

THE QUARRY

Target Number One

Cassandra Thomson

‘You’ve got ten seconds to tell me where he is or I’ll blow your brains out...’

Wide-eyed and mouth agape, his body shakes under my grip. All colour drains from his face as he collides with the brick wall. The loaded gun at the side of his head doesn’t stop him from spitting ancient Russian profanities, trying to pry his way out of my hold. He isn’t a very tall man, maybe a little smaller than me—around five foot six—but he is no match for me.

‘K, it’s nearly sunrise.’ I hear Stokes behind me, shifting from one foot to the other. He is the anxious one out of us both; I learnt to turn my feelings off a long time ago. I look out towards the entrance of the dark alleyway; the sunrise is peeking across the downtown skyline. It has to be at least 5 am.

‘Sergei...’ I urge him, pressing the gun harder against his temple. The beat of his heart is rapid like wildfire against my arm; he swallows tightly but says nothing.

‘Ten...’

Nothing.

‘Nine. I’m not playing Sergei...’ Sergei thrashes around, but doesn’t break from my grip. He digs his nails deep into my forearm.

‘Eight...’

‘Seven...’

‘Six...’

Nothing.

‘Five...’ With every second my hand squeezes the base of this throat tighter. His face changes from a ghastly white to a deadly mix of yellow and blue. I wasn’t playing around when I said I would come back for him.

‘Fou—’

‘Okay, okay. I will tell you,’ he chokes out, body slumping as I release him.

He slides down the wall, whimpering. It looks like he hasn’t shaved in days, his usual five o’clock shadow is nothing but scruff. Kneeling down, I face Sergei for the first time since I found out the truth about his involvement with The Apex and the death of my parents. They say resources were at a dangerous low, and maybe they were but that’s not what killed them. Sergei splutters across the floor, his head drops. He is barely conscious but it is enough to get what I need.

‘Last... Last time I heard from him he was hiding in a warehouse downtown off the main street. The one made of steel... He’s been there for weeks.’ I let Sergei talk before gunshots ring through the early morning streets. One, two, three. His blood splashes like fireworks; across the crisp white of my blouse. Another shirt ruined. I stand in silence, biting my lip as I walk past Stokes. I tuck my gun away and call Suki on my watch. We enter the main street.

‘Suki, Target 470 is complete. Information on Target Number One is coming through now.’

‘Did you really have to kill him?’ Stokes asks, following closely behind. I feel something spark deep down as I tap the information into my watch. I frown at my thoughts. *Did I really have to kill him?* Is that even a question? I push every thought away as I swallow against the hard, growing lump in my throat. I focus on finding a storm drain along the broken concrete.

‘Of course, I did...’

Stokes nods. He isn't as into this job as the others, his father is one of the founders so he didn't have a choice like I did. I see his face change from the corner of my eye; something is off. He scowls one moment, expressionless the next. Knowing he's not the type to talk about himself, I choose to ignore it for now.

The streets are empty for a Friday morning but I don't mind. Minute by minute the sun makes its journey into the sky and over us, warming up our surroundings. The polar caps had melted years ago, sending the sea level up like those crazy scientists predicted. Most summer days like these averaged 55 degrees but somehow, we humans adapted and made do. If only those generations had believed back then. Maybe we wouldn't be in such a bad state now. For all of us that was history, but it didn't stop me from mourning a real free world. This free world is anything but.

'You okay?' I hear Stokes whisper as he links his fingers with mine, his eyes searching for something within my own. I nod with a small smile, urging to push on.

'Back to base we go.'

Stokes and I cross the street when I see a storm drain at the corner of a bread shop. The heavy, circular metal tops create a barrier between the surfaced world and ours. Stokes lifts the lid and hurries me to climb down, grunting at the weight in his hand. I climb down the ladder as he follows; step by step we enter the labyrinth that is our home. Since the end of the Earth almost three years ago, what was left of the human race had to learn how to survive in this new world. Most of us had taken shelter within the confines of the underground storm drains, rebuilding our lives with what we could as bombs and missiles flew above us on the surface. We were the lucky ones.

I hear Stokes slide the grate over the hole as I jump off the ladder and onto the concrete; separating us and them once more, bringing me back to my reality.

Leaning over the table, I place a red X against all the possible entrances to the warehouse on the drawn-out map. The dim lighting makes it hard to see, but I make do. We keep the lighting in here to a minimum; don't want or need outsiders snooping around like they do in this neighbourhood. The house is small but cosy; a perfect place for us to gather and work. Most

of their group work is criminal targets, mine is and always has been The Apex. It is purely personal in this case and I'm not afraid to admit it. There is no way I am going to let him slip through my fingers like he had so many times before.

I hear a beep from across the room, Suki's face pops up on my teleprompter. She had been created by a special team of ours not long ago, helping us gather intel on clients but she is so much more than a machine to me. She is more than the metal that made her. She too is a friend in this chaos.

'Hello Keely, I have some information that might be of assistance to you.' Void of all emotion, I hear Suki's fan kick in through the audio as she gathers everything within her chip.

'We have confirmation. The Apex has been sighted lurking the downtown streets. Sergei's information was correct,' I smile at Suki's face as I listen to her talk.

'Keely, he is watching you as much as you are watching him...'

'I'm sending you the specific address of where Target Number One is currently situated. Sources have seen him moving about inside the warehouse and on the outer surroundings. He has been alone for some time and from what I gathered in his phone conversations he will be for a while yet.' I take down the address and sign Suki off with a goodbye, trying to process everything. We haven't been this close to The Apex since 2033, one year ago to the day in the midst of the final days of the war.

It wasn't just the limited resources that were murdering people. Inside intel had told us there was talk of a "populous culling" post-war; too many people in the world and not enough resources to sustain us. They thought no one would ever find out the truth. The irony was The Apex murdered the people he deemed unfit for our world, we murdered those people involved with him.

'What's on your mind?' Stokes questions, bringing me out of that dark hole I find myself in. I feel him press his lips to the base of my neck, rubbing soft circles into my shoulders with his thumbs. I hadn't noticed that in between all the daydreaming and drowning in thought I had curled up on the table top, my head in my hands. Clammy palms rest in between my hair and my forehead, capturing the fever that slowly built up in me. I shake my head. Pushing myself away I tell him I'm fine, just tired. A generic response, but truth be told it feels like I haven't slept in months. I walk away and down the hall into the bathroom, needing some air and a little time to myself. I have been at this for hours, planning that is. I look back to see Stokes standing at the table looking over my work with a furrowed brow.

Locking myself in the bathroom, I lean against the sink and turn the tap on high. The water spritzes anywhere and everywhere, marking cool droplets against my skin, the floor and the mirror in front of me. The mirror wears the same expression I do; blank and heavy with deep circles around my eyes. The blonde curls of my hair sit in a bun on top of my head, dull and hidden away from the eyes of this world. I had changed hours ago, leaving the blood covered blouse lying next to the laundry basket in the corner of the room.

I feel as dark, as empty as the black singlet and leather jacket combination I am wearing but I have to suppress it, for now anyway. I have to believe. There is a job to be done and that's the worst part... I realise tonight is the night I would kill him or be killed.

'Are you ready?' I look to Stokes for some sort of reassurance that I am doing the right thing. Now that we are here, I am starting to second guess myself.

'I got your back, babe. Let's do this.' He smiles, urging me to push on. He rarely calls me babe, but when he does I feel something trigger deep within. I never acknowledge it. He is right, it is time.

We stand against the metal exterior of the warehouse; looking around for any sign of life. I hear Stokes say go, prompting me to turn and face the large metal door that would lead us into the warehouse. I pull out a butterfly knife, lodging it in the lock of the door and start to meddle with the fixtures. It isn't your typical lock and key. Minute by minute goes by, it isn't unlocking. I growl in frustration, starting to feel defeated.

'Come on K, you can do this.' I whisper to myself, taking out the knife and starting all over again.

'Let me do it.' Stokes says, slightly nudging me aside to play with the lock himself. I huff and fold my arms, still watching for any signs of movement around us. Not a moment later is the door unlocked; like he has done this before. Stokes, with a smirk on his face, urges the door open slightly in silence.

'Ladies first,' Stokes puts his arm out as he softly chuckles, noticing how sour I am. This is definitely not the time for laughing. He follows carefully as we step into the warehouse, feeling the cold air hit us and escape into the outside world.

The lights that hang above are scattered across the roof, barely lighting the empty space. The atmosphere is filled with a hundred shades of grey, concrete and metal. Looking around there is nothing in sight, nothing. Silence spreads through the space, the only thing heard is our shallow breaths. It looks like no one had been here in ages, the place is dead.

Almost.

‘Hello Keely, it’s nice to see you again,’ I hear his voice from behind me. I spin around to see the six foot two, dark haired, blue eyed man that ruined my life and many others standing only metres away.

‘I can’t say the same, Uncle Alex.’ I snort, clearly not prepared for him to show his face so soon. Alex Porter, The Apex. Once upon a time he was a true gentleman until power and control went to his head. Being blood never mattered to him.

‘Looks like you’ve seen a ghost.’ Alex looks at me and laughs, swirling the scotch glass in his hand; nonchalant at the excess liquor spilling over onto his sleeve. I watch the droplets fall from his skin and onto the concrete floor, staining the grey foundation beneath him.

Without a second thought I lunge for him; tackling his mid-section I take him down and pin him to the floor. His head slams against the concrete hard. He groans in pain. I take out my gun and click the safety lock, pressing the pistol hard between his eyes. His breathing harsh, he tries to fight but fails. I tuck his flailing arms under my leg, squeezing them between my thigh and my calf.

‘Give me one reason why I shouldn’t shoot you dead right here and now!’ I scream in his face, the adrenaline pumping through my bloodstream so hard I can feel it in my fingertips. I wrap my hands around his neck, pushing down on his trachea. He coughs and splutters, trying to throw me off his torso but doesn’t budge.

‘If you... If you k-kill me, you... you are dead. It’s... It’s that simple,’ Alex splutters out, slowly going limp underneath my touch.

‘I-I have eyes and... And ears e-everywhere.’ He cackles through a shallow whisper. I shake my head and laugh.

‘I think that’s a chance I am willing to take.’ Forcing the gun harder against his forehead, I didn’t give him the chance to speak another word as I ended him right there and then. Gunshots ring through the warehouse, his body stills under me. I watch him take his last,

shallow breath. His eyes roll to the back of his head as blood pools around him, staining his blue ensemble.

Harsh and heavy breaths shake me as I stand up, trembling; the shock almost pushes me back to the floor. Adrenaline surges hard and fast with every heartbeat. It's over.

Bang bang. I choke, gasping. I collapse in a surge of pain. Uncontrollable, writhing pain that spreads from my sternum in a cold flush. I press a hand to my chest, watching the red liquid fall from my fingertips. I turn, breathless, a cast of dimmed light shadowing a man's face as he stands over me in a blur. Stokes, it is Stokes.

'Nothing lasts forever, Keely.'