

Londoner 103

Chapter 103. The Moment Of Truth

Immediately, Nokoza and three other bandits who were sitting in a crouch near the bluff got ready with their swords out, while the archers nocked an arrow on their bows at the top of the bluff.

Calubo had seen that his cousin Nurobo was also in the caravan when they were going north, so what if the bandits really did attack them? A single lucky arrow might mean that he would be without the last of his family in this world. Shaking his head, he tried to reassure himself that everything will go well. It had to!

Before long, he saw that the first of the wagons started to pass on the dirt road in front of them between the continuously falling snowflakes. Looking closely at the caravan, he saw that once again, the caravan seemed to have sixteen men, all but one of whom seemed like well-trained swordsmen. The guards looked ready and alert for anything, but only he knew the reality that it was just a sham. However, the bandits didn't know anything about that, did they?

Although Calubo had been tied a few yards away from others, he was still close enough to see the expression on the face of Nokoza. Taking his eyes away from the grain caravan passing in front of them in the continuous snowfall, he looked at the bandit chief's face and it seemed to be drained of color.

By now, Nokoza had to have realized that the fatso wasn't lying and the caravan really did have sixteen armed men in well-used leather armor with swords on their backs. More importantly, the caravan looked like it was fully loaded again - so the bandits really could have gotten a lot of loot if it didn't look like the caravan was so well guarded. At this point, Nokoza must have known that they really couldn't attack the caravan, after all. Calubo couldn't put it in words how satisfied it made him feel.

One by one, the wagons and the horses kept passing in front of them, while Nokoza seemed to be clenching his fists hard enough to draw blood. The other bandits were alternating between looking at Nokoza's face and the caravan, waiting for any sign that they really would have to fight so many trained swordsmen. He could clearly see the fear on the runt's face, who looked terrified about the bandit chief ordering them to recklessly start the attack, since the runt would be amongst the first ones to die in that case, being as small as he was.

Looking back at the caravan, Calubo again recognized a few of the guards as those who used to work as coal miners until recently, so he knew that if the bandit really did choose to attack, it might not end well

for the caravan. But as the wagons kept passing, Nokoza just gritted his teeth, and the whistle which all the other guards were waiting for, never came.

Once he saw the wagon in which his cousin Nurobo was sitting along with another guard, Calubo had a sudden urge to just somehow grab his attention. Nurobo and the other guards would be going back to their village, and with Tiranat probably having enough grain now, Calubo didn't want to stay between these bandits for even one more day, but he firmly crushed that thought as soon as it arrived. He wouldn't be able to do anything to grab the caravan's attention anyway with his hands and mouth tied already, and more importantly he knew the reality of that caravan. If it really led to a fight between the bandits - who were already prepared to attack the caravan, and the caravan guards - many of whom probably had no idea about how to fight, he didn't rate the chances of the caravan too highly. More importantly, he knew what it would mean for Hyola and other stonecutters back at the quarry. So he ruthlessly put an end to the selfish and stupid idea.

As the wagons kept passing in front of them one by one, he saw that one of the guards in the caravan - someone who actually looked more like a mercenary than a normal guard based on his flinty expression and steely eyes - someone who was probably new in the village, since Calubo didn't recognise him at all - looked towards the bluff where the bandits were hiding. For a moment he thought that the guard would be able to clearly see him and the other bandits, and he got nervous that if the guards decided to stop and fight the bandits, it wouldn't end well for the caravan. But thankfully, the moment passed, and that guard looked forward again and Calubo was finally able to give a sigh of relief after that.

Of course that steely eyed guard would know the caravan's situation much better than him, and looking at the scars visible on his face in the last rays of sunlight, he seemed like a veteran of many battles, so he would already know what to do in such situations - especially if he had realized that there was an ambush waiting for them here. Calubo did realize how unlikely that was, since the bandits had taken more than enough care to make sure that nobody would be able to see them from the road, but that still hadn't stopped him from getting worried again.

Eventually, the eighth wagon passed in front of them, and soon, the last opportunity to begin the ambush had passed as well. Such an elaborate plan to attack the last wagon from two sides along with the archers and the bandits' swordsmen... And it had failed before it had even started. All because of someone in Tiranat who had played such an audacious gamble.

It was true that it might also have gone very badly for the caravan, but the final result was that that gamble had paid off extremely well. He was also glad to know that all that grain would go a long way to feed the village this winter. All of it made Calubo feel so satisfied! If only he were in the village when the caravan returned triumphantly with such a narrow escape from the mouth of death for most of the miners pretending to be guards...

When he saw the anger on Nokozal's face at his failure, Calubo got a huge urge for a moment to start laughing loudly at the absurdity of it all, but somehow he managed not to show any expression outside.

Once the caravan had gone completely out of their sights, Nokozal slammed his sword in the ground. "Damn it! Damn it all! How the heck could this have happened!"

The bandit chief immediately started cursing everything, from the bandits, to the caravan and its guards and all other things in existence. Soon, the bandits hiding on the other side of the road came there as well to see what had happened.

However as soon as Nokozal saw the fatso returning from the other side, he bellowed, "How the heck did that damned village get so many guards to spare? I thought there would be seven or eight guards at the most!"

The runt spoke softly, "I did tell you about them, milord."

"Shut up!" Nokozal barked, "You told me the caravan had twelve men, then the fatso told me that it had sixteen men, and the next time someone would have told me that they had a bunch of knights escorting the caravan! Who was I supposed to believe!" He scowled. "I know you all are cowards, so I thought you all must be exaggerating that number so you wouldn't have to fight! But apart from a fat old man who couldn't have fought even once in his life, the rest of them seemed like trained guards, dammit!"

"We still would have fought if you had ordered us, milord," the runt said, "since trying our chances to get some grain is still better than starving after all. But there was no way we could have taken on those sixteen men by ourselves."

"How the heck did Torhan's group raid that village so easily then?" Nokozal glowered at everyone there. "If that village really had so many guards to spare, where were they hiding those guards when they were raided by Torhan's men!"

The fatso replied, "We do know that Torhan's group is a large one, much bigger than ours and they have a lot more horses too. So maybe they just raided with many more men than us?"

NokozaI grunted, before glaring at Calubo. "I guess you weren't just trying to scare me off to save the lives of your friends when you told me that the village had so many guards. But why do you think your village couldn't defend themselves from that raid, if they really do have that many men?"

In the past few days here, Calubo had been worried that if the bandits left him tied here, and in case the ambush went badly for them, he would either freeze or starve to death, since he wouldn't even be able to call the other guards for help with his mouth tied with a cloth. He didn't know which was the better fate for him. So he had to use this rare opportunity to get into the good graces of the bandit chief, while still not giving away the weakness of the village he had lived nearly all his life in.

On that day a few weeks ago when he had been caught by the bandits, they had interrogated him about Tiranat, and he had wildly exaggerated the number of guards that the village had, knowing that another bandit raid into the village would completely leave the villagers to starve. But he had no idea at the time how helpful that bluff would be in the future.

And today he was the only one who had realized the elaborate ruse the village had put together to show that they could easily spare so many trained swordsmen to escort a caravan, but the bandits didn't know anything about that. And he had no intention to correct the bandits' flawed assumption. He had to do his best to present it in a way which would keep his cousin and his friends safe.

He still had the cloth tied on his mouth, so he tried to speak but all he could do was to make some muffled sounds. But one of the bandits moved to untie that cloth at NokozaI's gesture, although they still left him tied to the tree. But at least he could breathe properly now.

"Speak!" The bandit chief ordered.