

## Londoner 121

### Chapter 121. Precautions

Feroy shrugged. "Can't say, milord. I had taken all the precautions that I could think of while I was on the road with the caravan." He added, "Pydaso and I made sure to buy everything from a few different vendors and shopkeepers in Cinran, instead of buying everything in bulk from a single merchant, so that the quantity of our purchases wouldn't be noticeable easily. We also staggered the arrival and departure of the wagons in the caravan when entering and exiting the town, in a way that at most only two of our wagons would pass the gates at one time, with the rest of the wagons in the caravan continuing through only after some time."

He continued, "This was to ensure that any observers would think that those wagons were led by different people, and would likely be going in different directions, instead of them realizing that it was a single caravan which would be traveling through these treacherous forests. But even then," Feroy added with a shrug, "those town merchants like to talk, you know? It's one of their favorite pastimes in the bigger towns and cities. So any news of a big purchase still gets around, which means that despite all our precautions, someone might still have realized that it was a single person making those purchases. And that would make the caravan and probably even the village a target for bandits."

"That's very concerning..." Duvas muttered with a frown.

Feroy nodded. "That's why I was expecting an ambush on every return journey of ours, but as you know, nothing like that happened." He added, "However, in our last journey, while we were on the road when returning from Cinran, I thought I saw the glint of a sword in the east, a few hours after we entered the forest in the light of the setting sun. Although I'm not very sure about it..."

"Oh..." Gorsazo whispered. "You mean the caravan might really have been ambushed in the forests?"

Feroy gave a slow nod. "Possibly. But still, we weren't ambushed there, or anywhere else, for that matter." He continued, "The reason might simply be that those bandits - assuming they really were there - were simply unwilling to attack such a big caravan."

He explained, "While it would have seemed like a very juicy target for them, they would also have seen that we had fifteen well-armed swordsmen and archers protecting it. That would mean that our ruse had worked and the caravan did appear very well defended from the outside, and that is why those bandits didn't attack us at that time. Or maybe... It was just my usual paranoia and I was imagining

things. That means it could have been just something shiny on the forest floor which caught my eye, and not the sword of a bandit." He shrugged. "We can't be sure about it either way."

Kivamus gave a slow nod. "That's true. Either of these things are possible..." He muttered, "Now I can't help but be worried about this."

"Exactly, milord," Feroy continued. "Since that time I've always felt that something wasn't right, but I didn't have any real reason for it, you know? That is why I didn't mention it until now. However, when I combine my suspicions with the fact that that laborer might have seen someone in the northern forests, it might just be that there really is a group of bandits hiding there, just waiting for a good opportunity to raid the village." He added, "Now whether they got the news from a Cinran merchant with a loose tongue, or whether they just heard that the village was already raided successfully a month ago, and that's why they want to raid Tiranat too, we can only make guesses..."

The ex mercenary continued, "But this still leaves open the possibility of a bandit raid in the near future. And if it is going to happen, I'd say it'll happen soon - maybe even in the next couple of days, since winter is here now, and those bandits would like to raid as soon as possible to stock up on food grains and maybe even slaves, before the snow slows down travel everywhere."

Kivamus frowned after hearing Feroy explain it so well. "That does make a lot of sense, but how do you even know that much about the thought process of bandits?"

Feroy hesitated for a moment. "I'd rather not talk about it, milord..."

However, he gave a sigh soon after that. "But you already know about my past, so I guess it's okay." He added in a voice barely above a whisper, "Let's just say that my time with the mercenaries came to an end because they had forgotten that they were sellswords, and not raiders and looters. But it still took a while for me to make the decision to quit that group, you know? And during that time, I found out a lot about how a bandit group operates..."

Duvas looked repulsed on hearing that, especially with his usual hesitation in trusting the ex-mercenary, but Kivamus realized how difficult it was to survive in this brutal world, especially for commoners. So instead of thinking that Feroy was still not trustworthy, he thought it was courageous that he made the decision to leave that group after that. And if Hudan - someone who had been training to be an honorable knight - trusted the ex-mercenary with his life, then so could he. So he just gave a nod to Feroy, and decided not to ask too much about his past. For now anyway.

Coming back to the present, it still meant that there might be a bandit group waiting to raid the village. But without more information, there wasn't much he could do about it other than to try their best to boost their defenses.

He looked at the guard captain. "Hudan, while we don't know anything for sure, there is still a serious risk of a bandit raid in the near future. So we still have to take some precautions. For the next few days, I want you to utilize all our guards for the defense of the village. Take all the on-duty and off-duty guards and after properly arming them, put them to patrol around the village. Give them the horns - the ones which we were planning to use on the watchtowers - so that if any of them comes in contact with any bandits, they should blow the horn immediately, and that should be the signal for the rest of the guards to become ready for an imminent attack."

Seeing Hudan's nod, he continued, "According to Feroy, such a raid would be less likely after snow starts to gather on the ground, which means the guards would not have to pull double shifts for long. Just tell them that the next few days will be critical for us, so we need everyone to pull more than their weight if we want the village to come through this unscathed."

"Of course, milord," Hudan said while standing up. "I will alert every single guard immediately," he added, and left the manor hall.

Feroy stood up as well. "I'll be leaving too, milord. I'll try to see if I can find some more information from the other laborers who have worked in the north. The feast is still ongoing, so some of them might be eating outside even now."

"That's a good idea," Kivamus said to the ex-mercenary, and then Feroy exited the hall as well.

Duvas said, "While it shouldn't be more than an hour or so until the feast is over, I should also go and keep an eye there until then." He stood up, and started walking towards the door, but then paused and looked back at Kivamus. "Should I also alert the servants and maids about the threat of a bandit raid?"

"No, not until we have definite information about it," Kivamus replied after a moment. "It would only cause unnecessary panic at this time - especially with the villagers already gathered in a crowd outside. I don't want to start a stampede there."

He added, "Truthfully, we don't even know yet when that raid will happen - or if there is going to be a raid at all. And being on edge for days would only exhaust everyone. Hudan has already gone to tell the guards to increase the patrols and to be more alert, so let's wait to tell other people about it for now."

"Of course, my lord," Duvas said. "Then I'll just go and take a look at where the feast is happening." And with that, the majordomo also exited the manor hall.

That just left Gorsazo and Kivamus inside for now. He asked, "Should I also go out there, to keep an eye on the villagers and the feast?"

"I don't think it's a good idea, my lord," Gorsazo replied immediately. "Your safety is the most important thing for the village right now, and with Hudan and Feroy busy with other things, it might be very unsafe for you if you exit the manor gates right now. Let's not give a third chance for any assassin to succeed where they failed the first two times, alright?"

Kivamus took a deep breath and nodded. "That's true enough, Gorsazo."

He gave a sigh before adding, "We can only hope that everything goes well in the coming days, otherwise it really might be the end of this village, since we can neither send any more caravans to Cinran for food, nor can we afford to buy more of it now."

"Don't worry, my Lord," Gorsazo tried to reassure him. "We have to trust that Hudan and Feroy are competent enough for this. Otherwise, may the Goddess save us..."

\*\*\*\*\*

~ Calubo ~

~ Somewhere in the forests surrounding Tiranat ~

It must have been around an hour or so since the fatso and the other bandit had started their watch duty, although the passage of time was very hard to tell in the night, especially with the moon hidden behind the clouds.

The other bandit's tale about the village feast had ended a while ago, but the fatso had started getting sleepy after that, so he had asked the other bandit to keep speaking about something else. That had led to nearly an hour of the other bandit regaling them with bawdy tales of the time he lived in Cinran and when he used to go to a particular inn there, which was famous for its pretty serving-maids.

Calubo couldn't believe how easily they could talk about such things, when they were going to loot and even kill people soon after this. Perhaps that's how people became after living a bandit's life for a long time, but it didn't change the fact that many people in Tiranat were going to die in the next few hours. And if the bandits were successful in looting enough grain from the village, most of the people here wouldn't survive the winter.

As he looked at the rope tying his hands, he was reminded that it was his own mistake which had led to Nokozal coming here to raid Tiranat.

So once again, he prayed to the Goddess that somehow she would give him a chance to do something to redeem himself, and to thwart the plans of these bastards. If only he could find a way to warn the village...

Chapter 122: Conjectures

"Shut up!" the bandit snapped at him. "I didn't ask for your opinion."

The fatso sniggered as he taunted Calubo, "Like you would know anything about the count's knights! You were only a manor guard in this pitiful little village, not a knight in the count's retinue!"

Immediately the other bandit started to laugh as well. "The count's knights coming to these forests in the middle of the night? And on the same day we are here? Don't make me laugh! So you are an idiot after all."

Calubo sighed. There went that plan of separating them. Trying to salvage his attempt to separate them, he said with a shrug, "The knights might still come... you can never know..."

"Yeah, I can!" the fatso boasted. "I have actually been to the count's mansion in Cinran - unlike you - so what would you know? Anyway, shut up now unless you want to get a beating."

Calubo didn't say anything after that. He had tried his best to separate them, hadn't he?

But he still felt guilty. It was his mistake of telling Nokoza that the manor guards might not leave the walls of the manor if a raid happened, and because of that, these bastards were going to raid Tiranat. They'd probably even burn the houses and kill many villagers during that attack. So he still felt responsible about it, since it had all started with his own mistake. And yet, there still wasn't anything he could do to help the village, damn it!

As the other bandit started telling the fatso about the feast in the village, with even more exaggeration than what the runt had told them, the fatso's stomach growled loudly.

"Dammit! I'm really hungry now!" The fatso grumbled again as he sat up straighter. "And being so hungry is already making me sleepy. Why did the chief have to put me on watch duty right now?"

The other bandit shrugged. "Doesn't matter, man. The chief said that we'd get to eat as much as we want after tonight! So just hold on for now."

The fatso grumbled something again, then settled down with his back to the tree again, while the other bandit continued his tale of the feast.

\*\*\*\*\*

~ Kivamus ~

~ Baron's Manor, Tiranat ~

Kivamus and others had just finished their own feast, and while Clarisa and Sryne cleared the wooden plates and cups from the long dining table, he moved to sit in front of the roaring fire in a comfortable armchair, with others following him as well. The feast was a rare change from their regular meals, and while they couldn't afford it frequently, it still made him happy that he was able to eat something like that in this world.

"That was a wonderful meal, Madam Helga," he praised the former innkeeper. Remembering the taste of the only sweet thing he had tasted in the past few weeks, he said, "I particularly liked the Toloraberry Pie! It's a pity that we won't be able to have more of it until after the winter, when those shrubs begin to give fruit again. But still, it was a delicious feast."

"Thank you, milord!" Madam Helga replied with a smile, as she picked up another empty plate from the table to take it away.

"I'd love to have more of the Rizako stew, though," Feroy said as he leaned back further on an armchair. He had returned to the manor an hour ago while looking a little edgy, but after seeing the feast in front of him, he had seemingly focused only on the food. The ex-mercenary added, "Nothing beats the taste of that!"

Madam Helga laughed. "You were the one who grabbed the cauldron of the Rizako stew for yourself, so you could soak up any leftover broth with bread! So you know that there isn't any more of it left, Feroy!"

Everyone laughed remembering that, while Feroy looked unabashed. He just shrugged. "What can I say, it was just that delicious."

"I am glad to hear that. And don't worry, you'll be the first one to eat the Rizako stew whenever I make it the next time, assuming we are able to replant the mushrooms again in new barns," Madam Helga replied, before she walked away with Clarisa with the empty plates in her hands.

Feroy grinned. "I can't wait!"

Kivamus smiled seeing the rare smile on the face of the ex-mercenary. It was good to see that everything was going so well.

"How is the meal for the villagers going?" he asked the majordomo.

Duvas replied, "The feast is nearly over now, and the villagers have started returning back. But there is still a small crowd remaining in front of the gates, mainly of those children who are still finishing their second helping of food, along with their families who are keeping an eye on them."

"Hmm... I am glad that we were able to provide the children something tasty," Kivamus said with a smile.

"Certainly," Gorsazo said with a nod. "The winter months were already difficult for commoners even in Ulriga - where it didn't snow that much - but here in Tiranat, they would be much more severe and with a lot of snowfall. So the rare experience of eating in a feast would be something that will keep the villagers' morale high, instead of them just trying to survive the bleak winter days."

Kivamus nodded. "That's true enough."

Hudan stood up from his armchair. "I should go and take a look again at the feast, to make sure that everything is going well."

Before Kivamus agreed to him, Feroy interrupted with a serious expression, "Wait here for a moment, Hudan. I have something I need to talk about."

"What is it?" Kivamus asked curiously.

"I didn't mention it earlier while we were eating since I didn't want to spoil the mood," Feroy said, "but you all still need to know about it." He added with a shrug, "You can certainly call me paranoid, but I am usually right about such things."

Hudan's expression became serious as he retook his seat. "What are you talking about?"

"I've been feeling that something is off since the past few days, you know?" the ex-mercenary began, "and after what I found out today, I don't think I was wrong."

Duvas looked concerned, while Kivamus and others listened carefully.

Feroy continued, "I asked around with the guards who were on watch duty in the previous few days - including those who went to patrol around the village in the night - but they hadn't seen anything out of

the ordinary. So, earlier in the evening, I took a look around the village myself, but I didn't find anything unusual either."

"I told you there was nothing," Hudan said with a frown. "I asked them exactly the same thing earlier and got the same answer. So why are you still worried about it?"

Feroy raised one of his hands to placate Hudan. "Just hear me out." He continued, "Something still didn't feel right to me, so just before I came here for the dinner, I went outside to where the feast was being held. I thought that it was a good opportunity for me to ask around, since all the villagers had gathered in the same place. Otherwise it would be too difficult to go from house to house and look for those people whom I wanted to ask about it, you know?"

At Kivamus' nod, the ex-mercenary continued, "So I searched for those villagers who were cutting the trees - since they are the ones who are working the farthest from the village, and if there was anything suspicious in the forest around us, they would be the first ones to know about it." He added, "There were a lot of people who work as woodcutters away from the village, but for each direction of the village, I made sure to find someone who has been working in that direction, and then asked them if they had seen anything unusual."

"Alright," Kivamus nodded. "So did you find anything?"

"I think so, but there isn't anything I can say for sure, you know?" Feroy explained.

"That's okay," Kivamus reassured him. "Just tell us what you found."

Feroy nodded. "In the evening, one of the villagers who was in the group which is working to build the village walls in the north, had gone further away in that direction to relieve himself, and he thought that he saw someone further ahead in the forests. But it was just him at the time, so he wasn't very sure about it."

Hudan frowned on hearing that. "Then why didn't he report it to a guard? I would have sent a few men to check it out immediately if he had told us. It's already been a few hours since then, so we wouldn't find anything even if I did send guards now."

"I asked him that as well," Feroy replied. "But he told me that it was already getting dark by that time, so he thought it might be just shadows of a branch moving from the wind, or maybe it was just some other laborer who had gone further ahead. So he didn't think it was worth mentioning it to anyone."

"But he still should have gone further ahead and taken a look himself," Gorsazo said. "At least he could have made sure that it wasn't someone he didn't recognize."

Feroy nodded. "He probably should have, but like I told you, he was alone at that time. And people in the village don't like to go too far into the forest alone, especially in the dark."

Kivamus wasn't sure what it meant, and if it was something to be really concerned about, so he gestured to Feroy to keep speaking. "Carry on."

The ex-mercenary nodded. "Having said that, it wouldn't normally be much cause for concern, since it could just have been some wild animals there. Or like that laborer thought, it might be another villager who had gone further ahead, or maybe it was just some branches moving from the wind. We simply can't be sure about it."

Feroy continued, "However, I have just been back from three separate journeys with the caravan and travelled through those same forests. While Hudan said earlier that it was just my nerves which were making me too paranoid, but I don't think so. Not anymore."

"Could it be possible that the news about the caravan got out while you were in Cinran?" Kivamus asked.

#### Chapter 123: Precautions

Feroy shrugged. "Can't say, milord. I had taken all the precautions that I could think of while I was on the road with the caravan." He added, "Pydaso and I made sure to buy everything from a few different vendors and shopkeepers in Cinran, instead of buying everything in bulk from a single merchant, so that the quantity of our purchases wouldn't be noticeable easily. We also staggered the arrival and departure of the wagons in the caravan when entering and exiting the town, in a way that at most only two of our wagons would pass the gates at one time, with the rest of the wagons in the caravan continuing through only after some time."

He continued, "This was to ensure that any observers would think that those wagons were led by different people, and would likely be going in different directions, instead of them realizing that it was a

single caravan which would be traveling through these treacherous forests. But even then," Feroy added with a shrug, "those town merchants like to talk, you know? It's one of their favorite pastimes in the bigger towns and cities. So any news of a big purchase still gets around, which means that despite all our precautions, someone might still have realized that it was a single person making those purchases. And that would make the caravan and probably even the village a target for bandits."

Your next read awaits at empire

"That's very concerning..." Duvas muttered with a frown.

Feroy nodded. "That's why I was expecting an ambush on every return journey of ours, but as you know, nothing like that happened." He added, "However, in our last journey, while we were on the road when returning from Cinran, I thought I saw the glint of a sword in the east, a few hours after we entered the forest in the light of the setting sun. Although I'm not very sure about it..."

"Oh..." Gorsazo whispered. "You mean the caravan might really have been ambushed in the forests?"

Feroy gave a slow nod. "Possibly. But still, we weren't ambushed there, or anywhere else, for that matter." He continued, "The reason might simply be that those bandits - assuming they really were there - were simply unwilling to attack such a big caravan."

He explained, "While it would have seemed like a very juicy target for them, they would also have seen that we had fifteen well-armed swordsmen and archers protecting it. That would mean that our ruse had worked and the caravan did appear very well defended from the outside, and that is why those bandits didn't attack us at that time. Or maybe... It was just my usual paranoia and I was imagining things. That means it could have been just something shiny on the forest floor which caught my eye, and not the sword of a bandit." He shrugged. "We can't be sure about it either way."

Kivamus gave a slow nod. "That's true. Either of these things are possible..." He muttered, "Now I can't help but be worried about this."

"Exactly, milord," Feroy continued. "Since that time I've always felt that something wasn't right, but I didn't have any real reason for it, you know? That is why I didn't mention it until now. However, when I combine my suspicions with the fact that that laborer might have seen someone in the northern forests, it might just be that there really is a group of bandits hiding there, just waiting for a good opportunity to

raid the village." He added, "Now whether they got the news from a Cinran merchant with a loose tongue, or whether they just heard that the village was already raided successfully a month ago, and that's why they want to raid Tiranat too, we can only make guesses..."

The ex mercenary continued, "But this still leaves open the possibility of a bandit raid in the near future. And if it is going to happen, I'd say it'll happen soon - maybe even in the next couple of days, since winter is here now, and those bandits would like to raid as soon as possible to stock up on food grains and maybe even slaves, before the snow slows down travel everywhere."

Kivamus frowned after hearing Feroy explain it so well. "That does make a lot of sense, but how do you even know that much about the thought process of bandits?"

Feroy hesitated for a moment. "I'd rather not talk about it, milord..."

However, he gave a sigh soon after that. "But you already know about my past, so I guess it's okay." He added in a voice barely above a whisper, "Let's just say that my time with the mercenaries came to an end because they had forgotten that they were sellswords, and not raiders and looters. But it still took a while for me to make the decision to quit that group, you know? And during that time, I found out a lot about how a bandit group operates..."

Duvas looked repulsed on hearing that, especially with his usual hesitation in trusting the ex-mercenary, but Kivamus realized how difficult it was to survive in this brutal world, especially for commoners. So instead of thinking that Feroy was still not trustworthy, he thought it was courageous that he made the decision to leave that group after that. And if Hudan - someone who had been training to be an honorable knight - trusted the ex-mercenary with his life, then so could he. So he just gave a nod to Feroy, and decided not to ask too much about his past. For now anyway.

Coming back to the present, it still meant that there might be a bandit group waiting to raid the village. But without more information, there wasn't much he could do about it other than to try their best to boost their defenses.

He looked at the guard captain. "Hudan, while we don't know anything for sure, there is still a serious risk of a bandit raid in the near future. So we still have to take some precautions. For the next few days, I want you to utilize all our guards for the defense of the village. Take all the on-duty and off-duty guards and after properly arming them, put them to patrol around the village. Give them the horns - the ones which we were planning to use on the watchtowers - so that if any of them comes in contact with any

bandits, they should blow the horn immediately, and that should be the signal for the rest of the guards to become ready for an imminent attack."

Seeing Hudan's nod, he continued, "According to Feroy, such a raid would be less likely after snow starts to gather on the ground, which means the guards would not have to pull double shifts for long. Just tell them that the next few days will be critical for us, so we need everyone to pull more than their weight if we want the village to come through this unscathed."

"Of course, milord," Hudan said while standing up. "I will alert every single guard immediately," he added, and left the manor hall.

Feroy stood up as well. "I'll be leaving too, milord. I'll try to see if I can find some more information from the other laborers who have worked in the north. The feast is still ongoing, so some of them might be eating outside even now."

"That's a good idea," Kivamus said to the ex-mercenary, and then Feroy exited the hall as well.

Duvas said, "While it shouldn't be more than an hour or so until the feast is over, I should also go and keep an eye there until then." He stood up, and started walking towards the door, but then paused and looked back at Kivamus. "Should I also alert the servants and maids about the threat of a bandit raid?"

"No, not until we have definite information about it," Kivamus replied after a moment. "It would only cause unnecessary panic at this time - especially with the villagers already gathered in a crowd outside. I don't want to start a stampede there."

He added, "Truthfully, we don't even know yet when that raid will happen - or if there is going to be a raid at all. And being on edge for days would only exhaust everyone. Hudan has already gone to tell the guards to increase the patrols and to be more alert, so let's wait to tell other people about it for now."

"Of course, my lord," Duvas said. "Then I'll just go and take a look at where the feast is happening." And with that, the majordomo also exited the manor hall.

That just left Gorsazo and Kivamus inside for now. He asked, "Should I also go out there, to keep an eye on the villagers and the feast?"

"I don't think it's a good idea, my lord," Gorsazo replied immediately. "Your safety is the most important thing for the village right now, and with Hudan and Feroy busy with other things, it might be very unsafe for you if you exit the manor gates right now. Let's not give a third chance for any assassin to succeed where they failed the first two times, alright?"

Kivamus took a deep breath and nodded. "That's true enough, Gorsazo."

He gave a sigh before adding, "We can only hope that everything goes well in the coming days, otherwise it really might be the end of this village, since we can neither send any more caravans to Cinran for food, nor can we afford to buy more of it now."

"Don't worry, my Lord," Gorsazo tried to reassure him. "We have to trust that Hudan and Feroy are competent enough for this. Otherwise, may the Goddess save us..."

\*\*\*\*\*

~ Calubo ~

~ Somewhere in the forests surrounding Tiranat ~

It must have been around an hour or so since the fatso and the other bandit had started their watch duty, although the passage of time was very hard to tell in the night, especially with the moon hidden behind the clouds.

The other bandit's tale about the village feast had ended a while ago, but the fatso had started getting sleepy after that, so he had asked the other bandit to keep speaking about something else. That had led to nearly an hour of the other bandit regaling them with bawdy tales of the time he lived in Cinran and when he used to go to a particular inn there, which was famous for its pretty serving-maids.

Calubo couldn't believe how easily they could talk about such things, when they were going to loot and even kill people soon after this. Perhaps that's how people became after living a bandit's life for a long time, but it didn't change the fact that many people in Tiranat were going to die in the next few hours.

And if the bandits were successful in looting enough grain from the village, most of the people here wouldn't survive the winter.

As he looked at the rope tying his hands, he was reminded that it was his own mistake which had led to Nokozal coming here to raid Tiranat.

So once again, he prayed to the Goddess that somehow she would give him a chance to do something to redeem himself, and to thwart the plans of these bastards. If only he could find a way to warn the village...

#### Chapter 124: Brave Attempts

Maybe half an hour later, the other bandit's bawdy tales ended and it became quiet for a while. Based on how long Nokozal had told these bandits to keep watch, most likely not even an hour was left before they began the raid. While it was probably an enjoyable time for the fatso and the other bandit - where they must be looking forward to how good a haul they would get tonight - Calubo was getting more and more worried as the time for the raid came closer.

He had closed his eyes a while ago while lying down to think if there was a way for him to do something to help the village. But even though thoughts about the impending raid on Tiranat were the only thing swirling in Calubo's mind, so far he hadn't found any way to warn the village. The bandits had camped far enough from the village that even if he started to shout as loud as he could to send a warning to Tiranat - knowing that it would lead to his immediate demise - they likely wouldn't even hear it. Even so, Calubo wished the fatso would go to sleep, so that he might get a chance to escape, although the other bandit who was wide awake wouldn't waste any time in cutting him down. He sighed again. He still couldn't see any way for him to remedy his mistake and help the village.

After it had been quiet for some time, he heard the sound of the fatso beginning to yawn again.

"Oh, man..." the fatso muttered while taking a big yawn again. "Why did... Why did the chief select me to keep watch, huh?"

The other bandit chuckled. "Are you getting sleepy again?"

"It's the middle of the night, for Goddess' sake..." the fatso drawled lazily. "Why wouldn't I be sleepy? And it doesn't help that I am starving now..."

The other bandit laughed quietly. "Only you would be hungry right before we are going on a raid!"

Right at that moment, Calubo heard the sound of clothes rustling from nearby. Being curious about it, he started to open his eyes, but stopped when he heard the other bandit mention him - as insulting as always.

"This idiot has also fallen asleep now..." the other bandit muttered with a yawn. "You know what, after seeing the both of you sleeping, now I am starting to get sleepy as well..."

However, Calubo was very much awake, even though his eyes had been closed for a while. It seemed like closing his eyes to think about the situation had somehow worked in his favor anyway. So for now, it would be better for him if he kept pretending that he was sleeping, and not eavesdropping on the bandits. So he decided not to open his eyes at all and tried to keep his breathing even, while listening to them carefully.

"I wasn't sleeping..." the fatso answered lazily.

"Of course you weren't..." the other bandit chuckled. "But anyway, I've been sitting for too long, so I gotta stretch my legs and take a leak. It'll wake up my mind as well. I don't wanna find out what would happen if the chief found both of us asleep on watch duty."

"Yeah, but who'll keep an eye on the idiot?" the fatso drawled in a sleepy voice.

"This idiot is already sleeping," the other bandit replied, "so you can easily keep an eye on him since you are still awake, aren't you?"

"Yup, I'm awake..." the fatso mumbled. "But don't take too long..."

"Yeah, yeah..." the other bandit grumbled. "Like the Count's knights are coming to attack us right now!"

Both of the bandits laughed, probably while looking at Calubo, but he made sure not to make any sound at all, so they would keep thinking that he was still sleeping.

There were more sounds of clothes rustling, probably from the other bandit standing up, but Calubo made sure to keep his eyes firmly shut and his breathing even.

"Eh... don't worry, man, I'll be back soon enough," the bandit muttered, and Calubo heard the sound of him walking away.

For a while, Calubo stayed just like that, pretending to sleep while listening carefully. After some time, when he was sure that the sound of the other bandit's feet were not close anymore, Calubo dared to slowly open his eyes a little to take a glimpse of his surroundings. While the light from the moon hiding behind the clouds was barely enough to see much, closing his eyes for a while had worked in his favor, since his eyes had completely adjusted to the dark and he could see more clearly now. Opening his eyes wider, he looked around himself without moving his body even an inch, and he saw that while the fatso was wriggling around with closed eyes, probably trying to get more comfortable, the other bandit was nowhere in sight.

Before long, he saw from the corner of his eyes that the fatso had slouched further, with his back supported by a tree, and his eyes still closed. His sword was kept next to him, although half of his hand was still kept above the scabbard.

Calubo kept watching him carefully, and soon enough, sounds of snoring began coming from the fatso.

After giving it some more time for the other bandit to move away further - just to be on the safer side - and for the fatso to completely fall asleep, Calubo sat up slowly while making sure that he didn't make any sounds.

After sitting up, he carefully looked all around him to ensure that no other bandits were nearby, and thankfully, he saw no one else in sight anywhere. Looking back at the fatso, Calubo didn't know for certain whether he was really sleeping, or if he had just closed his eyes to rest a little and those snoring sounds were that of the fatso just breathing normally. But for Calubo, it was good enough. It had to be.

He took a deep breath to calm his mind. This was it. This was the opportunity he had been waiting for. He looked at the rope tying his hands to those of the fatso. If he could somehow free himself, he could escape from these bandits and warn the village. But he knew that it wasn't going to be easy.

He had no idea how long the other bandit would be gone, and even if he didn't return too soon, the fatso might still wake up and kill him right here. And if any of the other bandits had woken up by now, and they wandered here by chance and found out about what he was trying to do before he escaped, Calubo knew that he wouldn't see another day for certain. There were countless risks to his plan to escape.

Regardless, he knew that he wouldn't get a better opportunity than this. He still felt guilty about how he had let slip to Nokozal that the guards wouldn't come out of the manor, and he didn't want his mistake to be the cause of the bandits killing the villagers, or looting their houses and kidnapping their children as slaves.

In the corner of his mind, there was a voice screaming at him to just stay put right here, and let the bandits do what they wanted - since that option had the biggest possibility of him staying alive and seeing Hyola again.

But... but, he couldn't do that, not really. Although he had been a slave for more than two months by now, he still saw himself as a guard of the manor, which meant that it was his duty to protect the villagers, whether he was currently employed as a guard or not. So he had to use this opportunity to warn the village, no matter what. And if he was successful in this... who knows, maybe the guards of the manor might very well be able to take care of these bandits completely! That would also mean freedom for him, and possibly... hopefully... for Hyola as well.

Taking another deep breath, he nodded to himself. He had to do this.

He stood up slowly, trying not to make any sound, and with careful steps, walked closer to the still sleeping fatso. Reaching on the other side of the bandit - since that's where his sword was kept - he paused for a moment, and carefully looked all around him again. There still wasn't anyone else in sight.

Kneeling down, he held the sword - which was still inside its scabbard - with both of his hands, and gently pulled it sideways, trying to get it away from under the hands of the fatso. It didn't budge at all. The fatso hands were much heavier than he had expected.

Taking a deep breath again, he put more force into pulling the sword away, and slowly, it began to move away from under the hands of the sleeping bandit.

Suddenly, the fatso lifted that hand up, and Calubo's heart nearly stopped beating, assuming he was already caught. At that moment, Calubo felt like a deer caught in front of a knight charging on a warhorse in plate armor. So he just held his breath and didn't dare to make any sound at all.

But the fatso hadn't lifted the sword with his hand. His eyes were still completely closed, and that hand had only gone up to scratch at his cheek. Calubo just thanked the Goddess that the fatso hadn't woken up.

After scratching his beard and cheek for a while, the fatso started to put his hand on the ground again. Thinking quickly, Calubo pulled the sword a few inches towards himself, and the fatso's hand fell on the ground this time, instead of above the sword.

And finally Calubo was able to breathe again. The scabbard with the sword inside it was free now, though his hands were still tied to the fatso. He lifted the scabbard, and after standing up carefully, he slowly moved a few steps away to the other side of the wide fedarus tree, so that the fatso wouldn't hear any sounds of him cutting his rope. Thankfully, the rope tying their hands together had more than enough slack for this.

Slowly and very carefully, he removed the scabbard from the sword, and put it gently on the ground, trying to make sure there wouldn't be any unnecessary noises which might wake up the sleeping bandit. Now he just had to cut the rope tying his hands together, but both of his hands were tied very close to each other, so it wasn't possible for him to hold the sword in one hand while cutting the rope in another. Thinking quickly, he sat down, and put the sword on the ground horizontally. With the sharp side of its blade upwards, he clamped the sword between his feet, and began moving both of his hands above the blade to cut the rope.

It was slow going, since the rope was quite strong, and before long, he began to get frustrated after not seeing enough progress in it. The fatso might realize at any moment that his sword was missing, or the other bandit might return back and see what was happening. With his hands still tied together with the rope, it would only take a moment for the bandits to separate his head from his body.

However, he had accepted the risk before he began doing this. He knew he might die any moment if he was found out, but he still had to try. This was exactly the time to be brave. Mr Dugas had depended on him to bring grain from Cinran with the last of their gold crowns, and he had already failed in that. But he won't fail now. Not when there was a new baron in Tiranat, who was doing his best to help the villagers. He had to do his best to help the village - just like a manor guard would do - and hope that the goddess would take care of him and Hyola.

Your next read is at empire

Before long, he noticed that the rope was starting to become frayed where he was cutting it. Freedom was not far away now!

But suddenly, he heard a rustling sound from the direction that the other bandit had gone.

#### Chapter 125: Escape

Calubo froze for a moment, and slowly turned his head towards the sound, and with a huge amount of relief, he saw that it was only a rabbit grazing nearby. But it was still making sounds which could wake up the fatso. He tried to shoo away the rabbit, and for a moment the rabbit just paused and looked at him. Then he tried again, with the sword clumsily held between his still-tied hands, and perhaps realizing that it didn't want to become a late night snack for him, the rabbit quickly scurried away.

He breathed a sigh of relief, and clamping the sword between his feet again, he continued cutting the rope. It seemed like a very long time to him - although it was probably only a short while - and suddenly, the rope tying his left hand was cut through completely. Giving a rare smile of victory, he held the sword properly in his left hand, and began to cut the other loop of the rope which was still tied around his right hand. And this time, it barely took any time before his other hand was free as well.

Grinning in victory, he slowly stood up, and holding the sword carefully in his left hand, he began to walk to the other side of the fedarus tree again. The fatso was still snoring, and right now, the bandit was as well defended as a newborn puppy. Calubo could just leave him there, and start running towards the village immediately, but if the fatso woke up and raised an alarm for the other bandits before he had gotten far enough, they'd catch him and kill him before he ever reached the village to warn them. That would mean all his efforts and his suffering for more than two months would be a waste, so he just couldn't leave him alive. Calubo looked around him again, and seeing nobody nearby, he began to move in a position to quickly kill the sleeping bandit in a single strike, but he hesitated.

While he was no stranger to combat, he had only fought against well-armed opponents before, and not someone who was sleeping helplessly... He also hadn't taken a life before today - not for sure anyway, since he didn't know whether the bandit he had fought off a few years ago while traveling to Cinran had survived or not.

But he clenched his jaw when he remembered that the fatso wasn't some honest citizen of the Reslinor Kingdom. He was a bandit. Just like the other bandits sleeping nearby, the fatso was an outlaw, and had likely done much worse things than Calubo was thinking about doing right now.

He didn't think that he could kill someone innocent in cold blood, but this was a bandit - someone who was going to kill people within an hour, and after looting their homes, he was going to take their women and children as slaves. The fatso didn't deserve his mercy.

Steeling himself, he crouched close to the fatso, and quickly clamped his hand above the bandit's mouth so he wouldn't make any sound. Immediately, the fatso's eyes opened up with surprise, but before he could realize what was happening, Calubo cut open the bandit's throat with the sword. The fatso struggled for a few moments while making wheezing sounds, and tried to pry open Calubo hands from his mouth, but it didn't take long for him to slump over, the life leaving his eyes.

Exhaling once, Calubo slowly put down the body of the now-dead bandit on the ground, so he wouldn't fall over loudly, waking up other bandits in the process. Standing up straight, he couldn't help but be satisfied for a moment. This was one bandit down, and he wouldn't be able to kill anyone in Tiranat tonight.

Discover more stories at [empire](#)

Looking up at the night sky, he thanked the goddess for this opportunity to help the village and redeem himself. He didn't have any possessions with him right now, so he began to move slowly in the direction of the village, not knowing when the other bandit would be back to raise an alarm.

He kept moving slowly towards the village, trying not to make too much sound, but then he remembered the other bandits sleeping nearby. He hesitated about whether he should run away and warn the village, or try to take down more bandits himself. Right now he was armed with a sword, and he would be able to take down one, if not two bandits before they realized what was happening. He might even be able to kill Nokozal if the bastard was asleep! He nearly turned his feet towards them but stopped.

He wasn't the same burly manor guard of a few months ago. While he had been able to kill a bandit who was already sleeping, he was in no condition to fight even one man in a proper sword-fight after nearly two months of barely getting anything to eat. And if he still tried it anyway, there was no doubt that he wouldn't survive the fight with the bandits - who still outnumbered him nine to one - and that would

mean the village would still be unwarned and undefended - which would defeat the whole point of escaping.

He shook his head, no matter how much he wanted to take revenge against these bandits for taking him hostage and making him a slave, he had to think about the bigger picture. And that meant giving a warning to Tiranat, not to indulge in his personal revenge fantasies.

His decision made, he turned back towards the village and began walking with faster steps. And soon, he decided that he was far enough from the bandits, and started running full-tilt towards Tiranat. As he reached closer, he began to hear the sounds of a crowd gathered together - probably those in the feast - and he began salivating at the thought of so much food. He hadn't eaten anything for nearly two days now, and his brain was screaming at him to go towards the feast and eat something there. But he realized how it would seem to the guards - someone they had probably taken for dead was running towards them, covered with fresh blood and with a sword in his hands. They might just shoot him down first, and ask questions later.

Still, he had to go towards the manor anyway, hoping that the new baron would believe his story - assuming there really was a new baron in the village, and it wasn't just his imagination. It was far from certain that the other guards would let him meet the new baron immediately, especially since he had been away from the manor for more than two months without any news about him, and since he was returning without the gold and the horse Sir Duvas had given to him. And he was also bringing the news that there were bandits waiting outside the village... But would they really trust the words coming from someone who might have changed his side to the bandits after all? Would they not think that he was just a distraction sent by the bandits themselves?

He shook his head. He still had to try! Nurobo would vouch for him for sure, and hopefully Sir Duvas would believe his story that the bandits had taken him captive, and it wasn't just him returning back after wasting away their precious money in the brothels of Cinran.

Even so, he didn't know what would happen to him, and if his story would be believed, but he had to try! And he had to trust in the goddess. She had helped him this far, so he had to trust that the people in the manor would believe his story and prepare their defenses, instead of just locking him in a barn as a possible traitor. He had to try!

\*\*\*\*\*

~ Kivamus ~

~ Baron's Manor, Tiranat ~

Kivamus was sitting with others in the manor hall, listening to what Feroy had found out from the remaining villagers who had worked as laborers in the north, and it wasn't much. There was one more villager who had claimed that he had probably seen someone at nearly the same time, but other than that, there was nothing. Yet, two villagers claiming to see people in the north meant that there might really be something in that news.

Hudan was still out, telling the other guards about the threat of a bandit attack, and giving them horns to blow if they got attacked.

Suddenly, the outer doors of the hall opened, and Kerel walked inside. "Milord, someone who had been missing for over two months has returned. And he says that he somehow managed to run away from the bandits that had captured him.

Kivamus straightened up in his armchair and held its armrests with surprise. "What?"

"You can hear from him yourself if you want," Kerel answered. "A guard is holding him just outside the door."

Kivamus looked at Feroy, who gave him a nod of acceptance, and stood up to stand right next to him with his hand on the hilt of his sword, just in case.

"Bring him in," Kivamus ordered.

Kerel, with his iron gray mane of hair, exited the door, and before long, he came back while holding a gaunt looking young man with threadbare clothes and a mud-spattered appearance. The man's hands seemed to be tied with a rope behind him, with the other end of the rope held by Kerel. On a closer look, his tunic sleeves looked reddish, as if they were covered in blood. Is that really what it was?

Hudan followed them inside as well. Looking at Kerel, the guard captain said, "I'll take it from here, you go and keep an eye outside."

Kerel nodded and after handing over the rope to Hudan, he returned back.

"Where did he come from?" Kivamus asked curiously.

"We found him running towards the manor like this with a sword in his hands," the guard captain replied.

"What?" Gorsazo exclaimed. "Is he a bandit then?"

"I don't think so," Hudan replied. "When the guards at the manor gates stopped him, he gave up his sword without any protest, and since then, he has been urging to see the new baron. I wasn't sure whether to bring him here, but Kerel and a few other guards vouched for him, so..."

"And why would the guards vouch for someone like him?" Feroy interrupted with raised eyebrows. "I can't be completely sure about it, but I don't think I've seen him in the village before."

Before Hudan could say anything in reply, Duvas - who had been squinting at the newcomer - exclaimed with disbelief. "Is that... is that you, Calubo?"

Calubo nodded with a tired smile. "Indeed, Sir Duvas. It is me."

"What happened to you?" the majordomo asked with surprise. "I thought you were dead!"

"You know him, Duvas?" Kivamus asked.

"I do, milord!" the majordomo replied. "He used to be one of our guards. The last time I'd seen him was around a month before you arrived here, when I sent him to Cinran on a horse to buy even a single sack of grain for us, but he never returned after that. I thought bandits had killed him for the gold and the horse."

"Right... I remember you telling me about this." Kivamus looked back at Calubo. "So, where have you been for the past two months?"

#### Chapter 126: Truth Or Lie

"Sir Duvas is mostly right, milord," Calubo replied. "A day after I had left Tiranat for Cinran through the northern road, a group of bandits surrounded me in the forest and..."

And then the former guard launched into a tale explaining everything that had happened to him for the past two months, including his life as a slave in a limestone quarry somewhere in the forests, along with another two dozen slaves there who barely got anything to eat these days. The limestone quarry was run by someone called Nokozal, who saw himself as a minor lord, but was most likely only a bandit who had contacts in high places in Cinran. And that was the one thing in that tale which concerned Kivamus more than anything else - that the quarry was owned by a baron in Cinran. Calubo hadn't been able to find out who that baron was, but that a noble was supporting banditry like this was very concerning.

Another thing that stood out to him was that it was a limestone quarry! And limestone was a very important ingredient of cement, using which he could make concrete! Concrete meant much stronger walls to defend the village. It meant much better insulated houses than the wooden shacks that most of the villagers now lived in. Concrete would also allow him to make taller buildings, which could house a lot more people. And not just that, it meant... No, stop! This wasn't the time to get lost in daydreams!

He had to focus on the present. But the fact that there was a limestone quarry located only a few days' journey by horse was something that was making him giddy with excitement! A few days' horse journey meant that it would only be a few hundred kilometers away at most, but there was also the fact that they didn't have any modern transportation methods here. If they had a rail line connecting the quarry with a cement factory here, they could get a steady supply of limestone to make concrete, but this wasn't modern earth.

Here, the best they could do was to haul it through the treacherous terrain of the dense forests using horse drawn wagons... but in the beginning, their demands of limestone wouldn't be that high, would they? Just a dozen wagon loads of limestone per month might be more than enough for their needs. That meant... No, stop! He chided himself for getting lost in his thoughts again. He had to focus on the bandits hiding outside the village right now!

He took a deep breath to calm his racing mind. The most pressing thing was that Calubo had told them that he had escaped after slashing the throat of a bandit, and that there were nearly a dozen bandits hiding in the forests to raid the village tonight.

He looked back at Calubo. "You said there are less than a dozen bandits?"

The ex-guard nodded. "There are fourteen bandits in total in that group, but four of them had stayed back at the quarry to keep an eye on the stonecutters. And out of the ten bandits who came along with me, I've already killed one. That means there should be nine of them outside the village now."

As Kivamus thought about it for a moment, Calubo seemed to get impatient. "We have to do something about it, milord," the ex-guard pleaded, "or those bandits will kill a lot of the villagers! It won't be long before they find out that I've escaped, and once they do find it out, they won't waste another moment before attacking us!"

He continued agitatedly, "They are ruthless bastards, and they wouldn't hesitate for a moment in killing even a defenseless woman, or running away with them and their children as slaves. We have to send the guards to ambush them before that happens!"

Gorsazo said, "But if there are just nine of those bandits, would they even be able to storm the manor walls? We could just pick them off as they try to climb the walls."

Continue reading stories on empire

"No, we can't!" Calubo shook his head vigorously. "We won't be able to do that since they aren't going to attack the manor at all! They believe that in case of an attack, the manor guards will stay inside the manor instead of going after them, just like it happened in the previous bandit raid on Tiranat."

Duvas grimaced on hearing about the previous raid, but didn't say anything.

Calubo continued, "That means they are only going to attack the houses of villagers, hoping to steal grain and capture a few slaves, while staying clear of the manor."

Hudan looked at Kivamus for his decision. "What should we do with this story, milord?"

Before Kivamus could reply, Calubo interrupted him angrily. "It's not a story, milord! I'm not lying about any of it! Nokozal might be running towards the village right now!" Seeing the frown on Duvas' face,

Calubo took a deep breath, and continued, "I apologize for shouting, milord. But we have to do something about the bandits before they attack, or they might set the village on fire when escaping, and we won't be able to do anything about them at that time!"

Kivamus nodded. "I hear you, Calubo. And I don't think you are lying, but you've been out of the manor for months, so I still can't trust you completely either." He looked at the guard captain. "For now, hand him over to another guard outside, and come back here so we can discuss this."

Hudan nodded, and took the ex-guard outside of the manor hall. And before long, he returned back and closed the outer door.

Kivamus looked at the majordomo. "Among all of us here, you are the person who seems to know Calubo the best. So, do you trust him, Duvas?"

"Without any doubt, milord," Duvas replied with a nod. "He used to be a guard here, for Goddess' sake!"

"Yeah... but it's been more than two months since then, so how do you know he hasn't changed his loyalties by now?" Feroy asked.

"We can't know anything for sure," Duvas replied, "but I've known him for more than a decade, and I know his character. One of our other guards, Nurobo, is his cousin - which means he has family here. And I don't think he can ever take up arms against his cousin or the other guards."

Feroy nodded. "But I'll still prefer to lock him up for now. Just in case, you know?" He explained, "I don't think he's lying either, and I have a knack for catching lies, but we still can't be completely sure that he won't just open the back-door of the manor for that Nokozal, while we are out chasing shadows in the forests. We just can't take that risk."

"It won't work, Feroy," the guard captain remarked. "If he's telling the truth, and we decide to go after the bandits, we'll need him with us to show where they are hiding, otherwise we'd never find them in the night just by ourselves. And since he'll be right next to us, he can't open the eastern door of the manor either. So that'll take care of your concern as well."

"That's true enough," Feroy shrugged, "but how do you know he'll not just lead us into an ambush there?"

Hudan grimaced. "You are right, and we won't know if there is an ambush until we are already there, but I still say that this is a good opportunity to get rid of those bandits. If we wait too long and allow them to attack the village, who knows how many people they'll kill, and Goddess forbid, if they put the new longhouse block on fire... we simply wouldn't be able to house all the villagers properly for the winter."

The guard captain exhaled loudly before adding, "And yet, I certainly don't want to lead the guards into an ambush, not to mention it will leave the manor and the village nearly defenseless while most of the trained guards are out..."

"If you just give me some time with Calubo alone," Feroy suggested with a shrug, "I'll make sure to find out every single thing he knows."

"We just don't have time for you to interrogate him," Hudan replied with a frown. "Those bandits would have found out by now that one of them is dead, which means they could attack at any moment. We have to take care of defending the village first. And if it turns out that it was all a lie, you can interrogate Calubo tomorrow."

Kivamus was also thinking about the situation, and he still wasn't sure whether to trust Calubo or not. On one hand, the ex-guard might be lying completely and simply wanted to take the guards into an ambush - in which case it would be better to stay put here and focus on defending the manor. But on the other hand, and he was leaning towards this option by now, Calubo might be speaking the truth, which meant that it would be a good idea to go and attack the bandits without any civilians nearby, before they raided the village. But before he made up his mind, his former teacher Gorsazo interrupted them.

"Weren't you all hearing Calubo properly?" Gorsazo asked.

"What do you mean by that?" Kivamus asked with a frown.

## 122. Brave Attempts

Maybe half an hour later, the other bandit's bawdy tales ended and it became quiet for a while. Based on how long Nokozal had told these bandits to keep watch, most likely not even an hour was left before

they began the raid. While it was probably an enjoyable time for the fatso and the other bandit - where they must be looking forward to how good a haul they would get tonight - Calubo was getting more and more worried as the time for the raid came closer.

He had closed his eyes a while ago while lying down to think if there was a way for him to do something to help the village. But even though thoughts about the impending raid on Tiranat were the only thing swirling in Calubo's mind, so far he hadn't found any way to warn the village. The bandits had camped far enough from the village that even if he started to shout as loud as he could to send a warning to Tiranat - knowing that it would lead to his immediate demise - they likely wouldn't even hear it. Even so, Calubo wished the fatso would go to sleep, so that he might get a chance to escape, although the other bandit who was wide awake wouldn't waste any time in cutting him down. He sighed again. He still couldn't see any way for him to remedy his mistake and help the village.

After it had been quiet for some time, he heard the sound of the fatso beginning to yawn again.

"Oh, man..." the fatso muttered while taking a big yawn again. "Why did... Why did the chief select me to keep watch, huh?"

The other bandit chuckled. "Are you getting sleepy again?"

"It's the middle of the night, for Goddess' sake..." the fatso drawled lazily. "Why wouldn't I be sleepy? And it doesn't help that I am starving now..."

The other bandit laughed quietly. "Only you would be hungry right before we are going on a raid!"

Right at that moment, Calubo heard the sound of clothes rustling from nearby. Being curious about it, he started to open his eyes, but stopped when he heard the other bandit mention him - as insulting as always.

"This idiot has also fallen asleep now..." the other bandit muttered with a yawn. "You know what, after seeing the both of you sleeping, now I am starting to get sleepy as well..."

However, Calubo was very much awake, even though his eyes had been closed for a while. It seemed like closing his eyes to think about the situation had somehow worked in his favor anyway. So for now, it

would be better for him if he kept pretending that he was sleeping, and not eavesdropping on the bandits. So he decided not to open his eyes at all and tried to keep his breathing even, while listening to them carefully.

"I wasn't sleeping..." the fatso answered lazily.

"Of course you weren't..." the other bandit chuckled. "But anyway, I've been sitting for too long, so I gotta stretch my legs and take a leak. It'll wake up my mind as well. I don't wanna find out what would happen if the chief found both of us asleep on watch duty."

"Yeah, but who'll keep an eye on the idiot?" the fatso drawled in a sleepy voice.

"This idiot is already sleeping," the other bandit replied, "so you can easily keep an eye on him since you are still awake, aren't you?"

"Yup, I'm awake..." the fatso mumbled. "But don't take too long..."

"Yeah, yeah..." the other bandit grumbled. "Like the Count's knights are coming to attack us right now!"

Both of the bandits laughed, probably while looking at Calubo, but he made sure not to make any sound at all, so they would keep thinking that he was still sleeping.

There were more sounds of clothes rustling, probably from the other bandit standing up, but Calubo made sure to keep his eyes firmly shut and his breathing even.

"Eh... don't worry, man, I'll be back soon enough," the bandit muttered, and Calubo heard the sound of him walking away.

For a while, Calubo stayed just like that, pretending to sleep while listening carefully. After some time, when he was sure that the sound of the other bandit's feet were not close anymore, Calubo dared to slowly open his eyes a little to take a glimpse of his surroundings. While the light from the moon hiding behind the clouds was barely enough to see much, closing his eyes for a while had worked in his favor, since his eyes had completely adjusted to the dark and he could see more clearly now. Opening his eyes

wider, he looked around himself without moving his body even an inch, and he saw that while the fatso was wriggling around with closed eyes, probably trying to get more comfortable, the other bandit was nowhere in sight.

Before long, he saw from the corner of his eyes that the fatso had slouched further, with his back supported by a tree, and his eyes still closed. His sword was kept next to him, although half of his hand was still kept above the scabbard.

Calubo kept watching him carefully, and soon enough, sounds of snoring began coming from the fatso.

After giving it some more time for the other bandit to move away further - just to be on the safer side - and for the fatso to completely fall asleep, Calubo sat up slowly while making sure that he didn't make any sounds.

After sitting up, he carefully looked all around him to ensure that no other bandits were nearby, and thankfully, he saw no one else in sight anywhere. Looking back at the fatso, Calubo didn't know for certain whether he was really sleeping, or if he had just closed his eyes to rest a little and those snoring sounds were that of the fatso just breathing normally. But for Calubo, it was good enough. It had to be.

He took a deep breath to calm his mind. This was it. This was the opportunity he had been waiting for. He looked at the rope tying his hands to those of the fatso. If he could somehow free himself, he could escape from these bandits and warn the village. But he knew that it wasn't going to be easy.

He had no idea how long the other bandit would be gone, and even if he didn't return too soon, the fatso might still wake up and kill him right here. And if any of the other bandits had woken up by now, and they wandered here by chance and found out about what he was trying to do before he escaped, Calubo knew that he wouldn't see another day for certain. There were countless risks to his plan to escape.

Regardless, he knew that he wouldn't get a better opportunity than this. He still felt guilty about how he had let slip to Nokozal that the guards wouldn't come out of the manor, and he didn't want his mistake to be the cause of the bandits killing the villagers, or looting their houses and kidnapping their children as slaves.

In the corner of his mind, there was a voice screaming at him to just stay put right here, and let the bandits do what they wanted - since that option had the biggest possibility of him staying alive and seeing Hyola again.

But... but, he couldn't do that, not really. Although he had been a slave for more than two months by now, he still saw himself as a guard of the manor, which meant that it was his duty to protect the villagers, whether he was currently employed as a guard or not. So he had to use this opportunity to warn the village, no matter what. And if he was successful in this... who knows, maybe the guards of the manor might very well be able to take care of these bandits completely! That would also mean freedom for him, and possibly... hopefully... for Hyola as well.

Taking another deep breath, he nodded to himself. He had to do this.

He stood up slowly, trying not to make any sound, and with careful steps, walked closer to the still sleeping fatso. Reaching on the other side of the bandit - since that's where his sword was kept - he paused for a moment, and carefully looked all around him again. There still wasn't anyone else in sight.

Kneeling down, he held the sword - which was still inside its scabbard - with both of his hands, and gently pulled it sideways, trying to get it away from under the hands of the fatso. It didn't budge at all. The fatso hands were much heavier than he had expected.

Taking a deep breath again, he put more force into pulling the sword away, and slowly, it began to move away from under the hands of the sleeping bandit.

Suddenly, the fatso lifted that hand up, and Calubo's heart nearly stopped beating, assuming he was already caught. At that moment, Calubo felt like a deer caught in front of a knight charging on a warhorse in plate armor. So he just held his breath and didn't dare to make any sound at all.

But the fatso hadn't lifted the sword with his hand. His eyes were still completely closed, and that hand had only gone up to scratch at his cheek. Calubo just thanked the Goddess that the fatso hadn't woken up.

After scratching his beard and cheek for a while, the fatso started to put his hand on the ground again. Thinking quickly, Calubo pulled the sword a few inches towards himself, and the fatso's hand fell on the ground this time, instead of above the sword.

And finally Calubo was able to breathe again. The scabbard with the sword inside it was free now, though his hands were still tied to the fatso. He lifted the scabbard, and after standing up carefully, he slowly moved a few steps away to the other side of the wide fedarus tree, so that the fatso wouldn't hear any sounds of him cutting his rope. Thankfully, the rope tying their hands together had more than enough slack for this.

Slowly and very carefully, he removed the scabbard from the sword, and put it gently on the ground, trying to make sure there wouldn't be any unnecessary noises which might wake up the sleeping bandit. Now he just had to cut the rope tying his hands together, but both of his hands were tied very close to each other, so it wasn't possible for him to hold the sword in one hand while cutting the rope in another. Thinking quickly, he sat down, and put the sword on the ground horizontally. With the sharp side of its blade upwards, he clamped the sword between his feet, and began moving both of his hands above the blade to cut the rope.

It was slow going, since the rope was quite strong, and before long, he began to get frustrated after not seeing enough progress in it. The fatso might realize at any moment that his sword was missing, or the other bandit might return back and see what was happening. With his hands still tied together with the rope, it would only take a moment for the bandits to separate his head from his body.

However, he had accepted the risk before he began doing this. He knew he might die any moment if he was found out, but he still had to try. This was exactly the time to be brave. Mr Duvas had depended on him to bring grain from Cinran with the last of their gold crowns, and he had already failed in that. But he won't fail now. Not when there was a new baron in Tiranat, who was doing his best to help the villagers. He had to do his best to help the village - just like a manor guard would do - and hope that the goddess would take care of him and Hyola.

Your next read is at [empire](#)

Before long, he noticed that the rope was starting to become frayed where he was cutting it. Freedom was not far away now!

But suddenly, he heard a rustling sound from the direction that the other bandit had gone.

123. Escape

Calubo froze for a moment, and slowly turned his head towards the sound, and with a huge amount of relief, he saw that it was only a rabbit grazing nearby. But it was still making sounds which could wake

up the fatso. He tried to shoo away the rabbit, and for a moment the rabbit just paused and looked at him. Then he tried again, with the sword clumsily held between his still-tied hands, and perhaps realizing that it didn't want to become a late night snack for him, the rabbit quickly scurried away.

He breathed a sigh of relief, and clamping the sword between his feet again, he continued cutting the rope. It seemed like a very long time to him - although it was probably only a short while - and suddenly, the rope tying his left hand was cut through completely. Giving a rare smile of victory, he held the sword properly in his left hand, and began to cut the other loop of the rope which was still tied around his right hand. And this time, it barely took any time before his other hand was free as well.

Grinning in victory, he slowly stood up, and holding the sword carefully in his left hand, he began to walk to the other side of the fedarus tree again. The fatso was still snoring, and right now, the bandit was as well defended as a newborn puppy. Calubo could just leave him there, and start running towards the village immediately, but if the fatso woke up and raised an alarm for the other bandits before he had gotten far enough, they'd catch him and kill him before he ever reached the village to warn them. That would mean all his efforts and his suffering for more than two months would be a waste, so he just couldn't leave him alive. Calubo looked around him again, and seeing nobody nearby, he began to move in a position to quickly kill the sleeping bandit in a single strike, but he hesitated.

While he was no stranger to combat, he had only fought against well-armed opponents before, and not someone who was sleeping helplessly... He also hadn't taken a life before today - not for sure anyway, since he didn't know whether the bandit he had fought off a few years ago while traveling to Cinran had survived or not.

But he clenched his jaw when he remembered that the fatso wasn't some honest citizen of the Reslinor Kingdom. He was a bandit. Just like the other bandits sleeping nearby, the fatso was an outlaw, and had likely done much worse things than Calubo was thinking about doing right now.

He didn't think that he could kill someone innocent in cold blood, but this was a bandit - someone who was going to kill people within an hour, and after looting their homes, he was going to take their women and children as slaves. The fatso didn't deserve his mercy.

Steeling himself, he crouched close to the fatso, and quickly clamped his hand above the bandit's mouth so he wouldn't make any sound. Immediately, the fatso's eyes opened up with surprise, but before he could realize what was happening, Calubo cut open the bandit's throat with the sword. The fatso struggled for a few moments while making wheezing sounds, and tried to pry open Calubo hands from his mouth, but it didn't take long for him to slump over, the life leaving his eyes.

Exhaling once, Calubo slowly put down the body of the now-dead bandit on the ground, so he wouldn't fall over loudly, waking up other bandits in the process. Standing up straight, he couldn't help but be satisfied for a moment. This was one bandit down, and he wouldn't be able to kill anyone in Tiranat tonight.

Discover more stories at [empire](#)

Looking up at the night sky, he thanked the goddess for this opportunity to help the village and redeem himself. He didn't have any possessions with him right now, so he began to move slowly in the direction of the village, not knowing when the other bandit would be back to raise an alarm.

He kept moving slowly towards the village, trying not to make too much sound, but then he remembered the other bandits sleeping nearby. He hesitated about whether he should run away and warn the village, or try to take down more bandits himself. Right now he was armed with a sword, and he would be able to take down one, if not two bandits before they realized what was happening. He might even be able to kill Nokozal if the bastard was asleep! He nearly turned his feet towards them but stopped.

He wasn't the same burly manor guard of a few months ago. While he had been able to kill a bandit who was already sleeping, he was in no condition to fight even one man in a proper sword-fight after nearly two months of barely getting anything to eat. And if he still tried it anyway, there was no doubt that he wouldn't survive the fight with the bandits - who still outnumbered him nine to one - and that would mean the village would still be unwarned and undefended - which would defeat the whole point of escaping.

He shook his head, no matter how much he wanted to take revenge against these bandits for taking him hostage and making him a slave, he had to think about the bigger picture. And that meant giving a warning to Tiranat, not to indulge in his personal revenge fantasies.

His decision made, he turned back towards the village and began walking with faster steps. And soon, he decided that he was far enough from the bandits, and started running full-tilt towards Tiranat. As he reached closer, he began to hear the sounds of a crowd gathered together - probably those in the feast - and he began salivating at the thought of so much food. He hadn't eaten anything for nearly two days now, and his brain was screaming at him to go towards the feast and eat something there. But he realized how it would seem to the guards - someone they had probably taken for dead was running

towards them, covered with fresh blood and with a sword in his hands. They might just shoot him down first, and ask questions later.

Still, he had to go towards the manor anyway, hoping that the new baron would believe his story - assuming there really was a new baron in the village, and it wasn't just his imagination. It was far from certain that the other guards would let him meet the new baron immediately, especially since he had been away from the manor for more than two months without any news about him, and since he was returning without the gold and the horse Sir Duvas had given to him. And he was also bringing the news that there were bandits waiting outside the village... But would they really trust the words coming from someone who might have changed his side to the bandits after all? Would they not think that he was just a distraction sent by the bandits themselves?

He shook his head. He still had to try! Nurobo would vouch for him for sure, and hopefully Sir Duvas would believe his story that the bandits had taken him captive, and it wasn't just him returning back after wasting away their precious money in the brothels of Cinran.

Even so, he didn't know what would happen to him, and if his story would be believed, but he had to try! And he had to trust in the goddess. She had helped him this far, so he had to trust that the people in the manor would believe his story and prepare their defenses, instead of just locking him in a barn as a possible traitor. He had to try!

\*\*\*\*\*

~ Kivamus ~

~ Baron's Manor, Tiranat ~

Kivamus was sitting with others in the manor hall, listening to what Feroy had found out from the remaining villagers who had worked as laborers in the north, and it wasn't much. There was one more villager who had claimed that he had probably seen someone at nearly the same time, but other than that, there was nothing. Yet, two villagers claiming to see people in the north meant that there might really be something in that news.

Hudan was still out, telling the other guards about the threat of a bandit attack, and giving them horns to blow if they got attacked.

Suddenly, the outer doors of the hall opened, and Kerel walked inside. "Milord, someone who had been missing for over two months has returned. And he says that he somehow managed to run away from the bandits that had captured him.

Kivamus straightened up in his armchair and held its armrests with surprise. "What?"

"You can hear from him yourself if you want," Kerel answered. "A guard is holding him just outside the door."

Kivamus looked at Feroy, who gave him a nod of acceptance, and stood up to stand right next to him with his hand on the hilt of his sword, just in case.

"Bring him in," Kivamus ordered.

Kerel, with his iron gray mane of hair, exited the door, and before long, he came back while holding a gaunt looking young man with threadbare clothes and a mud-spattered appearance. The man's hands seemed to be tied with a rope behind him, with the other end of the rope held by Kerel. On a closer look, his tunic sleeves looked reddish, as if they were covered in blood. Is that really what it was?

Hudan followed them inside as well. Looking at Kerel, the guard captain said, "I'll take it from here, you go and keep an eye outside."

Kerel nodded and after handing over the rope to Hudan, he returned back.

"Where did he come from?" Kivamus asked curiously.

"We found him running towards the manor like this with a sword in his hands," the guard captain replied.

"What?" Gorsazo exclaimed. "Is he a bandit then?"

"I don't think so," Hudan replied. "When the guards at the manor gates stopped him, he gave up his sword without any protest, and since then, he has been urging to see the new baron. I wasn't sure whether to bring him here, but Kerel and a few other guards vouched for him, so..."

"And why would the guards vouch for someone like him?" Feroy interrupted with raised eyebrows. "I can't be completely sure about it, but I don't think I've seen him in the village before."

Before Hudan could say anything in reply, Duvas - who had been squinting at the newcomer - exclaimed with disbelief. "Is that... is that you, Calubo?"

Calubo nodded with a tired smile. "Indeed, Sir Duvas. It is me."

"What happened to you?" the majordomo asked with surprise. "I thought you were dead!"

"You know him, Duvas?" Kivamus asked.

"I do, milord!" the majordomo replied. "He used to be one of our guards. The last time I'd seen him was around a month before you arrived here, when I sent him to Cinran on a horse to buy even a single sack of grain for us, but he never returned after that. I thought bandits had killed him for the gold and the horse."

"Right... I remember you telling me about this." Kivamus looked back at Calubo. "So, where have you been for the past two months?"

Chapter 127. Is It An Ambush

Hudan snorted. "I'll never call them ready for battle until they can fight equally against me! And without a doubt, they will break at the first cavalry charge of a knight against them."

"I have plans for the future in case it does come to that," Kivamus interrupted, "But let's leave that for later."

The guard captain nodded. "Thankfully these bandits aren't going to be anything like that. Anyway, I've tried my best to train them in the limited time we've had since recruiting them, so hopefully, they should still be able to hold their own in a one-on-one battle. But I don't want to take any chances here,

so I'll be leaving all our new guards here in the manor, where they will have the advantage of home ground in case the bandits manage to reach here, although I'll try my best to prevent that. And I'll still take Tesyb - who's one of the new recruits - with me, since he's already a good fighter."

For a moment, Kivamus thought of joining the guards as well, since he had been getting regular sword training from Hudan as well, but he knew that he had no real experience in fighting, and even if he did go with them, he would be a liability at best, since some of the guards would try to protect him instead of putting an end to the bandits.

And now that he knew what kind of medicine they had available in this world, he just couldn't find the courage in him to volunteer for this, knowing that even if he got through the coming battle alive with just a few cuts to show for it, he still might not survive long enough - since even a infection through a small wound could easily kill people here. So he didn't mention it at all. He wasn't sure whether that decision was cowardly or he was just being cautious. But this way, at least the few remaining leaves in the losuvil vine they had found, could be used for the other guards in case any of them got injured, which others wouldn't allow to happen if he was injured as well.

After a moment, Hudan continued, "Including Calubo and me, I'm taking a total of fourteen guards with me. That should be enough for us to take on the nine bandits without too much difficulty. That will leave thirteen guards here to defend the manor - since I have alerted all the off-duty guards as well - although most of them are the new recruits. Apart from them, we do have two women guards with us now, but without any crossbows, Isomi and Savomi wouldn't be of any help to us in a sword fight. So I'll leave them here in the manor, so they can stand guard outside the door of the servants hall to protect the other maids, just in case the bandits manage to breach the manor gates."

At Duvas' worried expression, the guard captain added, "Don't worry about it, Sir Duvas. It's not likely to happen. I'll make sure of it."

"I know you will," the old majordomo said with a forced smile. "May the goddess help you succeed and rid our world of those lowlifes."

"Go on then," Kivamus added as well. "Good hunting!" Explore more adventures at [empire](#)

Others looked confused at that unfamiliar phrase, but Kivamus just grinned, knowing they would get the meaning.

After a moment, Hudan gave a confident smile, and nodded. And with that, the guard captain exited the manor hall with Calubo in tow.

Feroy stood up as well. "I'll also go and organize our remaining guards to defend the manor."

"That reminds me," Duvas asked, "what do we tell the villagers who are still outside? The feast is nearly over now, but there are still a few dozen people outside keeping an eye on their children."

"I think it'd be a good idea to end the feast now and send the villagers to their homes," Feroy suggested, "since all of them have already eaten at least once and it's not safe for them to stay there anymore. Those people, and especially the children, would easily become the targets of bandits and it would make it difficult for us to defend the gates. Not to mention, the wooden tables and carts outside would give a good hiding place to bandits, and our archers wouldn't be able to target them easily."

Duvas nodded. "Do it then."

"No, wait!" Kivamus interrupted. "You'll have to give them a reason to send them back suddenly, and if you tell them that there is a bandit attack, it would easily cause panic amongst the crowd. And that could lead to a stampede which could mean many people including children might die."

"Then what do you suggest, milord?" Feroy asked with a frown. "I don't want our archers to try to shoot bandits if they get mixed in that crowd."

Kivamus thought for a moment, and said, "I think there is a better idea than just telling them to leave. You should go there and calmly inform one of the maids to tell the villagers that there is no more food now, so they have to take back the carts and food buckets inside. If the maids ask for a reason, you can tell them that there is an imminent threat of a bandit raid - but let them know that they shouldn't say anything about it to the villagers. And to act normally until they are inside the gates."

Feroy gave a slow nod. "That would work."

Duvas asked, "Isn't this a good time to bring back those villagers who are good with a machete? They could help us in defending the manor."

"It would be too difficult now," Feroy answered. "Going door to door to bring those villagers back here could also cause panic amongst them. Also, I think it's a good idea to just leave them in the village, since that way there would be at least some people there who have some basic training, in case the bandits do reach there."

"That's true enough," Kivamus said with a nod. "So, let's leave them where they are, to defend their homes. But we still have a lot of machetes and axes here, so you can give them to our servants within the manor and tell them to be ready to support the guards. It's better than leaving them undefended and the machetes unutilized."

As Feroy started to object, Kivamus added, "I know that they aren't trained swordsmen. But if nothing else, you should tell them to stand near the manor walls in every direction and be ready to shout or blow a horn immediately if they see someone climbing the walls."

Feroy nodded. "Of course, and I'll also give them the machetes, just in case." And then he exited the hall as well.

"Let's hope that the goddess takes care of us and the village," Duvas prayed while looking upwards.

Kivamus and Gorsazo gave silent nods as well.

\*\*\*\*\*

~ Calubo ~

~ Somewhere in the forests surrounding Tiranat ~

Calubo was leading the guards of the manor towards the place where the bandits had been hiding earlier. He didn't know if they would still be there, but he had to try to find them, otherwise the guards might start to doubt his whole story. Although he was still grateful that at least they had trusted him enough to give a sword in his hands.

Earlier, when he had met the new baron - and he was glad to see that there really was a new baron in the village - he was surprised to see that he looked so young, and nearly the same age as him. Although his unusual silver colored hair made him stand out easily, but he didn't behave anything like the nobles were supposed to. It was a good thing though, since it seemed like the baron really cared for the villagers instead of just considering them a tool to earn more money for him.

He had also seen Nurobo when going there, and they had both been glad to see that the other was okay, but he had still not gotten a chance to talk to him. He really wanted to know everything that had happened in the village since he had left, but he would have to wait to ask that until the bandits had been dealt with - assuming he survived the coming battle, of course. But he had faith in the Goddess. He knew she would help him survive this night, and one day he would be able to see Hyola again.

For now, he kept leading the guards - including the huge man who was the guard captain - towards the northwest of the village, hoping he could find the bandits' hiding place even in this darkness. For a while, he stumbled around, looking for that particular grove of trees where the bandits were sleeping, but everything looked the same in the dark. After some time, he started to hear a few guards whispering about him, talking about whether he was lying or if he was taking them into an ambush. He was going to retort back, but he took a deep breath to calm himself and decided that instead of wasting more time in bickering - which could easily be heard by the bandits - he should keep trying to find their hideout.

He kept leading others, looking carefully at each fedarus tree he saw, and searching for the one with a low branch, where he was sitting with other bandits, but he still couldn't find anything. He was starting to become disappointed, when he turned his head to the left and saw that branch.

"There!" He whispered to the other guards. "That's where I was sitting with two other bandits who were on watch duty."

Immediately, the rest of the guards became alert, and at Hudan's gesture, they started to spread around, and began walking even more slowly with their swords ready in their hands.

As they came closer to that tree, he didn't see any bandits there - which wasn't really unexpected though. Then he slowly started to circle around the really broad tree along with the others, and in the faint light of the full moon which was still hiding behind the clouds, he saw a leg sticking out on one side of the tree. He pointed silently towards it, and the rest of the guards came closer and saw the dead body of the fatso lying there.

"So you weren't lying after all..." one of the guards muttered.

"Of course I wasn't!" Calubo finally snapped back with his confidence high again - now that he had proven his story. "This isn't something to joke about."

"Be quiet!" Hudan admonished them. "The rest of them might still be nearby."

"It doesn't seem like that though," a guard muttered, "or they would have already tried to attack us."

Then Hudan bent down closer to the body - likely to confirm that the man was dead - and suddenly they heard the whistling sound of an arrow passing right next to them.

Chapter 128. Enemy At The Gates

"What was that?" one of the guards asked with alarm, as they all stood up and started looking around carefully with their swords ready.

"It was an arrow, dammit!" another guard whispered. "What else would it be?"

"I thought all the bandits had already gone away from this place..." the first guard muttered.

"There's still an archer here though..." another guard spoke in a hushed voice, "and he must have been waiting for us to look at the dead body before shooting - when we wouldn't be too careful."

Right at that moment, another arrow whistled towards them, hitting a guard somewhere with a thwack.

"Ahh..." the guard cried out.

Immediately, all of the guards crouched even lower to give a smaller target to the archer, while looking all around them hoping to see the archer, but to no avail.

"Damn that archer, hitting us from the dark like a coward!" Looking towards the general direction where the arrow had come from, the injured yelled, "Come fight with me face-to-face if you can, you bastard!"

"Is it bad?" one of the guards asked the man who had been hit.

"Nah, I'll live," that guard replied. "The arrow just glanced off my shoulder. If it was just a few inches off, it would have taken my head off!"

"Shut up, all of you," Hudan scolded them again from his crouched position, where he had still been looking at the body of the dead bandit. Then he stood up quickly, and jogged to take cover behind a tree. "There might still be more than one man here. And move around, you idiots! Don't stick together and make it easier for the archer to send you to the goddess!"

Immediately, the guards spread around in groups of two or three, and took cover behind other trees.

Earlier in the manor, Calubo had heard the guard captain saying that he had been training others, but while the guards might do well enough in an actual sword fight against a bandit - just like himself - how to act in case of a sudden attack on them was not something they had any experience in.

He remembered that until the time he lived here, usually the manor guards just had to escort the previous baron's carriage to Cinran and back, apart from their regular watch duties at the manor gates - which rarely involved any kind of bloodshed. They really didn't have any experience of going out on an offensive to strike at a bandit hideout in the night, and that inexperience was easily apparent here. But at least it seemed like the guard captain knew what to do in this situation.

One of the two other guards with whom he had taken cover behind a fedarus tree, whispered in a low voice, "It seems like the bandits were waiting here to ambush us!"

"Does that mean they have given up on raiding the village tonight?" the other guard asked.

And right at that moment, they heard the sound of a horn being blown loudly from the direction of the village.

"Shit! They are already at the village!" the first guard yelled to the others. "Let's return back."

And just as he stepped to the side of the tree, an arrow whistled sharply from nearby, making him jump back behind the tree to hide.

"Damn it!" Another guard cursed from behind a nearby tree. "What are we supposed to do now?"

"Listen to me," Hudan said to all of them. "The bandits seem to have divided their forces and they have left at least one man here - since they anticipated that we'd come for them. But that archer is only to keep us bogged down here, while the rest of them go to attack the village."

"What should we do now?" the guard next to Calubo asked. "We can't leave without taking care of that archer."

"Here is what we'll do," Hudan replied. "We will divide as well. Four of us will stay back here - just in case there is more than one bandit here - and the rest of us will immediately return back to the village. That's where most of the bandits are going to be, and the other guards will need our help there."

He pointed at some of the guards including Calubo and ordered, "You four will remain here." He added, "Two of you should stay here behind different trees, and you'll keep changing your positions to other trees while making enough sound - or just keep taunting him - to make the archer think that we all are still here."

"Isn't that dangerous?" one of the guards asked doubtfully.

"That archer wouldn't be able to see in this darkness any better than we can," Hudan replied, "so most likely he's got a perch at a branch of one of the trees ahead. While he might still be able to hear us, he'd barely be able to see anything, and certainly not well enough to target accurately. So he's likely just shooting arrows blindly to where the body of the dead bandit is, since he knows we would be nearby."

He continued, "So while two of you will stay here, two others will circle around the area towards the archer's direction - one from each side - and it will be your task to take him down. Once you've found him, you should call the two guards who will be staying back here." He added, "Most archers aren't good with a sword anyway, but you'll still have numbers on your side - even assuming there are two or even three bandits there. And we know that there are nine bandits in total, so it's not likely that they would leave more than one or two of them here when they are going to attack the village."

Calubo and the three guards who were staying back nodded in reply.

"Follow me," Hudan ordered. "Try to move while crouching low for a few dozen yards so that even a stray arrow would be less likely to hit you, and then we will be free of that archer." And with that, the rest of the guards including the guard captain crouched low and started moving back slowly towards the village, and once they were a little distance away, they started running towards the village under raid.

Immediately, the archer - who must have heard the sound of their running footsteps - started shooting in their direction, but while most of the arrows must have missed, Calubo heard one of the running guards shout in pain - likely because he was stuck. He had no way to know if it was a light wound or a fatal one, but he had to trust that Hudan and others would do their task - including taking care of the injured guard.

For now, he had to take down the bandit archer. He opened his mouth to give orders to the still remaining guards, but then he paused, being uncertain if they would even listen to him now.

But he shook his head. This wasn't the time to have self doubts. He knew these men. He had worked as a guard right next to them for many years. He had to make this work.

Looking at the guard who was standing next to him, Calubo said, "I'll go towards the archer from the left." Pointing at the other two guards who were hiding behind another nearby tree, he said, "One of you will go towards him from the right."

At the guards' nod, he added, "The newbies back at the manor don't have any fighting experience, so we have to do our best to hurry up, since they will need our help in the village."

The other guards nodded in acceptance.

Although he wasn't feeling confident inside, when Calubo looked at the determined faces of the other guards, he knew that he was back with his brothers. He was back at his home.

He gave a confident smile to them. "Let's go! We have a bandit to kill!"

\*\*\*\*\*

~ Kivamus ~

~ Barons' Manor ~

It had been a while since Hudan had left with the guards, and although Kivamus wasn't expecting him to return back and say that all the bandits had already been dealt with, he was still getting more and more worried with each passing minute. Growing up in a world where people were accustomed to getting minute by minute updates of everything - including wars taking place on the other side of the planet - it felt very difficult for him to do nothing except to just... wait.

If only Hudan had a modern helmet providing a live camera feed to him... He snorted. They were a long, long, way away from that, if they ever reached such a level of technology in this world at all.

Earlier, he had told Madam Helga and her kids to stay inside of the manor house for now - along with Clarisa, who already spent more time in the kitchen here, than in the servants' hall outside. So for now, Duvas, Gorsazo and he were sitting in the manor hall along with them, while waiting for someone to bring news. Any news.

Suddenly, the outer door of the hall opened, and a guard came running inside, his face white with fear.

"Milord... there is... there is..." he tried to speak, but he looked so out of breath that he struggled to form words. After a moment, he took a deep breath, and reported, "Milord! There is a bandit raid in the village! They are already here!"

"How?" Madam Helga asked while standing up from her chair in surprise. "Hadn't Hudan gone to deal with them?"

Gorsazo, whose face rarely showed any expression, also had a tinge of fear on his face now. "It means Hudan is out chasing shadows now, while we just have the new guards to protect the manor right now."

"May the Goddess protect us..." Duvas prayed while looking upwards.

Thinking quickly, Kivamus ordered the guard, "Tell someone to blow the horn immediately. We need to let Hudan know that the bandits are already here."

The guard nodded, and just as he was going to speak, they heard the sound of a horn blowing from somewhere in the manor. Well, at least that was taken care of. As he thought about what to do now, Lucem's fearful voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Will the bandits kill us, ma?" Lucem asked with wide eyes, while Clarisa was clutching Syryne in fear.

Kivamus didn't know what to say for a moment, then he tried to reassure the kids, all of whom were looking scared now. "Don't worry, Lucem. Fero is still here, and so are Kerel and the other guards. We even have three archers on top of the manor house to protect us. Don't worry, nothing will happen to us."

Lucem looked reluctant to accept it, while Clarisa still hadn't spoken a word.

Kivamus was also quite worried now, and while the manor hall had always felt safe to him, he felt confined within the room right now. He knew that if he left the safety of the manor house, many of the guards wouldn't be able to fight the bandits properly - in case they really did breach the walls of the manor - since they would only try to protect him after that. But he still didn't want to keep sitting here without any idea of what was happening outside. It was making him even more agitated than he already was.

Suddenly, he was craving to breathe the fresh albeit cold air of the roof. Thinking about it for a moment, he said to Lucem who was still looking scared, "Tell you what, do you want to see the archers on the roof?"

Discover more stories at [empire](#)

Taking their mind away from the thoughts of impending death should be helpful for both of them. He knew that it would still leave him exposed, but it was still much safer than going outside of the manor house. And this way he would still be able to see what was happening.

Lucem hesitated, but after looking at his mother for a moment, he gave a slow nod.

"Good." Kivamus looked at the guard who had given the report. "Go outside now and help the other guards to defend the manor."

The guard nodded and immediately ran outside with his hands on the sheath of his sword.

Kivamus followed him to the outer door, and after locking it, he barred it with an iron rod from the inside. Before going towards the stairs, he asked others in the room to see if anyone else wanted to follow him to the roof, but most of them didn't want to leave the safety of the hall. Duvas didn't want to come since he did not like to climb stairs at his age unless he really had to, while Madam Helga wanted to keep an eye on Syryne and Clarisa. That meant it would be just Gorsazo and Lucem along with him.

He tilted his head towards the stairs while looking at them. "Let's go then."

Chapter 129. Fear

Soon, they reached the roof of the manor house, and seeing that there were three archers standing on three sides of the roof with their bows ready in their hands, he walked towards the man who was facing the western gates of the manor, which was also the location of the feast. While it was completely dark in most places, the area outside the gates was still well lit by a few burning braziers. It was also quite cold here, but at least it wasn't windy right now.

As he reached closer to the man, he realized that it was Yufim - one of the new guards with a very accurate aim - who had tied his long blonde hair in a knot behind him.

"Do you see that man?" he whispered to Lucem.

Lucem nodded, while Yufim gazed back towards them after hearing their voices.

"He is one of our best archers," Kivamus said to Lucem in a low voice, "and he can even shoot a flying raven accurately from two hundred yards away!"

"Really?" Lucem asked with huge eyes. "He can do that?"

Yufim started to say something in response, but Kivamus gestured to him not to say anything with a wink.

"Yes, he really can!"

"I wish I could do that as well!" Lucem spoke in a wistful voice.

Discover more stories at [empire](#)

"You can do it too," Kivamus replied, "but only if you practice a lot."

Lucem looked delighted to hear that, with his eyes looking somewhere in the distance - perhaps daydreaming about the time when he would be able to do that as well.

Kivamus smiled after seeing that. At least the kid didn't look so scared anymore. He gently guided Lucem towards one of the nearby railings at the edge of the roof, and spoke in a whisper as if he was sharing a secret. "You can start practicing for it right now. Just keep an eye outside in this direction, and if you see any bandits, just let one of the guards here know about it. Can you do that?"

Lucem nodded excitedly. "Leave it to me! Nobody will be able to hide from my eyes!"

"Perfect!" Kivamus patted his back with a smile, and walked back towards Yufim, where Gorsazo was also waiting.

Before he could say anything, Yufim protested, "I never claimed that I could shoot a raven from that far, milord! Nobody can do that!"

"I know," Kivamus said with a laugh. "But I needed to give a purpose to Lucem to take his mind away from the thoughts of bandits coming to kill him and his family."

Yufim gave a sober nod at the mention of bandits.

"How is it going?" Kivamus asked the young archer.

"Can't really tell from here, milord," Yufim replied while looking back toward the manor gates where a few people were still keeping an eye on the children. "Feroy had just told us to be ready to shoot down any bandits if we see them nearby." He turned back towards Kivamus, "But shouldn't you be inside now, milord?"

Kivamus exhaled. "I didn't want to stay cooped up inside when you all are doing your best to defeat the bandits."

Yufim looked surprised to hear that, but he nodded with a smile, and turned back to keep an eye outwards.

For a moment, Kivamus wasn't sure what to do now, since he didn't want to keep talking with the archer and distract him from his duty. But he certainly didn't want to return back to the manor hall so soon. So after telling Gorsazo about it, he walked to an unoccupied side of the roof and took a position there to keep watch for any bandits rushing towards the manor. It was the least he could do to help the guards.

It had been a while since the horn was blown, which meant that Hudan would already know about the attack on the village. For now, he just hoped that the guard captain would return back along with the other guards soon to take care of the bandits before they did too much damage.

\*\*\*\*\*

~ Kigeir ~

~ Outside the gates of the Baron's Manor ~

~ A short time before the blowing of the horn ~

The feast was nearly over now, and Kigeir was glad that he had gotten to eat so many fancy things. And for free! That was the thing which mattered the most for a merchant like him.

He looked at the kids who were still eating, probably on their third or fourth helpings - since the baron had allowed them to eat as much as they wanted. He had thought about taking his family back home after the children had gotten to eat a third time so they wouldn't get a stomach ache, but when the kids - especially the youngest two - begged him with their overjoyed expressions to remain there for another helping of food, he hadn't been able to stop them. He snorted. It wasn't like he was paying for it himself, and if the baron wanted to feed the children so much, who was he to stop him?

The rest of them had been waiting for the children to finish eating, and by now it seemed like they were mostly done. He was thinking about telling them again that they had to leave now, when the gates of the manor opened and a guard with a small beard and a serious expression came outside.

Kigeir kept looking at the guard with curiosity, and saw that the guard went to one of the maids and whispered something in her ear. The maid looked shocked for a moment, before she controlled her expression and put a smile again for the children who were waiting in line to get food once again. But Kigeir could easily see that it was a forced smile.

And soon, he saw that the same guard muttered something in the ears of the other maids and servants as well, and he saw the same shocked expression on their faces as well. Or was it a panicked expression? After hearing whatever the guard was saying to them, they all had become tense for a moment, before they forcefully relaxed their faces.

Kigeir had no idea what could cause that, but then he saw that the maids who were serving the food until now, started to cover the wooden buckets, and began telling something to the children who were waiting in line. Although the maids were speaking to the children with a smiling face, he could easily see that the smile didn't have any joy in it. Not anymore.

Before long, he saw Elsie, Maisy and the two boys returning back towards him with a dejected expression. He thought of asking them what was wrong, when Elsie spoke for the group.

"There is no more food, papa..." she said in a depressed voice.

"The maids told us that we had eaten all the food - so they had to take back the buckets now," Maisy added as well. "But..." she hesitated as she spoke, "but I'm sure I saw that some of the soup was still remaining."

Kigeir frowned after hearing that. Why would the maids close down the stalls so abruptly, especially when there was food still remaining? It wasn't likely that the baron suddenly decided to be a miser after he had spent so much to feed all the village for free. Something wasn't right here.

"Didn't you all already eat enough though?" His older son Leif asked the kids with a laugh. "It's good that they stopped you, or all of you would be complaining about a tummy ache later."

"But I wanted to eat more..." Elsie whined. "I'm still hungry..."

"If the maids still have some soup remaining with them," his wife said, "should I ask them if we can take some of it to our home? Otherwise that food would probably get wasted anyway."

Kigeir thought about it for a moment, then addressed everyone in his family, including Maisy and Timmy. "No, forget about the food," he replied. "Something doesn't feel right. Let's return back to our home now."

"But papa..." Elsie whined again, while Leif frowned but didn't say anything.

"No, Elsie," Kigeir said to his daughter. "You have eaten enough for tonight. Let's go now," he said to everyone in his family.

And with that, all of them started trudging back towards their home, some of them happily - since they had gotten to eat a feast for the first time in their lives, and some of them reluctantly - since they hadn't gotten to eat even more.

Just before exiting the mostly empty area of the feast, he noticed that while the servants and guards had already started hauling the buckets and tables back inside the gates of the manor, most of the remaining people had also started taking their children back towards their homes now. That worried him even more, since it wasn't just him who was getting a bad feeling about this.

They kept walking through the dark streets with quick steps, and reached the market square of the village - where a single burning brazier was still lit - bathing the wooden houses surrounding the square in a flickering yellow light. A few stragglers had stopped there to warm their hands before they returned to their homes, but other than that, the market square was nearly empty at this time. Kigeir's home was

located in a side street nearby, but as his family walked through the market square, he heard a commotion on the opposite side of the square.

Looking there, he was startled to see two men in fur coats entering the square from a side street there. For a moment, he thought that they were the manor guards on their nightly patrol - which was a new, but very welcome thing for the villagers - but then he remembered that the guards didn't wear fur coats, unless the baron had somehow gotten enough coin to buy such fur coats for all his guards?

While his brain was still thinking about it, he saw those men raise their naked swords in the air, and with a roar, they started running towards the men who were standing near the braziers.

And suddenly, he realized with a tremble that those weren't guards at all. They were bandits! The village was being raided by bandits again! His eyes widened in fear as the horrific images of the last time a raid had happened flashed in his mind. The burning houses, the sobbing children, and a grave fear for his life...

Immediately he screamed at his family, "Run! Run back to our home!"

Chapter 130. Playing Soyent Without Any Cards?

Then Kigeir picked up the two youngest children in his arms - who had started to cry by now - and ignoring the pain in his bad knee, he started trotting towards his home as fast as he could, his wife following just behind him. Looking back, he confirmed that his older son had understood the situation as well, and after holding the girls' hands in his own, Leif had started running as well, the three of them quickly overtaking him.

Although his heart was beating so fast he feared it would jump out of his chest, Kigeir was still glad that he had found out about this attack sooner than most people, so hopefully he'd be able to reach his home soon and keep his family safe.

While it was supposed to be nearly freezing right now, somehow he didn't feel the cold at all. At some point, he even heard the sound of horns being played from somewhere - probably as a warning of the bandit raid to the rest of the village.

As he turned into the side street towards his home, he noticed that the light of the brazier - which had been shining on the blonde hairs of Leif and Elsie - suddenly got extinguished. He wanted to look back into the market square to see what had happened, but he knew he didn't have the time to stop running.

Before long, in the light of the moon which was still hiding behind the now ever-present clouds, he was able to see his home just a few dozen yards ahead of them. He was going to thank the Goddess that they had gotten away from the bandits, when two huge men in fur coats emerged from a side alley right in front of them - preventing them from reaching their home.

It didn't take more than a moment for Kigeir to realize that they were bandits - with unsheathed swords held high in their hands. With the two youngest children bawling loudly in his arms, along with the whimper of the girls hiding behind his wife and Leif, he shivered in fear of their lives. May the Goddess save his family now, because he certainly had no way to fight those bandits.

\*\*\*\*\*

~ Tesyb ~

~ Somewhere near Tiranat ~

They all had been running towards the village as fast as they could, hoping they reached the village before the bandits killed someone. Although one of them had even gotten an arrow in his arm when leaving the other guards near the bandit archer, but thankfully the wound was not in the guard's leg, so after putting a piece of cloth to tie his arm to stop the blood, the guard had been told to go directly to the manor, since he wouldn't be of any use in a fight for a while.

Soon, they reached the edge of the village - where the longhouses were being constructed, and Hudan gestured all of them to stop for a moment. Although it wasn't windy anyway, all that running had easily warmed up his body, making the nearly freezing weather seem irrelevant.

"Now listen to me carefully," the guard captain began. "We've left four guards back there and one of us already got injured and had to leave - that means only nine of us are here now. But one bandit is already dead and at least one of their archers is also back there, which means there would be at most eight bandits in the village right now. So while it won't be easy for us anymore, we can still take them down!"

The other guards gave confident nods in reply to that, but Tesyb wasn't feeling confident at all. The rest of them were veteran guards, and they had been doing this for years by now, but he used to be just a coal miner a couple of months ago! While he knew by now from his regular practices with other guards

that he was good with a sword, would he really be able to go against a real bandit? Would he really be able to take a man's life? He was also getting worried about his parents, who lived at the western edge of the village. What if the bandits attacked that part of Tiranat?

But Hudan's next words brought his mind back to the present. The guard captain was looking directly at Tesyb. "Don't worry, lad, I know you have it in you. Just do what you've been doing in the training and the Goddess will take care of the rest."

Tesyb gave a hesitant nod. "I'll do my best."

"That's what I like to hear!" Hudan added, "Now we don't know where all the bandits are, but they want to loot as much as possible, so they will certainly be spread out. So here's what we'll do. We are going to break into four groups - each of two men - while I'll go alone."

He pointed at four guards before speaking. "The first group will circle around the village from our left - which is the east - and the second group will go around from our right - that's towards the west. Your target is to look for any bandits who are trying to loot the houses at the edge of the village - and that's where they are most likely to be, since that would make it easier for them to run away at the end. That's why I am giving both of our horns to these two groups, so you can blow the horn to call for help from the other guards in case you find more than two men against you."

Once the selected four guards had nodded, Hudan pointed at four other guards including Tesyb. "The last two groups of two men, as well as I, will run straight into the village. Since it's unlikely that the bandits would have gone into the middle of the village in bigger numbers, your task is to quickly look for any lone bandits - and to move on as soon as you can after taking care of them. And of course, if a horn is blown from the edge of the village, the closest group will go to help them, while the rest of us will continue taking care of these pests."

"Now do you all understand what you have to do?" the guard captain asked. Once the rest of the guards nodded, he gave a savage grin. "Then let's go and send these bastards to the Goddess for daring to attack our homes!"

"For Lord Kivamus!" one of the guards shouted a rallying call.

For a moment, Tesyb and the others were surprised, but then they looked at each other's faces for a moment, and grinned. It was the new baron who had given faith to the villagers that they'd be able to survive the winter - even after they had lost all hope in the recent months. Lord Kivamus was the one who treated the commoners as humans - instead of like nodor dung stuck to his boots - completely opposite to what the other nobles did. He was the one who had made everything possible and given them hope for a bright future. So of course, they were fighting to protect him and his ideals. They were fighting for him!

"For Lord Kivamus!" he and the others shouted their new war cry as well. And with that, they divided into five groups, and each of them ran towards their allotted areas to eliminate the bandits.

As Tesyb entered the village along with another guard and started running between the houses, he wished that he was the one allotted to go towards the western edge of the village, so he could go towards his home and protect his parents from the bandits. Could he do that even now? Hudan wouldn't really find out anyway, as long as he told the other guard some make-believe reason, right?

But then he forcefully put that thought away from his mind. Just like Hudan was trusting him to do his job, he also had to trust the rest of the guards that they would do their jobs properly - including those who were going towards the west side of the village.

Glancing at the guard running next to him for a moment, he nodded to himself. He trusted the other guards. They were his brothers now. And his parents will be safe. They would make sure of it. And then, he kept running between the houses, hoping to test his newfound sword fighting skills soon.

\*\*\*\*\*

~ Calubo ~

~ Somewhere in the forests surrounding Tiranat ~

Calubo had been moving slowly and silently towards the left of the location where the archer was supposed to be hiding - trusting the other guard to be moving towards him from the right. The two guards back near the body of the fatso had been told to move around and make lots of sounds there, to hopefully make the archer keep thinking that all the guards were still there.

Before leaving, for a while he was thinking that there were more than one archers here, since he had felt that some of the arrows were coming from a different direction. But after thinking about it, he had realized that it was likely just a single archer who was changing his position again and again, to make them think that there were more bandits here than there actually were.

It made sense too, since the bandits would have wanted to take most of their men to the village to loot even more grain. That meant they might be able to take care of the lone archer sooner than they thought.

Truthfully, he didn't even know if he would be the one to find the archer, or the other guard. But he prayed to the goddess that it was him, since it would give him a chance to get even with these bastards for nearly starving him and others at the quarry while making them work them to the bone.

As he came closer to the location that he had last seen the arrows coming from - assuming he really was coming closer, since it was hard to tell in the night - he saw a wide fedarus tree. So he crouched even lower, and very slowly, moved behind the tree, trying not to make any sound. He did hope that the archer hadn't seen him on his way here, but he couldn't be sure about anything now.

After giving a moment to catch his breath, he slowly bent his neck around the tree to see if he could observe the archer from there, but there was nothing ahead of him - apart from even more trees and a few small shrubs further ahead.

Did that mean the archer had changed his position again? Dammit! How was he going to find him again from here?

He was thinking about leaving his current position and circling around once again from the north, but just to satisfy his curiosity, he decided to stick his neck around the fedarus tree again. And right at that moment, he jerked back as an arrow whistled very close to his ear, making him fall down in surprise. But he quickly got on all fours, and scrambled to get his whole body behind the cover of the tree again.

The archer was still here!

Even though he tried to breathe deeply a few times to calm his wildly beating heart, it took a while for him to start thinking properly again. He realized that his sword had also fallen down from his hands in that terrifying moment, but thankfully, its hilt was still within the cover of the wide fedarus tree, so he

swiftly pulled his sword back and held it close to his body, like it was the only thing standing between him and a raging adzee.

This meant that he wasn't wrong in gauging the bandit's position, after all. But now that the archer had seen him for sure, it would be stupid to stay in the same place for long.

He stood up again with his sword in his hand, and once he had located a nearby tree with a good cover, he quickly jumped ahead and rolled to a position behind that tree. Immediately, an arrow passed right through the position he had been just a moment ago.

Dammit! Just how many arrows did the archer have? Discover more content at [empire](#)

He exhaled again, and once he was ready, he repeated the same thing, and got cover behind another tree. Thank the goddess for the forests! He didn't know how else he could have moved closer to the archer if there was just empty ground between them.

And then, again and again, he did the same thing, and kept moving closer to the archer, with an arrow passing close to him nearly every time. It was risky, and it felt scary, but there was no other way to get closer to the archer. And as long as there was a good distance between them, it would be like the archer holding all the Soyent cards in his hands. And nobody wanted to play Soyent without any cards, did they?

This time, he had gotten cover behind a relatively narrow tree, so after thinking about it for a moment, he stuck his sword to the left side of the tree, and quickly moved his neck to see from the other side. As expected, the archer shot an arrow towards the side where his sword was, narrowly missing it, but his head remained safe.

And within that single moment, he glimpsed movement behind those shrubs he had seen earlier. He had found the archer!