalled that back on earth, the name of any medicine was usually derived based on what its primary purpose was, as well as the source from where it was created. Here, this medicine had properties similar to acetylsalicylic acid - commonly known as aspirin - as well as that of an antibiotic, since this powder worked to prevent infections in any wounds as well, while it was created from the leaves of losuvil vines. Using that concept, some possible names for it could be losutic, vilotic or acelos. Hmm... Losutic sounded like the name of some bug, while vilotic... didn't sound like a medicine. Acelos - which was coined from the first syllable of acetylsalicylic acid, and that of losuvil - sounded better. That could work.

He looked at the merchant. "Acelos. It's called Acelos."

Pydaso nodded. "Acelos, huh? I think that's an interesting name. What about the pricing?"

"Like you said earlier, it is going to save a lot of lives, so I don't want to profit too much from it," Kivamus explained, "but I do want to charge enough to cover our costs and make a reasonable profit." He looked at Duvas. "How much had you mentioned that a single use portion of fresh losuvil paste sells for in Cinran?"

"Usually it's around a week's wages of a labourer." The majordomo continued, "That would be around 60 to 70 copper coins per portion. In other words, 6 to 7 silver coins for a single use."

Kivamus took a moment to think about what the price of this medicine should be. Ideally, it should be cheap enough that even a poor labourer should be easily able to afford it to cure his child, without him spending a week's wages on it. Since most of the unskilled labourers earned around 8 to 10 coppers every day, from which they also had to feed their family, the price should ideally only be somewhere around one or two coppers at most. However, there were three problems with that approach which he could already think of.