

Londoner 25

Chapter 25. Guard Captain

"But for now," Madam Nerida continued, her voice regaining its usual strength, "I will return to my duties and ensure the kitchens are well-prepared for the new meal schedule."

With a quick curtsy, Madam Nerida excused herself and returned to her duties within the manor.

Kivamus, left alone with his thoughts, pondered Madam Nerida's words. While the immediate crisis was averted, the long-term food security of Tiranat remained a looming challenge. And the idea of self-sufficiency, of Tiranat growing its own food, was an enticing one. But with the surrounding lands covered with deep forests and overrun by bandits and wild beasts, the dream seemed far-fetched. Yet, the conversation had put a seed of an idea in his mind.

He couldn't help but steal a glance at the dense forests surrounding the village. The potential for growing their own crops there lingered in his mind, a tempting solution to their long-term problem of buying and transporting food on the bandit-infested roads. However, the challenges were numerous. Clearing land, acquiring seeds, and establishing proper irrigation were just a small part of the many hurdles they would need to overcome.

Yet he knew they couldn't afford to remain dependent on traders forever. As he gazed at the towering forest looming around the manor, he thought that perhaps, just perhaps, they could find a way to make it a reality.

Kivamus' gaze darted towards Hudan, who was engrossed in an animated conversation with the guards near the manor gate. A small cluster of off-duty guards, and even some servants, had gathered around him, their postures suggesting their fascination with his words.

He summoned a nearby servant with a wave of his hand. "Bring Hudan here," he instructed.

The servant acknowledged the order with a respectful bow and hurried towards the gate, his footsteps light and swift. Kivamus then turned to Duvas, his brow furrowed in thought.

"Duvas," he inquired, "how much coal do we currently have in storage?"

Duvas took a moment to think. "While I can't give a precise figure right now," he admitted, "I can give you an estimate. As you know, my Lord, we have barely been able to sell any coal in the past few months. Although, a few of the villagers do buy a small amount from the merchants, now that winter is coming, along with the blacksmith Cedoron. And to supply them, the merchants buy the coal from us."

"However," he added, "without any traders coming from Cinran to buy it in bulk, those small purchases barely make a dent in our stockpiles. As a result, both of our dedicated coal barns are nearly full at the moment. To give you a rough estimate, my Lord, I'd say we currently have... somewhere between sixty and seventy wagonloads of coal stockpiled."

"That's a significant amount," Kivamus remarked. "Even with Pydas making multiple trips back and forth to Cinran, it's highly unlikely we'll be able to sell much of that coal before the snow blocks the roads. And with a gap of a few months before the snow melts and traders start coming again, it is not sensible to start coal mining again any time soon. I don't see a need to buy the tools Pydas had brought with him either. Unless..."

That stray comment from Madam Nerida about farming had planted a seed in Kivamus's mind, a seed that began to sprout with an intriguing possibility.

"Unless what, my Lord?" Gorsazo asked, mirroring the question in Duvas' mind.

"Duvas," he began, his gaze fixed intently on his advisor, "a question has been nagging at me. Why hasn't farming ever been attempted here in Tiranat?"

Duvas let out a weary sigh. "There are many reasons, my Lord," he explained.

"Firstly," he continued, his gaze sweeping across the bustling scene of various servants unloading the grain sacks, "we simply never had the manpower for it. Most of our able-bodied villagers work in the coal mines, my Lord. There simply aren't enough people in this village to spare for tending to farms. However," he added, "now that the coal mines are flooded and have been closed for the foreseeable future, we do have a village full of unemployed people right now."

"Indeed," Kivamus commented. "Carry on."

Duvas gestured towards the towering trees that bordered the manor grounds. "Secondly, as you can see, my Lord, Tiranat is enveloped by this dense, unforgiving forest. Clearing enough land for farming would be a monumental task that would require a significant number of workers that we haven't been able to spare in the past."

"Furthermore," Duvas continued, "Tiranat is a relatively young village. And the previous baron, the first to be awarded these lands after coal was discovered here, had little interest in its development." A flicker of disdain crossed his features as he spoke of the deceased baron. "May the Goddess forgive me for speaking ill of the dead," he continued, "but the previous Baron, who hailed from Cinran, had his only focus on profiting from the coal mines. He viewed these lands just as a source of personal wealth, which he then squandered on a lavish lifestyle back in Cinran."

Duvas shook his head in disapproval. "As a result, no effort was made to clear the surrounding forests. Speaking of the forests, they also pose a significant threat to any crops we might try to cultivate, not to mention, to the villagers themselves. Wild boars, wolves, bears, and even a few much more dangerous predators like adzees roam freely within these woods," he explained. "The promise of easy pickings in cultivated fields would undoubtedly draw many herbivores here, potentially destroying crops before they could even mature, while the carnivores would also come to hunt those animals themselves."

"It's also important to remember, my Lord," Duvas pointed out, his voice regaining its neutral tone, "that all these lands, including the surrounding forest, belong to the Baron of Tiranat - which is you now. The villagers themselves don't even own the land their shacks and houses are built on. That means even hunting in these forests isn't lawful without getting the baron's permission."

He paused for a moment, allowing the weight of his words to sink in. "And even if the villagers were inclined to take up farming themselves, they would require the baron's explicit permission to cultivate the land. And considering the previous Baron's nature," he concluded with a wry smile, "I can assure you that getting such permission wouldn't have been an easy thing, to say the least. Some villagers did try to do that, but the previous baron had refused to even make time to see them."

Duvas continued, "However, a few of the more daring villagers did start small vegetable patches and such behind their houses, even without getting any permission." He looked at Kivamus carefully. "I could have told the previous baron about them, and forgive me for saying this, my Lord, but... I did not do that. Most of the villagers in Tiranat barely have enough to eat anyway, and I saw no need to take even that from them. The same goes for the few brave souls who ventured into the forests to hunt, not that it would have been an easy thing to stop them without a wall surrounding the village."

Kivamus just shook his head, thinking about the greed of the previous baron. "There is nothing to forgive, Duvas. You did the right thing."

Hudan, his brow furrowed in concentration, marched purposefully towards Kivamus, Duvas, and Gorsazo upon hearing his name called by the servant.

"You wished to speak with me, my Lord?" he inquired.

Kivamus acknowledged the burly man with a nod. "Indeed, Hudan," he replied. "I'd like your honest assessment. How defensible would you say this village is? Could we defend Tiranat against a potential bandit raid?"

Hudan, his gaze sweeping across the palisade walls that encircled the manor, pursed his lips in thought. After taking a minute to think, he spoke. "The palisade itself appears to be in good condition, my Lord," he admitted. "The wooden stakes are strong, and the construction seems solid," he conceded. "It would provide a formidable barrier against a small raiding party."

"However," he continued, "our true weakness lies in the limited number of guards we have. While we might be able to hold the manor itself against a band of raiders, we simply don't have enough well-trained guards to defend the entire village, let alone chase them back."

He pointed towards the dense forest that surrounded the village. "The encroaching forest growth only amplifies the problem, my Lord," he explained. "Bandits could easily use the trees as cover, allowing them to lie in wait mere yards from the village, unseen and unheard, especially under the cloak of darkness. Such an ambush," he warned, his voice grim, "would leave us with little to no time to prepare a proper defense."

Hudan paused for a moment, his gaze moving toward the guards scattered around the manor grounds. "Also," he continued, "we lack a designated Guard Captain, my Lord, someone with the experience and leadership qualities to effectively command the guards during a crisis."

His voice firmed with conviction as he concluded. "My Lord, I strongly recommend promoting one of the more experienced guards to the position of Guard Captain as soon as possible. It's a critical role that shouldn't be left vacant any longer."

Kivamus and Gorsazo exchanged a thoughtful glance, both recognizing the merit of Hudan's observations. The immediate crisis of food shortage had been temporarily averted, but the ever-present threat of bandit attacks loomed large.

"Yes, of course," he admitted. "The appointment of a Guard Captain was already on my mind."

He observed Hudan thoughtfully, his thoughts lingering on the way the other guards had gravitated toward him earlier. "It seems the other guards hold you in high regard, Hudan," he remarked. "They were quite engrossed in your tales, weren't they?"

A hint of pride flickered in Hudan's eyes as he offered a curt nod. "Indeed, my Lord," he confirmed. "They were curious about the rigorous training I had endured to hopefully become a knight. Unfortunately, none of the men stationed here have had the privilege of such formal training." He shook his head slowly. "Of course, it's a different fact that I couldn't eventually succeed in becoming a knight."

Kivamus studied Hudan for a moment, a decision solidifying in his mind. "Hudan," he declared, "based on your experience and the respect you command amongst the guards, I am appointing you as the new Guard Captain."

Hudan's eyes widened in surprise. "Me, my Lord?" he stammered, his voice laced with disbelief. "But... but why? I haven't led that many men before... Surely someone else here would be more qualified for this position?"

A gentle smile played on Kivamus's lips. "You provided the answer yourself, Hudan," he pointed out. "None of the other guards have gone through the training that you have."

"The guards here already hold you in high esteem," Kivamus continued. "And as you know, we also need to significantly increase the number of guards we have. Only you possess the necessary skills and knowledge to properly train them."

He paused for a moment, allowing his words to sink in. "But most importantly," he continued, his voice dropping to a low, sincere tone, "you are amongst the very few people here whom I can trust with my life, Hudan. I believe you are the best person to lead our village guard."

Hudan remained silent for a moment, his brow furrowed in contemplation. Eventually, he nodded slowly.

"I understand your reasoning, my Lord," he conceded. "I will gladly accept this duty."

He bowed deeply before Kivamus. "I promise to dedicate myself fully to protecting you, the village, and its inhabitants. You will not be disappointed, my Lord," he added, his voice firm with newfound resolve.

A warm smile touched Kivamus's lips. "I have no doubt about that, Hudan," he replied, gesturing for him to rise.

Turning towards Duvas, he instructed, "Make an official announcement later. Inform everyone in the manor that Hudan has been appointed as the new Guard Captain."

A frown creased Kivamus's brow as he turned to Duvas. "How many guards do we have here at the manor, Duvas?" he inquired, a hint of concern lacing his voice.

Duvas stroked his beard thoughtfully for a moment before responding. "Currently, my Lord," he began, "we have eleven trained guards in the manor." He paused for a beat, then added, "However, if we include Hudan and Feroy, the total number increases to thirteen."

Kivamus muttered, "Eleven trained guards, you say. Thirteen including Hudan and Feroy. That's still a very small number to defend the entire village..."

"The situation wasn't always this dire, my Lord," Duvas responded. "Before the previous baron's ill-fated trip, we did have more guards. However, as you are well aware, none of them survived that journey." A brief silence descended upon them after hearing that.

Kivamus then shifted his focus to the present situation. "Currently, how are the remaining guards distributed?" he inquired.

"Before that tragedy," Duvas replied, his voice tinged with a touch of nostalgia, "we maintained a more robust guard presence. We had four guards stationed at the main gate and three guarding the eastern entrance, where the coal wagons typically arrive."

A shadow of worry creased his face. "However," he continued, his voice dropping to a low murmur, "the aftermath of that incident forced us to make difficult decisions. With fewer guards at our disposal, we could only afford to have two guards at each gate, and even then, we had to extend their watch hours, to compensate for the reduced manpower."

"Also," he added, "when the coal mines were operational, we needed to send an additional three or four guards there to ensure security. Although, with the mines currently closed, we don't have to send guards there."

Kivamus took a minute to absorb this information. He then turned his gaze towards Hudan, his mind already formulating a plan.

"Hudan," he started, "your first task as Guard Captain is to recruit new guards. We need more men who can be trained to fight effectively."

"Understood, my Lord," Hudan replied, his voice resolute. "I will make an announcement in the village after our talk."

Kivamus nodded approvingly. "With so many people currently unemployed in the village, I believe you'll have enough applicants to choose from. It is up to you to decide which of them possess the necessary skills and temperament to become a guard."

Hudan, however, interjected with a thoughtful frown. "While increasing the number of guards is essential, my Lord," he began cautiously, "allowing a large number of complete strangers to stay within the manor walls during these uncertain times might not be a good idea."