

Londoner 74

Chapter 74. Raiding Plans

Calubo gave a reluctant nod, but didn't say anything while he ate what little remained of the meat.

Soon, he heard some heated voices from the bandits. They seemed to be arguing furiously amongst themselves, their voices raised in a fierce debate about something. Nokozal, a huge grizzled man with a scar that ran from his temple to his chin and a big beard which was starting to get streaks of gray in it, seemed to be staring at the fire, while the other bandits bickered agitatedly.

Calubo tried to listen to what they were arguing about, but only caught snippets of it. As he strained his ears, he heard one of the bandits protesting, "But the baron told us to...", but Nokozal immediately glared towards that man and hissed, "Shut up! This is my decision and it's final." The other bandits grumbled for a while after that, but eventually became quiet.

Once Nokozal saw that none of the other bandits was opposing him, he stood up along with the other bandits and walked towards the stonemasons, who had been looking towards them in curiosity. He put his hands on his waist, while the other bandits stood next to him, and announced, "Listen up, you freeloaders. On my previous trip to Cinran, I met someone from Torhan's group in an alehouse, and guess what he told me?" Without waiting for any response, he continued, "Once he was drunk enough, he told me that they raided the village of Tiranat a couple of weeks ago, which means they..."

Calubo stood up in surprise, and immediately asked, "What do you mean the village was raided?"

Nokozal laughed loudly. "I meant exactly what I said. Once Torhan's group heard that the village was unprotected, with its baron and many of his guards dead in an ambush a while ago, they went on a raid all that way across the forest, and stole all the grain from the village and burned half the houses when escaping."

"There are children in that village, you bastard!" Calubo yelled with outrage on hearing that half the village was burnt. With many of their guards dead, it had hardly any protection right now, and lowlifes like these bandits wouldn't hesitate once about killing anyone. He wondered if Nurobo and others were okay now.

Nokozal laughed again. "And what am I supposed to do about it?" The bandit leader looked at him with mirth in his eyes. "Why? Do you wanna try running to that village again?"

Calubo stared at him with hate, and started to retort but the bandit chief interrupted him.

"Now shut up! I have listened to your whining long enough," Nokozal growled. "At least that sleazy bastard Torhan has a clay mine to get an income, while you bastards do nothing and are just freeloading."

One of the women spoke up in response. "We still work all day! But we can't cut any limestone before we empty the quarry from its water logging, you know that!"

Nokozal glared at her. "Quiet, you old crone! I'm not here to listen to your excuses." He looked at all of the stone cutters gathered around the fire. "It's been a couple of weeks since that raid, so more merchants will likely be visiting Tiranat soon once they hear that the village needs more grain to survive the winter. Although..." he scratched at his long beard, "I have heard that merchants are rarely traveling to that cursed village these days, because of a fear of getting ambushed, so I think it's more likely that Tiranat itself might send a caravan to Cinran. Either way, it's a good opportunity for us to get some grain for free."

Calubo was seething inside to hear that this cheap bastard wanted to steal grain from those who really needed it, instead of spending any coin to buy it. But he really should have expected it, knowing how Nokozal had already turned to kidnapping to get more stone cutters, instead of buying slaves by spending gold crowns. However, he tried his best not to show his anger at this plan on his face, or he would get another beating for sure.

Hearing that news seemed to bring some relief into some of the stonecutters, even though they knew what it meant. But when you didn't get enough to eat, stealing from others didn't seem as bad to those who were starving. However, he noticed that some of them, including Hyola, had clenched their fists in anger, even though nobody had the courage to oppose the bandit chief.

Nokozal tilted his head and continued, "That means some of us will be away from here for at least a few days. I am telling you all about this to warn you that if even one of you thinks that it's a good opportunity to run away because of a shortage of guards and tries to escape from here, I'll break that person's leg and give a beating to every single one of you, even if others didn't try to run. So it is up to you all to prevent any fools from getting any silly ideas in their minds and getting you all beaten in return."

He turned to the bandits around him, and pointed with both hands to himself as he gloated. "This is where the brilliance of Lord Nokozal shines. Since we don't know from where the village will buy grain from, I'll make two groups, one to scout on the road connecting Tiranat to Cinran, and the other on the road connecting Tiranat to Kirnos."

"But milord," another bandit said, "Kirnos might not even have enough grain to sell to Tiranat, while Cinran - which is a big town - certainly would. Shouldn't we just send scouts on that road?"

"And what if the road connecting Tiranat to Cinran is already blocked by snow?" Nokozal grunted. "That road is quite close to the mountains, as you know well, while the other road is always open, so Kirnos might be the only option for them if the road to Cinran is blocked by now."

The other bandits nodded in acceptance of the logic.

Calubo really wanted an opportunity to escape from this place and warn the village, but the consequences of getting caught were dire. He kept his face calm despite the anger he was feeling, and listened as the bandit chief continued, not caring that the rest of the stonecutters were also listening.

One of the other bandits asked, "Lord Nokozal, can we take horses with us? We can reach there faster with them. Otherwise it will take us at least a day of travel, or maybe even longer to reach those roads."

Nokozal put his arms on his waist as he seemed to think about it. "We only have three horses with us, so both of the groups can't possibly get two horses to ride there. That means you will have to walk to the scouting locations anyway. So I'll keep one horse here, to keep it fresh, and each group will get one horse. If either of the group finds any tracks of any caravan passing recently, then one of you will ride hard here to the quarry to report to me. Then I'll send someone on that fresh horse to bring the other scout group back and then we'll ambush the caravan. With most of their guards already dead with their baron, I'd say they can only afford to send a couple of guards out of the village to escort the caravan at most, which means they should be easy pickings for us, as long as we can spot them in time."

One of the other bandits asked, "Lord Nokozal, what if any tracks we see are those of a caravan having already returned back? What if they don't travel again?"

Nokozal grunted, "That's a big village with hundreds of people, so they will need more than one trip to get enough grain to feed them through the winter, assuming they have money left at all for multiple

trips. And any caravan that travels in one direction will have to return back to the village. So we should get our chance. Even though we were late in getting this news, it's still our best hope of getting enough grain before the winter." He pointed at three of the bandits and said, "You all will go to the road in the south going to Kirnos." He pointed at two others, "And you both will go east on the road connecting that village to Cinran. "

Calubo was simmering inside, and quickly tried to think of something to sidetrack Nokozal's plans, "I don't think the village has enough coin left to send a caravan to buy grain anyway. I was going to Cinran with the last of our coin when you kidnapped me. You are just wasting your time by doing this."

Nokozal turned around and glared at him. "Shut up! You have been using that mouth of yours too much and not doing enough work here." He stared at him for a moment before speaking, "You know what, you have been lazing around here for long enough. Now you need to earn your keep as well, so you will also go with others to the eastern road and keep an eye for any tracks of a caravan." He gloated, "This will be a good lesson for you to see what the mighty Nokozal can do to your former village."

He turned to the other guards who were going to the road connecting the village to Cinran, and said smugly, "If Calubo tries to escape at all, you have my permission to beat him thoroughly and break an arm of his." The other bandits smirked while looking at him.

Calubo was seething inside, but he still kept his mouth shut, otherwise he would get that beating right now. He was worried about Tiranat losing what little hope they had of getting enough grain to survive the winter. He didn't know if Mr Duvas even had enough gold crowns remaining to send a caravan. For a moment a thought came in his mind that Nokozal had given him a good opportunity to escape, but then he crushed that thought immediately. Those bandits were ruthless and they would be keeping an eye on him continuously.

And even if he somehow managed to escape from them, the retribution that Nokozal would give to the other stone cutters would be fierce. He didn't want to see Hyola and others getting beaten up in retaliation, which Nokozal was sure to do in response to anyone running away. The people here were already malnourished and barely got anything to eat. If any of them got injured or sick on top of that, they likely wouldn't survive the winter.

Calubo prayed that the bandits wouldn't find the caravan in time - if there was such a caravan at all. He also hoped that it would be well protected enough so that even if the bandits somehow managed to find it, it would be safe enough. Or at least he prayed to the Goddess that it would be, since he already knew how few guards were left in the manor to send with any caravan.

Nokozal gave the final order, "Be ready to leave before dawn tomorrow."

The five bandits nodded at the bandit chief and walked back towards their burning fire.