

Londoner 44

Chapter 44. Free Meal Program

~ Kigeir ~

Kigeir grinned. "There's always another option, you know." He gazed at the younger merchant. "You can just close up your shop and join the line for work at the manor from tomorrow."

Dalaar's smirk was humorless. "You would love that, wouldn't you? To get your only real competitor out of business?"

Kigeir threw his head back and laughed again. "Of course not! But a man can dream, can't he?"

Dalaar's earlier annoyance seemed to be fading, replaced by a simmering resentment as he watched more guards emerge from the manor gates, pushing carts laden with steaming buckets. "Those rumors must hold some truth, though," he muttered, his voice laced with a venomous hiss. "No noble in his right mind would willingly come to this wretched village. He must have been exiled for a heinous crime!"

Kigeir whirled on him, his face hardening. "Shut your mouth, Dalaar!" he hissed, his voice tight with anger. "Those are dangerous words to speak in the open."

Dalaar fell silent, cowed by Kigeir's sudden display of temper. The two men watched in tense silence as the guards barked orders, attempting to herd the throng of villagers into some semblance of order. Without another word, Kigeir nudged his children towards the manor gates. "Go on now," he murmured, his voice gentle with concern, "and wait patiently."

After a while, Dalaar couldn't contain himself any longer. "Damn this new baron and his handouts." He scowled. "Look at those greedy wretches, waiting to gobble down that free slop like starved dogs."

Kigeir whirled on him, his eyes blazing. "Shut your trap! My children are also in that crowd, you insensitive cur!"

Dalaar flinched. "You know I meant no offense."

Kigeir's jaw clenched, his gaze locked on Dalaar's. "No, you did mean offense," he said. "And I don't want to hear another word of it. If you can't manage a civil conversation, then maybe you better find another place to watch."

Dalaar's gaze darted towards a group of younger villagers, who seemed to be his friends by the look of their exaggerated gestures towards him. A sly grin tugged at his lips. "Well," he drawled, a hint of defiance in his voice, "perhaps I'll try my luck at snagging a free meal myself. It's the least the baron can do after stealing our livelihood!"

Kigeir eyed him with exasperation. "It won't work, Dalaar. There are guards watching like hawks. No need to make a fool of yourself."

Dalaar's smirk widened. "Maybe it'll work, maybe it won't. But the baron can't stop me from trying, can he?" And with that, he weaved through the crowd towards his friends, whose sniggering felt out of place in the hopeful atmosphere.

Kigeir watched him go, a sigh escaping his lips. Unlike many villagers, Kigeir had managed to keep his family fed, albeit with ever-shrinking portions. Just yesterday, a heavy conversation with his wife and children had revolved around rationing their meals for the coming winter.

While he did realize that the baron's plans would likely mean a sharp decline in his grain sales, a bittersweet warmth bloomed in his chest as his gaze landed on his two children. Despite their young ages, they had somehow understood their situation yesterday. He didn't have words to express how painful it felt to have his young children try to console him, when he couldn't even fulfill his duty as a father to provide food to them regularly. But their innocent faces, usually etched with worry these days, beamed with a newfound hope tonight with the promise of regular meals here, instead of the single, meager one he'd mentioned the day before.

This was the first genuine joy he'd seen in their eyes in a long time. How could he begrudge the baron for trying to help, and easing the burden on families like his, even if it meant his own business suffered temporarily? The man was simply trying to ensure the villagers didn't starve through the harsh winter.

But a flicker of unease settled in his gut as he watched Dalaar and his companions huddle together, their scowls a stark contrast to the hopeful faces around them. It wouldn't be an easy feat, Kigeir realized. Winning over the entire village, especially those clinging to their dwindling livelihoods, would be a long and difficult task for the new baron.

~Tesyb ~

Thankfully, there wasn't any wind right now, so the weather didn't seem very cold tonight. As he took a moment to look at the crowd, those who were truly in need were joined by a fringe of onlookers standing at the edges of the empty space outside the manor gates. These curious villagers, who were not eligible for the meals, stood at a distance, their faces a mix of skepticism and a yearning for a morsel themselves. This spectacle - a baron offering free food - was a stark departure from the harsh realities they'd known. A few of the younger villagers who were standing together even seemed to be laughing scornfully at the crowd of elderly and children.

Putting them to the back of his mind, Tesyb watched as the older villagers, including a few of those whom he knew to be homeless, shuffled forward to see why the manor gates had been opened. Disbelief flickered in their eyes, born from years of broken promises and empty bellies. But as the steaming buckets of porridge came into view, that disbelief morphed into astonishment, then into a surge of unbridled joy that warmed Tesyb from the inside out. For many of them, this porridge represented more than just sustenance - it was a lifeline, a beacon of hope in the midst of despair.

"Clear some space here." Kerel, the veteran guard, barked orders through the din. "Make way, all of you! Move back!" The crowd, initially resistant, shuffled back a few paces, their hunger a powerful motivator for obedience. "Form lines!" Kerel bellowed again. "Old folks to the left, children to the right! The rest of you, move back behind the lines! And no pushing, there's enough food for everyone we'd promised."

Confusion rippled through the crowd for a moment, as the villagers, accustomed to a chaotic scramble for scraps, were unsure how to proceed. Many, weakened and disoriented, stumbled about, unsure of their place. Kerel and a few other guards, their voices hoarse from shouting instructions, waded into the human tide, gently guiding and separating the crowd. Some of the recruits stepped between the crowd to help as well, while Tesyb, Yufim and a few other recruits stayed with the carts to protect them from a rush.

The older folks, their movements slow and deliberate, gravitated towards the left, while the children, their eyes wide with a mix of anticipation and apprehension, clustered to the right. Slowly, a semblance of order emerged - two distinct lines snaking their way towards the steaming buckets.

"Kerel, look there!" Yufim pointed towards the back of the older villagers' line, his keen eyes spotting a few able-bodied men attempting to blend in with the elderly. Tesyb recognized them as those standing

on the fringes of the crowd earlier, who'd seemed to be scoffing at the idea of the baron providing free food, but were now trying to snag a free meal themselves.

Kerel, his weathered face hardening with anger, strode towards the men who had positioned themselves between the older villagers for an undeserved free meal. "Out!" he growled, shoving one particularly audacious young man back with a firm hand. "Don't test Lord Kivamus' generosity!" he warned, his voice having a dangerous edge to it. "You want to eat, you work for it tomorrow. One more attempt at this trickery, and you can forget about getting any work at all!"

Initially, the ruler-breakers seemed to be scowling, and looked ready to break into a fight right there. However, a couple of experienced guards jogged over there sensing trouble, flanking Kerel for support. The veteran guard snarled, putting his hand on the sword on his shoulder, without pulling it out yet, "Walk back immediately! Otherwise we can break your legs right now, and then you'll rightly deserve a space in this line. Up to you all."

The chastised rule-breakers, their faces flushed with shame, mumbled apologies and retreated back to the ring of onlookers. Kerel, satisfied with maintaining order, gave a curt nod to the other guards. "Alright," he announced, his voice gruff but relieved. "Let's feed these people."

Finally, with the creaking of wooden wheels, Tesyb, Yufim, and the other recruits pushed their carts to the head of the lines. Most villagers, anticipating this moment, had already brought their own vessels - wooden mugs, chipped bowls, anything that could hold the much needed nourishment. With practiced efficiency, the servants and maids started to ladle the steaming porridge into the bowls the villagers had brought.

Tesyb, however, noticed a few faces that lacked even this meager possession - those who possessed nothing but the clothes on their backs in this unforgiving world - the homeless elders, stooped figures with resignation etched deep in their wrinkles, and a handful of orphans, their eyes large and wary. But the maids, anticipating this need, had brought their own stock of simple wooden bowls.

"Here you go," a maid said, placing a bowl of porridge in a weathered hand. "Eat slowly, now. There's no hurry."

The old woman cradled the bowl, her eyes brimming with tears. "Bless you, child," she croaked, her voice thick with emotion. "Bless Lord Kivamus for his kindness."

Tesyb watched as the line inched forward steadily, a wave of gratitude rippling through the line as the elders and children received their share of the porridge. He couldn't help but notice disbelief in some of the older faces, a testament to the years of hardship they'd endured. But with each steaming bowl distributed, that disbelief melted into a genuine smile, a silent prayer for a brighter future. Blessings upon blessings were heaped upon Lord Kivamus for this unexpected bounty, along with a lot of thankfulness for the benevolent Goddess.

"One bowl per person," a maid called out, her voice carrying over the murmur of the crowd. "Remember to return them after you've eaten. We need them back for tomorrow."

Each villager, young and old, received their portion of porridge with a mixture of gratitude and disbelief. Some had even brought small pots or wooden plates, hoping to sneak an extra helping for a bedridden family member or a neighbor too frail to stand in line. And a few of them were even allowed the extra meal, as long as one of the guards recognized the name of the person and already knew that they were indeed bedridden or too weak.

As he scanned the crowd to see that the villagers maintained a proper line and didn't try to re-join the line at the back, he spotted Father Edric, the village priest, a man rarely seen outside the confines of the temple of the Goddess. The old priest, his long white beard moving as he spoke, was deep in conversation with Mr Duvas and Hudan, who had come out of the manor at some point.

He knew the priest did his best for the villagers. Father Edric and other younger followers who lived at the temple of the Goddess, regularly ventured into the forest to forage for fruits and vegetables for the poorest and most vulnerable - orphans and the very old. But their efforts had been overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the recent hardship in Tiranat, leaving them helpless in the face of such widespread hunger.

Another figure caught Tesyb's eye - a man with a withered leg, using a crude wooden branch to help him walk. The man's eyes were brimming with disbelief as he accepted a bowl of warm porridge from a maid, the new baron's kindness being completely unexpected for him. Although Tesyb's own parents weren't old enough for this handout, he was glad to see that even the downtrodden like him, those who usually received only morsels of pity, hadn't been forgotten. A bittersweet pang struck Tesyb - there was only one disabled person in the crowd. The harsh reality was that many in such circumstances wouldn't have lived long enough to see this day.

Tears welled up in the eyes of some of the homeless elders as they cradled their bowls of porridge. For many, it was the first decent meal they'd had in weeks, a taste of hope after a long descent into despair. These were the people who had lived on crumbs for weeks, their bellies hollow and their spirits crushed.

As Tesyb watched the lines dwindle, a quiet satisfaction settled over him. This was a good day for Tiranat, a day that promised a bright future for the long-neglected mining village at the fringes of civilization.

Though he hadn't been outside Tiranat for a long time, he had heard enough stories from his parents and others to realize how common it was for nobles to care only about themselves, or their profits, like the previous baron. He knew it had to be the Goddess' blessing for her to have sent this unusual baron to their poverty-stricken village, and he would do his best to protect the baron and his ideals, starting from the visit to Cinran tomorrow. He also made a promise to visit the temple to thank the Goddess for their good fortune, as soon as he got a chance to visit.