

Londoner 78

Chapter 78. Food Sources

In the evening, Kivamus and others were sitting in the manor hall near the fireplace, when a guard entered.

He said, "Milord, the blacksmith has provided us what he forged today - eleven braziers and two iron sheets to wrap around the axles of the log movers. Taniok told us that he would attach the sheets on the axles tomorrow using a few iron nails."

"That's good to hear," Kivamus replied. "Eleven braziers is more than what I was expecting." He looked at the majordomo. "Give the braziers to the workers when they go for work from tomorrow morning, like we discussed earlier. Also, send someone to put one of them in the marketplace tonight itself, which should still leave us with a couple of extra braziers. You can put them up outside the manor gates whenever you are distributing the food, so that those elderly villagers and children won't get too cold while waiting there."

"Of course, my Lord," Duvas said. "I'll make sure of it personally. And now that we have enough braziers, I will also tell the servants to use them regularly within the manor as well, wherever they are going to be working in the cold."

"Certainly," Kivamus nodded. "Also, put a servant on a regular duty to refill all the braziers in the village twice a day. A guard can go with him each time to escort the cart of coal."

Duvas gave a nod. "I'll do that, my Lord." He gestured for the servant to leave.

Kivamus began after a minute, "We also have to think of something soon to get more food, or we would start to have a food shortage again by the end of winter."

Gorsazo said, "I have heard that the hunters have been bringing in a small amount of meat, but we can organize bigger hunting groups ourselves. Sending more of them out there while escorting them with guards would allow them to kill and bring in bigger animals, and that meat would be very helpful to add to ours as well as the villagers' diets."

Kivamus replied, "That's a good idea. I have been thinking about that as well. But do we even have that many trained hunters in the village?"

"Not really, milord," Duvas said. "We do have a few, but two of them are working as our guards now - Yufim and another new recruit, whose name I can't remember right now. I think there should still be one or two other hunters in the village who have regularly been bringing in some small game, but as you know, nobody likes to go too deep into these forests. But if we send trained guards with them, that would make it much safer for them to go further."

Hudan interrupted, "We will have to wait for that. As of now, we can't afford to send our limited number of guards outside the village, at least until all the guards are back from the escorting trip to Cinran."

Kivamus nodded. "That's true enough. But once they are back, we will have two dozen guards with us, not including the ones you are training with machetes. After that we can certainly send a few of them out to hunt in the forest every day." He added, "We can make groups of four people, two of whom will be good swordsmen from our guards, and they can also carry spears with them if needed. The other two should be archers. We can also send our own guards who are archers along with the hunters in the village if needed. That way the archers can hit an animal from far away and if required, the spearmen can go closer to finish them off. If we just send out two or three such groups out to hunt every day, they should be able to provide us with a steady supply of meat."

"That's a good idea, my Lord," Hudan agreed. "Four trained men in each group would be large enough that they can take on all but the most dangerous beasts - from which they should be running away anyway - and yet, it's a small enough group that they will be able to move fast enough. I will try to add one recruit in each group - the ones who are showing the most promise - so that they can get some real fighting experience as well."

"Good," Kivamus nodded. "But how will they carry the meat? Especially if they are going deep into the forests?"

"We never really had to think about that until now," Duvas replied. "Usually, the hunters only bring in small game to the village market, like rabbits or pheasants. The previous Baron never liked to send his guards away from the manor, so we could never organize bigger hunting groups in the past, to bring in deer or boar. Of course, even with hunting groups of four men, they will still have to be careful of the much more dangerous beasts like bears and packs of wolves, not to mention adzees and other such top predators."

"True enough," Kivamus said. "But even then, we need to send them to the forests, because we really need that meat. Now that it seems unlikely that the caravan might be able to go for a third trip, we need every source of food we can get to supplement our diets in the winter. Apart from that meat, the fur we will get from many animals can be used to make more fur coats as well." He added, "Since they can't carry four-wheeled carts into the forests, I will look into having a few wheelbarrows made, which is similar to a cart but only has a single wheel, which makes it much easier to move it in difficult terrain. And having a few sledges would also help in the winter for the hunters to carry the bigger animals they hunt. Once Taniok gets some free time, I will tell him about that."

"We did have a sledge here in the past," Duvas said, "but it was damaged a few years ago. The baron didn't see much need to have it rebuilt, since there wasn't much use for it, since we never sent big hunting groups into the forests."

The outer door of the manor hall opened again, and Helga walked inside.

"Oh, you are already here, my lord," she said with a little surprise. "I was looking for you around the manor. I need to talk to you about something."

"What is it?" Kivamus asked with curiosity.

Helga sat at one of the armchairs near the fire, and took a moment to warm her hands by the fire. "You had told me earlier to look around for edible berries and other usable shrubs outside the village." Seeing Kivamus nod at that, she continued, "That's how I was spending the last few days, and finally I found something of use. In the northwest of the village, maybe four hundred yards away from the last of the houses, I found a small puddle of water, and there were edible Rizako mushrooms growing there under the trees. I have brought a few of them with me, and I will cook Rizako stew for dinner tonight!"

"Sounds wonderful!" Kivamus said with a smile. "How many mushrooms were there?"

"Not that many..." Helga replied. "Maybe a few dozen at most. But I don't know why nobody in the village ever ate them..."

Duvas gave the answer. "It is very difficult to identify which mushroom is edible, and which is poisonous. A few months ago, when we were getting short on grains, one of the guards found some mushrooms in

the forests, and not knowing better, we cooked it for lunch that day. Thankfully, nobody died from eating those mushrooms, but let's just say, the next few days were not a pleasant experience for those who had eaten it. There was an unending line in front of the outhouses that day."

"That makes sense," Helga said with a grimace.

Duvas added, "That was the reason why I was unable to accompany the previous baron on his last trip to Cinran. In a way, eating those mushrooms saved my life."

Helga began after a moment of silence, "Unless you know for sure that a particular mushroom is edible, you really shouldn't try to eat them. Even if you don't die from it, it can have serious side-effects like blindness and such." She gave a confident smile. "But that won't be a problem now! While I was living at the inn, I got a lot of experience finding edible mushrooms. So I know for sure that the ones I brought with me today are edible, and tasty as well! Rizako stew is actually one of Lucem's favorite dishes. Feroy really likes them too. You all will get to see how good it is tonight itself!"

Others praised Helga after hearing that they would get something different to eat today, since their diet didn't really have much variety these days. However, Kivamus was thinking ahead of tonight's dinner. Mushrooms could be a decent source of nutrition for them if they could successfully grow a good amount of them here. They wouldn't just add variety to their diets and make it more balanced, but they would also allow them to keep providing food to the villagers without starting food rationing if they couldn't buy enough grain before the winter.

He looked at others, and said, "If there were mushrooms in that place, that means they can grow in this climate, so can't we try to cultivate them ourselves? Those few dozen mushrooms wouldn't be enough to even feed the whole manor for a single day, but if we could grow them at a bigger scale, it would be really helpful for us in the winter. Although I'm not sure if they would even grow in snowy conditions." He looked at Helga. "Do you have any experience with that?"

"As a matter of fact, I do, my Lord," Helga replied. "Like I had told you in the past, we didn't get much income in that inn, so a few years ago I tried cultivating a batch of these Rizako mushrooms so that we would have something to eat in lean times. The first few tries were a complete waste. But I kept trying, and eventually I was able to successfully grow them in a closed barn there." She continued, "While it's true that they can't really grow in the snow, they can still survive in freezing conditions, although they will only start fruiting once the weather becomes warmer."

She added, "In our case, since we can maintain warmer conditions indoors by burning braziers nearby, we should still be able to grow them indoors throughout the winter. I had no idea that I would be able to find them here! But now that I have already seen that they can grow here, we really should try to cultivate them." She thought for a moment before she continued, "I can use the help of some maids in this, and I would need a dedicated barn for that - since they only grow in the shade. That barn should be away from where people live - otherwise they can cause sickness if you stay close to them for too long. I learned it the hard way. Now, I always tie a piece of thick cloth to cover my nose and mouth so that I wouldn't have to directly breathe the air when working close to them. Apart from that, some sawdust and small logs would be needed to provide a surface for them to grow. If you provide me with those things, I will do my best to cultivate them here."

"That's very good to hear!" Kivamus said with a smile. "As for closed rooms, we don't have any empty rooms in the manor, but once the longhouse blocks have been built for the villagers, we can build more such buildings specially to grow these mushrooms. With more than enough coal to heat the buildings, we can maintain a good temperature for them as well." He asked, "You said that they were growing close to a puddle of water, and from what I remember, mushrooms need a good amount of humidity in the air to grow. So you will also need to make some water troughs in those rooms - maybe even metal troughs near the fire, which would make sure that some of the water would keep evaporating continuously and the air wouldn't get dry there."

"Certainly, I was already thinking of that," Helga said with a nod. "But it would take time for the longhouse blocks to be completed, and by that time these mushrooms might not survive in the cold."

"That's true enough..." Kivamus muttered. "Is there anything we can do about it?"