

Londoner 43

Chapter 43. Kigeir and Dalaar

~ Tesyb ~

Thankfully, Madam Nerida, the head maid, had already foreseen this. After deducting the rations the guards would consume themselves, she had ensured each new recruit received a fixed quantity of grain and coal as the weekly payment of their wages. These precious provisions, packed into small sacks, would be a lifeline for their families.

Hudan, with surprising leniency, had even granted them a precious hour outside the manor walls. It was a chance to share the news of their selection and to deliver the much-needed supplies to their loved ones. His parents' faces had lit up at the news, with pride shining in their eyes in the glow of the newly lit coal fire, courtesy of his first wages in a new job. Their son, a guard for the baron! It was a position of respect in the village, a chance to earn a steady income and secure a brighter future, not just for himself, but for them as well.

He wiped a stray bit of porridge from his lips, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. He had put the extra time outside the manor to good use. With the help of a mortar and pestle borrowed from a neighbor, he'd managed to grind a portion of the allotted grain, to make it easier for his parents to prepare porridge in his absence. Normally, with his income from the mines, they could afford to buy fresh bread from the village baker.

Now, however, bartering would be their only option. To get bread, they'd have to take some of their remaining grain to the baker, who would then take it to the miller to be milled into flour based on his own needs. But it was still much better than not having any grain at all, and wondering where their next meal would come from. He did hope that the baron would start paying them in coin after the winter, and wouldn't go back on his bunch of promises, unlike what usually happened with nobles. When he had told his parents that he would be leaving for Cinran tomorrow, they were worried for a moment, but his mother had reminded them that it was a good opportunity for him to check on his sister who lived there.

Another concern gnawed at him - his father's recent sickness. His father had told him that he hadn't been able to go to the manor earlier because he was feeling too weak to walk that much, but thankfully, it didn't appear to be anything serious.

Most importantly, with his new position as a guard, he could now provide grain and coal regularly to his family. This, he hoped, would allow them to regain their strength and face the coming winter with more resilience. His father, his voice raspy but resolute, had assured him that he would meet with Lord Kivamus the very next morning, and apologize for the delay. He knew it would take some time until their situation approached anything like normal, but at least his parents wouldn't have to face the coming winter hungry or cold.

His reverie was interrupted by a nudge and a playful jab. It was Yufim, another recruit who was the same age as him, known for his excellent archery skills honed during his hunting days in the forest. Though a familiar face from their small village, their conversations had been brief. However, their shared selection as guards had forged a quick bond between them.

Yufim spoke again with a hint of amusement in his voice. "Stop daydreaming, you idiot! No time for sleeping now. Didn't you hear? Kerel's here." He gestured towards the door of the servant's hall with a jerk of his thumb.

The mention of Kerel, the gruff taskmaster who oversaw the new guards' training in the absence of the guard captain, sent a jolt of nervous energy through Tesyb. "Shut up!" he retorted. "I saw him already."

Kerel, a seasoned guard with a mane of iron-gray hair, strode towards the group of new recruits. "Alright, lads," he rumbled, his voice roughened by years of shouting commands. "Bellies full, I guess? Good. Because now we've got a job to do."

His gaze swept over them, taking in the nervous energy and the eagerness to prove themselves. "Head to the kitchens," he ordered, pointing a thick finger towards the door where the maids were working. "The porridge needs to get to the manor gates."

He jerked his head towards the kitchen. "The maids have already filled the buckets. Two men to a cart, and make it quick. There's a hungry crowd waiting outside." Following the order, Tesyb stood up from the straw mattress he was sitting on, along with the other new recruits.

Kerel jabbed a finger in the general direction of the manor gates, his voice dropping to a low growl. "Remember, there'll be a mob out there. Hungry, desperate, and likely more than a little unruly. And a hungry crowd can turn ugly in a heartbeat. Make sure the food gets distributed fairly, no pushing, no shoving." He paused, letting his words sink in. "The gate guards won't be able to lend a hand - they gotta keep an eye out to prevent unwanted folks from slipping into the manor during the chaos. That means

you lot, along with a few other guards who're already there, are responsible for keeping the crowd in check."

A collective intake of breath filled the air. Kerel, however, didn't miss a beat. "Don't worry," he added, a hint of a smirk playing on his lips. "You lads grew up here. You know these folks. Use that to your advantage. A calm word here, a gentle nudge there - you get the picture."

A chorus of assent rippled through the group. Yufim fell into step beside Tesyb, their new camaraderie already forming a silent bond. The sharp-eyed archer used the walking time to tie his long flaxen hair into a knot behind his head, unlike Tesyb's own brown hair, which he had cut short nearly to the roots, so he didn't have to worry about it too much.

The servant hall buzzed with activity as they reached the kitchen. Maids bustled about, carefully transferring the steaming porridge from large cauldrons to smaller, more manageable wooden buckets. The aroma of cooked grains filled the air, a stark contrast to the emptiness that had gnawed at many bellies for far too long. Working in pairs, the new guards hoisted the buckets onto sturdy wooden carts kept outside the servant hall. With a shared grin, they grasped the handles, ready to embark on their first official duty. The small carts, usually used for transporting supplies within the manor, were now laden with their precious cargo. Together, they maneuvered the cart on the gravel path, the weight of the porridge buckets surprisingly heavy.

Yufim grinned at Tesyb as they pushed their own cart. "Ready for your first taste of guard duty?" he quipped.

Tesyb chuckled, "As ready as I'll ever be, I suppose."

Leading the way was Kerel, his imposing figure a beacon of authority. Mr. Duvas, the old majordomo, kept a watchful eye on the procession, his brow furrowed in concentration. A few servants and maids trailed along, carrying additional supplies - wooden ladles to serve, as well as bowls and wooden spoons for the neediest. As they navigated the gravel path towards the manor gates, the distant clamor of a large crowd grew steadily louder. Tesyb's heart hammered in his chest. This wasn't just about delivering food - it was about facing the desperation that had become a part of village life.

Finally, they rounded the last bend, and the sight that greeted him was both overwhelming and heartbreaking. A sea of weary faces, etched with desperation, stared back at them in the light of the two torches placed near the gates, which were burning bright with animal fat. Haggard men and women,

their faces etched with the lines of hardship, were waiting there, not knowing whether the new baron would really provide them food, or this was another one of a noble's grand lies.

The older folks, their bodies stooped and gaunt, leaned heavily on makeshift walking sticks, their eyes dull with exhaustion. Scattered amongst them were children, their bony limbs a stark reminder of the harsh realities the village faced. Some of them clung to their parents' legs, their wide eyes reflecting a hunger that went beyond food. Many young villagers who had escorted their own children and parents to the manor gates, were standing there as well.

A handful of off-duty guards, their expressions grim, were already working to maintain some semblance of order within the crowd, their voices growing hoarse from shouting instructions.

A knot of tension tightened in Tesyb's stomach. This wasn't just about delivering a meal - it was about offering a lifeline, a glimmer of hope in a time of despair. And for the first time, Tesyb felt the weight of his new responsibility settle upon him. He was no longer just a young man from Tiranat - he was a guard, a protector, and today, he would play a small but vital role in bringing a measure of comfort to his people. He took a deep breath, straightened his back, and pushed the cart forward, his resolve hardening with each step. He wouldn't let them down.

~ Kigeir ~

Kigeir, a wiry man with worry etched into his brow, stood amongst the throng of onlookers gathered outside the baron's manor. His gaze was fixed on his two younger children, their hopeful faces bobbing in the crowd for the free meal. His eldest son, who was too old for the free meals for children, was back at their shop, minding the meager stock of grain. His wife had also stayed behind to keep an eye on things.

Suddenly, a voice broke through the murmur of the crowd, calling his name. Dalaar, the other grain merchant in Tiranat, a man perpetually on the cusp of a scowl even on the best of days, walked towards him. The man was in his thirties without a child to call his own, and he looked far from pleased with the current turn of events.

"This whole thing leaves a sour taste in my mouth, Kigeir," Dalaar grumbled. "All these people lining up for free meals. They could have been buying the grain from us. Think of the coin we could be making!"

Kigeir shot him a sideways glance. "They wouldn't be lining up if they had the money to buy grain, Dalaar. You know that as well as I do." His gaze moved towards the front of the crowd, where a skeletal elder was waiting with an empty bowl, a tremor running through his hands. "Do you really believe that those starving orphans or those frail old folks have the coin to spare?"

Dalaar scoffed. "Well, even if they come into some coin, they won't spend it now, would they? Certainly not with free meals like this up for grabs. Damn this baron and his bleeding heart! Trying to take food out of our mouths."

Kigeir's eyes narrowed, his patience wearing thin. "What in the name of the Goddess do you want, Dalaar? For these people to starve on the streets? Is that your idea of good business?"

Dalaar muttered a reply which wasn't loud enough for him to hear. He cleared his throat and continued, his voice sounding desperate. "But this isn't some temporary act of charity! Didn't you hear the rumors? The baron is ordering a massive shipment of grain. Seems he fancies himself a merchant now!"

Kigeir nodded. "I did hear. But it doesn't necessarily mean anything. The snow will soon block the roads to Cinran, remember? At least this way, the village will have enough grain for the winter, since neither of us could have bought that much grain right now."

He paused, his gaze moving back to his children. "Look, I'd rather see the villagers stay alive through the winter, so they can buy grain from me next year. Many of them really would die without these free meals from the baron."

Dalaar scowled. "I don't wish them to die, Kigeir. A living customer is better than a dead one, that much I know. But a man needs to make a living! I want to make money, dammit!" He looked towards the manor. "Before this... this boy-baron arrived with his free meals, at least I could mark-up my prices enough on those who could still afford to buy. It evened out the losses from the lower sales, you know. But now? Free meals for the children and the elderly, and those who can work, get grain directly from the baron! What are we supposed to do, if nobody's buying grain from us merchants? We can't just sit twiddling our thumbs while everyone eats for free!"