

Londoner 90

Chapter 90. Surveillance

~ Calubo ~

~ Somewhere on the road between Tiranat and Cinran ~

They had been waiting on that bluff for more than a day by now but there was still no sight of any caravan coming or going on the road. The weather kept getting colder but they couldn't even light a fire here since it could be seen from far away in the darkness. He cursed Nokozal for kidnapping him, he cursed the weather for being so cold, and he cursed the runt and the fatso for keeping him here. He cursed his inability to run away, because of the consequences it would lead to for Hyola and others at the quarry. He even started to curse himself for starting to care about her, but then stopped himself. Even before he had been captured by the bandits, his life hadn't been easy back in Tiranat, and meeting her had been a beacon of hope for him in his dreary life. And yet, he couldn't stop blaming Nokozal for everything. Damn it all!

It was late evening, and it was starting to get a little dark now. All of them had been lying at the top of the bluff, with just the top of their heads visible from outside while keeping an eye on the desolate road. It was hardly a road though. Maybe calling it a path going through the forest would be more accurate. All it had was a track of flattened grass.

"Do you think there is a caravan coming at all?" The runt asked the fatso while scratching his back.

"Hell if I know," the fatso shrugged, as he turned a little to get more comfortable at the top of the bluff. "I can't just wish for a caravan to appear out of nowhere."

"Still, we haven't seen even a single rider coming or going from here," the runt replied. "At this rate we would have to return empty handed, and I don't want to be the one to give bad news to the chief." He turned his head towards Calubo. "Hey, you have been far too quiet. What do you think? Is a caravan coming any time soon?"

"How the hell would I know!" Calubo retorted. "You know that I haven't left the quarry for weeks now." He pointed at one of his hands which was still tied with a rope connected to a hand of the fatso. "It's not like I can go to the village to get any information."

"But you must still know something!" the runt asked again, his breath visible in front of him in the cold.

Calubo shrugged. "Like I told Nokoza the last time he asked, I don't think the village has any coin left at all after that raid from uh... Torhan's group." He added, "If they still had any coin... I'd say they would be able to send a single rider at most, not a full caravan."

The runt squinted at him for a moment. "You don't seem to be lying, but that's a whole village. They have to have something left. Hmm... I still think..."

Suddenly the fatso hissed, "Shut up, both of you! I see something."

"What? Where?" The runt asked in a low voice.

The fatso pointed towards the north. "There!" he whispered. "It is getting dark now, but there is still enough light to see it."

"I don't see anything..." the runt squinted as he looked towards the north, while Calubo did the same.

"Just stay quiet and keep watching," the fatso rebuked him. "We don't want them to get even a hint that we are here." After the runt nodded, the fatso looked at Calubo. "You! Don't you even think about shouting for help, or you know what the chief will do to the stonecutters and that girl you fancy!"

Calubo seethed inside but managed to hold his tongue somehow. Gritting his teeth, he gave a reluctant nod and they hunkered down further to keep an eye on the road without being visible from outside.

Soon, Calubo saw it as well. At first it looked like a single wagon with two horses pulling it. But slowly as the wagon came closer, he saw another wagon behind it, and another behind that one and so on. Slowly the wagons kept coming closer, and he counted a total of eight wagons in the caravan! He was surprised that there was even a single wagon coming here, but a whole caravan? And a caravan this big at that? As he kept looking, he saw that all of the wagons had an oil cloth covering them, so he didn't know what they were carrying, but knowing everything, that had to be grain - and a lot of it!

"Damn!" the runt grunted. "That's a really big loot!" He glared at Calubo. "So you were lying, after all!"

"Shut up," Calubo retorted back. "I told you I've been out of the village for weeks now. How would I know anything about it?"

"Be quiet, dammit!" The fatso said angrily. "Not one more word until they are far away!"

As the wagons started to pass in front of them, their axles creaking on the otherwise silent road, he counted the wagon drivers - and there were a total of fourteen of them driving the eight wagons. No, they weren't just drivers! Except a portly man, all of the rest of them had a sword with them. Some even had spears and bows! They looked like well trained guards, not just hired wagon drivers! The last he remembered, the manor barely had a dozen guards left at the time he had left to buy grain from Cinran. Where did that many guards even come from?

"Damn... Did the village really have that many trained guards with them?" the runt whispered.

"Of course they did," Calubo replied with a faked grin. He had no idea how a dozen guards were out of the village to escort a caravan, since Mr Duvas couldn't possibly have left the village undefended. Even so, he didn't want to give any reason to these bastards to ambush the caravan.

However, in the dying light of the recently set sun, he gazed at them carefully and slowly, he began to recognize some of them. There! Nurobo was there as well! He thanked the Goddess that he was still okay. And looking at his ever-bulging belly, it seemed that the manor wasn't quite at the brink of starvation yet. There were also other guards of the manor whom he recognized easily. However, there were many others who weren't guards at all! There was Tesyb, who was one of the young miners in the coal mines. He also recognized some others who were either miners or other common people from the village!

He frowned. Why would those people be here pretending to be guards? None of them had any training at all, and wouldn't last a minute in a fight with a bandit. However, as the runt cursed the presence of that many swordsmen in the caravan, he immediately realized that this was the exact reason those villagers were here dressed up as guards! It was a ruse to fool anyone who would want to ambush the caravan! They had even given leather armor and swords to those miners, even though they might not have held a sword in their lives ever before!

He laughed inwardly with nervousness. He had no idea who had thought of something so audacious, something so... so reckless! He was just glad that these bandits had no idea if those were real guards or

just pretenders. He would also have to do his best to talk up the defenses of the village - so that these bandits would give up on this plan to steal grain from the nearly starving villagers. It was bad enough that he couldn't return back with any grain and lost the gold coins to the bandits. But he still had to try his best, so the bandits wouldn't steal what little grain remained with the villagers.

Even so, he didn't think such a scheme could have been thought of by Mr Duvas. He wasn't a person who'd ever do something so reckless. And with the previous baron already dead, there was nobody else in the manor to give orders to him anyway. So who had thought of this elaborate ruse? And where did they even get the coin to hire that many wagons and buy that much grain?

Something must have changed in the village... He had no idea what it could be, but the village wouldn't be the same now - not anymore. Especially since they had someone there who had the coin as well as the audacity to do something like this! Moreover, all this couldn't have happened without the consent of Mr Duvas, and only the baron could give such orders to him. Did that mean Tiranat finally had a new Baron now...? It had to be! Who else could give such orders to Mr Duvas! He was getting very curious now. Was it someone from the court of Count Cinran?

Seeing that the new baron was spending so much of his coin to buy food for the villagers, he couldn't be a bad person, could he? This made him want to return back to the village even more! He smiled inwardly, making sure not to let his face show anything from outside. Let the bandits think that the caravan had a dozen swordsmen escorting it, and that the village had that many trained guards to send outside! Nokozal couldn't possibly think of ambushing that caravan now, even though Calubo himself had no idea if the caravan would go back for another journey to Cinran.

Slowly all the wagons moved ahead, and before long, they were out of their sights in the south.

The runt sat up finally, and glared at him. "You knew that the village had this many guards didn't you?"

Calubo grinned. "Indeed, like I have been telling Nokozal so many times! But it's not like any of you ever listened to me. It's pointless to try to attack them."

The fatso stared at him as well as he stood up, while pulling Calubo up as well using the rope. "I don't believe you. I don't think a small village would have that many guards. Did you even recognize anyone?"

"Of course I did," Calubo replied with a grin. "There was Nurobo the archer, and Tesyb the expert swordsman." To make the village seem even stronger, he added, "I have trained with those guards for years, even though I could never actually defeat them."

"Of course you couldn't defeat them, you can't fight for shit!" The runt snorted.

Calubo shrugged and looked away. He could hardly have defeated any of the bandits when they were trying to beat him in a group after the time he had tried to run away, when he had his own hands tied and without any weapon in his hands. Give him a good sword, and he would easily take on Nokozal one on one! However, he chose to keep his mouth shut. There was no point in trying to claim that he could fight better. All it would do was to get him another similar beating.

The fatso shook his head slowly. "I still don't believe you. Nokozal said that the village couldn't have that many guards."

The runt added, "Doesn't matter if they were guards of the village. Both of us saw that there were more than a dozen swordsmen guarding that caravan. They might very well be hired mercenaries, but in any case that village has a lot of men to defend themselves." He swore, "Damn it! I don't want to be the one to give Nokozal the bad news."

"But we still have to tell the chief about the caravan," the fatso said, and gestured at Calubo. "It's not like we can send him with the horse."

"I have to be the one to ride back, don't I?" The runt muttered. He looked up and down at the fatso. "The horse would die if you rode it that far anyway."

The fatso snorted. "Off you go, then. I will keep an eye on Calubo here." He scowled, "Don't know why Nokozal even sent him with us. He is a deadweight at best."

Calubo frowned, but kept his mouth shut.

The fatso continued while looking at the runt, "Try to ride fast. The earlier you report, the sooner the chief can decide what to do. We can't be sure if the caravan would go for another journey - especially since it seems like it would snow soon here, but if the village had enough coin to buy that much grain

and hire so many wagons, they might just have the coin for another trip. Still, even though I don't think the chief would want to ambush this caravan anymore, it is not our call. We have to give him the news as soon as we can, or it's our hides on the line."

The runt gave a reluctant nod, and moved to untie the horse which had been grazing on some grass nearby.

Soon, Calubo watched him ride away, as he returned back towards the top of the bluff along with the fatso. He didn't know what the future held for him, but at least those in the manor and other villagers wouldn't starve now, with that much grain going to Tiranat.

He just wished that he was back in his village, instead of with these damned bandits. He gazed at the fatso with the corner of his eyes. Could he...?