

Londoner 79

Chapter 79. Levalas

"What about using the wood from the damaged houses of the villagers?" Hudan suggested. "Since many such villagers are living temporarily with others now, we have many such damaged wooden houses in the village which are empty. We cannot grow any mushrooms there - since the villagers still live nearby, but we can still use the wood from those houses to build a temporary shed easily enough - maybe somewhere outside the walls of the manor, but still close enough that madam Helga doesn't have to walk too far for that."

"That's a very good suggestion, Hudan!" Kivamus said. "We can make it south of the manor walls. There are no people living there, so it wouldn't be a problem to cultivate them in that place. Duvas, do it tomorrow itself. Tell a few workers to tear down the houses which are completely damaged, after telling the villagers to remove any belongings from them. Ask Taniok to send one of his new apprentices to help and tell him to use that wood to make a temporary shed in the South outside the manor walls, maybe two hundred yards away from the walls. They should be able to make something by evening. It doesn't need to be anything sturdy, but it should be able to last a month or two, so that we can cultivate the mushrooms there temporarily, until we can make a dedicated wooden building for them."

He looked at Helga. "Once they have done that tomorrow, use the workers to bring in any small logs and the sawdust which would be easily available where Taniok was cutting the wood into planks. Think about what kind of water trough you need there, and send someone to the blacksmith to get a few such troughs made. Once everything is ready, you can transplant the mushrooms from that puddle along with some of the nearby soil inside that shed. This is an important project, and if we are successful with this it would really help to feed the villagers through the winter. So use any resources that you need for this."

Helga gave a confident nod. "Leave it to me, my lord. I have experience with this, and it will give me something important to do when I am not cooking meals for us. I will still leave some mushrooms in the puddle there, so that they can provide us with more of them after the winter, in case we are not successful with the cultivation."

"Good idea. Once we have made the longhouse blocks, I will put Taniok on this, so that he can make a big barn in the south in place of that shed. Assuming the mushrooms have survived in the shed until then, we will try to do mushroom cultivation at a larger scale, so that it can be an important source of food for us even after the winter." Kivamus added, "You should still keep looking around in the area we are clearing around the village in your free time, in case there are more such mushrooms or any usable shrubs."

"Of course, my Lord," Helga nodded. "But all that comes tomorrow. For now, I am going to cook an excellent Rizako stew for you all!"

There were cheers in the manor hall after hearing that, as Helga went further inside the manor house to start cooking the dinner.

~ Levalas ~

~ Count Ebirtas' Mansion, Cinran ~

Levalas, his clothes tattered and muddy, entered the gates of the grand stone mansion of Count Cinran and stepped into the courtyard. It was dusk now, and the fallen leaves on the cobblestone path crunched beneath his feet as he made his way towards the stables. The past week had been a long and difficult journey for him. After running away from the baron's manor in Tiranat, he had been walking north through the dense forest in the chill of the coming winter, while trying to survive from dangerous beasts and poisonous plants all the way. After surviving on just a few fruits he had found along the way in the forest, he had finally reached Cinran in the evening after more than a week of walking.

The Count's mansion, where he was born nearly two decades ago, and which had been his home for all his life, was a formidable structure, its stone walls thick and imposing. A large, horse-drawn carriage stood in the courtyard, its polished wood gleaming in the fading light. Probably a baron had come here to visit the count today.

He walked towards the western stables, which was one of the three stables in the mansion of the count. He had been working there as a stablehand for nearly all his life, since that dreadful day his destiny had been stolen from him by Count Ebirtas. Now once again he was back to the place he hated with all his heart, but there was nothing he could do about it. He had been doing unsavory jobs for Baron Zoricus in the past few years, not limited to stealing and putting a competitor's warehouse on fire, and he had been adding up his coins one by one to save them. This was supposed to be his final task before he could finally leave this wretched life behind. But his luck had deserted him that day when he tried to poison the Baron of Tiranat, and the faint hope of leaving this place had now flown away from him. He shook his head with a sigh. Dwelling in his past wasn't going to help him right now.

Looking inside the stables, he saw that two stablehands he knew quite well were tending to the horses, their movements rhythmic and efficient while they fed the horses with hay. A small well, its water lapping gently against the stone sides, stood near the stables. A young maid, her face framed by a simple headscarf, was drawing a bucket of water from the depths. Once she had gone, he made his way towards it. He knelt beside the well, the axle creaking as he dipped the bucket into the cool, refreshing water. He pulled it up with a grunt of effort, his weary arms protesting all the way. Finally, he poured the water over his face and hands, the cool liquid washing away the dirt and grime of the past week, revealing his pale, gaunt features beneath. As he dried his hands on his tattered tunic, he saw two of the stablehands walking towards him with a smirk.

"Oh! Master Levalas is here!" The taller one of them sniggered.

The other stablehand asked with a smirk, "Were you out for a leisurely trip, your highness? We didn't see you here for more than a week, and we had to do all the work since then!"

"Shut up..." Levalas grumbled. "I had an errand to run for Baron Zoricus."

"But you stink, Levalo! Have you been crawling through a muddy ditch?" the taller stablehand asked smugly. "I didn't know highborns like you did that as a pastime these days."

Levalas didn't deign to give an answer to that, and used the water to begin washing his feet as well.

The other one added with a sigh, "Come on Levalo, and help us with the horses. It's been difficult to handle all the work with just the two of us." He paused, while pinching his nose with his fingers. "But you know, maybe get a little cleaned up first, or the horses would run away from your stench."

Immediately both of the stablehands started sniggering at the joke, and turned away to walk back towards the stables.

Levalas called out, "Hey, do you know if Baron Zoricus is in Cinran right now? I need to report to him first. I will come back to help after that."

The taller stablehand pointed at the large carriage standing nearby. "Oh, that's his carriage. He is here today to meet with the count."

Levalas gave a nod in thanks, and continued washing himself to get rid of some of the stink before he went to the baron, while grumbling under his breath. Damn that greedy bastard Zoricus, he was already the richest baron under the Count of Cinran, but he was still not satisfied even now. He already had huge land holdings in the west of Cinran, what would he even do with even more land in the south? These money-grubbing bastards had no limits on their greed.

The baron was a frequent visitor in the Count's mansion, though he didn't always come by the same carriage, since he probably owned a dozen such carriages, which is why Levalas didn't recognise that carriage. This is where Levalas had gotten acquainted with him in the past, and started doing disreputable jobs for him so that he could finally get enough coin to leave his wretched life behind.

Once he considered himself a little more presentable, he dried himself with a rag kept nearby and walked towards the Count's residence. His stomach was rumbling with hunger, but if the baron found out that he had gone to eat instead of reporting to him immediately, the outcome wouldn't be pretty for him.

Entering inside, he asked another servant there about Baron Zoricus, and he was pointed towards a room ahead. He walked there, and spoke to the three guards standing outside the room. "I'm here to meet the baron."

One of the guards looked at him with raised eyebrows, while the older one glared at him. "Scoot off, lad, before we make you. The likes of you have no business meeting with a noble."

Levalas sighed and looked at his tattered clothes. Of course the guards wouldn't allow an unknown servant to meet the baron. "Just let the baron know that Levalas is here to talk to him. If he still doesn't want to meet with me, I will leave without making any ruckus."

Hearing his name, the guards looked surprised for a moment, before one of them opened the door and entered inside on the older guard's order. Soon, the guard returned and whispered something to the others. The older guard stared at him for a moment, before he said, "Alright, you can enter. But we'll be watching you. Don't try any funny business, or you won't leave in one piece." Seeing Levalas nod in reply, the first guard gestured at him to come along.

As he followed the first guard, he heard the other guards muttering something about a servant having a noble's name. He snorted at that, and entered inside, and found himself in a luxurious room. It was an

elaborately decorated place, with many ornate paintings hung on the walls. The floor had pelts of a variety of animals, while there was a fire burning in the fireplace, keeping the room at a pleasant temperature, unlike the chilly weather outside.

Baron Zoricus, a rotund man in his mid-forties with a huge pot belly, was sitting on a chair at one edge of a long dining table, while eating a lavish meal. A servant was standing nearby, with a carafe of what was probably some very expensive wine, ready to pour more into the baron's glass. Levalas followed the guard and stood near the table with both of his hands behind his back.

As he watched, the baron cut up a huge piece of meat with a sharp iron knife, and used his plump fingers to put the delicious looking meat into his mouth with a fork. Levalas' stomach was making sounds in protest on seeing the feast laid out on the baron's table, but he tried to keep his eyes on the wall in front of him.

The baron's keen eyes seemed to be looking into his soul, as he stared at Levalas while chewing the meat slowly. Zoricus looked at the guard and the servant. "Leave us."

The guard looked quite surprised. "Are you sure milord? He is..."

The baron glared at the guard and growled in a low voice, "Do I need to repeat myself? Clear the room and close the door. Now!"

Immediately, the guard and the servant scrambled outside, closing the door of the large room behind them.

The baron took a long sip from his glass of wine and looked at him. "Where have you been for so long, Levalo?"