

Londoner 95

Chapter 95. Hyola

~ Hyola ~

~ The Limestone Quarry, somewhere southwest of Cinran ~

It was the morning of another cold day, and she and the other stonecutters were going to start today's work. They were walking towards the pit of the quarry with buckets in their hands, to remove the small amount of water that still remained there. One of them was riding in a wagon with two nodors pulling it, so that they could put the buckets filled with water on that wagon before he took the buckets to throw the water outside in the forest.

She gazed towards the east, even though all she could see was the towering leafless trees right now. It had already been a few days since the scouts of bandits had gone away from the quarry and without getting any more news, she was getting worried about Calubo now. Even though she had only known him for a few weeks, they had somehow become very good friends in that short time. She just prayed to the Goddess that some of the Count's knights who patrolled the major roads didn't get to them, since it wouldn't end well for Calubo either, even if he was not there by choice.

She sighed, and shook her head to rid herself of those thoughts. Thinking negatively wouldn't make the outcome positive anyway. Nokozal, who was supervising them, started to shout at them to start working instead of wasting time, so she took her bucket and dipped it in the nearly freezing water, and took it to the waiting wagon. As she turned back after putting the full bucket on it and picking up another empty one, she heard a commotion towards the path which led from the quarry pit to the forest outside. Looking there, she saw that it was one of the bandits who had gone to scout the roads. He was riding his horse hard, and soon he reached near them to report to Nokozal.

She slowed down her walk to listen to what they were saying.

"Millord! We found it, we found a caravan on the road going from Tiranat to Cinran!" the bandit reported, out of breath. "I rode nearly all day yesterday to get this news as quickly as I could to you, although I still had to stop for the night since I couldn't reach here before it got too dark to ride a horse in the forest."

She scoffed on hearing the bandit address Nokozaal as 'milord.' Like he was some noble! But she continued hearing carefully, to see if there was any news of Calubo.

"Doesn't matter, since I was right!" Nokozaal gloated at the other bandits who had gathered nearby. "See, that's the genius of Lord Nokozaal! I knew there was going to be a caravan after all!" He looked back at the bandit who had come on horse. "But why are you so late? I thought you would be back yesterday."

"We did see some tracks on the road there, but the ground was very dry, so we couldn't be sure if those were recent tracks," the bandit replied. "I didn't want to report back unless we were sure, so we waited for another day to see if there really was a caravan, and we got lucky and saw a line of wagons going south."

"Tell me the details," Nokozaal grunted. "How many wagons? I hope there were many!"

"It was a caravan of eight wagons going south towards that village," the bandit answered with a grin.

"Eight wagons!" Nokozaal exclaimed. "I can already see us getting rich! I don't think they could have had more than a couple of guards though, right?"

The bandit seemed to grimace for a moment, before he added, "Actually, we counted a total of fourteen men guarding the caravan."

Hyola felt a quiet satisfaction on hearing that. The number of guards being that high would mean the bandits couldn't try to ambush that caravan, which means Calubo should be safe now. She stayed nearby to keep hearing further, hoping Nokozaal didn't notice her dawdling.

"What? That's impossible!" Nokozaal barked. "A small village like Tiranat couldn't possibly have that many guards to spare to accompany a caravan, unless they leave the village completely undefended!" He growled as he glared at the bandit, "Can you even count to fourteen?"

The bandit flinched. "I sure can, milord! And I counted them twice!" He added, "Apart from a portly middle aged man who didn't have any visible weapons with him, the rest of the men all had swords. Some even had spears and bows! They all looked like experienced fighters to me."

"I don't believe it!" NokozaI snapped with a scowl. "I don't think that village could even have that many swordsmen in total, otherwise Torhan's group wouldn't have had such an easy time raiding that village a few weeks ago."

He added, "Eight hired drivers for eight wagons I could understand, but they are all well-armed men? And fourteen men at that, not just eight?" He glared at the bandit again. "Were you drunk? Or did you steal from my stash of ale again? Since that's the only reason I can think - because you couldn't even count properly! Because you were drunk again!"

"We didn't take any ale with us, milord, and I am not lying!" the bandit protested. "But I don't know if they were guards of the village itself. They might very well be hired mercenaries from Cinran."

NokozaI grunted. "I don't think a small village would have enough coin to spare to hire a dozen mercenaries." After a moment of thought, he grinned. "I still don't believe that number, but it's good for us either way. If there is only a small number of guards with the caravan, we will ambush them on that road, and just in case you are right - which I still don't believe at all - it would mean that the village still has a lot of coin stashed away if they spent money to hire those mercenaries. So once the mercenaries return back to Cinran, we can raid the village itself and get the grain directly from there, since they wouldn't have enough guards to defend themselves if they had to hire mercenaries from outside to escort the caravan. It's a win-win for us either way."

The other bandit gave a nod. "I don't know if they will go on another trip to buy more grain though. It looked like it was going to snow soon on that road - since it is much closer to the mountains."

"You said they were going towards the village," NokozaI said, "which means most of the wagons and those mercenaries - if they really do exist - have to return back to Cinran anyway." He looked at the other bandits there. "So we will go there with all the men we can spare, and see it for ourselves. And depending on what we see, we will either raid that caravan - even if we just steal some horses from them, otherwise we will travel further to raid the village itself."

Hyola felt worried to hear that they will raid anyway, which means they might make Calubo fight along with them too.

NokozaI looked at another bandit. "You take the fresh horse, and ride fast to the south, and return back with the three men who are scouting there. They already have a horse with them, so the four of you can

ride back on the two horses themselves, instead of walking here. It will take nearly a full day for you to reach there and another day back, so I expect all of you to return before tomorrow evening. We will leave immediately after that towards the eastern road on foot." He looked back to the bandit who had come back on the horse. "You rest for now, because you will have to come with us to show where the other two are staying on that eastern road. I will leave some other men here to keep an eye on the stonecutters while we are away."

"We'd have reached the eastern road by tomorrow if we had all our men here," one of the bandits grumbled. "These two extra days while we wait for others to return back are a complete waste... Who knows if there will even be a caravan when we reach there..."

"It's because someone had decided to send scouts on both the roads..." another bandit muttered. "And we don't even have enough men with us to ambush the caravan without them. It was a genius stroke of brilliance, milord!"

"Shut up, unless you want a beating!" Nokozal said with a scowl. "If we had sent all of them in a single place, and a caravan had gone on the other road, we would never have found out about them. This way we should still be able to catch the caravan on their journey back to Cinran." He glared at the stonecutters who had been listening from nearby. "Get back to work, you freeloaders, or there would be no food for you tonight!"

Grumbling under her breath, Hyola walked back towards the pit of the quarry with others, while dark thoughts about the safety of Calubo swirled in her mind. What if the bandits made him fight with them? Would he even agree to fight against the guards he had known for all his life? What if he denied Nokozal to fight the village guards? Wouldn't that bastard Nokozal beat Calubo then?

Or what if he did something worse? What if Nokozal just killed Calubo so that he wouldn't side with the villagers? She shook her head to try to clear her mind. It didn't work.

As she walked with other stonecutters to the pit of the quarry to fill the bucket with water again, horrible thoughts came to her mind. What if Calubo was already bleeding away somewhere in the forest, as the other bandits who had gone with him just laughed at the dying man?

She gazed back at the bandit chief with hatred in her eyes. What had she done to deserve this fate? Why did she have to be sold as a slave? Why did that bastard have to capture Calubo and bring him here, which only led to her caring so much about him? As a slave she couldn't afford to care about anyone, when she didn't even know how her own future would turn out to be... Couldn't she have been born

with the fate of living her life as a free person? Couldn't she have been born in the Tiranat village, where she could have lived a happy life with Calubo?

With watery eyes, she dipped her bucket in the water to fill it again before putting it on the waiting wagon, and then picked up another empty bucket from there. As she walked back towards the water, she looked at the cloudy sky. It wouldn't be long before it started to snow. It was already so cold, and without the stonecutters getting much food, at least some of them would surely freeze to death in the winter. She blinked her eyes furiously to stop tears from flowing. What had she done to deserve this fate?

She just stood there for a while, being unable to find the energy to start working again, when an older woman noticed her as she was bringing her own empty bucket. Walking towards Hyola she patted her back.

"Don't worry, child," the older woman said in a calming voice. "I know what must be going on in your mind - we have all been there at some point. But you have to trust the Goddess that she would take care of us. We wouldn't have survived this long without her blessing after all."

Wiping her eyes, Hyola gave a slow nod. The older woman was right. She had to keep faith in the Goddess.

It was the Goddess who had let her meet a kind soul like Calubo in this dreary place. She had to keep faith that the Goddess wouldn't tear them apart so soon. Giving a weak smile, she used the nearly freezing water to wash her face and thanked the woman.

She nodded to herself, trying to gather her courage. She had to keep faith in the Goddess, especially in these dark times. She didn't know what the future held for her, but she would trust that the Goddess would give them a way out of this situation, somehow...

With renewed vigor, she dipped the bucket into the water again, filling it to the brim, and started walking back towards the wagon.