

## Londoner 73

### Chapter 73. Recollections

"What would he even sell right now to earn more gold?" Hyola snorted. "We have only been trying to remove the water from the quarry for the past month, and haven't actually been able to cut any stone. So he doesn't even have any limestone to sell right now, even if there was any demand for it these days."

"And guess what?" she added sarcastically, "It doesn't even cost anything to him to keep the stonecutters here even if we aren't doing any mining, since it's not like they have to spend coins to pay us! Or to even feed us!"

Calubo shook his head, "You really should have taken that chance to escape in the past. You might have been living a good life today if you had left." She had told him earlier about a good opportunity a few months ago to run away from this place, when there were only a few bandits guarding the stonecutters that day.

Hyola looked with hateful eyes at the group of bandits sitting around the other fire nearby, while putting her hand on the small dagger hidden on her waist. "I do realize that! I don't even have any slave branding on me, so if I had left this Goddess-forsaken place at that time, I might even have found work in Kirnos or Cinran by now, instead of having to deal with the lecherous stares of those bastards every damned day. "

She turned her gaze towards some of the older stonecutters sitting around their fire, and looked at them fondly. "But they have been taking care of me since I was sold by my parents as a slave when I was just a child. These people are my real family now. That day, it wasn't possible for all of us to run away, and I couldn't just escape from this place by myself, only to leave them here to their own fates."

Hyola had told him in the past that many of the stonecutters here had been working in this place for decades, and most of them had been branded as slaves at one point or another, just like cattle. So even if they managed to escape to another town, it would be easily found out that they were escaped slaves and the consequences would be harsh, including cutting the limbs of some of them to set an example.

For many of the stonecutters here, it had been so long since they had been living at this quarry, that they had no other place to go anyway even if they managed to escape. All they could hope for was that, some day the situation would normalize, and the quarry would be able to sell limestone normally, and Nokozal would bring grains for them again.

Yet, Calubo didn't know how long the current state of the high grain prices would last, and if the quarry would be able to sell any limestone at all in the near future. Proper food had already become rare to everyone here in the past few months. What little they managed to gather and hunt from the forests was hardly enough to keep everyone fed, as the bandits took the biggest share of the food for themselves. And with the winter nearly here, the situation wasn't going to get any better.

Thinking about family, his thoughts drifted to Nurobo, his rotund cousin who had also been a guard in Tiranat. The thought of Nurobo, a gentle soul with his love for food and helping others who got injured, brought a wave of sadness to his heart. As he watched the fire, his mind was occupied with thoughts of his past life. He missed the security of the village, the familiar faces, the routine of his duties in the manor. How was little Clarisa now? Did the slave maid Leah get to meet with Cedoron again? Did everyone in the manor have enough food these days, or were they also close to starvation like the stonecutters here? He didn't know, and he had no way of finding out either...

He didn't belong in this quarry, he knew that. But escape seemed impossible from this place. Nokozal was ruthless, quick to dole out punishment if he suspected anyone of trying to escape. He had already seen Nokozal nearly beat to death one of the other stonecutters, when he thought that the man wasn't working hard enough to remove water from the quarry. He gave a sigh, while longing for the days when he wore the leather armor and sword of a manor guard, when his life had a sense of purpose and direction. He could only hope that one day, he would find a way to escape this dark world and return to a life of honesty and dignity.

The night was chilly, a harbinger of the approaching winter, and the constant wind in the cavernous hollow of the quarry didn't help. The stars were twinkling overhead, casting an ethereal glow on the forest. But despite the beauty of the night, he couldn't shake the feeling of dread that had settled in his heart. He was a prisoner in this place, even though he wasn't bound by chains. And he knew that his days were numbered here if he couldn't find a way to escape... whether he died by starvation or at the hands of bandits if he tried to escape again, it was only a small detail.

"What are you thinking of?" Hyola asked.

"Nothing really..." Calubo muttered. "Just random thoughts about life in Tiranat."

One of the bandits was cutting up the roasted meat of the deer now, to give it to other bandits sitting there. Once all of the bandits had more than enough meat in their bowls, they put a small portion of the deer in a bigger wooden plate, and gave it to a young stonecutter to share with the others... all two

dozen of them, from that single plate. When the young stonecutter who had gone to take the bowl from the bandits protested about it, he got punched in his stomach for his troubles. Immediately, others started to get up to defend him, but Nokozal told the bandit to stop, and let the man leave with that bowl, while warning the stonecutters not to complain about it or they wouldn't get even that much.

Slowly, others helped the young stonecutter to walk to their own fire, where they divided up the meat amongst themselves, and started to eat it. It was just a small portion for everyone, but even getting this much meat was a rare luxury for them. A few weeks ago, the stonecutters had tried to bring a rabbit for themselves while hiding it from the bandits, but somehow Nokozal had still found out, and he had beaten one of them enough that he still had trouble walking properly. After that time, the stonecutters had learned their lesson, and rarely complained about their small portions of food, as much as they hated it.

Even though winter was nearly here, none of the stonecutters had good enough clothing for the oncoming cold weather. The few crude fur coats that they had made from the animals killed in the past years, had only gone to the bandits. Now the bandits draped those blankets above their regular leather armor in the cold, along with their swords and daggers which they carried everywhere. The stonecutters had to make do with threadbare tunics, with just the fire to warm them. At least they had no shortage of wood here to burn for heating, or they would have frozen to death soon enough.

He looked at Hyola. "It's a strange thing, you know?"

"What do you mean?" she asked curiously, as she ate her own portion of meat.

"When I lived in Tiranat, I never really liked the place. We never had enough to eat there, and I often had to pull double shifts because of a shortage of guards in the past few months. Those days I was always dreaming of finding work as a guard in Cinran, so I could live in the big town instead of that poor village," he snorted, while looking at the little amount of meat in his bowl.

He gazed at the bandits merrily laughing around their own fire, and telling bawdy stories while getting second and third helpings of the well-roasted deer meat. "But now that I am here in this Goddess-forsaken place, I would do anything to go back to my life in Tiranat. I had friends there... I had family there too, if you count the fatso. And after the previous baron was killed, at least Mr Duvass made sure that everyone in the manor got a fair portion of the limited food we had. It wasn't like this place, where the bandits take everything we hunt and gather, and throw us the scraps."

"It must be a nice place," Hyola said wistfully. She had told him that she didn't even remember how a normal life as a free person used to be, since she had been a slave for nearly as long as she could remember.

"Truth be told," he mumbled while looking down at the ground, "and I am not proud to admit it, but when I was going to Cinran that day, I had thought about running away with the gold I had. I don't think I would have acted on that urge even if the bandits hadn't found me that day, but I can't deny that the thought did come in my mind. I guess the Goddess is punishing me for thinking about trying to abandon others in the manor who were depending on the grain I'd have brought... And after all, I couldn't return with the grain anyway..."

Hyola gazed at him for a moment, and put a hand above his own. "It's not like that, Calubo. The Goddess is forgiving, and she wouldn't punish you for just thinking about something bad." She continued, while looking at the other stonecutters, "Everyone has such thoughts, you know. Even though I consider some of the people here as my family, many times I have thought of running away to Kirnos or Cinran to find new work." She looked at him again. "But what matters is your real actions, and not just the thoughts you have. You didn't actually run away with the gold by your own choice. Getting captured by bandits wasn't something in your own control. The Goddess wouldn't punish you for that."

"What do you call this, then?" he muttered. "We barely get enough to eat here, and one of us is beaten nearly every day. If this isn't Goddess' punishment, then what is?"

"I don't know, Calubo, I don't know..." Hyola muttered. "All I can say is that she must have some plans for us. It is not for us mortals to know about that in advance. We can just pray to her that she wouldn't leave us in our current situation."