

## Londoner 341

### Chapter 341 Progress Check - I

"We started sowing again this morning," Pinoto said as they reached him. "We just can't afford to wait too long with the weather already getting warmer. Anyway, if you provide us enough seeds, we'll still be able to finish sowing this whole stretch within a week. The weather should hold until then, I think." The foreman pointed into the distance, where a small group of people were hard at work, with the huge log-mover visible next to them. "The loggers have kept clearing more ground in the south while the sowing is still going on, just like you wanted, so the farms are growing for now, but we can still manage the sowing, I think."

"Whatever we can produce here will be helpful to us in the next winter," Kivamus said. "I'll also try to get you more seed as soon as I can."

Pinoto's gaze turned toward the distant rows, where men and women were working in pairs with the new seed drills. "It's still hard to believe though..." he muttered. "Barely thirty of us are sowing a field which should have needed more than a hundred men easily, if not even more. I'd never have imagined such a miraculous machine existed in this world if you hadn't made them here..."

Kivamus smiled faintly. "It's only a start. I'll keep improving them, so that the same number of people can sow an even larger area in the future. We are going to need all the grain we can produce in the coming years."

The foreman nodded, half lost in thoughts. "Well, I'd best check on the rest before they start to slack off." He raised a hand in farewell and started walking off toward the other end of the field.

Kivamus stayed a while, watching the steady rhythm of the farmers at work, before turning back. They entered the village again through the southeastern gate, passing under the sturdy wooden structure. He decided to visit Darora's workshop next - which was basically just a makeshift shed in the northwest of the village.

Their group walked next to the palisade walls of the manor, before they reached the northern areas. The longhouse blocks stood on the right side of the wide dirt road—their broad, square courtyards surrounded by a single story timber building. A thin plume of smoke was visible on the top of both of the blocks, indicating food being cooked in their kitchens.

However they were nearly vacant at the time, since all of the working age men and most of the women were out working: whether it was mining coal, trapping and hunting small game in nearby forests, clearing brush and hauling timber in the south with the help of the log mover, digging the trench outside the village walls or just helping out on the farms. The few who remained—mainly the mothers with small children—were cooking lunch for the residents of these blocks, before the kids took them to those workers later, while a few elderly people were sitting next to the Bilona trees in the courtyards, keeping the youngest ones occupied with simple games, while their mothers cooked.

From an open window of one longhouse came the soft murmur of Gorsazo's voice. The older children and the kids must be gathered there now, sitting on the wooden floor of the blocks. He guesses that they must have already finished their morning shift of sawdust gathering, so they would study until midday before having lunch and going out again to gather more of it while carrying lunch for the others. Kivamus paused briefly to listen—the steady rhythm of words and laughter mixed with the faint scratching of charcoal on wooden boards—which gave him a lot of satisfaction and hope of a bright future for Tiranat, before he moved on.

While they walked, he noticed Duvas making furtive glances around them, like he was waiting for a quiet place to talk about something. Kivamus thought of prompting him to speak his mind, but then decided not to. It seemed like the matter might be sensitive, and this really wasn't the place for such a talk. Hopefully the majordomo would come around in a few days and speak about whatever he wanted to say.

As they continued walking, he decided to check on the progress of the trench work before heading to the carpenter's workshop. From the longhouse blocks, he walked north, then turned east until the northeastern gate came into view. Two guards stood there, leaning on their spears, who straightened and saluted him and the captain as soon as they saw them. One of them hurried to open the gate.

He stepped outside along with others, and turned left, and found the air smelling of fresh earth and sweat. A few dozen paces away, the sound of digging reached him—steady, rhythmic thuds mixed with the scrape of metal on soil. A small open stretch separated the trench from the wall to avoid weakening its foundation. Next to that, about two dozen men and women were hard at work. Most were shoveling dirt from the growing ditch, their movements constant but slow with fatigue from working under the midday sun. He knew lunch break couldn't come soon enough for them. Some others were pushing heavy wheelbarrows, moving the loosened soil either toward the outer edge of the wall, where it was piled against the logs for extra reinforcement, or back through the gate to be used on the inner side.

Kivamus paused near the edge, watching for a while. Duvas and the others stood next to him as well. The trench stretched parallel to the wall, about five feet deep and wide enough for two wagons to stand side by side, which was just around six meters. In the sections already finished, rows of sharpened

stakes jutted out of the mud like jagged teeth. A few off-duty guards sat nearby, cutting small but straight branches with machetes and shaving them to sharp points for later use. The foreman, Yeden, was standing near the diggers, calling out curt instructions and checking the depth of the trench with a wooden rod.

"How long will it take?" Kivamus asked.

"I spoke with Yeden yesterday," Duvas said. "He thinks four to five weeks in total to complete the trenches around the village at the current pace."

Kivamus nodded slowly. "Longer than I expected," he said. "But this is the best we can do unless we pull more workers from the other jobs."

He stood another moment, watching the diggers work in the damp soil under the warm light of the sun, before he turned back toward the gate. The guards opened it again for him, and he stepped inside the walls, brushing dirt from his boots for a moment, before giving up. From there, he took the road running parallel to the walls to walk westwards.

Soon, he saw an older villager posted at the middle watchtower of the northern wall. Only the head of the man was visible from here on the ground, which meant he must be sitting on the hidden compartment which they had made to hide their new weapons from the knight, but he looked alert and was gazing into the distance, ready to alert the manor with the horn if any danger was seen. One of the two crossbows allotted to each watchtower must also be kept next to him, while the other one had been given to the newest hunting groups who had left yesterday after the raid.

He noticed the uncovered ladder which the watchmen used to climb up the tower, and remembered how easy it had been for a single archer outside the walls to pin Hyola up there. He had been thinking about providing it some cover by using planks nailed on the outer side as a shield from any arrows so the guards could climb up and down the tower without any risk. However, it would need a lot of planks to cover all the towers, and the valuable time of the carpenters, which meant the task had been postponed after that previous raid. But it had to be done soon. Thankfully, Torhan had decided to siege the village instead of attacking it directly-including with archers-so that hadn't been a problem in this raid, but it couldn't be left as a weak point of the watchtowers for too long.

For now, the older men only had to pull duty on the watchtowers during the daytime, while the female guards would take over the duty again in the evenings, both for the early night shift lasting from four bells of the temple till midnight, as well as for the late night shift starting from the midnight till eight

bells of the temple were rung in the morning. This only allowed a single set of eyes on each tower, which wasn't ideal, but it was the best they could do to send hunting groups out regularly.

The three hunting groups who had returned yesterday would only be given a day of rest in the village, before they were sent again tomorrow morning to bring more meat, this time with the help of a single crossbow with each group.

He kept walking to the west with the others and before long, he saw the carpenter's shed located on a stretch of open ground some distance away from the palisade walls. It was little more than a wide wooden roof set on posts, with a makeshift wall made of leftover planks on one side, but the various workbenches around the place were crowded with hammers, chisels, saws, planes and other woodworking tools. A few wooden rulers were also kept in many places for easy measurement, with both the metric measurement - which was used commonly by the craftsmen these days - as well as the older one marked on them for reference. Several men and a woman were working on one thing or another at the moment, their tools moving in a hypnotic rhythm. Noticing everyone working normally, for the first time in weeks, he felt the village moving again, step by step, toward something that looked like peace.

Darora looked up from one of the benches when he noticed their group and jogged over, dusting off wooden shavings from his hands. "Milord."

"How's the work going?" Kivamus asked. "On the scorpion?"

"Better than expected," Darora said, scratching his cropped black hair before he led Kivamus and the others into the shed. "Taniok couldn't get to the triphammer site with all the bandit trouble, but I haven't missed even a single hour of daylight to work more on this project, since I didn't need to leave the village like him. There's a lot of work to do."

The smell of fresh fedarus wood hung thick in the shed. On one wall, Kivamus's blueprint of the scorpion was pinned flat—a set of clean lines and careful angles. On a table below it lay a collection of many carved wooden parts in different shapes and sizes, sanded smooth and ready for fitting. He picked one up and turned it in his hands, looking at what would become the trigger for the new weapon in the future. From the sharp angles along with the smooth curves, it was clear that the craftsmanship involved to make it was no less than top-notch.

"You've done good work here," Kivamus praised the young carpenter.

Darora's grin was quick and proud. "First time I'm building something like this, so I want it done right. I've settled all the measurements already. Once I've made a full set of all the parts so I can get a good idea of what can go wrong, I'll start training one of the apprentices to help in it after telling them about it. That should speed things up."

Kivamus nodded. "Good. We'll need more men to work on it if we're to make all six of them soon."

Kivamus looked around the shed again, his gaze moving over the four others working nearby—three men and a woman—each bent over their own tasks. The air was filled with the sounds of steady work: the rhythmic rasp of a saw, the thud of a hammer, the sharp tap of a chisel, the creak of clamps being tightened. Sawdust and wood shavings littered the floor in soft curls.

"How are they coming along?" Kivamus asked, while gazing at the apprentices.

#### Chapter 342 Progress Check - II

Darora brushed his palms against his leather apron and turned to glance at the others. "Pretty well, actually. By now they all know how to make their assigned crossbow parts." He pointed first to an older man flatten a thick length of wood with a plane. "That one trims the fedarus branches into the rough pieces we need. The younger fellow next to him handles the prod and the stock of the crossbow. And the blonde woman there - Layita - she works on the trigger, the nut, the trigger guard and other small parts."

The carpenter chuckled. "You should've seen the looks I got when I first said she'd join them as an apprentice carpenter. The others didn't like the idea at all. But I told them what I learned from experience—women can do any damn thing just as well as a man." He grinned wider. "Trust me, I've known Hyola for years, and she was scary enough even without a crossbow - which proves my point."

Darora shrugged. "Anyway, to shut them up, I gave everyone a test. Told them to carve the fine shape of a trigger, each of them working on their own with no help from me." He pointed at the woman. "Layita finished two perfect ones before the others were even done figuring out where they were going wrong. After that, they stopped arguing. Now they just ask her for advice."

The majordomo began to laugh nearby before he hid it with a cough, while Kivamus smiled, knowing that every small step in changing the locals' mindsets would be helpful to the village in the future. "That's good to hear. With the persistent shortage of workers in Tiranat, we simply can't afford to ignore half the people in the village if we want to keep growing our workforce."

Darora nodded, then pointed at another man working farther back. "That one's new. Took him on just a few weeks ago to ease the workload. He's still learning the basics, but he's picking it up quick enough. There's another lad too. He's not here today since his infant's sick, so he's back at the longhouse block helping his wife. But he's a surprise. Before winter he'd never even touched a saw, and now he's my most talented apprentice. Well, after Layita, of course. Anyway, he's the one who assembles the crossbows these days, fitting the wooden parts with the iron ones from the smithy. If something's off by a finger's width, he'll fix it before I even have to check."

The carpenter nodded toward the corner where some half-finished stocks were stacked neatly. "Once he's done, he gives the crossbow a few test runs with a spare bolt, and makes sure everything's working smoothly, before he takes it to the manor. Of course, for now I still inspect each crossbow myself before letting him take it to you, but it won't be long before I wouldn't need to do that either."

Kivamus looked over the workshop again, pleased to see how well things were running, although it would help them to get a better workplace soon. "It seems the idea of specialization is working well. When should I expect the next one?"

Darora's tone was confident. "As long as the blacksmith keeps giving us the iron components on time, now we can make at least two new crossbows each week. Now that Cedoron has enough iron to forge those parts, we could have been faster—but I need all my hours to work on the scorpion, so I can't help them much other than some supervision."

"That's still very good, that they are capable of making a new crossbow from scratch without any help from you," Kivamus said. "Two new ones per week may not sound like much, but they'll still add up in time. You keep your focus on the scorpion. When do you think it'll be ready? I want to start installing them on the watchtowers soon."

Darora scratched at his shaved chin. "First time I'm making one, so there've been a few mistakes. I'm doing all the shaping myself for this build, plus checking the others' work occasionally. But if nothing goes wrong, I'll have all the parts for the wooden frame done in four or five days. By then, the smith should already have given me all the iron components too, so a couple of days to attach them to the rest of the frame, then I'll start assembling the final product. Hmm... Gimme ten more days and I'll have it done. Once you've tested it and confirmed that it works as you wanted, the next ones shouldn't take the nearly 20 days this one needed. I'll also know exactly what problems to expect in its construction by then, so I'll also bring in the apprentices to help out for the next one."

"I can't wait for it." Kivamus nodded with approval. "Good work. Keep at it."

He gave the carpenter a final pat on the shoulder before leaving the shed. Outside, the afternoon sun was breaking through thin clouds, glinting off the damp roofs. He made his way along the dirt road toward the market square in the west of the village, where the blacksmith's workshop was located.

The way to the market square took him past several burned or broken houses which were still standing. Those of them which were more or less fine were being used by the refugees they had accepted here in the past couple of months, but the rest of them still stood empty, and looked nothing more than an eyesore, apart from taking unneeded space. The blackened beams and leaning walls looked out of place even among the few wooden houses, while the shacks could barely be called even that by now.

Thinking about a solution, he frowned slightly, and called out Duvas, who was walking beside him. "We'll need to bring down these burnt houses soon. They're unsafe and we need this place clear to start constructing new housing in the future." He added, "How are our coal stores looking? We had nearly emptied them by the end of winter, and we have also sold it to visiting merchants after that, even though only a few of them have come here so far."

Duvas immediately opened the small ledger he had brought with him, and began to turn its pages before he cleared his throat. "The first coal barn is already half full—which is around fifteen wagonloads. The miners are also bringing in more than 10 wagon loads of coal every week. With no new merchants coming to buy it these days, we'll reach its full capacity of 30 wagon loads soon enough. Our second coal barn is still empty though."

Kivamus nodded, thinking about it. "We can spare some hands, then. Losing twenty men will only reduce our output by less than a fifth, so we can afford it. From tomorrow, tell twenty of the coal miners to stay here and start tearing down these shacks. They can keep aside any planks still worth something, though most of them look fit only for kindling."

"As you wish," Duvas said, jotting a note in his ledger.

Kivamus gave one last look at the blackened frames of the ruined houses as well as the nearly burnt down shacks, before turning his eyes toward the market square ahead.

The steady clang of hammer on anvil grew louder as Kivamus and his group reached the blacksmith's workshop. The air smelled of coal smoke and hot metal, sharp and heavy even from a distance. The forge itself burned bright red, and sparks leapt into the air whenever a hammer struck steel. Cedoron's shop had nearly doubled in size since the time before the winter. He had taken over an empty house next to it when he needed to expand, and both spaces were crowded with apprentices right now.

Inside, men and women were working nonstop. One apprentice hammered short pieces of iron into nails, the sharp ringing of each blow cutting through the steady roar of the forge. A woman nearby was weaving thin, uneven iron wires into a mesh for making the safety lamps. Another man pumped a large bellows into the forge, the rush of air feeding the glowing charcoal until they spat and flared. Near him, an older worker was hammering a red-hot sword—likely one of those taken from the bandits—reducing it into a lump of metal. Across the workshop, another apprentice was beating that same type of lump into a long strip, likely meant to be shaped into crossbow or scorpion parts.

One more woman was sitting at the edge of the workshop, turning around a piece of shaped iron in the light of the sun, before she put it in a pile and picked up another piece. However, Leah - the manor maid who lived here with the blacksmith wasn't present right now, since she must already be working in the manor, probably cutting and sewing the leather armor they had gotten from the bandits.

Cedoron himself stood near the center, a giant of a man, sweat darkening his cut-off tunic despite the mild spring weather. He was holding a small piece of metal in tongs, shaping it with short, precise blows from a hammer. When he was satisfied, he plunged the piece into a barrel of water with a hiss and pulled it out to inspect it near the forge light. He grunted once, clearly pleased.

When he saw Kivamus, he raised a thick finger to ask for a moment more. Kivamus nodded and waited while Cedoron finished checking the metal, before handing it over to the woman who was doing a similar task under the sunlight. Then the blacksmith set down his tools, wiped his hands on a rag, and strode over, giving a short bow.

Chapter 343 Progress Check - III

"How's the work?" Kivamus asked.

"Busy," Cedoron grunted, his voice rough but good-humored. "Busier than ever. I've taken on another two apprentices to keep up, but it's getting crowded. Even after expanding into the empty house next door, there's hardly room to move. I might have to expand again in the future. I'll probably have to start thinking about building another forge as well in the near future."

"That's a good problem to have," Kivamus chuckled.

Cedoron smiled faintly. "Aye. The scorpion parts have been keeping me occupied. They're far tougher to make than axes or shovels, that's for sure—but it's a fine challenge after a winter of simple work. The good news is that two of my apprentices are now trained well enough that between them, they can forge all the crossbow parts by themselves. That eases up my workload a lot."

"That's nice to know," Kivamus said. "We'll need you working on the scorpions to make all of them soon."

Cedoron nodded and picked up a long, thick metal bar which looked like it was half made only, and turned it in his hand. "We're going to burn through iron pretty fast now because of those huge things. For the crossbows, we managed to cut down the metal use a lot by making the prod - which is the bow-like part - from fedarus wood, but those crossbows are little things compared to a scorpion. But this—" he tapped the rod against the anvil "—this scorpion's much larger. Its prod needs to be made completely of iron. Wood simply can't hold that kind of tension."

Kivamus nodded. "I had a good idea of that when I drew the blueprint. You know I'd made two versions, one with wood, one with iron, even though I expected that the wooden one was unlikely to work. Still, we had to give it a try with fedarus wood."

"And we did," Cedoron said, "but it's gotta be iron. In my test with Darora a few days ago, the wooden prod broke at barely half the force which will be needed for this scorpion."

"Then it's better that we found it out sooner," Kivamus said, "instead of learning it the hard way."

Cedoron nodded. "That's why I said we are going to need a lot of iron. The rusted swords you gave me from the bandits will certainly help, but it's good you bought that big shipment of iron ingots. The scorpions alone will eat up a lot of it, without even counting the other things I need iron for." He grinned. "I saw that big stack of ingots in your barn yesterday—good thing it's there, because we'll need every bit."

"That's the reason I bought it even when we could barely afford it," Kivamus said. "We'll need a lot of iron in the coming months. When will all the components for the first scorpion be ready?"

"In two more days I think - three max," Cedoron said confidently. "Everything should be done by then."

"Good," Kivamus replied. "After that, I'll need you to start collaborating with Taniok about the outer shell of the triphammer, and all the metal fittings and blades for the sawmill. Those are some really big machines, so we might have to buy iron again to complete both of them, but that's on me, and I'll manage it somehow. You just carry on doing your work."

The blacksmith's grin returned. "You've said that a triphammer will do some of what my apprentices do now, only faster. I'm looking forward to seeing it working."

"It will," Kivamus said. "And it'll do it at a much larger scale. I've also been thinking about where to set everything up. There's enough space on both the banks of the eastern stream. Once we add another waterwheel for the dam, both banks can be used for work using that water power. I think it will be better for you to move the smithing work to the far bank where the triphammer will be built. Taniok and Darora will use the near side for all the carpentry work, since the sawmill will be located on this side. This'll be safer for everyone since hauling the heavy logs over the dam is just not a good idea."

Cedoron frowned slightly. "Taking the distant side is fine by me, but hauling my work there and back every day will waste a lot of time. I'll probably lose a couple of good working hours each day, even if I travel by wagon."

"You don't need to move everything," Kivamus said. "Only the heavy hammering work, which means there also needs to be a forge built on that bank to heat up the iron first. You can do the finer shaping here in this forge. I also want to start smelting raw iron ore there in the future, and the triphammer will be vital for it." He shrugged. "It might not seem like it today, but don't worry, once the triphammer's running, you'll see just how much time it saves."

The blacksmith nodded slowly. "Fair enough. I'll decide what to move once I've seen it in action. Until then, I'll keep all the work here."

"That's fine," Kivamus said. "After you've finished all the components for the first scorpion, and then completed forging all the sawmill and triphammer parts, you'll have to go back to working on more scorpions. By the time we have made six of them—one for each watchtower—I'll have something new for you, though it won't be easy."

Cedoron gave a grin that showed more enthusiasm than worry. "Like I said, milord—I always like a new challenge."

"Then carry on," Kivamus said with a laugh.

Cedoron gave a nod and returned to the forge, already shouting an instruction to one of his apprentices. The hammering resumed, louder than before.

Kivamus watched them a moment longer—the glowing forge, the flurry of motion, the scent of metal and sweat mixing in the air—before turning back toward the market square. Duvas and Hudan fell beside him again, the other guards following nearby.

The road to the market square was still wet from the recent rains, and Kivamus felt the mud sucking at his boots with every step. The gravel paths inside the manor connecting its inner buildings had spoiled him. Out here, the streets were uneven and soft, with puddles clinging stubbornly to the edges of the shacks.

Reaching the market square, he saw that as expected, most of the shops were shuttered, with their doors barred and windows closed tight. Only the alehouse stood open, its faded sign swinging a little in the breeze. Through the half-open door, he saw the owners cleaning tables and restocking shelves - with what little they had anyway - but there were no customers at this hour. He heard the sound of stone grinding from a nearby alley, which meant the miller was still at work. However, the butcher shop and the bakery were closed, although a few covered tables stood nearby. From beneath the coarse cloth coverings, he caught glimpses of green and orange—vegetables kept safe from the sun and the flies.

Duvas noticed his gaze. "Those belong to the families who lived in the nearby shacks," he explained. "They grow them there—using whatever free time they can spare. As you know, vegetables are also being grown in the courtyards of the longhouse blocks, but those are communal properties and are being used to feed the people who live there. But the people who grow them here still have to go to work in the coal mines or on the farms during the day, so they cover the tables till evening. When they come back, they sell whatever they've managed to harvest that day."

Kivamus nodded, still studying the rough stalls. "But how are they selling if no one's being paid in coins yet?" He frowned slightly, remembering about the guards' request to be paid in cold, hard coin, but he still hadn't found a way to start paying them either. He knew he'd have to speak with Hudan soon, privately, about delaying their pay again for a few more weeks.

"People always find ways to adapt to any difficult situation," Duvas said. "Most of it's done on barter. Some trade on credit, promising to pay later when they have the coin. Same with the alehouse, but the owner only lets a few people drink on debt since he still needs to buy ale from the travelling merchants, whenever they come here. But everyone adjusts somehow."

Kivamus walked in silence for a while, thinking about possible ways to start paying everyone in coins, before he was distracted again by his boots squelching softly through the mud. "We'll have to improve these paths soon," he muttered, glancing down at his soaked trousers from the puddles' splashes. "If nothing else, putting some gravel here will at least make it walkable... Late summer will bring a lot of rain in this region from what you've told me."

"We can do it after the burnt shacks have been removed," Duvas said, while noting it down in his pocket ledger with a small stick of charcoal.

Kivamus nodded as he kept walking. "Now that we're clearing most of this area, it'll be better to make proper, wide roads here, like we've done near the longhouses, but that's for later." He added, "How's it going with Taniok? I wanted to meet him before he went to work today."

"He's already left the village," Duvas said. "Headed to the dam site this morning to look over where the triphammer and sawmill will go. He said he'll use your blueprints once he starts working on them later today, but he wanted to see the ground himself first to see if there were any changes needed."

"That's fine," Kivamus said. "He can speak to me this evening if he needs to adjust anything."

They turned east again, heading toward the manor. The sun was climbing through thin clouds now, making the wet ground glint dully.

#### Chapter 344 Plans

Kivamus's thoughts drifted as he walked. Every craftsman in the village was busy with something—Darora on the scorpion, Cedoron on the iron parts, Taniok on the sawmill. It gave him time to focus on building something for the future: designing machines for making cloth, starting right from the cotton bolls. That was how the first industrial revolution had started on earth, and he knew it was the right way to progress for this village as well. But it was a long-term plan, which would probably need several months, or maybe even a year before all the machines for this project had been built and began to work properly, but that's why he had to start now.

He knew that they couldn't grow cotton here, not in this climate, and they also needed access to bigger markets to sell the clothes they would make here, but if there was one thing he had noticed in this world, it was that after food, what everyone needed the most was better clothing. That's why he knew that they would basically have access to an unlimited market once he could get the basics right for making cloth in bulk, and most importantly, for cheap. The time required to build the machines would also give him enough time to find big markets, and start looking for raw materials, hopefully before the year end.

Still, despite all his time spent reading on the internet before being transported to this world, he knew that these were complicated designs, which is why it was taking him so long to draw the blueprint of the first machine - the cotton gin. He hoped Tesyb's sister, Isuha, would decide to come here soon in the future. Her practical experience working as a seamstress' assistant in Cinran would help him a lot in finalizing the designs.

However, even with her input, it wouldn't be easy to build spinning and weaving machines from scratch, especially without access to a real power source. Human and animal strength would only go so far. But Tiranat sitting on these huge deposits of coal could change everything. With so much of it lying under the eastern hills, he knew that he had to attempt to build a steam engine soon, even if only a primitive one.

If he and Cedoron could make a working model soon, or even if by the year's end, it would change everything in the village—every craft, every workshop. It would increase the productivity of everything being done here by a factor unimaginable right now. And if Darora could craft all the machines required to produce cloth, starting from processing cotton bolls, then coupled with the productivity of the steam engine, it could drive a level of production no one in the kingdom could imagine today.

That, though, was still far ahead, since he also had other things to manage. Before anything else, he had to keep his people fed and safe. Hopefully, the apprentices being trained by the carpenters and the blacksmith would take over more responsibility in the future. It would help a lot if more people and craftsmen came to live here—but that meant they would need more food, which made it a catch-22 situation. It was always the same loop: getting more work done required more people to live here, but more people required more food, and producing more food required more people.

He breathed in the damp air and looked at the narrow muddy path in front of him. Well, he would manage. Somehow.

They kept walking and soon, they turned the last corner, the path curving toward the manor gate. Ahead, a servant was waiting just outside the entrance, shifting his weight from foot to foot. His anxious face brightened with relief when he saw them.

Duvas frowned slightly. "What's the matter?"

"I've been looking for you, milord," the servant said, bowing quickly toward Kivamus. "A merchant's been spotted coming from the north. The watchtower guards saw him a short while ago."

Kivamus grinned, the weariness of the long walk forgotten for a moment. First the bandits had been taken care of, then the hunting parties had returned when they needed them most—and now, finally, the merchants were back on the road. It almost felt like things were turning in their favor again.

Duvas nodded briskly. "If it's Pydaso or Trevalo, escort them and their wagons to the manor house as soon as they arrive. If it's anyone else, they'll know where to find me."

The servant nodded and hurried off towards the north.

Kivamus and Duvas shared a brief look before heading through the gates, boots scraping on the gravel path. Hopefully, the merchant would have brought enough grain.

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By the evening, the manor was quiet again. The new merchant who had arrived earlier in the day had brought four wagons with him—though only one was filled with grain. The second wagon carried odds and ends: vegetables, salt, rope, a few sacks of dried beans. The remaining two were empty, meant for taking back coal.

Duvas had handled the trade for the manor, since the two local merchants were barely buying anything these days. Hopefully, that would change when the manor started paying the guards and the villagers directly in coin.

However, as expected, the exchange with the merchant hadn't gone in their favor—grain prices were still painfully high. In total, they'd spent just over a hundred gold and earned about forty from the coal they sold. Sixty gold gone, leaving barely the same amount left in their strongbox.

It was enough to make Kivamus sigh. "We'll have to renegotiate with Trevalo when he comes," he said. "He'll understand we didn't have a choice."

Duvas nodded. "This grain will stretch our stores by a full week, but less than that if we use half for sowing."

"Keep only a third of it for sowing," Kivamus said. "We'll use the rest as food. We can't afford hunger right now. Hopefully, another merchant will arrive soon."

Duvas nodded again but didn't answer. His gaze drifted toward the floor, the way it did whenever something weighed on his mind. Kivamus noticed the hesitation—he had seen that look several times over the last few weeks—but before he could ask, the door opened and Hudan and Feroy walked in.

The captain looked dusty, as though he'd been on the training grounds since sunrise. He took a seat and exhaled. "The new guards are shaping up well," he said. "We'll keep the fresh recruits here for more drills and send the experienced men on the next hunt instead. No point risking the green ones too early, now that we have dealt with the bandits."

Feroy didn't say much, and just dropped into an armchair with a tired grunt and leaned back with his eyes half closed. Probably taking a catnap, like he often did, while still being ready for anything.

Kivamus's attention went back to Duvas, who was still fidgeting. "All right," he said. "What is it?"

The majordomo hesitated. "It's nothing, milord..."

Kivamus shook his head. "No, you seem like you want to talk about something. What is it about? You can talk to me."

Duvas dithered for a few moments, before he took a deep breath and stood up. "I guess it's time for you to know about this too... But it will be easier if I show you."

The majordomo disappeared into the adjoining room and returned with the rolled parchment of their regional map. He cleared the table, then spread the map open. The light in the hall was dim—the fireplace had been cold for weeks now because of the growing temperature—but the glow of the candles nearby was enough to make the ink lines stand out clearly.

Kivamus moved his chair closer. It was the same map Pydaso had brought the last time—crude, drawn in broad strokes that outlined the southern lands of the Reslinor kingdom and the forests and mountain ranges beyond it.

Noticing the map, Hudan and Feroy leaned forward, their earlier weariness forgotten. The flickering candlelight played across everyone's faces as they looked at the map, waiting for the majordomo to explain what had brought it out again.

Duvas's expression tightened. He rested a hand on the edge of the table, eyes fixed on the rough ink lines of the map. "I think," he said slowly, "it's finally time I tell you something I should have told you long before."

Kivamus frowned. "Something you should have told me before?"

"I know you won't like it, my lord," Duvas said, his voice low. "But I hope you can forgive me for not telling you until now. You've had too many problems on your shoulders already, and I didn't want to add another one." He tapped a spot on the map—a stretch of squiggles marking the southern forests. "The thing is... Even though we just killed most of Torhan's men, the village is not safe—far from it... That's because there are mercenaries living in those forests. Feroy can confirm it."

Feroy gave a brief nod. "That's true enough, milord. The groups I used to run with often stayed in those woods."

Kivamus looked between them, brow furrowed. "It's a little concerning that there are mercenaries in those forests, but how much does that actually affect us?"

Duvas exhaled heavily. "They're mercenaries, my lord. And that means they always want gold. More than anything else." He drew a slow breath. "I'll have to start from the beginning to make sense of this. You probably know some of it, but I'll explain it all the same."

Kivamus gestured for him to continue.

Chapter 345 Mercenaries - I

"The ruling council of the Giralican Oligarchy," Duvas began, "sits in their capital, Rutodan, down by the southern coast of Cilaria. All they care about is trade and profit. Their fertile lands produce far more than they need, so they sell the surplus to the merchant fleets in their ports, mainly in Rutodan itself. Apart from grain, they also sell a lot of timber, glass, wine, salt, cloth, ale, precious gems and even slaves. It makes them rich—but it also means they put gold above everything else."

Kivamus nodded slightly. "So Giralica makes a lot of gold from selling grain and other things." He frowned. "Wait, if they produce more grain than they need, why haven't we ever tried to buy it from them? In fact, the whole region of southern Reslinor could benefit from buying it from Giralica!"

"Because of the same reason I am explaining today," Duvas said. "There are simply no trade routes between us. Apart from the long and very expensive sea route, there are only three ways for anyone to get from Reslinor to Giralica. The western path, circling around the Nisador range near Kirnos is out, since those dangerous wastelands don't allow any kind of bulk trade. The eastern path, passing through the Tolasi Hills is also not an option, since it is heavily militarized, and the border forts of the three countries don't allow any civilian or merchant movement through those hills to the other countries. I remember that in the past, there used to be a lot of trade through those hills, but since the previous war two decades ago, all merchant movement and any trading between the three countries through the Tolasi hills had stopped completely."

The majordomo shrugged. "That only leaves going through the dense southern forests of Cilaria while passing between the two mountain ranges south of us, but that is also very dangerous - all kinds of wild beasts, including roaming packs of fiercely territorial adzees, as well as the huge flying monsters known as bakkores live between those mountains. When you include the mercenaries living there, no merchant ever wants to go through those forests. They value gold, but not more than their lives."

Kivamus sighed, realizing that before the previous war, this region of Cilaria might have been prospering with all the trade passing through those hills. It would also have ensured no food shortage like the one southern Reslinor was dealing with in recent years, since a country's shortfall in grain harvest was usually accompanied by a surplus in another country, and people could simply trade for it. But that was not an option anymore. He looked at the majordomo. "Okay, I understand that there are many mercenaries living there, but I still don't see how it affects us."

Duvas shook his head. "You see, both Reslinor and Binpaaz always keep a certain number of standing forces—knights, squires, and trained soldiers, just in case a war breaks out, or another country invades them. Ours are at Fort Aragosa, theirs at Fort Tuscarr. You can guess that keeping that many people fed and equipped costs a fortune - especially since they aren't doing any productive work like farming - but both countries accept that as a necessity. Girnalica, though—they see soldiers as a waste of hands outside the times of a war. They'd rather have their men farming or working as craftsmen in all kinds of trades so their rulers can earn more gold. So apart from the few knights and squires who guard their border at Fort Nertas near the Tolasi Hills, they don't keep too many armed men permanently."

He looked up at Kivamus. "When Girnalica needs fighters, in case a war seems imminent - which hasn't happened for two decades anyway - they just hire mercenaries. They've certainly got the gold for it. But as you can guess, when those mercenaries aren't needed, well... they have to live somewhere."

Feroy's mouth curved into a grim smile. "And the ruling council wouldn't want them hanging around their towns and cities."

Duvas nodded. "Exactly. So outside the times of a war, the mercenaries move into the southern forests—which is a vast, ungoverned land. Neither Reslinor nor Girnalica properly controls these forests. There are no major towns there, not even villages worth taxing. And that makes it the perfect place for brutal cutthroats like those mercenaries to disappear when they are not needed."

Kivamus folded his arms. "All right, that explains why there are mercenaries down there. But they'd stay on their own side of the border, wouldn't they, even if the border is barely defined? After all, those men belong to Girnalica. They might not have families there anymore after living for years as mercenaries, but they were still born in that country."

Feroy gave a dry laugh. "Borders mean little to men who aren't paid to respect them, milord. When a group's not under contract to the Girnalican Council, they just go where they want. I was part of such a group once, long before I came here. I remember telling you that that's where I first saw an arbalest in use. In short, they're well armed, well trained, and not the kind you want to meet in the woods."

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He leaned forward towards the map, tapping at the southern edge of their own kingdom. "Most of the groups around here are small—anywhere from five or six men to a few dozen. But I've heard rumors

about one that's much larger. Over a hundred mercenaries in that group, perhaps more. And these are only the ones living close to our border, which is between the two mountain ranges. There are surely dozens of such groups scattered through those forests, which stretch all the way down to the southern coast of Cilaria."

"That's basically an army..." Kivamus frowned. "Those numbers would add up to, what, five hundred well-armed men? Maybe even a thousand?"

"More," Feroy said. "When war breaks out between the countries—and it does, every few decades—there are many thousands of men involved on each side, so there certainly have to be enough mercenaries down there to defend Giralica. Thousands of them, probably." He shrugged. "Giralica would probably have to call over their own farmers as a militia in case of a bigger war, just like Reslinor does, but they still need to have a certain number of well trained men to lead their army. For Reslinor, it is those knights, squires and other swordsmen, spearmen and bowmen living in Fort Aragosa which provide that leadership, but for Giralica, it is those mercenaries who do that."

Kivamus stared down at the map, the candlelight making his silver hair glint. "Then we'd best hope no war breaks out in the near future. The raids from Binpaaz near Cinran are already creating trouble for the Count, but hopefully it won't grow into anything larger." He looked up again. "Still, these mercenary groups have been living in those forests for years, haven't they? Decades even. So what's the issue now? Is it about the large group Feroy mentioned?"

Duvas didn't answer right away, his fingers tracing a faint line through the forest inked on the map. "Yes," he said at last, "that's the group that concerns us." He looked at the map again and sighed. "While the Giralican councilmen can keep those mercenaries under control in their own country—since they can threaten not to hire them again if they cause trouble, which keeps those groups somewhat docile in Giralica—that doesn't work for us here in Reslinor, since we don't have that kind of leverage over them. Even if our rulers offered them gold to fight for us in case of a war, those mercenaries'll never accept. They are Giralican people, after all."

His tone grew somber. "That particular group - the large one led by their leader Velonox, always had a bad name - including in the previous war. After the war ended, they started raiding and taking tributes from the border villages and towns on our side. They even raided the village of Kirnos a few times - which was probably the most fortified village in this region until we built our walls - and razed half their village in one such raid. Eventually their baron Farodas had no choice but to pay Velonox a tribute every year to leave the place alone." He paused, looking uneasy. "You can probably see where I'm going with this..."

Kivamus felt his stomach tighten, hoping it wouldn't turn out to be what he imagined it was. He stared at Duvax, searching his face. "Are we too...?"

"We are..." the majordomo said, voice barely above a murmur. "We have to."

Hudan stared at them. "Wait—what do you both mean?"

Duvax lowered his gaze. "I mean that the previous baron of Tiranat was forced to do the same. A few of Velonox's men came here not long after this village was founded after the war. They made it clear what would happen if no deal was made, and after seeing them bring Farodas' fortified village to its knees, we had no reason to doubt their words. So the previous baron struck a deal as well and since then, we've been paying them a tribute every summer."

For a moment, nobody said anything. Hudan's fists were clenched so tightly that his knuckles had turned white. Feroy was looking somewhere past the table, lost in thoughts.

Kivamus spoke slowly. "You can't be serious..."

"I wish I wasn't," Duvax replied, grimacing. "But it's true. We have to pay them a fixed amount every year by the end of summer. The current sum is 400 gold." He hesitated. "And now that we've built walls, farms, and watchtowers, their scouts will surely see the changes and will think that our village is flourishing. They'll surely demand more this time."

The room went quiet. The only sound was the faint crackle of the candle wick on the table.

Kivamus stared hard at the majordomo. "You mean to tell me that after being forced to pay those ridiculous taxes to the Count—which almost left us broke—we still have to pay another 400 gold? To mercenaries?"

Duvax nodded with visible regret. "I'm afraid so."

Kivamus stood abruptly, his voice rising. "How could you hide this from me all this time?"

"I told you that you wouldn't like it, my lord," Duvas said quietly. "You've been dealing with enough as it is, since the very moment you arrived here. The assassination attempts, the constant raids, the pre-winter food shortages, the grain caravans... All of it. And then all the new projects you've started—the longhouses, the seed drills, the crossbows, the wheelbarrows, the compasses... You've been active every waking moment just trying to keep this place alive. I didn't want to add one more worry on top of that. Even then, I did try to tell you about it in the past. Twice. But I just couldn't find the courage to burden you with it at the time since I believed we had enough time to prepare before the tribute was due. Forgive me, milord, I was only trying to help you..."

Kivamus took a deep breath, forcing himself to calm down. Getting angry at the majordomo - who was only trying to take on more responsibilities himself, so he wouldn't have to burden him with it - wasn't going to help anyone here. "Never again, Duvas. This is the last time you have intentionally hidden something from me."

The majordomo nodded slowly. "It won't happen again, milord. Trust me. But with summer getting closer, we do have to start thinking about how to handle it."

Hudan's jaw tightened. "How long before that bastard Velonox comes here?"

"Two, maybe three more months," Duvas said. "He'll likely send scouts first. Then a small group will arrive, expecting us to pay them the tribute, like every year."

Kivamus began pacing near the table, the boards creaking under his boots. "And if we can't? What then? You said there are over a hundred of them. We can't possibly take on a hundred trained men! Even with our new wall, we'd be wiped out."

Duvas nodded heavily. "That's why the deal was made in the first place. Years ago, we didn't even have this many guards. There was no wall, no proper defense. If we can't fight them today with 40 guards, our crossbows and a village wall with watchtowers, then we certainly couldn't have fought them in the past when we had less than 20 guards and no wall to protect the women and children. The village wouldn't have lasted a day against them. We had no choice but to accept their demands."

Kivamus stopped walking and turned sharply toward him. "But this is madness!" he said. "You're saying we've just been paying them every year, like it's normal?"

The majordomo just gave a reluctant nod.

Hudan leaned forward, the chair creaking under his bulk. "Did the previous baron ever ask for help from the Count? Cinran has more than enough knights. They could've dealt with those mercenaries. That's why we even pay them the taxes, for Goddess' sake!"

Duvas let out a bitter laugh. "We tried, Hudan. We tried... The count just wouldn't believe us. Said he'd heard rumors of bandits in these forests, but not of mercenaries, and certainly not of such a large group. He simply dismissed us! We had no proof to show the Count their strength, since Velonox rarely sends more than a handful of his men to collect the tribute. Even if more of those mercenaries had come, as they occasionally do, it wouldn't have mattered unless the Count came here himself to see it. And he never would."

Kivamus nearly blurted out to take their photographs as a proof, before he shook his head. What was he even thinking...

The majordomo rubbed his temple. "Back then, Count Ebirtas had just inherited his title after his brother's death in that riding accident. He was busy securing his own position in Cinran. That's why I also spoke with Sir Makanas, the Knight Commander of the town. He admitted that he'd fought those mercenaries during the last war, but he said they should've gone back to Giralica afterward. He refused to send help—said he needed all his men to guard the eastern border against Binpaaz."

Hudan nodded slightly. "That sounds like Sir Makanas... He obeys his superiors' orders, no matter what, even if he gave a different cause for it."

Feroy scratched his short brown beard. "There might be another reason behind them not wanting to help Tiranat. From what Sir Duvas told us about those mercenaries, and from what I know about them as well, they don't just hail from Giralica, they are basically the standing army of that country, even if unofficially. So at the time, the Count and the Knight Commander might have thought that attacking those mercenaries just to help a small village like ours could reignite another war right after it had ended in the wake of years of destruction everywhere. I was a teenager back then, but from what I remember, Cinran's walls had been reduced to rubble by the time the war had ended, and Lord Ebirtas wouldn't have wanted another war right after that, especially if his own position as a Count wasn't secure."

Kivamus gave a slow nod. "It's certainly possible. Why risk a new war just to help an obscure village which didn't even exist during the war and had only been founded recently. They had been managing

just fine without Tiranat's coal until then, so risking a new war just for some extra coal might not have been worth it in their eyes."

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"Whatever the reason may have been for the Count refusing to help us, the previous baron had no choice," Duvas went on. "Either pay Velonox's men or see the village burned. And you know as well as I do that Tiranat couldn't have survived fighting with them. Apart from that, the previous baron was only a minor noble before he had been made the ruler of this village, so losing Tiranat would have meant losing all these lands and the new lofty position he had just been granted. So he decided to pay them and remain a poor baron - but still a baron - instead of not paying them and having to go back to Cinran as a nobody - who also lost his village."

The majordomo continued, "After a few years of the war's end, the situation had calmed down everywhere, so Sir Makanas wouldn't have been able to claim that he still had to send his knights to defend the border against Binpaaz. But by that time we had already made a deal with Velonox, and going back on it and attacking them using the few knights Cinran might have given to help us wouldn't have ended well for Tiranat, and probably even for Cinran. Velonox's men - of course, including the other Giralican mercenary groups as well as the Binpaazi - were the ones who had reduced Cinran's walls to rubble after all."

"Even if you had asked them for help later," Feroy said, "I don't think Lord Ebirtas would have sent knights here. By then he would have been secure in Cinran and enjoying his new life as a Count after living in the shadow of his brother all his life. Risking the start of a new war wouldn't be something he would have wanted."

Kivamus stared at the floor for a long moment before sitting back down. His tone was low with disbelief as he spoke. "I knew Count Ebirtas didn't care about anything outside Cinran and his luxuries, but this is..."

He shook his head. "Regardless of the futility of trying to ask him for help, we barely managed to pay the taxes this year, even with the help of my savings. Yeah, we basically had to pay the taxes twice, but still... How did you even afford to pay Velonox in the previous years?"

The candles flickered in the still air, and for a while the only sound was the faint rasp of the fire dying in the hearth.

Duvas cleared his throat. "You remember when I told you about our expenses and income in the past?"

Kivamus nodded. "Yes. You'd told me that outside the winter months when the northern road is closed, Tiranat's monthly income was around 500 gold, and the expenses were about 440 to 450 gold. The rest went to the previous baron as profit."

Duvas shook his head slowly. "It wasn't quite like that. Most of that so-called profit went to pay off the mercenaries. So the previous baron didn't really get to spend that fifty gold every month."

Kivamus frowned, leaning back slightly in surprise. "I wasn't sure, but I had been wondering how he even managed to spend that much coin in Cinran. Fifty gold is a big amount to spend every month, even in Uliga, and Cinran doesn't have nearly as many luxuries as that place. So this was the reason..."

"It was," Duvas said quietly. "Still, we have to start thinking about paying them again. Assuming they don't try to increase the tribute, we'll still need to pay 400 gold by the end of summer. Although they might try to increase it this time..."

Kivamus let out a breath, rubbing the back of his neck. "There's no way I can see us paying that. If we can sell enough losuvil powder as acelos medicine, it might be possible—but I wanted to use that money to improve the village, not hand it over to mercenaries. And now you've given me another problem that will take nearly everything we earn." He turned to look at Feroy, who was sitting across the table. "Is there really no way we can fight them?"

Feroy shook his head at once. "There's no chance. Not with what we have right now. Our forty guards include fewer than thirty swordsmen. And these mercenaries—Velonox's group and the others—they're not like the bandits living in the north and west of us. You have to understand, these men aren't ex-farmers and laborers who turned to crime out of desperation. They are soldiers, the vanguard of Girnalica's army. Taking over or burning down a small village like ours would be nothing to them. In fact, that's probably why no bandit groups ever go south. That territory belongs to the mercenaries."

He rested his arms on the table. "These mercenaries aren't just strong—they're ruthless. The bandits we've fought, most of them used to be farmers or miners before they turned to this life. They still remember what it's like to be poor, so even when they raid, they usually avoid killing civilians unless it's necessary. They're after loot, not slaughter. Even Torhan, for all his cruelty of setting the houses on fire just before winter, didn't kill villagers for no reason once he got what he wanted in that raid."

Feroy exhaled. "But mercenaries are just different. I've fought beside men like them. They don't care who they kill. For them, killing is as normal as breathing, even if they also want to plunder in case of a war or take tributes in peacetime. If this Velonox ever decides to attack us, his people won't try to storm the gates to get inside, like the bandits did to loot grain and gold. The mercenaries will start by setting the walls and towers on fire, and if they get inside—or rather, when they get inside—they'll likely kill a quarter of the people here just to set an example. That's how they make sure no one ever thinks about refusing to pay them their tribute again."

Kivamus shook his head, trying to get that gory image out of his mind. He stared into the distance for a few moments before speaking again. "What about our crossbows? Wouldn't they help us against them in a battle? Surely those weapons can work just as well against mercenaries as they did against bandits. Or do these mercenaries have plate armor like the knights do?"

### Chapter 347 Mercenaries - III

Feroy snorted. "No. Plate is far too costly. Maybe a few of their leaders might have it—men who've killed knights and taken their armor—but not many. Most of them wear layered leather or chainmail. And yes, a crossbow bolt can kill any man if it hits right, but for that, our guards would have to get close enough to aim properly, and that would be suicide. Even if Velonox's group has just a hundred men, they'll have at least two dozen archers, probably more. And those aren't villagers with bows who learned hunting in their spare time—they're trained soldiers, who've already used them in a war to good effect. Warbows in their hands will shoot far and hit hard. Velonox's group will use them to set the village on fire from a distance before we even see them properly. The towers, the roofs, everything will burn before we can react."

He paused, his voice hardening. "And that's if they come alone. If Velonox calls in the other smaller mercenary groups for help—and he can, since most of those men have fought beside him before—it won't just be a hundred. It could be two hundred. Maybe even more."

Kivamus stared at him for a long moment, then muttered, "That's... a depressing thought."

No one said anything for a while. The fire in the brazier crackled faintly, filling the silence. Duvas was still looking down, his expression dull, as if he had already accepted all of this long ago. Hudan stood near the table, his hands clenched into fists, the muscles in his jaw tightening and relaxing. He looked ready to kill someone—anyone—but he knew as well as the others that training their forty guards well simply wouldn't be enough if a hundred or two hundred seasoned war veterans came for them.

Remembering about the latest weapon they were building in the village, Kivamus looked at the former mercenary and asked, "What about our scorpions? Their range is much higher than the crossbows. We've cleared five hundred meters past the wall, and from the height advantage of the watchtowers, they should cover nearly all of that. The mercenaries' warbows can't possibly have a longer range than our scorpions."

Feroy nodded slowly. "That's something that could be a game changer—if it works like you say it does. I haven't seen a working one yet, so I can't say for sure, but if it really works like you've said, then yes, our scorpions could easily kill their men at a range their archers can't reach. But you still don't see the full situation."

Kivamus frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Let's say all the mercenaries attack from the south," Feroy went on, leaning forward a little. "Let's assume they only have a hundred men, no more. Even then, we'd have just three scorpions covering that side—one on each of the southern watchtowers. Even if none of the scorpion bolts missed, which is unlikely, that's just three men killed in the first volley. Then the guards'll have to reload. For now, I'm assuming it will take the same time to reload as the crossbow does. By the time they've done that, the mercenary archers might already be close enough to fire. Even if they aren't, at most the guards will be able to get out one or two more volleys. Again, that's just three to six more men killed, out of the hundred coming to attack us. Eventually, the mercenary archers will still get close long before we can kill enough of them to make a difference. And once those flaming arrows start flying, it'll only take one or two to set a tower ablaze. The moment a tower's on fire, that scorpion becomes useless."

Feroy shook his head. "Even if our crews reload faster, I'd say at best we could take out something like 10 to 12 men before all three towers are burning. After that, the watchtower guards will have to jump down for their lives, and the mercenary swordsmen will close in. You can imagine the rest..."

Kivamus let out a long breath and sat back. While Feroy was only comparing the scorpions with the crossbows, he had a nagging suspicion that with the considerable power of the scorpions and their huge bolts - which would be much, much bigger than the crossbow bolts - they might easily take out more than one man at a time if the enemy was massed together, but even then it probably wouldn't be enough to make a difference against what was basically a small army of a hundred men...

"Then it seems we have no choice but to pay them this year," he said quietly, "as much as I hate the idea of handing over our hard-earned coins. I simply don't see how it would have been possible to do that right after spending a lot of gold to basically pay the Count's taxes twice if we hadn't made the acelos

powder, but either way, we do have that option now. That medicine, along with the improved papers we are making now, will earn us all the gold we need to pay these bastards, and likely more."

Duvas nodded. "I'll also try to see how to manage that new income source to save as much of it as we can. The best thing is that it's tax-free."

Kivamus nodded and ran a hand through his hair, thinking about other possible options. If only they had guns—something that could kill many people before a magazine needed to be replaced—they could have taken care of these mercenaries easily. But he knew that even if he tried to somehow make a few guns in the coming months by putting all the other projects on hold, it would only be a crude matchlock or a flintlock, not a modern machine gun with a replaceable magazine. And as revolutionary as those flintlocks may be against a bandit group, they'd still be useless against a trained army - which is what the mercenaries were.

On the other hand, if he tried to make bigger cannons, those might still be useful against a massed enemy, but those needed to be well tested and safe enough that they wouldn't explode under the much higher pressures needed for them to work. It wasn't something that could be made in a hurry, or the rest of the guards would just refuse to use any gunpowder weapons once they saw a comrade being blown to pieces by their own weapon.

That didn't even take into account the various kinds of raw materials, machine tools and metallurgy skills needed to produce even a primitive gun. From what he remembered from his memories, no such guns existed in southern Reslinor, including in Ulriga and in Fort Aragosa, from what Hudan and Duvas had told him. It still left open the possibility of at least a primitive type of gun or cannon existing somewhere out in the world, even if they might not exist yet in Cilaria. He'd have to ask around about it in the future, but for now, gunpowder weapons wouldn't be helpful for them to deal with these mercenaries, at least in this summer.

He looked back at Feroy. "Is there any way to keep our walls from catching fire? If we can make them at least somewhat fire resistant, it would help us a lot."

Feroy thought for a moment. "It won't be completely effective, but we can still coat the outer sides of the walls and the towers with a thick layer of clay. That would at least reduce the chances of the logs catching fire. We should also make a lot of wooden buckets, fill them with water, and keep them near the gates and towers. It wouldn't be much, but it'd give people a way to put down a fire quickly if they reach it in time, especially since the fire'll spread slowly if the logs are coated with clay. Hmm... Apart from that, we only have two wells right now—one in the center of the village at the market square and another here inside the manor. I'd say we need to dig more of 'em. If a longhouse catches fire right now,

villagers have to run all the way to the well in the market square to fetch water. That wastes time and gives a chance for the fire to spread further. That's a risk even if the fire is caused by a mistake and not by enemies attacking us. So we should dig new wells so people don't have to cross the whole village to fill their buckets."

Kivamus nodded, already forming plans in his head. "Those are good ideas, and we'll use all of them. I was already thinking of digging another well in the north for the longhouse blocks, but yes, it's better if we have more. That's our only source of water without a river nearby."

He turned to the guard captain. "Hudan, go to the north tomorrow where the trenches are being dug. Take any free guards and manor servants with you. Tell them to use ladders to coat the outer side of the walls and the watchtowers with clay."

He looked at Duvas next. "Meet with Yeden and ask how long it'll take to dig a well and how many men we'll need. The good thing is that we already have people who know how to dig now. Those clay diggers can handle it easily. Tell Yeden I want half of them reassigned to digging wells from tomorrow. Once that is done they can return to digging trenches."

Kivamus started listing the locations on his fingers. "We already have one well in the market square and another in the manor. That covers the center of the village and the east. I want a third one dug just across from the road running in front of the longhouse blocks. I've already planned to make a new market square there, so that new well will fit right in. That'll cover the north. Another well will be dug in the southwest, close to the southwestern gates, and a fifth one in the southeast near that gate. That'll give us five wells in total—one in each direction. It'll help us fight fires quickly, and as the population grows, we'll need the extra drinking water anyway. We can easily make enough charcoal to clean that water from the new wells and make it drinkable too."

He thought for a moment. They already had plans to dig a canal connecting the dam reservoir to the farms, but that might take time. He said, "Add one more well near the farms. It will help the farmers a lot if they don't have to return back inside the village to carry the water bucket by bucket. "

Duvas nodded. "I'll talk to Yeden. Even after the sowing is completed, we can allow the farming foreman Pinoto to use a wagon and a pair of horses to carry enough buckets of water to the farms from the well, but that would still need a lot of buckets. What should we do about them?"

"Talk with Darora," Kivamus said. "Tell him to assign one of his apprentices to it. He'd told me that he'd taken on a new one who couldn't yet help with the intricate work of crossbow or scorpion parts. But

making buckets is simple enough—the apprentice can easily shape the wood, and someone else can teach him how to finish it up. For the iron bands to strengthen the buckets, talk to Cedoron. He can put one of his own apprentices on that. Between them, we'll have what we need. We don't have any shortage of iron right now, and we are never going to be short of Fedarus wood. So they can keep making new buckets until we have enough of them to keep near each well."

He paused, glancing at each of them in turn. "That'll take care of the basic precautions. But don't mistake this for us surrendering to these bastards. I'm not giving up on fighting these mercenaries. I won't let anyone threaten my people or my village. Once we have the scorpions installed on all the watchtowers, the village will be considerably better protected than it is right now, but we'll also start thinking of new ways to defend ourselves if it comes to that."

He turned to the captain again. "Hudan, your task for now is to keep training our men as best you can. We can't afford to hire more guards right now, but if more refugees arrive, we'll add some new ones to the ranks. I'll also have that dedicated training ground built in the east soon. Until then, make do with what we have."

He looked around the table once more. "You all have your orders. Get to them. Now that we know about this new threat, we don't have any time to waste."

Hudan, Fero, and Duvas stood. Each gave a short nod before leaving the hall, already discussing their parts of the plan as they went.

Kivamus stayed behind. He stood up slowly and started pacing, his mind still working. At least they had a few months to prepare. If things went well with Pydaso in Ulriga, they should be able to pay the tribute easily this year, but he would never pay it again. Not to these mercenaries.

He looked toward the window, where the last traces of daylight still showed over the walls. Whatever it took, he'd protect his village and his people from anyone who wished them harm.

By now he realized that problems never seemed to end in Tiranat, and probably never would—but his people depended on him, and he wasn't going to let them down.

#### Chapter 348 Circumstances

Late in the next morning, Kivamus stood near the manor gate, watching as Duvas oversaw three sacks of grain being loaded onto a wagon bound for the southern farms. The three hunting groups had already

left early, and after buying wheat from the merchant, for the first time in weeks, there was enough food to last at least ten days. That gave them some breathing room - not much, but enough.

He crossed his arms, thinking about the merchants. Their visits were still irregular - probably the lingering effect of the bandit threat on the northern road last autumn; trade had dropped almost completely back then. However, before the bandits had ambushed and killed the previous baron on that road, merchants had come often enough to buy nearly 500 gold worth of coal every month - at the then prices. Spring had brought improvement, and at least some merchants had started coming now, but it wasn't back to normal yet. He hoped it would normalize completely in the near future.

Right now, he was walking on a gravel path in the manor, checking on the vegetable patches planted all around the courtyard, when a servant came running from the gate. The man was flushed and breathless.

"Milord! Another merchant has arrived. It's Trevalo!"

Kivamus exhaled slowly, then smiled. "Good," he said, more to himself than the servant. Maybe this was the start of things returning to normal. If Pydaso returned soon as well - and he was already overdue to come back - they might even have some luck to work with for once. Two reliable merchants coming regularly had already brought some stability back in Tiranat—and if the smaller traders followed, the village could start breathing again.

But for now, he'd take any good news, and Trevalo's arrival was exactly that. However, it wasn't as though he had any shortage of problems to deal with. Torhan was still alive somewhere, likely plotting revenge for the bandits they'd wiped out, though Kivamus figured he simply couldn't come again for at least a couple of months. Then there was the looming issue of the southern mercenaries—a threat that sat like a weight in the back of his mind.

And there were other problems as well. The families living in that temporary encampment in the north—those belonging to the desperate men who had attacked the village a few weeks ago—needed to be brought in soon, before someone else preyed on them or those men decided that they needed to take matters in their own hands again. Joric, the former slave, had also been begging to have his own family brought here from Kirnos, but that would be difficult, for more than one reason.

Still, at least Trevalo was here. If he'd brought enough grain, the sowing could finally be completed, and there might even be a small stockpile left for a few weeks of rations. The village would probably be able to return to three meals a day after this. That was something.

He started walking again, making his usual circuit through the manor grounds. The weather was still pleasant, though the air had begun to dry up, which meant the summer heat wasn't far off. That meant they'd soon need to arrange proper irrigation for the farms. For that, he wanted to start a canal from the reservoir at the dam to carry water down to the fields—a difficult project which would require them to dig through the treacherous and uneven terrain of the eastern hills. It would need careful planning and a lot of man-days of work.

Making an aqueduct directly from the reservoir would also work for this, and that would even allow them to run a waterwheel somewhere in the aqueduct's path, but they didn't have cement to make it with concrete, and it would need way too many planks or hollowed half-trunks if made from wood, even if the Fedarus wood was highly water resistant. That meant it had to be a canal.

The new water well they had planned to dig near the farms would help for now, but the canal was something that was required soon, especially if they increased the farming area from the next year, which was basically a given.

He also wanted to get a proper road built from the village to the dam. The current path was a mess—half-filled potholes, puddles everywhere, loose stones on the hills, and uneven slopes that slowed down wagons. A proper road - even if just an evenly laid out dirt road covered by gravel - would make coal transport much faster and a lot safer.

Then there were the mines themselves. He'd need to fix the tunnel mouths going inside those hills before the thunderstorm season started in late summer, or they'd flood again like last year. The coal miners had already reported that some water had still pooled near the entrances after the recent rains. That had been easy enough to clear with buckets but it had still wasted time. He also needed to think about increasing the productivity of coal mining by improving their tools, or rather, by finding a way to reduce their dependence on raw manpower. He didn't yet know what could be done about it, but there had to be ways to improve it even without access to advanced technology like steam engines.

At least the reservoir behind the dam was already full. The miners had even said they'd seen small fish spawning there—proof that the stream water had settled into a stable ecosystem. But it would take months, perhaps until winter, before the fish were ready to be used as food sustainably, but that was something to look forward to.

Grain storage was another issue. Harvest season was still far away, but he'd need new warehouses before then. Since its existence, Tiranat had only been buying what they needed to feed the village for

that particular month, and their sole grain barn in the manor as well as the two village merchants' own shop-storage had been more than enough for that. Until now, they didn't have to care too much about grain rotting or being eaten by rats, because every sack of grain would be used up within a few weeks of buying it, and the village would just buy new grain in the next month.

But for the first time this autumn, they would get a year's worth of grain at the same time. At least 600 to 700 sacks, on the conservative side. Probably more. Hopefully more. That would require making new storage warehouses of good quality, preferably outside the manor to avoid congesting the place. It would also have to be built on small stilts, with proper protection from moisture and rats. That was another thing on their to-do list.

He also wanted to make new longhouse blocks soon—the ones already built were far too overcrowded already. Clearing the rubble and the remains of the burned shacks had finally begun in the village center, which would free up space for construction, but he just didn't have enough craftsmen to do it quickly. Their skilled workforce was already stretched thin, making crossbows, scorpions, safety lamps, mining tools, farming tools or making the triphammer, the sawmill and so on. Well, the sawmill would help a lot in speeding-up the construction once it was ready, but the point still stood.

He sighed and rubbed his forehead. He still had to pay the smoked-fish merchant in Kirnos and find a way to get a regular trade going with him to get access to another source of food. And then there was that plan he'd basically shelved for now—calling in prospectors from the north to look for metal veins in the southern forests and the mountain ranges there. That idea looked far less promising at this point.

As he had found out yesterday, those forests were crawling with mercenaries, and greedy ones at that. If there had been any precious metals or any good veins of ore there, those men would have found and claimed them long ago, and the nearby towns or cities would have known about a new source of ore there. As it stood, most likely the mercenaries hadn't found anything, and it would be a wasted effort to send prospectors there, especially knowing that the previous baron had already tried it in the past. Still, he might try sending a small scouting party one day—but not anytime soon.

They were already consuming a lot of iron in the village, but it was only a small fraction of what they would need in the coming months and years. So even if there were no iron or other metal mines in the southern forests, he still needed to find a regular source of iron - cheap iron. That meant directly buying the ore, and smelting it here to make ingots.

So, instead of wasting their precious gold on prospectors, he wanted to gain access to the iron mines of Perika, on the far side of the Nisador range. That was a known factor, and those iron mines had been very productive in the past, which meant trying to purchase iron ore from there would be far more

efficient than sending prospectors to stumble around in the southern forests, which likely didn't even have anything. But that meant passing through Kirnos, which in turn meant dealing with Baron Farodas—and paying his border taxes and custom duties. He might not even allow it easily, if only to prevent a rival barony from getting stronger.

He exhaled deeply, forcing himself to stop worrying. He knew he couldn't keep thinking through a dozen problems at once. He had to focus on one thing at a time. Trevalo had arrived. That was what mattered today.

If he could buy all the grain the young merchant had brought—even on credit—that would keep the village stable for a while longer. He took another deep breath and turned back toward the manor hall. Duvas would be bringing Trevalo in soon enough. It was time to talk business.

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The manor hall was quiet except for the soft crackle of a few candles kept on the side table. Duvas sat across from Kivamus, a ledger open beside him, while the young merchant Trevalo rested his hands on his knees, looking tired but content. Two guards stood by the wall, silent and watchful, as they always did when someone from outside visited - especially when Hudan and Feroy were out on other tasks - instead of leaving Kivamus and the majordomo alone.

Kivamus leaned forward slightly. "Trevalo, you own six wagons, and I clearly remember that the last time you visited here, I told you to bring as much food as you could. So why did you bring only four wagons worth of wheat with the remaining two wagons empty?"

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Trevalo gave a small chuckle that sounded weary. "Just be glad I was able to bring even this much, milord. I know that you wanted me to load all of it with food, so of course I tried. But it's hard to buy grain in bulk in Cinran these days. To get even these four wagons worth of wheat, I had to call in every favor I had, visit nearly every bulk dealer in the town, and still couldn't fill the rest. Even then, I had to pay some really high prices to buy this wheat, which is why the best I can do is five gold and six silvers per sack of wheat.

"That's outrageous!" the majordomo exclaimed. "You have to give us a discount on that!"

The young merchant shook his head reluctantly. "Not in my hands, with the prices I bought it at. I am barely making any profit on this deal as it is. And I'll warn you in advance—even though the prices are already higher than they've ever been, everyone in Cinran expects food prices to rise even more before the next harvest, so no merchant wants to sell large amounts right now."

Duvas frowned. "Why? There's always been enough grain in Cinran."

Trevalo shrugged. "It used to be so in the past, but not anymore, with the bad harvests in recent years. And besides, isn't four wagons going to be more than enough for you, after what I'd brought the last time? It's already unusual that your manor is buying nearly everything itself instead of the two village merchants buying it. I'm curious about why you even need so much grain all of a sudden... I've been the primary grain supplier for this village for years, and I know that Tiranat never used to buy more than four or five wagon loads in a month. I usually brought four myself, and someone else brought the rest. Counting the three wagons of wheat I brought last time and these four now, that's already a lot more than you used to buy. Shouldn't that be enough to last you this month?"

Kivamus kept his face even, though his thoughts were already moving. Even though a lot of grain had been needed for sowing, he couldn't tell Trevalo the real reason—the rising population from the refugees and former slaves who had arrived quietly through the winter and spring, and were still coming every week or so—sometimes with their families, while sometimes alone after running from their slave masters.

With the village population now approaching nearly 450 people, it had already increased by around a third of what it used to be before the winter. However, he didn't know Trevalo as well as he knew Pydaso, and any talk of Tiranat taking in refugees and freed slaves might spread in the wrong ears in Cinran if the young merchant gossiped about it. That could cause all kinds of problems for them, and he didn't want to risk it.

"I have my reasons," Kivamus said calmly, "and you're free to sell to the village merchants as usual. It's not like I'm forcing you to only sell to us. But they don't have the coin these days, and I won't let my people go hungry waiting for them to buy it. So I'm using my own gold for this."

He paused, thinking about an improvised reason which would satisfy the merchant about the higher amounts. "The truth is, the population here was undercounted in the past. People barely ate two meals a day, and some starved every winter since there simply wasn't enough grain to feed everyone. You might have heard of that before."

Trevalo nodded slowly. "I've heard about such things happening in nearly every village in the winter months."

"Well, I don't want that to happen ever again," Kivamus said. "Most days, people get three meals a day in Tiranat. We've also done a proper count recently, and based on that, we'll need at least six wagon loads of wheat every month instead of the four we used to buy. Maybe even seven. You've still brought a good amount, but if you can manage to bring more, I'll buy it. And you should know this won't be a one-time thing. You'll find steady business here every month."

Trevalo rubbed the back of his neck. "I didn't know that," he said finally. "I can't imagine how you'll afford that much grain every month with prices like these. But business is business, and more trade's always welcome." He exhaled. "That said, I don't think it's even possible for me to buy that much wheat for you in Cinran."

The majordomo frowned. "What are you talking about?"

The merchant shrugged. "Let me explain why. From what I know, the town of Cinran needs around 35 wagon loads of grain every month just to feed its people. So during harvest season, the merchants of the town buy from the nearby farms and store enough in their warehouses to sell about 50 wagon loads a month throughout the year. That gives a surplus of about 15 wagons a month for traders like me to carry to smaller places—Tiranat, Kirnos, or some other mining villages which don't grow enough food for themselves. That worked fine in normal years."

Trevalo shrugged. "But you know that the last two harvests have been pretty bad. Some of the villages around Cinran—ones that usually sold their extra grain—didn't even grow enough to feed themselves last time. So their barons are keeping their own grain for themselves, and instead of selling to Cinran, they're even buying from it this year. That's the problem. Places that used to add to the surplus of the town are now taking from it. Basically, the supplier villages have become net buyers instead of net sellers, if you know what I mean."

Kivamus nodded grimly. "Yes. I understand exactly what you mean."

The merchant rested both elbows on his knees, as his tone turned more serious. "From my estimate - and I should say that I obviously don't have any official numbers on this, only what I've heard in the markets - Cinran's merchants were able to buy a much smaller total quantity of grain during last year's harvest. That's why, for this year - until the next harvest in late autumn - they'll only be able to sell about 40 or so wagon loads a month instead of the usual 50. They can't even get access to more grain to

sell because most of the nearby barons of the farming villages have stopped selling entirely and are keeping their grain for their own people."

Kivamus listened silently while Duvas started noting down figures in his ledger.

Trevalo went on, "Now, I told you that Cinran needs around 35 wagons of wheat every month just to feed the town. Maybe a little less these days—some of the poorer folk are eating twice a day instead of three times, or maybe even once because of the higher prices. But still, that leaves only a handful of wagons left over. Out of those 5 surplus wagon loads of grain available, this time I've already brought 4 here, because you were willing to pay higher rates, while the rest is being sold to other richer barons who can afford to pay even more. That's basically the whole surplus gone."

Kivamus sat back in his chair, his eyes unfocused for a moment. He could already see the chain of consequences forming—rising prices, tighter trade, and hungry mouths. The room stayed quiet, only the sound of the wind against the shutters breaking it.

The merchant sighed, spreading his hands. "You can see the problem now. The merchants in Cinran know exactly how tight it's gotten. If I try to buy more than my usual four wagons next time, they'll just raise the price further—maybe above six gold per wagon. And it's only going to get worse as the months go by. I wouldn't be surprised if the Count soon puts limits on selling grain to traders hailing from outside Cinran. Even then, the harvest time is still around 6 months away, so I think you should be fine for the next few months as long as you are willing to pay the higher prices. But as the stores of wheat in the town go down further - since the merchants will obviously try selling it in the black market to the highest bidder - it is possible that the Count will completely prohibit selling any wheat outside the town. After all, no ruler wants food riots in his town."

Kivamus frowned, dreading the day their only source of grain might stop selling to them. That thought made the mood in the hall feel somber. "What do you suggest then? You must already have noticed that we have started farming here, but we still need to buy grain to feed the villagers until the harvest. Even after that, we'll likely continue buying wheat from the outside to make up for any shortfall. I can't have people starving again, not after all the work we've done. Just the thought that we might not be able to buy any wheat after a few months is..." He stopped himself, shaking his head. "It's not something I can accept."

Trevalo stayed quiet for a moment, drumming his fingers lightly against his knee as if thinking it through. "Tell you what," he said finally, "I've been trading grain all my life, and I do have some contacts in Ulriga. If you can give me a written guarantee that you'll buy whatever I bring, I can travel there for you and arrange to bring wheat from the city. I usually only trade between Cinran and the nearby villages, but I'll

make the trip if you make it worth my while. Of course, the wheat will still be just as expensive, but at least you'll have all the grain you want."

Duvas looked up from the ledger. "Ulriga's a big city, everyone knows that. But the harvest has been bad everywhere. Are you sure they'll have enough to sell to us?"