

## Londoner 72

### Chapter 72. Quarry

The guard captain announced, "Those recruits who had been selected to escort the caravan last time will stay here this time, and the rest of the new guards will accompany the caravan on the second trip."

Tesyb was upset to hear that now he wouldn't be able to tell Isuha about his father becoming a foreman, but the guard captain looked at him and spoke again.

"Tesyb and Yufim, the two of you will go this time as well since you both are decent enough in your own fields of combat, and we need to protect the caravan the best we can." Hudan continued, "So, those of you who are leaving tomorrow should rest now, so that you'll be ready to leave when the caravan leaves before dawn." He grinned at the other recruits who were staying back, "As for the rest of you, from tomorrow onwards it's your turn to get some much-needed training! Be ready to get your bones aching after the drills. And you also have to start guard duty from tonight itself so that those who are leaving tomorrow can rest for the night. Report to Kerel within the hour for that."

"We'll be ready to leave!" Yufim said excitedly.

After Hudan went back, Tesyb turned to the archer. "Why are you so happy?"

"This time I will go inside the Cinran town, for sure!" Yufim muttered, while tying up his long flaxen hair into a knot. "And you can't stop me from taking a swim in the Kal river this time!"

"I wasn't the one who stopped you, you idiot!" Tesyb retorted.

Ignoring him, Yufim kept muttering to himself, "And I will eat a lot of food inside the market place! There must be so many pretty girls in the town as well! And I will also visit the taverns there! And I will..."

Tesyb just chuckled and let the archer continue to daydream.

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~ Calubo ~

~ Somewhere in the forests southwest of Cinran ~

The chilly wind in the night howled through the crevices of the limestone quarry, carrying with it the scent of rotten eggs and decaying leaves. The huge quarry, which had been flooded after that spate of heavy rains and thunderstorms a month ago, now looked more like a pond than a quarry. It used to produce limestone blocks, which were transported to the towns and cities on wagons to be sold to the rich landowners and other nobles for construction of their mansions and walls, but since that flooding, nothing was being mined here. Their camp, nestled on a ledge within the cavernous hollow, was a makeshift affair of a few crude huts. With the ledge being lower than the surrounding ground, the towering trees of the vast forests surrounding them seemed to be reaching the skies from here.

After the heavy rains had flooded the quarry, which had led to the huts of the stonecutters on the pit of the quarry being submerged in water, they had to build makeshift huts on the narrow path which ran around the sides of the quarry sloping downwards in a circle. That collection of crude huts huddled together on a wide ledge on that slanting path was their only shelter in this desolate place. That is where the stonecutters, who were slaves owned by the chief of the quarry, along with the other guards had been living for the past month since the quarry pit was flooded. Although calling them guards might be too much, Calubo thought, since they were bandits in all but name, and so others had taken to calling them bandits when they weren't listening.

There was still a danger of wild beasts coming there in the night, but that ledge was only connected to the forest floor outside through that path connecting the forest to the pit of the quarry. Although they had barricaded that inclined path with fallen trees and branches, making it difficult for any animals to come down there, it was hardly reassuring when living in this vast forest full of dangerous beasts.

A flickering fire cast dancing shadows on the faces of the bandits sitting around it, their bawdy jokes and crude stories echoing through the night, while Calubo and the stonecutters sat huddled around another fire burning nearby. The night air was crisp and cold, but the fire provided at least some warmth in this weather, although their threadbare clothes certainly didn't help.

A deer, its carcass partially charred, was being cooked over the bandit's fire, the aroma of roasting meat mingling with the smoke. It was a rare meal of fresh meat for the hungry band, a luxury in the harsh reality of their lives. Usually, they all survived on fruits, berries and the small critters found in the vast forests surrounding them, which a few bandits and some stonecutters went to gather and catch every day. But today, they had been lucky to hunt a deer after many weeks, not that he thought that the stonecutters or him would get more than scraps, if that.

As he gazed at the quivering flames, Calubo's mind wandered to the past. Just a few weeks ago, he had been a guard in the baron's manor in Tiranat, his life a predictable routine of patrols and watch duties. But on that fateful day, when Mr Duvas had sent him to buy some grain from Cinran after the manor's grain stores had started to run dangerously low, a few bandits had surrounded him on the road. After telling him to hand over his dagger, sword and what little amount of gold crowns he had been given by the majordomo for the purchase, their grizzled leader Nokozal had given him two choices: to come with them quietly, or die.

As much as he hated bandits and slavers, it wasn't a difficult choice to make when he was heavily outnumbered. And so he had found himself with the rest of the stonecutters in this quarry, thus becoming the latest slave to be brought to the quarry by Nokozal. That greedy bastard didn't have a drop of noble blood in him, but he still called himself Lord Nokozal, though he was a bandit chief in all but name.

Life here was not easy. Nokozal kept gloating about his greatness any chance he got, and didn't trust the stonecutters one bit, while making them work like dogs everyday. But it wasn't like Calubo could do anything about it without access to any weapons himself. He had already tried running away once, but he had been caught within an hour by the bandits searching for him on their horses, along with a good beating to go with it. He had been warned that the next time he tried it, he would get a brand to mark him as a slave. Since then, he had been biding his time for a good chance to run away, or better yet, to put a dagger into the bastard's neck.

During his time here, he had found out more about this crew of bandits which ran the quarry, which was owned by a Baron named Zoricus. In fact, he had heard from others that Baron Zoricus owned huge tracts of lands in the west of Cinran, including a lot of these forests, and the land around this quarry was also owned by him. He had also found out that Nokozal was a known slaver in Cinran, and he used to go there regularly to buy new slaves whenever he needed more stonecutters here.

But due to the rising grain prices everywhere, the demand for limestone had dwindled to a trickle since the past year, and these days the quarry was barely able to sell any limestone at all. For the stonecutters, it meant that what little grain rations Nokozal used to bring for them from Cinran on his return trips after selling the stone blocks, had also stopped completely. And now the bandit chief sent a few bandits and stonecutters everyday to the forests to gather fruits and berries, and to hunt for small birds and rodents. That was their only source of food right now.

In the past few months Nokozal and his lackeys had also started to kidnap lone travelers from nearby roads so he wouldn't have to spend gold on buying new slaves, after every time that a stonecutter died

due to illness or from an accident, which he had found to be fairly common here. And that was how Calubo had become a new slave in the limestone quarry run by Nokozal, after living nearly all his life as a guard in the baron's manor in Tiranat.

Since the quarry had been flooded a month ago, the other stonecutters, and now Calubo too, had been spending all their days hauling water from the quarry pit to the forest outside, bucket by bucket. It was slow going, with the filled buckets needing to be stocked up on a wagon, and then pulled by the bandits' horses and two nodors to the forest outside, through the sloping path which ran along the sides of the quarry pit. Now the quarry was nearly dry again, and they would have to start cutting limestone blocks again soon.

Hyola, a young woman, who was probably the same age as his own early-twenties, also used to work as a stonecutter here, and she was one of the five women amongst them, out of the nearly two dozen slave stonecutters working here now. While the bandits numbered nearly a dozen, and they leered at the women every chance they got, at least the stonecutters were still numerous enough to prevent anything bad from happening to the women.

Hyola was sitting next to him on a log now, around the flickering fire of the stonecutters, as they ate parts of a small fruit they had been given today. She asked in a low voice, "Why do you think Nokozal's men have stopped going to raid any places these days? Isn't that what bandits like them are supposed to be doing? But other than his trip to Cinran every few weeks, they haven't been leaving this place at all."

"Who knows...," Calubo muttered. "They certainly know that we wouldn't miss an opportunity to run away from this Goddess-forsaken quarry if we get a chance, especially now that we are barely being fed these days. Maybe Nokozal is worried about that, so he doesn't want to leave this place with only a few men to watch over the rest of us."

"I don't know how a bastard like him wheedled his way into running a quarry," Hyola grumbled. She looked wistfully at the small fruit in her hands. "As much as I hated it, at least we used to get some grain and bread earlier, even if they were supplies stolen by these bastards from other people. But now that they have stopped going on raids, we barely get anything to eat."

Calubo shrugged. "It could very well be that any nearby farms located north of the forests have already been raided in the past few months. This quarry is located in the middle of these vast forests, you know, so it's not like he has easy pickings anywhere nearby. Certainly not these days, when nobody seems to have enough to eat."

He added, "I tried asking discreetly about it to one of his lackeys one day, but he never spoke anything about it. But it's true that Nokozal is not earning anything these days, so I'd say he has to be thinking of a raid soon."