

Londoner 19

Chapter 19. A New Beginning

"Wake up, my lord."

"It's getting late, my lord. Please wake up."

Kivamus blearily opened his eyes, blinking at the unfamiliar ceiling. This is getting old... he thought as he saw that it was Gorsazo who was waking him up, again.

Seeing that Gorsazo was going to speak again, he added, "Alright, alright! I'm awake now. Give me a minute." For a moment, he felt a sense of *deja vu*, before he remembered the near-poisoning of the last night and getting to his bed on the upper floor, after a quick meal of porridge and... soup.

Slowly, he sat up on the bed, looking around the room. It was a simple enough room but had an actual bed, unlike the inns he had stayed in until now. The wooden window, without any glass in it, had been opened in the morning to let in some light, and it was around... he looked around at the walls by habit, searching for a clock, before remembering where he was. Right... no accurate clocks in this era.

The room was decorated by many pelts on the floor as well as the walls, along with a few fur coats hanging on a hook on one side of the room. There was a small wooden table, along with two chairs, kept close to the window. A few decorative items including a vase, perhaps made of silver, were placed on it. There were also a few wooden chests on one side of the room.

"You should have some breakfast, my lord," Gorsazo said. "Madam Nerida has told me that she'll bake some bread today."

Nodding in reply, Kivamus left the bed finally, starting the first day of his new life as the Baron of Tiranat.

Kivamus pushed open the heavy oak doors leading into the manor's sitting hall, the resulting creak a jarring contrast to the silent efficiency of his modern London apartment. He winced, the memory of the ramshackle privy's rough wooden bench still fresh in his mind. Indoor plumbing was a necessity, not a luxury, and he made a mental note to address the issue as soon as possible.

Inside the hall, a warm fire crackled in the hearth, casting a glow on the faces of those already gathered. Gorsazo and Duvas were already seated at the long table, talking in a low murmur. Madam Helga was sitting nearby, along with Syryne and Lucem.

"Good morning, my lord," Duvas greeted, a hint of concern in his voice. "I hope you slept well."

Kivamus couldn't help but chuckle wryly. Compared to the comfort of his modern apartment in London, everything here was practically a medieval nightmare. But considering the alternative of sleeping in wagons and on straw beds, he replied, "It wasn't so bad."

Madam Nerida entered the hall at that moment, flanked by another maid. They were carrying a basket overflowing with freshly baked bread and trays laden with steaming bowls of porridge mixed with some meat and vegetables, and a surprising sight - several boiled eggs. The aroma of food filled the air, a welcome change from the trail rations he'd been surviving with, on his journey. Kivamus' face broke into a smile after looking at the food. And he also didn't have to worry about his teeth breaking since he didn't have to eat hard-tack biscuits anymore!

"Good morning, Lord Kivamus," Madam Nerida said, her voice a touch hesitant. "I prepared breakfast. I hope it meets with your approval."

"It looks delicious, Madam Nerida. Thank you." He gestured towards an empty chair at the table. "Please, join us for breakfast."

Madam Nerida blinked in surprise. No lord in Tiranat had ever invited a maid to share a meal. Yet, something in Kivamus' sincere demeanor put her at ease. With a hesitant nod, she took a seat at the edge of a chair, her posture stiff with unaccustomed formality.

Around the table, murmurs of gratitude filled the air, their faces creased with a genuine appreciation for the shared meal. Lucem, wide-eyed with wonder, alternated looking at Kivamus and his breakfast with a mixture of curiosity and hesitation.

Turning to Helga, Kivamus inquired, "And how is Clarissa this morning?"

With a gentle smile gracing her lips, Helga replied, "Much better, my lord. The fever has gone down, and I gave her some soup before putting her to sleep again."

As they ate, the clattering of bowls and spoons filled the room. The freshly made food was a welcome change from the dried rations and meat jerky they had on their journey.

The door of the hall swung open suddenly, shattering the calm that had settled over the group. A guard, his face flushed and chest heaving, stumbled into the room.

"My lord!" he gasped, bowing clumsily. "Levalo, the wagon driver... he's escaped!"

Kivamus, startled by the abrupt announcement, shot upright in his armchair. "What!" he boomed, disbelief laced in his voice. The news sent a jolt of tension through the room.

Feroy burst through the doorway moments later, his face contorted in fury. "Did I hear that right?" he thundered, his voice low and dangerous. "Levalo escaped? How in the blazes did you let that happen?"

The guard, now thoroughly flustered, stammered out an apology, bowing low before Kivamus. "Forgive me, my lord," he stammered, a tremor in his voice, "I... I went inside the barn when I thought to give him some water, but he was gone!"

Feroy let out a frustrated growl. "That's impossible!" he interjected, his anger simmering back to the surface. "Those knots I tied him with, they wouldn't have budged!"

Kivamus held up a hand to silence Feroy's tirade. "Calm yourself, Feroy," he commanded, his tone firm yet pacifying. "Let the guard explain."

He turned back to the trembling guard. "Tell me what happened," he ordered gently. "Don't be afraid, just tell us the truth."

The guard shrunk back under Feroy's glare, his nervousness intensifying. "It... it might be my fault, my lord," he gulped, his eyes darting around the room. "Levalo woke me up in the middle of the night,

begging to go outside to relieve himself. I didn't make him do his business right there, you see, because of the grains we store in the barn. Didn't want him messing it all up."

He continued, his voice barely a whisper, "So I took him to a corner outside the barn, with his hands still tied. After he was done, I locked him back in the barn after tying him to a wooden post again. I... I fear I didn't tie the ropes as securely to the post as I should have in the darkness."

Feroy's anger flared anew. "This wouldn't have happened if you hadn't untied him in the first place!" he bellowed. "My knots wouldn't have budged! Why didn't you call for the guard captain?"

The guard flinched at Feroy's outburst, his eyes darting between him and Kivamus. "There's... there's no guard captain right now, sir," he stammered. "Usually we go to Mister Duvas to ask what to do, but I didn't want to disturb Lord Kivamus's sleep by waking up Mister Duvas who stays in the manor house too."

A tense silence descended upon the room. Kivamus, his brow furrowed in thought, weighed the situation. Levalo's escape was a complication they could ill afford, but assigning blame wouldn't solve anything. "We'll address the lack of a guard captain later today," he assured the guard. "But even if Levalo managed to untie the ropes somehow, he was still confined within the barn. How did he escape from there?"

Feroy spun on the nervous guard, his anger barely contained. "Did you abandon your post at any point during the night?" he barked.

The guard, his face reddening, shook his head vehemently. "No, sir! I remained by the door the entire night," he defended himself.

Just then, another guard who was older than the first one, entered the hall. He bowed respectfully to Kivamus before speaking. "My lord," he reported, "we found a loose plank in the back wall of the barn. It appears Levalo used that to escape."

The guard continued, his voice grim. "We also couldn't locate the ropes we used to bind him inside the barn. It seems he used them to climb over the palisade fence behind the barn and then disappeared into the forest under the cover of night."

Kivamus rubbed his temples in frustration. "Can we organize a search party to track him down?"

The older guard shook his head regretfully. "I already dispatched a few men upon learning about the escape, my lord. They found tracks leading north into the forest, but the fallen leaves made it difficult to follow it for long. By now, it's been several hours and he'd likely have covered a significant distance already. And a thorough search would require venturing deep into the woods. Unfortunately, we simply lack the manpower to effectively search such a vast area."

Feroy added, his voice low but firm. "He's right, my lord. These forests are sprawling and treacherous. As much as I loathe to say it, spending any more time searching for him would be futile now. Instead, we should focus on tightening the manor's security."

Kivamus, after a moment of consideration, gave a firm nod. "Agreed, Feroy. See to it that the security measures around the manor are bolstered immediately. We need to ensure such a thing doesn't happen again."

After bowing to him, Feroy along with the two guards exited the hall, leaving them to their now cold meal.

Breakfast passed in companionable silence, broken only by the clinking of spoons and the murmur of conversation from Helga's kids. As the breakfast dishes were cleared, Kivamus rose from the table, his gaze sweeping across the room. Madam Nerida, her earlier nervousness replaced by a newfound respect on her slightly wrinkled face, stood up as well.

Kivamus stretched, his muscles protesting silently after a night spent on an unfamiliar mattress. He moved towards the plush armchairs nestled near the fireplace, the warmth inviting him.

"Duvas, Gorsazo, Helga," he invited, "join me by the fire. Syryne," he added, turning to the young woman, "perhaps you could keep an eye on Clarisa for a while?"

Syryne, with a small smile, nodded and left towards Clarisa's room. Lucem, being curious, followed Kivamus like a shadow, eager to soak up everything he could about this new place and his new liege.

Kivamus turned to the head maid. "Madam Nerida," he began, gesturing towards a chair near the smoldering fireplace. "Please, do not leave just yet. I would like to discuss a few matters with you."

Madam Nerida hesitated for a moment, the ingrained hierarchy of lord and servant battling with the genuine warmth in Kivamus's eyes. Finally, with a small nod, she settled into the offered chair, her gaze unwavering.

Concern flickered across Kivamus's face as he spoke. "How are our grain stores?" he inquired.

Nerida's smile faltered slightly. "Until recently, my lord," she began, "we still had enough to ensure everyone had two meals a day, even if we couldn't afford to eat three meals like in plentiful times. But our reserves have dwindled considerably. To conserve what little we have left, we had to cut back to one meal a day not long ago."

Kivamus winced. One meager meal a day was hardly enough to sustain a population, especially with the physical demands of manual work in this era. He needed to get a handle on the exact situation.

"How much grain do we have remaining in the barns?" he inquired, his voice firm. "And how long will it realistically last us?"

Nerida fidgeted with her hands. "Last I checked, my lord, we only have about three sacks of grain remaining." She continued hesitantly, "To feed everyone in the manor now, even with only one meal a day, that might stretch for at most two months. If we go back to two meals a day, it would last half of that."

Kivamus grimaced. The situation was far worse than he had anticipated. Three sacks wouldn't even make a dent in feeding the entire manor for an extended period. He had to find a solution, and fast. He had to. The lives of his people depended on it.

Kivamus asked Duvas, "What is the situation in the village? Do they have enough to eat in the winter?"

Duvas sighed with a deep rumble that spoke volumes. "They do not, my lord, but the village's problems are even worse than just low grain stores," he admitted, his voice heavy with worry.

Kivamus's brow furrowed. "Even worse? Explain yourself, Duvas."

The majordomo cleared his throat and launched into a detailed explanation. "Around a month ago, my lord," he began, "a fierce thunderstorm wreaked havoc on Tiranat. The rains were relentless, and unfortunately, they flooded the mineshafts. We were lucky to get everyone out safely, but..." he trailed off, his face etched with a mixture of frustration and helplessness.

"But?" Kivamus prompted, a knot of dread forming in his stomach.

"Since then, the mines have been unusable," Duvas finished grimly. "And with hardly any traders willing to brave the bandit-infested roads to buy our coal in the past few months, both of our coal barns are nearly filled to capacity. That's why I had to make a difficult decision..." The implication hung heavy in the air.

"You stopped mining altogether..." Kivamus breathed.

Duvas nodded with a trace of sadness in his eyes. "There was no choice, my lord. We couldn't afford to continue mining and pay the miners if we were unable to sell what we'd already extracted."

"And the miners?" he asked, his voice grim. "What about the men who rely on the mines for their livelihood?"

Duvas shook his head, his expression filled with sympathy. "They're out of work, my lord. Most of Tiranat's workforce relies on the income from working in the coal mines. With the mining halted, they have no other source of income, and that is what has led to the current dire situation in the village."

A heavy silence descended upon the room. Coal mining was the lifeblood of Tiranat's economy. Without it, the already precarious situation had become a full-blown crisis. The lack of trade wasn't just affecting their food stores, it was crippling the entire economy of Tiranat. The image of families struggling to survive, their hearths growing cold as winter approached, painted a bleak picture in his mind.

Duvas leaned forward, his voice dropping to a low murmur. "The meager funds we have left would barely be enough to pay the miners' wages for a full month, my lord. We simply can't afford to reopen

the mines until we manage to obtain more money by selling the coal we already have. We won't be able to pay the miners otherwise... We simply don't have the funds for it, my lord."

He looked at Kivamus with a worried gaze and continued, "I could have let the mines run for a few weeks longer, my lord, but I had to hold on to some of the money, in case we got an opportunity to purchase some grain. We couldn't risk being completely depleted if a trader did come here."

Dwindling food supplies, unemployed workers, and a crippled economy - the situation was far more grave than he had initially imagined. The village was teetering on the brink of collapse. Kivamus, a man from a world of plenty, now faced a battle for survival in a land where every resource, every decision, held the potential for life or death. He gripped the arms of the chair, knuckles turning white. Winter was approaching, and without a drastic change in fortunes, many in Tiranat wouldn't survive the harsh season.