

Londoner 34

Chapter 34. All Work And No Pay...?

A chorus of angry shouts erupted from the assembled villagers after hearing that. The announcement, far from the news of opportunity they had craved, was met with an immediate uproar.

"We have to risk our lives without pay? How are we supposed to feed our families?" a man shouted in protest, his tone laced with anger and despair.

"It doesn't make sense! Why would we work for free?" a woman's voice shrieked in disbelief. Frustration and desperation boiled over as others continued to voice their concerns.

Tesyb's heart sank as disappointment clawed at him. Truth be told, he wasn't surprised by the lack of coin. The manor wouldn't have been able to sell any coal in the recent months after all, without any traders coming here. But the spark of hope he'd clung to - a chance at a steady income, a way to provide for his family - vanished like smoke in the wind after hearing the harsh reality of no coin payment. He stood rooted to the spot, the weight of the announcement settling heavily upon him, as he waited to hear if there was more to it.

Kerel held up his hands, palms facing the crowd, in a desperate attempt to quell the rising tide of anger. The air crackled with frustration, the villagers' shouts echoing off the houses that surrounded the square. Once a semblance of quiet had returned, his voice, roughened by years of service, cut through the tension.

"Hold on, everyone!" he bellowed. "There's more to the announcement. I'm not saying that you wouldn't be compensated for the work! Instead of providing coin, the Baron is offering the new guards a regular allotment of grain and coal - enough to feed their families and keep their homes warm through the coming winter."

A lone voice, laced with suspicion, cut through the fragile calm. "But why not coin?" the man hollered. "Grain and coal are all well and good, but we need coin for other things - clothes for our children, repairs to our homes..."

Kerel locked eyes with the speaker, his gaze unwavering. "It is not for me to explain the reasoning behind this decision," he admitted. "I'm simply here to deliver the message. The exact amount of grain and coal each guard will receive will be determined once we've chosen our recruits."

With that, Kerel hopped off the bench, his job complete. The crowd, however, remained abuzz. Tesyb, his heart pounding in his chest, knew what this meant. With the mines shut down, this was their only chance to put food on the table. Only a dozen new jobs for the whole village wasn't much, but it meant a dozen families would have a chance to survive the harsh winter. Every unemployed miner in the village would be vying for these guard positions. But he wouldn't let this opportunity slip through his fingers.

Tesyb, a broad-shouldered former miner himself, felt a surge of adrenaline course through him. He scanned the crowd, his eyes locking onto other burly men, their faces a reflection of his own desperation. The air crackled with unspoken tension as everyone shuffled forward, jockeying for position, each pushing to be the first to reach the guards. Heaving himself onto the balls of his feet, Tesyb used his broad frame, honed by years of laboring in the mines, to his advantage.

He waded through the throng, shoving and jostling his way towards the guards, determined to be among the first considered. Every other able-bodied man in the village seemed to have the same idea. Elbows started to fly, shouts erupted, and a tense silence punctuated by the heavy thud of boots on packed earth filled the air. The promise of food and warmth had turned neighbor against neighbor, friend against friend, all in a desperate bid for a sliver of hope in a bleak future.

Kerel's voice boomed through the square. "Hold it right there, all of you! Reaching the front first won't guarantee your selection. We need disciplined men, not brawlers!"

His words, laced with authority, gradually penetrated the haze of desperation. Slowly, the initial frenzy subsided, replaced by a tense calm. Many villagers - those too old, too young, or simply unfit for such a role, drifted away from the center of the village square. Their faces were etched with disappointment and a hint of resignation, as they moved towards the outskirts of the square to keep watching. The women, some of whom were cradling toddlers or infants in their arms, retreated to the periphery of the square, casting worried glances at their husbands and sons still vying for a spot. Even the children, initially curious about the commotion, lost interest and wandered off to play amongst the few stalls.

The announcement, while offering a glimmer of hope for some, only served to highlight their own helplessness. As the crowd thinned near the center, only the young men remained near the well - those with a strong build and a look of determination etched on their faces. Tesyb scanned the faces around him - a sea of former miners, their calloused hands and sturdy builds a testament to their past profession. Yet, the despair of unemployment had brought them here, ready to trade the darkness of the mines for the uncertainty of a guard's life.

They were all competitors now, vying for a limited number of spots. He estimated close to a hundred men still standing to be chosen as a manor guard, a number far exceeding the dozen guards the Baron required. A cold knot of anxiety formed in his stomach. Only a select few would be lucky enough to be chosen, leaving the rest to face the harsh reality of empty bellies when they returned home.

He straightened his back, a steely resolve hardening his features. He couldn't afford to dwell on the odds. He had to make a case for himself and prove his worth. This was his only chance, a chance for survival, not just for himself, but for his parents who depended on him. Even if the pay wasn't in coin, as announced earlier, the grain and coal would be enough to keep his aging parents fed and warm through the harsh winter. This was his only chance, and he wouldn't let it slip through his fingers.

With a newfound determination, Tesyb focused his gaze on Kerel. Now that the initial mayhem had subsided, the guard seemed to be waiting for something.

Once Kerel noticed only the young, able-bodied men remained, he cleared his throat and addressed the remaining hopefuls. "Alright, lads," he announced. "Now, you have to wait. The guard captain himself will be coming to assess the recruits."

A murmur of anticipation rippled through the crowd as they waited. Tesyb took a deep breath, his nerves frayed with a blend of apprehension and determination. He had to be ready. The future of his family depended on the impression he made on the guard captain.

The tension in the village square remained thick as the minutes stretched into an hour. Based on the temple bell which was rung twice during that time, he guessed that more than an hour had passed by as they kept waiting, marked only by the occasional cough from an older villager and a muttered curse from the gathered men. Some of the villagers had found places to sit, usually on the ground where they were standing. Tesyb shifted his weight from one foot to the other, anxiety gnawing at him.

Then, a commotion arose from the edge of the square. Tesyb craned his neck for a better view. A group of villagers parted, revealing a familiar figure - Duvas, the Baron's majordomo. Flanking him was another guard, a man Tesyb recognized seeing with the baron's caravan yesterday. This new guard, however, was impossible to miss. Armed with a sword on his back, he was a giant of a man, his heavy boots thudding on the packed earth as he walked. This man was built like an ox, his broad shoulders straining the seams of his leather armor, as his height towered over the villagers. Even Tesyb, known for his stature amongst the miners, paled in comparison.

The newcomers walked towards the well, the crowd parting easily around them. After a brief conversation with Kerel and the other guard, the giant of a man strode towards the well, his gaze sweeping over the assembled hopefuls with a critical eye. Tesyb felt a tremor of apprehension run through the crowd. This seemed like the new guard captain, and his approval was the key to securing the coveted position of a manor guard.

The huge man reached the empty bench beside the well and hoisted himself onto it with surprising agility for his size. Finally, the man cleared his throat and addressed the assembled men.

The huge man's voice, deep and booming, echoed across the square. "Listen up, all of you!" he commanded. "Hudan's the name, and I'm the new guard captain of the manor. First things first - make some space here. I need to see each of you properly."

A hesitant murmur rippled through the crowd. A few men shuffled their feet a little and moved a step back. But most of the men, desperate to be seen as the best candidates, were reluctant to move back.

But Hudan's patience seemed to be wearing thin. His brow furrowed, and his voice took on a harsher edge. "Did I stutter? Move back! Create some space in the center. Right now!" he bellowed.

This time, the message resonated clearly. The raw power in his voice brooked no argument. The crowd slowly shuffled backward, muttering amongst themselves, but a clear space finally opened up in the center of the village square. Tesyb himself had only moved back a small step, resulting in his new position much closer to the front of the crowd, instead of in the middle where he had been standing earlier.

Hudan grunted in satisfaction. "Alright, that's better," he rumbled, surveying the newly formed space with a nod of approval.

"Good. Now, listen closely," he barked. "I'll be pointing at some of you. Those chosen will step forward. The rest of you - stay back. And remember, one word out of line, one disruption, and the whole damn recruitment is off. Disobeying orders will guarantee that you're not getting selected, is that understood?"

A chorus of gruff affirmations echoed through the square. The air crackled with nervous anticipation. Tesyb straightened his back, his heart hammering a frantic rhythm against his ribs. The moment of truth

had arrived. His future, and the well-being of his family, hung in the balance. He had to be ready to prove his worth to this formidable new guard captain. He even craned his neck upwards to be more visible to Hudan, a nervous tremor running through him.

Finally, Hudan, the imposing guard captain, began his selection. One by one, he pointed a thick finger at different young men, his gaze lingering on each for a moment before a gruff, "Step forward," echoed across the square. Envy washed over him as each chosen villager, a triumphant grin plastered on their face, stepped into the designated area. Yet, as the number of chosen villagers rose higher, Tesyb's own smile remained stubbornly absent.

The minutes ticked by, agonizingly slow. Tesyb remained rooted to the spot, a knot of anxiety tightening in his gut with every passing selection. He kept watching, his heart sinking with each choice that wasn't Tesyb himself. He was well aware of his own strength, honed years in the mines swinging a pickaxe. Yet, as the number of selected men rose past a dozen, cold sweat began to prickle his skin. Why hadn't his turn come yet?

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, his gaze constantly flitting between Hudan's imposing figure and the dwindling pool of hopefuls. Suddenly, Hudan's gaze snapped towards him. Tesyb felt a jolt of adrenaline course through him as the captain's finger pointed directly at him. "Step forward," Hudan rumbled.

Relief flooded his system, so intense it almost knocked him off balance. With a surge of nervous energy, he pushed his way through the remaining crowd, a wide grin splitting his face. Joining the ranks of the chosen, Tesyb cast a glance around.

He couldn't help but notice a pattern. These men weren't just physically imposing, they exuded a certain fierceness. Many of them, including Tesyb himself, bore the marks of past fights - scars that crisscrossed their faces or adorned their knuckles and arms, each one a testament to a past brawl or skirmish. They held themselves with a different kind of confidence, a predatory glint in their eyes that spoke of experience in the harsher realities of life.

A frown creased his face. This wasn't right. Hudan wasn't picking based on strength or fitness for work, at least not solely. He seemed to be picking based on something else entirely - a past marked by violence, an apparent willingness to get into fights. Or more likely, based on their looks - those who looked like they were already experienced in fights were the ones to be chosen.

The realization gnawed at him, a bitter taste in his mouth. Was this truly the only way to secure a place as a guard? It seemed absurd, a nonsensical way to choose guards. Surely, strength and skill held more weight than a collection of past brawls. He shook his head. Perhaps the long hours underground had dulled his senses, or maybe the desperation clouding his judgment was playing tricks on him. He pushed the thought aside, focusing on the task at hand.

Hudan's selection process continued until nearly twenty men stood before him. Then, to Tesyb's surprise, the guard captain stepped off the bench and turned to Duvas, the majordomo. They huddled together, their voices dropping to a low murmur. The majordomo, his brow furrowed in concentration, scrutinized the chosen men before murmuring a response back. Tesyb strained to hear what was being said, but only fragments reached him - whispers of "loyalty," "discipline," and a name he couldn't quite catch.

Finally, Hudan cleared his throat and addressed the group once more. "Alright, listen up," he boomed, his voice silencing the murmurs that had begun to rise. "This is it for now. Those of you who have been chosen will come back with me to the manor. There, we'll put your skills to the test. We need men who can fight, who can defend the Baron and his interests. After I see which of you can actually hold your own in a fight, we'll choose the final twelve who will become the new guards for the Baron."

What? They had to go through another test now? Tesyb was quite surprised to hear that there would be a further selection process before they became manor guards. He had thought the guard captain had simply decided to recruit more guards than he had claimed earlier.

Disappointment clouded the faces of many of them, while some even muttered curses. The initial relief of being chosen was replaced with a new wave of uncertainty. A physical test? Even if getting in a brawl in the alehouse was nothing new to them, none of them had ever trained for combat. They were miners, not warriors. But it couldn't be helped...

Tesyb squared his shoulders, a newfound determination hardening his gaze. This wasn't over yet. He may have been chosen based on his scars, but he wouldn't back down without a fight. He had come this far, and he wouldn't let this opportunity slip through his grasp. Gritting his teeth, he steeled himself for what was to come. The promise of food and warmth for his family outweighed his fear. He would prove himself, even if it meant facing his fellow villagers in combat.