

FROM LONDONER TO LORD

10. Interlude: Dwellers of Tiranat Village

~ Kigeir ~

Kigeir sighed, the sound heavy and defeated in the dusty confines of his small shop.

He stood inside his shop, his bony hand resting on the rough-hewn wood. He ran a weary hand over his thinning gray hair, the dust inside the shop clinging to his calloused fingers. Unlike the plump, overflowing sacks that used to lean against the wall, only a few meager bags of grain lined his shelves, their coarse texture a pitiful representation of what his store usually held. They were a stark reminder of the slow decline that had gripped their isolated little village since the murder of the baron a few months ago.

His normally bustling shop, filled with the murmur of bartering and the clatter of coins was silent now. The villagers, once lively and eager customers, had become gaunt with hunger and worry, their pockets as empty as their stomachs.

A few months ago, news had slowly traveled to Tiranat about the baron's demise. Although he was a greedy wretch with little interest in his people, preferring to spend more time in Count Cinran's court than here in his own village, his presence had at least ensured a trickle of merchants coming to the village seeking its coal. But ever since the brutal murder of the baron at the hands of bandits, the village had sunk into a suffocating fear. If even a baron was not safe in these parts, what would become of his family or the villagers?

He sighed, the heavy silence in the village broken only by the occasional cough or the mournful cry of a hungry child. Traders and merchants, once a regular sight on the muddy path in front of his shop, were rarely seen now. The roads lay silent, while the coal kept piling up in the barns. But without traders coming to buy it from the village, it was a worthless treasure. And with all the coal stored in the barns of the manor being the baron's property, the villagers had to buy it from him if they wanted to use it. With people in the village barely having enough coin to buy food, they couldn't afford to pay for the coal as well, and had to go to the surrounding wild forests, filled with dangerous beasts, to gather firewood. Damn the miserly bastard! He cursed the previous baron again.

Tiranat wasn't a farming community. Unlike other villages nestled amidst sprawling farms, Tiranat, being surrounded by vast forests, offered no bounty of crops. The livelihood of most of the villagers relied entirely on the coal mines that burrowed deep under the eastern hills, and the hunting of deer and moose by brave souls venturing into the bandit-infested forests.

News traveled slowly in these remote parts. But it had been months since the baron's demise, and still, they hadn't heard about the village lands being handed over to another noble, even if he was not likely to be any better than the previous baron. Bandits, emboldened by the lack of authority, had raided the village a week ago, leaving behind a trail of fear and dwindling food supplies along with many burnt houses. The few remaining guards in the baron's manor had watched with fear, not daring to oppose the bandits as long as they left the manor alone. Thankfully no blood was shed, but the robbed supplies had left a gaping wound in their meager reserves. Kigeir knew it wouldn't be long before the bandits returned, emboldened by their easy victory.

With each passing day, villagers stopped bartering for his wares, their pockets as empty as their stomachs. No one had much coin left anymore. They were all clinging desperately to what meager savings they had. Kigeir himself had enough grain tucked away to feed his wife and three kids through the approaching harsh winter. But that was meager comfort in these times. Had the Count, a man rumored to be more interested in lavish court entertainments than the welfare of his people, even noticed the baron's absence in Tiranat? Kigeir wasn't even sure that the count remembered this forgotten corner of his domain. He feared the village had become a mere speck on a dusty map, forgotten and fading with each passing day in an uncaring world.

This barely known village, once a minor exporter of coal, now felt like a ghost town, shrouded in fear and an uncertain future. He worried the coming winter wouldn't just be a test of survival, it would be a fight for their very existence.

He was gazing at the empty road when he heard a commotion about wagons coming from the north. Even though it wasn't likely to change anything, he chose to take a look at the coming caravan. With hardly any goods to sell and without any customers, he really had nothing better to do, after all.

A sigh escaped his cracked lips, as he told his oldest son to watch the shop and began to walk towards the north end of the small village.

~ Tesyb ~

Tesyb, a man of just twenty-two with a face that told a different story, looked weathered by life's hardships. The lines that creased his brow and framed his eyes spoke volumes of the anxieties that gnawed at him. He was sitting outside what remained of his house, unlike the other villagers who chose to stay inside in the chilly wind. The afternoon sun cast long shadows across the deserted street before him, mirroring the hollowness in his own stomach.

Tesyb had spent most of his life in the belly of the earth, hacking away at coal seams in the hills east of Tiranat. The work was backbreaking, the air

perpetually thick with coal dust and the musky smell of sweat in the suffocating darkness. His muscles, forged in the depths of the earth, spoke volumes of his grueling labor. The meager wages he got with each swing of his pickaxe, each shovelful of coal, barely yielded enough to feed his aging parents. Saving was a luxury and yet he'd always scrimped, a small voice whispering caution in his ear. Hard times lurked around every corner for people like them.

The news of the baron's murder by bandits a few months ago, had arrived slowly in the village. At first, Tesyb hadn't thought much of it. After all, what did the death of a greedy noble change for the likes of him? Life had continued, albeit under a growing unease. The mines continued to churn out coal, a growing black mountain piled high in the barns.

But that normality had proved to be a fleeting comfort. Only a few traders had come to Tiranat through the dangerous roads since the baron's murder, and what little coal they purchased barely made a dent in the stockpiles. The coal they mined kept piling up, like an unwanted monument to their labor.

Then came the violent thunderstorm that ripped through the village a month ago. Roofs were damaged, crude shelters demolished, and worst of all, the mines flooded. Usually, a few days of backbreaking work with buckets would clear the water. But this time, Tesyb witnessed Mr Dugas, the baron's harried old majordomo who oversaw the mine as well, visit the site. His face pinched with worry, the majordomo had a long discussion with the foremen and

delivered the gut-wrenching news. With the coal stockpile overflowing and no buyers, there was no money to pay miners to empty the flooded mine corridors.

Tesyb had felt the world tilt on its axis. All the miners, the lifeblood of the village, were suddenly without work. He and his fellow miners had dug into their meager savings, built on sweat and sacrifice. But every day, with each meager meal, that lifeline dwindled until a single meal a day became the norm.

And then, to add to their misery, a group of bandits raided the village a week ago and what little the villagers had saved, they had to give up or lose their lives. With the baron dead and his guards, who provided a semblance of security from the bandits, dead along with him on that journey, they had no way to deal with those bandits anymore. He had tried to plead with them to leave at least some food for the villagers, before giving up most of his remaining savings and the stored grains under threat of death, just like others. But that hadn't been enough for them. Those bastards! Riding on horses with burning torches, they had put on fire many of the houses when leaving the village, including his own. He and other villagers had tried to put out the fires, but the wooden walls hadn't taken long to burn to ashes, leaving him homeless, along with many others.

He looked at his parents sitting inside what little remained of the burnt house, their once-proud figures now hunched with age and hunger. How would he

manage to feed his frail parents, even with a single meal a day? A single, tear-filled sob escaped his lips, swallowed by the oppressive silence outside. He was thankful to the Goddess that at least his sister had found work as a seamstress's helper in Cinran. The last few copper coins that he had clutched in his palm, the last of his reserves he had managed to hide from the bandits by burying them under the mud, felt like a cruel joke. How many more meals would it buy? Fear gnawed continuously at his insides. Winter, a monstrous season that demanded even more food, was on its way. How in the world would they survive?

He breathed deeply, sitting with hunched shoulders. He didn't know how yet, but he had to find a way. His parents, his only family here in Tiranat, depended on him. He just had to. He simply didn't know how...

When it was nearing sunset, he heard a commotion from people about wagons coming from the north road. He sighed deeply. What would it change? Still, Tesyb slowly got up and ambled toward the north end of the village, joining others in watching the oncoming wagons.

~ Maisy ~

Ten-year-old Maisy clutched her little brother, Timmy, closer. A caravan was coming from the north and it had many wagons. They looked to be full of stuff and they probably had food too. Two scary-looking guards were riding horses

on the sides. She was here since it was rare to see wagons coming to Tiranat now, and sometimes they threw scraps to stray kids like her.

Many villagers may be hopeful but for Maisy, that spark didn't last very long. She clutched Timmy closer, her threadbare clothes barely concealing the bony frame beneath. Years of patching and mending had turned them into a patchwork quilt of faded colors. Her once bright eyes, usually filled with a spark of defiance, were now clouded with worry. Hunger had etched itself onto her face, her cheeks sunken and her lips chapped. Timmy, smaller than most eight-year-olds, clutched a tattered cloth for warmth, that may have been a blanket far in the past. His face was pale and streaked with dirt.

They were standing close to the garbage heap which was stinking a lot, with flies buzzing near her. A few dogs who looked very hungry with their ribs showing, were digging in the garbage behind her.

Maisy stared at the caravan approaching slowly. Her stomach was making sounds now. She squeezed Timmy's hand, his thin fingers cold and clammy in hers. He hadn't stopped asking about the caravan since spotting it.

"Maybe they'll have leftovers," he whispered, his big eyes shining with a hope Maisy couldn't share. Leftovers were a luxury they couldn't afford to dream about. Their usual dinner came from the garbage thrown out from other huts around their makeshift shelter. Maisy bit back the familiar despair. No point in

crushing his spirit before reality did. She'd seen that hopeful look too many times, only to watch it fade with each empty stomach, each cold night huddled together.

Winter was coming soon and it scared her a lot. A month or two and snow would start falling. They had been living in their aunt's hut since their parents had died from fever a year ago, even if the hut didn't really stop the wind or rain. Their aunt, who was their last living relative, had died too at the end of last winter. Since then they had been eating the food that other villagers used to throw away, but for the last few months, even that had become rare. Then, a month ago, a fierce storm had reduced the hut to splinters, leaving them exposed on the cold, muddy ground between the other huts. They'd been living out in the open since then, staying in the small gaps between other huts, and sleeping on the cold and wet ground. But it had started to get really cold at night since the other huts didn't stop the chilly winds at all.

The fat baron who used to live in the big manor hadn't come back since he'd left with his family and his guards a few months ago. She hadn't seen many wagons coming or leaving the village since then. The villagers themselves had started to look bony, with smoke rising only once from most chimneys. Most of them were now scared of going too far in the forests to gather wood for fire. Looking at their gaunt faces, Maisy saw her own fear reflected back. Fear for the coming winter, fear for Timmy, fear for herself.

When the bandits had attacked, she had hidden between the garbage heap and the shack next to it, clutching Timmy hard, hoping they didn't notice them under the garbage that she had thrown over themselves. Thankfully, they hadn't, or they would have joined other children who had been taken by bandits in the past.

Every new day was a battle to stay alive now. Scraps and spoiled food thrown away by villagers had reduced to nearly nothing now. She hadn't eaten for two days. Scavenged from behind a crumbling hut, a sliver of moldy bread had been her only find yesterday. Seeing Timmy's once-chubby cheeks now hollowed with hunger, she had given it to him. The urge to keep the bread for herself, a selfish whisper in the face of starvation, was quickly silenced by the sight of him. He had never looked so frail before.

Maisy didn't know how she and Timmy would survive the coming winter. Their bodies, already weak from hunger, wouldn't withstand the relentless cold. Her body ached with a constant hunger, but it was Timmy's wide, hopeful eyes that truly terrified her. How could she shield him from the coming cold and the growing hunger that threatened to consume them both?

A chilling fear colder than any winter wind ate at her heart. A fear that this winter might just be their last. The weight of responsibility pressed down on her small frame, a burden far too heavy for a ten-year-old girl. But she was all Timmy had. And for Timmy, for his innocent hope that still flickered, she would fight. She had to.

