

## Londoner 361

### Chapter 361 Inventions

Two days had passed and the late morning light was illuminating the manor hall, providing a good amount of light for working. The air carried that faint softness that came before summer. The mild warmth felt pleasant now, though Kivamus knew it wouldn't last. From what he had heard, summers in this region were harsh, the kind that baked the soil dry, while autumn brought sticky humidity from the western sea winds and made it too muggy. But that was for later. He had a lot of work to do before that.

He had barely left the long table which doubled as his working space since the last meeting, leaving the place only to eat and sleep. The overall blueprint of the lathe lay finished in front of him—its frame, spindle, treadle, and crank assembly sketched in careful detail. Now he had to work on the blueprints of the individual parts, the kind that would need exact measurements before they could be made.

He stepped back from the long table to allow himself a short break and sat on an armchair, taking a sip of cold water from the wooden mug kept on the side table.

Trevalo had departed for Cinran the day before with eight guards, Tesyb leading the group. They had originally planned to send four, but Tesyb had to take a detour to find the encampment of the families of the men who had attacked Tiranat in desperation, so it made sense to send a larger escort, just to be safe. One of those men had also accompanied the caravan, so they could introduce the guards to the encampment and confirm the well-being of the rest of their group. Hopefully, Trevalo should return in about a week with six wagons full of wheat—and Tesyb would come back with more refugees, unless something went wrong.

On the bright side, another merchant had arrived yesterday with three wagons containing some wheat and a good amount of iron, since it was selling for cheap right now. He had returned to Cinran with three wagon loads of coal this morning. Overall the trade was still lopsided, and they were spending more on buying goods than they were earning from selling coal, but it helped that they had a good amount of gold right now, so they were able to buy all the iron and had stockpiled it for later use.

Duvas entered the hall through an inner door at that moment and smiled. "Milord, it's ready."

Kivamus nodded, and stood up. He crossed the hall toward the same door and followed the majordomo. Soon, they reached the inner room that served as their laboratory for making losuvil powder. The tablet press machine had been delivered the previous evening, while one of the hunting parties had returned with another big haul of losuvil leaves—enough to prepare the next large batch of medicine. Once the

heat rose in the coming weeks, the leaves wouldn't stay viable long enough by the time they arrived here, but it was working for now.

When he entered, Syrene, Gorsazo, and Hudan were already there. Duvas followed behind, closing the door after him. An open window gave just enough light here without using braziers.

"Milord, you're here," Syrene said, glancing up from the worktable. "Should we start?"

Kivamus nodded and walked closer. The table in the center of the room held several shallow wooden bowls filled with reddish powder. The tablet press stood on the other side—a sturdy, compact machine of polished wood and iron hinges, with a small funnel-shaped hopper nearby, also made of wood.

"You should do the honors, milord," Gorsazo said with a faint smirk. "It's your invention, after all."

Kivamus snorted and gave him a look, half amused. Gorsazo knew perfectly well that none of this was truly his invention. The ideas were borrowed from a world long gone, but for now, they would serve this village well enough without him worrying about intellectual property rights.

He moved to the tablet press machine and picked up the wooden hopper, holding it right above the mold. Then he took one of the bowls and poured the powder slowly, making sure it was being deposited correctly into the molds. When it was full, he set the hopper aside and after leveling the powder using a flat piece of wood, he locked the upper mold piece into place with a simple latch from both sides.

He turned to Hudan. "Time to use your muscles, big guy. The lever makes it easy enough that even Syrene could press it, but since you're here, might as well utilize that strength."

Hudan snorted and stepped forward. "Glad to be of use," he said dryly. He grasped the mold with one hand and pressed down the far end of the long wooden lever with the other. It was a second-class lever, with its other end being fixed with a small iron hinge which served as the fulcrum. Just before that hinge, the lever pressed on the upper part of the mold as the captain used his muscles.

Soon, the lever stopped moving further, its fulcrum creaking slightly against the stand as the lever pushed down on the top plate.

"Hey, that's enough," Kivamus called out. "Any more and you'll crush the thing."

Hudan laughed and stepped back. Kivamus leaned forward, released the latch, and lifted the top part of the mold to see under it. The powder had been compressed heavily, and it looked like the tablets were ready. Then he removed the middle piece—a thin board with nine round holes, each now filled with a compact red tablet—and set it over a sheet of paper Syrene had brought. The lowest part, which served as the base, remained there, attached to the hinge and the lever.

"Let's see how they turned out," he murmured. Using a fingertip, he pushed gently on each one until they popped free, falling onto the paper with soft taps. When all nine were out, he picked one up between his fingers.

It was smooth, about the width of his thumb and maybe half a centimeter thick, the color of dried tomatoes.

He looked up at the others and grinned. "Here it is."

Duvas picked up one of the tablets, turning it between his fingers. "This little thing alone is worth twenty silvers, huh..." he muttered under his breath.

The others each took one, examining it with quiet wonder.

"The machine just worked like you said," Gorsazo commented, "not that I had much doubt about it. Just imagine if this medicine was available everywhere... Then my wife..." He sighed, before forcing a smile. "I'm just glad that it will save so many lives in the future. Pydaso would also be happy to know that the tablets are going to be ready soon."

"He will," Kivamus said. "Just need to do this 22 more times, and we'll have the first advanced order ready to deliver. Anyone else wants to try the machine or should Hudan do the work?"

Syrene stepped forward eagerly. "Let me try it this time."

Kivamus nodded, stepping aside. She followed the same steps he had shown her—pouring the powder, leveling it, then pressing down the lever—and before long, another nine tablets came out just as neat and firm as the first.

Duvas stared at Kivamus, then at the machine. "I know you already said so but how is this possible? Syrene can't possibly use the same force that Hudan did. He's, what, three or four times heavier than her?"

Kivamus laughed. "Remember when I told you about something called mechanical advantage? When we visited the dam, and that worker could lift the heavy sluice gates alone? It's a similar principle here. The lever multiplies the force—depending on the ratio of the distance from the hinge to the mold and from the hinge to the handhold. As you just saw, it makes it easy for even a woman to use the press machine easily. Go ahead, you can try it too."

Duvas hesitated, then took the next bowl of powder and did the initial steps before he held the lever. To his surprise, the lever moved easily, and the pressed tablets came out perfect after the mold was removed. He stared at them, then at his frail arms, shaking his head in disbelief.

Gorsazo moved up next, pressing another batch with the same result. Once everyone had satisfied their curiosity, Hudan took over, repeating the process with steady rhythm while the others sat on a bench kept next to the wall, watching the massive man work.

At the side table, Syrene had begun packing the finished tablets into ceramic jars lined with paper to keep them dry. She counted carefully, then called out, "One hundred tablets." She closed the first jar and tied it shut with string, then began filling a second one. Before long, she had closed both. "The first advanced order of acelos medicine is ready, milord."

"Good," Kivamus said. "Each of those jars is worth two hundred gold. Keep them safe until we hand them over to Pydaso."

Syrene nodded and carried the containers to a new shelf on the other side of the large room, which one of Darora's apprentices had built for her.

Kivamus began, "We'll have to tell him to pack a wooden box with a good amount of straw to give it some cushion before he hides it in his wagon's secret compartment."

"I'll let him know," Duvas replied.

Hudan glanced up from the press. "Should I keep going?" He didn't even look tired—if anything, he seemed amused at how easy it was.

Kivamus looked at the remaining powder, and estimated that it would have been enough for another 50 to 60 tablets. "No. We'll give the rest to Feroy as it is. Syrene, pack it into small pouches. We don't have much spare cloth, and folded leaves wouldn't hold it securely enough. Use a few sheets of our paper instead—it'll hold the powder well enough on horseback and keep it dry."

Duvas frowned. "Isn't that a waste?"

"Hardly," Kivamus said. "It'll take four or five sheets at most to wrap up the remaining powder in a few dozen small pouches. The medicine we are giving Feroy to distribute is worth far more than that. Anyway, we're making paper at a good rate now, so it's not a problem." He turned to Syrene again. "What's the status of the next batch?"

"It'll take about a week," she said. "I'll also start processing the third batch today. That one will take another three weeks to be ready, but we'll easily have enough tablets for the next advanced order by the time Pydaso returns from Ulriga in around 20 days."

Kivamus nodded slowly. "That's good—but we need to be able to sell these tablets all year round if we want a steady income, but that's not possible as it stands. Losuvil vines don't produce any leaves in winter, and in summer or autumn the heat and humidity will spoil the leaves long before the hunters can bring them back from the eastern hills. So we have to stock up on as many tablets as we can before that starts to happen. How long do you think we can keep this up before the heat makes it impossible for the leaves to remain viable by the time they arrive here?"

#### Chapter 362 An Encampment

Syrene thought for a moment before answering. "It's already mid-spring, so I think the hunters will probably be able to bring the leaves safely for another two weeks—three at most. After that, the heat will make them unviable well before they reach the village."

Kivamus nodded. "All right. Then let's focus on making as many tablets as possible until then. I'll tell the hunting groups to prioritize gathering losuvil. We have enough wheat for now, so we can afford to get a

smaller amount of meat for the next few weeks." He paused, planning the next steps in his mind. "After that, I've been thinking of setting up a small encampment deep in the eastern hills where the vines grow. It's a full day's journey from here, so it'll need to be a semi-permanent post, with facilities for people to live and a large hall which will serve as the laboratory and the processing room. Doing this will also save time for the hunters—they won't have to rush back every few days after gathering the leaves, so they can spend more time hunting instead."

He turned toward Syrene. "You'll need to go there yourself to supervise everything. You can take around four to five servants or maids to help out in processing the fresh leaves. I'll assign enough guards to protect all of you, and we'll rotate the people as needed. But you'll have to stay there most of the time, at least until you can train an apprentice to handle it in your place."

Syrene nodded without hesitation. "That's all right. I've never lived away from my family until now, but someone has to oversee the processing. There's no one else trained for it yet, so it has to be me anyway." She paused. "Clarisa's been doing very well in Teacher Gorsazo's lessons—she already knows her letters and numbers, so I think she has the right kind of mindset to learn this work. But that's for the future since she's still too young for this. For now, I'll look for someone among the servants and maids who can learn quickly and pay attention to details so they can oversee the whole process without me present all the time."

"Good," Kivamus said. "That'll help us a lot in the long run when we expand our production further."

Duvas looked at him, his brow furrowed. "By an encampment, do you mean shacks for living? Will it even be safe in those hills? And we don't exactly have spare carpenters right now to build those or a processing hall."

"I know, so temporary shacks will have to be enough in the beginning," Kivamus said. "Later, we'll build a wooden dormitory—a large hall where everyone can live and sleep—and a separate laboratory next to it for processing the leaves. It won't be feasible for such a small group to produce food there, so that'll have to come from here. The guards posted there will hunt what they can, but they'll still need a steady supply. So we'll send a weekly supply wagon from the village with food, clean clothes, ceramic jars, ropes, and whatever's needed. The same wagon can take new servants and guards from here for a rotation of shifts at the encampment, and it'll bring back the tablets made that week as well as the people who need to come back."

Kivamus leaned back slightly, gazing outside through the open window of the processing room. "As for the availability of carpenters, that's why we're building the sawmill. Once it's up and running in a few more days, we'll be able to make the planks and beams for those structures easily. So, after we've

gathered enough construction material for a full structure, we'll send it on a small caravan of wagons with Taniok and his apprentice to set up the place."

He sighed softly. "Of course, we have bigger priorities before we can make that encampment—like constructing new housing here. The longhouses are already packed beyond capacity these days with the new arrivals. It'd be impossible to live in those conditions in the summer. So right after we have built a new longhouse block, we'll send the old carpenter to start building the encampment. Taniok and his boys can handle the dormitory and the processing hall, while the guards and servants will raise a boundary of sharpened logs. That will make the encampment an adequate place to live and work, for now."

He turned to the guard captain. "Hudan, how many men do you think we'll need for that?"

Hudan shook his head once. "Bandits don't live that deep in the hilly areas, so they aren't of concern there. The danger'll come from any roaming wolf packs, boars, bears and other such wild beasts. Adzees are also found in the eastern hills, but they tend not to climb the slopes unless they have to. They're apex predators in this region, so they don't bother with ambushes when they can just chase something down and make them a snack."

The captain added, "So, as long as the encampment is built on the slope of a hill instead of on the valley floor, it'll be safe enough from the adzees, while the guards should be able to take down other beasts without much hassle. The real nightmare are those giant flying monsters—bakkores. If one of those swoops down on a camp, then all anyone can do is to pray to the goddess and run for their life."

Kivamus frowned. "Are we really helpless against it?"

Hudan scratched his shaved chin. "Perhaps a really big scorpion might be able to take it down after a few accurate shots, but it'll be hard even to get a flying bakkore on target. So we can only hope it doesn't come there, or even here in the village, since we have no way to deal with them right now. As for your earlier question, for usual predators you'll need at least four swordsmen. More would be better if we could spare enough men—especially until a small palisade is up and the lookouts are set—just in case an adzee comes to sniff around. Apart from that, since we can't afford to make our archers sit idle there instead of hunting for the village, giving the people at the encampment a good number of crossbows will act as a goddess-sent gift out there. That'll mean every single one of those dozen people could become a menace for any attacking beasts, but we simply don't have enough crossbows for that." He paused. "Although we can still send a pair of female guards there... They are already experienced in using crossbows, and we should be able to spare two crossbows for them."

"That's a good idea," Kivamus said, "but we still have some time until we have to set up the place, and that'll give us time to stockpile enough resources. Syrene said the hunters can bring leaves safely for nearly three weeks, and that last batch will take another three weeks to process. So we have roughly a month and a half to get the encampment up and running. We're also producing more losuvil powder than we're selling right now, so we can use the surplus to sell in the intervening days, after the final batch has been processed in the village, and before the first batch at the encampment is ready. There is no point in selling everything immediately and pushing its price down, right after we've started making some good profit from it. Hopefully, we'll get a working lathe in a few weeks. After that, we can easily make more crossbows to protect the camp while keeping enough here. Hudan, keep looking for more recruits as well. Target ten more men in this round."

Hudan gave a short, approving grunt. "It'll bring the number of our swordsmen up to forty, not counting the dozen women on duty. That'll make it easier to defend the encampment and still be able to send guards as caravan escorts without risking the village's defense."

"Good." Kivamus rubbed his thumb along his jaw. "By the way, tell the hunters to start looking for any promising sites for it. They've already said that there are acres and acres of losuvil vines out there—the plant is basically a weed on those slopes. That will be very helpful for us until we expand the production further, although we will have to start maintaining big gardens of those vines in the future to maintain their numbers. Anyway, it shouldn't be a problem to find a good spot. We need a relatively large and flat location, easily reachable by a wagon, but off the valley floor for safety, like you suggested."

"I'll let them know," Hudan said.

Gorsazo, who had been listening quietly until now, spoke up. "In the future, this encampment could also become a place for the children and kids to be taken on an academic field trip. They can see how the medicine is produced, and it'll give them some practical experience of the kind of work they need to do in the future. Some kids might think of it as boring, but even if a few of them find it interesting, it would be helpful to Syrene."

Kivamus nodded. He had been thinking the same thing. "Good idea," he said. "This way, we can train some dedicated apprentices for making the medicine instead of using the manor servants and maids for it. But that's for later, since there would be a big risk of the kids telling about it to their parents, who could blab about it to anyone who wants to sell that info to our foes. For now, after the encampment is built and is safe enough, you can take Clarisa, and perhaps Lucem, on the supply wagon once a month so they can meet Syrene and learn a little without making the process fully public."

Kivamus glanced at the ceramic jars on the new shelf, before he looked at Syrene, who had been listening with the same practical, watchful expression she gave to everything. "Excellent work on the tablets. Keep working on the next batch." He looked at the majordomo. "Now, we should give these jars to Pydaso. It's still morning so he can leave within the hour."

Duvas stood up. "I'll send a servant to find him immediately."

#### Chapter 363 A Letter

Sometime before noon, Kivamus was sitting in the manor hall with Duvas and Pydaso. Two reliable guards stood silently in the corners—as usual when there was a guest here. The air still felt mild now; but it was warm enough that lighting the fireplace—which was rarely extinguished in the colder months—would have made it unbearable.

"Is it ready, milord?" Pydaso asked.

Kivamus nodded and handed him one of the ceramic jars. "Take a look."

The merchant opened it and lifted a single red tablet, turning it between his fingers. "So this is what you meant by a tablet... It looks impressive," he said. "I think I can keep selling it at the same rate, though it'll only reach nobles and rich merchants. The price is already three times higher than the fresh losuvil paste sold by the herbalists in Ulriga—and even that's quite costly for commoners."

Kivamus knew that selling a single tablet for twenty silvers—nearly a month's pay for a laborer or a miner—had simply priced them out of this new medicine. However, the production costs for the tablets were fairly low, including from the wine and ceramic jars they needed to buy, and in the future, the wages for the potters to make the big clay pots, hunters to bring the leaves, and workers who made the medicine. So, once the encampment in the eastern hills began producing at a steady pace, and when they were making a lot more tablets than now, he could afford to lower the price and still get some profit.

He leaned back slightly. "It'll have to do for now. The medicine should keep well for at least six months, and probably close to a year, so as soon as the news about its efficiency spreads in Ulriga, the rich people will want to stockpile it before their rivals can. Still, I plan to make a cheaper version in the future for the commoners, but that will take a while."

Pydaso tucked the jars safely into his satchel and stood up. "Then I'll take my leave."

Kivamus raised a hand. "Before you go, take this."

He handed over a folded envelope which had been kept on the side table. He had made it himself from their locally manufactured paper, and after writing the letter, he had closed it with wax and stamped it with his seal from his ring. "This is for my sister, Astela Ralokaar. You need to deliver it in the Ulriga Palace."

The merchant froze. "Milord, with respect, I'd do anything to help you out, but there's no chance I'd get anywhere near the Duke's daughter. I wouldn't even get entry inside the palace without a very good reason."

Kivamus nodded, already expecting that reply. "I know, and you don't need to take it to her directly. You just have to deliver the letter to a guard I trust at the palace, and he'll take it to my sister. His name is Rutanmo—he's usually on duty at the eastern gate during the day. When he's off duty, you'll likely find him in a nearby tavern called The Crooked Dagger."

"I know the place," Pydaso said. "I've been there myself."

"Good. Then look for him there. He has a big scar running on his left cheek—gotten while trying to save my life in the past—so you'll recognize him easily. If you still don't recognize Rutanmo, just ask the barkeep to point him out in the evening. Once you've found him, give him this letter and tell that it's from me. My seal will be enough to verify your words."

Pydaso took the envelope carefully, studying the seal before slipping it into his satchel. "I'll make sure it reaches him. If needed, I can pass him a few coins for his trouble so he gets it safely to your sister."

"No need," Kivamus said. "He's one of the very few men in that city I trust completely. He won't need a bribe."

"As you wish," the merchant said quietly.

"The captain's already assigned two men to accompany you as escorts—Calubo and one other. They're ready to leave whenever you want. Both of them are reliable and you can trust them with your life and with the acelos tablets." Kivamus smiled. "I wish you a safe journey ahead."

Pydaso gave a quick bow. "Thank you very much for that, Milord."

When the merchant left, Kivamus stayed seated for a moment, staring at the door. He hoped the letter would find its way to his sister soon—and that she would be safe and happy. He'd also added an invitation in there for her to visit Tiranat, or to stay here permanently if she wished, saying she would find the village far more surprising than she thought it'd be.

The manor house couldn't offer any kind of luxuries which were available in the palace, but at least she'd be safe here and would have the freedom to decide her own future, instead of their older brothers marrying her away to some undeserving bastard for political gain. He knew that such a marriage arrangement hadn't taken place yet, since news about an impending marriage of the Duke's daughter would be huge and would spread around immediately, but that didn't ease the worry.

Giving a sigh, he turned to Duvas. "Give Feroys the remaining losuvil powder from the first batch. Tell him that he can leave for Cinran with Hyola. They can travel together with Pydaso's group through the forest road for safety, since it's the same route till Cinran, and then each group can go their own ways."

Duvas stood up. "I'll find him."

"Good." Kivamus stood up as well. "I'll go with Hudan to the smithy and talk with Cedoron about how we can start making some steel here." He noticed the hesitation on the majordomo's face and snorted. "Don't worry. I haven't forgotten about that conversation we need to have. We'll talk later in the afternoon when I'm back. Gorsazo doesn't have classes at that time, and Pydaso and his driver will also have left by then."

Duvas let out a small laugh. "Well, I'm getting more and more curious with every passing hour. But I'll wait."

Kivamus smiled, then left the hall with the sound of his boots echoing against the wooden floor.

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The clang of hammers filled the yard, sharp and rhythmic, mixing with the hiss of quenching metal and the thick scent of smoke and oil. Kivamus stood just outside the smithy's wide doorway, the heat from the forge washing over his face even though he was several paces back from the edge of the workshop. The forge smoke clung low to the rafters, slowly moving towards the open side on the left, while the ground was blackened from years of coal ash. Hudan and two guards waited nearby, keeping an eye on any curious passersby. Duvas had also wanted to join them but had been needed somewhere else for his duties.

Inside, Cedoron's voice easily rose over the noise. At the moment, the blacksmith was scolding a young apprentice who looked close to melting from both heat and embarrassment. The boy was holding a half-finished crossbow latch, its edge bent way out of alignment.

At the next workbench, another apprentice shaped a pickaxe head, the hammer ringing out a steady rhythm. Near him, one of the older men flattened the blade of a shovel, the glow of the iron fading as he struck. Both of those things were required to increase their coal output in the near future. Another muscular man was forging a sword, which would be needed for the latest recruits the guard captain was going to hire. A young man suddenly called out for him to step aside, before he pushed a wheelbarrow full of charcoal and deposited it in a pile to be used later in the forge.

Away from them, in the sunlight, a woman was checking the finished parts spread across a wooden table—iron hooks, nuts, bolts, saws, and so on—turning each one in her hand and squinting at them, before she put it in one of two small stacks on the table. Someone else was weaving the mesh of a safety lamp in the sunlight, while another was applying oil on a recently made dagger, its faint smell drifting across the air.

The whole place felt alive, packed to the corners with noise and movement, and it made Kivamus feel happy to see all the work under progress. Even so, there was no doubt that it felt cramped. However, it would have to do for now. The sawmill construction had been given more priority, but once that was done in a few more days, Taniok would begin working on the triphammer on the far bank of the eastern stream, and then some part of Cedoron's workload would shift there. No point expanding this workshop if half the crew would be moved in a few weeks.

Cedoron finally dismissed the apprentice with a swat on the shoulder and a few muttered words, then walked to Kivamus with a grin. "Milord, is it finally time for me to work on something new? That has to be why you found time to visit here. I've been holding off making iron components for the next scorpion, until Darora gives me the go-ahead that all the parts are working properly in the first one,

while my apprentices can make the crossbow parts themselves. Apart from some of my own work, I've also been supervising everyone, but it still makes me bored when I don't have something interesting to work on. So, is it time for that?"

Kivamus smiled at the enthusiasm of the bulky man. "It is. I've finished the overall design for the lathe I mentioned to you in the past. But we'll need a better quality of iron for making its metallic parts. So we need to make steel first."

"That sounds interesting." Cedoron gestured toward a nearby bench. "Mind if I sit? I may be bored but I've still been hammering one thing or another since dawn."

"Of course." Once the blacksmith had sat down, Kivamus joined him, brushing the soot from the seat before sitting down.

#### Chapter 364 Steelmaking - I

The blacksmith leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "About steel... You know, when my father was alive and we lived near Ulriga, he used to work at a big smithy inside the city. They made plate armor for knights there. That had to be steel, I think."

Kivamus nodded. "I saw the armor of Tuilas from up close. It was definitely steel. And now we need to make it here."

Cedoron rubbed the back of his neck. "I've always wanted to work with steel. Heard it's stronger and tougher in every way. Never thought I'd get the chance in Tiranat, though."

"You will, soon enough," Kivamus said with a smile. "And on much more, in time. Anyway, before I tell you about steel, do you remember what I'd told you about carbon?"

"Sure. You said that it's a small particle which is found in everything that lives." The blacksmith snorted, "I guess that's why whenever Leah overcooks the food—whether it's plant-based or meat—it turns into something black which looks suspiciously similar to charcoal powder... She can sew any cloth or leather which has been torn in a jiffy, but she can't cook anything worth a copper! Just don't tell her I said that!"

Kivamus and the guards laughed loudly hearing about the young maid who lived with Cedoron, while also working at the manor during daytime.

Hudan spoke up while still trying to control his laugh, "That must be the reason Madam Nerida only gives her the sewing tasks at the manor, instead of telling her to cook."

"Perhaps..." The blacksmith chuckled before he looked at Kivamus. "More relevant for a smith, you said that this carbon is found in a big amount in coal and even more in charcoal."

Kivamus nodded. "Right. And coke—which is a purified form of coal—has an even higher carbon content. The more carbon in the fuel, the hotter and cleaner it burns."

Cedoron scratched his smooth chin. "So that's why we have to use charcoal when we need some good heat for forging. Coal's fine for heating up the iron for small tasks, but it's not nearly enough for forging or shaping. It's cheaply supplied to us by the manor, though, so we save the charcoal when we can, since it takes a really long time to produce and needs an apprentice working on it full-time to make it."

"That's true." Kivamus leaned back against the wooden wall behind the bench. "Coming back to the topic, there are two main types of iron—wrought iron and pig iron." He was omitting cast-iron here, since the bloomeries in this world, or at least in this kingdom, didn't produce enough heat to melt iron ore completely, or to cast it into, well... cast-iron.

He continued, "Wrought iron has almost no carbon, so it's malleable—soft and easy to shape. On the other hand, pig iron has too much of it, so it's too hard and brittle to forge into tools. That's why we need to make steel, since its carbon content sits between the two. More carbon than wrought iron means steel is much stronger than it, but it doesn't have nearly as much carbon as pig-iron, which would prevent bending or shaping it."

Cedoron nodded. "Yeah, you had explained about this in the past. The ingots we buy from Cinran—which are actually brought there from Ulriga—are wrought iron. It's what every smith wants for his forging work. Hmm... So that's the reason the knights get their plate armor made from steel, even though that armor costs way too much. Steel makes it much stronger, so it can withstand most strikes from any common iron sword."

"Exactly," Kivamus agreed. "Wrought iron has been strong enough for most of our purposes until now, but we need to use steel to further improve the quality of our weapons and tools—which will also make them last longer—and also for the lathe components you need to make. Once you are making the iron components of crossbows from steel, the weaker parts will stop breaking again and again, which will

save your time instead of you forging those parts again to fit that particular crossbow. Same for spearheads, and later in the scorpion parts."

"True that," Cedoron quipped. "So how do we make steel?"

Kivamus sighed. "To produce steel in a large quantity, we'll need pig iron first. Since we can't buy it easily in southern Reslinor, that means building a blast furnace to smelt iron ore directly into pig iron."

He looked into the distance. "If we could produce pig iron here, we could then use something called a Bessemer converter to turn the pig iron into steel. This method is also fast and cheap compared to other methods—perfect for making steel in bulk. In particular, it will produce the general purpose steel known as mild steel. The Bessemer converter would also let us make all kinds of special steel alloys in the future—each one meant for a different purpose—which mild steel just isn't suitable for."

Cedoron grinned. "I can hardly wait to use steel. It sounds so interesting to work with!"

"That it is, but..." Kivamus paused, shaking his head. "But we're nowhere near that level yet. With our resources and manpower we simply cannot make a blast furnace right now, and we don't even have a good source of iron ore so far—or the funds to buy it. We can't even afford to spare enough iron to make the Bessemer converter at the moment. We need that iron for other tasks—like making mining tools and weapons. Apart from that, we'll also need to produce coke here for both of those steps for making steel in bulk. While we can do that with our current resources—and we'll even do it soon to improve the efficiency of your forge in the future—it wouldn't really help us until we can make a blast furnace and a Bessemer converter."

The blacksmith's grin faded, replaced by a thoughtful frown.

"My target," Kivamus said, "is to reach that stage and achieve those capabilities in the coming year. It won't be easy, but we'll get there step by step."

Cedoron nodded slowly. "I'll be waiting eagerly for that day, but what do you want to do right now? You wouldn't have come to me unless you had a plan."

Kivamus nodded. "Yes. I do have a plan that fits our current capabilities. What we have plenty of right now is wrought iron—and we can use that to make steel through what's called the cementation process. It's a very slow and time taking process compared to the methods I mentioned before, but it's within reach for us."

He gestured loosely toward the forge, where sparks were still flying from the apprentices' work. "We'll build a new furnace for it with the fire-clay the diggers had gathered from the eastern hills when they were digging there to build the dam. Once we're making steel regularly this way, our target will be to produce more steel than we require for our current needs. That surplus will be stored for later—eventually reaching enough to build the Bessemer converter in the future. The blast furnace will be built once we secure a steady and cheap source of iron ore. Once we have both of them ready, our bulk steel-making capacity will exceed anything you can imagine right now." He smiled faintly. "Of course, we'll need to spend a lot of gold to build all that, but leave that part to me."

"Of course," Cedoron nodded, his thick arms folded over his greasy apron. "So about this cementation process—how exactly does it work? Will it turn our ingots directly into steel? The same kind they use for plate armor?"

"Not directly," Kivamus said. "Firstly you'll have to forge the ingots into long iron bars. And you'll also need to produce much more charcoal than usual for this to work."

Cedoron grunted. "That'll be time-consuming but sounds easy enough. I'll put one apprentice on bar-making and another on charcoal. It will occupy them full-time, but this is important."

"Good. You can hire more workers if you need." Kivamus unrolled a big sheet of paper and handed it to him. The drawing was clean and detailed the cross-section of the furnace. "You'll make the furnace from fire-clay following this design. It won't be too large—our current supply of iron doesn't justify it—but it's not a good idea to build it here inside the village for many reasons. So we'll place it on the far side of the eastern stream, close to where the triphammer will stand. Duvas will assign you some extra workers for this construction. Once it's built, light a fire inside and let it bake solid before we can use it for the cementation process."

Cedoron glanced over the blueprint, tracing the sketched lines with his thumb, while trying his best not to make the big sheet of paper dirty. "I was at the stream yesterday, and I saw there's plenty of room on both banks. You chose the site for the dam very well, milord."

"I had to travel for a good distance to find such a superb spot," Kivamus grinned. "The stream narrows just upstream of where the dam is located now, which made it easy to build the reservoir there. But just downstream of the dam, the stream bends southward and the hills are spaced much wider. Perfect for making furnaces and running machines with water power. So, how long will it take?"

The blacksmith paused for a while. "I think we can make the clay furnace in two days or so if we have enough hands. Baking it will take another few days. What's the next step?"

"When the furnace is ready for use," Kivamus said, handing over a second, smaller sheet of paper, "you'll place layers of iron bars and charcoal inside the furnace, alternating them until it's nearly full. The top layer must be charcoal, then it'll be sealed with fire-clay to make it airtight—that is, to keep out any air until the process is complete. You have to keep in mind that bars shouldn't be too thick, but even then, you'll need to heat the furnace for at least a week. I've written about the full process in this sheet."

Hudan, standing nearby with arms crossed, gave a low whistle. "A week? That's a long time!"

#### Chapter 365 Steelmaking - II

Kivamus snorted, glancing at the captain. "That isn't even half of it." He looked back at the blacksmith. "Anyway, you'll have to keep examining the bars regularly during the process, and once the proper conditions have been reached—as written in that sheet—you will remove the heat. Afterward, we'll have to let it cool for another two weeks."

Hudan let out a short laugh. "You were right, then!"

Cedoron frowned, still studying the drawing. "That's a really long process... and a lot of fuel, too. I hope it's worth all that trouble."

"It will be, trust me on that," Kivamus said firmly. "Like I said earlier, this is only the beginning. Once we've made enough steel to build the Bessemer converter—and once we've got a good stock of pig iron to feed into it regularly—we'll be able to make large batches of steel in a third of an hour. Of course, the loading of iron into the converter, and pouring the melted steel into molds will take much longer, but it's still much, much faster than the process we need to use."

The blacksmith looked at him in wonder. "That's really way too fast!"

Hudan looked curious. "Why is it so fast anyway?"

Kivamus glanced at the captain with a chuckle, knowing that he barely understood anything about the process, but he encouraged curiosity and a spirit of inquiry in everyone, which would be a good thing for Tiranat in the long run. "It can do it that fast because the converter uses coke and its design is very efficient, which allows it to melt the iron completely—something which this furnace we're making simply can't do."

"Hmm... That makes sense," Hudan nodded sagely, making the other guards snicker nearby, although it only took a single glare from the captain to shut them up.

"Wait," Cedoron interrupted, "did you just say that this converter will melt the iron completely?"

Kivamus nodded, recalling that the technology to make cast iron—that is, melting the iron completely and casting it into molds—was only introduced in Europe in the 15th century on Earth for casting cannons and their round shots, even if it may have been used earlier in other locations. So far he had seen that the Kingdom of Reslinor was similar to medieval Europe in technology level, which meant the process of making cast-iron was not something common here, even if other places in this world might have discovered it already. Or maybe not, he had no way to know for sure.

He explained, "Yes, that's one of the reasons which makes the Bessemer converter so efficient." He grinned, thinking of modern methods of making steel on earth. "In fact, I know of a way which is much better than even that method, and another way which is a lot better than that second method, but we have a long, long way to go before we can reach there. Still, making the converter is our next target after we get the furnace working properly."

Cedoron nodded slowly. "I have absolutely no idea how you know about so many things which I can't even imagine, but you're right. It'll be worth going through all this to make the slow-working furnace, if we can eventually make steel that fast with that converter." He paused for a while, scratching his chin. "Earlier, you said that pig iron has too much carbon, and wrought iron doesn't have enough, while steel has just the right amount of it. So, if we're using wrought iron to make steel, does that mean the iron's going to absorb some carbon during the process to turn into steel?"

Kivamus looked proudly at the smith, seeing how far Cedoron had come by now even though he only got a little time to explain about these things to others. "Exactly. The Bessemer converter works by removing carbon from pig iron, while the cementation process adds carbon to wrought iron. They do the same thing in reverse, and reach the middle ground of mild steel, which is what we need here."

He added, "So in the furnace we're building, the iron will slowly absorb carbon from the charcoal. When it's ready after three weeks, those bars will turn into an intermediate form of steel. That will be better than what we're using, but it just needs one more step to reach the final product, since that intermediate product won't be uniform enough yet to be used practically. So it'll need just a little more work after that."

Cedoron straightened eagerly. "Tell me what needs doing. I'll handle it."

"You'll need to cut the bars into shorter lengths and bind them with each other," Kivamus explained. "Then heat them in the forge and weld them together. After that, cut and weld them again. Then again. Do this process three to four times, and we'll get a good quality of steel here. I know it's tedious work, but the more you repeat it, the more uniform the steel becomes. But no need to do it more than four times, since the gains are minor after that, and it could lose too much carbon. Once all that's done, the steel we'll obtain will be much more uniform and suitable for all our uses."

"That's fine," Cedoron said. "If it helps us build this Bessemer converter later—or to make the lathe parts you want—it's worth every bit of trouble. This welding process is easy enough, so my apprentices can manage it by themselves. But will this steel be easy to work with? Will it even be of the same quality as that made by that converter you mentioned? Or will it be weaker?"

"No, it'll be just as good," Kivamus replied. "You can forge the steel just like wrought iron—file it, shape it, weld it and so on. Once it's ready, you can forge it into the gears and complex parts we need for the lathe, then use a file to brush off any excess fragments and achieve the exact shape we need."

"Oh, that's good to know," Cedoron said with a nod. "Then I'll have the boys help with it as well. Of course, I'll check each steel component of the lathe by myself and will confirm that it matches the dimensions in the blueprint."

"Perfect," Kivamus said. "I'll tell Duvas to send you some extra hands tomorrow so they can start building the furnace from the fire-clay. Just make sure they follow the measurements on the drawing correctly. Even after attending Gorsazo's classes for a few months, hardly a few of them can read anything. So you'll need to be there until it's ready."

"Of course," Cedoron said. "I'll get it done."

"One last thing," Kivamus added. "Once the steel-making furnace is ready, use the same crew to build another furnace nearby—which is called a beehive oven because of its shape and it'll be used to turn coal into coke. The full design's on the back of that second blueprint, along with its dimensions. It's also quite simple to make and manage, but again, it's slow work. So better to start early."

"How does it work?" Cedoron asked. "Coke is also mostly carbon, just like coal, so the process can't be similar to making steel since we aren't adding anything in it."

Kivamus explained, "Think of it like baking bread—the outer layer burns and heats the inner layers, driving off the impurities until what's left is pure fuel—using a process called destructive distillation. You can leave the details to me, but in short, coal will be heaped inside it, and the furnace will be sealed with clay, leaving only a small air vent near the top. Once it gets hot enough, the impurities will turn into gas and start burning, providing more heat for the remaining coal, and soon what's left will be purified coke."

He continued, "That coke will burn much hotter and cleaner than coal and will help every step of smithing. Once that's ready, you can stop making more charcoal and just use coke instead." He tried to think if there was anything he had left out. "Just remember that everything related to smithing—the cementation furnace, the beehive oven, the triphammer, and later a new forge—will be built on the far bank of the stream. The near side will only be for carpentry stuff and the sawmill. The workers can't be allowed to mix up any of these, since that would easily ignite the wood and the sawdust spread around on the near side, if it comes close to the burning gases and sparks from the furnaces."

"I understand," Cedoron said. He looked toward the forge, where the light of the glowing fire flickered on the walls. "It's already late in the afternoon, so I'll have the laborers work on it starting tomorrow morning. It will occupy a lot of my own working hours, but until Darora wants me to make the iron components for the next scorpion, I can spare the time for this."

"Good," Kivamus said, standing up. "Then carry on. You've got plenty of work to do."

Cedoron dipped his head respectfully, then turned back to the smithy, shouting orders at his apprentices before his voice was lost again in the din of the forge.

Kivamus watched for a while—the steady rhythm of hammers, the flare of sparks, the low hum of men at work—then turned to Hudan. "Let's head back."

The guard captain nodded, and the two of them, as well as the other guards walked away from the heat and noise toward the quieter dirt road leading to the manor.

Kivamus noticed the coal miners they had pulled from the mine and told to break up the huts and shacks and clear the ground of the village were hard at work on their way to the manor. It wouldn't be long before that was done too. Hopefully the sawmill would be ready soon, and they could start making more housing soon.

#### Chapter 366 Growing Quietly

The sun was low by the time Kivamus returned to the manor hall and had some late lunch. The light through the western windows had turned amber, spilling across the floor in uneven shapes. The air inside was still, faintly warm from the day, and quiet in a way that made every sound from outside—the creak of a wagon's wheel, the distant chatter of servants—feel sharper.

Duvas sat across from him, his ledger closed but resting on the side table, one hand idly tracing the well-worn cover. Kivamus had placed a guard outside the main door with strict orders not to let anyone in except Gorsazo. Feroy and Hudan were both away on their rounds; Madam Helga had gone with a few maids to check the mushroom barn, as usual in her after-lunch free time; Lucem and Clarisa were out collecting sawdust for the briquette makers, while Syrene was somewhere out in the manor, probably talking to her friend Leah again. That meant the manor house was empty other than the two of them.

Kivamus waited patiently, drumming his fingers lightly against the armrest. He wanted Gorsazo to be here before he began the impending discussion—the one about Earth. Duvas had earned his full trust, but the news would still come as a shock. Better to have someone who already knew about it present during the explanation to help steady things if needed.

Duvas broke the quiet first, after he opened the ledger and looked at it. "Milord, the coin we got from Pydaso this time has helped a great deal. We've managed to keep paying all the craftsmen without a gap. They are far too valuable and we can't risk any of them thinking about leaving the village if someone finds out about their new skills—like making crossbows—and makes them a good offer, so we can't afford to stop paying them. Losing even one of them would be too costly, so that had to come first."

The majordomo sighed, leaning back in his chair. "But the guards and the manor servants have already begun complaining. We'd promised them regular payment once winter ended, but it's already approaching late spring. And the merchant in Kirnos who sold us the smoked fish on credit—he's still waiting. We were supposed to pay him back weeks ago."

Kivamus nodded slowly. "I know... But like you'd said before, the mercenaries take priority. If we fail to pay them, we risk losing far more. We still have enough time until autumn—when we have to pay this year's taxes—but the mercenaries could arrive any time after two months from now."

He paused, thinking for a moment. "Thankfully, the revenue from acelos medicine should be able to cover it. If we can keep the sales steady, we'll be earning about four hundred gold every three weeks or so. Add to it the better quality paper we are selling now, and we're looking at an extra income of above six hundred gold every month. We don't even have to pay taxes on that, because officially, we're not producing anything like that here. Our coal sales are also improving every week, even if they are still barely a third of what we were selling last year, but this new source of tax-free gold will more than make up for it."

The majordomo smiled, rubbing his beard. "I'm just thankful that you somehow managed to create those things here, right when the village needed it the most. I guess you're going to tell me soon about how you know such extraordinary stuff, but either way, you've turned everything upside down here..." He shrugged. "I can't even imagine how you think of these things, but you've already changed our fortunes. It's still early days, and we have some debts to pay off first, but that surplus gold will save us in more ways than one. However, when winter comes, we'll be cut off from the north again. Three months with no trade routes open. Well, except for Kirnos, but we barely trade anything with them."

"I know," Kivamus said. "That's why we need to sell a good amount of everything before the northern road gets blocked."

"I have no doubt that you won't let the village people sit idle in those months, like it was common in the previous years," Duvas said, "which means once we start paying everyone—guards, servants, maids, all of them—we have to keep it going even in the winter. The village can't go back to bartering or weekly food rations after that. It'll undo everything we've built."

"That's true," Kivamus agreed. "So we have to save up enough gold by then to continue paying them over the winter, even without selling the medicine or coal in those months."

Duvas nodded grimly. "Then we'll need to start saving any surplus from medicine and paper right away."

"Exactly." Kivamus leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. "But even that won't be enough in the long-term. We need more ways to bring in gold. I've thought about selling the new machines we've

made to other towns and cities—things like the seed-drills, wheelbarrows or log-movers—but they're far too bulky to transport. Even if I just sent out the designs instead and tried to charge a small fee for it, the moment another carpenter saw them in work, they'd just copy the idea and we'd earn nothing. Without any law to protect the original idea—something which is known as intellectual property rights—"

He saw Duvas' confused expression, and added, "I'll explain it later. Anyway, without any strict law for protecting IP rights, whoever sees one of those things will just steal the idea for himself, and we wouldn't earn any gold from it anyway. At worst, it would only make the nearby nobles stronger and richer by increasing their people's efficiency. And right now, that's the last thing we need. Once we're more secure, maybe we'll hand out the ideas for the betterment of the kingdom. But not any time soon."

He sat back, eyes drifting toward the open window. "It's true that unlike the acelos medicine and the paper, we're not exactly trying to hide those machines—it's not really practical anyway—so news about them will eventually get out. But that's fine. By the time anyone understands how much they matter and how effective these simple things are, we'll have strengthened our village even more and will already be far ahead of others for it to matter."

"What about the seed drills?" Duvas asked. "We still have no real experience of how effective they are, but if it works like what you've told us, it could help increase grain production everywhere and decrease its prices, which would help us a lot to feed our ever-growing population when we have to buy wheat next year."

"Maybe..." Kivamus gave a slow nod. "I'd even been thinking about it earlier, but I decided not to, since the earlier logic still stands. Think of it this way. It's already too late to matter in this sowing season, but let's say we give the designs of seed drills to everyone in the coming months, so they all have time to make enough drills by the following sowing season in the next spring. Then, in the next year's harvest season, the grain production of Zoricus and other nearby nobles will increase by a lot, and the new supply will cause a glut in the market, thus plummeting the wheat prices. That sounds good for everyone, right? But it's very unlikely to work like that."

He continued, "Now that those nobles have seen that the wheat prices can go this high, what do you think their next step would be? Knowing what we do about Zoricus, based on Levalas' information, and the fact that he controls a lot of the Cinran's markets, he'll either stockpile it in new warehouses, leaving only a small supply in the market, which'll cause the prices to increase to previous levels again, and if it doesn't work, he'll probably even burn the surplus, to the same effect. It's not like he wants to help feed the poor. He only wants to line his own pockets with more and more gold, like he's been doing until

now. Same for the other nobles. Most likely, the situation wouldn't change for the better even if we freely spread out the designs for seed drills, for one reason or another."

Duvas sighed. "I think you're right in saying that..."

"That's why once the sowing is completed in a few days, we'll put the drills in an empty barn in the manor until we need them again, so nobody easily finds out how we managed to sow such a large area with just a few dozen farmers." Kivamus shrugged. "Like I said earlier, it'll happen eventually anyway, since it's not possible to hide our whole farmlands from any spies of the nobles who notice those new machines at work, nor can we stop the farmers or the villagers from gossiping with any visiting merchants, but we can't let it happen this early. It's far too risky right now."

He added, "If word spreads around too soon, it'll only make us a target, highlighting that our village is making those revolutionary machines. If they find out about them, they could also realize that we are the ones making the medicine, the crossbows, the scorpion and so on. Barons like Zoricus and Farodas—and even Count Ebirtas—will never want to see a rival village getting stronger under their noses. They'll surely think of a plausible reason to march on us if they found out about even one of those things, and if that does happen, we simply can't stop them with our current strength. Not yet anyway."

Duvas gave a slow nod, his voice quieter now. "So we keep our heads low and keep working to strengthen our defense."

"Exactly," Kivamus said. "If everything goes well, and if we keep getting more refugees, craftsmen and immigrants, then in another year or so, we'll be strong enough to defend ourselves from any nearby nobles who want to harm us. Most likely, by that time, nothing short of the Duke's army in Fort Aragosa or a foreign military force could threaten Tiranat. Until then, we grow quietly and keep building our strength."

The majordomo sighed, closing his ledger at last. "Then let's at least make sure we start paying the people soon, before they lose faith. They've earned it."

Kivamus gave a nod, folding his hands on his lap as he spoke. "Just wait a few more weeks," he said quietly. "Once Pydaso returns next time, we'll have the gold from another advance order. He'll also know a lot more about that Ulrigan trader's intentions—whether he plans to keep the source secret or not. If all goes well, that gold, along with what we'll earn from coal until then will give us enough of a cushion. After that, we can finally start paying everyone. Just tell them to hold on a little longer."

Duvas nodded, though his expression showed more strain than relief. Before he could reply, the door opened.

Chapter 367 Earth - I

Gorsazo entered the manor hall with a calm, deliberate step, his face set in the same serious expression he'd worn when Kivamus had told him what this meeting would be about. Without a word, he shut the door behind him and dropped the wooden bar into place. The other doors had already been barred shut and the windows locked.

Kivamus waited as his former teacher walked towards them. The light from the small, high windows had dimmed into gold and dust, announcing the arrival of evening. Soon, all three of them were sitting near the small table, the only sound being the faint creak of the old wood.

Duvas raised an eyebrow. "So?"

Kivamus drew in a breath. He had no idea where to begin, but there was no gentle way to say it, so he decided to be blunt. "Well, Duvas," he said, forcing a small grin, "the truth is, I know all the things I do because I come from a different world. That world had unimaginably advanced machines and knowledge so far ahead of Reslinor that no one here could even dream of them. That's where the ideas I've been using come from."

Duvas stared at him for a moment. His lips twitched, before he broke into laughter. "Hah! That's a good one, Milord! I never knew you liked telling jokes like that."

Kivamus looked toward Gorsazo, but he just gave a simple shrug.

When Duvas finally caught his breath, he leaned forward, still smiling. "All right, you've had your fun. Now, come on, tell me the real reason. How do you actually know these things? I am so curious to know about it!"

Kivamus sighed and met his eyes. "That really was the truth, Duvas. I don't have another explanation to give you. I lived nearly thirty years on a world called Earth before I woke up here, just a few days before I reached Tiranat last autumn. I don't have any proof of it—other than the memories and knowledge I have in my head. And that is indeed where I get all these unique ideas from." He exhaled deeply. "What

other explanation do you think can account for my knowledge? Gorsazo already knows the truth; I'd told him about it some time ago. You can ask him yourself if you don't believe me."

Duvas frowned, turning to the teacher. "Did Lord Kivamus drink that wine we bought for making the tablets? Because this sounds like the sort of thing you'd say after finishing a bottle. That has to be the reason why he's telling such ludicrous stories!"

Gorsazo's face was grave. "No, Sir Duvas. He didn't drink anything. And he's not joking. What he's telling you is the real truth." He paused, his voice quieter now. "I know it's not easy to believe. It took me a long time to be fully convinced too, and you haven't even heard the half of it. But he's told me enough by now that I can be fully sure that he isn't lying. He really is from another world called Earth."

Duvas blinked, speechless for a moment. "What are you two even talking about...? That's impossible." His tone was more bewildered than angry. "I'd seen the boy growing up in the Ulriga palace before he ever came here. Not up close, but enough to know that he's real, and that he lived there long before he supposedly appeared from another world." He scoffed. "I went to the palace several times over the years for some work. I remember seeing him as a child, running around the courtyard of the palace. That's how I recognized him immediately when he arrived here the first time. Now you're telling me he just appeared on this planet last year? I saw him grow up, for Goddess' sake!"

Kivamus shook his head. "You misunderstood me. The man known as Kivamus Ralokaar—the youngest son of the Duke, third in line to inherit the duchy of Ulriga—indeed lived here all his life, since the very moment he was born. He resided in that palace for his whole life of 21 years on this planet of Eranityn, but the person inside his body isn't him anymore. I used to be a man known as Steven, and I lived in a massive city called London, on a planet called Earth. From what I remember, its population was around 9 million, with a similar number living on the outskirts of the city, just like in Ulriga. That's how different that world was from this one."

Duvas gaped at him. "Nine million? That's nonsense! It's just impossible." He shook his head slowly. "Now you really sound drunk, milord. How's such a thing even possible? Our village may be small, but the town of Cinran holds about three thousand people. Ulriga's around eight times bigger, so there must be nearly twenty-five thousand people living there. If you assume nearly the same number of people live in the outskirts—it's still fifty thousand at most! And that city is bigger than any other I've seen, apart from the capital Dorastiz. That city does have more people within its walls—probably above thirty thousand—but hardly anyone lives outside its walls, since it's just too cold up there."

The majordomo shrugged. "I've never been outside this kingdom, but from what I've heard in rumors, the largest city in Cilaria is Rutodan—the capital of Girnatica. It's said to hold maybe forty thousand

within its walls. Including those living in the outskirts, it might be double that, as hard as it is to imagine such a humongous city. But now you expect me to believe there's a city with nine million people? Eighteen million including the outskirts? It's just absurd! Can it even be called a city if it's that big?"

Kivamus shrugged. "There were some other words used for huge cities like London—megacity, megalopolis and so on. Their definitions varied, but there were probably dozens of them on Earth."

"Dozens..." Duvas breathed. "Even so, how's that possible?"

Gorsazo leaned forward slightly. "You're not comparing this properly, Sir Duvas. From what he's told me, London was one of the biggest cities on Earth—not the biggest, but still amongst them—and that world was probably a lot more populous than ours. So you can't compare the population of cities in this small island of Cilaria to one of the biggest cities on the whole of planet Earth. A much better comparison would be if you also considered the biggest cities on Eranityn, don't you think? That empire has to have some really big cities, I'd say. So if there's any fair comparison even possible between these two worlds, it has to be with their largest cities. We've all heard stories about them—cities so vast you can walk for days without leaving their walls."

Duvas looked stunned for a moment before shaking his head slowly. "You're right... We never really have any reason to talk about places outside Cilaria, so I didn't even think of that. Still, his claims were so strange and unexpected that I suppose my mind forgot to think about them." He paused, his brows furrowing as he thought. "Even so, I can't imagine any city in this world being close to what you described—about this so-called city of London. That empire in the western continent—which rules something like half the world and never stops conquering new countries—certainly has to have much, much bigger cities than those in Cilaria. I've even heard about another vast realm on the eastern continent, with cities said to stretch as far as the eye can see."

The majordomo leaned back in his chair, looking dazed. "I've never been to those places, so I can't know if they are real or just stories. But even after including them, I'd be surprised if there were more than a few cities in the world with a population exceeding, say, five hundred thousand. Maybe—maybe—there might be a handful of cities whose populations exceed a million, as unbelievable as that number is for us simple people living in a village of barely 500 people. But nine million? Eighteen million including the outskirts? I have... I have no way to even visualize it... I don't know if this whole kingdom has that many people! Duvas shook his head slowly. "That city of London must be bigger than this whole duchy if there really are that many people living in it!"

Kivamus gave a short laugh. "No, it wasn't as spread out as you think. The reason is that people in big cities on Earth lived in structures called skyscrapers—buildings far, far taller than the one or two story

houses common here. Most residential buildings were probably around 10 stories high, while even 20 to 30 floors was also common in most dense cities. But some buildings reached more than a hundred floors high, although that was rare." He added, "As for your question, most big cities on Earth grew upward instead of outward, which is why they occupied much less area on the ground than expected, leaving space for farming, industry and transportation." He paused. "But before I continue—what was that huge empire you mentioned earlier? Doesn't it have a name? This is the first time I'm hearing about it."

At once, Duvas looked upward and murmured a quick prayer to the goddess. Gorsazo's expression tightened.

Kivamus frowned. "What is it?"

Gorsazo took a slow breath. "It's an empire so mighty and dangerous that even speaking its name makes people uneasy... When I was still in Ulriga, I had an opportunity to see a simple map of the world from a sea merchant who was a friend of a friend. From what I saw, Cilaria is a pretty small island compared to the two great continents located in the west and the east of the world, which is probably the only reason we've been safe from them so far."

Chapter 368 Earth - II

The teacher continued, "As the legend goes, about a century ago, an empire rose from almost nothing on the western continent. Since then, it's conquered nearly everything it's touched. From what the sea merchant said, there's hardly any land left on that continent that isn't under their rule, and by now, there's probably no country in the world which can stop them. In the past decade, they've even begun reaching into the eastern continent—which is located just to the south of Cilaria—but people say that some of the eastern kingdoms are quite strong and won't fall that easily..."

Kivamus tried to remember any information about this empire from the memories of the original Kivamus, but found absolutely nothing. That meant even the Duke's library didn't mention them even once, as if they were the boogeyman of the world. He looked at Gorsazo. "You still haven't said the name. Come on, Gorsazo, you can't seriously believe that saying it out loud will make them attack us."

The old teacher hesitated for a long moment. "Perhaps not... But there's a reason people fear saying their name. I pray the day never comes when we see the red sails of that empire's ships on our shores. Rumors say those ships spew fire, and they can turn any coastal city's walls into rubble, before their troops even set their foot on land. I've heard that their uniforms are also made in a blood-red color, so that the blood of the countless people they kill when conquering a new land wouldn't make their clothes look stained."

Kivamus' frown deepened. Ships emitting fire and breaking down the walls of a coastal city from a distance? That kind of sounded like... shore bombardment done by a ship using cannons—of whatever technology level. But these ships still used sails, so their technology level still had to be medieval, even though it sounded far ahead of what was found in Cilaria. But if they already had something like cannons, what if they were using the sails just as a red herring—or just to intimidate their enemies into submission using the psychological effect of those dreaded red sails—and actually used a more advanced propulsion method? Like steam engines, or maybe even diesel engines?

He had been so overwhelmed with all the problems of Tiranat and its surroundings and making sure that everyone survived the winter, that he had never given much thought to what lay outside Cilaria. Was this whole world truly in the medieval era? What if it was more advanced than he'd been thinking? So far he had assumed that the whole planet was in the medieval ages, which ended somewhere around the 15th century on earth. But what if this empire was further ahead?

It was obvious that the planet's technology level certainly wasn't anything close to earth, or he would have recognised the tell tail-signs like airplane contrails and he'd have heard about such modern things by now. But what if they had technology comparable to that of the 16th century on earth? Or even the 17th century? Or maybe further ahead? Was that how they'd conquered so much?

But how could he even find out for sure? There was no way to know anything with certainty unless he visited these places himself, but that wasn't practical. There was no Internet or TV to get the latest news or airplanes to fly such a great distance easily. So there was no real way to find out more, other than by asking around for rumors, which might just be based on superstitions, and might not hold even a speck of truth in them...

He shook his head, stopping his thoughts from running away. No, he was worrying for no good reason. All evidence stated that advanced technology did not exist in this world. He realized that the island of Cilaria was pretty isolated from the rest of the world, but ocean-going sea merchants regularly visited the port city of Ulriga. If even something as simple as steam engines, which was the fundamental technology of an industrial revolution, existed anywhere in the world, like to power ships—something which would threaten the livelihood of those sail-operating sailors—those merchants would have known about it for sure.

And if they had known about it, the original Kivamus would have heard about at least something regarding steam engines, and so would have Gorsazo—who'd lived two decades in that city, and had friends amongst the sea merchants. But there was nothing in his memories about it. So, it wasn't possible. That meant no steam engines in this world, and no industrial revolution either. However, the technology level of some countries, including this empire, might still be decades or a century ahead of what was found in Cilaria. That was some food for thought...

He gave a deep exhale. There he went worrying again...

There was no point in thinking about what might or might not be present. Not right now. He had to focus on his current problems first, but he would have to keep an open mind in the future about any news about this empire. He looked at the teacher. "Go on. What else do you know about them?"

"Not much more than what I've already told you, and even those were second or third hand rumors," Gorsazo said. "But if the stories are true, whenever those sails appear on the horizon, that country is said to be doomed, since most likely no army on Eranityn can stop them once they set their sights on a target." He glanced toward the window, his voice low. "But I suppose you're right that just saying their name won't summon their ships here. It's called—"

"Stop!" Duvas said sharply, raising a hand. "Why are you willing to invoke the devil? What good will it do to us? Do you even realize just how powerful that empire is compared to us? Tiranat can barely defend itself from bandits, and if the nearby barons decided to march on us for whatever reason—with or without the support of the count—we'd be ash before sunset. Fort Aragosa—whom we can't even dream of taking on—is the mightiest fortress in this kingdom, and even they could barely push back Binpaaz beyond our borders in the last war. And Binpaaz is absolutely nothing in front of the might of that empire. You know what that means? It means that that empire could destroy us without even noticing. Even if every kingdom in Cilaria united together—not like that would ever happen—but even if it did, they'd still crush us—" he snapped his fingers "—just like that. Like Cilaria was nothing more than an annoying fly!"

Kivamus frowned, his thoughts racing. Until now, he had only been worried about the smaller threats like bandits or the neighboring nobles—which had already seemed formidable. But if an empire existed in this world that could crush this entire kingdom so easily... just how strong were they?

Gorsazo looked at the majordomo for a moment, before he let out a long sigh. "Perhaps you're right. It might just be superstition, but there's a reason people are too scared to take their name. The less we talk about them, the better." He looked at Kivamus. "Just let it be, milord. Apart from their name, we hardly know anything about that empire anyway—only that they rule the western continent and that their power is unmatched. So even if this is just a superstition, they are far, far too strong for us to risk invoking their wrath, even by something as trivial as taking their names. So let's leave this conversation for the future. Long, long in the future..."

Kivamus took a slow breath, letting the weight of everything settle in his chest. Maybe it was fine that Duvas didn't want to take the name of that empire. What could he even do against an empire so vast and mighty that even its name was treated like a curse? If they truly had cities holding above a million people—compared to Ulriga, the biggest city of this kingdom which had fewer than fifty thousand—then that empire's strength would be on a scale Tiranat couldn't even begin to grasp. If nothing else, then because of the sheer size of their manpower. And places that big, assuming they were even somewhat prosperous, often led to human innovation. It would make that empire more and more powerful with every passing year, which meant no country could hope to stand in front of them as the years passed... Perhaps that was why people feared taking their name or seeing their red sails on the horizon. Perhaps that fear wasn't superstition after all...

He reluctantly pushed the thought aside. There was no way for them to fight a force like that. Not in the foreseeable future. Better not to dwell on it too much, and to just try to stay unnoticed by them.

"It's fine then," he said quietly. "Let's put that discussion aside for now. Coming back to the question you asked, the original Kivamus lived his life normally for 21 years. Then one day... I—Steven—opened my eyes in his body on the road to Tiranat last autumn. I have absolutely no idea how it happened. There's no logic to it that I can think of, no explanation that I've found. All I know for sure is that I carry Steven's memories from Earth, and Kivamus's memories from Ulriga. I remember my friends and family on Earth, just as I remember my younger sister here supporting me when we were children... and our older brothers who wouldn't stop tormenting us. I don't know if I'm still Steven or the old Kivamus, or an amalgamation of their minds. It's impossible to say. But either way, this is who I am now."

He let out a slow exhale. "Anyway, you still need to know about Earth, which was far, far more advanced than this world. I grew up there, and in that life I used to work in a profession called a mechanical engineer. That's how I know about the things I've made here. I'm not inventing anything from scratch—I'm just borrowing ideas from that world and adjusting them so they can work here. And about that restricted section of the Ulriga Palace library, which I kept using as an excuse to explain all this?"

Kivamus shook his head. "No books with that kind of information exist there. The library isn't nearly large enough to hold knowledge like that. All it contains is a few books on the ancestry of the Ralokaar dynasty, on the plants and animals commonly found in southern Reslinor, as well as some books on military strategy—which is all the restricted section contains. Maybe a few more I don't remember, but that's all. So the only reason I know about these unconventional and even revolutionary ideas is because I've lived an entire life in another world... and those memories stayed with me. How else could I possibly know any of it?"

Duvas stared at him. "Did that world really have such revolutionary things?"

Kivamus nodded. "So, so many of them. Earth had machines called trains—huge vehicles that could easily carry weight worth the whole village of Tiranat and more, powered by mighty engines far beyond the simple steam engines I want to build here someday. We had machines called airplanes that let people fly thousands of kilometers in a few hours. We had devices small enough to fit in a pocket that could hold more written knowledge than the entire world here has produced since humans learned to write. We had another enormous thing called a rocket, which could take people directly into the skies, to the moon and beyond, if needed. We had a small device—called a smartphone—that let people talk instantly with someone on the other side of the planet, just like talking face-to-face. We had devices which could change the genome—the very basic structure—of plants, to create seeds which were more hardy and produced a much better yield. And... weapons so powerful that a single one could destroy this whole kingdom within a moment. And that's just scratching the surface."

Chapter 369 Earth - III

Gorsazo remained quiet, since he had already heard about most of these things about Earth, but nodded in support.

Duvas looked between the two of them, struggling to find words. The disbelief was still written clearly across his face, but his tone had softened from scorn to unease. "You're saying all of that... is real?"

"It is," Kivamus said quietly. "And someday, we'll build some of it here."

The majordomo looked at him in wonder. "If all that's true... was there even anything that world didn't have? I can't imagine how life would have been living in that world..."

"Better in most ways, but worse in some..." Kivamus shook his head slightly. "There were so, so many other things on Earth which would take me a whole lifetime to describe, and new inventions and advancements were happening every single day, but there was a lot we still hadn't discovered or invented. But yes, it's all real. Or at least it used to be."

Duvas swallowed. "Let's say for a moment that I believe everything you've said. But as proof, can you make any of them? Could you make that... airplane? Or that device that stores the knowledge of the world?"

"Not immediately," Kivamus shrugged. "There's no possible way. Earth didn't reach that level in a day either. It took centuries of progress to achieve all that, starting from a technology level not too different from this world. I don't know if we could reach that point within our lifetimes even with all my

knowledge, but I do know I can still build things far beyond what exists here now. And if we keep moving forward on the path to progress and continue improving our technology, then with my knowledge, I can train and guide other smart people here to keep researching and improving things. If enough bright minds work on it, the path of progress could eventually look similar to Earth's. Does that make sense?"

Duvas nodded slowly. "Kind of..."

Kivamus added, "Then think of it this way. As much as I know about advanced technologies, there are simply not enough hours in the day for me to do everything myself—which is why we need people like Sryne—someone who can do a lot with just a little guidance from me. Her creation of acelos medicine is proof of that. I couldn't have done that without putting all my other duties on hold, and she couldn't have created it without my guidance. But together, we made something which is revolutionary and will save a lot of lives. It's the same in all other fields. That's why I keep saying that I want more people to move here. Just assume if we had a dozen people—researchers—like her living here. We would be able to create a lot more advanced things after that. But what if we had a hundred such people? A thousand? Or even more? Can you imagine the outcome? During the time I lived on Earth, there were probably more than 10 million people researching the latest technologies. And those were the very advanced scientists and researchers. There were probably 10 times more people there who assisted them, whether as graduate students, or full-time assistants. Either way, that should make it easier to visualize just how vast the gap between Earth and Eranityn is." He took a deep breath, not knowing how else he could explain it. "Do you believe me now?"

Duvas rubbed his hands together, looking uneasy. "I don't know what to believe... What if all this was just a dream? Dreams can often feel quite real."

Kivamus gave a tired smile. "If you want, I can sketch basic diagrams and blueprints right now for everything I've mentioned. Not perfect, not complete—that'll take far too long, and I don't have a perfect memory—but enough to show workable ideas. No one else in this world could make a usable sketch of a machine which could fly and carry humans on it. But I can create a full blueprint of it. Will that make you believe it?"

Duvas snorted. "I can barely understand half of the simplest blueprints you make even now. For all I know, you could draw a weird flying cow on a sheet and tell me it's an airplane, and I wouldn't know the difference. So there's no way I'd be able to distinguish between your blueprint of a so-called airplane and the chicken scrawl which Lucem claims to be the alphabet."

Kivamus let out a laugh, half amused, half frustrated. "Then I don't know what proof I can give you..." He shrugged. "But honestly, you don't even have to believe me. As long as we keep improving the village

using my knowledge and continue making it more prosperous and safer like we've been doing in the previous half year, that's good enough."

Duvas studied him for a long moment. "That makes sense, and I do want to believe you, but I really don't know how I'm supposed to accept that humans could fly or all the knowledge in the world could be stored in my pocket."

Gorsazo frowned. "Then tell me—how else could he know about these things? You think a dream could ever be this detailed? With this much structure?" He shook his head. "No. Dreams fade. They drift. They don't give you thousands of pieces of knowledge that all connect properly into something that makes sense. Even ignoring anything which Lord Kivamus could create in the future, things which he has already made in this village can't possibly come from imagination, or someone else would have dreamed of it already. The only explanation is that he really did live a different life in a different world before arriving here." He looked at the majordomo with a quiet certainty. "And you know it."

Duvas stared at him. "If you are right, and if Lord Kivamus really did come from a different world, then it has to be some kind of witchcraft, hasn't it? There is no other explanation! And he has to be a..." The majordomo shut his mouth after that, not completing the sentence.

Kivamus leaned forward. "A what? I have to be what?"

"A demon..." Duvas muttered in a low voice, before he joined his hands starting a silent prayer to the Goddess.

"What did you just say?" Kivamus glared at him. "I am a demon? Do I look like I have horns on my head?"

Duvas didn't answer and kept praying.

Kivamus had expected that he wouldn't be easily believed, but it still felt awful to be called a demon when he had done so much to help everyone. He was starting to get angry at that accusation, but before he could say anything, Gorsazo pushed himself out of his chair and walked straight to the old majordomo. He gripped Duvas's shoulders, making the man look up at him in surprise.

"Stop!" Gorsazo said loudly. "Stop making accusations you know nothing about, and just look in front of you." He pointed at Kivamus. "Look at the young man sitting there. Does he really look like a demon to you? Does he look like someone who would eat puppies for breakfast or something else which is that absurd or horrific?"

Duvas stared at Kivamus, startled.

Gorsazo went on. "Lord Kivamus—Steven—arrived in this world only a few days before we reached Tiranat. That means you have known this person for almost as long as I have. So tell me, has he done anything demonic? Do you think the progress in the village happened because of witchcraft he performed secretly? Or was it the blood, sweat and tears of our craftsmen, guards, and villagers? Was it? Stop falling into prejudice which you don't really believe, and use your head! Think!"

A long moment passed before Duvas let out a breath, looking defeated. "I think... I understand." He removed Gorsazo's hands, stood up, and walked to Kivamus. Then he bent into a deep bow, far lower than a man his age usually managed.

Kivamus was surprised to see that, and rose as well.

Duvas stayed bowed. "I humbly apologize, milord. I let superstitions affect me instead of looking at the facts. I used to have a very open mind, but living in a small village of superstitious people for decades had probably affected me more than I thought. It's my fault. But I have seen you staying awake whole nights to work on blueprints of one thing after another. I've seen you eat tiny meals, saying you were already full, because everyone else needed the food. I've seen you talking to common guards and former slaves like they were your friends. You were the one who freed them, for goddess' sake... I think I've made a horrible error here. Please forgive me..."

"There is nothing to forgive," Kivamus smiled after a moment. "Just keep supporting me the way you always have, and I'll hold nothing against you."

Duvas finally straightened and went back to his chair. He sat carefully, taking a steady breath before he gave a small smile. "Then... if you are not a demon, you must have been sent here by the goddess... She must have seen how close our village was to starving last year, and how bandits had easily taken away everything from our people, and there was nothing we could do to change any of that. That's why she must have sent you to this village. To help Tiranat and keep it safe from its enemies. There is no other explanation for this, especially if you cannot use your knowledge and science to explain how you arrived."

Kivamus shrugged. "I have no way to prove or disprove that I was sent here by the Goddess you all worship or some other powerful entity. But if you want to believe so, that's fine by me."

Duvas suddenly looked excited, and looked at Gorsazo. "Wait, so that's what you meant by otherworldly! I remember you using that word to describe Lord Kivamus' ideas on some occasions, even though I didn't understand at the time. But that word had been stuck in my mind for weeks since the time you said that he knew about a lot of otherworldly things, but this explains it!"

Kivamus laughed. "You're right. Things from earth can certainly be said to be otherworldly, as much as I told Gorsazo not to use that word in front of others."

Gorsazo smirked as he took his seat again. "Well, what can I say? I didn't have anyone else to talk with regarding the ideas from earth, so instead, I decided to have a little fun at your expense."

Kivamus just laughed at the goodnaturedly jibe, knowing that his former teacher only meant well.

Gorsazo grinned at the majordomo. "Now that we know there is nothing demonic happening here, don't you want to hear more stories about Earth? I still enjoy them every time Lord Kivamus has a moment to talk. I'm sure you will love them too."

Duvas gave a small smile. "Well, as hard as it is to believe that there is something called a rocket or a smartphone, I suppose it won't hurt to hear the stories."

Kivamus grinned. "Then here we go."

Chapter 370 Cinran - I

~ Tesyb ~

Tesyb sat beside Trevalo on the lead wagon, watching the stone walls of Cinran approaching ahead of the caravan. This was the afternoon of the third day since they had left Tiranat, and they were arriving right on time. Last autumn, during those frantic emergency runs with Pydaso, they had pushed the horses hard and managed to reach Cinran within two days. Luckily, none of their horses had broken a leg that time, or the wagons' axles, but that was far from assured. So this time they'd taken a more normal

pace, letting the wagons creak along the road at their usual speed. In the coming months, they had a lot more trips to make along with Trevalo, after all.

Six wagons made up the caravan, all belonging to Trevalo. Including the merchant and his six drivers, the eight guards—including Tesyb—had been squeezed onto the fully loaded wagons along with a man from the encampment which they needed to liberate. It felt crowded, but only for now. Once the wheat was bought and delivered this time, and Trevalo returned from his trip to Ulriga a few weeks later, they would be running a bigger caravan. Eight guards might start feeling like too few then. But that was a problem for later.

Looking at the approaching stone walls of Cinran, a small thought came to his mind. Yufim must be wishing he was here. He always complained that he wanted to see a proper town or a city, but he kept getting sent to the hills to hunt. Even on the trips to Cinran before the winter, he had to stay outside the town walls to keep the wagons safe. He's probably grumbling at me right now, Tesyb thought with amusement.

The journey had been mostly safe this time, aside from a wild boar attack on the way. A pair of them had burst from the undergrowth at their first nightly stop, but this time the guards knew what they were doing. That was a stark difference from the last time when most of the guards hadn't been able to do much, and even Tesyb had frozen in front of the boars.

However, by now, all the guards were well trained, and after the experience of fighting an adzee, a simple boar hadn't felt nearly as terrifying. The six wagon drivers had all worn short swords, though their stressed faces had shown how little experience they had in using them. So Tesyb had ordered them to stay back and guard Trevalo and the encampment man in case there was another danger out there. He and the seven other guards had taken the lead, spears forward.

Still, killing the boars hadn't been easy. Having a few crossbows would have helped a lot in injuring the beasts before they came closer, but they had been still able to kill the first boar without much difficulty, after a big thrust from a guard pierced the boar's neck, before another guard finished it off. The second boar fell quicker with all eight of them focused on it. When all was done, they had cleaned the meat and enjoyed a small feast by roasting it above a small fire. The food situation in the village was improving, but they still couldn't afford to waste the meat from two big boars.

Everyone had received a good amount of meat that evening, though Tesyb had known it was risky. A hungry adzee could have caught the smell. Even so, with 14 fighting men on their side—eight guards and six wagon men—he had believed they could handle a single adzee. They had just taken down two big boars easily, after all. But in hindsight, he realized that perhaps it was just overconfidence speaking. The

adzee they had fought in the village had looked aged, and they'd had archers, crossbows, and the village walls on their side.

He knew that he could never become a leader of guards like Feroy or the captain if he took such unnecessary risks. Lord Kivamus had trusted him to lead the caravan safely on this trip, and he wouldn't let him down, even if he had a habit of getting overconfident. Still, it had worked out this time, although he knew that he would have to be far more careful in the future.

They had only been able to consume a small part of the boars, but they had enough men to contribute in cutting and cleaning up the meat, so they had cut the rest of the meat in thin strips some distance away from the camp, and had smoked it overnight, and each man walked away with a few days of rations, which would help in preserving their other rations for the future.

He had also found something else curious. Similar to the last time, this boar attack had also happened near the closed-down Helga's inn. With the inn abandoned for half a year, no merchants had stopped there. With no humans living here, the inn had probably blended back into the forest, becoming a new territory for the boars. Lord Kivamus had asked him to check out the area, so during their first night's camp, Tesyb had taken a few guards to look over its condition. He already knew that it hadn't been in a good condition even before the winter, but this time he saw that the roof had fully collapsed under winter snow. Only parts of the walls still stood, with the roof open to the sky. Creepers and weeds had taken over everything. Even the old signboard was tangled in vines—though he could read it now, thanks to Teacher Gorsazo's lessons. He would have to report that the place had no chance of becoming an inn again. Not without a full reconstruction.

The wagon coming to a stop pulled his mind back to the present. They had reached Cinran's gates. Trevalo had stopped their wagon behind the small line of carts and other merchants' wagons waiting to enter.

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It was a long wait, but finally it was their turn. Tesyb watched the merchant pass a bribe to the gate guards, who took it openly, without any shame. He scoffed under his breath. A little coin, and anything could happen in a town like this! It still made him wish that the guards back home were earning real coin by now, but he pushed the thought aside. He had no doubt that Lord Kivamus was doing his best for the village. If payment of wages hadn't started, it just meant that the finances still had to be tight, and they probably didn't have enough coin to spare. This whole supply of wheat they had come to buy was still going to be bought by the manor, after all. He knew that the village merchants still weren't buying

much, and they couldn't, until the payments started in coin. But no matter, everything would come in time. Until then, he would keep doing his duty faithfully.

Once all six wagons rolled through the gate, they moved along the cobblestone street toward the market square. Crowds already started to thicken around them—vendors taking their wares to the market, draft animals mooing and bleating, carts rattling over stone.

Before long, Trevalo pulled the lead wagon to a stop and hopped down.

Tesyb looked at him in confusion. "Why are we stopping here? The market is still ahead."

Trevalo pointed to a large warehouse behind a short fence to their left. "The coal merchant who owns this place is an old acquaintance. I'll go and meet with him to make a deal for our coal, and he'll also let us keep our wagons here for the night. We'll stay here tonight."

Tesyb looked past the fence. The ground inside was dirt, not stone, and one corner held a well. A few neat stacks of hay sat beside it.

"That works," he said. "We can water the horses and feed them there, if he allows it. We'll sleep under the wagons as usual. The ground looks soft enough, since it's not cobblestone or something."

With that, Tesyb climbed down and gestured to the other guards to do the same.

The merchant gazed at the warehouse for a moment before he turned back to him. "Good. This is usually where my wagon drivers stay anyway. I usually book a room in a nearby inn, but this time I'll skip it and stay with you all. No point wasting time—the trip is already going to be longer than usual, so I need to be up early to make deals for wheat. So we need to unload the coal before it gets dark, and by tomorrow afternoon we have to buy enough wheat to leave. We'll only be able to travel a short distance tomorrow, but we should reach the forest before nightfall. The next day you and the guards can go with that man to his encampment to bring out those families. That'll take another day. Then we'll finally leave for Tiranat."

Tesyb stretched his legs after the long journey, while the merchant continued to lay out the schedule.

"Our speed will drop once those people join us. Instead of two more days at wagon's pace, it'll be three to four days of walking. That'll delay my plan to return here and look for a ship captain willing to lease his boat..." Trevalo brushed away the conversation with a flick of his hand. "Anyway, the first priority is unloading this coal. After making a deal for it, I'll try to meet some grain traders too and see if I can strike a few deals before dusk. We have a lot of wheat to buy this time."

Tesyb said, "Sure. I'll tell the boys to help out the drivers. But we'll be hungry after."

Trevalo laughed. "Don't worry. There's a tavern nearby, which offers cheap but good food. I can't afford more than a mug of ale for you all, since we have to get to work loading the wheat right from the morning. We'll leave a few men here to keep an eye on the wagons, and the rest of us will go to eat. We'll bring back enough food for those who remain here."

Tesyb grinned in anticipation of having some ale after so long. "That's just perfect. You go talk to the coal merchant now. I'll give the news to the boys and we'll get the wagons inside and start the unloading."