

FROM LONDONER TO LORD

14. A New Home

The doors of the manor house stood in front of them, promising some respite from the chilly evening air. Kivamus and Gorsazo fell into step behind Duvas, their boots crunching softly on the packed dirt path. Helga and her family followed close behind, a mix of apprehension and curiosity swirling in their eyes.

The heavy doors creaked open with a sigh, and a scene of rustic warmth greeted them. The floor, constructed from broad, uneven planks, creaked softly beneath their footsteps as they entered. The large hall doubled as a living and dining area, its thick wooden beams stretching overhead. A massive stone fireplace dominated the wall on the right, its flickering flames casting long, dancing shadows across the rough-hewn wooden walls. The air hung heavy with the scent of smoke, a familiar and comforting aroma in this weather. A young man in a tunic, probably a servant of the manor, was putting more coal in the fire. A thick chimney loomed above it, its blackened stone testament to countless fires in the past.

A long wooden table, its surface worn smooth by countless meals, was kept on the left side of the room. Animal pelts, mostly of wolves and bears from the surrounding forests, adorned the floors and walls, adding a touch of warmth and texture to the otherwise spartan space. A much bigger pelt, likely of an adzee that Kivamus had seen for the first time today, was spread on the floor as well. The windows, devoid of any glass pane within them, were closed at this time to preserve the heat. Closer to the fireplace, a group of sturdy wooden chairs awaited them.

Duvas gestured towards the chairs closest to the crackling fire. "My lord," he said with a bow, "please, make yourselves comfortable."

Kivamus nodded his thanks and settled into one of the chairs, Gorsazo taking the seat beside him. The warmth from the fire seeping into their chilled bones was a pleasing experience for everyone. Helga and her family hesitated for a moment, unsure of their place in the manor's hierarchy. Seeing their discomfort, Kivamus gestured toward the remaining chairs with a smile. "Please, everyone," he invited, "take a seat. There's room for all of us." Nodding obligingly, Helga and Syryne took the remaining chairs, while young Lucem sat on the edge of a pelt on the floor, his wide eyes taking in everything with a mixture of apprehension and wonder.

Kivamus eased himself into his chair, the weight of his new title settling upon him with a mix of excitement and trepidation. This was his new home now, a

far cry from the life he once knew, but a challenge he was determined to embrace.

"Thank you so much, my lord, for allowing us a place here," Helga said gratefully. "When we left the inn, I wasn't sure what awaited us, but you have been more kind than I could ever have imagined. We are forever in your debt, my lord."

"Of course not. I'm just trying to do my part to help," Kivamus replied. "After we have eaten, Duvass will show you your rooms."

Duvass nodded to that. "There are many rooms here, my lord. Your own bedchamber is upstairs, along with a few more empty rooms on the upper floor. I stay in one of the guest rooms on the ground floor, and Madam Helga and her family can stay in another guest room there. Mister Gorsazo can take a room anywhere he wishes, as well."

"I'd prefer to stay on the upper floor, in case Lord Kivamus needs any help."

"Of course, Gorsazo," Duvass added.

They all sat there near the welcoming warmth of the fireplace, waiting for the simple dinner to be ready.

"Duvas, why don't you take a look again at the Duke's proclamation in the light of the fire? It will be better to get it over with," Kivamus said.

"Oh, forgive me, my lord, I nearly forgot! Like I said earlier, my lord, it is only a formality at this point, but I should confirm it anyway," Duvas said. He walked to the bigger table where he had kept the mentioned scroll earlier and brought it near the light of the fireplace. He sat down again on his chair, reading the scroll carefully.

Kivamus stared at the rolled-up parchment in Duvas' hand, the rough, leathery texture a stark contrast to the smooth, cold feel of the touchscreen he was accustomed to. Back in London, promotions or new positions came with an impersonal email, a sterile notification that did little to stir emotions. Here, in this world bathed in the flickering firelight, such pronouncements took on a tangible form - a weathered scroll, perhaps of bark or cured animal hide, imbued with the weight of tradition. The official announcement outside the manor house, delivered with such reverence by Duvas, seemed like a relic from a bygone era to Kivamus.

A pang of longing shot through him. He missed his phone, a pocket-sized portal to the world at his fingertips. He missed the comforting hum of his

computer, with the familiar glow of its screen. Here, such technology would be seen as the work of witchcraft, as foreign and unbelievable as little green men landing from an alien ship in Trafalgar Square. Would he ever see such gadgets again? A wave of homesickness washed over him with a yearning for the familiar comforts of his old life.

Duvas carefully rolled the scroll back up, his weathered face etched with seriousness. "Everything appears in order, my Lord," he declared, his voice a steady rumble in the firelit hall. "No cause for concern with this record. Welcome to Tiranat, my lord, once again," Duvas added, a hint of warmth in his voice.

Duvas' words, meant to be reassuring, only emphasized the vast gulf between his two lives. Welcome. The word felt hollow in this unfamiliar world. The comfort of his past life was a distant memory, replaced by the harsh realities of this new one. This new life, so different from anything he'd ever known, presented a formidable challenge.

Yet, as he looked around the room at the concerned faces of Helga, Gorsazo, and the others, he realized that he wasn't alone in this. He might be a stranger in a strange land and his past a distant dream, but he wouldn't let nostalgia cripple him. And perhaps, just perhaps, he could forge a new and meaningful path in this strange land. After all, a welcome, no matter how different, was still a beginning. Taking a deep breath, he straightened his shoulders, ready to embrace whatever challenge this strange new world had in store for him.

Despite the whirlwind of emotions swirling within him, he managed a grateful smile for Duvas' welcome. "Thank you, Duvas," he said, his voice sincere. "I may be new to this, but I assure you, I'll do everything in my power to make life better for everyone here in Tiranat."

A glimmer of hope sparked in the eyes of Helga, Duvas, and the others around the fire. A genuine smile touched Helga's lips, a stark contrast to the worry lines etched on her face just moments ago. Kivamus recognized the weary fatigue in their expressions.

"It's been a long journey," Kivamus continued. "Everyone must be exhausted. After we've eaten, let's get a good night's sleep. But from tomorrow," he continued, his gaze sweeping across the room, "we begin the hard work of rebuilding Tiranat. There's much to be done." His voice held a quiet determination, a stark contrast to the previous Baron's perceived apathy.

Gorsazo added, "Indeed, my Lord. Looking at the faces of the villagers today, I couldn't help but think the previous baron had been mismanaging the barony. Even if the coal mines are the only major source of income for the barony, surely there could have been something more done to ensure the villagers weren't on the brink of starvation." Gorsazo cleared his throat and continued with a touch of remorse in his voice. "May the Goddess forgive me

for speaking ill of the dead, but I believe most in the village would be relieved that he's gone."

Duvas nodded. "Indeed, my lord. I tried on numerous occasions to bring the villagers' plight to the previous Baron's attention. However, his mind was always set on the next grand trip to Cinran. As you might have heard, my lord, Count Cinran is well known for his extravagant celebrations, and his court is a beehive of nobles vying for his favor. The previous Baron, unfortunately, preferred that company to the needs of his own people."

Kivamus nodded, gesturing for them to continue.

Helga leaned forward, her brow furrowed in concern. "My lord," she interjected, "perhaps the most pressing matter is taking stock of what resources we have remaining. We need to assess the grain stores here in the manor. Even if we have to purchase additional supplies from Cinran, we need enough grain reserves to sustain the village through the winter. Once the snow falls, as Pydas mentioned yesterday, all the roads near the Arakin mountains become treacherous, and the route from Tiranat to Cinran usually gets impassable for wagons."

Kivamus couldn't help but feel a surge of gratitude for the people around him. These were the advisors he needed around him, honest, capable, and deeply invested in the well-being of Tiranat. People who understood the land and its

challenges, and were already offering solutions to the problems he could only begin to grasp. "Excellent point, Helga," he acknowledged, his gaze flickering between them all. "We'll talk in detail about these matters tomorrow morning. Additionally, Duvas, I need a complete picture of our financial situation. Knowing the exact amount of gold crowns at our disposal will be crucial in determining our next steps."

Duvas's nod held a hint of resignation as he spoke. "Certainly, my lord," he said. "However, Tiranat is a small barony, one of the poorest in the Duchy, I dare say. We have no grand treasury to speak of. All we have is a simple iron strongbox which I used to keep the Baron's funds. And on that ill-fated journey to Cinran..." he paused, his voice trailing off for a moment.

"The Baron took most of it, didn't he?" Kivamus finished the sentence for him, a grim understanding settling on his features.

Duvas sighed. "Indeed, my Lord. He needed it to pay the annual taxes to the Count. Normally, I would have accompanied him for such matters, but on that occasion, a sudden illness kept me bedridden." A hint of relief flickered in his eyes. "In hindsight, perhaps it was a blessing from the Goddess. If I had gone with the Baron on that journey, I wouldn't be sitting here now."

"Duvas, I'm grateful you're alive and well. But those damned bandits! Without a decent starting sum, doing anything to help the village is much more difficult."

"There's more, my lord," Duvas added. "Unfortunately, on that journey, the Baron took most of what we had, to pay the annual taxes to Count Cinran. And while the Count hasn't sent any riders so far to demand the taxes that were due to him for this year, it might not be long before he does."

Kivamus shook his head slowly, a wave of frustration washing over him. "We can only hope that the approaching winter prevents him from doing that. He has to know that the village was barely standing in the absence of the Baron! We can't afford to pay any taxes right now!"

Gorsazo spoke up. "It may be fine, my lord. By now, the news must have gotten to Count Cinran that this barony was given to you, a son of the Duke. And even if any apparent goodwill to you doesn't last for long, we can hopefully still ask him to waive off the taxes for at least this year, if that rider does come with the demand."

"I hope so, Gorsazo, I really hope so." He looked at Duvas. "But even then, we would have to pay the taxes the next year, won't we?"

Duvas replied, "Indeed, my lord. Usually, the taxes are paid in spring, but if we ask for an extension, the Count may allow us more time to pay, as long as we don't skip paying for another year."

Kivamus turned his gaze to Gorsazo. "You have kept my personal savings securely with you, right Gorsazo?"

"Of course, my Lord," Gorsazo replied, his hand instinctively going to the hidden pouch at his waist.

Kivamus leaned back in his chair, the weight of the situation settling upon him. "At least that's a start," he muttered.

Syryne, unable to contain her surprise, blurted out, "My lord, you'd use your own savings to help the village?"

Kivamus met her gaze with unwavering determination. "Without a doubt, Syryne. We have no other choice at the moment. Tiranat is my village now and these are my people. I won't leave the survival of villagers in the hands of fate this winter."

A warm smile spread across Helga's face, mirroring the expressions of others around the fire. A sense of hope, fragile yet persistent, bloomed in the room. They had a leader, a strange one perhaps, but a leader who, unlike the last, seemed to genuinely care for the welfare of his people. He was a man willing to put his own well-being on the line for the betterment of Tiranat. Tonight, with a meager starting point and a whole lot of determination, the future of Tiranat began to look a little less bleak.

As the fire crackled and the last embers of the day died down, they waited for the simple dinner to be served to them with all kinds of thoughts passing through their minds. The discussion had also served as a stark reminder of the challenges that lay ahead of them. And yet, the air also held the warmth of a new beginning, of shared purpose, and perhaps, just perhaps, the spark of hope that a better future was within reach.

Soon, a young maid, a girl in her early teens, entered the sitting hall of the manor house while carrying a big wooden tray with a single bowl. She came near the people sitting close to the fireplace, and after performing a quick curtsy to Kivamus, held the tray in front of him. She looked waif thin and took a moment to speak, seemingly shy before her new liege. "This is for you, my lord. Madam Nerida, the head maid, said to bring it to you first, my lord, since you might be hungry a lot." She took a deep breath, as if willing herself to continue speaking. "The food for others will be brought soon too, my lord."

Kivamus took the bowl from her with a gentle smile and kept it on a small table next to him. "Thank you, uh... what's your name?"

"I'm Clarisa, my lord," she squeaked.

"Well, thank you, Clarisa." Kivamus added, "And would you please thank Madam Nerida as well for me, Clarisa?"

"I will, my lord," she said and with another quick curtsy turned away to go back.

"You should start eating, my lord, we will wait for our food," Sryne said to Kivamus.

"No, no, it's fine. I'll just wait until we can all eat together," Kivamus added.

All of a sudden, Helga, who was watching the maid going back, spoke loudly, "Hey! Are you okay, Clarisa?"

Kivamus also looked towards the door, when Clarisa, the young maid, who was holding the wall near the door for support, lost her balance completely and fell on the floor, the tray in her hand clattering on the wooden planks nearby.

Helga, who was the first to reach her, took a single look at her foaming mouth and convulsing body, and weakly said to others, "Poison..."