



Strategic Tale 12.1 (On forming alliances)

How about pooling our resources?

Marta Toral Heredia
Juan Uña García
Universidad de León

As the saying goes, "a year of snow, crops will grow". The winter of 1974 had been a snowy one. So much so that by April, the pastures in the mountains around Prioro in northern Spain were so verdant and lush that the flocks of sheep in the area would be able to graze right through until October.

Every day from early in the morning, the flocks belonging to Gaspar, Aurelio, Benito, and Argimiro were led out to graze until they returned home at nightfall. It was spring, and the lambing season had just begun. The shepherds would sell the lambs at the June festival, enabling them to pay for the pastures at the end of summer. However, despite the idyllic setting, surrounded by nature and amidst the fresh air, not everything was as simple as it seemed. The struggle for the best pastureland was constant, and the shepherds were always arguing over the land.

Argimiro was a greedy fellow, and although he had only just arrived in the village, he wanted the biggest and the best land for his sheep. Aurelio, on the other hand, was not greedy, and he was a highly respected member of the local community. The fact that a newcomer like Argimiro tried to impose his rules questioned his honour and his dignity, so he always stood his ground.

Benito, on the other hand, always backed off to keep the peace, to the point that he sometimes preferred to feed the flock grain from the barn when he returned from the fields rather than argue over whose animals should have the best grass. Last but not least, there was Gaspar, oh Gaspar! He was lazy and loved his bed, and his flock often remained in the pen because he fell asleep, and then the shepherd spent the afternoon playing cards.

One April day, Argimiro rose early to go to the spring at Teso Redondo, where the sheep could drink fresh water. In addition, that year it was surrounded by a



spectacular growth of rich, nutritious grass, perfect for the ewes to raise their lambs. Aurelio had the same idea. When they reached the main road, the two flocks bumped into each other and, among cries, shouting, and some scuffling, they fought until a young passer-by managed to separate them.

To avoid making matters worse, Aurelio gave in for once and headed for the El Picu meadow. It was a secluded spot, and he was sure his sheep would graze all morning without meeting anyone. Around noon, he saw how his sheep suddenly became startled and huddled together, and his two sheepdogs, Paco and Nena, started barking. That's when he saw the wolf. The animal, as the oldest and most cunning of the pack, prowled along the edge of the field so the dogs could see him; he appeared to be provoking them. And he succeeded. Paco and Nena went after him and chased him until Aurelio lost sight of them. Just at that moment, when he was left defenceless, he saw the main pack of younger wolves coming down the hill. When they left, they carried off four newborn lambs and a ewe pregnant with two.

As usual in spring, the weather suddenly changed, and a storm swept over the land. Aurelio waited until Paco and Nena returned exhausted and defeated. The flock, the dogs, and the shepherd returned home in the dark, in the middle of a raging storm, with such heavy rain that the road was no more than a blur. The animals were nervous and upset. After feeding them, Aurelio went in for supper, soaked and with a dejected look that said it all.

"What happened, Aurelio?" asked his wife, Mercedes.

"Another attack by the wolves." Four lambs and a pregnant ewe this time," said the shepherd, bowing his head.

"Another attack? There have been six so far this year, the damn wolves are stealing our future, we cannot continue like this!" Mercedes shouted angrily.

"What do you want me to do?" Tell me, what the heck do you want me to do, Mercedes? The dogs can't protect the whole flock, and I can't scare them off on my own. I can't take it anymore, if this goes on, I'll have to sell the flock and go down the mine," and slamming the door behind him, he went off to bed without uttering another word.

At dawn in Prioro the next morning, Aurelio could not get out of bed. The previous day's soaking had raised his temperature to almost 40 degrees. When Mercedes finished attending to him, he decided to take his lunch, the dogs, and his sheep out to graze. It was ten o'clock in the morning, and in the Osilga valley, he saw another flock grazing in the shade of the thousand-year-old oak trees. It was Gaspar's. After seven days, his sheep were finally able to roam out in the





open air. Mercedes decided to visit him, but just as she was going down the road, she saw Argimiro's flock heading in the same direction.

"Don't even think about going down there, that valley is mine, and it doesn't belong to you or to the lazy so-and-so lying on his back there", Argimiro shouted in a threatening voice.

"This grass belongs to everyone, and you're not going to bully me the way you do with my husband. If you don't want me here, you'll have to throw me out by force", Mercedes exclaimed in a firm and defiant tone.

Argimiro was surprised by the woman's reaction and, with a cocky smile on his face he chose to let her pass and head down to the meadow with Gaspar. When the three of them were having lunch, they heard a cry on the western slope. It was Benito asking for help. When the three shepherds reached him, the wolves had already left. Benito, in tears, was unable to comprehend how, in just a couple of weeks, half of his flock had disappeared.

"Benito, if it's any consolation, I've lost 25 sheep so far this month," Argimiro said, showing a degree of compassion that was unusual in him.

"Only?" Look, I don't go out much, but whenever I do, they always attack me, and I lose a sheep or two," Gaspar complained.

"But can't the dogs protect the flock?" Mercedes asked in amazement. The three shepherds laughed at her ignorance.

"Mercedes, not even three large mastiffs could protect the flock," Benito said in a tone of desperation.

"And what about twelve?" Mercedes asked.

"To feed twelve mastiffs, you'd have to sell all the sheep; it's not worth it," Gaspar replied sadly.

"I'm not saying that everyone should have twelve mastiffs. It would obviously be impossible to feed them. But I suggest buying three mastiffs each and going out together with our flocks. All our sheep can graze in the same meadows and our dogs can protect them. Each one of us will stay in our own patch, and it will be much more difficult for the wolves to attack us. And if they still come closer, they will be the ones to run off with their tails between their legs," Mercedes said convincingly.

"I think it's an excellent idea, so our sheep will always feed off the same grass, and there will be no arguments," Benito added.





"I'll have to get up early and get my act together, but I think it will keep the wolves at bay", Gaspar said resignedly. Argimiro, suspicious by nature, exclaimed:

"My sheep have to have the best grass, and yours don't."

"Well, that's up to you then, your sheep will have the best grass, but fewer and fewer of them will survive," Mercedes replied caustically.

Benito and Gaspar supported Mercedes, and between them they managed to convince Argimiro. They met in the village square the following Thursday at nine in the morning. That day, and as agreed, the four flocks came together as one, and accompanied by the twelve mastiffs they had just bought and the sheepdogs they already had, they set off for Vega full of expectation.

The day passed quietly until around four o'clock in the afternoon, when the sun began to sink in the sky, Benito's intuition and Argimiro's experience warned that the wolves were near. They put themselves on guard. As on other occasions, the alpha male appeared with the intention of distracting the sheepdogs, but only Gaspar's two border collies were lured away.

After a few minutes, the pack of young wolves came down to attack the flock, but they encountered the mastiffs. The wolves tried to intimidate them, but one of Benito's mastiffs took a chunk out of one of the assailants' backs, and they turned and fled, ending the attack.

The sheep were startled, but none had been harmed. Gaspar's two dogs returned, and it only took an exchange of complicit glances and satisfied smiles among the four shepherds to know that, from that day on, the flocks would graze together and return together. The arguments gave way to friendship, and they soon decided to enlarge the flock together and build new pens, and so it was that a few years later, they owned the largest flock of sheep in the mountains of that part of northern Spain.

Tale date: April 2023

More teaching resources at: www.querrasynavas.com/index_english.htm

