

FROM LONDONER TO LORD

4. Discourse

"Why did you say that Tiranat is one of the most dangerous baronies?"

"Mainly because of its location, my lord. It is surrounded by forests on all sides, and forests in southern Reslinor are known to be full of bandits and even armed mercenaries. It is also situated far away from any major town or city so the rule of law doesn't mean much there. So far, I know of only a single barony, whose baron died of something other than natural causes in recent times, outside of war, of course. Also, after Cinran, it is one of the closest places in the kingdom to the Tolasi hills, where all three major kingdoms of Cilaria have claims and where skirmishes happen frequently between them for control of the hills. And while the southern forests will make it difficult if the Kingdom of Giralica ever decides to invade Reslinor from the south, Tiranat would be the first place they'll encounter in our kingdom."

"I see, there are multiple factors at play. It really doesn't seem like a place I'd like to live, not that I have any say in the matter." This world seemed more and more intent on killing him soon. He decided to ask about the thought that had given him a pause earlier. "Tell me, does it not seem suspicious that the

previous Baron was killed by bandits so soon before I was sent here?" Kivamus asked in a low voice.

"My lord, it is not my place to cast suspicions on the Duke or his family, even though I have my doubts about it. In fact, even talking to you this much is not something I'm used to, my lord, outside of the lessons I used to give to you in the past."

Kivamus had realized by now how difficult it must have been for Gorsazo to deal with the ever-drunk Kivamus in the past. While it was true that Kivamus's drinking got out of control only a few weeks ago, the original Kivamus had indeed liked drinking a lot in the past. However, he knew that to survive in this harsh world he would need all the help Gorsazo could provide him, and that wouldn't happen if he was not comfortable talking to his... uh... liege. It was still difficult for him to think of himself as a noble, whom others called a "lord".

"I realize that now. But like I said yesterday, consider this a new beginning to my life. I am not going to repeat the mistakes I made in the past and I need you to be as open and frank with me as you can. We are both going to Tiranat now and we have to be able to talk to each other freely if we are going to survive this."

"I'm very glad to hear that, my lord," Gorsazo said with a small smile on his face. He continued, "About what you asked earlier, my lord, although the

official announcement was that the previous Baron of Tiranat was killed by bandits who were after money, there are whispers amongst people that he was actually ambushed by people to kill him. As a baron, he would always have at least a few guards with him, and even if the bandits decided to attack someone who had guards, I don't think they would have killed a noble and even his family after realizing that it was a baron."

Gorsazo paused for a moment, thinking. "My lord, although bandits are known to occasionally hold members of a noble's family for ransom near small towns and villages, it is rare and only done by a big gang. And even then they don't actually harm a noble or his family physically. That's an unwritten rule that seems to be followed everywhere. Also, the guards would have tried their best to defend the baron and usually, the bandits would run off when they think it's too tough a fight for them. They usually only try to go after less well-defended targets anyway. But in this case, nobody of the Baron's retinue survived the attack. If you ask my opinion, my lord, I think the bandits knew who they were attacking and their actual target was to kill the baron, and not just to rob him."

"After hearing about all this, that's what I think as well. And not to leave even a single person of his retinue alive... I'd say they didn't want to leave any witnesses." Kivamus continued after a moment, "And since nobody survived to tell the tale, who's to say that it was even bandits and not actual mercenaries hired to kill him?"

"It's certainly possible my lord. Their bodies were found by another merchant traveling on the road later that day. If..." Gorsazo hesitated before speaking, "If I may suggest this, my lord, it might have been arranged by one of your brothers, or even both of them. Since they might have wanted you to be sent only to Tiranat."

"I told you Gorsazo, you can speak freely with me. And while it's still possible that it might be a powerful gang who did it just for money, I don't think it's very likely from what you told me. Still, the baron was killed soon before I was going to be sent here, while bandits have seemingly started to kill nobles now. And thus, Tiranat, probably the most dangerous barony in the Duchy of Ulriga, was without a baron right when I was going to be sent away as another newly made baron... All of this taken together seems too much to be just a coincidence, doesn't it? It makes me think that my brothers are not satisfied enough by sending me far away from Ulriga. They might actually prefer a permanent solution to me."

"So it seems, my lord. They may even have arranged for another such ambush on your journey." He thought for a minute and said, "In fact, it did seem unusual for a member of the Duke's family to be sent to Cinran on a solo carriage without even a guard, instead of in a boat which would be faster as well as safer. Now that I think about it, the road till here might not have been as safe as I thought earlier... I apologize, my lord."

"What's done is done. And you know as well as I do that it's unlikely they'll leave a witness this time around either. That means neither of us is safe. We are in the same boat, so to speak. And indeed, unless we hire enough guards for our journey to Tiranat, which we probably don't have the funds for anyway, we can't deal with a bandit attack if it comes."

"True, my lord. And hiring people we don't already know, when there might be an imminent threat on you is too risky as well, since we can't be sure where their real loyalties lie. But we should still stay in Cinran for tonight and see if we can find a merchant going south to Tiranat in the morning. We might not have to hire guards if he already has them."

"But would he even want others to travel with them? Especially people he doesn't know?"

"Not always, my lord. Although it's better to not let anyone know that you are the new baron before you reach Tiranat, just in case someone is waiting to get words to bandits about you, we might still have to tell the merchant about it. Since turning a profit is any merchant's top priority, building a good relationship with a new baron would be considered advantageous by him in the long run. So, if we mention your title to him, he might be more likely to agree to our proposal."

Gorsazo continued, "However, it is also possible that people might not want to take the risk of traveling with you if they know your title, because, after all, the previous baron was ambushed and killed as well. We'll have to see in the morning, my lord. Thankfully, the clothes you've been wearing since we left Ulriga don't immediately identify you as a noble, even though people can tell that you might be a rich landowner or a big merchant. So any watchers waiting for you won't recognize you that easily by your clothes unless they remember your face."

"That's good, I guess," Kivamus said, having not given much thought to that until now. "But how will you even convince the people in Tiranat that I'm the new baron and not an imposter?"

"I do have the Duke's proclamation with me, my lord," Gorsazo said while patting a pocket on the side of his tunic.

"But, anyone could claim that with a written document, right?"

Gorsazo looked at Kivamus as if he was being daft again. "That's not possible, my lord, rest assured. No one will dare to try and impersonate a noble, or he'll be hanged when caught."

"Oh..." Kivamus realized that this was indeed very different from modern London, where copying a document just required a good photocopy machine. But in this era, most people wouldn't even own any paper and likely couldn't read or write either. So, for most people in this world, a written document with the Duke's seal meant it was genuine without any doubt.

"By the way, do we need to meet the count while passing through Cinran, since the barony of Tiranat comes under his territory?"

"I don't think it's a good idea, my lord. Although the count is not a supporter of the Duke, he might still be allied with your brothers, because by helping your brothers to get rid of you, he still removes a possible heir of the duke, while currying favor with your brothers at the same time, one of whom will be the future duke and other the commander of Fort Aragosa. This way, he'll have favorable relations with them in case the kingdom of Binpaaz invades Cinran again in the future. Thus he can also expect help from the Fort quickly, while it still serves his long-term goal of supplanting the duke in the future. So I think we should try not to let anyone else know about you until we reach Tiranat."

"We'll do as you say. You know much better about these matters than I do."

They decided to step outside to see if they were going to move again anytime soon.

There was another thing that Kivamus noticed only after getting out of the carriage this time. It was a small line of filthy, disheveled people who had their hands in manacles attached to an iron chain that seemed to be connected to the manacles of all the people in that line. Earlier they were hidden from his view by a wagon which had moved forward by now. He couldn't see their faces, but their shoulders were slumped with hopelessness. They were wearing tattered clothes and their bodies were gaunt with hunger. The way their heads hung low as if weighed down by the crushing weight of despair, twisted his gut. It was another harsh reminder of the kind of world that he had found himself in.

"Who are they? Criminals?"

"No, my lord. They seem like new slaves meant for sale, probably in Cinran," Gorsazo replied, seemingly habitual of seeing them.

"Slavery... they must still have done some crime to be put into chains, right?"

"Not always, my lord. Some of them might indeed have been criminals, but many of them likely couldn't pay back their debts, so they would have been put into chains by the debt collectors, to be sold to some merchant or landed farmer who needed extra hands. Of course, many families are even forced to

sell their sons or daughters to have their debt written off." Gorsazo paused, "The situation is not good for the common people, my lord. Most people barely have enough to eat anyway, and just a single bad harvest puts them into debt or even in chains."

"But why doesn't the Count help them? Why doesn't the Duke do anything!" Kivamus said, agitated.

"Because they always have some... better things to do. Forgive me for saying this, my lord, but did you ever think about such people before you left Ulriga for Tiranat?"

While Kivamus knew that he wasn't even on this planet or in this body before a few days ago so it wasn't his own fault, he could still recall from the original Kivamus' memories that he or his brothers or even their father, the Duke, had never talked about the common people. While the duke had nearly no interest in running the duchy after the death of Kivamus's mother, his older brothers spent all their time scheming to grab more power or wasted it trying to seek more pleasure. What happened to poor people was just... something that happened.

"I realize that now, Gorsazo and I will try to do better in the future. But can we do anything to help them now?"

"Not unless you had much more money, my lord. You could indeed free them by paying their debts, but as it is right now, you don't have nearly enough money for that. Also, judging by the livery of the men guarding them, they are a part of the retinue of the Count himself. So it is out of your power and authority as a baron serving under him to oppose the Count or his men. Again, it is also possible that the slaves might not want to be free anyway."

"What! How's that possible?"

"I told you earlier my lord, most of the common people don't always have enough to eat, and they have to sleep on empty stomachs on many nights. But as a slave, they will at least be fed, even if it won't nearly be enough. Whether it's the slaver or a new lord who makes them work on a farm, they will at least get something to eat, which won't always happen if they are free, my lord."

"I had no idea the situation was this bad," he said softly, without hearing any response from Gorsazo.

A crushing weight settled in Kivamus' chest as he watched them stand in chains. The sight was a physical ache, but the deeper pain was his helplessness and his inability to intervene.

Soon enough, another wagon moved forward and hid the line of slaves from his view. But it seemed impossible for him to get that painful sight away from his mind. Being unable to do anything to help them, he made a feeble attempt to distract his mind by watching the line of other wagons moving ahead slowly.