

Londoner 26

Chapter 26. Planning

Duvas nodded in agreement. "Normally, Hudan, your cautious approach would be absolutely right," he conceded.

A wry smile touched his lips. "However," he continued, his voice laced with a hint of pride, "I have been living here since this village was founded. Being a small village, there's hardly a face I don't recognize. Most of these young miners, the ones most likely to answer the call to become guards, I've seen them growing up since they were toddlers taking their first steps."

Duvas's gaze swept across the courtyard, looking at the servants and maids going about their duties. "Many of these people here have families in the village too," he pointed out. "They know the villagers well, and they wouldn't hesitate to vouch for anyone with a good reputation."

"That being said," he acknowledged, a hint of caution creeping into his voice, "before finalizing your selection, Hudan, it wouldn't hurt to run the names by me first. That way, I can verify if a potential recruit is someone I know and can vouch for, or perhaps someone who only arrived in Tiranat in recent years."

Hudan acknowledged Duvas's point with a respectful nod. "I understand your reasoning, Mr. Duvas," he replied with a respectful nod. "I will definitely consult with you before finalizing any selections."

Turning his attention towards Kivamus, Hudan inquired, "My Lord, how many potential recruits should I announce we're looking for?"

"Before I answer that," Kivamus began, "Duvas, can you tell me how much we currently pay our guards?"

"Certainly, my Lord," Duvas responded. "For a new guard, the daily wage comes to eleven coppers," he explained. "That's much better than the eight to ten coppers a day they typically earn as a miner. As for experienced guards," he continued, "their daily wages can range up to fourteen coppers, while we pay the Guard Captain eighteen coppers a day."

He paused for a moment, then added, "Unlike the miners who receive their wages daily, all the permanent manor staff, including the guards, are paid on a monthly basis. However, we do deduct the cost of the food and lodging we provide from their wages. Taking that into account," he calculated, "the net expense for a new guard comes to seven coppers per day, or a total of twenty-one silver coins every month."

"Now," he added, a hint of concern creeping into his voice, "this is assuming we offer them food and living quarters within the manor. If the new guards choose to buy their own food and stay with their families in the village when they're off duty, then we'd have to pay the full eleven copper daily wage."

Kivamus winced at the realization. "That can get expensive quickly," he muttered, stroking his chin thoughtfully. "For a dozen new guards, the monthly cost in cash alone would be over twenty-five gold crowns. And that figure nearly doubles if we have to pay their full wages without deducting for food and lodging."

A sigh escaped his lips as the weight of financial constraints settled upon him. The task of bolstering the village's defenses seemed to be getting more complicated by the minute.

"My Lord," Gorsazo said, "we've already made a contract to buy enough grain to sustain the entire village through the winter. So..."

"Indeed." Kivamus interrupted, a plan formulating in his mind. "We can offer grain as a form of payment instead of relying solely on coin."

"Hudan," he instructed, "when announcing the guard recruitment, inform them that we will compensate the new guards with grain instead of cash. Madam Nerida will be the best suited to determine a fair quantity - enough to sustain a family. When distributing the grain, she can help us with that. Of course, if they choose to live within the manor, they would get food and lodging with no wages for now, like the other guards, instead of grain."

"Announce that we will be recruiting a dozen guards for now, and possibly more later on." Kivamus added, "Make it clear that each guard we employ will receive a weekly allotment of grain sufficient to feed their family in case they choose to stay outside the manor with their families when they are off-duty. This system will remain in place throughout the winter. We will reconsider it after that."

Duvas interjected, "My lord, usually, when we provide them with a regular wage, they would use the coin remaining after buying grains to purchase coal, for cooking and heating. However, they can't do that now if we just provide them grain as payment and no coin. It would also be difficult for them to find the time to look for firewood in the forests when training and guard duty will take most of their time."

He continued, "For those who live in the manor, it won't be a problem, since their food will be cooked along with others' meals by the maids, and there will be enough braziers for heating in the manor. So, I'd suggest providing a small quantity of coal as well, along with the grain rations, for those who'll live outside the manor."

Kivamus nodded, "That's a good idea." He looked at Hudan. "Add that to the announcement as well."

He paused for a moment, his gaze sweeping across the courtyard, and the sacks of grain being transferred to the barns. "Thankfully," he added with a hint of relief, "we will have all the grain we need within two weeks if everything goes well. But even until then, we should have enough reserves now to compensate the new guards with grain rations. And of course, we aren't going to have a shortage of coal this winter, so we can provide them with sufficient grain and coal for now."

Hudan looked curious after hearing about the availability of grain but didn't say anything. "I'll ensure the message reaches every villager, my Lord," he pledged with a curt nod. "I will personally make this announcement to the villagers after our discussion."

Kivamus, however, had a different plan in mind. "Hold on, Hudan. Just give the information to some off-duty guards, and they can spread the news throughout the village." He said in a low voice, "There's something else I need to discuss with you."

He cast a wary glance around them, trying to ensure that no one was within earshot. After seeing that a few servants were working nearby, he signaled for others to follow him toward a secluded spot near the manor walls. Hudan fell into step beside Kivamus as they moved towards the location, while Gorsazo and Duvas followed closely behind.

Once they reached close to the walls, Kivamus looked around to confirm no one else was nearby and lowered his voice even further.

"Hudan," he began, his tone serious, "there's something you might not yet be aware of. I just struck a deal with Pydas to purchase additional grain from Cinran and have it delivered here."

Hudan's brow furrowed on hearing that. "Additional grain, my Lord?" he echoed, looking at all the grain being unloaded from Pydas' wagons.

Kivamus nodded curtly. "While buying the stock of grain Pydas had brought with him was a good start," he explained, "it simply won't be enough to sustain the entire village through the winter. We need significantly more - around a hundred and fifty sacks, not including what we've already bought."

Hudan inhaled sharply on hearing the amount of grain they still needed.

"Don't worry, providing the money for this is my concern." Kivamus paused for a moment, allowing the weight of his words to sink in. "However, to achieve this, we need to organize two more trips to Cinran and back, each taking at least a week to complete. We'll also be providing three wagons of our own on top of the three Pydas brought, to transport that big an amount."

Hudan looked towards the busy courtyard. "I did notice the servants loading coal into our own wagons as well."

"Indeed." Kivamus continued, "Ideally, we needed there to be eight wagons in the caravan, but we'll only have six of them, even including the three of ours. Although Pydas has said that he will try to rent more wagons from Cinran, I'm still sending another damaged wagon that we have here, to Cinran for repairs. It won't be useful on the first trip, but hopefully, it will be repaired in time for us to use it on the second return trip from there, in case Pydas isn't able to get more wagons."

"It will make the caravan quite large, and thus, a ripe target for any bandits on the road. But this is the only way that we can stock up all the grain we need, in case the snow falls early this year." He continued, his expression grim. "So we must take every precaution to ensure the caravan's safety. We just can't let the bandits get their hands on it, or the village will starve."

Hudan nodded. "Indeed, my Lord. But currently, Pydas only has a single guard with him, after everything that happened with Levalo."

"I pledged Pydas to provide six guards." Kivamus thought for a moment and added, "However, I plan to send two guards for each loaded wagon we are sending. We just can't afford to take any chances with the caravan. This would bring the total number of guards needed for the first trip to eleven, not including the one already with Pydas. Or, even more, if we can afford it."

"My Lord," Duvas reminded Kivamus, "I tried to tell this to you earlier when we were negotiating with Pydas, but you stopped me from speaking at that time. We only have thirteen guards in total as I mentioned, even including Hudan and Feroy. Dispatching eleven guards for the caravan would leave the manor virtually defenseless. It's just not feasible, my Lord!"

"I realize that," Kivamus conceded. "But Pydas doesn't know about it, nor does he need to know that we are so short on trained guards. This is not the kind of information that we should let any outsiders find out about. That's why I cut you off at that time."

"Frankly," he continued, his voice dropping to a low murmur, "if I hadn't promised him to provide enough guards, he probably wouldn't even have agreed to take this trip in these dangerous times, especially considering the size and value of the caravan. Apart from that, we're also entrusting him with a significant amount of gold. So we need enough guards not just to protect the caravan from bandits, but also to keep Pydas from getting any thoughts of just taking off with our gold."

"That's true enough, my Lord," Gorsazo commented. "But the problem remains that we simply don't have enough trained guards to protect the manor, and escort the caravan at the same time."

Kivamus, after confirming no one else was nearby, leaned forward and interjected with a smirk, "I didn't say that we needed eleven trained guards, did I?"

"What do you mean, my Lord?" Duvas asked.

"Let me explain," Kivamus continued, seeing the confusion etched on their faces. "Even if we sent half of our trained guards with the caravan, and we can barely afford to send even that many of them away from the manor, the reality is that a bandit attack could still result in many casualties. We already know from the bandits who attacked us at Helga's inn, that their group could have mobilized up to a dozen men with prior notice."

Hudan added, "It was indeed a big group, my Lord, but we did kill five of them, including their leader. And I'd say they were mercenaries more than bandits since many of them were staying in Cinran itself, waiting for contracts. So it's unlikely that they would be trying to ambush caravans on that deserted road. That's not to say there couldn't be other groups of bandits roaming around."

"Indeed," Kivamus nodded. "However, a bandit group cannot know if or when a caravan will pass on that rarely traveled road, so it is unlikely they would have a dozen men lying in wait on just a single route. But even if they have just seven or eight men waiting to ambush the caravan, and we send half a dozen trained guards, we might not be able to protect the grain even after losing men to a fight."

A shadow of concern flickered across his features. "We simply cannot afford to lose any more of our already limited pool of skilled fighters. They're the backbone of our village's defense right now. Even though I have told Hudan to recruit more guards, it will take time until they are ready to defend the village."

He paused for a moment, his gaze sweeping across their faces. "But the thing is, whether the guards are seasoned veterans or raw recruits," he pointed out, "the difference in their training only becomes a factor if an actual fight erupts. So our primary objective in defending the caravan has to be deterrence. That's why I proposed sending at least a dozen guards, including Pydas' driver. And we'll send Feroys to lead them as well. That number," he explained, "will serve as a powerful deterrent, forcing any bandit group to think twice before attempting an attack."

"What I hope with this," he added, "is to prevent the situation from escalating to an actual battle at all, in case bandits are indeed scouting that road. From what I've heard," he continued, "bandits typically target easy prey - undefended caravans or lone travelers where they can plunder without risking their own necks. Engaging in battle with more than a dozen guards wouldn't be a risk most bandit groups are willing to take, at least not without a significant advantage in numbers," he added with a hint of confidence. "They would much rather seek an easier target with a higher chance of success."

Hudan offered a nod of agreement. "Indeed, my Lord," he concurred. "Realistically, any bandit group targeting a caravan with a dozen guards would likely require a force of around eighteen to twenty to have a good chance of winning without taking too many casualties themselves. And a huge group of twenty bandits waiting in ambush along such a deserted road, where potential targets might appear only once every few weeks, seems highly unlikely."

"If they did possess such a sizable force," Hudan added, "they would likely have focused their efforts on wealthier trade routes or targeted bigger towns within the kingdom. They wouldn't waste their time lurking in this poor and sparsely populated region."

"All of that makes sense, but how do we even get a dozen guards, my Lord?" Duvas asked.