

# FROM LONDONER TO LORD

## 7. Helga's Inn

It was around noon when the vast forest ahead finally came into view. Despite the clear sky, the dense trees cast a heavy shadow, making the area feel dark and foreboding. They stopped for a short rest before entering the forest, stretching their legs and grabbing a bite of their dried rations. Pydas, the merchant, even surprised them with a loaf of bread they all shared. Still, they couldn't afford to wait too long, so they continued their journey soon after their rest.

It was autumn, and trees had begun shedding leaves, creating a thick layer of fallen leaves on the ground. As the three-wagon caravan approached the treeline, the creaking of the axles was joined by the crunching of the wheels over a carpet of dried leaves. Once they entered the forest, the dense canopy blocked most of the sunlight, creating a constant twilight beneath the trees.

The colorful leaves, a mix of yellows, oranges, and maroons, blanketed the forest floor, almost obscuring the faint wagon tracks ahead. Pydas easily followed the tracks, navigating them with a practiced ease.

It was nearing the evening, when Gorsazo muttered under his breath, "Damn it," his voice barely a whisper.

Kivamus was nearly dozing off by this time, despite the discomfort of sitting on a wagon all day, so it took a moment for him to register that Gorsazo had said something. "Did you say something Gorsazo?"

"Don't be alarmed, my lord, but I think there are people following us."

"What? Where? How can you tell?" Kivamus looked around the wagon for a moment, trying to calm his suddenly racing heart. "I don't see anyone."

"I'm not certain, my lord, but I believe I heard some crunching of leaves on our right some time ago. It might just be animals though, I can't say for sure."

Unable to hear anything but the sound of wagons moving over dried leaves, Kivamus sat up and strained to see into the dense foliage.

After a while, when he had started to relax thinking it was a false alarm, Gorsazo suddenly spoke, "There! Did you hear it this time?"

Kivamus still hadn't been able to hear what he was talking about, but it was unlikely that Gorsazo had misheard it twice. "What should we do?" he asked, trying to calm his nerves.

"Nothing, for now, my lord. They may only be scouting right now to see if this caravan can be a good target for them. I don't think they would know about you specifically, my lord, since we don't have a visible detail of guards with us."

"Do we need to tell Pydas?"

"He would have noticed it before even I did since he is used to traveling on such treacherous roads. And since he hasn't stopped, we have to trust that he knows what he is doing." Gorsazo added, "Unless there is an imminent attack, I think getting to Helga's inn quickly is the best way forward."

"Then, shouldn't we at least tell him to speed up?" Kivamus asked, at the same time he heard Pydas whipping the horses to make the wagon move faster.

"Like I said, my lord, he knows what to do."

The other wagons had also sped up to follow the lead wagon closely. As they continued to move, the sun gradually began to set, casting long shadows through the trees and cloaking the forest in a deepening twilight. Kivamus couldn't help but feel a sense of unease as they trudged along the winding path, his eyes constantly scanning the surrounding foliage for any signs of danger or movement. Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a flicker of movement in the distance. Squinting through the dense underbrush, he thought that he caught a glimpse of what looked like a horse with a rider moving swiftly through the woods. Though he couldn't be sure, the sight made his heart race with uncertainty and apprehension. It continued like this for a while, and they kept moving while the sun started to set, making it darker in the forest.

By the time it had gotten dark enough that Kivamus thought it would be difficult to keep moving, he saw a glimpse of light a little way ahead on the path. "Is that...?"

"Yes, my lord, I believe it must be Helga's inn," Gorsazo said with a smile, "It seems we will be safe, after all."

Slowly the wagon approached the two-storey wooden building in the middle of the forest. The flickering light of a lamp, perched on a wooden pole outside the building, served as a beacon in the encroaching darkness. Trees had been cleared around the inn to provide a clear view of the area, and a partially open structure to the left of the inn housed a single horse and some carts. A small, painted sign hung from a wooden pole. It displayed the symbol of a tankard and the words "Helga's Inn" written in the strange script of the local language. The inscription would likely be unreadable to the majority of the people in his world if literacy was anything like that in the medieval era on Earth. However, thanks to the memories he'd inherited with the body, Kivamus could read it with ease.

"We are here, my lord," Pydas announced with relief while turning around in his seat to speak. "We managed to reach Helga's Inn safely after all. After that scare of riders following us, I thought we might be attacked right in the middle of the forests. But thankfully, we are safe."

"Indeed, Pydas, and I thank you for taking us here," said Kivamus. "And remember, not a word about us."

Pydas nodded respectfully. "Of course, my lord."

Gorsazo admonished him in a low voice, "Don't keep saying 'my lord' from now on, it will defeat the purpose. If you have to say anything, just talk to me."

"As you wish, Mr Gorsazo."

Kivamus disembarked from the wagon with the help of Gorsazo, taking in the surroundings with tired eyes. The leaves made a crunching sound with each step and added to the whinnying of the tired horses. The other wagons had stopped nearby as well, with their drivers stepping out of their seats after sitting there all day.

Hearing all this sound, the door to the inn opened and a teenage boy came out of the door to the inn. He looked around quickly and ran back inside, shouting, "Ma, we have visitors! Mr Hudan, please come outside!"

Soon, a tall and burly man, who was perhaps in his early thirties, came outside. He had the build of a professional bodybuilder, with a few scars added all over. He was wearing a well-used leather armor with a chainmail above it. The huge sword he was carrying behind his shoulder only added to his intimidating appearance.

"How many of you are here?" he asked.

Gorsazo answered for all of them. "There are five of us, Mr...?"

"I'm called Hudan," the huge man answered in a stern voice.

"Well, the two of us are just catching a ride to Tiranat with Pydas, the merchant here," Gorsazo explained while pointing to Kivamus and Pydas respectively. "If you have free rooms, we would like to stay in your inn for the night."

"I'm not the owner here, I'm here to help guard the inn against... let's say, unsavory characters," Hudan said with a frown. He took a moment to gaze over all of them. "I already know Mr Pydas, and both of you seem okay to me." He called out in the direction of the inn, "Feroy, Lucem, come here and help them inside."

"Thank you," Pydas said with a nod.

"You're a pal, Mr Pydas. Of course, you're welcome here."

Soon another man came outside along with the boy they had seen earlier. He was dressed similarly to Hudan, but he looked to be a few years older than him and had an average build, quite unlike the hulking body of Hudan. The boy, who looked to be in his early teens, was wearing a well-patched tunic.

"This is Feroy," Hudan said while pointing to the man. "He helps guard the place along with me." He gestured to the boy, "And this is Lucem, the son of the owner, Madam Helga."

Before the conversation could continue, they heard the sound of leaves crunching nearby in the forest, and suddenly an arrow whizzed close to the face of Kivamus.

"Down, my lord!" Gorsazo shouted while harshly pushing Kivamus to the ground, seemingly forgetting his own instructions to not call Kivamus a lord.

Soon, they heard the sound of more men coming from the same direction and five figures emerged from the trees, shadows given form by the dying embers of the setting sun. One of them, a hulking brute with a longsword, bellowed, "There he is! Get him!" while pointing at Kivamus, who was still on the ground. Two others, wiry and mean-looking, hefted their bows, their arrows aimed with deadly precision. The remaining two, clad in mismatched leather armor, brandished shortswords, their expressions feral.

While Kivamus was like a deer caught in headlights, having no idea what to do, it only took a moment for Hudan to assess the situation. "Lucem, take them inside and block the door. Feroy, with me." He looked at the other two

wagon drivers who had taken out their own short blades by now, and said, "You two, circle around and try to get the archers." He had taken out his longsword from his back and was holding it with both hands while crouching a little. Feroy took out his own shortsword and stood next to Hudan while trying to block the path of the bandits from going toward the unarmed people.

Panic flickered briefly in the eyes of the wagon drivers, but they did as told, and started to move around the wagons to get behind the bandits.

Gorsazo managed to get Kivamus up and in a crouch and ran with him towards the door of the inn. He kept his own body in the way of any more incoming arrows to protect Kivamus. They were joined by Pydas and Lucem shortly, who pointed towards the door of the inn and shouted for someone to get it open.

Hudan reacted fast. He roared a challenge and moved forward with his own blade drawn out. Feroy, though older, followed suit with his own shortsword.

The bandit archers let loose more arrows, only one of which even came close to Kivamus and his companions in the darkness. Thankfully, no one seemed injured. They ran faster towards the door, while still crouching, to present a smaller target to the archers.

Hudan, a veteran of such fights, bellowed as he cleaved through the air, his weapon connecting with the sword of the brute. At the same time, Feroy let loose a flurry of strikes against the two other bandits with short swords, managing to hold both of them back for now.

The archers shot more arrows close to the running men and suddenly Lucem cried out in pain while holding his left arm. "Don't stop running!" shouted Pydas as they neared the door to the inn. There was a young woman standing inside the entrance with a fearful face while holding the door open for them.

The fight devolved into a chaotic dance of steel and frantic movement. One of Feroy's strikes managed to hit a bandit's shoulders with a sickening thud. The man screamed and fell back, clutching his wound. Hudan and the largest bandit kept exchanging strikes with no clear victor.

As Kivamus and others reached the door another volley of arrows passed close to them, with no one else hurt this time. Hurrying inside the inn, they slammed the door shut. The young woman, working with others, secured it with a heavy wooden bar.

By this time the wagon drivers had reached the archers who had drawn their own short blades and began to exchange strikes against them. The taller wagon driver managed to disarm one of the archers with a swift maneuver,

the man collapsing with a yelp. And it became a fight of two against one for now, making the other archer lose ground.

The largest bandit who was fighting against Hudan managed to hit him on his side, drawing blood, and making Hudan fall back a little while holding his side. Fero, whose strikes were faster, killed the injured bandit with a quick jab against his chest and pulled back his sword to engage with his remaining opponent.

The wagon drivers, with a two-to-one advantage now, had the upper hand, but the archer was quicker and managed to stab one of them in his thigh. But the other driver took this opportunity and got to his side and killed him with a quick strike to his neck. At the same time, the fallen bandit got up again after picking up his own dagger.

Fero, who had circled around his remaining opponent by now, kept engaging against him, while Hudan roared back against the largest bandit. Despite being hit, he kept exchanging strikes equally until the bandit stumbled against a rock on the ground, in the barely visible light of dusk. Not missing this opportunity, Hudan jabbed into the chest of the bandit, who crumpled to the ground, his eyes wide with shock.

Hudan looked around and saw Feroy still engaged with his opponent and moved to help him. With the two of them, it didn't take long until they managed to kill the remaining bandit as well.

At this point, only the second archer was alive amongst the bandits, who looked around to see all his companions on the ground. "I yield!" he shouted and held up his hands, dropping his blade.

Looking around and making sure that no other bandits were coming, Hudan sat down on the ground while clutching his bleeding side. Feroy took charge of the bandit who had surrendered and told the uninjured wagon driver to bring a rope to tie him.