

## Londoner 27

### Chapter 27. Subterfuge

"Here's what I propose," Kivamus began, his voice low. "As I said earlier, we'll need to send a contingent of a dozen guards with the caravan, but not all of them need to be seasoned veterans."

He held up a hand to forestall any objections. "Hear me out," he said. "We'll select half of those, that's five men not including the guard Pydas already has, from our trained guards, to escort the caravan and provide genuine protection. These will be the veteran defenders we already have here at the manor."

"Now, for the remaining guards," he continued, his voice dropping to a whisper, "we primarily need bodies - men who can convincingly appear to be trained guards from a distance."

"Think about it," he continued, upon seeing the uncertain faces of others, "bandit scouts would typically observe their targets from afar, usually from the fringes of the forest bordering the road. To maintain their element of surprise, they're unlikely to get very close to the caravan unless they are going to attack immediately." He added, "And if all the guards, both seasoned and green, are outfitted with similar leather vests and armed with swords, shields, and bows, they'll present a formidable appearance from a distance."

"What I'm hoping with this," he added with a hint of optimism in his voice, "is that the bandits' scouts, upon seeing a dozen guards protecting the caravan, will deem it too well-protected to attack it and will move on. It's all about deterrence, not necessarily about having the most skilled fighters."

Kivamus cast a wary glance around them, ensuring their privacy. "As for Pydas," he added, "we'll simply tell him that we're sending just a few new guards alongside the veterans as a training exercise so that they can gain experience, just in case any of the newer recruits are... less discreet about their recent addition to our ranks."

He continued, "But he doesn't have to be told the exact number of veterans and new guards. All he needs to know is that we are sending at least a dozen guards with the caravan."

A thoughtful silence descended upon the group as they thought about the subterfuge.

Gorsazo chimed in with a measured response. "My Lord," he began, his brow furrowed in concern, "while I understand the logic behind your plan, it does seem like a rather audacious gamble. There's always the chance the bandits might see through the facade, and then the caravan could be in a dangerous situation."

Hudan said, "I can't say that I support the idea of sending untrained men to escort the caravan either. But since we barely have a dozen trained guards in total, it is necessary to keep at least half of them here to defend the manor." He paused for a moment, then added with a hopeful note, "But if the Goddess smiles upon us and it does work, my Lord, it would be a brilliant stroke of strategy. We would be able to protect our much-needed grain, and assuming we can deter an attack from happening at all, we would also prevent any casualties in the caravan guards."

"Indeed," Duvas conceded. "But we'll be stretched thin on manpower to defend the manor if we send half our trained guards with the caravan. However, the alternative is certainly unthinkable. We desperately need those grain supplies to see us through the winter. We simply cannot afford to have it fall into the hands of bandits."

Kivamus offered a resolute nod. "I understand your reservations, Duvas. But like you said, the grain is essential for our survival. As for the manor's defenses," he continued, "we'll still have six of the trained guards remaining in the manor. Hudan will be here as well, along with the new ones that we will start training from today or tomorrow."

He looked at Hudan. "Assuming we get enough new applicants by evening, those who show a good aptitude for this, we will put on duty from tonight itself to man the gates. One new guard paired with an experienced one on every shift. Of course, the best six of them will go with the caravan tomorrow, but the others can be put on duty immediately to give them some experience."

Hudan confirmed, "I will select those who look dangerous," he said with a determined glint in his eye, "and can learn how to act tough by tomorrow to send with the caravan. As for the rest, I will start their training as soon as I have enough men."

"Good," Kivamus said approvingly. "Hopefully, by the time Pydas returns in a week, we will have enough guards here who at least know the very basics of fighting."

He then turned to Duvas. "Do we have enough armor and weapons to equip them?" he inquired.

In a less than enthusiastic voice, Duvas offered, "I can't say that our extra equipment is of top quality, my Lord," he admitted. "However, we should have more than enough to equip at least those six new guards we'll be sending tomorrow."

"My Lord," Hudan reminded, "we also have the spoils of our recent victory at Helga's inn." A triumphant glint flickered in his eyes. "We seized a decent amount of equipment from those bandits - seven swords and five well-worn leather armors. While their quality is far from great, they'll serve our purpose."

A hint of a smile played on his lips. "Equipping the new guards on the caravan with the looted armor will create the impression of seasoned fighters. From a distance, bandit scouts won't be able to discern the true quality of the equipment anyway. All they'll see is a caravan well-guarded by men who appear battle-hardened. But if they do come a little closer to observe, then because the armor bears the marks of previous battles," he reasoned, "it will lend an air of experience to the new guards."

"This, in turn," he concluded, his voice firm with conviction, "will significantly enhance the illusion of strength we're trying to create, deterring any potential bandit attacks. We can reserve our higher-quality equipment here at the manor for the new guards we'll be training, my Lord."

Kivamus, a smile spreading across his face, offered a nod of approval. "Excellent thinking, Hudan," he commended. "That will indeed support the illusion of a well-guarded caravan."

He cast a glance at the group, ensuring everyone was on the same page. "Now, listen closely," he began, his voice laced with urgency. "Pydas departs with the caravan at dawn tomorrow. We need to be prepared to send the guards by then. Ideally, we should have at least eleven guards ready to escort the shipment, and more if possible."

He turned to Hudan. "You have a single day to assemble this contingent. Scout both the servants within the manor and any potential recruits from the village who would have applied. By nightfall, I need you to identify the most suitable candidates for this. Prioritize those with prior fighting experience," he instructed, his voice firm. "But in their absence, select strong individuals who can convincingly pass themselves off as trained guards."

Hudan acknowledged the task at hand with a curt nod. "Consider it done, my Lord," he affirmed. "We'll send at least eleven guards with the caravan tomorrow, and the rest will start their training here under me." He looked at Duvas. "I'll let you have the final say in the selection, Mr Duvas, to verify which of the recruits can be trusted inside the manor." Duvas gave a nod as a reply.

Gorsazo interjected with a question. "But what about Feroy, my Lord?" he inquired. "Shouldn't he remain here to assist with the training of the new recruits?"

"No, it'll be better to send Feroy to accompany the caravan," Kivamus declared. "We need a trustworthy individual to keep an eye on things. And if needed, they can take shelter at Helga's inn for the night. After all, we can certainly trust Feroy with the keys to the inn."

"Indeed, my Lord," Hudan replied. "I'll go and find someone to make the announcement in the village." With a newfound sense of purpose and a plan already in place, Hudan hurried off.

The weight of the plan hung heavy in the air. The fate of the grain shipment, and potentially the well-being of the entire village, rested on their ability to pull off this elaborate bluff - a daring gamble that hinged on creating a convincing illusion of strength. It could ensure their survival through the harsh winter, or leave them exposed and vulnerable.

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The tension surrounding the urgent discussions about the caravan and the limited number of guards they had, was interrupted by a servant's arrival. He approached Duvas, interrupting their hushed conversation, and delivered a brief message.

Turning back to the group, Duvas addressed Kivamus and Gorsazo. "The maid," he announced, "the one who was a slave, has returned from the village." He also gestured for the servant to bring the young woman to them.

Their conversation paused as they turned their attention toward the approaching figures.

A young woman, seemingly in her early twenties, walked hesitantly towards them, her eyes brimming with unshed tears. Clad in a maid's attire in a faded brown color, she appeared fragile and uncertain. Madam Nerida, the head maid, accompanied her, a hint of a reassuring smile gracing her lips.

Before Kivamus could utter a word of greeting, the young woman, her voice trembling with emotion, blurted out a question. "My Lord," she stammered, her words tumbling over each other, "is it true? Am I truly free? I'm no longer a slave?"

She cast a pleading look at them, her voice laced with disbelief. "The other servants told me about what you said earlier," she continued, "but I... I thought they were jesting... They even said that I will be paid like the other workers from now on!"

The raw vulnerability in her voice resonated with everyone present. The very concept of freedom, something most took for granted, seemed almost unreal to her.

Kivamus, his features softening with empathy, offered a reassuring smile with a firm nod. "Indeed," he confirmed gently, "you are a free woman from now on and not a slave. And yes, when the situation improves, and we are able to resume a proper wage system, you will be compensated fairly for your work, just like everyone else in the manor."

His words seemed to hit her like a physical blow. The weight of her newfound freedom, a concept she might have only dreamt of before, appeared to overwhelm her. As if the ground beneath her had vanished, her legs buckled beneath her, threatening to send her crashing to the ground.

Before she could crumble to the ground, Madam Nerida, with practiced grace, darted forward and caught the young woman, steadying her before she could fall. The dam of emotions finally broke, and the young woman dissolved into open sobs.

The sight of her unrestrained grief tugged at the heartstrings of those witnessing the scene. Sensing the others' concerned gazes, Madam Nerida spoke in a calming voice. "There's no need to worry, my Lord," she assured Kivamus. "She's merely overwhelmed. The news of her freedom is a lot to take in, but I will take care of her."

Kivamus, relieved to see the young maid in capable hands, offered a grateful nod. "Of course, Madam Nerida," he replied. "Please do. And give her a day off for today, if she needs it."

Madam Nerida nodded with a grateful smile. She turned to the maid, attempting to gently guide her away. "Come, Leah," she said softly. "Let's head back."

Leah, however, surprised everyone by pulling back slightly, determination replacing the earlier vulnerability in her eyes. "I can stand, Madam Nerida," she declared, her voice still having a small tremor in it.

A hint of concern lingered in Madam Nerida's voice as she inquired, "Are you sure, Leah?"

With a determined nod, for the first time since her arrival, Leah straightened her posture, her chin held high. In that single moment, a spark of newfound strength flickered within her - a testament to the transformative power of freedom.

Kivamus had a smile on his face, with a sense of purpose stirring within him. The fight to secure the village's future wasn't just about protecting their walls, it was about building a future where freedom and hope could flourish, even amidst hardship.

She turned back towards Kivamus and dipped into a curtsy, her voice thick with gratitude.

"Thank you, my Lord," she stammered, wiping her tears with the sleeve of her worn dress. "Thank you for everything."

A hesitant question escaped her lips. "Does that mean, my Lord," she asked, her voice still laced with a hint of uncertainty, "that I am free to leave?"

Kivamus, his gaze filled with a newfound respect for the young woman's spirit, offered a reassuring nod. "Indeed, Leah," he confirmed. "You are a free woman, and it is up to you now. You are no longer bound to this manor or any master."

"But have you considered your options carefully, Leah?" he asked kindly. "If you choose to leave the manor and quit working as a maid, do you have the means to support yourself? To buy food and shelter?"

Leah shook her head fervently. "No, no, my Lord!" she exclaimed, her voice tinged with panic. "That's not what I meant at all! I would like to continue working here if you would allow me to. It's just..." her voice trailed off, her words catching in her throat.

With a deep breath, she managed to continue. "I simply cannot... I cannot bear to live within these walls any longer..." she confessed, her voice barely a whisper.

Kivamus, a hint of understanding dawning upon him, acknowledged her feelings with a gentle nod. The weight of her enslavement had undoubtedly left scars living inside this manor, particularly under the previous baron, who was not known to be kind to the servants. He remembered how little Clarisa was scared that he would beat her because the previous baron used to do that. The situation couldn't have been any better for the former slaves either, under the previous baron's rule.

"I understand, Leah," he reassured her. "As I said before, where you live and how you live is entirely your choice now. It is your life to lead. However," he cautioned, "I would advise you to remain in Tiranat for the time being. The other nobles and slave owners in the region might not take kindly to the news of a freed slave." He added, "I'm not even certain they'll tolerate the act of freeing slaves within my own barony, but it's my burden to bear, and I will find a way to deal with it."

Leah offered a grateful nod. "Of course, my Lord. I am an orphan, with no ties outside of Tiranat. I have no desire to leave. But," she suggested tentatively, "would it be possible for me to work here in the manor during the day, and then live outside in the village when I'm not working?"

She instinctively turned towards Madam Nerida, a person she seemed accustomed to reporting in her role as a maid. "Madam," she pleaded, "would it be possible for me to live outside the manor grounds? Like the other villagers?"