

FROM LONDONER TO LORD

6. Road to Tiranat

The next morning Gorsazo woke up Kivamus while it was still dark outside.

"This is way too early, Gorsazo," Kivamus grumbled while sitting up. The bone-jarring jolts while riding in a wooden carriage on dirt roads for the past few days had taken their toll. His body ached in every muscle as if he'd run a marathon, though one entirely spent sitting. And the straw bedding he slept on the previous night hadn't allowed him to get a good sleep. Adding to his misery, he had no idea where to get a cup of coffee to jolt him awake, or if coffee even existed in this world. "Do we really need to leave right now?" He hedged.

"We do, my lord. We need to find a merchant willing to take us to Tiranat, my lord. And if a merchant is already leaving Cinran for Tiranat today, we need to be on that road before they depart so we can try to convince them to take us with them."

"Alright, I'm awake now. Just give me a moment."

Finishing up with their daily necessities, and visiting the privy of the inn, which consisted of a hole in a wooden bench, only made Kivamus miss his old apartment in London even more. Their meager breakfast of reheated soup and stale bread in their room, salvaged by Gorsazo from the inn's kitchen before dawn, fueled their bodies for the journey ahead. With a final exchange of coins with the innkeeper, they stepped out of the inn and set off again.

It was still mostly dark outside so Kivamus followed Gorsazo through the dirt streets which were still full of stench and decaying matter of unknown origins. Trying not to think about it, he kept following him until they reached the gate, and this time, the guards didn't need to be paid their 'toll' since they were neither in a carriage nor carrying any goods on a wagon to sell.

Gorsazo had a quick discussion with the gate guards and this time they didn't cross the wooden bridge they had passed yesterday. Instead, they took a dusty path that ran alongside the town's wooden walls, heading south. Soon, they found a relatively clear place to sit on the grass next to the dirt road. It was starting to get brighter in the East by now, but there still weren't any other travelers outside at this time of the day.

Kivamus rubbed his hands together, wishing he had something warmer to wear against the chill of the morning air. The meager protection of his tunic

was a stark contrast to the memories of his old life. He longed for the forgotten comfort of a warm coat, a silent yearning that bit at him as much as the chill.

Before too long, they saw a wagon emerge from the gates but instead of turning south towards them, it crossed the wooden bridge to go to its destination somewhere on the other side of the Kal River.

"The road to Tiranat would have much fewer travelers compared to the road going north, right?"

"Indeed, my lord. We will be lucky if we can find a wagon going south soon."

"There's something I have been thinking about." After making sure that no one else was nearby for now, Kivamus said, "If my brothers really wanted to kill me, then why would they wait until we had left Cinran for Tiranat? They could have tried something before we reached here, couldn't they?"

Gorsazo thought for a while, and said, "My lord, were you to be harmed before reaching Cinran, it would reflect poorly on the Duke's control of the Duchy. The other nobles would seize upon your death as proof of his ineptitude, claiming he couldn't even safeguard his own son on a well-traveled road. However, if an unfortunate bandit attack were to occur after we left the safety of Cinran, particularly on the notoriously dangerous forest road to Tiranat, the

narrative would completely change. While tragic, your demise would be viewed as an unavoidable consequence of the region's lawlessness, garnering sympathy for the Duke, rather than condemnation. In fact, since most nobles are already aware of his seclusion from public life, their condolences would likely be directed towards your brothers, not knowing that they were the ones behind the attack."

"How fortunate for my brothers," Kivamus grimaced. "And if bandits do attack us, it can only mean that my brothers have clearly planned this out well in advance," he murmured, a tremor in his voice betraying the unease he tried to mask. "Will we even be safe if we reach Tiranat? You did mention earlier that it was considered the most dangerous barony in the duchy."

"I can't be sure, of course, but I believe that for us the danger is mainly in reaching there. Your brothers, if they really have planned for a bandit attack to kill you before we reach Tiranat, then they wouldn't expect us to reach Tiranat in the first place. So I don't think they would have made any preparations to ambush us there as well. For now, our target is to reach Tiranat safely, if we can manage it at all. After that though, we should be safe for some time." Gorsazo chuckled nervously. "As for later in the future, only they will know more."

"It seems all of this anticipation and dread will kill me before the bandits even get a chance," Kivamus muttered, a shiver crawling down his spine. "Will we ever be safe though, Gorsazo?"

"I don't know, my lord. But I too would like to see my children again." Gorsazo sighed.

"Would it not have been better to have hired guards then?"

"They would be mercenaries for hire, my lord. One can never be sure of the loyalties of those who fight only for coin. I still believe that traveling anonymously without a visible group of guards is our best bet for safety at this time, even if we might have to tell a passing merchant more, for him to give us a ride."

The air felt thick and suffocating, mirroring the oppressive weight of the conversation and the ever-present dread that coiled in his gut. Kivamus massaged his temples, willing the beginnings of a new headache to subside. But there was no other choice for them than to keep going. In this brutal new world, the only sanctuary for him was Tiranat.

They sat for a while and watched the rising sun in the east while waiting for a merchant or a caravan to come towards them.

Soon, they saw another wagon exiting the gates, and thankfully this time it turned south and started moving towards them. It was a small caravan of just three wagons, each being pulled by a pair of horses. All the wagons seemed to be made for carrying goods and didn't have a closed compartment, unlike the carriage they'd arrived in yesterday. The wagons were covered with an oilcloth to keep their contents safe from the elements and each of the wagons had a lone driver sitting on a bench in the front. As they came closer, Kivamus noticed that the driver of the leading wagon was the same merchant who was arguing with the gate guards yesterday.

When the wagons reached close to them, both of them stood up and Gorsazo hailed the wagon driver to stop the wagon for a moment. The merchant in the first wagon slowly stopped his wagon and gestured for the wagons following him to stop as well. He looked at Gorsazo for only a moment, while his gaze stayed longer on Kivamus, perhaps noticing his better-quality clothing. The merchant himself was wearing a tunic as well, while the other wagon drivers had leather armor of some kind above their own well-patched tunics.

"Greetings, friend! Are you all going to Tiranat, by any chance?" Gorsazo asked the merchant.

"What is it to you? Are you also with those money-grubbing bastards at the gate looking for another toll? I already paid them their share, damn them!" he grumbled. He was a balding man of a mediocre height and with a short beard, looking to be in his late forties.

"Not at all, my friend. We too had to pay an entry tax to those corrupt guards yesterday. In fact, we saw your argument with them yesterday. We despise such corruption too, not that the guards are going to change their habits anytime soon," Gorsazo lamented to the merchant.

"Hmm... that's true enough. Well, why did you both stop me then? I doubt that you are bandits looking to raid my caravan, this close to Cinran," the merchant replied with a small laugh.

"Well, you do know that Tiranat does not have a baron right now, don't you? And about what happened to the previous one?"

"Indeed. It was a sad affair. They didn't even leave his family alive!" The merchant muttered, "If you ask me, I'd say the bandits knew exactly what they were doing."

"And did you hear that Tiranat was going to get another baron soon in the future?" Gorsazo asked, carefully watching the merchant.

"Now that you mention it, I did think that it had been a few months already, so the duke should have allotted the lands to a new baron by now. Those poor

people in Tiranat surely need a leader there. But I can't say that I heard it was going to happen anytime soon. Why do you ask?"

Gorsazo looked at Kivamus for a moment, seemingly thinking about what to say. However, to Kivamus it seemed that in this corrupt place, a merchant who at least complained about corruption was probably a little more ethical than someone who would just accept it as a part of life. And they couldn't keep waiting for the next merchant going to Tiranat, who may or may not even come here all day. So he looked at Gorsazo and gave him a small nod.

Gorsazo nodded back, seemingly having come to the same conclusion, and said to the merchant, "I am Gorsazo, and as it happens, the new baron is right here," while gesturing towards Kivamus. "Meet Kivamus Ralokaar, the third son of the Duke of Ulriga, and the new Baron of Tiranat. If you want, I can show you the Duke's proclamation," he added while patting the side of his tunic.

For a moment, it seemed the merchant was either not going to believe them, or he was so surprised that he didn't know what to say. However, he shook his head and called out to his companions, "You two, come here right now!"

He leaped out of his wagon seat and immediately bowed towards Kivamus. "Forgive this man's forgetfulness, my lord, and please don't trouble yourself with the proclamation. I believe you. When I saw you, I thought that I had seen

your face in the past, my lord. Now I recall it was on a visit to the Ulriga Palace some time ago. It is an honor to meet you in person, my lord."

His companions, uncertain of what was happening, looked at the merchant. One of them was quite a tall and well-built man and looked to be in his thirties. The other man was much younger and looked to be barely out of his teens in the light of the newly risen sun.

"Bow, you idiots!" The merchant admonished his companions, who followed him and bowed in front of Kivamus as well.

For Kivamus, it was such a unique experience of people calling him a lord and bowing to him, that he had no idea what to say for a moment and looked to Gorsazo for help. However, Gorsazo had no way of knowing that this Kivamus was not the same person inside as the one who had lived surrounded by servants all his life as the third son of the duke. So he just stood looking at them.

Kivamus took a deep breath, willing down a trace of hesitation. "Get up, you all. There's no need for all that," he said, his voice steady despite the knot of tension in his stomach. "I don't want us to be noticed."

The merchant and the men with him stood up but they still had their heads bowed slightly. "As you say, my lord."

Gorsazo finally came to Kivamus's help, and said, "Well, tell us who you are. And we don't need to make a spectacle here for any passersby, so just stand normally."

The merchant nodded hesitatingly, and said, "Forgive this one's lack of manners, my lord. I am Pydas, a traveling merchant and these two are drivers I've hired for the other wagons, who also help out with keeping things safe."

"Alright. Well, we are going to Tiranat, as you may have guessed. Can you take the two of us there? We will pay a fee, of course," Kivamus said.

"It would be an honor, my lord! And how can I take money from you? I am going to Tiranat anyway, my lord, and I'll be glad to take you both with us."

Gorsazo spoke up before Kivamus could object, "I thank you for that, Pydas. Also, we don't want to let anyone else know who we are until we reach Tiranat. So you three cannot mention a word about us to anyone else until we reach there."

Pydas said, "Of course my lords. However, we should leave soon, if we are to reach Helga's inn by nightfall." He hesitated, "Uh... I'm sorry to say this, my lord, but I don't have any place suitable enough for a noble in my wagon."

"Don't worry about that. We just need a place to sit," Kivamus said.

"In that case, just give me a moment, my lord," the merchant replied hastily, scurrying back to his wagon. A flurry of hushed conversation and gesturing ensued between him and his companions. With practiced efficiency, they shifted a few hefty sacks and wooden barrels, redistributing the load between the wagons. Pydas beckoned them over and gestured towards two empty spaces on his own wagon, adorned with a scrap of rough cloth fabric, offering a marginal improvement over the bare wooden planks. "I'm sorry my lord, but this is the best I can do for now."

"It'll have to do, Pydas," replied Gorsazo. "Come on, my lord," he said to Kivamus, "it's getting late so we should leave now."

With ungraceful bumps, they clambered into the back of the wagon and settled onto the seats, a generous term for the thin scrap of cloth draped over the wooden planks. Kivamus winced as the rough fabric did little to soften the unforgiving wooden planks beneath him.

And yet, complaints died on his tongue. The discomfort was a small price to pay for a place on this ramshackle wagon, their only hope for reaching the safety of Tiranat.

Pydas and the other drivers settled into their seats, the reins growing taut in their calloused hands. With a flick of the reins and a chorus of creaking axles, the caravan lurched into motion. The journey to the south began, a balancing act between hope for safety and the ever-present threat that lurked on the untamed roads.