

Londoner 17

Chapter 17. Unraveling Schemes

"Who was it?" Kivamus demanded, a cold edge creeping into his voice.

"You won't believe it, my lord," Feroy replied, his voice devoid of its usual gruff humor. "It's Levalo, the young lad Pydas left here to watch over the horses and wagons."

Kivamus' brow furrowed in disbelief as Feroy ushered the young man inside. Levalo, a man barely in his twenties, stumbled through the doorway, a whimpering cry escaping his lips. His hands, bound with a rough rope, scraped against the floor as he fell to his knees, his entire body wracked with sobs.

Disbelief morphed into a cold fury in Kivamus' gut. Pydas, the seemingly harmless trader who'd offered him safe passage, couldn't be behind this, could he? The man had been nothing but helpful since meeting him. Yet, here they were, with Pydas' hired hand as the culprit.

Gorsazo mirrored Kivamus' outrage. "Pydas? But... but why?" His voice was mired in confusion. "He had countless opportunities if he wanted to harm you, my lord. Yet, he seemed genuine in his support all along!"

Levalo's choked sobs intensified at the mention of Pydas' name. "No, my lord! Mister Pydas had nothing to do with this! Please, you have to believe me, my lord! He doesn't even know! I... I did it alone! Please forgive me, my lord!" he begged with his head on the ground, as he broke into another fit of sobs and tears.

Feroy interjected. "I tend to agree, my lord. This reeks of desperation, not a calculated plot. I think he acted alone." He punctuated his statement with a swift kick to Levalo's back, sending the young man sprawling before Kivamus in a new wave of tears.

The action, though harsh, served to focus everyone's attention. This sniveling mess, barely a man, was the one who had poisoned him? The image of Clarisa, the young maid, trembling in pain flashed in his memory. This wasn't what he'd expected. He'd braced himself for a hardened criminal, not this quivering mess of fear and regret. This was no cunning assassin, no seasoned conspirator. This was a frightened boy, barely a man, whose bravado was shattered. Kivamus felt a surge of unexpected frustration. This was not the answer he'd anticipated. Levalo's pathetic display left him feeling more bewildered than threatened.

Levalo, his voice thick with tears and hiccups, began to plead. "Forgive me, my lord! Forgive me! I had no choice, truly I didn't! I..." His voice trailed off, dissolving into another torrent of choked sobs.

Gorsazo, a man who rarely lost his composure, seemed on the verge of exploding. "Choice? How dare you say that! You nearly ended Lord Kivamus' life, and of a child's too for good measure! What could justify such a heinous act?"

Levalo's cries escalated into a pathetic wail. "Forgive me! I swear I had no choice!"

Just as Gorsazo was about to yell at Levalo again, Feroz stepped in with a firm voice. "Please let him speak, Mister Gorsazo. We need to understand what drove him to do this. It may be vital in preventing something like this from happening again."

Kivamus, his initial anger giving way to a cold curiosity, found himself nodding in agreement. This sniveling mess of a man might hold the key to a much larger conspiracy, a conspiracy far more intricate than a simple poisoning attempt by a disgruntled guard of a traveling merchant.

Feroz growled at Levalo, "Speak now, you sniveling little cretin!"

Levalo hung his head, his voice trembling as he spoke. "My lord," he began, his words punctuated by choked sobs, "I saw you go to the manor house to wait for your meal. When that young maid arrived with the bowl of soup, I... I confirmed from her that it was for you."

Under the harsh scrutiny of the others gathered in the room, Levalo crumbled. Tears welled in his eyes as he stammered, "Please... forgive me, my lord."

Feroz added curtly. "Keep talking, Levalo. Leave nothing out."

Drawing a shaky breath, Levalo continued his confession. "I needed a moment alone, so I told the maid it wouldn't be proper to deliver food to the Lord without even a tray to hold the bowl. When she hurried back to fetch one," he choked back a sob, "I... I offered to hold the soup for her, claiming I didn't want her to spill it and anger the Baron."

He squeezed his eyes shut, his voice barely a whisper as he recounted his actions. "She left for the tray, and while she was gone, in a dark corner away from the torches... I added a few crushed Jocinaq leaves to the soup, my lord."

A collective gasp rippled through the room as Feroy cut in, his voice hard. "That is a very poisonous plant. Where did you find it, Levalo? It only grows within deep forests."

Levalo sniffled, wiping his tears with a grimy sleeve. "... I spotted it growing close to the road when we stopped to rest on our way to Tiranat, my lord."

Kivamus, his voice heavy, pressed on. "Continue, Levalo."

"That's all, my lord," Levalo finished, his voice barely audible. "When the maid returned, I handed the bowl back to her."

Feroy asked coldly, "Was this the first time you tried to kill Lord Kivamus? What about when the bandits had attacked, or when we were on the road?"

Levalo looked at Kivamus with eyes full of tears. "I never found you alone earlier, my lord, even on the road. And during that attack, you had already gone inside the inn."

Kivamus, his initial shock giving way to a wave of cold anger, leaned forward. "Why, Levalo? Why would you do something like this?"

The young man collapsed to his knees, his entire body wracked with sobs. "Forgive me, my lord! I... I had no choice! My family are serfs, bound to the land of Baron Zoricus in the west of Cinran. We barely have enough to scrape by, and our debt keeps growing. We were on the verge of starvation!"

He looked at Kivamus with pleading eyes, his voice thick with despair. "A few weeks ago, the noble... he offered a deal through another person. If I did this... if I came to Tiranat and managed to kill you, he said he would consider our debt paid in full. That's why I was in Cinran, my lord, searching for a caravan heading south since a week ago. When Mister Pydas hired me for the trip to Tiranat, I couldn't believe my luck. You were in the same caravan! Please, my lord, forgive me!" He had bent and put his head on

the floor in front of Kivamus, begging for forgiveness in between the wracking sobs and tears he couldn't stop from flowing.

Kivamus sank back in his chair, a heavy sigh escaping his lips. The weight of the situation settled on him like a suffocating cloak. This wasn't a villain with grand ambitions or personal vendettas. This was desperation, raw and primal. This world was nothing like the place he'd grown up in, a world of opportunity and progress. Here, in this harsh kingdom, a young man's life could be reduced to a single, desperate act for the sake of his family's survival. He looked at Levalo, his youthful face etched with fear and regret. Levalo's story painted a bleak picture of this world.

In another world, another era, Kivamus thought, Levalo could have been studying at a university, preparing for a future filled with possibilities. But here, in this brutal new world that he'd found himself in, his family was bound to the land as serfs to a ruthless noble in Cinran, their fate tied to his whims. It had chained him to a life of backbreaking labor and crushing debt, forcing him to contemplate murder for their survival.

Kivamus sighed, the sound heavy with a newfound understanding of the harsh realities he now faced as the Baron of Tiranat. He stared at the trembling figure lying on the floor before him as a war raged within him. The anger at the attempted murder was undeniable, but it was overshadowed by a wave of unexpected empathy. This wasn't a villain, he was just a product of a broken world, a world where basic necessities like food were a luxury for many.

Kivamus spoke in a voice laced with exhaustion. "Take him away and lock him up somewhere. I need time to think."

Duvas shook his head apologetically. Clearing his throat, he said, "My lord, unfortunately, we lack a proper prison here in Tiranat. There's never been a need for one, given the size of the village."

Feroy stepped forward with a glint in his eye and said, "Not a problem, my lord. We can tie him to a pillar in the barn. Won't go anywhere there."

Gorsazo said, "One last question before you take him." He looked at Levalo. "Do you know who that person was? Can you tell me his name?"

Levalo shook his head, and answered between sobs, "As I told you, my lord, my family works the lands of Baron Zoricus. His land holdings are very big to the west of Cinran, and he has a lot of people working for him. But the man who gave me that offer was someone I had never seen before, who said he was acting on Baron Zoricus' behalf. But at this point, I don't know if he was speaking the truth. I had never seen him before, my lord, and I don't know who that was."

After a quick nod from Kivamus, Feroz marched towards the sobbing and babbling Levalo, who continued to plead for forgiveness. He practically dragged the young man out of the hall, the echoes of Levalo's apologies fading into the distance.

A tense silence had descended upon the room, broken only by the crackling fire.

A few minutes later, the door creaked open and Feroz re-entered, his brow furrowed but a hint of satisfaction in his eyes. "Levalo is secured in the barn, my lord," he reported. "I've also instructed one of the guards to keep an eye on him."

Kivamus was sitting in a chair near the fire, his fingers steepled together and his brow furrowed in contemplation. His features etched with a mixture of anger and something akin to pity, he finally addressed Feroz after his return. "How did you manage to apprehend him so quickly, Feroz?" he inquired.

Feroz, wiping his hands on his roughspun trousers, launched into a detailed account. "As you instructed, my lord, I went straight to the kitchens in the servants' hall. The first thing I did was spread the news about the attempted poisoning."

"And how did they take it?" Gorsazo inquired.

"Shock, mostly," Feroz replied. "There was a fair bit of fear mixed in too, understandably." He continued, "One of the maids who was helping in the kitchen mentioned that when Clarisa, that's the young maid who delivered the soup, returned for the tray, she was berating herself for forgetting it in the first place. This particular detail piqued my curiosity."

Kivamus leaned forward, intrigued. "Interesting. Go on."

Feroy continued, "So, after giving Clarisa the tray, the maid in the kitchen decided to keep an eye on her. From a nearby window, she observed Clarisa speaking with the wagon driver who had arrived with you, my lord."

"The driver, of course," Kivamus interjected, piecing together the puzzle, "had to be Levalo, since Pydas still hasn't returned with the other driver."

"Precisely, my lord," Feroy confirmed. "The maid saw Levalo holding the very bowl of soup and talking with Clarisa."

Syryne interjected, a hint of frustration in her tone. "Why didn't this maid report this suspicious behavior?"

"Asked her the same thing, Syryne. Apparently, the poor girl never thought to doubt someone who had traveled all the way from Cinran with you, my lord. She did apologize profusely, though, along with the others in the kitchen. They all wanted to come and apologize to you in person for letting it happen, but I figured it best to keep them inside until the culprit was caught."

Kivamus nodded, his gaze flicking toward the empty space where Levalo had been moments ago. "So, you located Levalo after that?"

"Well, my lord," Feroy chuckled, "after questioning the servants and piecing things together, I easily found Levalo tending to the horses. He denied everything at first, of course. But when I mentioned that several people had witnessed him speaking with Clarissa and handling the soup bowl, his resolve crumbled. He confessed to the entire scheme."

Kivamus couldn't hide his surprise. "He gave up that easily after doing all this?"

Feroy chuckled humorlessly. "Of course not, my lord. But I think it's best if we skip some details..."

Kivamus grimaced, understanding the hidden implications. He let out a heavy sigh, the weight of the situation pressing down on him.

He considered the reasons behind Levalo's actions, the desperation that had driven him to such a deed. "And the rest of the soup?" he finally asked with a concerned voice. "Is there a chance Levalo did something to poison the whole pot?"

"No worries there, my lord," Feroy reassured him. "The other maid confirmed she never left the pot unattended near the fire, and the others, including Madam Nerida, confirmed it as well. Levalo, according to them, never even entered the kitchen in the servants' hall."

He continued, "Just to be doubly sure, though, I made him down a bowl of soup from the same pot before bringing him here. He gulped it down without a second thought, and as you saw, he's no worse for wear."

The hall was quiet for some time, as they thought about the incident and its implications.

After some time, Helga asked, "Why did they even send Clarisa, such a young maid, to bring the soup in the first place? An older maid would have easily become suspicious of a wagon driver asking to hold a noble's soup. And this wouldn't have happened at all."

"That is precisely because she was young, Madam Helga. I asked about it too. They said Clarisa was so excited to meet the new baron that they couldn't say no to her when she eagerly said 'I will take the soup to Lord Kivamus, and it is final!'"

Helga nodded, "I can understand that. It's hard to deny children's wishes sometimes..."