

Londoner 35

Chapter 35. Big Promises

A low murmur of disappointment rippled through the crowd. The unchosen men, their dreams of a steady income now disappeared, slowly shuffled away, muttering curses under their breath. It could have been him, Tesyb thought. It still could be so, if he didn't get picked in the final selection.

But before they could start to disperse, Duvas intervened and halted the guard captain. A short exchange with Hudan followed, and the guard captain gave a nod to the majordomo before addressing the crowd once more, after climbing back on the wooden bench.

"Hold on, everyone!" he boomed. "There's more to the announcement. Mr. Duvas was going to tell you about this, but instead, he has asked me to make the other announcements as well."

A spark of curiosity flickered in the weary eyes of the villagers. Even the women and elders, who had retreated to the fringes of the village square after the initial selection, perked up their ears, eager to hear what else the Baron's representatives had to say.

Hudan cleared his throat and continued. "Let me assure you," he declared, "the new Baron, Lord Kivamus, is different from the nobles you're used to. He doesn't just see Tiranat as a source of revenue. Lord Kivamus has a genuine interest in the well-being of Tiranat and its people. He envisions a brighter future for this village, a future brimming with opportunity for everyone. He has grand plans for this village, plans that extend far beyond the selection of new guards."

A murmur of surprise rippled through the crowd. Tesyb, along with most others, had grown accustomed to the indifference of the previous Baron. The notion of a leader who actually cared for their plight seemed almost unimaginable to them.

Hudan continued, his voice taking on a more official tone. "There's a significant amount of work to be done to realize the Baron's vision. And that's where all of you come in. Those who weren't chosen for guard duty, and anyone in the village willing to put in honest manual labor can report to the manor gates starting tomorrow morning."

Hudan paused for a moment, letting the meaning of his words sink in. "Lord Kivamus," he proclaimed, his voice ringing out across the square, "has decided to establish farms here in Tiranat itself!"

Tesyb, along with the rest of the villagers, couldn't help but stare in astonishment. The previous Baron had been a leech, sucking the village dry without giving a single thought about its well-being. Under his rule, farming had never been allowed here, except for a few meager vegetable patches behind the houses of some villagers, which he probably never noticed. The villagers were forced to rely on overpriced grain from distant traders, putting a constant burden on their meager earnings, just so the previous baron could increase his profits by taxing those traders from Cinran, as well as the local merchants.

The prospect of growing their own food here, of achieving a measure of self-sufficiency, was a dream they had almost dared not dream. Of course, even then the baron would take his share of the profits and his taxes, but it still would be much better than buying the grain from the traders who charged sky-high prices for it.

A murmur of excited chatter erupted amongst the villagers. The prospect of work, of a chance to contribute to their own future, was a beacon of hope in their bleak circumstances. Even those who hadn't been chosen as guards couldn't hide the smiles spreading across their faces.

If Lord Kivamus' plan came to fruition, it would mean a future free from the chokehold of exorbitant food prices. The village could become self-sustaining, and it could become a turning point for Tiranat. A genuine smile stretched across Tesyb's face as well. He glanced around the square and saw the same flicker of hope reflected in the eyes of his fellow villagers. Perhaps, just perhaps, a brighter future was on the horizon.

A hush fell over the square once again. Every villager, young and old, able-bodied and not, strained to catch Hudan's next words.

Hudan, his gaze sweeping over the attentive faces, continued. His large hand gestured outwards, encompassing the trees that fringed the village. "To make way for these fields," he explained, "we'll need to clear the land - a lot of it. That means felling trees, clearing the shrubs, and once the land is clear enough, then preparing the soil for planting in the spring."

A ripple of eager mutterings spread through the crowd. Many of the men, especially those who hadn't been chosen as guards, straightened their backs, a sense of purpose rekindled in their eyes. The prospect of working on the land, of nurturing crops that would sustain them through harsh winters, held a noticeable allure. But as Hudan held up his hands again to silence the crowd, Tesyb realized he wasn't finished yet.

"And that's not all," the guard captain declared. "Lord Kivamus has also noticed the plight of those who lost their homes in the fire." His gaze swept over the makeshift shelters and the remnants of burnt houses which were easily visible beyond the packed marketplace as a silent acknowledgment of their hardship.

A collective gasp rippled through the crowd. The burnt houses, a constant reminder of their misfortune, now seemed to hold a glimmer of hope for them.

"So, he's decided to address that as well," Hudan continued, his voice rising above the murmurs. "The Baron is going to construct new housing for all the homeless villagers! No one in Tiranat will have to face the coming winter without a roof over their heads!"

A beat of silence followed, before giving way to a thunderous eruption of cheers, a joyous roar that echoed through the village. Relief, disbelief, and pure, unadulterated joy washed over the faces of the villagers. No more nights spent huddled together for warmth, shivering in the unforgiving winds... The thought of a secure roof over their heads brought tears to some eyes and wide smiles across others.

Tesyb, his heart swelling with cautious hope, couldn't help but grin as well. A genuine, unrestrained smile stretched across his face for the first time in months. Perhaps, just perhaps, this new Baron would really be different... The prospect of his parents finally having a proper home, a place free from the biting wind and relentless rain, filled him with a hope that had been absent for a long time. But, would it really happen...?

A sliver of doubt remained lodged in Tesyb's heart. Years of neglect under the previous Baron had instilled a healthy dose of cynicism in him and many of the villagers. They had heard grand pronouncements before, promises that fizzled out like dying embers. And so, he wouldn't allow himself to get swept away by euphoria just yet. He would only believe Lord Kivamus' promises when he saw definite action, until his parents had a roof above their heads and the first seeds were sown. Only when these pronouncements transformed into tangible improvements in their lives, would he allow himself to trust the new baron's words. But for now, at least he had some hope for the future...

Hudan, his hands raised in a placating gesture, waited for the joyous outburst to subside. "There's a lot of work to be done to achieve all this, as you all can guess," he continued once a semblance of quiet returned. "Winter is approaching fast, and these houses won't build themselves. We need to move quickly to ensure everyone has a roof over their heads before the harsh weather sets in."

He looked at the crowd for a moment. "That means there'll be enough work for just about everyone in the village. Those who can fell trees, those who can haul stone, those who can work on sawing the logs - all your skills will be needed."

Another wave of cheers echoed through the square, a testament to the renewed spirit that coursed through the villagers. Tesyb looked around at the faces of the villagers, as a sense of camaraderie, a shared purpose, filled the air. They may have been battered by hardship, but their spirits were far from broken.

The once-despondent crowd thrummed with a newfound energy, a collective determination to seize this opportunity and rebuild their lives. With work to be done, food to be grown, and a roof over their heads, Tiranat might just rise from the ashes of despair. They would face the challenges together, as a village united. And for the first time in months, hope, a fragile yet persistent flame, flickered brightly in the hearts of the people of Tiranat.

Hudan raised his hand to calm down the crowd, and a hush fell back over the square. "As Kerel must have informed you earlier," he began, "there are reasons beyond our control that prevent us from offering coin payment for the work at this time."

"That's why," Hudan continued, "the compensation for all laborers - those clearing land for the farms and those assisting with construction, will be similar to what the guards are receiving. Everyone who reports for work tomorrow will be paid a fixed amount of grain and coal every week. This system will continue throughout the winter, and then Lord Kivamus will re-evaluate the situation."

A collective sigh rippled through the crowd, the disappointment palpable. The promise of grain and coal had initially sparked hope, but it wasn't coin. Coin meant freedom, the ability to choose what they bought and how they spent it. Grain and coal as payment, while essential, felt restrictive. But at least it was better than starving and freezing in the winter.

Tesyb exchanged glances with the other selected recruits, a silent conversation passing between them. Becoming a guard, with its inherent dangers, wasn't the only option anymore. The announcement sparked a quiet conversation amongst the newly selected recruits. Tesyb himself didn't mind fighting. He had been a big man all his life, and although he had never gotten any formal training to fight, he had had more than his fair share of breaking up brawls in the alehouse when a few miners got too drunk.

Suddenly, two of the men chosen as guards stepped towards the guard captain, their faces etched with trepidation. One of them, a young man named Finn, addressed Hudan directly. "Sir, if the wages are the

same anyway, we would like to work as laborers for clearing land and felling trees instead of becoming a guard. We'd prefer not to risk our lives, now that we know there is another option to feed our families."

He glanced at the other recruit who had stepped forward with him. "Like him, I have a wife and a young child waiting for me at home, and I'd rather not take the risk of making her a widow already."

Hudan, his face an impassive mask, acknowledged their request with a nod. "The duty of a guard does carry a higher risk," he rumbled, "which is why they typically receive a higher wage than miners or laborers. To compensate for that risk, even though we are not able to pay you all in coin, the guards will still receive slightly larger portions of grain and coal each week compared to the laborers."

The announcement had a clear impact. The other hesitant recruit, swayed by the promise of more provisions, seemed to reconsider. He mumbled something under his breath and stepped back into the ranks of the guards-to-be. Finn, however, remained resolute. The thought of risking his life was seemingly not acceptable to him if there were other options to provide for his family. Hudan, with a curt nod of understanding, dismissed him and Finn returned to the crowd surrounding the center of the marketplace.

Scanning the crowd once more, Hudan addressed a new topic. "We are aware," he boomed, "that some of you have been cultivating vegetable gardens behind your homes, despite the lack of permission from the previous baron."

A flicker of apprehension ran through the crowd like a nervous breeze. Hudan's words brought back memories of the iron fist of the previous Baron. Tesyb's father had also been growing a few vegetables behind their now-damaged house, which had helped them a lot in recent times. Were they now facing punishment for those vegetable gardens?

Hudan, sensing the shift in mood, quickly interjected. "Hold on now, there's no need to worry!" he boomed in a reassuring voice. "Lord Kivamus is not going to punish anyone for simply trying to feed their families. He understands the hardships you've faced, especially with the recent grain shortage."

A collective sigh of relief washed over the villagers. Their defiance, born out of necessity, had been tacitly acknowledged, and perhaps even commended.

Hudan continued, his voice laced with a hint of empathy. "Lord Kivamus sees the value in self-sufficiency. That's why, starting today, he has lifted all restrictions on vegetable gardens. Every villager is free to cultivate whatever they can behind their houses, and the Baron even encourages you to expand them if possible. The more food you grow, the better!"

A cheer erupted from the crowd. Nervous glances were replaced by nods of approval and murmurs of gratitude. Women who had nurtured small vegetable patches in the shadows, fearing the Baron's wrath, now beamed openly.

"This new policy extends for hunting in the forests as well," Hudan continued. "While the forests belong to Lord Kivamus, he recognizes the village's desperate need for varied food sources." He paused, letting the weight of his words sink in.