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Chapter 351 Trevalo - II

Trevalo laughed—a deep, confident laugh that filled the hall. "You must be joking! Ulriga is enormous—far, far bigger than Cinran! It's the second largest city in the kingdom, maybe the third largest in all of Cilaria after Rutodan in Girnalica and our capital Dorastiz. If I had to guess, I'd say Ulriga consumes something like 300 wagon loads of grain every month, maybe more. And that's just inside the city walls."

Kivamus nodded faintly, remembering his own journey from there to Tiranat before last winter. Even after leaving the city gates, he'd passed row after row of small houses, shops, and roadside stalls—almost like a whole second town stretching along the roads outside the walls. The simple reason for it was that living inside the city walls had become so expensive by now that only the relatively rich people could afford to live there at this point. The rest of the people had moved out to houses outside the walls to save on rent and other costs of living.

Trevalo caught his expression and grinned. "You've seen it, then. The people living outside the walls probably add up to another half of the city's population. If you include them, Ulriga might easily be producing and consuming over 400 wagon loads of wheat a month. The bad harvest and the high prices might have made it lower, but the city of Ulriga is not called the biggest port in the kingdom without a good reason. They can always import whatever they need, whether from the northern provinces or from other countries outside of Cilaria."

The merchant shrugged. "So yes, the harvest might've been bad there too, but Ulriga can always buy its way out of trouble. They certainly have the coin for it. Between imports and what the farms near the city produce, I'd say they handle something close to 500 wagon loads of grain every month. Even if they're only importing this year instead of exporting, it's still a vastly bigger market compared to Cinran, which needs just 35 wagon loads to feed itself. So, providing just a few extra wagons of wheat for your village wouldn't even make the big traders in Ulriga blink at it."

Kivamus leaned forward, listening closely. This already seemed like a possible solution to their problems.

"So, in the coming months," Trevalo said, "if the situation in Cinran gets worse and the Count completely forbids selling grain outside the town until the next harvest, you can still get your supply from Ulriga. Even if you buy your whole requirement of 6 or 7 wagons a month from them, it would be less than nothing to their traders. I'm even willing to go there and handle the trade for you—but I'll need a written guarantee, with your seal on the paper." He shrugged. "Unless I'm sure that you'll buy the grain when I bring it, I simply won't take the risk."

Duvas and Kivamus exchanged a look. The idea was tempting—and risky. But it might be their only path forward if Cinran closed its gates.

Kivamus nodded slowly. "If it comes to that, you'll have your guarantee," he said. "For now, let's hope Cinran doesn't make that decision too soon."

Trevalo smiled faintly. "Hope is good, my lord. But in my line of work, I've learned not to count on it for long."

Kivamus thought for a moment before nodding. "Alright, I think it might be good to prepare for that in advance anyway. We have a few other merchants we buy grain from, and if they bring me wheat at a lower price, I won't be able to say no to them. So, to leave my options open, I'm willing to give you a written guarantee that I'll buy five wagon loads of wheat—fifty sacks—from you every month at a pre-agreed price, whether you bring it from Cinran or Ulriga. This agreement will last until the next harvest. After that, we can renegotiate it or cancel the deal. My guess is that Tiranat will need more wheat than this, but for anything above those five wagon loads, I'll have to buy from whoever offers the lowest price. Whether it's you or someone else won't matter beyond that limit."

Trevalo thought for a while before nodding. "That works for me. Getting a guaranteed sale of fifty sacks every month will be worth it, even with the higher costs of going as far as Ulriga."

"Good," Kivamus said. "However, for reasons I can't tell you right now, when you visit Ulriga, I want you to make it seem that you're buying the grain for Cinran instead of my village. I don't want Tiranat's name highlighted anywhere right now, even if it's just about buying wheat from that far away. But Cinran's a big town; and no one in Ulriga will think twice if you say the grain is for them."

Trevalo gave a puzzled smile. "That's a strange request. I don't think the big traders in Ulriga will even care about where a few wagon loads of grain are headed, but I don't mind. If anyone asks, I'll say it's for Cinran." He leaned back. "In fact, you may have guessed this already, but doing this can also help you sell more coal—that is, if you can produce enough. There isn't much demand for it in Cinran this summer, and that town is your only major market, apart from what little might be bought by the village of Kirnos. But Ulriga City is far larger and needs much more coal. They buy from many mining villages like yours and even import by sea when needed. They'll take every lump of coal you can mine. As long as you can produce more, I can sell all of it in Ulriga for you."

Kivamus remembered that Pydaso had told him it took nearly twenty days for a round trip between Tiranat and Ulriga traveling by wagons. He also recalled that Tiranat usually sold around 40 wagon loads of coal every month.

"Including loading and unloading days, going there would take about twenty days for a round trip by road," he said. "That won't help us much, even if you sell in a bigger market. That kind of schedule means just three trips every two months. You'll only need to take five wagons there for the wheat I'm buying, but even if you take a much bigger caravan of ten wagons to Ulriga, the travel time means you can sell only thirty wagon loads of coal to Ulriga every two months. That's fifteen per month on average. Compared to the twelve you already sell to Cinran with your six wagons, that's only three extra wagon loads of sale for us—barely an improvement. Taking an even bigger caravan is an option, but it would only make you an easier target on such a long journey, especially if bandits notice a regular route and schedule."

Trevalo shook his head. "That's not what I'm thinking. I don't have to travel the whole way by wagon. If you can guarantee me regular business, I can skip trading with other small villages and become your primary wheat and coal trader. For that, I can even lease a boat in Cinran. Rowing boats are reliable in any weather, but they would be far too expensive for bulk cargo like coal, so it will be better to lease a sailing boat."

"How long will that route take?" Duvas asked.

Trevalo shrugged. "It takes me two days to reach Cinran from here if I hurry, three if I travel at a normal pace. On that forest road, a larger caravan might be better anyway. That leaves taking the coal from Cinran to Ulriga. I am no sailor, but I still know that the wind changes every season. It blows from the northeast of Cilaria in winter and reverses direction in the summer. So how long it'll take depends on that."

Kivamus wished Tiranat was located next to a river, or that steamships worked on that river route. He had no doubt that they would get there eventually, but not anytime soon. "Just give me an estimate so I can see if it would be worth it," he said. "I know the time'll vary."

Trevalo thought for a moment, rubbing his chin. "Well, I have a friend who works as a deckhand on a boat that runs that route. I'm only telling you what he told me once. Going downriver should take maybe four to five days this time of year—spring doesn't have much wind to help. To save on costs, we also won't use horse tows along the banks when going downriver because it'll be too expensive for bulk cargo like coal, and the flow of river will be enough anyway. With good wind it could be done in under three days, but that's rare in this season. Of course, coming back upriver will take longer. We'll have to

use horses for towing on the return journey, which adds to the expense, but even then, it'll take at least a week to return to Cinran without any favorable wind - which we can't count on, especially in spring. It'll help a bit that the boat will be lighter on the way back, since I'll be carrying much less wheat than the coal I'll be taking there."

"This still doesn't sound much better," Kivamus said after thinking for a moment. "From what you've described, that's three days from here to Cinran, then around five days from Cinran to Ulriga. Add a couple of days there to unload the coal and sell it, as well as to buy wheat and load it back on the boat. Then another week to come back upriver, and three more days from Cinran to here. That's twenty days for each round trip. So we're back to where we started—three trips every two months, which means we'll still get to sell only 15 wagons of coal a month, even with 10 wagons in your caravan instead of the six you use now. That's compared to you selling 12 wagon loads to Cinran per month currently, which is hardly any improvement - once again."

He scratched his chin, thinking. "This won't work... How big are those boats anyway? I saw some when I came here, but you'd know better."

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Trevalo shrugged. "The Kal River isn't really a big river, more like medium-sized, but it still has boats of all kinds. The sailing ones are larger than the rowing ones, of course."

"But how much cargo can a sailboat carry?" Kivamus asked.

Trevalo frowned. "I don't know how to describe it... Definitely a lot more than my wagons, for sure."

Kivamus exhaled in frustration. Then he thought of trying another angle. "Then can you tell me how many wagon loads of coal can one of those sailboats carry?"

"That I can do." Trevalo thought for a few seconds. "A medium-sized sailboat should carry around 15 to 20 wagon loads, I'd say. The bigger ones could take above 25, but they'd cost a lot more to rent and wouldn't be worth it for cheap cargo like coal."

Kivamus made a few quick calculations in his mind. A wagon in this world usually carried about twelve to thirteen hundred kilos, so that meant a medium-sized boat could carry somewhere between 20 and 25 tons, which was 150 to 200 sacks of wheat.

"Alright," he said finally, "I think I have a better idea of what to do."

Trevalo and Duvas both looked at him curiously.

"Instead of you traveling all the way from Tiranat to Uliga for every single trip," Kivamus said, "you can make two trips from here to Cinran, and store the coal in a riverside warehouse there. I saw plenty of them in Cinran. One round trip from here to Cinran should take about seven days, including loading and unloading. After two trips, you'll likely have enough coal stacked up for a full load on a medium sailboat. Then, instead of taking it yourself, you'll hire a ship captain in Cinran to take the coal to Uliga, sell it, and bring back wheat. He'll need about 12 to 14 days depending on the wind. Let's assume the worst for now—fourteen days. While he's on that trip, you'll continue transporting coal from here to Cinran. By the time he's back, you'll already have made two more trips and will have enough coal gathered for the captain to go again."

He continued, "Add a day for loading and unloading of the boat, as well as some rest for his crew, and the ship captain could leave again after that. That means he can manage a round trip from Cinran to Uliga around every fifteen days. This way, we'd keep the coal moving regularly—one round-trip of your caravan every week to Cinran, and two full shipments on a sailboat every month to Uliga. Doing this, we can easily move four caravans worth of coal from Tiranat to Cinran every month, which that captain will sell in Uliga in two journeys on his boat. That's at least forty wagon loads of coal sold there every month, assuming you can run a caravan of 10 wagons."

Trevalo's eyes brightened. "I can!" He thought for a while and nodded. "If I rent just four more wagons, I can use ten in total—six of mine and the rented four. Then I can easily take twenty wagon loads of coal every 15 days to Cinran. If Tiranat had a river running to Cinran or even to Kirnos, you'd be rich already, but you can still sell a big amount of coal the way you suggested."

Duvas grinned. "That's 40 wagon loads of extra coal we can sell every month, apart from the 40 we already sell to Cinran and Kirnos! It'll easily double our revenue."

Kivamus shook his head. "Not quite. We won't be selling the usual twelve wagon loads to Cinran anymore, since Trevalo will be storing up everything for the boat shipments instead of selling it there. But you're right about the rest. If he rents even more wagons, it can work like you said. For this plan to work, Trevalo will be making about four regular trips every month from here to Cinran to keep it running smoothly. If we add, say, three more wagons to each of those trips, that adds another twelve every month—on top of the forty being stored at the riverside warehouse for shipping to Uliga. That way, we can fulfill the whole demand of Cinran as well, and this extra cargo space will help us in trading the other

way in the future when we have more things to buy and sell." He glanced at Trevalo. "But that'll mean managing a caravan of thirteen wagons."

"That's doable," Trevalo said. "A big caravan like that will need more guards, but if the profit's there, it'll be worth it."

Kivamus nodded, already thinking ahead. If the population of Tiranat kept increasing, they would definitely need more grain in the future. His goal was to feed everyone from the local farms eventually, but that might take time, since every year the population was going to increase between the sowing and harvest time. Until then, having this extra space in the caravans could help them bring back more wheat or anything else they wanted. If needed, they could even rent another boat in Cinran to transport more wheat from Ulriga to Cinran, and it could be brought back to Tiranat by Trevalo on his 13 wagons in the future.

Trevalo looked uncertain. "But are you sure you can produce that much coal? If you were only producing forty wagon loads until now, this plan means you'll need at least seventy a month to fill the boat I rent. Maybe eighty, if you still plan to keep selling to Cinran."

"Not immediately," Kivamus said. "But I have plans to reach that amount in a few months."

Trevalo frowned in thought, then nodded slowly. "That'll give me time to find a proper contact in Ulriga to sell the coal and get the trading route set up properly. Once I secure a steady buyer in Ulriga, the sailor I hire in Cinran can handle the route regularly. Still, finding someone to buy forty wagon loads at once—even in Ulriga—won't be easy, but I'm sure I can manage it. For the first trip or two, I'll have to go along to make sure things go smoothly. After that, it'll run on its own." He glanced at Kivamus again. "But even for taking ten wagons of coal on each trip, I'll need ten drivers, plus enough guards to keep the caravan safe from here to Cinran."

Kivamus leaned forward. "Tell you what. You already have six wagons and six drivers. If you rent four more wagons from Cinran, I'll provide enough guards who can double as drivers—four of them to drive the new wagons, and another four for security until the road gets safer. When you rent three more wagons in the future to fulfill Cinran's demand, I'll send more men with you as well. That should save you a fair bit of coin. In return, I'll expect a better price for coal and wheat once we have that trading route set up."

Trevalo grinned, the unease fading from his expression. "That works for me. Eight more men, plus my six—that's fourteen in total for the caravan. When you give me more guards for selling coal to Cinran, I'll

have nearly twenty armed men. That's more than enough security to keep the wagons safe on even the northern road."

Kivamus nodded slightly. It meant he wouldn't be able to send two hunting groups while those eight guards were gone, but the trade-off was worth it. The amount of coal they could sell in Ulriga—and the wheat they could bring back—would easily make up for it. They needed to ensure their food security until the farms could sustain the village, so this was a necessary investment of their guard force until then.

"What about security on the Kal River?" Kivamus asked. "Will you need men there too?"

Trevalo laughed. "Of course not. The road from Cinran to Ulriga is patrolled by knights, and it's completely safe. It runs almost parallel to the river, which makes the waterway safe too. Even then, it's just a river—not the open sea. There are no pirates there. Once we load the cargo in Cinran, we won't be getting off until we reach Ulriga, and the same on the return trip. Trust me, that route's as safe as it gets. I've never heard of any bandits trying to loot merchants on that route. The only dangerous stretch is the road from Cinran to Tiranat, because of all the forest surrounding it."

"Well, that's good enough," Kivamus said. "It will be difficult for us to spare more guards anyway."

He paused, his thoughts drifting to the numbers. Last year, their monthly income was around 500 gold when merchants came regularly. It would be a little less now since he wasn't charging border entry and exit duties—he didn't want to discourage the few merchants who still visited—but even then, it should be about 450 gold at the old coal prices, or just above 400 at the current lower rates - once coal trade returned to normal. If they could sell an extra forty wagons of coal each month, their income could cross 800 gold a month. They would still have to pay taxes on that income, since they couldn't hide that sale from the tax collector—unlike on the new products they had made here—but it would still be a lot of money to improve the village as well as to pay the tribute - assuming this new trading route was working well by then.

Of course, all of this depended on producing enough coal to meet Cinran's needs while still selling the surplus to Ulriga. But that city was such a huge market that once they were able to produce even more coal as the laborer population grew, and as he made improvements and introduced new technologies to improve the coal output, they could earn even more from it.

If this plan went well, he would also gain something just as valuable—a dependable merchant. After this deal, Trevalo would be trading solely with Tiranat. He wouldn't dare to risk damaging that relationship.

Through him, they could one day sell not just coal to Ulriga, but also the cloth they planned to produce here. Since it was a port city, that meant access to international sea trade routes—and being able to export their products to the vast world market out there.

Doing that through Kirnos—which was much closer to Tiranat compared to Ulriga—would be much faster, but that wasn't an option yet. That village's port only had a single, small pier, and no major ships ever docked there. That was in stark contrast to the dozens of huge piers in Ulriga, where all kinds of big merchants brought their ocean-going ships. For now, Ulriga was the better choice, although he had to see what could be done about Kirnos.

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"All right then," Kivamus said. "This plan is final. When you visit Ulriga, use your contacts to strike a deal with a reliable coal merchant there, and with a captain in Cinran who owns a medium-sized sailboat."

Duvas nodded in approval. "It sounds like a good arrangement. Just make sure you trust the sailors you hire, Trevalo."

"I'll do my best to look for a reliable one," Trevalo agreed. "I'll leave for Cinran with my wagons tomorrow, and then sail with a ship captain to Ulriga on his boat, so I can see for myself how long the journey takes."

"No," Kivamus said. "I still need you to bring more wheat from Cinran first. You said the Count is unlikely to ban outside sales for now. So try your best to bring all six wagons loaded with more wheat in a week. After that, you can go back and make the deal with the ship captain in Cinran and the trader in Ulriga. I'll tell the guard captain to assign you some men for protection on this run too."

"Well... I guess that's fine," Trevalo said after a pause. "It won't be easy to buy that much—like I told you earlier—but since I won't need to buy from Cinran after this, I can lean on my contacts for one last big purchase. After that, though, you'll really have to buy from Ulriga."

"That's fine," Kivamus said. "Now let's settle today's trade." He looked at the majordomo. "Duvas, have you finalized the prices?"

"Yes," Duvas said. "We had already negotiated the rates when I was walking with him to the manor hall. We've agreed on five gold and six silvers per sack of wheat—which is an outrageous price compared to last year's rates, but that's the best he could do. He's brought forty sacks, so the total price will be 224

gold. We're selling six wagon loads of coal, which will earn us about 61 gold, which means we owe a net amount of 163 gold. Wait, we also have to pay around 29 gold for the bottles of wine he brought us. So the total we need to pay is 192 gold."

Kivamus nodded and turned to the merchant. "Are those prices acceptable?"

"They are," Trevalo said. He gave Kivamus a curious look. "I didn't take you for much of a drinker, especially that of the pricey wines. But you are a duke's son. You can probably afford it."

Kivamus laughed. "I've hardly had a drink since I arrived here in the autumn," he said, recalling consuming some ale during the two feasts, while keeping the real reason for buying the wine to himself. "But in some sense, you're right."

"Either way," Trevalo added, "you also owe me 156 gold from my last visit."

Kivamus nodded, face tightening. "Yes. That puts us at... 348 gold owed." He took a deep breath. "But you know our current situation—we can't pay that amount now. For today, we can pay just over 65 gold. That's all I can spare. I'll pay the rest in the next few weeks."

Trevalo shook his head. "You want to buy on credit again?"

Kivamus exhaled deeply. "That's our only option right now..."

Trevalo sighed. "Usually, if someone wanted to run such a huge tab with me, I'd simply refuse to trade with them anymore." He thought for a while. "But... I guess this is a different situation. Once I close the deal with the ship captain and a buyer in Ulriga, you'll be my only trading partner until this deal remains valid, and I don't want you going under before we even start that new trading route. Still, buying wheat in Cinran without being paid up front is not easy—especially if you want six more wagons in a week—but by the goddess's grace, I'm not short on coin right now, so I can give you some slack."

The merchant continued, "I realize that you must not have been able to sell any coal in the winter and I know you're spending the gold to feed every villager from the manor's coffers, which is why your financial situation is so bad. But from what I've seen, the villagers only sing praises of you and your benevolence. However, commoners praising a noble is... rare, to say the least." He smiled. "I guess

sending you here as the new baron has to be the goddess' will, and I can hardly throw an adzee bone in her plans. So, as a gesture of good faith, I'll sell you the wheat I brought today, and the next Cinran load in a week, on full credit."

Duvas seemed to be taken aback. "This is..." He glanced at Kivamus for a moment, before he gazed upwards and murmured a short prayer under his breath.

Trevalo explained, "For a rough estimate, the cost of sixty sacks which I'll bring next time will be around 350 gold—because the price will be higher for buying such a big amount again. Add the 348 gold you already owe me and it'll be around 700 gold. I've never let anyone run such a huge tab in the past, but I know you are the Duke's son, and you'll be good for it. If not right now, then in the future. But this is all I can do. Don't ask me to sell you on credit after that, because I simply don't have the gold for it." He smiled. "You also don't have to worry about that 65 gold for now. Just keep it. It'll hardly make a dent in what you owe me, and you seem like you'll need every copper right now."

"Thank you, Trevalo," Kivamus said. "I'll remember this favor."

"You'd better!" Trevalo said with a grin. "Anyway, I see it as an investment. Once the new trading route is running, you'll earn enough for me to recoup my investment easily. Well, that's as long as you can produce enough coal, but I'll take your word for it. Now, about the written guarantee...?"

Kivamus looked at the majordomo. "After this meeting, write up everything we've finalized on a sheet of our paper and put my seal on it. Also include the amount we already owe. Trevalo, you'll have it by the time the servants have unloaded the wheat and loaded coal on your wagons. Let's say by late afternoon."

"Perfect," Trevalo said. "By the way, once the Ulrigan trading route is set, I can bring more than wheat—soap, cloth, iron tools, and even luxury goods if you want. Ulriga has everything."

"That might help us later," Kivamus said, "but for now, wheat and other edible goods are our highest priority with our limited funds. Let's focus on that and keep the rest for the future."

Trevalo stood and brushed his palms together, all businesslike. "Then we have a deal!"

Kivamus rose and offered his hand. "We do. Bring the next wheat shipment as soon as you can, and travel carefully. If this works, it will help both of us for a long time."

Trevalo shook on it. "Don't worry, my lord. I'll make sure that it works out." He turned to go, then hesitated. "About my wagon drivers—they are tired. That bumpy forest track is never easy to travel. I'll still take a room at the alehouse, and I'd normally have arranged for them to sleep on the tavern floor, but I am a little short on coin... Can you help me out here? Even the stable floor will be good enough."

"Don't worry, I'll see to it," Kivamus said. "It's the least we can do for you after you've been so helpful to us. It's already approaching noon, so we can't help them for breakfast, but their lunch and dinner is on us for today. Duvas, get some space cleared in the stables, and put some hay on the floor. I don't want them sleeping in their wagons tonight. Arrange some food for them with our guards."

"Understood," Duvas said. "I'll speak to the stable master and Madam Nerida. The Rizako mushrooms are still coming in regularly, so she can easily stretch the stew. With the wheat we bought today, we'll even be able to bake some fresh bread for everyone."

The merchant gave a grateful nod. "They'll appreciate that. A roof and hot food go a long way."

As Trevalo left the hall, Kivamus's attention shifted to the practical steps. "Duvas, prepare the letter by afternoon and hand it to him before he leaves. Note the total credit clearly—348 gold until now, plus whatever the next Cinran load costs. Also, put in that request about Trevalo naming Cinran as the buyer when he's dealing in Ulriga, so he doesn't forget it. I want Tiranat kept out of any gossip there."

"I'll handle it," Duvas said. "I'll add your seal and keep a copy for our strongbox."

"Good. Send word to Hudan—tell him I want four guards to join Trevalo's caravan this time. He can hold back one hunting group for this, so the other group can bring some more meat. Once they've returned from Cinran along with the next delivery, as well as the four new rented wagons, we'll add four more guards to ride escort. Hudan can pick the men—preferably those who have previous experience of escorting caravans. Make sure to include Tesyb in that group so he can try to convince his sister about moving here."

"I'll find the captain," Duvas said. "He was in the yard earlier with the training group."

Kivamus stepped to the open window. The low churn of voices and hoofbeats drifted inside. In the yard beyond, servants were already rolling away loaded wheelbarrows from the wagons. The first sack from the second wagon came off as he watched, then another was thumped carefully onto the wheelbarrow, before a servant started pushing it towards the grain storage barn. A groom was already leading the tired horses toward water. He stayed there a moment, sorting the multitude of plans in his head.

He called out to the majordomo who had already reached the outer door. "Duvas, when you draft the written guarantee, add one more line clearly—that the guards we lend won't draw pay from him. They're ours. But in return, the savings on his end will come back to us in the coal price he offers once the Ulriga route starts. I don't want him to renege on this just because it wasn't written down."

"I'll put it in," Duvas said. "Do you want me to inform Cedoron as well? If coal production needs to rise, he'll want to plan iron orders for forging new tools, more safety lamps, and so on. We still can't make those lamps fast enough, so we'll have to ask the village chandler to make more candles for lighting the mines. We have enough tallow for it these days, and we can pay him with the gold we saved today."

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"You can talk with the chandler, but as for the blacksmith..." Kivamus thought about it. "Tiranat's coal deposits may be huge, but we simply don't have the workforce to double our coal output just by putting double the number of miners to dig more. We'll have to start thinking out of the box for this. Either way, we'll certainly need to open up new mineshafts for this, so tell Cedoron to stop by in the evening once he's done with today's work. The triphammer and the sawmill are still the first priority, and Taniok will keep pushing on making the frames for both, but we'll need more shovels, picks, wheelbarrows—anything that keeps the coal coming until we can do something else about it. Also, speak to Yeden. His workers will start digging new wells from today, but tell him to send a small crew to the eastern track to smooth the worst potholes so the coal hauling wagons don't snap an axle on their way back. I overheard the mining foreman complaining about it yesterday."

"Oh, that had been an ongoing problem since the last rains," Duvas replied, "which had created new potholes when the mud flowed away after the downpour, so I've already sent some men for that today. It should be done in another day or two. It won't make wide, flat roads like you want - that's a long term task - but they'll still fill the new potholes with some gravel from the mines."

Kivamus nodded. "That'll do for now. Once you're done with that, meet with Pinoto and let him know that he'll get all the seeds he wanted from today. But in return, tell him to complete the sowing on time. I don't want any problems in it after spending so much gold and effort on this project. We'll think of what to do with the farmers once it's done. I know they'll still be needed for weeding and irrigation, but even so, they'll have a lot of free time on their hands, and we can't afford for anyone to sit idle."

"I'll see to it," Duvas said, waiting by the door for any other orders.

Kivamus thought about whether it was possible to provide three meals to the villagers from the new wheat they had gotten. But out of the 40 sacks they'd bought, around a third would go to complete the sowing, and the remaining would only give them a cushion of another two weeks—assuming they fed everyone just twice. No, it was better to wait. Feeding everyone twice regularly was still better than having food riots because they had run out of food.

"Let's hold back on giving everyone three meals a day until Trevalo comes with more wheat. Once we get those 60 sacks, it will give us a buffer of another month. Adding to it what we bought today and what we already have, along with the meat the hunters are bringing in, we will have nearly 2 months worth of food stored for our current population. So we can afford to move to three meals after he returns in a week."

The majordomo nodded. "I'll let Madam Nerida know about it so she can plan accordingly. If you want, I can also make an announcement about this to the villagers and the manor residents. We all have been getting only two meals for more than a month now, so having something to look forward to will improve everyone's morale."

"That's a good idea. Do it in the evening when the workers return for this week's rations. It is due today from what I remember."

"It is," Duvas replied. "I'll make the announcement at that time."

"What about Darora? Did he give any estimate of when he'll be able to make the tablet press machine? I had given him the blueprint a few days ago."

"I talked with him yesterday," Duvas answered, "and he said it was simple enough, but he had been so busy with other things that he didn't get the time to work on it until then. But he had promised me that it should be done in one more day, probably by this evening."

"Perfect!"

Kivamus knew that it was only a hand powered machine—barely a machine at all—but it would still allow them to put the acelos powder in a hopper on the top part which was around 15 centimetres wide. Then the powder would flow into small molds by gravity. The current design had a grid of 3 x 3 molds, so they could make nine tablets per use. Then a worker would put the top cover on the mold to seal it and then he would use a hand cranked lever attached to the base of the mold to compress the powder. Once it was done, he'd move the lever in reverse and remove the upper part of the mold, with nine tablets ready in the lower part.

He would still have to see it in operation to check whether it worked properly, but the concept was simple enough so he didn't expect any problems. If it worked well and if they needed to increase their production of pills in the future—assuming they could make enough losuvil powder for it—he could easily make a bigger version of this mold, which could have a grid of 5 x 5 or even bigger ones. His thoughts were interrupted by the majordomo.

"Is there anything else, milord? I need to talk with Madam Nerida and others."

"No, you can leave now."

Kivamus looked out the window again once the majordomo had exited the hall. Two more sacks were handed down to a waiting wheelbarrow. A servant who had climbed up on a wheat wagon called for a handhold with a yell; another man answered back. He watched as the second empty wagon creaked forward to make room for the next one. For once, the noise here wasn't trouble knocking—it was work he could track and count.

He let the steady rhythm settle his thoughts. For now, the trade looked promising—a rare bit of progress amid everything else that needed solving.

It was early evening, the manor hall was lit by the soft glow of a few tallow candles. The windows were open, letting in the mild spring air and the quiet hum of the manor outside. Kivamus sat at the long table with Duvas, Gorsazo, Hudan, and Feroy, a few ledgers and loose papers spread before them. The day's work had left him tired, but he wanted to finish this discussion before dinner.

"How are the classes going?" he asked, leaning back in his chair.

Gorsazo smiled. "The children and kids are getting better every day. The older villagers are slow on the uptake, but even they are trying their best, otherwise their own children start poking fun at them, showing off their new knowledge."

Everyone laughed hearing that.

"That's good to hear," Kivamus replied. "Once the sawmill's running, I'll see about getting you a separate building as a permanent school. Don't hold your breath for it, though. We have other things of higher priority right now."

Gorsazo chuckled. "That's fine, my lord. It'll certainly help me to organize things better, but we are already doing good in the longhouse blocks."

Kivamus looked at the majordomo. "How's the progress with the vegetable patches?"

Duvas looked up from a small note he had been reading. "Better than expected, milord. Until now, with the grain shortage, we were forced to use everything that was growing inside the manor for immediate consumption as food. But now that we've gotten more wheat, we can finally afford to save the vegetables and their seeds for planting."

The majordomo rested his elbows on the table. "It's already been more than a month since we planted the first patches, so their seeds are ready to replant. Most of the open ground inside the manor is full already, so Madam Nerida has decided to take a few maids and any off-duty servants or guards to start new plots in the south of the village—between the manor walls and the village wall. That land's just lying empty right now. The new gardens should be ready to harvest a few weeks after planting. It'll take at least two more rounds of growing and replanting to fill all that space, but after that we should be getting a good amount of vegetables regularly—assuming we have enough hands to tend them."

Kivamus nodded with satisfaction. "Good work. We'll ask for volunteers from the village to help out. Some of the older folk may not be fit for heavy work anymore, but they can still look after the gardens in their free time. That'll help keep things running smoothly without overburdening Madam Nerida."

Duvas gave a short nod. "Madam Helga's also working hard these days. We've been relying heavily on Rizako mushrooms lately. We couldn't refill the whole mushroom barn because we were using them too

quickly. But now that we've restocked on grain, I've told her to use the mushrooms sparingly and save the rest for planting. It'll take twenty to thirty days for them to grow, but once the barn's full again, we'll have a steady supply. That'll make meals less repetitive."

Kivamus smiled. "That's good news. It'll help to reduce wheat consumption and will provide a proper balanced diet to everyone." He turned toward Hudan. "We'll be sending four guards with Trevalo this time, and eight of 'em from next week. That'll leave us with two less hunting groups. Take the two crossbows we'd given them and pass them to the other three groups. Add one more from the watchtowers, so each of those three groups has two of 'em. It should help them hunt faster and bring back meat more often."

He looked at the former mercenary. "Without the eight guards we are giving Trevalo, our defences will be getting weak again. But we've gotten more than a dozen new refugees from the west in the last few days, so start thinking about taking in more guards soon. Don't recruit anyone yet, but you, Hudan and Duvas can start shortlisting strong, trustworthy men for when we're ready."

Feroy nodded. "Got it, milord. By the way, since we're already sending guards north with Trevalo, why not make better use of them? We can use them to bring back the families of the earlier refugees from that encampment near Cinran. We'll have to send one of those refugees with the caravan to show the path and introduce us, but from what they've told us, their people are camped in the forests somewhere southwest of Cinran, not far from the start of the forests. When Trevalo is returning, the guards can take a small detour and bring those refugees here with them."

Kivamus thought for a moment, then nodded. "That's a good idea. If we can bring those families safely, it'll give us more workers. Then we can easily recruit more guards from among our long-term residents."

Hudan sat forward. "I'll tell the men about it tonight, so they can prepare to leave with Trevalo tomorrow morning. Tesyb will lead them to the encampment later, and they should be back within a week."

Kivamus gave a short nod of approval. "Good. Do that. Hopefully Tesyb will also be able to bring his sister here to help me in designing the cloth-making machines."

Just then, the hall door opened and a servant ran in, slightly out of breath. "Milord—another merchant's arrived! It's Pydaso."

Kivamus glanced toward Duvas, who was already grinning.

"Finally," Duvas said, while gazing upward and sending a short prayer to the goddess.

Kivamus pushed back his chair. "Let's hear what news he's brought."

Chapter 355 Pydaso - I

Pydaso sat in the manor hall across from Kivamus, Duvas, Hudan, and Feroy. Gorsazo had already left for the evening classes in the longhouses. The evening candles flickered against the wooden walls, and the merchant looked tired but pleased with himself, his cloak still dusted from travel.

"The journey took about twenty-two days," Pydaso began. "Mostly uneventful, thankfully. Though the gate guards in Ulriga did stop me. They insisted on checking everything in my wagon to make sure I wasn't smuggling anything." He chuckled dryly. "For a moment, I thought I was done for—but they never found the hidden compartment. Our little secret cargo stayed safe."

Duvas closed his eyes briefly and muttered a quick prayer under his breath. "Thank the goddess..."

Kivamus leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. "All right, then. Tell me how it went."

Pydaso shrugged. "I have both good news and bad news, my lord. The good first. I spoke with that Ulrigan trader, and he was basically foaming at the mouth when he saw what I had. Once I showed him the losuvil powder and let him see its effect, he immediately agreed to buy as much as I could bring him. The price was a bit high for him at first, but I still managed to negotiate him to our expected prices. He'll take a hefty commission for keeping the real source hidden, but even then, I can keep buying from you at twenty silver per tablet."

He leaned back, pride in his voice. "He even paid me in advance for the two hundred tablets I promised to deliver next time. So before I leave again, I'll need those tablets from you. After that, we can talk about another advanced order."

Kivamus nodded slowly. Syrene had mentioned a few days ago that she was in the final stage of processing the first batch of losuvil leaves. Once the powder was ready, it would take only a few hours to make the tablets, assuming the tablet press was ready by then. She'd also started working on the next batch from the new leaves which the hunters had brought, though that one was still at an early stage.

"Unfortunately," Kivamus said, "a big group of bandits raided us recently, and that caused some delays. But don't worry—the tablets should be ready within two or three days. I hope you can wait that long."

Pydaso sighed, then gave a small nod. "It's not ideal, but after hearing what the village went through, I can't complain. I'm just glad to see everything still standing. It'll mostly be a waste of my time staying here for three days, but I can manage. Although I can talk to Kigeir and Dalaar in my free time to see how they're doing. Anyway, if I'm late reaching Ulriga, I'll just tell that trader that one of my wagons broke an axle and I had to wait to get it repaired."

"That'll work," Kivamus said. "But what about his reliability? Can he be trusted not to ask too many questions? I don't want anyone finding out we're the real source of the medicine."

The merchant hesitated. "For now, it's fine. He paid because we've known each other for years, and he trusts me that I'm not going to swindle him. But he's only seen a small amount of the powder so far. He knows it works, but I doubt he truly believes I can deliver two hundred tablets in a few weeks. So, for the moment, his curiosity is mild."

Duvas frowned. "Even though he paid you four hundred gold for it?"

Pydaso laughed. "He's a big trader, Sir Duvas. He's amongst the bigger ones even in a huge city like Ulriga. 400 gold isn't much for a man like him, especially if he's handing it to someone he trusts, and for something which could bring him huge profits in return. So right now, he's only mildly curious about a new product entering the market in future. But once I deliver the tablets next time, it'll change for sure. He'll certainly start wondering where it's really coming from. At that point, he might even send someone to shadow me, and I have no way to stop someone following me back to Tiranat."

Feroy crossed his arms. "You should've taken precautions for that."

"Of course I did!" Pydaso retorted. "I'm not an idiot. I made stops in every town and village along the way so anyone following me couldn't know for sure where I got the medicine, but that Ulrigan trader will still be able to guess that the source is somewhere along my route. So I had to give him a made up story, telling him that I bought it from a hermit priest who lives somewhere in the vast southern forests—a recluse making medicines to help the poor."

The merchant smiled. "Naturally, the trader asked if I'd tried to learn the recipe. I told him the priest was old, stubborn, and refused to share it at any cost. It's a weak excuse, but it'll at least make the trader think he can't easily find this priest and make him work for himself. Still, I doubt that tale will hold for long. So it would help me a lot if you could offer some protection on my trips in the future. Of course, I could hire mercenaries in Cinran or Ulriga using my own coin, but I just can't trust them with something this sensitive and valuable."

He explained, "The first time I went, nobody had any idea that I might be carrying that medicine or the paper - simply because nobody even knew such a thing existed - so there wasn't a big risk apart from any gate guards finding my hidden compartment. But even if I trust that trader, the news of a new source of these products is now in the open... and anyone could try to have me followed for this. If any thugs in Ulriga ever force me to give up my goods and also find the hidden compartment, it won't take much for them to trace it all back here."

Kivamus's expression tightened. "That's very concerning." He turned to Hudan. "I know we're already going to be a little short on guards, but can we spare a couple of them for his protection? I don't want someone holding him at knifepoint and forcing him to talk."

Hudan thought for a moment. "It's not ideal, but yes—we can send two guards. This trade's too important to risk. Fero would be perfect for spotting anyone tailing the wagon—he can spot trouble a mile away—but we can't afford to send him off right now."

Fero smirked slightly but didn't argue. The hall went quiet for a moment, the crackle of the candles the only sound. Everyone knew how much was riding on Pydaso's journeys now.

Kivamus looked at the ex-mercenary. "What do you think?"

Fero scratched his short brown beard. "Levalo would also be good enough for this, but I don't think we can trust him with something this sensitive. Not yet. Still, there are other guards who are careful and suspicious enough. Calubo's the first one that comes to mind. After living among bandits for months, he won't trust anyone in Ulriga who claims they 'just want a ride' on Pydaso's wagon. That kind of man could easily be sent by the trader—or anyone else who's heard about the medicine, including some noble. So we can send Calubo along with another reliable guard. That should be enough."

"Good," Kivamus said. "Do it then. Pydaso, as you heard, we'll send two guards with you for protection. We both have a lot to lose if this gets out, so I'm willing to make the investment for this. So I'll cover their wages while they're away, but during the trip, you'll need to take care of their meals and lodging."

Pydaso nodded gratefully. "That's no problem. I'm only using two wagons these days, so I travel with just my usual wagon driver. That's just two of us on the road. That was fine for the first trip when no one knew what I was carrying, but the word about acelos medicine will spread around soon. Having two more reliable guards will make things much safer. It will take care of anyone who gets too curious about my cargo."

"Let's hope so. Sending any more guards to protect just two wagons would only make it look more suspicious, so this will have to do," Kivamus said.

For a moment, he wondered if giving crossbows to the guards would be a good idea. It would mean they could easily take care of even a serious bandit attack or thugs trying to extort money. Hmm... No, it was still too risky. A merchant wasn't supposed to have guards equipped with crossbows. Only the Duke's men in Fort Aragosa were meant to have them, or at least their bigger versions—the arbalests. If any gate guard or patrolling knight on that road saw something like that with Pydaso, it would only raise more questions and would make it more likely for his wagons to be searched thoroughly, risking their real cargo. The crossbows couldn't be hidden as well as the medicine anyway, or they would be useless in a sudden ambush. No, it was better to send them without crossbows.

"Now, what about the paper? Were you able to sell it?"

Pydaso sighed. "That's the bad news. The paper's of decent quality, but it isn't something which is used too much—especially at the price you're setting. However, it's not of a quality good enough to sell to luxury merchants who supply the nobles, and it's too expensive for common traders to use in bulk for themselves. I was able to sell the small stock I'd taken, but I can't buy large quantities unless you either lower the price or raise the quality. If you lower the price, I can move it in bulk to merchants for their own use. If you improve the quality, I can sell it to the upper-class buyers. Otherwise, it'll just sit unsold."

Kivamus grinned and glanced towards Duvas. "Bring the new paper."

Chapter 356 Pydaso - II

Duvas stood and went inside. A few moments later, he returned with a few sheets and handed them to Pydaso.

The merchant's eyes widened. "This... This is much better than what I saw last time!" he said, running his fingers over the sheet. "It's still yellow, but that's hardly an issue. It even feels stronger." He tore a small piece from a corner and nodded approvingly. "It doesn't rip nearly as easily as before." He shook

his head in wonder. "Now I'm sure you made it yourselves. There's no way you'd find paper of this quality outside the guilds of Plumron, and I know you are not buying it from them at their highly inflated prices only to resell it to me at cheaper rates. They certainly wouldn't have given you their secret techniques to make this paper, that's for sure."

"Obviously," Kivamus chuckled. "I will also do something to improve the color of it in the future, to make it similar to what I saw in the Duke's library, but that's for later. But we do have a good stock of this better paper now. Are you willing to buy it?"

"Of course," Pydaso said without hesitation. "At this quality, I can easily sell it at the same price as before. Minor nobles will snap it up immediately. None of them expect to be able to afford the same quality paper as the Duke, but it's still close enough for them to brag to those who don't have it."

"Good. That price works for us too," Kivamus said. "For now, anyway." He added, thinking about the triphammer. "In the future, we might even be able to sell it to you cheaper, if another project which is under progress works out as we expect. Hopefully."

Pydaso gave him a look of disbelief, then shook his head and chuckled. "I suppose I should get used to you making such rare and innovative products."

Duvas smiled. "That would be wise. I've already learned to expect it—even if it wasn't easy." Everyone began laughing at that.

"You said you can have the two hundred tablets ready in a few days?" Pydaso asked.

"We should be able to make 'em," Kivamus said, "unless there are some unexpected problems."

"Good," Pydaso said. "Then I'll place another advance order for two hundred tablets, as well as all the paper of this improved quality you can spare. I'll also take two wagon loads of coal as usual—so no one suspects I'm carrying anything more valuable in secret."

"That's a good idea," Kivamus said. "What did you bring with you this time?"

The merchant smiled. "I knew Trevalo must already be bringing plenty of wheat with his six wagons, so I didn't bother with that. But I brought other food products—cheese, salt, butter, honey, and those vegetable seeds you asked for."

"That's great," Kivamus said. "We were just talking about expanding the vegetable gardens further. You've brought these seeds just in time."

"I also brought some commoners' soap - since you don't want the luxury version, as well as a few coils of rope, and enough ceramic jars to store the acelos tablets," Pydaso continued. "I've brought a few rolls of linen cloth too. That doesn't come cheap in our kingdom, but I remember the manor and the village merchants always bought new cloth in spring, although I think you make most of the clothing here yourselves from that fabric."

Duvas nodded. "Yes, we have a maid who's good with that. This will help us a lot in giving proper clothing to manor residents. Is that all?"

Pydaso looked at Kivamus and grinned. "Actually, I managed to find something else you wanted."

Kivamus leaned forward curiously. "What is it?"

Pydaso beamed. "I managed to find seeds for liwabeans! Apart from use as livestock feed, they aren't used much for human consumption in Cilaria since the beans are quite bitter unless boiled thoroughly - which takes too long and wastes precious firewood - but you still wanted it, so I asked around in Ulriga on my visit there. By chance, there was a visiting ship merchant who had a big stock of it. I didn't buy much though—only two sacks—but that should still cover a good bit of land if you want to plant it here."

Kivamus sat up straighter, remembering the conversation they'd had the last time Pydaso visited, when the wheat sowing had just begun. Back then, he'd been thinking that while the soil was fresh now, its fertility could decline quickly without crops that helped restore nitrogen. It wouldn't be a problem in the first growing season, but it could become a serious issue in the coming years. So he had asked the merchant and other advisors about beans that had small root nodules, and preferably, ones which could be grown in the winter season.

Gorsazo had suggested liwabeans, a hardy crop that could survive the winters of Cilaria. It was planted in autumn and harvested in spring. The best part was that just like soybeans on earth, its beans could be

used as food for humans and the hulls as livestock feed, even though usually it was only used to feed animals in this kingdom because of its bitter taste. It had sounded perfect for Tiranat's needs - since they had no shortage of firewood here to boil it thoroughly - so he had requested Pydaso to find it if possible, even though it was rarely grown and consumed in Cilaria.

"That's great," Kivamus smiled. "I'll have to talk with the farming foreman about it. Depending on the amount of liwabeans he estimates would be needed to cultivate the full area of the wheat fields, I might need you to buy more of it next time."

"Well," Pydaso said, "those ship merchants usually stay in Ulriga for a few weeks to look for good deals, and the captain who sold me these seeds had only just arrived, so if we're lucky, he'll still be there when I go back. He was new to Cilaria and didn't know about its rare usage here, so he couldn't find buyers for it. So by the time I found him, he was looking to clear his cargo space to take some other cargo back from there, even by selling it cheaply. If he hasn't left by the time I reach Ulriga, I can buy as much of it as you need, and at a very low price, since by then he would be overdue to return and would be willing to sell it at dirt cheap prices."

"That's even better!" Duvas said with a grin.

"I'll let you know about the amount we need by the time you leave," Kivamus said to the merchant before he turned to the majordomo. "Duvas, finalize the prices now."

Duvas and Pydaso leaned closer together, beginning their usual quiet negotiation. Kivamus stayed seated, his thoughts drifting. If they could grow enough liwabeans here, the crop could become another ample food source by spring—and more importantly, it would help restore the fields with its property of nitrogen fixation. With the wheat harvest and this crop rotation, they could keep the soil strong for years. He planned to eventually move to a four field crop rotation, but that was for the future, since for this year, they needed all the food they could get even at the cost of harming the soil.

After a while, Duvas looked up. "My lord, we've finalized it. We'll pay 147 gold for everything he's brought. We'll earn 16 gold for the two wagon loads of coal at the discounted price we offer him, plus 400 gold for the next advance order of the acelos medicine, as well as 36 gold for the paper. That gives us a total gain of 305 gold."

The merchant counted out the coins, handed it to Duvas, and watched as the majordomo went inside to store it in the strongbox. Soon enough, Duvas returned.

"I also asked around about the adzee items," Pydaso said. "There isn't much demand of its fangs as I expected, but one craftsman, who carves adzee bones into intricate decorative pieces—knife handles for nobles, figurines of the goddess for the bigger temples, things like that—was interested, but he didn't buy any for now. He said most of the nobles aren't spending that much on luxury items now, not with food prices so high. Even the temples in big cities like Ulriga are using all of their donations to buy food for the poor instead of decorations which won't fill the stomach of a hungry child."

Kivamus sighed. "That's fine, I guess. I wasn't expecting much from it anyway."

Pydaso continued, "Although I heard a rumor about a sea trader from a distant country who only visits Ulriga once or twice a year. Others told me that his country worships adzees as a minor god, and he might be interested in buying the bones and even the fangs. I'm not sure if I'll get to meet him any time soon, but if you want, I can take the remaining adzee bones and fangs with me, just in case. I'll hand it over to a local merchant I know there, and he will be able to make the trade if that sea trader visits and wants to buy it, even if I'm not in the city at the time. I won't be able to pay you until he pays me, though."

"In that case," Kivamus said, "Duvas will hand them over to you before you leave. They're only taking up space here, and you might be able to make something out of them."

The merchant stood up, adjusting his cloak. "It's always a pleasure trading with you, my lord. I'll wait until you're ready with the acelos tablets."

"Same here," Kivamus said. "We should be ready in two days if everything goes smoothly—three at most. As usual, you can keep your wagon inside the manor for safekeeping. We don't have extra rooms to let you stay here - not yet - but your wagon driver can stay in the stables if he wants. Trevalo's men are already staying there, and they even get warm food from the servants' hall."

"I'll take that offer, of course." Pydaso hesitated for a moment. "But it reminds me of something else I'd been thinking about."

Chapter 357 Pydaso - III

Pydaso continued, "Since the time before the winter, my wagon driver has been saying that Tiranat looked like a much better place to live than his own village, after he saw you spend your own gold to bring wheat from Cinran for the villagers. Also, most villages are in worse shape after the winter, but

when we came here again a few weeks ago, we both saw that everyone looked fit and healthy, instead of the usual gaunt and bony looks which are common everywhere after the winter."

The merchant added, "So when I went to Ulriga last time, I took a detour to visit my family in a nearby village, and my driver went to his. When he came back, he said his whole family wanted to move here—if you allowed it. In fact, after he told his neighbors and friends, many others in that village wanted to come here too. They've heard that there are a lot of opportunities for work here, and everyone gets food and a roof over their heads. I can't speak for the other villagers, but my wagon driver's wife can work as a laborer or as a cook, and they have a teenage son who can help out too. But I wasn't sure if you wanted more mouths to feed here, so I told him I'd ask you about it. What do you think?"

Kivamus grinned, but before he could say anything, Hudan and Feroy both started laughing. Duvas soon joined them, and the manor hall was filled with the sound of joyous laughter.

Pydaso looked confused. "What's so funny?"

Duvas chuckled. "You didn't even need to ask. Lord Kivamus wants as many workers to move here as he can manage. Anyone who can contribute to the village is accepted as a resident of Tiranat. Even if they can't work much - whether because of old age or disability - as long as they try to help out where they can, they'll still be welcome."

Pydaso laughed as well, finally understanding the reason. "Then I'll tell my wagon driver that when we go back to Ulriga next time, he can tell his family that they can move here. I'll let him know that other villagers are also welcome. Actually, this makes me think I should start thinking about moving my own family here someday. I won't do it immediately—it's a big decision—but seeing how fast your village is changing, I don't think it'll be long before I make that choice to move here permanently. As a merchant, Tiranat seems like the place to be, in these tough times everywhere."

Kivamus smiled. "You and your family will always be welcome here, just like everyone else."

"Well, I should go and move my wagons to the shed now, so your servants can start unloading it." The merchant gave a small bow and left the hall.

Once he was gone, Duvas turned to Kivamus. "Including the gold we got today and what we already had, we have nearly 400 gold now. Shouldn't we pay Trevalo from this to reduce our amount of debt?"

Kivamus shook his head. "No, we can't afford that. Trevalo already agreed to sell us on credit until the new trade route is set up, so paying him back so soon would be a waste. We need to save gold for the mercenaries' tribute in a few months. We also need to pay the craftsmen, and I want to start paying the guards and villagers in coins soon—otherwise, there might really be a mutiny. We'll also need gold for things we can't make in the village yet, like wine for the acelos medicine, and basic goods like soap and rope which we can't produce here. So hold on to it for now."

Duvas smiled. "In that case, I'll keep it safe. Our strongbox will be happier for it."

Kivamus leaned back in his chair, wondering about the delay in Darora's latest delivery of ranged weapons. "What's the status of the scorpion and the crossbows? Now that we've given six of them to the hunting groups, we only have one for each watchtower. We'll need more of 'em soon."

Duvas nodded. "Darora mentioned a small issue with the scorpion. He's already crafted the gears, but the part that connects those gears to the main frame kept breaking. He had to adjust the design a bit, which delayed the work by a couple of days. He should still have all the parts ready within the next few days, though. Cedoron already gave him all the iron components he needed. After that, Darora will just need to assemble everything. Overall, it'll take about a week—10 days at most."

He continued, "As for the crossbows, work is going on for them everyday, but the carpenter and his apprentices are overworked. They're also making other wooden things—buckets, smaller parts for the triphammer and the sawmill, and so on. They don't even have enough time to carve enough shafts for crossbow bolts and arrows, and without them, the fletcher can't make new bolts or arrows."

Hudan folded his arms. "That could turn into a problem later if we don't get enough of 'em, but for now we've got a decent stockpile. It'll be fine in the short term."

"That's a relief," Duvas said. "Anyway, we should also get another crossbow today, and then we'll keep getting new ones at an average rate of around two new crossbows every week."

Kivamus frowned, frustration rising in his voice. "That won't do... Two crossbows a week is much faster than what we were getting when he started making them, but it's still too slow. I don't know how it'll go with the mercenaries, but I want our defenses as ready as possible, just in case. But even at this improved pace, we'll only get just 8 new crossbows a month. That means in around two to three months when the mercenaries are supposed to come here, we will only get something between 16 to 24

crossbows. If we give two more of them to each hunting group to improve our meat yields, and put two of 'em on each watchtower, we'll be left with barely a dozen extra ones at best, or just four at worst. There's no way we can arm every guard with a crossbow like we'd planned if it keeps going on like this."

He began pacing, his boots echoing softly on the wooden floor. "Even the scorpion is taking far too long. I know it's Darora's first time building one, and it'll get faster later, but it's already been ten days since he started, and you said it'll take another ten days to complete it. At this rate, we'll get just three scorpions in two months. We won't even have enough to mount one on every tower by the time those mercenaries arrive! That's the bare minimum of defense we need—which still might not be enough—but at this rate we wouldn't even get there! That's not acceptable—we need more craftsmen!"

Duvas sighed. "I know that you only want the best for everyone, but you have to understand that things are already moving at a pace no one could have imagined a year ago. We're also getting new refugees and freed slaves every week, but skilled craftsmen are very rare. Most of 'em would already have stable work, and they would usually be in a good position in society wherever they are living. It's unlikely they'd move to a small, poor village like ours."

He shrugged. "Still, news about the availability of good opportunities here for everyone—especially for craftsmen—is already spreading in the west near Kirnos, and now even in the north and the northwest, because of Pydaso and his driver. But moving to a different place just based on some wild rumors is not something which anyone except the most desperate people would want to do. I'm not sure how we can make this go any faster."

"Rumors... huh?" Kivamus muttered as he stopped pacing. "That actually sounds like a good idea!" He looked at Feroy. "I think it's time we sent you out again to spread some rumors—just like you did in Kirnos. That's already helped us get more people from there and the nearby farmhouses."

Feroy gave a nod. "Where do you want me to go?"

Kivamus glanced at the map spread on the table. "Ulriga would be ideal, since it's a huge city with lots of craftsmen, but apart from the wagon driver's family and maybe his neighbors, we won't easily get any immigrants from there or its nearby villages. That city is too far from Tiranat, and its relatively well-off residents wouldn't easily consider moving here with this village's reputation of being such a dangerous place to live. But Cinran is much closer, and the people living near that town would consider us much more seriously. So we need these new rumors to spread in Cinran too." He glanced at the majordomo. "Trevalo's leaving tomorrow, right?"

Duvas nodded. "He is. The servants have already unloaded the wheat and loaded his wagons with coal, but it's too late for him to leave today."

Kivamus nodded slowly "That's good. We can't afford to send Feroys with Pydaso anyway since a round trip to Ulriga takes around twenty days. But I think it will be good to send him with Trevalo to Cinran instead. It's still a big town, with plenty of people living there, and even more in the surrounding villages and farms."

He looked toward the ex-mercenary. "Now that the bandit threat of Torhan has been dealt with, and the arrival of mercenaries still at least two months away, we can afford to send you out for a while. By only going as far as Cinran, you can come back to the village nearly every week, so we'll keep getting regular news about your progress. And we can even hold you back if needed."

Feroys shrugged. "Fine with me. It's been weeks since I left the village anyway. It's making me itchy."

Chapter 358 Goodwill

Hudan nodded. "It's fine with me as well. As long as Kerel and I are here, we'll still have two leaders to command the guards in case of an attack even if Feroys and Tesyb are out of the village."

"Good," Kivamus said. He looked at the ex-mercenary again. "Then I need you to leave for Cinran tomorrow and spread the word about Tiranat. Let the common people know that we need more workers and labourers. If you meet any craftsmen—carpenters, blacksmiths, or anyone with usable skills we need—tell them they'll be very welcome here."

"Will do," Feroys said simply.

Hudan leaned forward. "By the way, should we give him some losuvil powder as well? To hand out to those who need it in Cinran or nearby places? It helped a lot in spreading a good image about the village. We've already attracted many refugees from Kirnos because of it."

Duvas shook his head. "We could earn a lot of gold by selling that medicine instead. We need that coin right now. We simply aren't in a position to afford too much charity."

"No. This is an investment in the village's future. It'll only be a small amount compared to what we can earn from acelos tablets, so we can afford it to spread some goodwill about Tiranat." Kivamus thought

for a moment. "But if Feroy goes with Trevalo, he won't be able to move around freely. Trevalo will have a strict schedule from now on. It'll be difficult for Feroy to go off on his own without delaying the caravan or drawing attention from Trevalo and his wagon drivers."

Feroy scratched his short beard. "I think I have a better idea. There's no real need for me to travel with the caravan tomorrow, you know? I can just go on my own with another guard, although in that case we'll need two separate horses so we can travel wherever and whenever we need to. This way, we won't have to follow Trevalo's schedule and we can visit any villages or farms that look like they're in a tough situation, and tell people about Tiranat wanting more workers."

Kivamus nodded. "That'll work much better. Who do you want to take with you?"

Hudan began, "We're already sending a third of our swordsmen out of the village for the protection of Trevalo and Pydaso, so we can't spare any more of them. Feroy won't be protecting a caravan, so most likely, he won't need to fight bandits either. I think we should send a female guard with him this time."

Kivamus nodded again. "Good idea. I think Hyola is ready for this. She already has some experience from when she went to Kirnos with the guards. Hyola has also been the leader of the female guards here and she has done well in training others with a crossbow and making them more disciplined, but this will give a chance to the other guardswomen like Isomi and Savomi to take more leadership. The next two or three months should be relatively safe for the village, so I think this can work."

Hudan gave a nod in agreement. "In that case, we'll tell Hyola to be ready to leave by tomorrow." He looked at Feroy. "Will two of you be enough? What if you run into bandits anyway?"

"It's not ideal, but then no situation is ever perfect, you know?" Feroy shrugged. "We can't afford to send any more guards away from the village anyway. Although it would help if we had crossbows with us..."

Kivamus thought for a while. Giving them two crossbows would leave only four of them for the watchtowers, with six of them already out with the hunters. But another one would be finished today, which would leave just a single tower without one of them. That should be manageable. "You should each take a crossbow," he said. "We can't afford to risk your safety."

Feroy smirked. "That will make it much easier for us. We can hang the crossbows on the sides of the saddles and cover them with some rough cloth. As long as we don't let anyone get too close to the horses, nobody will notice them, and we can reach them quickly if needed."

Kivamus leaned back in his chair, resting his elbows on the armrests. "Good. Assuming you both load the crossbows each morning, you'll be able to shoot once immediately, and then again if you get even a short notice to reload. That means you both could take down four attackers before they even get close. Two people—including a woman—taking out four men at a distance will be enough to scare off even a group twice their size. That should keep you both safe enough. Thankfully, we also have enough gold right now to give some of it to you, in case you need to stay in an inn or buy some food for someone desperate. It'll earn goodwill, and might convince more people to move here. Trevalo's already bringing us more wheat on credit, so food for the villagers isn't a problem right now."

Feroy snorted. "We don't need an inn! We aren't lazy merchants or pampered nobles going out for a leisure trip. We'll be just fine sleeping in the forest or in the open fields. Trust me, I've lived more than a decade in forests—no one's getting close without me noticing. We'll save the gold and use it to help out more people instead."

"That's up to you," Kivamus said, giving a faint smile. "Along with that food and the losuvil powder, we'll hopefully encourage more people to come here."

Hudan interrupted, "But do we even have enough of that acelos medicine to give him? Don't we have to prepare two hundred tablets for Pydaso within two days?"

Kivamus nodded. "We do, but it's not like Feroy has to leave right away, and Syryne's already processing another batch of it, just in case. The powder from the first batch should be ready to press into tablets tomorrow or the day after. She didn't measure the leaves to make exactly two hundred tablets, so we'll likely have a little extra. Whatever's left after we give enough for Pydaso can go to Feroy. And if it's not enough, he can wait a few more days. The next batch should be ready soon after."

Feroy shrugged. "Better to wait, then. I'd also suggest taking the losuvil powder directly to those people, instead of me taking the acelos tablets. Like you'd said earlier, we can't afford to let anyone know that we make those tablets here, so if I distribute them in and near Cinran, the local nobles or merchants will surely hear about it, and it won't take them long to find out that the real source is Tiranat. But if we just distribute the losuvil powder, it'd still heal the sick just as fast, but it wouldn't be the same thing as the acelos medicine being sold in Ulriga."

The ex-mercenary shrugged. "Sure, anyone sharp enough could link these two miraculous medicines appearing in southern Reslinor at the same time, but there would still be a reasonable doubt, which should be enough for now. Eventually, the news would surely get out about us being the source, but by then we should be in a better position to resist any nobles' demands to hand over the secret recipe." He added, "Even with the losuvil powder healing a sick family member, people will think that it's a blessing from the goddess herself. That kind of thing spreads fast—people will start believing Tiranat's some miracle place. It'll make them more likely to move here."

"It does make sense," Kivamus said. "Then it's settled. Trevalo will leave tomorrow with Tesyb and the guards. We'll wait to produce 200 tablets for Pydaso's order first, then we'll give you the remaining powder from the first batch directly, and more from the second batch if needed. You and Hyola can take them to Cinran. Duvas will give you some gold to buy food or to hand out to those who truly need it. Even then, make sure to tell the curious ones that we don't make the powder here. We just buy it from a hermit priest who lives somewhere in the southern forests. Probably even somewhere in Giralica. We only buy it from a travelling merchant. That'll give them hope that they can heal their injured people here, without any of them getting greedy and pointing us out as the source."

"Of course, I'll make sure of it." Feroy stood, pushing his chair back. "I'll tell Hyola, then. She'll be happy to hear she's being trusted with something this sensitive."

Hudan laughed. "Well, if we'd sent any other female guard instead of her, she'd have come storming in here to complain to the baron with fury." He stood as well. "Anyway, I should go too. The guards' training is about to start, and I still need to start looking for the next recruits. We don't need more women right now, not until we have enough crossbows. But I'll need to hire the men soon to start training them with swords so they can hold their own by the time mercenaries arrive."

"Go on then," Kivamus said. "Let me know when you have found some good candidates."

With a nod, Hudan and Feroy left the hall, the sound of their boots fading once they exited the door.

Duvas looked toward Kivamus. "If this goes well, we should start getting refugees from Cinran and its surrounding areas too. It'll probably take time for them to make up their minds—so maybe a month for the first of 'em to start arriving—but it'll help us a lot."

Kivamus shook his head slowly. "It'll help with labor, yes. We can even start increasing our coal production that way, albeit slower than we really need to. But there's no guarantee that even a single person amongst the refugees will be a craftsman. That's who we really need." He stood and began

pacing near the table. "We can't rely on manual work forever... Darora and his apprentices are doing what they can, but even if we got another carpenter or two, it wouldn't make a drastic change. And that's what we need here."

He paused, rubbing his forehead as he thought aloud. "I think I'll have to postpone working on the blueprints for the cloth-making machines. The new trade route to Uliga will take time to set up, and until we can buy cotton or flax from there at a good price, there's no point rushing those plans. We'll also need to wait until we can gather enough gold to buy the raw materials once they're available, but that won't happen any time soon with the mercenaries' tribute due within three months, and the annual tax three to four months after that. I can't finalize the blueprints without a skilled seamstress' or weaver's input, anyway." He let out a slow breath. "Leah only does some basic sewing work for the manor residents, so we need someone a lot more experienced. Hopefully Isuha will come along with Tesyb soon. Until then, that plan'll have to wait."

Duvas kept his arms folded. "That's up to you. But do you even have something in mind for that drastic change you want?"

Kivamus grinned. "I do!"

Chapter 359 Machines

Kivamus explained, "There's a machine I've wanted to build since winter. I'd even started its blueprint in the past, but we had so many other things at a higher priority that it kept getting pushed back. If I sit with it for a week, I think I can finish all the remaining details. Once the machine is built, it will be something that will revolutionize crafting anything small and precise—first in woodworking, later in iron parts too."

Duvas frowned. "What are you even talking about?"

"It's something we call a lathe," Kivamus answered. "But to do it right, we'll need a better version of iron than what we're using now—steel. After seeing the Tuilas' plate armor up close, I'm sure some blacksmith in southern Reslinor already makes it, which means it will be easier than I thought it would be. I'll speak with Cedoron about how we can produce steel here. As soon as it is available even in a small quantity, we will use it to make the necessary metal parts for the lathe. We will also need some gauges to measure the parts accurately. Vernier calipers will be simple enough to make in the start with steel, and later we'll build a micrometer." He grinned. "That caliper can measure dimensions more accurately than the width of a human hair, while the micrometer is 20 times more precise than that."

Duvas looked wary. "Frankly, that's insane... I've never even heard of such a thing."

"You'll see when it's ready." Kivamus pointed lightly at the table as if lining pieces up. "Once we have a working wood lathe, a single carpenter can do the work of at least half a dozen of 'em, if not even more. But it will have another benefit apart from increasing their productivity—which is much improved accuracy and precision. So the lathe will also help us in making the crossbows and other such things more redundant to failure, since accurate parts are what make field repair possible."

He explained, "For example, every crossbow may look the same to the eye, but each piece is just a little different. That's normal when crafting everything by hand. So when a part breaks, you can't swap in another; you have to carve a new one to fit, which takes precious time of the carpenters. But with a lathe preset to fixed measurements, its accuracy and precision will ensure that the parts come off in the same size every single time. That means interchangeable pieces. Think of it this way—if a guard knows any particular part tends to break easily, let's say the trigger, he'll just keep a spare and replace the part easily by himself. Field repair becomes 'pull the bad part out, push the good part in,' not 'walk it back to the workshop and beg Darora for an hour.'"

Duvas' snorted after hearing that, but he still looked doubtful. "And this single machine does all that?"

"It does it by precise turning, but you'll see when it's ready," Kivamus said. "You've seen a potter's wheel, right?"

The majordomo nodded. "Yeah. The village potter uses it every day."

"The lathe is basically an advanced version of that, and it will increase the productivity of small scale and intricate carpentry just as much as the sawmill is going to do for the large scale wood cutting and shaping. Once these machines are ready, Darora and his apprentices will be able to craft the parts of crossbows and scorpions—stocks, shafts, triggers, pulleys, gears and so on—much, much faster, while Taniok and his own men will be able to make planks, beams, posts, and other such large things just as fast. The carpenters will stop losing their precious working hours to tedious manual shaping."

Kivamus glanced toward the window, thinking ahead. "When we can make steel, we'll build a simple metal-cutting version of a lathe too. That'll let Cedoron shape iron parts to pre-fixed measurements instead of by eye and hammer. Then the iron work becomes easily repeatable—screws that always match their nuts, axles that fit their bearings the first time, pulleys and small gears that don't have to be refiled for an hour to run true. Working together, Darora's men can make standard-sized hafts for spears, shovels, trowels, hammers, pickaxes and the like, while Cedoron's men will make the standardized iron parts in a single try without wasting time by needing to recheck whether the haft fits

the spearhead and so on. Just imagine this machine increasing the productivity of every wood and metal worker by 5 to 10 times easily."

"It does sound incredible..." Duvas rubbed his jaw. "How will you power this... lathe? Will it need a pair of nodors to turn it? Or a water wheel?"

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"Only human power, to start," Kivamus replied. "A simple up and down movement of a treadle under the carpenter's feet will move a crankshaft on the side of the lathe, which'll turn the spindle—the rotating part. If it needs more torque and less speed, we add a pair of reduction gears between the crank and the spindle. If it needs more speed, we change the ratio the other way. In the future, it will even help us in making the iron components for the cloth making machines. A lathe won't be easy to build the first time, but I think we can do it soon with what we have."

However, Kivamus realized that all the cloth making machines—the cotton gin, spinning jenny and the power loom—would need a better power source. Human or animal power simply wouldn't do it. For that he wanted to make a steam engine by the end of the year at most. However, making precise cylinders, pistons and other parts for the steam engine wouldn't be possible if everything was forged and shaped manually. It wouldn't even seal properly in that case. So they needed machine tools—lathes first, then the rest. The lathe was the door to the others. When they had both, it would be possible to make steam engines in the future.

Ideally, the lathe also needed a better power source like a steam engine, but that needed a lathe to be built first. It was a catch-22 situation. So they would have to make do with human power in the beginning.

He traced an invisible loop in the air. "Later on, when we have made a steam engine here, we can use that to run the lathes. But we don't have to wait for that. A foot-powered spindle will still give us the precision we're missing and will allow Darora and his apprentices to make everything much faster and accurate. Steam engine will be the next logical step."

Duvas blinked. "Steam...engine...?"

"That's a much, much better source of power than a water wheel," Kivamus explained. "And it will run on coal, which we have in abundance. The reservoir already gives us power at the dam through the water wheel for running the sawmill and the triphammer, but water doesn't go everywhere. However, just a small steam engine near the workshops would let us run a triphammer or a drill where we need it. Even a simple one changes what we can build. But we can't cut a good cylinder or shaft for that unless we first have a tool that makes round parts to size. So—lathe first."

The majordomo shook his head. "I don't understand any of those technical terms but you're telling me this one machine will solve crossbows, scorpion parts, and half the repair work headaches in the village?"

"Well, it won't replace human hands," Kivamus shrugged, "but it'll still multiply everyone's productivity. Darora and the apprentices will stop wasting time trying to match a curve by eye, since the lathe works on pre-fixed sizes. It means even a junior apprentice can produce usable pieces with a simple jig instead of a skilled carpenter who needs years of practice. Once we set all the dimensions, the next dozen pieces come out the same. That's what turns a day of shaping into a breezy hour's work."

He let the next steps line up in his head. In the future he could even design a duplicating lathe for producing the simpler wooden parts much faster, and with barely any manual input—like the stocks for crossbows and scorpions, and in the future, for guns. Blanchard lathe had revolutionized the process of making gun stocks in the 19th century on earth, and it could easily do the same in this world.

Duvas frowned. "All that sounds too complicated... I am already getting a headache hearing these new terms."

Kivamus chuckled. "I'll manage the technical side, although it's easy enough when you think of it step-by-step. Step one—finish the blueprint with proper measurements for the wood lathe. Step two—speak with Cedoron about small-batch steel. We don't need much to start: the spindle, bearings, tool rest hardware, and a few shafts. That'll do for now. Step three—have Darora and an apprentice build a strong wooden bed and frame while Cedoron and his boys forge and harden the steel bits. Step four—assemble, test, and set up measuring gauges so the pieces it makes stay consistent. Once the lathe is running, we'll standardize the critical crossbow parts and easily keep bins of spares."

Duvas's eyes narrowed a little. "And the lathe will really let a single carpenter do the work of—what did you say—half a dozen?"

"Likely more, in most tasks," Kivamus said. "Although not in everything. But for turned parts, it will."

He looked at the ledger stacked on the side table. "It'll also help us in arming the village faster. Once we standardize scorpion parts, the next one wouldn't take 20 days. We'll bring the time down—10 days, then less—as the workers get used to the machine. Same with crossbows. The trigger assembly becomes 5 pieces made to one set of sizes, not 5 guesses, hoping they would fit together—and if they don't, then spending hours making them fit. We are making two crossbows a week right now, but with a lathe, we could make a new one every day. Just think how much it would change everything."

"It certainly would." Duvas glanced toward the long table where some blueprints were spread out, then back to Kivamus. "But you've been working so hard on the cloth-making machines you've been sketching. Are you really going to postpone them?"

Chapter 360 Doubts

Kivamus shrugged. "I have no other choice. We don't have cotton or flax in hand or the gold to buy it from Ulriga yet, and even if we did, those machines need a proper power source to run well, and that'll need a steam engine. So I won't push those ahead of tools that fix our current bottlenecks. We finish the sawmill and triphammer, build the lathe and the gauges, and get repeatable parts moving through the workshops. When that's steady, we'll come back to clothing machines with better tools to make it easier to manufacture them. By then we will also need to finish a working steam engine, preferably a few of them, and that's when we'll get a new revenue stream from clothing."

Duvas stared at him for a while, keeping his mouth shut.

Kivamus felt unnerved seeing him stop speaking completely. "What...?"

The majordomo broke his silence after a moment. "You have to tell me, did you really read all this in books at the Ulriga palace library?" His brow furrowed as he continued. "I mean it. I barely understood anything of what you just said and I've been giving work and repair orders to the local craftsmen for nearly two decades. That is... peculiar, to say the least. So it's getting hard to believe that you read all of it in Ulriga. In fact, if that library holds knowledge of things like this, why hasn't the Duke used it to help his people—or for himself? No offense to you, millord, but nearly every noble wants more gold, and ideas like these would make it so easy to get hoards of it. Why would anyone in his right mind keep that sort of knowledge on a shelf instead of using it?"

Kivamus' mind came to a sudden stop hearing those unexpected, but valid questions. In his excitement of lining up the future steps for the village, he had forgotten that Duvas didn't know about his origin and how he knew about such things. He had told Gorsazo about it in the past, and that conversation had gone better than expected, but nobody else knew about his past life on Earth. The carpenters, the

blacksmith, and the guards didn't question him when he gave them new ideas, since most of them were either barely literate or completely illiterate, and they expected a noble of high birth like him to know about things they didn't know themselves. But Duvas was the son of a Baron, and had gotten a proper education, even if it was decades ago. Even at his advanced age, he was an insightful man, so Kivamus should have expected that the majordomo would start to question these things eventually.

Kivamus studied the old man sitting across from him for a while. It had been nearly half a year since he had known Duvas, and by now he trusted the majordomo with his life. Duvas had been there through everything—from the first chaotic weeks to the rebuilding in the winter—and never once had he done anything to betray his confidence.

So if there was anyone besides Gorsazo who deserved to know the truth about him, it was Duvas. Perhaps it was time for him to be included in the inner circle who knew about his real origin, which basically only consisted of him and Gorsazo for now. Syryne's sharp mind and her curiosity would make it impossible to keep her in the dark forever, but that could wait for now.

He took a deep breath. "I think it's time we had a serious conversation about something... extremely sensitive. It'll answer all your questions about the kind of knowledge I've been using here—about the things I've mentioned from the so-called 'library of Ulriga palace.' But it'll have to wait until we're completely alone. Right now, Trevalo's and Pydaso's wagon drivers are still staying in the manor, and it's not safe to speak openly. When they've left, we'll find a place where no one can overhear us. We'll need to include Gorsazo too. Just hold on to your questions until that day."

Duvas looked curious but nodded slowly. "As you wish, milord. I wonder what could explain everything about you, but after seeing more than sixty winters, I'm nothing if not patient. I'll wait for that day."

"Thank you," Kivamus said, letting out a sigh. It wouldn't be an easy conversation, but at least he had time to prepare for it.

Coming back to the present, he added, "Anyway, once the lathe is working properly, there is another benefit we'll get. We won't need to look around desperately for skilled craftsmen after that like we are doing these days. They'll still help, of course, but after that we'll be able to train any new refugees to assist the carpenter—just like how anyone can learn to use a crossbow in a few hours without years of training as an archer. Using a lathe is not exactly the same thing, but it's still close enough, and most people could learn to operate it in a few days at most. That's far from the years needed to train an apprentice to become a proper carpenter."

Duvas gave a small, amused snort. "Like every new thing you tell us, these latest claims of yours will be hard to accept until I actually see it. I do believe you—but I'll believe you more when that lathe of yours is sitting in the carpenter's workshop and making crossbow parts at miraculous rates and accuracy."

Kivamus snorted. "That's fair." Wanting to change the subject, he asked, "How did your announcement go yesterday? About everyone getting three meals after a week?"

Duvas blinked, as if resetting his thoughts. "Ah, yes... It was very well received. Getting two meals a day regularly is still better than what we had last year, but three meals a day gives people the energy to go the extra mile when doing their tasks. I even heard the longhouse blocks' foremen talking about holding a minor feast together in one of the blocks when that starts, to celebrate it."

"Oh, that's nice to hear. How is it going with the rabbits the hunters brought? And the other animals? I saw some newborns yesterday."

"Quite well, actually," the majordomo replied. "We've already had the first litter from the female rabbits, uh... does, as the hunter told me they are called. Seven of them have given birth by now—with around thirty kits in total. It'll take three to four months for them to grow old enough to start breeding, though the mature ones can have another litter in about two months. So, it'll be four months before we can start culling the males for meat. As for the sheep, three of them are due soon. They only give birth to a couple of lambs each, and it'll take six to eight months for them to mature and another six before they start to give birth as well."

Kivamus exhaled. "Well, it's slow going. At least we'll have another sustainable source of meat in the future. We'll also have to start looking to buy some pigs here. It'll take time to breed enough of them, but it'll be a good source of meat and leather."

Duvas nodded. "I'll talk with any visiting merchants about it, now that we can afford to buy them. It's also good we'd saved the bilona trees, toloraberry shrubs, and other fruit trees in the south between the farmlands and wherever else we cleared the forests. They'll help in the coming months. The toloraberries are already coming in good numbers, and the bilona trees should give nuts by early autumn. By the way, the servants have started shearing the sheep during free hours, and they're storing that grease which they produce—lanolin, you called it."

"Good," Kivamus said. "We'll need it soon for lubricating the metal parts and gears when we build the lathe."

Duvas continued, "Apart from them, the cows and horses should give two calves and a foal this spring. That's why we weren't able to use one of the mares recently. As for the chickens, we were forced to use all the eggs for food until recently, but now we can let some hatch to increase the number of chickens. By winter, we should be getting both chicken meat and eggs at a good rate, as long as we build a bigger coop for them by then. Same for the other animals."

"We'll handle that when the current space runs out," Kivamus said. "There's no more room in the manor to expand the coops and such, so we'll use the southern area inside the village walls for this. The new vegetable patches and the mushroom barn are already there, so once we have a few more mushroom barns, and have added some coops and cattle enclosures there, it'll make the south a sustainable source of food within the safety of the walls, even if it can never replace the farms. That will make it much easier to withstand another siege like Torhan's, if it comes to that. The animals will also be safe from any predators there. Well, except from the flying bakkores, but thankfully we haven't seen any of them here recently."

He continued, "There's still plenty of space within the village walls right now to expand. We'll build more longhouse blocks in the north as soon as the sawmill is ready, and some better homes in the center and west after that. The east is already occupied by the manor and the empty space where we'll make the guards' training ground and the barracks, while the south will be used for food production and grain storage warehouses until we need to make more houses there. I think the area within the current walls should be enough for this year, and probably even for the next year, though we might need to make a new expanded wall next winter."

"I guess so," Duvas said. "Although I never expected that we'd fill all the area within the walls so fast. From what I know, the village walls had covered an area around 5 to 6 times larger than what it had occupied before then, and that had been enough for two decades. Tiranat really is changing at an astonishing rate..."

Kivamus chuckled. "Well, it's still slower than I want, but we'll see." He stood up. "I should start working on the blueprint of the lathe now. Make sure to remind Darora that he needs to finish the tablet press machine today, or at most by tomorrow."

Duvas nodded. "Of course. I'll send a servant to meet with him right now."