

FROM LONDONER TO LORD

9. Allies

The next hour was lively as Helga made herself busy getting a few tables cleared with the help of Lucem, while Syrene helped by making a meal for everyone.

Before long, they were all served a warm bowl of soup with a few small parts of meat and vegetables floating in it, along with some freshly baked bread. Everyone got another tankard of ale as well.

It didn't take long for them to finish their simple meal. Helga approached the table where Kivamus was sitting along with Gorsazo and Pydas. "Forgive me for the poor meal, my lord, but this is the best we can do. The past few years haven't been good for us."

"Not at all, Madam Helga. A warm meal was all we needed," Kivamus replied. "However, if you don't mind, I would like to know more about this place."

Helga hesitated for a moment, then took an empty seat at the table. "I am grateful that you are the new baron, my lord. And I'm not saying this to earn your favor." She took a deep breath, "We used to live in Cinran in the past, my lord, where my husband was an innkeeper and I was a cook. That's where Syryne and Lucem were born. We tried to make do with what little we had, but soon we couldn't afford to stay inside Cinran anymore with the increasing food prices and rising taxes. We were traveling south, uncertain of where to go, when we met the previous owner of this inn during our stay here. Despite his advanced age, the man understood our hardship. When he learned my husband used to be an innkeeper too, he took our family in." She had a faraway look in her eyes now. "We had some good times here, my lord, with our children running around and the previous owner as a grandfather figure for them. Business was good too in those days. That was nearly a decade ago..."

Pydas reminisced, "I crossed paths with them once while traveling through here. Good folks, they were."

"Please go on, Madam Helga," Kivamus said gently.

"It wasn't to last, of course. It was around three years ago that everything changed. One day I was out in the forests with my children to gather wood for making food." Her eyes glistened with unshed tears. "When I returned in the

evening, they were dead, my lord. My husband, and the owner, both of them. Bandits had come here and taken everything we had saved, after killing my husband and the owner, brutally. I am only glad that I was outside then, and our children were spared. Even imagining my children like that..."

"I am really sorry that you had to go through that, Madam Helga." Kivamus tried to say more but found himself short of words. He hadn't realized the depth of hardship in this world. Living in London, concerns about food and basic survival had never crossed his mind. Yet, Helga's story revealed a reality so harsh it shook him to the core, igniting a determination to act. He vowed to do whatever he could to help them.

It took some time for her to continue after she wiped her eyes with her sleeve. "It wasn't your fault, my lord. You don't need to be sorry for it." She took a deep breath before continuing. "Since then, the three of us have been making this place our home. At separate times, Feroy and Hudan joined us here too and I couldn't be more grateful to them, but their stories aren't mine to tell." She exhaled deeply. "In the past few years, food prices have kept rising due to many successive bad harvests, my lord. We had been scraping by with the limited income from what little traffic we used to get on this road. But after the previous baron and his family were killed nearby a few months ago, hardly anyone is traveling on this road anymore."

Pydas added, "It is true, my lord. Even I rarely travel on this road now. I am only going to Tiranat after many months to try and sell what I can before winter hits and snow makes travel too difficult."

Helga continued after a minute, "My lord, this year we don't even have enough grain stocked up to last the winter. We've exhausted nearly all our savings buying food from Cinran these past few months. With barely any income these days, we simply can't afford to buy more food." She spoke softly, "I don't know what I am supposed to do anymore to make sure my kids don't go to sleep on empty stomachs, my lord. And after today's attack, we probably need to leave this place too, in case the bandits come again to take revenge for those we killed. Feroy and Hudan barely managed to hold them back today with the help of the wagon drivers. Next time it might be beyond them." Helga shook her head, perhaps trying to clear her mind, and said, "Forgive me, my lord, I got carried away there. It is my burden to bear and I will find some way."

Kivamus could only think of the miserable conditions of the slaves in chains he had seen outside Cinran. And it was not difficult to imagine that at the current rate, this family would be in a similar condition not far in the future. Being unable to help those slaves still gnawed on his heart, even if it had been out of his hands at the time. But he knew these people, and they had even saved his life. He couldn't imagine seeing Lucem and Sryne in chains, or worse...

It didn't take long for him to make up his mind. "Why don't you all come with us to Tiranat, then?"

A flicker of surprise crossed Helga's face before she responded. "What do you mean, my lord?"

"It's simple," he continued. "If you wish, you can accompany Gorsazo and me to Tiranat."

"But we don't have the money to buy or even rent a place there, my lord!" Helga insisted. "And how will we even earn a living in Tiranat?"

"There should at least be a manor house there for the baron, right Gorsazo?" Kivamus asked.

"I haven't been there yet, my lord. But I think so." Gorsazo replied. "Pydas, you must know better about it. Can you tell us more?"

Pydas thought for a moment, then replied, "The previous baron indeed had a manor in Tiranat. But I was never invited inside its walls, so I don't know any details about it."

"Well, there you have it, then," Kivamus said to Helga. "There should be enough living space in the manor, so you all can stay there as well. While I'm not yet sure of what awaits us there, Madam Helga, I believe we should be able to find some work for you all." Kivamus continued, "From what you've told me, there simply aren't enough travelers on this road anymore for you to break even, right?"

Helga just nodded in reply.

"Pydas, you must have traveled many times through here. Can you tell me about the travel conditions on this road in the winter?" Kivamus asked the merchant. "Will the road be passable in the winter?"

"My lord, there's a good chance it'll start to snow in most places near the Arakin Range in a few weeks. That includes this inn and Tiranat, along with the road joining them. While wagons might still get through for a few weeks, the snow will get too deep soon after that. Give it around a month, and most of the road from Cinran to Tiranat, and beyond that to Kirnos will be completely blocked for wagons," Pydas explained. "The coal which Tiranat is known for is exported only before the winter hits and the snow makes travel impossible, my lord. And their trade with Cinran starts again only after the snow melts in the spring. I know this, my lord since I'm one of the merchants making that trade

every year. So, I'd say there wouldn't be any more traders passing through this road after a month."

"It's true enough, my lord. And even in summer, this road rarely sees lone travelers. Most of our income is from passing merchants and traders who stay here overnight. Although after the baron's murder, hardly any traders have passed through here to buy coal from Tiranat." Helga hesitated, "But I'm not sure about this, my lord."

"Like I said, Madam Helga, I can't guarantee anything, but I will certainly try. And from what I can see, the alternative for you all isn't any better. It is up to you, Madam Helga." Kivamus added, "I think you should sleep on the decision. We don't leave until the morning, so you have all night to make your decision. Please let Hudan and Feroy know that they are welcome too. I know I will need trusted guards in the future if my brothers' methods are any indication, and those two have already saved my life once."

Helga nodded. "I will let them know, my lord. But what they decide is up to them. I can only speak for my family."

"That's okay, Madam Helga." Kivamus stood up from his chair, with the others following him. "And thank you again for the meal. Now would you please send someone to guide us to our rooms?"

Helga stammered, bowing apologetically. "My lord, I'm terribly sorry, but a severe thunderstorm heavily damaged the roof and windows of the inn around a month ago, and it's not safe for anyone to occupy the upper floor now. We haven't been able to scrounge up the money to fix it just yet. It pains me to say it, my lord, but we really are quite strapped for coin. However, if you'll give me a few minutes, I'll prepare bedding for everyone here in the hall."

Working together, Lucem, and Syrene, with the help of others, managed to create makeshift beds for everyone on the inn floor after shifting the tables aside. Straw bedding, covered with threadbare sheets, provided a semblance of comfort. Feroy, Hudan, and the wagon drivers then established a watch schedule to ensure someone was always on guard near the door, throughout the night. Although all the bandits had been dealt with, there was still a risk of another group trying to take advantage of the darkness to try again.

Once again, Gorsazo woke up Kivamus before daybreak. The world outside was still cloaked in darkness, with the inside of the hall illuminated only by the faint orange glow of a few earthen lamps. Around him, others were already up and packing their belongings. He could hear the sound of people arguing near the kitchen of the inn and looked there.

"I don't want to go there, ma!" Lucem whined.

"You don't understand our situation, Lucem. We can't stay here anymore, you know that much!" scolded Helga.

"But I don't want to leave... No, I won't go!" Lucem crossed his arms and petulantly yelled back.

"You will do as I say, and that is it. Now go and finish what you have to pack or you'll be leaving without it." Helga finally used the voice of a mother and sent him away to pack. She noticed Kivamus was awake and hurried over, eyes bright with relief. "My lord, I'm glad to see you're awake now. My kids and I have discussed your offer, and we've decided to join you on your journey to Tiranat. I still can't thank you enough for offering us a place there."

Taking a moment to compose himself, Kivamus rose to his feet. "It is simply the right thing to do, Madam Helga. And I'm pleased you've chosen to come. What was that argument about?"

Helga sighed. "Nothing important, really. Syryne, at twenty, knows why we must leave, my lord. But as for Lucem... this inn, it's the only home he's ever known. He was barely a toddler when we left Cinran a decade ago. It's hard for him to imagine leaving everything familiar behind."

"That is never easy, I can certainly attest to that. I do hope he'll come around soon." Kivamus looked around the inn in the light of the small earthen lamps. "And what about Hudan and Feroy?"

"I'll let them answer for themselves, my lord. Hudan! Can you come here for a moment?" Helga called out to the huge man.

Hudan stopped his work and walked towards them.

"Where's Feroy?" Helga asked. "And Lord Kivamus wants to know your decisions."

"He's outside, Madam Helga, readying our wagon and the horses." Hudan looked towards Kivamus. "My lord, I thank you for offering us a place in Tiranat. Feroy and I have decided to join as well. It wasn't hard to see that it was very difficult for Madam Helga to provide for us as well, despite her generosity." Hudan bowed towards Kivamus. "I do not know what awaits us there, my lord. But you have a kind heart, that much I can tell, even if I haven't known you for long. I have faith that you'll do your best for all of us. Thank you for offering us a place, my lord."

Despite his newly found noble status, Kivamus still felt a discomfort he couldn't quite place. He looked at Hudan bowing to him, unsure if this newfound respect was truly something he deserved. "I'm glad to hear that you'll be coming with us as well, Hudan. I give my word that I will do everything I can to help you all."

After letting Hudan go to continue his work, Gorsazo offered him a wooden bowl, "You should eat my lord. Others have nearly finished their preparations, and we will be leaving soon."

Lucem and Syrene were still bustling around trying to pack their meager belongings, with the help of Hudan. Kivamus sat down on an empty chair. Taking a sip of reheated lukewarm soup from yesterday, along with the now-stale bread, he braced himself for another grueling day on the wagon.

As dawn's first light painted the sky outside, Helga announced they were ready to depart. Kivamus stepped out from the inn, emerging into the crisp morning air. Feroy, already fussing around the lone wagon of Helga, reiterated his desire to join them. That wagon seemed to hold all of the worldly possessions of Helga's family and the former inn guards. However, it was hitched to four horses, unlike the two horses pulling Pydas's wagons. There were also a couple of more horses nearby, loaded with saddlebags.

"Where did the horses come from, Gorsazo? I only saw a single horse here yesterday," Kivamus asked.

Hudan, who was nearby, answered in place of Gorsazo. "They are the horses of the bandits, my lord. We found them tied a little distance away. We only had one horse earlier, and we simply couldn't afford any more of them, but getting possession of five new horses helped make our decision to join you. All of the mercenaries had a horse it seems, so we took them as well as the swords and other supplies from them, my lord, unless... you need them for yourself, my lord?"

"No, no, you should keep them," Kivamus shook his head slowly. "Consider it part of your reward for saving my life. And at least the mercenaries were helpful in something," he quipped, which got a chuckle from the others.

As they moved towards the wagons, Lucem climbed onto the driver's seat of the only wagon owned by the inn, now being pulled by two pairs of horses. Helga and Syrene settled in the back of their wagon after locking the inn with a large iron key they had, a reflective silence settling over them. Hudan and Feroy perched aboard the two other horses, while yesterday's spots on Pydas's wagon were reclaimed by Kivamus and Gorsazo. Hudan took his horse in the front of the caravan, while Feroy took his own towards the back end.

With a flick of the reins by Pydas, their small caravan of four wagons accompanied by two riders lumbered southwards toward Tiranat. As the familiar landscape gave way to the forest road, Helga and her family couldn't help but look back with a mixture of sadness and hope. A decade of memories flickered in their eyes, the laughter shared within the inn's walls, the comfort of routine, and the lives they had built in this place. They were trading it all for the unknown, a weight of unspoken emotions pressing down on them. Yet, beneath the bittersweet ache, a flicker of hope was ignited. Tiranat, a new horizon, promised an unknown future, but a future nonetheless.