

FROM LONDONER TO LORD

5. Cinran Town

By this time the line had moved forward, but only a little.

Around them, people were talking and muttering things like how long their journey was or how the guards seemed to be so slow in processing the line. At the mention of guards, he looked towards the town gates and noticed that there were indeed a few guards wearing some sort of leather armor. They were holding up the line at the gates of the town while questioning a man with a wagon who was standing next to them.

"Do you know what's taking them so long?"

Gorsazo, who was well accustomed to this world, unlike Kivamus, was quick to answer, "They're just making a fuss over that merchant's goods for no reason, my lord. It seems that the merchant doesn't want to hand over a few coins to smooth things over. He really should though, or guards can hold the line for hours. All they have is time."

"Ah, corruption and bribery. I guess that's one thing that will be the same in every era," muttered Kivamus.

The sun had only set recently and it was getting dark on the eastern side of the town. Kivamus squinted towards the gate, where a single flickering torch cast a meager light.

Eventually, the merchant seemed to be fed up with the guards and just shook his head in resignation while handing over something to them. Kivamus strained to see the exchange happening beneath it, but the shadows made it impossible to see the number of coins changing hands.

Soon enough, the line started moving again and Gorsazo and Kivamus sat back inside their carriage. The rest of the wagon drivers were quick to hand over some money to the guards on their turns, who didn't seem as thorough in checking the goods of the merchants after they had gotten their due from them.

Then it was their own turn and after their carriage driver dropped a few coins in the hands of the gate guards, they passed through the shadowed wooden gates and emerged into the unknown town of Cinran.

The first thing that Kivamus noticed after passing the heavy wooden gates was how dark it was already. Unlike the fading twilight outside, the town inside the walls seemed to be covered in darkness. His first thought was that it must be a blackout, before remembering that there had to be no electricity in this era. As their carriage moved further, he saw that at least there was a single burning torch lit close to the first intersection that they seemed to be moving towards.

"It's quite dark inside the town, isn't it?" he asked Gorsazo.

"It is true, my lord. Even though Cinran is not a village, most of the towns are like this at night. I know that you have lived in the Palace of Ulriga all your life, and it was considerably more well-lit there, but this is how the rest of the places are, outside of the palace," Gorsazo told him, having no idea that Kivamus' comparison was with London and not Ulriga.

As their carriage moved further and turned left at the first intersection, he could smell more of the unfamiliar odors of the town. It was a heady mixture of the smells of smoke, sweat, and feces. It was intoxicating, and not in a good way. While he could still hear the creaking sound made by the wheels of the carriage on the packed dirt street and the hushed sound of conversations coming from the wagon ahead of them, it still seemed very quiet.

"Should it be this quiet?"

"As I said, my lord, it's a town, not a city like Ulriga. It's quite common for people to stay indoors after dark. I don't know what's the norm in Cinran, but the town patrol usually has a curfew soon after dark to prevent robberies and other crimes. Even so, I do think the last time I came to Cinran, it was more lively here." Gorsazo continued, "Having lived in the palace, you probably don't know this but the previous year's harvest in the duchy was not good, and it doesn't look like this year is going to be any better. Work is hard to find these days for most people. The smithies, tanneries, and the like, operate fewer hours these days, even in Ulriga. So the conditions are likely the same here too, if not worse."

"I had no idea..." Kivamus breathed. "All this time, nobles have lived in blissful ignorance, while the world suffered." As their carriage moved further, thoughts about how bad the lives of common people were, kept echoing in his mind.

Their carriage continued moving on the streets for a while, making turns here and there, and soon enough he saw that while most of the houses had no lighting, one of them had a small earthen lamp mounted outside the door on a wooden post. A few people seemed to be coming and going from the place and he could even hear the sound of many people talking from inside the place.

As they reached in front of the place, their driver stopped the carriage and stepped off his seat. He walked towards the rear of the carriage. "We are here, my lords. This is where I was told to drop you off."

Before Kivamus could think of what to say, Gorsazo spoke up, "Thank you for bringing us here. I assume you were paid for this trip in Ulriga itself?"

"Indeed my lord, one of Duke's sons himself gave me the coin for this. I couldn't believe my luck meeting the future Duke in person!" the driver said, seemingly awed by the memory.

"Good for you!" said Gorsazo and he beckoned Kivamus to get out of the carriage first.

Both of them got off the carriage and since they didn't have any luggage apart from the few pouches and satchels that Gorsazo was carrying, they bid the carriage driver farewell, who bowed toward them and turned around the carriage, returning the way they had come from. For the moment, it was only the two of them outside the wooden establishment, which seemed to be an inn. While it looked far from being dilapidated in the feeble light of the lamp, it still seemed like a place to stay away from, according to his modern sensibilities.

"Where would the carriage driver stay?"

"He can't possibly afford to stay at such a pricey inn my lord, he will likely know a barn or some similar place where he could stay and park his carriage to save money."

"This is pricey? I thought we were in a run-down part of the town!"

"You will have to become used to this, my lord. You might not see the luxuries of a palace anytime soon."

"You're indeed right. Well, we might as well go inside now."

As he turned towards the entrance, Gorsazo pulled him away from the door and gestured to follow him.

"What are you doing?"

"My lord, did it not strike you as odd that your brother himself gave the money to the carriage driver?" asked Gorsazo in a hushed voice after taking both of them a little farther from the lamp.

"Well, I didn't think about it at the time, but now that you say it, yes, it does. Do you think..."

"Yes, my lord. There must be at least one person inside who would be sitting there just to recognize you. And we don't know who they will give this information to. That's why we need to go to a different place."

"That's a good idea. But do you even know this locality? How will we even find a place in this darkness?" Kivamus glanced at his surroundings, but couldn't discern one house from another in the darkness. "It doesn't seem like a good idea to stay outside for long."

"Indeed, my lord. Even though it's been a few years since my last visit to Cinran, something about the route the carriage driver had taken sparked a memory. Thankfully, I do recognize this locality, and there is another inn nearby where we can stay. I know the owner there from a previous visit. It is smaller and gets fewer visitors, so there shouldn't be anyone there who can recognize you, I believe." He continued, "Also, try to speak as little as possible when there are others around, my lord, since it would not be difficult for a person to surmise that you are a noble by your accent."

"As you say, Gorsazo. I am counting on you to keep us both alive in this place."

Gorsazo looked at him for a second, seemingly thinking of something, but didn't say anything out loud. He gestured again to follow him and started walking in a particular direction.

Despite his eyes slowly adjusting to the darkness, Kivamus was completely lost in this town. He had no choice but to follow Gorsazo blindly, unsure of where they were headed. Soon, Gorsazo beckoned him to enter a smaller alley and pointed at a similar lamp lit in front of another wooden building, located not too far inside the alley. They entered the small street and walked towards the inn. While walking, his boots seemed to squelch something but preferring not to think about what it could be, he kept moving.

They reached the building and he followed Gorsazo inside. There were only a few small earthen lamps kept inside, keeping the room in semi-darkness. A few wooden tables with empty chairs around them were kept on his right, while on the left side, a single person was standing behind a wooden bar. The perpetual stench of the town was less noticeable inside the inn, but it was still present in small amounts, making him grimace about the hygienic standards of the place. But having no other option, he could only keep enduring the smells.

He noticed that Gorsazo had started talking with the innkeeper in hushed voices. While he wanted to listen to what they were saying, the consistent threat of someone recognizing him and reporting to his brother's agents in the town made him stay close to the shadows.

Soon, Gorsazo passed a few coins to the man he was talking to and gestured to Kivamus to follow him. They climbed the stairs near the bar in the light of an earthen lamp the innkeeper had given to Gorsazo and went to the upper floor. It was quiet enough that it seemed the place was empty. Or nearly empty, anyway, since they passed another man walking down the stairs, dressed in a tunic.

Gorsazo looked around the short corridor and soon unlocked a room with a key he had and they entered inside.

It was a simple room, with only a single bedding, perhaps made of straw and covered with a semi-dirty sheet. Kivamus thought there would at least be a bed, but perhaps it wasn't common in this place. It didn't look sanitary at all to him, but he didn't have any other options. Apart from the small earthen lamp that Gorsazo had kept near an empty corner, there was no other source of light. The room did have a closed window but it was made of wood with no glass pane on it, and it didn't offer any extra light in the night. There was also a wooden chest kept near a wall. It made him think of a medieval movie set at

first before he sat down on the straw bedding and realized modern mattresses weren't nearly as uncomfortable.

"Can we talk here?"

"Of course, my lord, but try to keep your voice low." Gorsazo sat down nearby with his back to a wall. "Sound carries far through these walls and we don't know who might be listening."

"That's true. Is this typical of beds in these kinds of inns?"

"I'm sorry about that, my lord. The inn that the carriage driver brought us to would have had much better rooms which would be fit for a noble, or at least a rich merchant, but this place is far safer for you. I know this is not up to the standards of a noble, but that's the reason your brother's people in Cinran would never expect you to stay here. It doesn't hurt that the rooms are much cheaper as well."

"That's true. But where will you sleep?"

"Don't worry about me, my lord. I will just rest a little like this. Someone has to keep watch anyway."

"Are you sure? Can't we ask the innkeeper for another such bedding?"

"I told him that I was escorting the son of a merchant, my lord and that I was your servant. And no merchant will pay to get his servant a similar bedding as him."

"You are not my servant, Gorsazo!" Kivamus exclaimed. "And I don't mind that at all. We are in this together and spending a few more coins won't affect our money much."

"Thank you, my lord, and I know that. But while you don't mind that, it would still be very rare and the innkeeper or one of his servants will remember that. And we aren't in a position to be noticed in this town, my lord." He continued, "I have stayed in this inn before, but I don't know the innkeeper well enough to trust him."

"I didn't think of that," Kivamus said.

After a while, someone knocked on the door. Gorsazo got up and after checking who it was, brought back two wooden bowls with him.

"Food, my lord," he said while offering one of the bowls to Kivamus. "I told them to deliver it to our room, so you wouldn't have to sit in the open, where someone might still recognize you."

"Thank you." Kivamus took the bowl and saw in the little light available that it was a soup of some kind with small lumps of meat and vegetables floating in it. It didn't look very appetizing to him, but after eating dried rations for the past few days, it was at least a warm meal for a change. He tried it and decided that, while a little bland, it wasn't too bad. It didn't take long for them to finish it.

"You should sleep now, my lord. We have a long journey tomorrow."

"You mean longer than usual?" Kivamus asked. "Why?"

"Earlier I had thought that the journey to Tiranat would be three days long by carriage, my lord. But our previous carriage driver told me we could make it in two days if we left early tomorrow and didn't let up the pace. That way, we could make it to Helga's inn before it gets too dark. The inn is around the halfway point to Tiranat, my lord, and it's the only inn on the route. So it would

be much better to stay there overnight instead of sleeping next to the forests on the road. Then it's another day's hard journey to Tiranat."

"It would certainly feel much safer inside the inn, compared to sleeping in the open on the road," Kivamus said. "As you told me earlier, there are no patrols by knights on the road to Tiranat, right?"

"Indeed, my lord. So, we would need to leave early enough tomorrow. If we can't reach Helga's inn by nightfall tomorrow, then getting there around noon the next day would be a wasted stop, since there would be no point in stopping there during the daytime. It would add an extra day to our journey as well, and we'd have to sleep in the open on both of the nights."

"That's true. Well, have a good night, Gorsazo."

"You too, my lord."

Kivamus lay down on the bedding, which felt just as uncomfortable as before. He kept thinking about those slaves he had seen earlier and thought it could easily have been him if he had woken up in this world as one of them instead of finding himself as the third son of the duke. It still anguished him to be unable to do anything to help them.

Weariness from the long journey finally caught up to Kivamus, and it didn't take long for him to drift off to sleep.