

Londoner 33

Chapter 33. Tall Tales

Kivamus pushed open the heavy doors of the manor hall, a wave of warmth and enticing aromas washing over him. The afternoon sun streamed through the high windows, illuminating the room. Inside, the long wooden table that dominated the hall was already bustling with activity.

Madam Helga moved around the table, arranging an assortment of steaming platters and bowls, with the help of Syryne. Gorsazo and Duvas occupied one side of the table, deep in conversation. Hudan, on the other side, seemed a world away from his usual stoic demeanor. He was the center of attention for Lucem and an unexpected guest who was sitting next to him.

There, perched on the very edge of a chair, sat Clarisa, the young maid who had narrowly escaped death by poisoning the previous day, seemingly recovered and in good spirits. As his gaze settled on the scene, he realized the source of her merriment. Hudan, his massive frame occupying a nearby chair, was imitating one sword strike after another while telling a tale from his past. His booming voice, usually reserved for pronouncements and commands, was being used for recounting an outlandish story about the day when he single-handedly defeated an adzee. From the giggles escaping Clarisa and Lucem's awe, it was easy to guess that Hudan's story was a captivating one.

As Kivamus entered, Clarisa, startled from her amusement, leaped to her feet and bobbed a hasty curtsy. "My Lord!" she squeaked, her voice betraying a flustered mix of embarrassment and fear. "I didn't mean to take a seat here, my Lord!" she stammered.

"It's... it's Hudan's fault!" she declared, pointing an accusing finger at the still-chuckling giant beside her, her voice laced with mock anger. "He was telling us a really great story, my Lord! And I didn't even notice when I sat down! I promise!"

Hudan, his attempts at stifling his laughter now a comical sight, could only manage a series of snorts and wheezes. Kivamus couldn't help but smile at the sight. The previous day had been filled with tension, and this unexpected burst of lightheartedness was a welcome change.

Kivamus, who found the scene endearing, raised a hand in a placating gesture. "Don't worry about it, Clarisa," he chuckled, his voice radiating relief and amusement. "And I'm glad to see you're feeling well again."

Madam Helga interjected with a warm smile. "She woke up feeling much better earlier, my Lord," she explained, "and simply refused to stay cooped up in her room any longer. So, I brought her here to join us. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all, Madam Helga," he reassured, his voice warm as he settled into his seat at the head of the table. "It's a welcome sight to see everyone gathered and in good spirits, especially Clarisa." His gaze softened as he turned to Clarisa. "Are you feeling well enough to join us for a meal, Clarisa?"

Clarisa, still flustered from her outburst, hesitated before responding. "I... I'm not sure, my Lord," she stammered, her voice barely a whisper. Casting a hesitant glance at Syryne, she added, "Can I, Miss Syryne?"

Syryne offered a reassuring smile. "Of course you can, Clarisa," she replied, "as long as you feel up to it. Does your stomach feel okay now? Or is it still hurting?"

Clarisa shook her head. "No, Miss Syryne, I feel alright."

Kivamus, noticing her lingering uncertainty, decided to intervene. He gestured towards the table, and with a hint of encouragement in his tone, he said, "In that case, you can take a seat with us, Clarisa."

Clarisa's gaze darted around the table, taking in the faces of the assembled group. Hesitation flickered across her features once more. Perhaps the company of the Baron and his advisors seemed a bit too grand for a young maid who had just recovered from a poisoning attempt.

Clarisa's gaze darted to Syryne, who had become a pillar of comfort during her ordeal. Syryne's warm smile seemed to break the dam of hesitation. With a shy nod, Clarisa returned a hesitant smile. Gathering her courage, she took a small step forward, then another, until she reached the empty chair beside Syryne.

Sensing Clarisa's slight awkwardness, Syryne, who was sitting next to Lucem, reached out and patted the empty chair next to her. "Come on, have a seat here," she said in a gentle voice. "I'll keep you company and help you with your meal if you'd like me to."

A genuine smile finally bloomed on Clarisa's face, chasing away the last vestiges of shyness. With a newfound confidence, she walked towards the chair and settled down next to Syryne. When Madam Helga took a seat as well after she finished serving everyone, they began the simple lunch, with many conversations happening around the table simultaneously. Duvas and Gorsazo still seemed to be in a serious conversation, while Lucem and Clarisa were talking to Syryne, and Madam Helga watched the kids with a smile.

Meanwhile, Kivamus leaned in towards the new guard captain, a playful glint in his eye. "Hudan," he murmured in a low voice, barely audible over the soft chatter at the table, "that tale of single-handedly defeating an adzee? I find it a little hard to believe."

Hudan, unable to contain his amusement any longer, let out a hearty laugh, albeit softened to avoid startling the children at the table. "Of course you do, my Lord!" he chuckled, as he whispered. "Truth be told, even with four trained men, including a knight, it was a close call. But any good story needs a bit of uh... decoration, wouldn't you agree? Especially for youngsters like Lucem and Clarisa."

Kivamus couldn't help but laugh as well. Hudan, despite his gruff exterior, possessed a surprising knack for connecting with children, particularly after living the last few years in Helga's inn, where Lucem must have provided a keen audience for his tall tales. "True enough, Hudan, true enough," he conceded with a chuckle.

~ Tesyb ~

Tesyb hunched deeper into his worn out blanket, the late-morning chill seeping through the threadbare fabric. He was sitting on the crumbling remains of his doorstep, the remnants of what had once been a sturdy door creaking mournfully in the breeze. The news carried on the excited chatter of villagers hurrying past had drawn him out of his burnt house. Apparently, guards from the manor were going to make an announcement in the village square, and everyone was expected to gather there.

He hadn't missed the arrival of the caravan yesterday, the one that brought their new Lord to Tiranat. A young man by all accounts, his arrival had caused a stir in the village. Whispers flew like wildfire, carrying the rumor that he was none other than a son of the Duke of Ulriga himself. Tesyb had scoffed at the rumors at first. It seemed too grand, too unbelievable to be true, but a rapid spread of the rumors had lent them a troubling weight. Now, they seemed to be the only explanation for a high-born noble like him ending up in this desolate village. He guessed that the baron was exiled, most likely. The specific crime the new baron might have done to earn that exile remained a mystery, lost in the murky games of power that nobles played amongst themselves.

What could this announcement be about? Curiosity tugged at him. News was a rare commodity these days, especially good news. With a shrug of resignation, he decided there wasn't much else to do, so why not? As he stood up, a sliver of hope ignited within him. Maybe, just maybe, the announcement had something to do with the coal mines reopening. But Tesyb quickly crushed any lingering hope with a cynical scoff. Wishful thinking, nothing more. He knew for a fact that the manor's coal barns were still overflowing. After all, he had been the one leading the wagons the last time they delivered a load of coal to the manor - the barns were loaded to the brim back then. And without a steady stream of merchants to buy the coal, Tesyb couldn't fathom why anyone would consider reopening the mines.

He glanced towards the ramshackle structure that served as his family's home nowadays. His parents, their weathered faces etched with worry, peeked out from the doorway. Handing over his blanket to them, Tesyb offered a reassuring nod. "Just heading down to the square to see what the fuss is about," he called out. "Be back soon."

As he set off, Tesyb shook his head, trying to clear his mind. What did the lineage of the new Baron matter to him? A noble was a noble, exiled or not. Their reasons for being here were irrelevant to the harsh realities facing the villagers. Exiled for political missteps or genuine crimes, it all meant the same - another master to serve, another set of rules to follow.

The village square wasn't very far, and he needed to hear this announcement for himself, even if it was just another empty promise from a self-serving noble. As he reached closer, a wave of murmur and excited chatter drifted towards him from the square.

Tesyb rounded a corner and the familiar sight of the village square came into view. This central gathering place of the village, which doubled as the sole marketplace of the village, now reflected the hardships that had befallen Tiranat. These days only a few stalls stood as silent testaments to better days, their awnings drooping and their wares gathering dust. With the mines shuttered, and after the recent bandit raid, the villagers' pockets were lighter than ever, and there were few customers to tempt the weary merchants.

He gazed at the villagers walking towards the square, noting the familiar faces bearing a mixture of curiosity and desperation. A low sigh escaped his lips. It wasn't surprising. With the closure of the mines, and their most reliable source of income severed, most villagers had little else to occupy their time.

He quickened his pace, weaving his way through the growing crowd. As he entered the square proper, the sheer number of people already gathered there surprised him. Drawn by the promise of news, it

seemed like most of Tiranat's inhabitants were gathered here, a stark contrast to the deserted square he was accustomed to these days. He must have received the news later than most - his home, nestled near the village's western edge, placed him further from the rumor mill.

The sight before him stirred a bittersweet pang of nostalgia. He remembered evenings in the square after each hard day spent working in the coal mines, his pockets jingling with hard-earned coin. Nearly all the miners, their faces flushed and muscles aching from exhaustion, would gather here after collecting their wages for the day. This place would become a hive of activity in the evenings - stalls overflowing with fresh vegetables from the local vegetable patches and fruits brought by the gatherers would do a brisk trade, with the joyous laughter of children chasing each other in the background. The butcher's shop at the corner would offer freshly cut meat brought by the hunters venturing into the nearby forests.

All around the marketplace, merchants would be hawking their wares to the newly paid miners. The air would be thick with the chatter of bartering and the clinking of coins, their laughter mingling with the comforting aroma of brewing ale wafting from the alehouse at the corner. For many, it was a time to unwind - a mug or two of ale at the tavern, a shared joke with friends, a respite from the day's toil. Tesyb cast a wistful glance towards the alehouse, its once-gleaming sign now dull and chipped. It had been far too long since he'd enjoyed a mug of ale after a long day's work. A pang of longing shot through him - a longing for better times, for a full belly, and the camaraderie that had once filled the village square.

He shook himself out of his melancholy, the urgency of the present pushing aside the ghosts of the past. He needed to get closer, to hear what the Baron's announcement was all about. He maneuvered through the crowd, the press of bodies pushing him steadily toward the center of the now densely packed marketplace.

Tesyb squelched his way through the final patch of mud, a remnant of the downpours that had plagued them just days ago. Reaching near the center of the crowded square, he found himself craning his neck to see over the heads of the villagers gathered there. As he scanned the crowd, his gaze fell upon the two manor guards standing near the aged well that served as the unofficial heart of the gathering place. He recognized one of them instantly - Kerel, a grizzled guard with a mane of iron-gray hair who usually manned the main gate of the manor. A seasoned veteran pushing forty, Kerel wasn't exactly friendly, but Tesyb knew him by face at least.

The crowd continued to swell, their murmurs and hushed conversations creating a low buzz of anticipation. Tesyb had to wait for a while to hear the announcement since the guards seemed to be waiting for more of the villagers to gather there. Finally, Kerel stepped onto a sturdy wooden bench

beside the well, his presence demanding silence. He raised a hand, silencing the growing din, all eyes fixed on the guard.

"Hear ye, hear ye!" his voice boomed across the square. "A message from the Baron himself!"

A hush fell over the crowd, a mixture of anticipation and trepidation hanging heavy in the air. Tesyb shifted his weight, his curiosity piqued.

"The Baron seeks new recruits for his manor guard! Those with experience in combat will be given preference," he continued, his gaze scanning the faces before him. "Any young man, strong and fit, with a desire to serve as a guard, step forward and speak to me after the announcement." Young men, their faces etched with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension, shifted at the front of the crowd.

A flurry of questions erupted from the crowd. "How many guards is the Lord looking for?" someone shouted.

Kerel held up a hand, silencing the growing commotion. "We aim for a dozen new recruits today, and possibly more in the coming weeks."

Another voice, this time belonging to a burly miner, boomed with a question that echoed the anxieties of many. "And how much will the new guards be paid for it?" he demanded.

A tense silence followed the question. Kerel exchanged a hesitant glance with his fellow guard before turning back to the expectant faces. He shook his head slowly, the movement stiff and deliberate.

Turning back to the crowd, he spoke, his voice carrying a note of regret. "At this time, we cannot offer any payment of coin..."