

Londoner 100

Chapter 100. Toloraberries

As Helga took a seat on one of the empty chairs, Kivamus said, "That's really good to hear. What did you find?"

"It's nothing too much, but I saw a few Bilona trees in the west of the village, maybe around five hundred yards away from the last houses," she replied. "They only give fruit in the summer, but it is good to know that there are such trees nearby."

"I've already heard about them from Taniok, but they won't be helpful to us right now," Kivamus said. He had been hopeful that she had found something else, but it was old news, and those trees wouldn't give any more fruits in the winter anyway.

"Oh, that's not the only thing I found," Helga continued with a smile. "Those trees are growing right next to each other, and there are many toloraberry shrubs growing on the ground below those trees, and they are edible. Not too many of course, but there must still be a dozen such shrubs between those Bilona trees, and they still have some fruits on them." She looked at Duvas, "Did nobody here know about them? They are bright blue, for Goddess' sake."

"Of course we knew about them," Duvas snorted. "But you must also know how sour they are."

"That's true enough," Helga said with a grimace. "I've only tried eating them along with some honey, otherwise I can't eat them at all."

Duvas nodded. "People still eat them despite their sour taste, because eating something is better than starving, but nobody actually likes to eat them. When the village was short on grain a few weeks ago, some villagers regularly went there to pluck toloraberries to sell in the market square. But it's not like we can afford any imported sugar here to make their taste better, and we rarely get any honey here to sweeten them."

He continued, "However, since Lord Kivamus came here, people have started to get wheat again, which is much more preferable than eating those sour berries, not that there are enough of them to feed more than a few people. The fruits you saw there must have grown in the last few weeks, although they wouldn't be giving any more fruits, now that winter is here."

Kivamus nodded on hearing about them. These toloraberries sounded a lot like cranberries, which could usually only be eaten if you made some kind of sauce or jam with them using a lot of sugar - except for the fact that toloraberries were blue colored instead of red. But without access to a lot of cheap sugar or honey to sweeten them, they would be difficult to consume.

He said, "It's still good to know that those shrubs are found between those Bilona trees. I've already told Yeden to make sure those Bilona trees are not cut, but we have to preserve those toloraberry shrubs as well." He looked at Duvas, "We have already gotten a lot of rope from the caravan's last trip, right?"

Seeing Duvas give a nod, he said to Madam Helga, "Take a few workers with you along with some rope, and use them to surround that area. Tell them to tie those ropes around those Bilona trees while keeping a space of around five to ten meters on all sides of them. That will be our first ecological reserve." He added, "Duvas, tell the foreman Yeden and Pinoto to make sure nothing is cut in that area between those ropes even by mistake."

"I'll do that, my lord," the majordomo replied.

"I'll also make sure to surround that area with ropes today itself," Helga said as well.

"Good," Kivamus said. "We have to make sure to take care of anything that provides us with food. I haven't seen those Bilona trees with leaves yet, but I was told that they provide good shade in the summer. So in the future, even after we have cleared the area around that place, it can be made into a small park, where people can sit under those trees in the summer."

"That sounds like a good idea, milord," Helga said. "But I should leave now to take care of marking that area."

"Alright then," Kivamus said. "You can leave now."

~ Calubo ~

~ Somewhere on the road between Tiranat and Cinran ~

They had been waiting for a few days by now, with no news from Nokozal. The fatso had still kept one of the hands of each of them tied with a rope, which was foolish in Calubo's opinion, but he was reminded repeatedly that if he even tried to run away, it wouldn't end well for Hyola, so he hadn't even tried. It was also true that without a horse, it would take way too long for him to reach Tiranat anyway. For now, he was just biding his time instead of trying to run away. However he kept wondering if Hyola was okay now.

Even with only the fatso remaining there other than him, their limited rations of dried meat had ended yesterday. After they had gotten too hungry, they had managed to catch a rabbit a few hours ago in the morning. Although there was a risk of any fire being seen from a distance, they had still made a small fire away from the road to cook it - since with the road being so rarely traveled, there was nobody to see it anyway.

They were still lying on the top of that bluff, but soon he heard the creaking of wagon axles. As they kept their heads low, they saw that the caravan was going north again. This time they still had eight wagons, but there were sixteen men escorting it this time.

"Damn it! There are two more swordsmen this time," the fatso muttered. "At least we are lucky that the caravan is going for another journey."

"Speak for yourself!" Calubo retorted.

"Shut up! Without more grain it will be you stonecutters who will starve first!" Fatso muttered under his breath, "Where the heck is Nokozal anyway? We missed a good chance!"

Calubo could still recognize many of those guards as former miners, but at least the caravan looked well defended to any observers who didn't know the truth. Either way, even if Nokozal reached here in time, at least he should give up trying to ambush the caravan now. The bandit chief couldn't be so reckless that he would want to attack even now, could he? Even so, he had to do his best to discourage the bandits from an attack.

"What good chance are you talking about?" he said to the fatso with a smug smile. "When I said earlier that they are village guards you didn't agree with me, so that means they must be hired mercenaries right? And you already know how cruel those bastards are! Do you really want to fight against them?"

He smirked as the fatso couldn't think of any reply to that.

They kept waiting for Nokozal to arrive the whole day, but there was still no sign of him. And without being able to light a fire for warmth in the night, they were shivering throughout the night. After all, making a small hidden fire for cooking a rabbit was a very different thing than a much bigger fire for heating themselves in this frigid weather - especially in the darkness of the night.

The next day around noon, the clouds had covered the sky again, and it had started to become windy now. Snowfall couldn't be more than a day or two away now, and there was still no sign of the bandits. At this time the fatso was himself getting itchy about returning back to the quarry.

After a few hours, when Calubo was starting to become hopeful that maybe a pack of adzees got the bandits on their way, he heard the sound of people talking behind them in the forests. Soon he saw that Nokozal had arrived there along with many other bandits. Calubo counted that there were ten bandits in total, including the fatso here and the runt who had come back.

Truth being told, since he knew that those were untrained men pretending to be guards in the caravan, so at most half of them would be experienced men - or maybe even less, which meant if the bandits really did attack the caravan, it wouldn't go well for the village guards, since the bandits would have numbers as well as surprise on their side. But other than him, nobody knew that the caravan was not really escorted by that many trained swordsmen, so there was still some hope of Nokozal not actually attacking the caravan and killing his friends and his cousin.

As the bandits started to settle down away from the bluff, the fatso moved towards them, dragging Calubo along with him, and said, "Milord, there is good news. I saw the caravan going north again with eight wagons, but I don't know if it will go back to that village."

Nokozal grinned, while rubbing the scar on his face. "Eight wagons again! It seems luck is really on our side this time. We are going to get a good haul, for sure!"

Calubo interrupted, 'Don't get too happy. You don't know for sure if the caravan will return back to the village again. And while the caravan certainly had eight wagons, they also had sixteen men with them - and all but one of them were well-trained swordsmen. You cannot possibly want to attack them unless you are suicidal!"

NokozaI glared at him. "That bullshit again!" He looked at the fatso. "I know Calubo has a reason to overstate the number of guards that he claims that he saw, so you tell me the real number of escorting guards."

The fatso nodded reluctantly, looking at the bandits gathered there. "He is not lying, milord. We really can't attack them with our numbers. We have just ten men here, but there really were sixteen men in the caravan. And he's right that all but one of them looked like trained swordsmen." By this point NokozaI was getting red in the face with anger, so the fatso added in a low voice, "I know you said that the village couldn't have that many guards, so perhaps they were mercenaries...?"

"Again that nonsense!" NokozaI barked. "Can't any of you even count?" He glared at the runt who had gone back to report to him. "You told me that the caravan had twelve guards, and now this fatso is saying that they had sixteen guards? Both of you are cowards and just don't want to risk your lives in a fight! That's why you both are exaggerating that number! Do you even know how costly it would be to hire even half that many mercenaries?"