

Londoner 39

Chapter 39. Training Grounds

Kivamus winced as one arrow flew wildly off course, embedding itself harmlessly into the manor wall behind the targets. Another villager, a man of lean build and wiry frame, let out a triumphant yell as his arrow found its mark, striking the target squarely in the straw-stuffed head. Feroy acknowledged the successful shot with a hearty clap on the young man's back, although they were too far away from Kivamus for him to hear their words.

A satisfied smile touched Kivamus's lips. It seemed the testing was yielding positive results already, and they would get at least a few effective guards from these villagers. With focused training and dedicated instructors like Hudan and Feroy, these raw recruits had the potential to become capable guards, bolstering Tiranat's defenses.

Of course, if only he could get access to a few firearms, most of this training would become a moot point. Even untrained villagers, including the women and the older men, would be able to wield guns easily without much training, and they could successfully repel any bandit raid in the future. But that would come later. Before anything else, he had to secure the basic necessities of food and shelter for the villagers.

Kivamus watched as the mock duel between the two fighters within the circle reached its climax. Their wooden swords met again with a resounding thunk, but this time, the exchange ended less favorably for one of them. Losing his grip on the wooden sword, one of the fighters stumbled back and landed with a thud in the dusty ground. His opponent, flushed with victory, raised his own wooden sword and shield with a triumphant roar, as the collapsed villager slowly got up again while dusting his trousers.

The victor, however, enjoyed his glory only for a brief moment before Hudan's booming voice cut through the air, shattering the illusion of a real fight. "Not like that!" Hudan roared at the disarmed fighter who had picked up his wooden sword again. "You're holding the sword too loosely, again! I could disarm you with a single hand and a twig!"

He pivoted his attention to the victor, his growl deepening. "And you! That's a sword, not a pickaxe! Stop trying to hit from the top every single time. It'll only take a second for someone to slash you sideways and cut you in half!"

Suddenly aware of Kivamus observing the spectacle, Hudan redirected his gaze towards the Baron. He offered a brief apologetic nod before bellowing at the two sparring villagers. "Start again! And Kerel," he

barked, directing his attention to the grizzled guard with a mane of iron-gray hair, "keep an eye on them. I'll be back in a minute."

With that, he strode purposefully towards Kivamus and Gorsazo, his frustration simmering just beneath the surface.

"How's it going?" Kivamus inquired, his voice calm and steady.

Hudan shook his head slowly, a sigh escaping his lips. "Not great, my Lord," he admitted. "While a handful of them show some natural talent for combat, the rest are practically useless in a fight right now."

He paused for a moment. "At least Feroz seems to have discovered a decent archer among them. I'll be sending him with the caravan tomorrow, just in case they encounter any bandits on the road." He pointed towards the wiry villager who had once again found his mark, the arrow lodged firmly in the center of the straw target's chest. "In an ambush," Hudan explained, "that guy, Yufim, could potentially take out one or two bandits before they even reach the wagons." He sighed, "But the majority of these new recruits would be lucky to last a minute against a serious attack."

Kivamus offered a reassuring nod. "There's always a learning curve," he replied. "We wouldn't expect them to become knights overnight."

He cast a scrutinizing gaze over the group of recruits, noting their calloused hands and scarred physiques that spoke of a life filled with hardship. He commented, "But I have to say, Hudan, you've selected well for our purposes tomorrow. Even if they don't yet know how to fight well, at first glance it would be difficult for anyone to tell if they are seasoned veterans or new recruits, especially when they are outfitted with leather armor and real swords."

Lowering his voice to a whisper, Kivamus took a quick glance around to ensure that other than Gorsazo, no one else was within earshot. "Remember," he said, "we need half a dozen of them ready to leave by daybreak tomorrow. So after you send the extra men back to the village - anyone beyond the twelve we need, have these new guards test-fit the armor and weapons we retrieved from the bandits near Helga's Inn, tonight itself."

Hudan nodded. "Don't worry, my Lord," he assured Kivamus, "I'll get them outfitted later today. And by tomorrow morning, we'll have twelve well-equipped guards including Feroy, ready to escort the caravan."

He continued, elaborating on his plan, "And as you mentioned earlier, I'll assign the remaining recruits to night watch duty at the gates starting tonight, each recruit paired with a trained guard." He pointed towards the eastern gates of the manor, where two guards were standing next to the gate. "Currently, both the gates of the manor are manned by two guards at all times, but half of our trained men will go with the caravan tomorrow. So by putting one new recruit along with each trained guard, the gates will still appear well-manned from the outside, even if it would only be a facade right now. This will also give our five trained guards a much-needed night of rest, instead of them carrying out the night shift at the gates as well before they leave tomorrow."

He added, "Of course, the villagers will indeed realize that the new guards were mining coal a while ago, and are not trained, but we only need to present this facade to any scouts of the bandits who might be watching from the forests. Hopefully, within a week or two, I will have whipped them into a good enough shape that they will be able to hold their own in a fight."

A satisfied smile touched Kivamus's lips. "And to ensure these men would be loyal to us, I presume you've already vetted these men with Duvas?"

Hudan nodded. "Indeed, my Lord. Mr Duvas has known most of these men for at least a decade. They're trustworthy folk."

Kivamus considered this for a moment. "Speaking of guards," he said, "I've noticed that none of them, even those on duty, seem to be wearing any metal armor or even helmets."

Hudan offered a slow nod. "That's true, my Lord. Unfortunately, we simply don't have any iron armor or helmets here at the manor. Such equipment comes at a hefty price, and typically only knights can afford it. And based on what I've gathered, the previous Baron only had a single retired knight in his retinue, and he died during that ambush along with the baron himself."

He continued, "May the Goddess forgive me for speaking ill of the dead, but the previous baron was not known as a miser for nothing. If he had spent a little more money on equipping his guards, he might not be dead today." He gave a shrug. "But who am I to say that, maybe he really didn't have enough money to afford it."

A shadow of concern flickered across Kivamus's face as the reality of their limited resources settled in. This was indeed one of the poorest baronies in the duchy, if not in the whole kingdom, where the previous baron only had a single retired knight to defend him. He added, "So, for now, the best we can equip our guards with is just leather armor?"

Hudan nodded slowly. "That's the current reality of the manor, my lord."

Kivamus absorbed this information, his brow furrowed in contemplation. "I see," he murmured, acknowledging the limitations. "Well, carry on with your training and selections then," he finally said.

Hudan acknowledged the order with another nod and jogged back towards the area where the mock fights were taking place.

Kivamus turned to Gorsazo, a question hanging heavy in the air. "What do you think?" he asked. "Will our gamble with these new recruits pay off?"

Gorsazo studied the recruits for a moment, their movements reflecting a mix of raw determination and clumsy technique. He then met Kivamus's gaze, his own expression solemn. "I hope so, my Lord," he finally replied, his voice heavy with uncertainty. "I truly hope so. But only time will tell."

After observing the training exercises for a few more minutes, Kivamus decided to resume his tour of the manor grounds. As he rounded a corner, he spotted Madam Nerida approaching him.

"You asked for me, my Lord?" she inquired upon reaching him.

"Indeed," Kivamus confirmed. "I have new instructions regarding the meals you make. From tonight, I want you to significantly increase the quantity of food prepared." He continued, "Starting tonight, we'll be providing meals twice a day for all the elderly and children living in the village. Once our grain reserves are replenished, we will increase that to three meals a day." He gestured towards the manor house. "You can talk with Duvass to get a more accurate headcount for preparing the meals."

He paused for a moment, then continued, "As you may have heard, starting tomorrow, we'll be compensating both the new guards and the manual laborers with grain instead of coin. You'll need to

allocate a suitable amount for each individual, enough to sustain their families for a full week, since we will be providing a weekly payment of grain rations to them." He added, "Now, for those chosen as guards, I want you to allocate a quarter more grain than what the manual workers will receive."

Nerida's brow furrowed slightly. "My Lord," she began cautiously, "even with the recent grain purchase, our remaining stock can't sustain this level of increased consumption for long."

Kivamus offered a reassuring smile. "You don't have to worry about that. I've already made arrangements to acquire a fresh supply of grain within the week."

Nerida absorbed the information with a firm nod. "Understood, my Lord," she finally replied. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I must begin preparations immediately if we're to have enough food for everyone tonight."

"Of course, Madam Nerida," Kivamus said with a nod. "Carry on with your duties."

With a final nod of respect, Nerida hurried off towards the kitchens.

A guard, his posture stiff and formal, approached Kivamus, ushering forward a man whose powerful build demanded attention. While not quite as massive as Hudan, the newcomer's broad shoulders and bulging muscles still rivaled the guard captain's physique.

The man, his strides purposeful, stopped before Kivamus and dipped his head in a respectful bow. "Cedoron at your service, my Lord," he rumbled. "I take care of all the welding and blacksmithing work in Tiranat."

Kivamus returned the greeting with a nod, his gaze appraising the blacksmith. "Cedoron," he began, "I have a few things I'd like to commission, and your skills are exactly what I need for them."

Cedoron's face, etched with the lines of a life spent wrestling with fire and metal, lit up with a mix of relief and eagerness. "New orders would be very welcome, my Lord," he admitted. "Work's been scarce for me ever since the mines shut down."

Kivamus began, "As you may have heard from the village announcements, I'm aiming to clear a part of the surrounding forests to make way for farmland, for which I'll need a lot of axes. I'm also planning to construct a couple of large longhouses, which is a type of communal housing, before the harsh winter arrives, along with a few other projects I have in mind." He paused for a moment, allowing the information to sink in.

He continued, "While I'll send you to speak with Duvas, the majordomo, to determine the exact quantities needed, here's a rough estimate. I'll need around two dozen axes, along with a few hammers. Maybe a dozen machetes as well. And of course, a substantial amount of iron nails and some hinges for doors, along with various other odds and ends."

A frown creased Cedoron's brow as he interrupted. "Forgive my ignorance, my Lord," he said, scratching his head, "but what exactly is a machete?"

Kivamus pondered for a moment, searching for a way to explain the unfamiliar tool. "Hmm, it's like a small sword," he began, tracing a shape in the air with his hands. "But unlike a sword, it's usually a little curved and used for clearing away smaller branches from trees and shrubs."

A spark of recognition ignited in Cedoron's eyes. "Ah, I believe I understand what you mean. It's something similar to a cutlass, then?"

Kivamus raised an eyebrow, surprised by the blacksmith's knowledge. "A cutlass? Like the ones pirates use?"