

Londoner 45

Chapter 45. Interlude: Maisy and Timmy

~ Maisy ~

Ten-year-old Maisy, a wisp of a girl with eyes that held the wariness of someone who had seen too much, had heard that the village had a new baron now, who came with the caravan yesterday. She didn't know why the previous baron never returned to the village from his trip. Maybe he had another place to live, and he left the village forever. Who would want to live here anyway?

Earlier in the day, she had been standing outside the crowd in the market square while clutching little Timmy to her side, and had heard what the big, scary guard who came yesterday was saying. Free food for all the children, that's what the booming voice had declared. But Maisy had scoffed on hearing that. Of course, that had to be a lie. Free things were a fairytale, and she was old enough now to know those were just imaginary stories. Besides, nobody could afford to feed that many mouths anyway. Everyone in the village looked poor now, even those living in the manor. Maybe that's why the previous baron had gone away!

The guard's words, however, had been followed by another, even more incredible promise - a place for everyone to live in during the harsh winter! Surely that couldn't be true, could it? Would the new baron really give free food and a place to live to her and Timmy? Looking at the frail body of her eight-year-old brother, she hoped it was true, but it was far too difficult to believe, in all her worldly experience of ten years surviving in this cruel world. Good things, she had learned the hard way, never came to people like her and Timmy. So there was no point in getting their hopes up, only to have them broken again.

But when the evening turned into night, Maisy noticed a fuss amongst the villagers. Many people were gathering and heading towards the manor. She still didn't believe the baron would give them free food, but her belly which ached with a constant hunger, forced her to take a look anyway. She grabbed Timmy's hand, her brother constantly by her side. "Come on, Timmy," she said, her voice barely a whisper. "Let's go on an adventure." She didn't say that they might get food there, because she didn't want to crush the hopes of little Timmy again, in case it was all a cruel lie, which she was sure it had to be.

When she reached near the gates of the manor, she saw a huge crowd there, much bigger than the one in the market square earlier. She clutched Timmy's hand tightly, her small frame dwarfed by the press of bodies. It would be impossible to search for him if he ran away and got lost in this massive crowd. They stood waiting for a long time as the crowd kept growing, until there were enough tall people in front of her that she couldn't see the gates of the manor at all.

Maisy couldn't hear what was happening beyond the cacophony of voices, the murmurs and shouts punctuated by the occasional rumble of annoyance. She strained to understand what they were talking about, but the words swam in a meaningless jumble. The loud voices were already starting to scare Timmy, who was clutching her with both hands.

Then, a booming voice cut through the noise, demanding order, demanding space - it had to be the manor guards, their strong orders now starting to frighten her as well. But slowly, the noise died down, and it became a little quieter.

Then she heard someone in the crowd say that the guards were forming separate lines... including a line for the children. Confusion clouded Maisy's mind. What was going on? She was too far back to see what was happening, and the press of bodies made it impossible to push forward. There was no way she could navigate this sea of people, reach that line for the children, even though she kept trying. Slowly, she began to feel hopeless, as Timmy began to cry in the press of the crowd.

Just as despair threatened to bury her, a tall and scary figure emerged from the crowd. It was that huge guard, who was making the announcement in the market square earlier, who spotted her and Timmy. He saw the lost look in their eyes and with a hand gently nudging her and Timmy, parted the crowd, creating a narrow passage for them. "Come on, little ones," he rumbled, his voice surprisingly gentle, despite his scary look. "Looks like you two got separated from your folks. Come along, I'll put you at the back of the children's line."

Gently, he ushered them to the end of the children's line, where Maisy took her place while still clutching Timmy's hand tightly. "Thank you, mister," Maisy whispered to the huge guard for the unexpected kindness, who just gave them a sad smile before he left.

Now finally, the crowd was thin enough here that she realized that there was another line where the very old people were standing, along with the line for children, in which they were standing at the end. Timmy, overwhelmed by the crowd, had clutched her hand even tighter, the surrounding voices being too much for his senses. He tugged at her hand, begging to return to the small sleeping place on the ground between the huts, which was their current home.

Maisy, despite her own fear, forced a smile. "Just a little longer, Timmy," she soothed, her voice barely a whisper. She scanned the area near the manor gates, her gaze falling upon a cluster of guards. And there, steam billowed from large buckets perched on carts near them.

Her brow furrowed in confusion. Why would the guards keep hot water in the buckets there? She couldn't see any use for that, unless they were providing hot water to the people in line, since obviously, they couldn't provide food to all of them.

She sighed. Of course, there wasn't any free food! It was too good to be true anyway.

She looked at Timmy, and was glad that she hadn't told him about the food, so he wouldn't be disappointed once again, like her. She scolded herself for letting her believe in that possibility for a moment. Never again! Nothing came for free in this world.

After a while, the line started moving forward slowly. She watched with wistful eyes as the other children from their own line went straight to their parents standing in the crowd of onlookers surrounding the two lines. A few old villagers returned from the front as well, cradling steaming bowls close to their chests, tears glistening in their eyes. Relief, not disappointment, etched their faces. She was glad that at least the guards were providing hot water to everyone.

She leaned down to whisper the news to Timmy, whose face lit up after hearing that, and he finally calmed down to wait for their own chance to get a bowl of hot water. It was going to be quite cold at night in a few hours when they would go to sleep behind the huts with empty bellies, but she was glad that the hot water would at least heat up their bodies a little.

Maisy, emboldened by this small victory, kept her gaze fixed on the buckets, and kept checking again and again to see that the maids were still giving the hot water out - to confirm that there was still enough hot water remaining for them. But there were still too many people in front of her to see it clearly, and everyone around her, even those in their own line of children, seemed like giants, their forms blocking her view.

Slowly the line kept moving forward. After a long while, as they reached close to the front of the line, Maisy's heart hammered against her ribs with anticipation. She craned her neck once more, her gaze finally landing on the bowls. And what she saw caused a jolt of disbelief to shoot through her.

Her breath caught in her throat, and a shiver ran down her spine, but not from the cold. It wasn't hot water the maids were ladling into the bowls. The steam she had seen earlier - it was from porridge! Thick, warm porridge, the kind she hadn't seen in months. A wave of dizziness washed over her, before tears started to leak out of her eyes, blurring her vision.

Timmy, who was too short to see the buckets full of warm porridge, noticed this immediately and started to tug at her sleeves. "Big sis, what's wrong?" he whimpered. But Maisy didn't know the words to give a reply, and soon Timmy started to cry as well, mirroring her own distress. It took a few minutes for her to calm down enough to tell him that there was nothing wrong at all.

Now she understood why the older villagers were crying when they left with their own bowls. She knelt before Timmy, her voice thick with emotion. "We're getting food tonight, Timmy," she whispered. "Warm food."

Timmy wiped his own tears, his gaze fixed on the steaming buckets in front of them with disbelieving eyes. Even though he didn't really believe her words, at least his tears had stopped, replaced by a wary curiosity as he watched the maids fill the bowls.

When they finally reached the front of the line, the serving maid paused for a moment, her gaze lingering on their ragged clothes and hollow cheeks. When Maisy noticed that the maid looked really sad after seeing them, she thought the bucket was finally empty and there was nothing left for them, but the maid shook her head gently and reached for a wooden bowl.

"Goodness, you two must be starving..." the young maid murmured as she ladled steaming porridge into the bowl. Steam rose from its depths, carrying with it the most intoxicating aroma Maisy had ever encountered. It wasn't the faint, greasy stink of discarded scraps they were used to scavenging, but the rich, warm fragrance of freshly cooked meals and a hint of sweetness.

"Are we dreaming, big sis?" Timmy whispered, his voice barely audible above the murmur of the crowd. Maisy just shook her head slowly, a lump forming in her throat, and clutched him closer. The maid took another look at them and then heaped another ladle of porridge on top of the bowl which was now nearly overflowing, and gave it to Timmy.

Timmy stared at the bowl of porridge, his eyes wide with a mixture of disbelief and delight. He hesitantly reached out, his fingers brushing against the steaming hot porridge. It was real. Warm. Food.

The maid, her lips curving into a small, sad smile, reached for another bowl. After filling it until it was nearly overflowing as well, she handed it to Maisy. She knelt before Timmy, her voice gentle. "Don't rush yourself, okay?" she cautioned. "Your body hasn't had much food lately, and if you gobble it all down too fast, it might make you sick. Take small bites and chew it well."

Maisy finally found her voice, a mere whisper escaping her lips. "Thank you," she breathed.

The maid squeezed her hand gently. "Remember, you'll need to return the bowls after eating so we can give everyone another meal tomorrow morning. But for now, you two just enjoy your meal. There's no need to hurry."

Maisy nodded, her heart overflowing with a gratitude she couldn't express. Timmy was now holding his bowl with both of his little hands, while looking at it without blinking, as if he thought it would vanish if he closed his eyes for even a moment. Gently pushing him, she began to lead them away from the lines. They found an empty spot on the dusty ground, settling down near a group of older villagers who sat huddled together, already savoring their bowls of porridge.

For a moment, Maisy simply held the bowl, her gaze fixed on the still steaming bowl, a beacon of plenty in a world of scarcity. It was a simple thing, a bowl of food, yet in that moment, it felt like a precious treasure to her. She closed her eyes, trying to imprint the image into her memory. And if they never got to eat a full bowl of warm food again, in case this really was a dream, a cruel trick of a starving mind, at least she would have the memories of this evening.

Finally, she watched as Timmy, gathering his courage, hesitantly brought a spoonful of porridge to his lips. He blew on it tentatively, then took a small bite. His eyes widened in surprise, then crinkled at the corners in a smile that slowly spread across his face.

With trembling hands, she copied him, taking a small bite herself. The porridge was warm, creamy and sweet. The warmth of the porridge seeped into her frail body, chasing away the gnawing hunger that had been a constant companion for months.

It was supposed to be a simple meal, but after spending the last few months searching around in the garbage for food, she felt that she hadn't tasted anything better in her life. In that moment, the harsh realities of her world faded away, replaced by the simple joy of a warm meal on a cold night. She thought if this was a dream, it was the best and the tastiest dream she had ever had.

That simple bowl of porridge brought back a sliver of childhood innocence in her, a reminder of a time before hunger had become a regular part of their lives. This regular day, which started as just another day spent looking for a scrap of food, while shivering in the winds of the coming winter, was a day neither Maisy nor Timmy would ever forget.

Unknown to her, as she savored another spoonful, a small, innocent smile of pure joy bloomed on her face. She was just ten years old, after all...