

## Londoner 301

### Chapter 301 Wondrous Products

Firstly, pricing it that low simply wouldn't give them enough profit to make it worthwhile, and it would also raise more than a few eyebrows if a much better medicine had suddenly flooded the market while being priced at just one-seventieth of the earlier option of using losuvil paste. That would start an even bigger scrutiny over what was already going to be a revolutionary medicine, so they simply couldn't risk it at the moment.

Secondly, for Tiranat to be able to make any profit at all, they needed a way to scale up the production by many orders of magnitude, but they simply weren't in a position to do that yet. As of now, Syrene had to do everything by her own hands without the use of any kind of mechanical devices at all, and she simply couldn't produce more than a certain amount of this medicine like this. Right now, they didn't even have enough free labourers in the village for her to teach them to repeat the same processes to increase the production. Even if they could somehow allot enough workers for that, they would also have to pay the wages of them, which would again increase the cost of production of the acelos medicine.

That meant, to be able to sell it to other towns and cities, they needed a way to mechanize the production - or at least the simpler steps for now - while also being able to afford to allot enough workers to do it at a scale big enough to keep their prices low. While they would still need to pay a few workers to operate those machines - as well as having to pay the cost of making those machines to the craftsmen who would make it - it would still be much lower than doing every single thing manually. That way, they should be able to keep the prices low enough to make it affordable to everyone. However, doing all that would take quite some time, so they simply couldn't afford to sell the medicine that cheaply until then.

Thirdly, until they could produce the medicine in a large enough quantity, the small amounts of it which they could sell right now would simply be gobbled up by any nobles who heard of it, no matter what the prices they had to pay for it. That meant the common person simply wouldn't see this medicine until the market was basically flooded by it, which would take a long time. That's why if he kept the prices low right now, at something like one silver per tablet or even lower, the merchant making the final sale to the nobles would simply price it as high as he could, like 10 or 20 silver, or maybe much higher, and the nobles would still be willing to pay it once they realized the benefits of it. In that case, only Tiranat would be the loser in the whole scheme, while the merchants would be reaping huge profits and the nobles would begin hoarding this medicine for future use, since it would easily last a long time, while the common person would never even see the medicine anyway.

That's why until they could scale up the production of acelos, and by a lot, it would be better to keep the major share of that profit to themselves, which would earn them the gold they needed to invest for producing this medicine cheaply in the future, instead of the merchants getting richer and richer.

He looked at Pydaso. "If the losuvil paste sells for 7 silver coins per use, then I would like to keep our prices at least somewhat comparable to that, so anyone who wants to buy a healing medicine would prefer our acelos tablets over the losuvil paste because of its much more potent benefits and its ability to last for a long time."

Trying to hide the fact that for now they had access to the raw material for basically free in the eastern hills, he continued, "After taking into account the costs of the raw materials and the labourers' wages required in the production, I think we can sell it to you for... 20 silver coins per tablet. Your profits, as well as those of that Ulrigan trader could add up maybe another few silvers to the price, which would still keep the final sale price more or less comparable to the losuvil paste, but with its ability to be stored for very long, everyone who can afford it would prefer our medicine. That's why you have to make sure to explain clearly to the buyers that Acelos will be useful even after 4 to 6 months. Once we have better data... uh, numbers, of how long this medicine will last, you can promote its even higher shelf life which would make this medicine seem even more attractive."

"Uh... shelf life?" The merchant asked with confusion.

"It means how long something perishable can be safely kept on... a shelf. Basically, it means how long something is safe for use."

"Oh," Pydaso nodded. "Well, I think this is a reasonable price for now. If it was even higher, like 30 or 40 silver coins, only the rich nobles would be able to afford it, but this way even a commoner would prefer it over the losuvil paste in case he has some savings to buy it. Well, that's after the market gets enough of this medicine, anyway. In the beginning it is most likely going to be stocked up by the nobles as well as the rich merchants and landowners anyway, no matter what we try."

"I realize that," Kivamus said. "We simply can't make enough of it right now to provide to the general public anyway, but hopefully in the future we will be able to make it in bulk, and we can also change the price accordingly at that time."

"Well, that's a decision for later then..." Pydaso added with a smirk, "So is that all you have to sell this time, or have you made some other revolutionary products?"

Kivamus laughed, remembering the crossbows and the seed drills, as well as the scorpion he planned to build in the future - not that he wanted to sell it to anyone else. "No comments on that."

Pydaso looked stunned. "I was just joking... Have you really made other things like this?"

"Perhaps..." Kivamus chuckled. "but that's a conversation for the future."

The portly merchant shook his head in wonder. "I can't even describe how glad I am that I met you, milord. If things keep going like this... I might just have to become a merchant who only travels to Tiranat to buy its wondrous products before selling it to other towns."

Kivamus laughed, hoping that day would come sooner.

Pydaso seemed lost in thought for a moment, before he continued, "Well, for today, I'll gladly buy all the paper you have with you this time. However, since you said that making more of that acelos medicine would take time, I would like to put an advance order for a hundred tablets of it."

Duvas looked excited after hearing that, but the merchant interrupted, "Actually, make it 200 tablets. I simply can't say how big a market would be for this medicine at triple the prices of losuivil paste, but I think I should still be able to sell this much when including both Cinran and Ulriga as the markets. After that, we'll have to see how it goes."

"Of course," Kivamus nodded with a grin. "I think we should be able to produce that much medicine to sell to you in around a month. However, I have a favour to ask of you."

"What is it, milord?" Pydaso asked curiously. "Trading with you is always good business for me, and I would like to maintain this mutually beneficial relationship between us. Just tell me what you want. If it is in my power, I'll make sure to fulfil it."

Kivamus continued, "As I mentioned earlier, we have to pay the taxes to the Count right now, so I would like the payment for the medicine and the paper in advance, if it is at all possible."

Pydaso stroked his beard for a moment. "Usually it wouldn't have been possible, but you seem to be in luck." He shrugged. "The price of that medicine will run in hundreds of gold, and I rarely carry that much gold with me on the road. Too much risk of being looted, you know? However this time I was planning to buy cheap iron ingots from Ulriga in bulk on my second trip, before taking it to sell to Cinran and some other places. That's why I'd brought more gold than usual from my home this time, so I think paying in advance should be fine. It's the least I can do for you."

"That's wonderful," Kivamus smiled. "Now Duvas will finalize the prices of everything we have sold and bought."

The majordomo began scribbling on the back side of a used parchment, "We have 17 furs of good quality, and 41 of average quality with us. We also have just above 100 sheets of paper to sell, while we have to account for the prices of the adzee pelt and the acelos medicine you ordered in advance. On the other hand, we are buying two full wagonloads of iron ingots from you."

Kivamus tuned out their conversation while the merchant began listing out the prices he was willing to pay for everything. After a while, Duvas put down his quill, making Kivamus look at him in curiosity.

"That is acceptable with me," the majordomo announced to the merchant before looking at Kivamus. "We will be getting 82 gold for the adzee pelt, while all the other furs will give us a total of 96 gold. Individual sheets of paper aren't that costly, and we don't have a big stock of it, so Pydaso has agreed to buy all of what we have for 21 gold, while buying all the iron ingots will cost us 67 gold. That turns out to be a net total of 132 gold and a few silver coins that we will gain. Finally, the advance order for 200 tablets of the acelos medicine at a rate of 20 silver coins per tablet comes out to a total of 400 gold."

Pydaso nodded. "So that's a total of 532 gold that I have to pay. You want all of it in advance?"

"If you can manage it," Kivamus asked.

"It will leave me short on coins to buy the iron ingots I wanted," the merchant mused, "but I can sell these in Ulriga first, and that's where I have to buy the ingots anyway, so I guess it will work out in the end." He smiled. "Although it's always a risk for a traveling merchant to sell things on credit, by now I know that you will stay true to your words and that I never need to doubt your honesty, so I'll give you the full amount by evening."

"That's wonderful," Kivamus nodded gratefully, knowing how much they needed that cash right now.

Pydaso added, "By the way, I know that you said that you don't have much stock of the medicine left, but can I still get a few small samples of it to take back with me? Even though I believe in your claims, I will still have to show some of it to the trader in Ulriga for him to accept that acelos really works."

#### Chapter 302 Salvaged Parts

"Of course," Kivamus nodded at the merchant's request. "Duvass will give you a small pouch of acelos powder when you leave. Make sure that nobody sees you carrying the paper or the medicine on the road. I don't want even a vague rumor to start about Tiranat being its source."

Pydaso smirked, "Don't you worry about it, milord. Traveling merchants like me always have a hidden compartment or two in our wagons when journeying for long distances, to carry, well... stuff which we would rather not be caught with. These things won't take too much space anyway, so I'll keep it as a part of my personal belongings so that even my wagon drivers won't get any idea that I'm taking something like this with me."

Kivamus laughed loudly hearing that. Of course a traveling merchant would have a way to hide things which he wanted to transport away from the eyes of any guards at the town gates. "I guess I shouldn't ask too much about it."

"That would be... benevolent of you, milord," Pydaso grinned as he stood up. "It's always good doing business with you. I can't wait to return with good news about that Ulrigan trader."

"Let's hope for the best," Kivamus agreed, as the merchant turned to exit the manor hall. "Wait," he stopped Pydaso as he recalled something. While an adzee was still much smaller than an elephant, its bones and teeth might still be useful, like ivory from elephants was used for making jewelry and such in some places. "What about other salvaged parts from an adzee's carcass? Don't you want to buy them too?"

Pydaso looked at him in surprise. "Like what?"

"You have already bought the adzee pelt, but what about its fangs? Or maybe the skull? Won't they be useful for something?"

"How did you even get such an absurd idea?" Duvas interrupted him with a shake of his head. "Nobody in Reslinor wears animal skulls to protect their heads in a war or wears their teeth as necklaces! I would know... I've lived both in the very north and the very south of the kingdom, as well as in the center, and I've never seen such a thing anywhere. We are not brutes like the Binpaazi, milord."

Pydaso snorted. "What are you both even talking about? Binpaazi don't wear that either. That kingdom is just ruled by an iron fist, but they are not savages. I know a merchant who used to travel to Binpaaz in the past before they closed giving entry to any outsiders after the previous war. He often used to tell me stories about life inside Binpaaz." He shrugged. "While he could tell nothing about how their rulers lived, the common people there were just like those living in Reslinor - poor and oppressed by the nobility, but still normal people - just like us. He never even mentioned seeing anything like people wearing animal teeth as necklaces! Haha... It's just a legend that their ancestors used to do that centuries ago. So I don't think people are going to buy adzee teeth or their skulls." He squinted. "Did you really store them?"

Kivamus looked at Duvas for an answer.

"Of course we didn't!" the majordomo insisted. "I had no reason to order the guards to do that. I think they buried it somewhere in the eastern hills, along with the rest of its carcass."

Kivamus sighed. While it was easy to see that this world of Eranityn was still in a medieval era - even though he barely knew much about this world even now - perhaps he had wrongly assumed that people would be wearing animal teeth necklaces and such here. This wasn't the dark ages and people weren't savages here. He scratched the back of his head. "I guess I was wrong. Still, those adzee bones must have been huge. Couldn't they be used to carve some ornaments or something? Perhaps in the bigger cities?"

Pydaso shrugged. "Ulriga is the second biggest city in the kingdom after the capital. While I've never been to Dorastiz, I've heard that Ulriga is easily the biggest port in the kingdom, and sees far more visiting sea merchants from other countries of the world than the capital. Having lived near Ulriga for all my life, I know the local markets inside out and I don't think I remember seeing teeth or bones of any animal used as necklaces or something. Still, I'll ask around when I visit there this time to see if any foreign sea merchants might be willing to buy it. Don't hold high hopes for it, though."

Kivamus laughed. "I wasn't counting on it anyway. Still, let's hope your contact in Ulriga is trustworthy enough for us to sell paper and medicine through him."

"We'll find out in a month," Pydaso shrugged, "one way or another." He bowed deeply. "I'll take my leave now, if that's all."

Kivamus nodded and waved him off.

Once the merchant had exited the hall, Duvas looked at him. "The 200 tablets we have promised to sell him in the future will take the space of what... a small pouch?"

Kivamus nodded. "Something like that. Why?"

The majordomo shook his head in wonder. "It's just that after selling wagonloads after wagonloads of coal for decades here - which barely earned us anything - I never thought we'd be able to earn that much gold by such a little thing. I can't even imagine how much we can earn just by selling this medicine in the future!"

Kivamus smiled. "Of course, often the priciest and the most profitable trade goods are the smallest in size. Just take gemstones or jewelry for example. Anyway, while our earnings will increase quite a bit once we can scale up producing the medicine, it won't be by a simple multiple of how much more we can produce. At the current price of 20 silver coins per tablet, there is a very limited number of people who can buy it, since paying even 7 silver coins is often too high for most commoners. To be able to target a bigger market and sell to everyone, we'll have to continue lowering the prices as we scale up the production and make more and more tablets. That will certainly decrease our profit per tablet, but it will allow the medicine to be bought by a lot more people, so our profits will still increase, although at a slower rate than what you are imagining right now."

"That does make sense," Duvas nodded. "Still, you know that we earn somewhere around 500 gold every month by selling around 40 wagon loads of coal, so even adding up a few hundred gold to our revenue every month by selling this medicine would do wonders for our finances."

"That would just be a start!" Kivamus snorted. "I'm not going to stop when our monthly revenue reaches 700 or 800 gold. We have far too many enemies around us, so making sure nobody can harm our village is not going to be cheap. I've also been thinking of some new ways to improve the daily life of our people and increase the village's efficiency - which'll need gold as well. So we are going to need a way higher revenue than that."

Seeing the frown returning on Duvass' face, Kivamus grinned. "Don't you worry about it. I am only going to increase our spending once we have already created a way to earn that much gold." Knowing that life didn't always work perfectly like that and they might still have to spend first before earning it, he muttered, "Well, kind of..."

\*\*\*

It was just after lunchtime and everyone had returned to the more comfortable armchairs after eating. Apart from him and Duvass, Gorsazo was also present for lunch today. Ustaimo and the knight were sitting nearby, while Fero and Hudan had joined them as well, with another two guards standing in the corners of the hall as usual, just in case the knight got dangerous ideas in his mind - since he was wearing his full plate armor as always, apart from his helmet which was kept next to him.

The ex-mercenary looked a little tired today, since he had to stay awake last night to guard the stairwell from the knight, while Hudan looked as energetic as always, and should be leaving soon to take another round of the village on a horse to check their defenses before returning to train the six newly recruited guards later in the evening.

At this point, Kivamus knew that they would certainly be able to pay the taxes on time, but that would mean nearly emptying their strongbox once again. That might cause problems since they had promised to pay Trevalo soon for all the wheat he had given them on credit, while paying the smoked fish merchant in Kirnos for two wagon loads of fish which Fero had bought a few weeks ago on credit was still pending.

Even then, that fish had long been eaten up by the villagers, while most of their recently bought wheat was going to be used for sowing - which would leave just around ten days worth of food for the village, especially since the guards had stopped going out for hunting these days in anticipation of a raid from Torhan. After realizing that they would be short on seeds for sowing, Duvass had already reduced the amount of weekly grain rations they gave to the villagers since the past couple of weeks, and everyone had to return to having only two meals a day instead of the three they had been getting in the winter.

Despite that food rationing, they would need to buy more wheat within a week or risk the villagers starving. There was still an option of using the Rizako mushrooms as food in a pinch, but he wanted to prevent doing that since giving the mushrooms just two or three more weeks to grow would make them a sustainable source of protein for the village. He had also promised Hudan on their last dam visit that they would start paying at least some part of the guards' wages soon, which would also need gold. That's why he wanted to save some of their newly gained gold if possible.

He glanced at the tax collector, who had recently announced for the knight's benefit that he wanted to take some rest after eating before he started checking the numbers in the tax ledger again. On the other hand, Tuilas looked sullen and had been grumbling about having to stay in the village for longer than he had expected.

"Ustaimo," he began, "you already know that two merchants have arrived in Tiranat by now, so we did gain some gold from selling coal, but we still need to save some of it to buy food for the village. Can't you allow us to pay half of the tax now, and half after a month or so? That would help us a lot."

"I already told you about that, milord," Ustaimo began, "it's not in my..."

His words were interrupted by the knight, who scowled at Kivamus. "Huh? Again this shit of trying to get away without paying taxes?"

"We are not trying to get away from paying taxes!" Duvas insisted. "You know that we lost most of our tax gold when the previous baron was ambushed on the road. We just want some more time to pay it."

Sir Tuilas turned fully towards the majordomo and glared at him. "That's none of our concern! Uncle Ebirtas told me to bring back all the gold you owe us, one way or another. If you still can't find enough gold to pay the tax by the time Ustaimo gets done with his review of your tax ledger, you'll leave me no choice but to seize enough slaves to pay for the difference."

Ustaimo looked worriedly at Duvas, while Kivamus clenched his fists at this young upstart's audacity. However before he said anything, the ex-mercenary sat straighter.

"I'd like to see you try it!" Feroy growled. "You are just one man here with only a few other guards, you know? If you try forcing any condition on Lord Kivamus, I guarantee that your uncle wouldn't even receive enough intact pieces of your body to identify you."

### Chapter 303 Thinking Ahead

"How dare you!" Sir Tuilas snarled as he stood up, his hand already on the pommel of the sword tied at his waist. "I'll have your whole family line drawn up and quartered for challenging a noble from the Count's family! Lowlifes like you fall against my sword every other day!"

The two guards standing in the hall had jogged nearby in case the matter escalated, while Feroy had stood up as well and was glaring at the knight. But Hudan - who easily towered over everyone in the hall - put his bulk between the ex-mercenary and the knight, and pushed them away from each other. The guard captain glared at Feroy, who looked ready to taunt the knight again. "Be quiet!"

Gorsazo and Duvas had already moved to stand in front of Kivamus by this time with the guards accompanying them with their swords out, while Ustaimo was unsuccessfully trying to pull Tuilas back.

Kivamus was surprised to see Feroy acting like a hothead for the first time, while Tuilas was acting just as he had expected from a noble in this world.

"Enough!" He roared in a voice loud enough to make everyone stop in their places, and took a step towards the duo. "Feroy, move back right now! Tuilas, get your hand away from your sword immediately or I'll have you chained and thrown in prison for trying to attack a higher noble. Hudan, make sure they stay away from each other."

As Hudan moved Feroy away, the ex-mercenary seemed to be smirking for some reason, while Tuilas jerked his hands away from his sword like it was poisonous and sputtered, "But... but... I never tried to attack you! I only wanted to put this rogue in his place!"

"You still tried to pull your sword out just a few feet away from me," Kivamus declared. "From what I know, that's something which makes you deserve a punishment in any noble's court. I'm sure the Count will agree with me on this. Get your anger in control, and go and take a nap or something in your room. I'm trying to give you an easy way out, but this is my last warning to you."

"But! I... I didn't even..." The knight tried again, before he exhaled and gave a nod.

Kivamus looked at the tax collector. "I have been lenient with Tuilas' crude behaviour so far, but trying to attack my guard is crossing the line. Take him to his room, and make sure he calms down before coming out. We'll talk more about the taxes later in the evening after everyone has had time to cool down a little."

"As you wish, milord," Ustaimo nodded, before gently pushing the knight towards the inner door. Hudan ordered one of the guards to follow them and guard his room. Tuilas turned back with a scowl at Feroy

before he and the tax collector went out of the hall accompanied by the guard. The other guard was told to exit the hall as well and to man that door from the other side.

Seeing that the matter had ended for the moment without any bloodshed, Kivamus glared at Feroy after the door had closed. "What the heck were you trying to do by goading the knight? How could you not know that trying to threaten him would be a bad idea? Just be glad that he accepted my bluff. You know that the Count has no reason to favor us over his nephew."

The ex-mercenary - whose face looked nothing like a man who was willing to fight to the death just a few moments ago - grinned as he took a seat. "I knew exactly how he would behave if I said that."

Duvas looked annoyed, as he sat on an armchair along with the others. "Then why did you even do that? Couldn't you see that we were trying to negotiate to lower the taxes?"

Feroy smirked. "Two reasons." He continued in a low voice to make sure nobody else could hear them, "Firstly, I don't know all the details, but I have a good idea that after you talked with Pydaso for hours with nobody else in the room, you would have earned enough gold by now to pay the taxes, by selling..." He glanced at the inner door. "that stuff. Even then, from what the guards following Tuilas have reported to me about his ways, I have no doubt that he was already looking for a reason to try to take slaves, preferably some of them female ones he has been eyeing in the manor - whether you can pay the taxes or not."

The ex-mercenary added, "Even if he couldn't find an official reason to do that because you had paid all the taxes, he might have still tried to kidnap the women when leaving the village - expecting that nobody would be willing to stand up to a knight of noble lineage - especially one who's a nephew of the Count. But now?" Feroy snorted. "He saw how a commoner like me and the other guards were willing to fight with him as equals. That will give him enough reason in his mind to doubt whether he can get away with taking a few slaves by force, especially after he finally realizes just how many guards we have in the manor right now. Trust me, he'll notice it from now on."

Kivamus frowned at Duvas. "Is that something normal? I know the nobles of this kingdom don't blink an eye about keeping slaves, but could Tuilas really have tried to take them by force?"

The majordomo shrugged. "I don't know about him in particular, but occasionally some nobles are known to take slaves by force, especially when they think they can get away with it. Even if they still have to pay the slave price to their families later on, by then it's too late for the slave who would be condemned to a life of servitude for most of his or her life." He shook his head reluctantly. "Assuming

the previous Baron of Tiranat ruled here today, and Tuilas forcefully tried to take a woman as his slave, someone from the manor would certainly have alerted the baron about it, but for nobles, gold is often far more important than the life of a commoner. In that case, it's quite possible that unless it was a personal slave of the baron, he would have just shrugged and sent a note to pay the slave's price in full."

"Isn't the baron meant to have a higher station than a knight?" Hudan asked in confusion.

"Of course, but this particular knight is a nephew of the Count," the majordomo replied, "and has a lot more leeway than most other knights. The previous baron wouldn't have wanted to embarrass the Count by claiming that his nephew had stolen a slave. Most likely, he would have just demanded a higher payment for keeping his mouth shut about it, which would have kept the knight happy, and the baron away from the ire of the Count."

Kivamus shook his head in disgust. Is this how the powerful nobility behaved? Was the life of a commoner nothing more than a stack of gold in their eyes? Trying to put that thought away from his mind, he looked at Feroy. "You said two reasons. What's the other reason?"

The ex-mercenary shrugged. "It's just to give you a better bargaining position, milord. Although you have clearly told the knight that you won't give him slaves to pay off any shortfall in taxes, but now that you also hold the power of complaining to the Count that he pulled his sword in front of you, he would be more inclined to give you an extension to pay the taxes to keep you quiet."

"The Count has absolutely no reason to favor us over his own nephew..." Kivamus repeated.

Duvas was rubbing his short white beard. "Actually, Feroy might be right here. With Binpaaz getting more and more daring in the east, the Count needs the support of all the barons under him - just in case the raids become more serious. I know that there is no love lost between you and the Count, since he would always see you as a case of the Duke overextending his authority by appointing you directly, but easily forgiving his nephew who pulled his sword in front of his barons is also not a good option for him, whether he likes you or not. It would make the other barons and nobles under him feel resentful, which isn't something the Count wants with a possible war on the horizon."

"That really does make sense..." Kivamus looked at Feroy in wonder. "Sometimes... I'm just surprised by how far ahead you think. I guess I should learn not to second-guess you by now."

The ex-mercenary grinned. "I'm just doing my best to help the village, you know?"

Hudan snorted. "Sometimes I wonder just who you are... Hah! Doesn't matter, I guess. I'm just glad you're on our side."

"Should we really try to use this to postpone some of the taxes?" Duvas asked.

Kivamus thought about it for a while. "I don't think it's a good idea. Most likely, as a nephew of the count, Tuilas has been sent here to keep him away and safe from any Binpaazi raids in the east, which means he is the one who is likely going to come here to take the taxes for the next few years at least, until either a new war breaks out or the raids fizzle out into nothing. That's why threatening Tuilas isn't going to help us in the future, especially when we don't even know if the Count will punish him at all just based on my word against his. That being said, now that we can fully pay the taxes, I want to get it done and send Ustaimo and the knight away from Tiranat so they won't have any reason to visit us again until the autumn - when we have to pay this year's taxes."

He shrugged, "Saving some gold would certainly have been nice, but we would have to pay the remaining amount within a few weeks anyway, since the extension isn't likely going to be long, if we even get it. So, whether we pay the full taxes now and pay the merchants in a few weeks, or we save some gold from the taxes to pay the merchants right now and pay the remaining tax within a few weeks, is basically the same thing for us, since we would have to pay all the gold we owe within the coming month anyway. However, we have more important things which we need to keep hidden from the knight and the count, which would be difficult if they have to visit Tiranat again to take the remaining tax."

He glanced at the inner door to confirm that it was still closed, and continued in a lower voice, "Like the medicine and the paper, which we can't afford for Tuilas to find out about and report to the count. The same goes for crossbows and the scorpions which I plan to build - both of which are likely illegal for anyone outside Fort Aragosa to have - apart from some other things in the future. That's why it's better to pay them in full tonight, so they can leave tomorrow morning and we can get back to our normal lives until late autumn. We have far too much to lose if they find out about these things just to get a few weeks of extension on the tax."

"I agree with you," Duvas nodded. "Once Pydaso gives us the gold in the evening, we'll pay everything we owe to Ustaimo."

Chapter 304 A Spring Walk - I

The majordomo stood up. "I'll go and see if Ustaimo needs any help."

"Don't you know that the knight could be dangerous?" Hudan frowned.

The majordomo laughed. "I'm not the Baron of Tiranat. He has no reason to harm me. What will he even gain by that?" With a shake of his head, Duvas exited through the inner door.

Kivamus stood up as well. "I think it would be nice to take a walk. Dealing with Tuilas has annoyed me enough that I don't want to see him anytime soon."

"As you wish, milord," Hudan nodded. "I'll get a few guards to accompany us. Fero, you go and take some rest. You'll need to keep an eye on the stairwell again for tonight, so you will need the energy."

Fero yawned loudly. "Yeah... I think a nap would be nice right about now."

As Kivamus turned to the outer door, Gorsazo followed him. "I'll come with you too. We barely get any time to talk these days."

"Of course. Come on then!"

\*\*\*

Kivamus was walking in the north of the village in front of the first longhouse block, while the second one was visible only a short distance away. This was the most bustling area in the village these days, since most of the villagers lived here, so he had decided that this was the best place to take a walk. Gorsazo was walking next to him, while Hudan and some other guards had taken positions ahead of and behind them.

It was close to sunset, and a thin stream of smoke was coming out from somewhere inside both of the longhouses. The village workers had already started returning by now to their allotted blocks, which meant their evening meals must already be under preparation. The spring weather was as mild as expected, and it felt like the perfect time to be outside

He kept walking and soon reached near the northern wall, where he saw Taniok walking towards them with a few other carpenter apprentices in tow.

The bald carpenter stopped when he saw him. "Oh, I am glad to find you here, milord. I was thinking of coming to the manor to report to you."

"What is it?" Kivamus asked, before he looked in the northwest where the carpenter had been working these days. "Oh, is the watchtower completed?"

Taniok grinned. "It is ready! I just hammered the last nail in the tower. I know the guards were already being posted on it, but now all the parapets are completed, so they will be much safer keeping an eye around the village." He glanced at the workers waiting near him, and gestured to them to go ahead. Once they were out of earshot, he added, "The secret compartment you had told me and Darora to make were also completed in the morning. I think the crossbows were also kept inside them soon after that."

Kivamus nodded. "Yeah, Hudan had told me about it. Well done, Taniok! If you had been late in completing that, it might have caused many problems for us if the knight had found out about them."

"Yeah," Hudan agreed. "Now it makes sense to put the women guards on duty here, since they will have ready access to the crossbows in case they see anything suspicious out there."

"What do you want me to do now, milord?" Taniok asked.

"The same as we had planned earlier," Kivamus replied. "We need two more watchtowers in the village - one each in the middle of the northern and southern walls, which are longer than the other two. Going by the current rate of construction, it should take you around 10 days or so in total to build them, right?"

Taniok shook his head. "The foundations had only been dug for four watchtowers before the winter, since that is all you had planned at that time. For the next two, we will have to dig those as well, which will make it take longer. Actually, I think that works for us, since I've already used up all the stored planks to build the fourth watchtower and those compartments, so we need more of them anyway. Although now my apprentices can also cut them well enough, so I'll put them on that tomorrow, while I'll supervise digging the foundations and putting the pillars in those holes. By the time the foundation

for the next tower is ready, we should have enough planks in stock for us to start building it, but my carpenters have no experience in digging, so I'll need some workers who have dug foundations in the past."

Kivamus nodded. "I'll talk with Duvas. He'll allot you some of the fire clay diggers from the eastern hills for a few days."

"That will help a lot," Taniok said gratefully. "I think it'll take a few days to dig the foundations, and maybe four or five days after that to build the fifth watchtower. By that time, the foundations for the sixth one should already be completed, so I think it should take maybe two weeks to complete both of these towers."

"It's not ideal, but I guess we can't help it." Kivamus thought for a moment about the iron ingots they had just bought in bulk. "Did Darora talk to you about the scorpion?"

The bald carpenter nodded. "He did, and even showed me the blueprint you had made of it to discuss the design, but it seems far too complicated for me to try my hands in." He snorted. "I'm not as young as that kid, and my eyesight is not the same as it used to be. I'm just fine with constructing new watchtowers and longhouses, but sadly, I can't see well enough to make something as intricate as a crossbow or that scorpion."

"No, no, that's not what I had in my mind." Kivamus explained, "We just received a big shipment of iron today, so we can restart making everything we had paused because of a shortage of iron. I've already told Cedoron to team up with Darora so they can work on making the scorpion together, so you don't have to worry about it. However, now that we have enough iron, I think we can start working on the trip hammer I'd planned to make near the dam. Earlier I was thinking about having Darora work on it, but he will be busy making the scorpion and more crossbows in the future, so once you are done with the watchtowers, I want you to start on the trip hammer."

Taniok looked uncertain. "I have no idea how it would work, milord... I have never seen something like that in my life."

"Oh, I forgot that I had given the blueprint of that to Darora. Get it from him when you meet him next time. Keep taking a look at it in your free time in the next two weeks, and ask me if you have any doubts. It's not that complicated, although it will have some gears which have to work along with a rotating axle, but..."

"An axle?" Taniok interrupted. "I can't make an axle here, or I would have repaired the broken wagon myself before the winter."

"No, this axle won't be made of iron. It'll need to be quite long and sturdy, and we simply can't afford to spend that much iron on it. A straight wooden log will work just as well for this. That log will become the axle, while the gears will also be quite large, so I don't think it would be any problem for you to craft them. There's hardly anything complex in that hammer."

The bald carpenter scratched his chin. "I'll still need to take a look at that blueprint first, but I think I should be able to do it."

"I have no doubt that you can," Kivamus praised, "especially since it doesn't require any intricate work."

Taniok beamed at the praise, a gap in his teeth visible easily. "I'll do my best, milord! What will that trip hammer be used for, anyway?"

Kivamus grinned. "I think you'll like what it's going to do. It has been designed in a way so it can be repurposed to do many tasks. The main reason I had decided to build it was to beat and mix the sawdust pulp properly to make more sheets of paper, but the rotating axle can easily be repurposed to cut planks, like in a sawmill."

"A sawmill?" Taniok repeated. "Like the ones which work using water wheels on the Kal river in Cinran?"

Kivamus nodded. "At a smaller scale, but yes."

"I've seen those in work before I moved here, but it's been more than two decades so I don't remember much about it. I wouldn't know how to use it."

"Don't worry, it is very easy to operate," Kivamus reassured him. "The best part is that your apprentices won't have to waste time working on something as simple as cutting planks - which takes the majority of their workdays. A single sawmill should probably allow you to do the work of a dozen apprentices - or perhaps even more - with only one or two workers needed to operate it. As long as enough logs can be brought to the sawmill and the planks taken back to the village, you won't have any shortage of them"

anytime soon - especially since we have way too many Fedarus logs stocked around the village." He grinned. "The best part is that this sawmill can keep working around the clock... Uh... I mean the whole day and night without any problem."

Taniok frowned. "I don't think we would be able to work at night... There is simply not enough light for that, but I think I get what you mean. If this really works like you say I'll be able to do a lot more construction for you since this sawmill would allow most of my apprentices to work along with me to speed up building everything." He scratched his bald pate. "Although I think transporting enough logs from here to the dam and bringing back the planks would still be a problem since we don't have that many wagons even now."

"I know," Kivamus agreed. "That's another thing I plan to work on in the future, but for now we will have to make do with what we have. The coal mining wagons stay idle at the mines all day so we'll just have to use them more. By the time you finish the watchtowers, all the sowing will already have been completed in the farms, after which we'll also free up all those horses pulling the seed drills, as well as the wagon used to take seeds to the south."

"We'll still need a couple of workers to drive those wagons back-and-forth to the dam," Taniok suggested, "but as long as it keeps my apprentices free, I'll be happy. Wait, how will the axle change what it is doing? Didn't you say that it will also be used to beat the sawdust pulp? It's not like the axle will know by itself when it has to stop cutting planks and start mixing pulp, right?"

#### Chapter 305 A Spring Walk - II

Kivamus chuckled. "No, the log axle or the trim hammer aren't alive, but don't worry, there will be a simple lever to change what it's doing. You'll see it when you read the blueprint. We will build another waterwheel in the future to use in front of the other sluice gate, and after that, the triphammer can be moved there, and the lever can be used for other purposes."

"I see..." Taniok said before glancing to the south. "I think I should go now. I haven't eaten anything since breakfast, so my stomach demands some food now."

Kivamus sighed, remembering the recent announcement by Duvass that there will only be two meals for everyone in the village for now. "Of course. Go on then. Don't forget to take that blueprint from Darora."

Taniok nodded and gave a bow, before he walked away. Kivamus decided to turn around as well, along with Duvass and the guards, when his eyes went to the solitary smoke house in the northeast, which was idle these days because of a shortage of raw meat to smoke.

"We really need to buy more food, you know?" he muttered. "We can't even risk sending our guards out to hunt until the danger of a raid has passed away, which means we won't be getting fresh meat anytime soon." He sighed. "I just wish we had some more gold to buy wheat easily... Having to pay the taxes right when we needed the gold for sowing and stocking up again after the winter was a really bad stroke of luck."

Gorsazo shook his head. "It's not like you can just decide not to pay taxes. While Feroy was right this time and a single knight might not be able to force anything on us, we can't break the status quo and risk the Count sending a dozen knights to us in punishment to take gold or slaves by force."

"What are we even paying taxes for anyway?" Kivamus spat. "The roads are shit, the forests are just as dangerous as always, and we can't even expect any help from the Count or his knights during Torhan's raid! Who knows if the Count is also in cahoots with Zoricus—who must be foaming at the mouth to kill me and grab my barony."

"Calm down, Kivamus!" Gorsazo spoke sharply. "This isn't the place to talk about something like that," his former teacher whispered, before he gestured to the guard captain to move the guards some distance away. Once no one else was in earshot, Gorsazo stared at him. "Whatever the Count may be doing, he is still higher ranking than you in this kingdom, and this kind of talk might even be counted as treason!"

Kivamus glanced around them, noticing that the guards had walked further away and were looking ahead, trying to give them space, although some of the nearby villagers had begun to look at them in curiosity after hearing his raised voice. He sighed. "You are right..." While he trusted the guards with his life and knew that they wouldn't tattle on him, losing his temper wouldn't help anyone.

After making sure once again that they were away from everyone else, Gorsazo continued in a much lower voice, "We have no reason to think that the Count wants to kill you, but I realize that it's very likely that Lord Ebirtas is also in Zoricus' pocket. That is even more of a reason that we can't let anyone else hear this kind of talk from you. Judging by Sir Tuilas' behaviour, I don't think Zoricus has enough sway with Cinran's knights to order them to assassinate you—not yet, anyway—but if you don't pay the taxes or if Cinran got word of you talking like that, the baron can still persuade the Count to send a punitive expedition to Tiranat, which we are simply not in a position to resist. You know that!"

The teacher glanced at the guards for a moment. "I'm hardly a military expert, but I don't think the knights' plate armors are going to be damaged with a crossbow bolt, which is our only hidden

advantage. You'd designed the crossbows in a small size to be more handy. Like Sir Duvas had told us in the past, our crossbows aren't like those bulky arbalests in the Duke's army which are made to pierce plate armor. So we can't do anything if a dozen knights come to attack us..."

"That won't be the case when we've put a scorpion on every watchtower!" Kivamus retorted. "Let's see the knights try to attack us after that!"

Gorsazo shook his head. "Even if the scorpions manage to scare a dozen knights of Cinran from entering the village, what about after that? The Count will immediately ask for help from Fort Aragosa, which is controlled by your brother Tarilus. From what Duvas told us, while Lord Tarilus might knowingly dawdle in sending help to Cinran in case of a raid from Binpaaz to weaken the Count, but if he hears that the Count needs help against you and there is a good enough reason for that, do you think he'll hesitate to send his full force against Tiranat?" He exhaled. "I have no idea just how many armed men live in that fort, but if it is considered strong enough by the kingdom to resist a full scale invasion from Binpaaz, you can be pretty sure that they can crush Tiranat like a fly—with or without the scorpions."

Kivamus clenched his fists. "You are not wrong, but I hate this, Gorsazo! I hate this feeling of powerlessness! Those noble bastards use the threat of force to make us obey their wishes just because they are our so-called superiors, and make us pay them our hard earned gold, and for what! I just want my people and my village to be allowed to live freely, but this is like being forced to survive with their damned boot on our throats!" He shook his head. "These are the moments when I wish nobility never existed in this world, even if it meant I would also have been a commoner here."

Gorsazo took another look around them before he patted Kivamus' back. "I simply can't imagine how a world without nobles would work, but either way, this is a different world. For better or worse, you don't live on Earth anymore, Steven." His former teacher smiled. "But don't worry, everyone knows you are doing your best for Tiranat. That's all we can wish for."

Kivamus took a few deep breaths and forced himself to calm down. Hearing that name had made him remember and miss his life on earth even more. He looked at Gorsazo. "Whatever I do, it never feels enough... Whether it's finding enough food for the villagers, or dealing with greedy nobles, or defending our village from one bandit group after another..." He exhaled. "Even after doing everything to buy or hunt food in the past few months, once again we can't feed everyone three meals a day! No matter what I do, it always feels like there is a bigger problem rearing its head at us..."

"That's just called life." His teacher smiled. "I still had some doubts after your intentions when you told me about your real origin, but by now I'm absolutely certain that you have been doing your very best to help everyone here. I'm sure every single person who lives in this village will agree with me, whether

they are commoners like the carpenters and the coal miners, former slaves like Hyola or Joric, or even sons of nobles like Duvas."

Gorsazo snorted. "In fact, even with all my experience teaching others and despite considering myself quite knowledgeable for this world's standards, if I had been transported to another world so much different from the one I know, I don't think I would have done half as well as you have done in Tiranat. I can't even imagine how difficult it must be, but you are doing good. You are doing really well. Even if we are forced to cope with the demands of the Count and the higher nobility, you are still helping everyone around you far more than you realize - and in more ways than one. I am proud of you, Steven."

Kivamus took a deep breath once again. While he had been an adult even back on earth, it still felt good for someone to say that he was doing well here. He glanced around them. The villagers had continued with their tasks, with more and more workers returning to the longhouse blocks now. Some of them were using wheelbarrows to bring sacks of wheat from the storage rooms of the manor, while some frail-looking elderly villagers were sitting on a crooked log someone had dragged there and chatting merrily.

A few kids were running and laughing nearby, and playing a game of tag, while inside the courtyard of the longhouse, some younger children seemed to be having loads of fun playing on the swings hanging from the Bilona tree, looking happier than anyone else. Whenever any of the villagers passed near him, they always gave him a nod in respect, while some even bowed deeply, thanking him for one thing or another.

Eventually, he shook his head and smiled. "You are right, Gorsazo. We are doing well, and Tiranat has come a long way from the state we found it in before the winter. There is still a lot we need to do, starting from making sure the villagers can return to three meals a day soon, but I know we will get there in time." He gazed at the bustling village around him. "I know I didn't choose this life, but I want to keep doing my best for these people. For my people."

"I'm sure you will," Gorsazo returned the smile.

"Let's go back to the manor now," Kivamus said while gesturing to Hudan to bring the guards. "Coming out for a walk was a really good idea. I guess I was just feeling too stressed after dealing with the tax collector and the knight."

Gorsazo chuckled. "That's okay, it happens to everyone. It just proves that you are also a normal person like the rest of us, no matter how many wonders and miraculous ideas your brain contains inside it."

Kivamus laughed loudly, surprising the guards. "You have no idea, Gorsazo, you have no idea..."

\*\*\*

Later in the evening, after Gorsazo had gone back to the longhouse blocks to teach, Kivamus was sitting in the manor hall with Duvas, while Pydaso had just handed over the 532 gold he owed them.

"Before I leave, milord," Pydaso began with a grin, "I have a surprise for you. I had nearly forgotten about it after the excitement of everything you had shown me today." He put his hand into a satchel he had brought, before he pulled out a long rolled up parchment and handed it to him.

Kivamus unrolled the sheet, before he grinned. It was a map of the southern part of the Reslinor Kingdom and the nearby areas in Cilaria. It was hand drawn, as he expected, and outside of the major towns and cities, it only seemed to be filled with a very basic survey of the land.

It was certainly nothing compared to seeing an easily zoomable and scrollable satellite map on your phone, but it was still much better than having no idea of what lay around Tiranat. Handing it over to Duvas for safekeeping until he had more time to study it, he looked at the merchant. "This is wonderful! I had also forgotten about asking you to buy it. Where did you get it from?"

Chapter 306 A Special Relationship

"I bought this map from Ulriga," Pydaso replied. "I don't know if more detailed maps have been made of this region, but they certainly aren't available publically. Only the Duke's library might have them, or perhaps that of the King in Dorastiz, but neither of those would be for sale. So this is the best I could find."

Duvas interrupted, "How much will it cost us?"

The merchant smiled. "You don't need to worry about its payment. Consider it a gift from me to celebrate our ongoing trading relationship."

The majordomo chuckled. "I never knew you could be so generous, or I would have preferred trading with you even in the past."

Pydaso gave a loud laugh. "Nobody has ever called me generous as far as business is concerned. However, I've never met someone like Lord Kivamus before, and my association with Tiranat is now the most special one I have anywhere in the kingdom, so this is a small gesture from me to keep it like that."

Kivamus grinned. "Well, thank you for this, Pydaso. It will be very helpful to us."

"I hope so, milord," the merchant nodded. "Before I leave, I wanted to ask if you have some more coal to sell."

Kivamus snorted. "Of course we do. Tiranat is a coal mining village, after all. Why do you ask that?"

Pydaso shrugged. "The thing is, I met Trevalo in the market square earlier, and he told me that he has already bought six wagonloads of coal from you, so I didn't know if you would even have enough coal left to sell right now, especially right after the slow months of the winter when people don't mine coal here. Anyway, earlier I wasn't even sure if I'd be able to sell all the iron ingots here, but seeing both of my wagons empty when coming here made me think that I should also buy some coal from you to sell in Cinran or Ulriga - assuming you still had it." He lowered his voice. "I know the goods I am already carrying will account for the bulk of my trade on this trip, at least in value, but returning with empty wagons from Tiranat will raise quite a few eyebrows on the way."

Kivamus nodded. "That's true. Although I've heard that the demand for coal is low this time because of the bad harvests, so you won't be able to sell it at a good price anyway."

He thought for a moment. While Tiranat was always short on gold these days, this really was a special trading relationship, and instead of price gouging, he should try to make sure Pydaso remained buoyant enough to continue coming here. It wasn't like there was some other merchant they could fence paper and medicine through, and with how corrupt everyone seemed to be in this world, something like half of any traveling merchant's profit, or perhaps even more, might be going just to pay the bribes and taxes to enter and exit a town."

He looked at the portly merchant. "Tell you what, you already gave us a generous gift of the map, so we'll give you the coal at a half rate this time to return the favor. For two wagon loads it would have cost around 24 gold, but we'll sell you the same amount of coal for 12 gold. That should cover the cost of any bribes you have to pay on the road, even with low coal prices these days."

Duvas frowned at him after hearing that, but remained quiet.

Pydaso looked surprised for a moment before he grinned. "Thank you for this, milord! That will help me a lot! Usually, when I am only carrying things which are above board, I prefer not to pay any bribe, even if it would lead to the guards demanding to check my wagons." He scratched his scraggly beard. "In fact, I think you'd told me that you had noticed the same thing when you were coming from Ulriga, when I was held up outside the gates of Cinran for quite a while, and that was the reason you chose me to travel with you to Tiranat."

The merchant shrugged. "Anyway, when I'm sure that the guards won't find anything illicit, I let them do it, especially when I am not short on time. However this time, you know very well that we can't let anyone find what I'm carrying, so I might have to pay higher than normal rates to make sure no town guard tries to check my wagon. I do have a good place to hide those things, but it's better not to take such a risk."

"That's a good idea," Kivamus said.

"I agree with this too," Duvas nodded. "It's safer this way."

The majordomo stood up. "Well, I'll go and tell the servants to start loading your wagons with coal. You can pay us the gold after that."

"I'll come with you," Pydaso said as followed Duvas outside the hall.

Kivamus exhaled, remembering that the tax collector should be coming soon to the manor hall. He sighed loudly. Well, time to pay back nearly all the gold they had earned.

\*\*\*

Duvas had returned to the hall before long, after taking the payment and leaving the merchant outside to oversee the loading of his wagon with coal. Kivamus had been waiting for Ustaimo to arrive, but didn't want him to call him here, in case he was still trying to get the knight to calm down.

The majordomo had also brought the full amount of gold they would need to pay the tax, and it was kept in a satchel in front of them. That included the 687 gold from the very last of his savings from his past life in Ulriga, as well as nearly 400 gold which they had earned from Pydaso.

Duvas looked wistfully at the gold. "We rarely gather this much gold at the same time, and it is usually in the autumn. Which means we only ever see it for a few days before the previous baron had to take it to Cinran to pay the tax."

Kivamus nodded. "I'm just happy that we managed to gather all the gold on time. While Tuilas may not have been able to force us to give him slaves for the shortfall, it still wouldn't have ended well."

"That is true enough," the majordomo agreed. "The Count might very well have sent more knights in a week to force the issue in that case. Anyway, at least we don't have to pay the tax on this new revenue until the autumn, since the current taxes are only for the year which ended last autumn. Selling coal to Trevalo for nearly 70 gold, and the total sale to Pydaso for around 600 gold, means we have to pay around 180 gold as tax on it this autumn, at the new rate of 25%. I need to add all this to our revenue ledger too."

After making sure that there was nobody else in the hall and confirming that the inner door was still closed - with two guards keeping an eye in the inner corridor and waiting to inform him when the tax collector had exited his room to come here - Kivamus looked at Duvas and smirked. "Taxes? What taxes?" He laughed. "Taxes don't have to be paid on something which doesn't even exist."

"Huh?" The majordomo frowned. "What are you talking about? Of course we have to pay taxes on the barony's whole revenue!"

Kivamus grinned. "Aren't you forgetting something?" He lowered his voice further. "Those products will be sold by that Ulrigan trader - after he buys them from a visiting sea merchant. I don't see any reason for Tiranat to have anything to do with it."

Duvas looked speechless.

Kivamus smirked before he explained. "We have taken the best precautions to make sure nobody knows either of those things came from Tiranat. That means there wasn't any official sale or transaction at all. So why would we pay the taxes if we didn't even sell anything?"

He shrugged. "As far as the count or even the duke know, those things will be coming from some new sea merchant in Ulriga. Let them try to find him and get taxes from him. Actually," he paused for a moment to think, before adding, "I don't even know how the tax system works for sea merchants, but either way, it doesn't have anything to do with us. From what I see, all we have to pay taxes on is the 70 gold we earned from Trevalo for the coal, as well as the furs and coal we sold Pydaso. That will be 25% of uh... 260 gold, I think. So 65 gold is the tax we owe on it this autumn. That's it."

Duvas closed his mouth again after trying to speak for a few times, but words seemed to have failed him. Finally, he grinned. "That's... That's brilliant! I never even thought about it that way. Wait, doesn't this mean we won't have to pay any taxes for those two products at all, even in the coming months?"

Kivamus shrugged with a knowing grin. "Until we keep hiding the fact that we are the source of them, yes, we don't have to pay taxes on any of those things at all. Eventually, we will have to reveal it, but that's a long time away. Of course, this is being done off the books. So don't write anything about the income from those things in that revenue ledger."

Duvas nodded. "This will add up a lot to our earnings!" He shook his head in wonder. "You really are a genius, my lord..." he breathed. "If we somehow manage to sell those things regularly - with nobody finding out about its source - this is going to help us tremendously, especially with how many new ways you keep finding to spend gold."

Kivamus laughed. "That's the very reason we are in this position today. Anyway, it's not like our expenses are getting lower any time soon. We have to pay Trevalo and the Kirnos fish merchant soon, then we have to buy more food for the village, and before long, we have to start paying the guards as well. That would mean the rest of the villagers would also demand to be paid directly in coins instead of the grain and coal we are giving them. But yes, it's a good start to get enough gold for those things."

That was the moment when the inner door opened and a guard walked to him. "The tax collector has just exited his room and is coming here. Sir Tuilas seems to be staying back though."

"Good. Go and tell the other guard to continue keeping a watch outside Tuilas' room and to follow him around if he leaves it. He is not to be allowed to go to the upper floor. When you are done, return here with Ustaimo."

It was time to pay the tax and to finally be done with it.

#### Chapter 308 Accountants and Accounting

Soon, Duvas had handed over the satchel of gold after counting the full amount of 1071 gold and 9 silver coins to the tax collector, who finally looked relaxed, probably for the first time since he had arrived here.

"I am glad that you managed to pay all of this on time," Ustaimo smiled. "I really wouldn't have been able to give you an extension. Sir Tuilas also has no reason to cause any trouble now."

"I doubt it," Kivamus snorted, "but at least we are done with the taxes. For this year, it will be due in late autumn, right?"

Ustaimo nodded. "Right after all the harvesting is done in the farms. That being said, how did you manage to raise this much gold so fast? I remember you mentioning that you had around two-thirds of this amount ready to pay when I arrived, but what about the rest of it? I know two merchants have arrived here, but getting the remaining gold just by selling coal would take, what 40 wagons? I don't think those merchants could have bought that much."

Kivamus laughed. "No, of course not. We did manage to sell a good amount of coal, but the rest of it was earned by selling the furs we had stored in the winter. There were a lot of them," he added, trying to deflect the conversation, "so thankfully, it worked out for us."

"Oh, that makes sense," Ustaimo nodded. "It would take a lot of furs though..."

Duvas answered, "Oh, we also had an adzee pelt here. That made up for the majority of it."

"Wait, an adzee pelt? Did you really manage to kill an adzee here?" Ustaimo shook his head. "Those are rarely seen near human habitations, although I guess I shouldn't be surprised about it at Tiranat's location." He scratched his chin for a moment before he sighed. "As much as I hate to say it, the count wouldn't forgive me if I didn't try to buy that pelt for him. He has a weakness for them, even though he can hardly afford them right now. But I'd rather not risk my neck over that, in case he finds that I didn't try to buy it."

Duvas shrugged. "We still have to transfer the pelt to the merchant, but we've already made a deal to sell it."

"Doesn't matter," Ustaimo insisted. "How much did you get for it?"

"Uh... 82 gold."

"82 gold...? Then... Will you sell it to me for 85?" the tax collector offered. "No...? I'll offer you 90 gold! I have no doubt the count will be willing to pay that much, even by borrowing more - although Baron Zoricus might be the happiest at that time - since he will be the one eventually funding it at a high rate of interest. What do you say?"

"But..." Duvas hesitated, before looking at Kivamus.

He thought about it for a moment. While it wasn't ideal to ask to get it back from Pydaso, nobody wanted to risk angering the Count at the moment, especially for such a simple thing. He knew that the merchant would understand, even though he might ask a higher price for it. Finally, he gave a nod. "Alright then. We'll buy it back from the merchant and sell it to you."

"That's a relief..." Ustaimo smiled. "I'll pay you for it once I get the pelt."

"That'll work," Kivamus nodded. They would only be gaining at most 8 extra gold coins from this transaction, since most of the 90 gold they would get from the tax collector would go to pay back the merchant. Still, gold was gold, and the count might also be happier to see that pelt, even though it made him worry about the future of Cinran if things kept going like this.

Duvas stood up. "Coal is still being loaded to Pydaso's wagons outside. I'll go and see if he's still out there, so I can ask him to cancel the sale of the pelt." After a nod from Kivamus, he left the manor hall.

Ustaimo grinned. "Well, now that you have managed to pay the tax in full, I have no reason to continue rechecking the tax ledger again and again. I will talk with Sir Tuilas, and we should leave tomorrow morning."

"I hope you have a safe journey ahead," Kivamus wished, before he remembered what had happened to the previous baron and the tax gold they had lost on the road. Not wanting a repeat of it, he began, "As much as it hurt our finances, I can still agree to the reasoning that the previous baron didn't manage to take that gold to you or the count, which is why he asked for it from us again. However, this time, you - the tax collector of Cinran - has himself taken the gold from us, which means we shouldn't have any more liability to pay any tax on the previous year. But what if something happens to you on the road? I really hope it doesn't, but just in case you aren't able to take the gold to the count, how will we prove that we have paid the taxes?"

Ustaimo patted his pocket. "I will give you a receipt, of course, just like every year. It will have the seal of the count and you can show it to Lord Ebirtas to prove it in case I have to meet the goddess early."

Kivamus sighed with relief. "That will work. Wait, isn't it risky to carry the seal of the count in case something happened to you on the road? What if someone uses it to proclaim some forged document to benefit himself?"

The tax collector chuckled. "This is not a seal which carries the count's full authority, like the one Lord Ebirtas uses to give written orders to others. The seal I am carrying is just an ancillary seal which he has given me so I can confirm that the taxes have been paid in full, that's all. This seal cannot be used to give any other orders from the Count, forged or otherwise."

"That makes sense, but still, what if someone steals it from you on the road, or takes it from you in case you are killed? Can't he use it to produce a forged paper to prove that he has paid the taxes, even though he hasn't?"

Ustaimo grinned. "Don't worry about that. A new seal is crafted every autumn for this purpose, and its stamp contains the harvest year for which it verifies the tax payment. The one I am carrying has already been used to verify the tax payment of the other barons and merchants who owed us taxes, and Tiranat is the last barony for which it retains any purpose. However I get your point. Your concern would be valid even the next year, but even if someone steals it from me, they can only use it to prove that they have paid that particular year's taxes. It won't be something they can use repeatedly."

The tax collector continued, "Apart from the merchants who live within the walls of Cinran, the taxes are usually paid by the barons coming to the Count's mansion in Cinran - in which case they would first have to pay the gold to the treasury before I give them a sealed receipt. However, in rare cases, I have to go by myself to get the taxes in case it is late, like from Tiranat. In this case, if the seal is stolen but I still bring the tax gold, I can deposit it to the treasury and confirm that the tax was paid, and we will just make a new seal with a different design. Just in case, both the seal and the tax gold are stolen from me

and I somehow manage to return alive to the Count, I can tell him the truth about whether the tax was paid to us or not. If it was, the baron wouldn't hold any more liability for it and can also show his receipt, but if it wasn't, the barony will still owe the tax."

"So that's why we needed to pay the tax even though the previous baron had already gone to pay it..." Kivamus muttered. "We just didn't have the receipt!"

The tax collector nodded. "Indeed, that is what verifies it." He continued, "In the other case, assuming I die on the road while the seal and the tax gold are also stolen, someone can't claim after it that they have paid the tax by producing a sealed receipt, since there is no good reason for them to have it if I am dead. Whether they stole the seal from me, or killed me on the road, either way the Count will make sure they get the retribution they deserve, while the people from the treasury will also be able to confirm if the gold had reached them or not."

Kivamus snorted. So accounting would always be complicated, whether on Earth or Eranityn. At least it was good to hear that there was a proper system to verify if someone had paid their taxes or not.

The outer door opened and the majordomo walked inside.

"Pydaso has agreed to give back the adzee pelt at the same price," Duvas reported. "He was reluctant though, and was curious about how we could have found a buyer here, since he wasn't sure if he would be able to sell it even in Cinran, but when I told him that the count was the one buying it, he agreed readily."

Ustaimo sighed in relief. "I'm glad to hear that. If you can bring me a sheet of parchment, I'll write up the final receipt for you."

Kivamus nodded, and gestured to the majordomo to get it. He chuckled. "I can't wait to finally have a written receipt that we have paid the taxes."

Ustaimo grinned. "Trust me, milord. I understand completely. Nothing is more important than receipts!"

Kivamus laughed loudly at that. Accountants would always be accountants, no matter which world he was living in.

## Chapter 309 Dilemma

~ Levalas ~

Levalas was sitting with his back to a wooden wall in the servants' hall, with the other guards who had come from Cinran sitting nearby. It had gotten dark by now, although they hadn't been served dinner yet. Hopefully it will be a good meal. Having only eaten breakfast before this, he was feeling famished. A lot. The teenage squire who had come with them was also sitting nearby, looking at the kitchen with hungry eyes. Levalas had been surprised to see that he hadn't stayed with the knight in the manor house, but for some reason the local guard captain had told him to stay here with the others.

They had also been told by the knight that they would be leaving in the morning, so this would be his last night in Tiranat. However, Zoricus had sent him here for one purpose only, but he had no idea how to go about it even after two days here. That was what had been running continuously in his mind, and by now he didn't know what to do or how to proceed. Deciding to take a walk until dinner to clear his mind, he stood up.

Another guard looked at him. "Where ya goin' ?"

"Just wanna stretch my legs a bit," Levalas muttered. "Been sittin' here all day, ya know?"

Giving a nod to others, he exited the servants' hall, and ran a hand through his fairly long brown coloured beard. He had also let his hair keep growing since the time he had escaped from Tiranat last time, just so nobody would recognize him. That seemed to have worked even here in the baron's manor, since his newly grown hair and beard made him look quite different from the cropped hair and clean shaven look he had the last time.

He was also wearing chainmail armor this time, courtesy of that bastard Zoricus, unlike the last time when all he had was a ragged tunic. That must also have worked to change his look enough for others to not notice him. Although that mercenary-like guard, who had interrogated him last time, had given a few extra glances to him, thankfully he seemed to have other things on his mind, and hadn't recognized him either.

Remembering about why he was here still made him uneasy. The previous night he had thought of trying to assassinate the baron, but there were simply so many guards in the manor that he had found it impossible to find some place where he could try it. There were even a couple of guards patrolling

around the manor house all day, which had even made it unfeasible for him to enter the manor house to lie in wait for a good opportunity.

Somehow, all the guards also seemed to be completely dedicated to their duties this time - unlike in his last visit, when many of them were just lazing around, just like everywhere else. That had made it even more difficult for him to even approach the baron.

He had also noticed something else here. Before the winter when he had come to Tiranat the last time, a couple of guards in the manor had seemed way too fat to be of any use, while the rest of them were far too scrawny to be able to do much harm, but right now all of those guards had nothing but muscle! They looked nothing like the lazy, skinny men he'd seen before the winter. And just why were there so damn many of them? Anywhere he looked, there was a guard on patrol, dammit! All of them looked alert and ready, like they were expecting an attack or something.

Wait, it couldn't be possible that the baron already knew that he would be arriving, could it? He shook his head. No, there was no way they knew about him, especially after his changed appearance, otherwise they would have already caught him by now.

As he kept walking aimlessly, he glanced at the manor house, knowing that's where Baron Kivamus must be present at this time, and put a hand on the dagger tied to his leg. This being his last night in this village meant that he wouldn't be getting another chance to complete Zoricus' orders, but the question was, did he even want to?

He could never forget the kindness with which Lord Kivamus had spared his life. The story he had told the baron had been a lie, but even if other nobles had believed him to be truthful, they still wouldn't consider forgiving someone who had been forced to try and kill them, only to make sure his family would be spared. But Lord Kivamus had still spared his life... The whole winter he had been thinking about it, and he still couldn't believe that there could be a noble like him.

When Zoricus had told him to assassinate the Baron of Tiranat again, he didn't know if he wanted to follow any more orders from that bastard. But he had still taken this chance, so he would be able to meet Lord Kivamus again, to find out more about him. That is why he had spent a lot of time talking to the locals here, both inside and outside the manor, while also listening to others' conversations about the baron covertly. That had told him that it wasn't just an exception for the baron to forgive him. Lord Kivamus genuinely seemed to be a benevolent ruler, as hard as it was to believe.

He had even visited the local temple of the goddess, and talked with Father Edric for guidance. That's where he had found out that Lord Kivamus really was extraordinary. The baron had been using his own savings to feed the villagers over the winter, and had made sure that nobody in Tiranat had gone hungry in the frozen nights - whether they could work to earn their food or not - although there did seem to be more than enough opportunities for work these days. However, a noble using his own gold to feed the villagers? That was something he had never heard in his life. All the other nobles would still have tried to seize what little those poor people owned, even if they were starving.

Father Edric had even told him that this was the very first winter in the whole two decade long existence of Tiranat when nobody had succumbed to death due to cold or hunger in the winter. After that, Levalas had stayed at the ramshackle wooden temple for a long time, hoping she would guide him about what he should do, but he still had no idea about it.

Coming back to the present, he glanced at the manor house once again, thinking about what to do. At this point he was far from sure if he would even be able to get close enough to assassinate the baron - although he didn't feel like doing that at all - which meant most likely he would be caught and executed for sure this time. If he somehow escaped and returned to Zoricus, that bastard was unlikely to forgive him for missing his target twice, which is why he was fairly sure he wouldn't live long after that either.

He sighed. What option was left for him then? Did the goddess really want him to live his whole life in servitude under that fat bastard?

No, he refused to believe that. The goddess was benevolent to all her servants. There had to be a way out he wasn't seeing yet.

Then what? Should he skip trying to kill the baron, while painting a target on his own back from Zoricus? Could he really do that?

"Hey, come on in!" He noticed a guard waving towards him from the servants' hall. "The food is ready!"

Levalas blinked, not realizing that he had taken a full round of the manor by now and had returned right where he started from. He gave a nod, and began walking towards the servants' hall.

Entering inside, he noticed that a lot of guards were there at this time, while waiting for food to be served. Some of them were helping the maids to bring the buckets in which the porridge and bread

would be served, while a few had already started eating. It just felt so... homely, and made him miss something he never even had. While he did have some good acquaintances in the count's mansion in Cinran, everyone was only out for themselves in that place, by necessity. That place just didn't have this spirit of friendship—this camaraderie—like he was seeing here.

He glanced towards the wall on the other side, where the group from Cinran had been sitting. He snorted seeing the teenage squire bringing a pair of bowls for the two guards wearing chainmail who were already sitting there. Just wait a few years, and assuming that squire was lucky enough to be promoted to a knight, these other guards will be the ones serving the lad after that!

Wait, someone was missing here. Along with himself, the squire and the two guards, there was another guard who had come with them - Dosol. Shouldn't he be eating at this time too? It wasn't like there would be a separate meal time for a single guard. If the food was already finished, there would be nothing left for him, and Dosol had to know that.

Levalas scanned the hall, thinking that maybe Dosol was bringing his own bowl of food or something, but he was nowhere to be seen. Where was that guy?

That's when something clicked in his mind. Shit! What if Dosol was also sent by Zoricus? What if he was out to do something terrible? As far as Levalas knew, the fat bastard had sent just him to try to kill the local baron, but what if he had sent another man here? Perhaps to make sure that the order was fulfilled in case he failed to kill Lord Kivamus? Or maybe to silence him after he had done that, so there wouldn't be anything connecting the assassination to Zoricus?

Shit! Shit! Shit!

He glanced around in panic, hoping he had just missed seeing Dosol, but he wasn't here at all!

Chapter 310 Indecision

Shit! He should have known that Zoricus would pull something like this...

Levalas tried to think about why Dosol hadn't tried anything like this until now, before he remembered that this was their last night in this village, which meant if that guy was going to try and kill the baron, it had to be tonight.

Suddenly, he stopped in his tracks, realizing just what he was panicking about. Even if Dosol was out to kill the baron, why was he worried about it? That bastard would just be making his life easier if he did all the dirty work by himself, wouldn't he?

No! He didn't like it!

As surprised as he was to be feeling like this, he didn't like this at all! After everything he had seen here, he didn't want Lord Kivamus to be killed because of the greed of that gluttonous bastard, dammit!

Levalas took a deep breath, trying to think about this new situation calmly, ignoring the various frowns coming his way, since he was still standing in the middle of the hall. What if... What if this was the sign he wanted from the goddess?

Before returning to the servants' hall, he wasn't sure at all about what to do, but realizing that someone else was already trying to kill the benevolent ruler of this village had made him hate even thinking about such a thing happening. He had never even heard about a noble ruler doing this much for his people, so it had to be something planned by the Goddess to help the people of this village... right? And who was he to go against her wishes? The greed of that Zoricus bastard be damned!

His mind finally finding a sliver of peace in his chaotic mind, he nodded slowly. He didn't want Lord Kivamus to die, whether by his hands or at anyone else's. Yeah, this plan felt better. Much better.

This meant he had to stop Dosol before he did anything. Thinking about it, he realized that reporting about him would probably also reveal the fact that he was here to do the very same thing. Most likely the baron's guards would also find out that he was the same person who had tried to kill the baron before the winter.

He gave a morbid laugh, knowing that it was quite possible that he wouldn't live to see the morning, since after he had revealed everything, he was likely to be executed alongside the other assassin. He did wish that the baron would forgive him once again, but that wasn't likely, was it? Hah! It would probably be exactly what he deserved for trying to kill such a caring and benevolent person.

Perhaps, it would be a fitting end to his miserable life which began from his father getting murdered by the Count to steal his power, and would end with him being executed for trying to murder another

noble. He exhaled loudly, his mind feeling peaceful for the first time in months. Perhaps he would be able to escape from the clutches of Zoricus, after all. One way or another...

His decision already made, he looked around, trying to find someone to help him. It wasn't like he could go charging into the manor house claiming that he was trying to stop an assassin. Most likely he would be considered the assassin in that case, which would give the other guard enough distraction to do his dirty deed.

He scanned the guards sitting here, hoping to find a familiar face. Where was everyone he had seen the last time? He could only see new faces here. That was when the outer door opened and a burly guard walked inside. For a moment he flinched, thinking it was the guard captain coming to execute him, but no, it wasn't that giant guy who always had two swords with him. This was someone else - someone he remembered seeing from his last visit here, since this was the only guard rivaling the guard captain in his build. Uh... Tesyb, he thought the name to be.

He quickly jogged to the man, and showing both of his hands to be empty so he wouldn't be considered a threat, he urgently pulled the guard outside of the servant hall, and took him a little distance away from the door as well as any prying ears.

"What's wrong with you?" Tesyb grunted with a frown.

"Just listen to me! It's important, and the life of the baron depends on it!"

Hearing about that immediately made the guard alert. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"You know that four guards came from Cinran along with the knight and his squire, right?" Without waiting for a reply, he added, "There are only two of those guards inside the servants' hall right now. Do you have any idea where that fourth man is? He's called Dosol. Perhaps he went to the alehouse?"

Tesyb glanced at the manor house. "No, the knight had returned with all his guards earlier. Nobody went out after that. Wait, why do you think Lord Kivamus is in danger?"

"Shit!" Levalas clenched his fist, looking around for that guard.

Tesyb put his hand on the hilt of his sword, and pushed him back to the wall. "Speak! How do you know what he's going to do? Are you also a part of his plan?"

Levalas flinched. "Uh... yes? I mean no! Forget it! We don't have the time for it. You can interrogate me later all you want. Just get a few more men and find out where that bastard is right now. He might be trying to kill the baron right now."

"Shit!" The burly guard glanced around with indecision for a moment, before he glared at Levalas. "What does he look like?"

Levalas gave a brief description of the man, before he added, "Dosol was wearing chainmail earlier, but he might have dumped it by now if he's trying to blend in with others."

Tesyb nodded. "We'll find him. But first, give me your sword and any other weapons you have!"

"But I..."

"Do it right now or I'll consider you a part of the plot to kill the baron," Tesyb growled.

Levalas nodded and handed over both of his long fighting daggers as well as his sword. He hesitated for a moment before he pulled out a small dagger he had hidden in his boot. At this point his life was probably forfeit anyway, and having an extra dagger wouldn't save him now.

The burly guard glared at him as he took all the weapons. "Don't move from this place! If this is a trick, you won't leave this place alive."

Levalas gulped, before Tesyb jogged to the servant hall again, calling up the names of some other guards. Soon, nearly a dozen men were standing in front of him.

Tesyb started giving orders. "Yufim, go and find Feroy and report to him about this. Calubo, look for the guard captain, and bring him to the manor house. The rest of you, follow me!" The burly guard stared at Levalas for a moment. "You! Come with me. We'll need you to confirm his identity."

\*\*\*

~ Kivamus ~

He was sitting in the manor hall waiting for dinner along with the others. Tuilas had finally returned as well, and seemed to be in a sour mood right now, although he had stopped threatening to take slaves after finding out that all the tax had already been paid. Duvass and Gorsazo were sitting nearby while Feroy still hadn't returned. Hudan was also present this time along with two other guards, who were standing in the corners of the hall, as usual.

Kivamus looked at the knight, wondering if there was even any point in asking for help. He knew that Tuilas was unlikely to stay any longer - not that he even wanted him to - but there was no harm in just asking, was it?

"We have gotten reliable information that a very powerful bandit group is going to raid my village soon. Could you stay here for a few more days to help us deal with them? You and your guards will be a big help to us."

"Not in my hands to stay here any longer than I absolutely need to," Sir Tuilas replied with a lazy shrug. "I only follow the orders of the Knight Commander and the Count, and they had told me to return as soon as I had collected the tax."

Kivamus sighed. There went the hope for help.

"Why are they in such a hurry anyway?" he asked, already knowing the reason, but confirming an unreliable news from another person was always a good idea.

Sir Tuilas frowned. "Binpaaz has again started sending some small groups of knights to harass our farmers in the east since the snow melted this spring. Some of them have even been trampling and burning our crops, so Cinran needs all its knights there to deal with them."

Kivamus nodded. That confirmed that the raids were indeed happening frequently and they were at least somewhat serious, even if it wasn't a full scale invasion or the like at this point. That being said, while there was no doubt that being a nephew of the Count would have given Tuilas a pampered life, it

was good to hear that the knight wasn't trying to safeguard himself selfishly and actually wanted to go to the border to help defend his homeland - for all the help just one more knight would be against the might of what was easily the most powerful kingdom in Cilaria.

"Actually, I had even asked uncle Ebirtas to send me to the border a week ago," the knight continued, "but for some reason he sent me to this good-for-nothing village instead." He shrugged. "I still thought it would be a nice vacation before I went to show the binpaazi knights right where they belong - which is six under the ground - but I couldn't even find a bottle of damned wine here!"

Kivamus snorted. He had praised this selfish bastard way too soon. A pampered nephew of a noble would always remain spoiled, after all.

That's when the outer door opened with a bang and a group of guards thundered inside, looking more than ready to kill.

Kivamus' heart skipped a beat seeing their intense expressions, momentarily fearing it to be a mutiny, before he shook his head. No, that wasn't possible here. He had done nothing to make that happen. But... What if... What if they had found out about his origin?