

Londoner 46

Chapter 46. A New Friend

~Tesyb ~

As the last ladle of steaming porridge found its home in a waiting bowl, a hush fell over the crowd. The villagers, their faces glowing with the warmth of the unexpected meal, cradled their bowls close, savoring the simple pleasure of a full stomach. While they waited to collect the empty bowls, Mr. Duvas, the majordomo, stepped forward, his voice ringing out through the square.

"Now listen, all of you. While the baron is committed to building longhouses to provide shelter for all the homeless villagers," he announced, "their construction will take several weeks to complete. With the nights already getting colder," Mr. Duvas continued, his voice firm, "his lordship understands the immediate need for warmth and safety. So the baron asks those of you with undamaged houses to consider opening your doors to those in need. Of course, this would only be a temporary arrangement, until the longhouses are ready."

Tesyb scanned the faces around him, a sense of foreboding settling in his gut. Silence hung heavy in the air, broken only by the occasional cough or snuffle. This was exactly the reaction he'd expected. The villagers, already struggling to feed their own families, were unlikely to welcome the additional burden of housing and feeding others. He thought the baron and his advisers should already have known about it.

But Mr. Duvas, his voice betraying a hint of weariness, seemed to have anticipated this reaction. He cleared his throat and continued, "The baron understands the difficulties this may cause and to ease the burden, he is prepared to offer a form of compensation."

The crowd kept hearing the majordomo with bated breath, a keen interest replacing the initial resignation.

Mr. Duvas elaborated, "For every homeless person that a family takes in, they will receive a fixed amount of grain every week, enough to feed a grown up, as well as a small amount of coal. As you all know," he elaborated, "the elderly and the children will continue to be covered by the baron's free meal program until the longhouses are built, and those who are capable of doing manual work will also be working for their meal from tomorrow. That means, the grain and coal we'll provide for taking in the homeless, is for the use of those families themselves. Since they won't have to feed the people they take in, they are free to add it to their food storage for the future."

A murmur rippled through the crowd, while Tesyb's mind whirred with calculations. Grain and coal - essential for survival in the harsh winter months. The offer was indeed very tempting.

"Now let me be very clear," Mr. Duvas continued, his tone turning stern, "we will have guards patrolling the village regularly to ensure that those you claim to be sheltering are indeed residing with you. Taking advantage of the baron's generosity will be met with harsh consequences."

"Spread the word throughout the village," Mr. Duvas concluded. "Those who are willing to participate in this, should take in the homeless villagers as soon as possible, preferably tonight. As you all know, while many of those people who don't have a place to live are already here, a lot of them are not present here right now. It is up to you all to talk to them. And once that is done, those who have taken in other people will need to come to the manor tomorrow to register themselves. Once we have verified it, we will provide them the promised amount of grain and coal in the evening."

Tesyb watched as the villagers started speaking with each other immediately, the news buzzing amongst them like a swarm of restless bees. He knew this night would be filled with whispered discussions and difficult choices, but the promise of extra rations would be a huge motivator for the baron's plans.

He would have gladly offered his own home as well, for a chance at that precious grain, if it hadn't been nearly reduced to rubble during the recent bandit raid. And as he expected, he saw that it didn't take long for the implications to sink in. That was basically free grain given by the baron.

The villagers watching the meal distribution from the fringes of the ground had huddled together, whispering and gesturing towards those who sat finishing their meals. They were the same people who had seemed reluctant to open their doors just moments ago, but now they were practically tripping over themselves to talk to the older villagers and homeless orphans. Conversations buzzed with frantic whispers and hurried negotiations, all aimed at a search for the most suitable addition to their households - someone who wouldn't disrupt the delicate balance of their own family life but would qualify for the baron's offer.

The sight brought a bittersweet smile to Tesyb's lips. The transformation was remarkable. The homeless villagers, who had been openly ignored by other people until they heard about this incentive, were now approached with tentative smiles and kind words. And before long, most of the homeless had already found temporary housing, their faces reflecting a genuine hope that had been absent just an hour ago.

Even Kigeir, the usually stoic grain merchant who'd brought his own children for the free meal, seemed to have taken action. He was talking with a pair of young orphans, after they had returned their empty bowls. After a quick conversation, with a nod and a gruff pat on their heads, he ushered them towards his family along with his own two children. The orphans, hesitant at first, eventually turned to follow, a new hope visible in their eyes. Tesyb's heart warmed at the sight. Those children deserved a roof over their heads, and with Kigeir already having two children of a similar age, the adjustment to a new life wouldn't be as jarring. It still wouldn't be easy for the orphans, since they would know that it would only be temporary, but it was certainly better than the harsh reality of the streets.

The first voice, uncertain at first, rose above the murmur. "All praise the new baron! Long live Lord Kivamus!" it cheered, the sound echoing across the area. It wasn't clear who started it, but the cry ignited a spark within the crowd, quickly morphing into a unified chant. The air vibrated with a newfound optimism, a testament to the transformative power of the baron's well-timed generosity.

Once the cheers subsided, Hudan's voice boomed across the square, "Remember, those willing to work in exchange for grain and coal have to report here at seven bells tomorrow morning!"

Tesyb watched the crowd disperse slowly, a sense of hope blooming in his chest. The road ahead wouldn't be easy, that much was certain. But for the first time in a long while, the future of Tiranat didn't seem so bleak. The baron, with all his new plans and genuine concern for the villagers, had managed to spark a flicker of light in the darkness. The leaving villagers, once sullen and resigned, now seemed to hold their heads a little higher, with their bellies full and looking forward to the next day.

Whether this would be enough to get through the coming winter and the future challenges, only time would tell. But for now, Tesyb allowed himself a moment of hope, a belief that perhaps, just perhaps, brighter days were on the horizon.

~ Maisy ~

Maisy had heard the announcement from the old man earlier. It was supposed to be good news - the villagers would take in the homeless, including her and Timmy. But Maisy wasn't naive. In her world, nothing was truly free. It was a constant hustle, a relentless scramble for scraps. Getting a free meal had felt like she had already used up the little luck she had.

But when the old man mentioned free grain for those who took in the homeless, suddenly, everyone was eager to house the children and elderly. That, she understood. Give and take. It was the way the

world worked. She was still glad that the new baron, whoever he was, had thought of orphans like them, because no one thought about them. Well, almost no one.

The man who approached them, offering a place in his home, wasn't like the others. Maisy recognized him from her scavenging days - Mr. Kigeir, the grain merchant with his kind eyes and three kids. Two of them, a girl and a boy, had even looked to be of the same ages as her and Timmy. Back when things weren't so bad, Mr. Kigeir and his wife had even offered them a fruit or a leftover meal sometimes - a rare act of kindness in their world.

So, when Mr. Kigeir offered to take them in until the longhouses were built, Maisy didn't have to think long. It wasn't blind trust, but a wary acceptance based on her past experiences. Now they were walking towards the man's house, while his younger child, a boy the same age as Timmy, seemed to have found a new friend in her brother.

Elsie, Mr. Kigeir's daughter, was also ten-years-old, the same age as her. And no, Maisy didn't have to ask her. Elsie just didn't seem to know how to stay quiet, and kept talking about one thing after another. So when Elsie asked her about which games Maisy would like to play with her, she didn't know what to answer. She didn't even know any games! She wasn't used to someone who talked that much, so she just agreed to play whichever game Elsie wanted to play with her.

As they reached the house, Mr. Kigeir's wife emerged, her brow furrowed in surprise. She even asked Mr Kigeir about how he returned with double the number of children he'd left with, although Maisy couldn't hear Mr Kigeir's answer. While the adults talked, Elsie kept chattering excitedly. Maisy struggled to keep up with the young girl, most of her questions and answers being foreign concepts to Maisy's simple world.

Everything was changing so fast, it made her dizzy. But at least she was glad that unlike many times in the past, it felt like a change for the better.

Elsie, noticing that Maisy wasn't listening to her, puffed out her cheeks in annoyance. Then, in a gesture that surprised Maisy even more than the day's events, Elsie wrapped her arms around Maisy in a tight hug. "Talk to me!" she exclaimed. "You're my new best friend!"

Maisy didn't know why, but after hearing that, a tear of pure, unexpected happiness escaped her eye. In the midst of uncertainty, she had found not just a roof over her head with the promise of a warm meal, but maybe, just maybe, an unexpected friend as well. And in that moment, under the faint light of the

countless stars twinkling in the night sky, Maisy allowed herself to believe that maybe, just maybe, the world wasn't such a cold and unforgiving place after all.