

## Londoner 47

### Chapter 47. Departure

The crisp dawn painted the sky in hues of orange and red as Kivamus stood near the manor gates, with Hudan, Feroy, and Duvas standing nearby. The early morning breeze held a distinct chill, making Kivamus pull his fur coat tighter around his frame. Although he hadn't heard the sound of the temple bell earlier, Duvas had told him that the time was just after six bells right now.

Finally, after a lot of preparation for the journey, the caravan of seven wagons, each pulled by a pair of sturdy horses, stood ready before them. Although it had made the stables in the manor considerably less crowded for now, after providing the horses for the wagons. A dozen guards, a mix of seasoned veterans and recently recruited villagers, along with Pydas and his wagon driver, moved around the caravan, their movements purposeful as they performed final checks. Each wagon would be accompanied by two guards, one experienced and one new, who were now meticulously checking every rope and knot of their assigned wagon, ensuring nothing would come loose during the journey.

Kivamus scanned the guards, all of whom were clad in similar leather armor, with an iron sword strapped to their hips, and a sturdy wooden shield leaning against their designated seats. Although he didn't find it easy to tell which of them were the new guards. I guess that's a good thing, he thought.

Earlier, Duvas had told him that the guards had been well-provisioned for the journey. Some dried meat from their own stores, freshly baked bread, and a supply of hardtack biscuits would see them through, along with enough waterskins for everyone. Kivamus could even smell the remnants of the coal fire in the servant hall's kitchen, where the morning meal was prepared for those departing for Cinran.

Pydas, with his intimate knowledge of the route, had assured Kivamus that the dense forests along the way offered ample grazing areas for the horses, eliminating the need to carry additional feed. Six of the wagons were loaded with coal, their wooden frames straining under the black bounty, while the seventh one, which was damaged, would remain empty. All seven, however, were meticulously covered with oilcloth, in case it rained on the way, so it wasn't noticeable which of them was the damaged one. "Hudan," he asked, "why've you covered the empty wagon as well?"

Hudan pointed towards the last wagon. "This is the decoy, my lord," he explained. "One of the bandits' favorite tricks," Hudan continued, his voice low and serious, "is to target the last wagon in a line. They'll drop a fallen branch or some other obstacle right in front of it, creating a break in the caravan. And in bad weather, including rain or even during a rarely-made night journey, the wagons ahead might not even notice it right away. The bandits then have their pickings, plundering a single, isolated wagon without having to confront the entire group. However, by making it appear identical to the others, we

hopefully lessen the potential reward for an attack. The bandits wouldn't be getting anything, and by the time they'd go after the rest of the caravan, the guards would have enough time to prepare."

He added in a low voice, "I know this wouldn't do much to protect the caravan in case of an actual attack, but we might as well do it, even if it only improves our chances a little bit on this first journey."

Feroy spoke up with a hint of a smirk, "And jus' in case the bandits wanna get clever," he said, patting the hilt of his sword, "I'll be enjoying the view from the back, ready to give them a surprise welcome." He pointed towards a young guard with long blond hair tied into a knot standing near a wagon. "Yufim there," he continued, indicating the new archer with a proud grin, "will be sitting in the middle wagon, you know? His aim with a bow is unmatched, and he can cover all sides of the caravan if need be."

Kivamus nodded approvingly. "While the guards appear to be well-armed, wouldn't giving them spears be helpful as well? They'd offer a longer reach in combat, right?"

Hudan chuckled, a dry sound devoid of humor. He added in a low voice, "Training someone in proper swordsmanship takes time and dedication, my Lord. While a spear offers reach, it requires a tight formation to be effective. Most of these new recruits can barely hold a spear straight, let alone maintain a straight line during an ambush. And even if they could, a caravan's guards are spread a long way from the first to the last wagon, so in case an ambush happens from a side, they simply wouldn't have the time to form up properly in that chaos anyway."

Feroy added in an even lower voice, "Honestly milord, in this case, it's better to maintain the illusion of a well-trained force, you know? Swordsmen are often much better fighters than spearmen in a close range fight, and as long as the bandits believe they're facing a dozen well skilled sword-fighters, they'd be far less likely to attack the caravan - and that suits us jus' fine."

Kivamus nodded. "It makes sense..."

One of the new guards jogged towards them. "Feroy, sir," he called out, his voice a touch too loud in his enthusiasm, "we are ready to leave!"

"Stop calling me sir!" Feroy retorted. "And I'll be there in a moment." The guard nodded and jogged back towards his wagon.

Soon, Pydas approached Kivamus as well, with worry lines creasing his face. "We really should get going now, my Lord."

Kivamus took a deep breath. "Very well," he replied, his voice firm. "I hope the journey goes without any problems. Good luck to you all."

Feroy nodded with a grin, "Nothing to worry, milord. We'll be back within a week, you know?"

With a final nod, Kivamus watched as Feroy and the guards scrambled onto their respective wagons. The creaking of wooden axles and the rhythmic clapping of hooves filled the air as the line of wagons snaked its way out of the manor grounds. A knot of unease tightened in his gut as he watched them leave. The success of the plan, and the well-being of his people through the harsh winter, rested on the shoulders of these men and the precious cargo they'll bring back. The caravan's journey to Cinran had begun, and with it, the first crucial step towards securing their future.

After having a quick breakfast in the manor hall, Kivamus came outside again, walking towards the manor gate along with Gorsazo. A sizable crowd had already gathered outside the manor gates, including men and women, while Duvas was having an animated conversation with Hudan nearby.

"Quite a turnout," Kivamus observed, his voice carrying across the morning air.

Duvas nodded, "Indeed, my lord. There are even more villagers here than I expected."

"How many of them are waiting here?" Kivamus asked. "From what you told me, the total population of Tiranat is around three hundred thirty only."

Duvas nodded. "Thirty-nine amongst them... no. Now fifty-one people, including the new guards we have hired, are living in the manor. That means around two hundred and eighty people in total live in the village. That number is an estimate, of course." He paused, his gaze scanning the crowd. "Right now, at least sixty or seventy workers are already waiting here, and I think that number could climb to nearly a hundred and fifty, once everyone who's willing to work has arrived."

Gorsazo said, "That would mean nearly all the villagers of working age would be here."

"More or less, apart from those who have shops or work in other trades," Duvas replied with a nod. "When the mines were working, we had more than a hundred men working underground to dig coal, along with another twenty or thirty women who carried the coal out in small baskets, from inside the mines to the carts waiting outside." He added, "Nearly a dozen children also worked in the smaller tunnels, to bring the coal from hard to reach places. However, with the present condition of the village, if some women didn't have to stay at home to take care of their children or parents, even more people would have come here."

Kivamus winced on hearing about children working in the mines. Of course, child labour had to be present in most place in the medieval ages... He even remembered hearing from someone in the past, that even in England, child labor was fairly common until laws were passed specifically to prevent that. However, when a family is nearly starving, every single one of them would go out to find some work, no matter if it was a ten year old child, or a sixty year old elder.

"Very well," he said, his voice firm. "So there will be no shortage of workers then. But instead of waiting for the rest of them to arrive, we should put these people to work right now. Our first priority is to start cutting down trees in the north of the village to clear the land for the longhouses. About that, how many axes do we have at our disposal right now?"

Duvas hesitated. "Not as many as we'd like," he admitted. "We had a dozen axes in the manor, apart from a few more which some of the villagers have already brought here. I had told them yesterday to bring any tools they might have with them, and in return, those people will be given priority in allotting them work. I'll have a better count of axes soon, when more of them have arrived here. Hopefully, we should be able to gather around two dozen of them."

Kivamus nodded, his gaze fixed on the horizon. "Cedoron will give us another three or four axes by this evening, and then three machetes by tomorrow evening and so on. But that still limits us to a maximum of two dozen people actually cutting trees today."

Gorsazo interjected. "That's true, but they will still need at least that many more men to help them. Felling trees is only a start, and the real work begins afterward. The branches need to be trimmed, the logs cut to manageable lengths, and so on."

"They will also need to tie the logs to the horses with a rope," Duvas added, "to drag them to a central place, where they will stack the logs."

"Drag them?" Thinking about how much not having modern machines limited them in doing even simple things, Kivamus asked, "Isn't there a better way?"

Hudan replied, "Well, if the logs aren't too long, and the ground is flat enough, they can even roll the logs to move them more easily. But it's not always feasible, particularly in a forested area."

"Maybe we can use our carts to haul the logs..." Gorsazo added, looking at a small cart kept nearby. "Although I doubt our existing carts are built for such heavy loads."

Duvas shook his head. "You're right. They're simply not designed for that kind of weight, or I'd have suggested them myself. They'd immediately break into splinters if we tried to put fully grown trees on them."

A spark of innovation ignited in Kivamus' mind as he thought about the problem. While they didn't have any tractors or other such modern machines, it should still be possible to build a primitive system to pull logs much easier, even if powered by horses. Any simple method which used wheels to lift the logs, even from one side, would be better than just dragging them flat on the ground. "We could build a new kind of cart," he suggested. "Well, not exactly a cart, but something large and sturdy enough to handle these loads but also simple enough to make."

He added, "I know we had to send the damaged wagon to Cinran for repairs because no craftsman was skilled enough to do that in Tiranat, but that wagon was much more complex, with its bearings and double-axle design. What we need here doesn't need to be as complex as those wagons, but it should be sufficient for moving logs. In fact, building this should be a priority. We have to move as many trees as we can, as quickly as possible." He looked at Duvas. "How wide are these trees we'll be cutting?"

Duvas scratched his graying beard thoughtfully. "While a few of them grow much bigger than others, most of the mature trees should be around two feet wide," he estimated.

"Two feet," Kivamus muttered, thinking about it. "That should be manageable." He glanced around, searching for the carpenter, but didn't see him nearby. "Where is Taniok?" he asked.