

## Londoner 16

### Chapter 16. In Times Past

~ Kigeir ~

Kigeir had seen the caravan winding its way through the muddy road in the village earlier, going towards the baron's manor. But what had truly surprised him was the figure sitting in the first wagon of the small caravan. Tall and broad-shouldered, a young man with an air of quiet authority about him had been announced by his guards as the new baron of the village.

The surname of the new Baron spoken throughout the village, Ralokaar, the same as the Duke of Ulriga's family, had sent a tremor of apprehension through Kigeir. Was he a nephew? A distant cousin? Or could he be a son of the Duke himself? Kigeir couldn't fathom why a Duke's kin would ever leave the opulent halls of the Ulriga Palace and come to this desolate corner of the Duchy, to govern a poverty-stricken backwater like Tiranat. The only explanation that made any sense was punishment. Exile.

A shiver ran down Kigeir's spine. Tiranat was a village barely clinging to survival by its fingernails. If the Duke, or even the power-hungry Count of Cinran, decided to punish them further by raising taxes... Well, Kigeir didn't dare voice the horrifying thought that flickered through his mind.

Kigeir had recognized the weathered face of Pydas, the traveling merchant, perched on the seat of the lead wagon. He had clearly seen an opportunity in the changing guard of Tiranat. Kigeir had come back to his shop after the rare spectacle of a new caravan coming to Tiranat was over. He sighed, a sound heavy with worry. Just then, Pydas emerged on the muddy road walking towards his shop alongside another man, presumably a guard.

"Greetings, Pydas," Kigeir called out to the merchant as he entered his shop, his voice strained but welcoming. "It's been a while since you've graced Tiranat with your presence."

Pydas, a man bronzed by years spent on the road, chuckled. "Indeed it has, my friend. But with the previous Baron... Well, let's just say I wasn't eager to risk these treacherous roads until things settled down."

Kigeir nodded in understanding. "A wise decision," he agreed. "Though it seems you braved the journey after all."

Pydas's smile faltered slightly. "Necessity more than bravery, I'm afraid. Winter approaches, so I decided to make a trip to Tiranat once again, for a last trade before the snow blocks the roads."

Kigeir nodded grimly. "These are perilous times though, particularly for Tiranat."

Pydas sighed, his weathered face etched with concern. "The times are tough everywhere these days, my friend."

Kigeir couldn't help but shift his gaze toward the east, in the direction of the baron's manor. Curiosity gnawed at him. "Speaking of which, tell me about the new Baron. How did you come to be giving him a ride? Shouldn't he have arrived with a grand retinue, a caravan befitting his station?"

Pydas sighed again, laden with unspoken knowledge. "It's not a very good situation for Lord Kivamus, I'm afraid."

Kigeir leaned in, curiosity piqued. "What do you mean? Surely, a Baron wouldn't arrive alone?"

Pydas shook his head. "I found him just outside Cinran, with only one companion, likely an advisor or a guard. They were... hitching a ride, to put it mildly."

Kigeir's eyebrows shot up. "So the rumors are true then?" he blurted, his voice barely above a whisper. "He truly is an exiled son of the Duke?"

Pydas shrugged, his expression guarded. "I don't know the full details, but that's certainly what it seems like to me." They exchanged a few more words, the weight of the revelation hanging heavy in the air.

"Now, about the reason for my visit, Kigeir," Pydas began. "I have thirty sacks of grain with me and some mining tools, as usual, mainly shovels and picks. Although the prices are higher because of the bad harvests, at four gold crowns and six silver coins per sack of grain, I imagine you'll still be needing all of it, right?"

Kigeir's heart sank. As much as the village desperately needed these supplies, his meager earnings barely kept him afloat. "Pydas, my friend, as much as I'd love to take it all," he admitted, his voice laced

with helplessness, "I simply don't have the coin. Nor does anyone else here, from what I know. The situation in Tiranat is worse than you might imagine, especially after that bandit raid a week ago." He paused after seeing a grimace on Pydas' face, but reluctantly added, "The mines have also been shut down since the storm flooded them, so, there's no demand for tools these days. As for the grain... I could buy perhaps three or four sacks if you can keep the price low..." He trailed off, unable to voice the harsh reality anymore. Even at a discount, Pydas's prices were likely out of reach for most villagers, including Kigeir himself.

The weight of their conversation hung heavy in the air as Pydas' expression grew weary. He had clearly anticipated a brisk sale, assuming the village would need all the supplies it could get. "... I wasn't aware things were this bad, Kigeir. The grain wasn't cheap in Cinran, and I can't offer much of a discount." He flopped down on an empty chair with his head in his hands, a hint of desperation on his face. "You are the only big merchant in Tiranat... If even you don't have the coin to buy it, how am I going to sell anything here..."

After Feroy had left the hall, Kivamus exhaled hard and sat on a free chair, gesturing to others to sit as well. He looked to Helga. "How is she, Madam Helga? Will she be okay?"

Helga, who looked exhausted, wiped the sweat from her brow despite the cold weather and sat on an empty chair near the others. "She'll be alright by tomorrow, my lord," she replied with a hint of relief in her voice. "She just has a slight fever now. She had only taken a small sip from the bowl, and I managed to get most of it out quickly. By tomorrow, I believe she'll be back on her feet."

"I can't tell how grateful I am for your quick thinking, Madam Helga. You saved her life. I'm not sure what I would have done if something had happened to her through no fault of her own, other than being hungry." He shook his head slowly, "To think someone didn't even wait for a day before trying to poison me..."

Duvas spoke to him, "For what it's worth, my lord, I'm really sorry that it happened." He looked at the ground as if lost in his thoughts. "Even if I've been swamped with one task after another trying to keep the manor and the village up and running, even if barely, I still can't believe someone here would try to do something like this. No one here had any reason to do this at all."

Kivamus sighed, "But it still happened, Duvas. If Clarisa hadn't drunk from the bowl, I might be dead right now." He took a look at the offending bowl of soup, still sitting on the table near the fireplace. "That reminds me, what should we do with that soup?"

Hudan, who was listening to them, spoke from his place near the door. "I think we should bury it, my lord. Somewhere outside the manor, I'd say."

"Hmm... You're right. Once this is over, I want you to do it tonight itself. We can't leave the soup here, just in case some other hungry person thinks of drinking it."

"As you say, my lord," Hudan nodded.

Kivamus looked to Helga. "How did you act so quickly, Madam Helga? I was so startled that I couldn't think of what to do at that moment, but you acted immediately, saving the girl's life."

Helga reminisced, "I have some experience with poisons my lord." Noticing Kivamus' surprised face, she quickly added, "It's not what you're thinking, my lord. When my family came to live in that inn, Lucem was only a toddler. He had a habit of walking all around the inn and the nearby grounds whenever he found a chance, and he ate any leaf or other plants that looked tasty to his three-year-old mind." She shook her head, "Not all of those plants were edible, of course. Thankfully, there was nothing too poisonous around the area, but many times, I had to make him vomit to get rid of what he had eaten. That's why I immediately recognized the signs of eating something bad in Clarisa and made her throw up as well."

Kivamus nodded. He looked at Lucem with a smile, "I'm guessing you don't do that anymore, do you Lucem?"

Lucem, who had taken a seat near them as well, blushed immediately and quickly shook his head. "No, no, Lord Kivamus, I don't!" He looked to Helga with a glare that only young teenagers can manage at their parents, and muttered, "Ma speaks too much sometimes..."

Helga just gave a warm laugh along with others in the room on hearing that, marking a welcome change in the mood inside the hall.

However, the incident had already cast a dark shadow over the evening, and the change in atmosphere didn't last long. The warmth that had initially enveloped Kivamus had vanished, replaced by a cold awareness of the dangers that lurked beneath the surface of his new life.

After a while, Syryne returned to the hall. Noticing others' questioning gazes, she said "She's sleeping now, my lord. She should be okay, I think."

Kivamus sighed with relief. "I'm glad. Take a seat Syryne."

Kivamus cast a glance towards the hulking form of Hudan, who sat by the door like a sentinel. The flickering firelight danced across his broad shoulders and the hilt of his ever-present sword. "Hudan," he began, his voice low, "do you think Feroy might require assistance?"

Hudan snorted, a sound devoid of amusement. "No, my lord," he rumbled. "Feroy's a master at extracting information. Doubt anyone could keep a secret from him once he's determined to pry it loose." He paused, noticing the curious faces of Kivamus and the others in the hall.

"You might not be aware of this, my lord," Hudan continued, "but my family hails from Ulriga too. Of course, we only had a place outside the city walls. Throughout my childhood, I saw Knights in their shiny armor coming and going on a major road near our house. And just like every other boy my age, I dreamt of becoming a knight. All the glory, the respect, hearing the tales of their chivalry - it seemed like a life worth living."

A wry smile played on Hudan's lips for a fleeting moment before fading. "However the best I could manage was a position as a squire for a knight in Cinran." A hint of bitterness tinged his voice. "But when the time came for promoting me to a Knight, I was passed over in favor of... others. Even after years of service, I never got chosen to be a knight myself. Eventually, the position as a squire wasn't an option anymore, and I had to leave and seek new pastures."

He shot a quick glance at Helga, a flicker of warmth softening his gruff features. "After a while, I ended up at Madam Helga's inn. What I mean to say, my lord, is that since my childhood, I've been looking up to knights and the tales of their honor and kindness, like most young boys in the Kingdom. But Feroy, he's a different breed altogether, my lord. He..." Hudan hesitated, searching for the right words.

"He... well, he used to be a mercenary," he finally said, the word hanging heavy in the air. "He's seen the world, my lord, and fought for all sorts of folks in all sorts of places. As you may have heard, my lord, mercenaries are well known to be very brutal towards the defeated sides. But from what he has told me, he grew disillusioned with the way mercenaries treated civilians after a victory. He tried to change the ways of the group he was with, but..." Hudan shrugged. "Let's just say it didn't work out."

"So, he left them," Kivamus finished the thought. "And ended up at the inn?"

Hudan nodded. "Aye. Drifted from place to place until he stumbled upon Madam Helga's inn one day. Seems it felt like home, and he never left." A wry smile touched Hudan's lips. "So you see, my lord, Feroy knows how people work. He can read them like a book, making them tell their deepest, darkest secrets before they even realize they're spilling their secrets. Years of experience, I'd say."

Kivamus considered this, nodding slowly. Gorsazo's earlier warnings about mercenaries echoed in his mind. "From what I've gathered," he said cautiously, "mercenaries are a fickle bunch, their loyalty bought by the highest bidder. Can we truly trust him?"

Hudan met Kivamus' gaze with an unwavering expression. "I'd stake my life on him, my lord," he declared with full conviction. "We've known each other for many years now, through thick and thin. He may not be a knight in shining armor, but he has a code, a sense of honor that some knights I've known could only dream of possessing."

Kivamus considered this for a moment, the firelight reflecting in his eyes. "Very well," he finally conceded. "We will place our trust in Feroy and his abilities. Let's hope he finds some answers soon."

After a while, there was a knock on the door. On hearing Feroy's voice outside, Hudan stepped up and opened the door, letting him inside.

Feroy looked at the worried faces of the people sitting in the hall for a moment, and said to Kivamus with a grimace, "I found the person, my lord, the one who poisoned your soup."