

# THE QUARRY

## The Rider

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Anya could hear the stars ringing in her ears. It had started the day the sun had disappeared, and the world became cloaked by the night. In the shadow of darkness Anya was alone and she witnessed as the world crumbled around her. Fear of running out of electricity, food, and water had driven the populace to madness. In the dark people changed and evil found them. Chaos erupted. It oozed through the streets.

With the sun gone the temperature had dropped drastically and snow and rain became the common climate. Plants had begun to wither, and the trees began to sigh. The squirrels that used to scurry across Central Park had all but disappeared. They, like the birds and the butterflies, were unable to survive the eternal winter that had descended upon the earth.

Anya had become a membership desk assistant at The Frick Museum shortly after moving to New York. However, three months after the sun had disappeared people had stopped coming to see the artworks in the museum. Slowly the other staff began to disappear as well. A month later Anya's apartment had been broken into and she decided to move into the museum.

Anya adjusted. She didn't have another choice. She let herself succumb to the ravenous city and its darkness. No one had wanted her skills as an artist. Art itself ceased to have any meaning as everyone in the city became consumed with themselves. So, Anya's fingers were used in other ways, for other forms of satisfaction. And the stars. They never let her forget it. They screamed in her ears from the moment she awoke, to the moment she slept. Constant reminders that everything had changed.

One night a disheveled man arrived at the doorstep. He was drunk and had mistaken her for a woman that he had paid to sleep with a few days before. Anya profusely explained to him that he had her mistaken for someone else and eventually he left her alone. Yet the encounter remained stuck in her mind. As Anya's money dwindled and her food supply became minimal the wad of money the man had held in his hand flashed constantly before her eyes.

A few weeks later Anya was out at the store again and had caught a man staring at her. She left the store and could sense him behind her. Anya stopped abruptly and spun around to face him. She demanded to know what he wanted. The man was taken aback. His golden hair fell across his face like tendrils and his blue eyes were bloodshot. He wanted to spend the night with her. The same anger that had filled Anya during the encounter with the man that had followed her rifled through her body again. But when he pulled out a stack of notes the anger slowly seemed to diminish. All Anya saw was the notes. She wasn't the kind of person that chased after money, but a little voice in the back of her mind reminded her that all she had left was a ten-dollar bill, three cans of beans, and a quarter of a loaf of bread. She had to survive. No matter how much she wanted things to be different, this was the world she lived in now, but it hadn't always been this way.

The field of orange tulips swayed in the sultry Portland four o'clock sunlight as Anya and Noah lay watching the clouds play in the sky. Anya hadn't known Noah for long, but in the four months since she had met him Anya knew nothing else.

'It's clearly a dragon,' said Noah pointing to a large white cloud. 'See it's even breathing fire.'

Anya screwed up her nose the way she always did when she was concentrating and gazed at the clouds. The sunlight had sprouted freckles on her nose. Noah looked at her and smiled.

'No,' she asserted. 'It's a phoenix.'

Anya shifted closer to Noah until their knees kissed. ‘See its wings are flapping as it flies towards the sun. It’s so beautiful.’

‘You’re beautiful,’ Noah whispered into Anya’s ears, like it was a secret he had kept buried in his chest. A secret she now knew. Anya’s eyes blinked away from the clouds and fixated on Noah’s. She saw the sky reflected in them. The phoenix touched the sun, but Anya only saw Noah’s eyes. She could see herself in them.

‘When I look at you...I would rather look at you than all the clouds in the sky. I would rather look at you than the stars perched next to the crescent moon, and the fluorescent tides at twilight. I would rather look at you than the bees buzzing around the trees, or the fireflies sneaking around the tendrils. When I look at you, I catch myself forgetting to look away.’

Anya watched as the man stood in his doorway and fumbled around for the money, he owed her. Like confetti, rain fell from the sky and drizzled as she waited. Anya didn’t mind because the sound of the rain hitting the corrugated roof above her mildly drowned out the ringing in her ears. He finally retrieved the sum required and handed it to Anya. Without a word he closed the door, and Anya turned back towards home.

She was tired. Anya had a few clients that day. Even though she wasn’t far from the gallery her legs were sore from being pressed up against her chest. The backs of her knees ached. Anya walked across the front lawn. Pools of mud and water had formed in the dead grass. It swam beneath her feet, it lapped at them. The door seemed so far away, but Anya trudged along. Her body sagged, and so did the sky.

Anya’s footsteps became smaller and her eyes began to groggily close shut. Suddenly, Anya felt something prod at her funny bone. The sensation jerked her awake. The brittle branch of the magnolia tree had stretched as far as it could until it touched the young woman. With all its strength the magnolia tree wrapped its branch around Anya like a blanket and lifted her until she was safely inside the gallery.

Once inside Anya collapsed onto her mattress in the West Gallery, like a puppet whose strings had been snipped. The emerald silk-velvet walls matched the carpet and wrapped around Anya, forming a comforting cocoon of green around her. The branch of the magnolia tree had slowly retreated into its trunk. The feat had left it breathless and the rain that currently fell upon it provided both the magnolia tree and Anya with relief. Anya’s sleepy mind could hear the rain become heavier outside. The thunder sang, and the lightning danced to the

thunder's boisterous voice. Through the cacophony the stars couldn't yell at Anya as loudly. All she could hear were their distant shrieks. That would do, Anya thought as she lay her head down onto the pillow.

Anya had stopped counting the nights. The men didn't mean anything to her, and she was nothing to them. Simply a bed to be slept in at night, when their wives weren't watching, or their appetites had been filled from stealing and killing. In the darkness Anya had no one, except for her paintings. Yes, she thought as sleep was on the precipice of hoodwinking her, they are mine now, for no one else will be.

The hum of the paintings gently sang Anya to sleep. The red, greens, and blues twittered and whirled around her as she began to sleep, and *The Polish Rider* descended from its position above Anya's mattress.

He removed his red fur lined *kuczma* from his head, letting his thick wavy brass hair flow as the mountain breathed behind him. His gaze remained dead ahead. His white tunic top had no crease despite the wind. The stallion he sat upon stood as still as statuary.

Anya sat staring. Her eyes were unable to remove themselves from him. Suddenly, his hand reached out. His palm was facing up and was pointed in her direction. Enthused by his arrival Anya's fatigued body got up and closed the small distance between herself and the rider. She let her hand hover over his. His gaze never once broke, but his hand remained unmoving and outstretched. The life lines engraved on his palm were a deep burgundy. Anya stepped back. She couldn't do it. She couldn't take his hand. She didn't deserve to go with him. Suddenly, the rider's arm snapped back into place and he spun his stallion around and galloped back through the frame.

Anya returned to the mattress and fell like crumpled autumn leaves into it. Even though Anya's thoughts were consumed by the rider's hands another thought entered her mind. When the rider had arrived, the ringing had stopped.

'If you could go anywhere in the world where would you go?'

Anya leaned back into Noah's chest. His arms wrapped around her.

'The Frick.'

'What is that?'

'It's an art gallery in New York.'

'And why would you go there?'

Noah absentmindedly played with Anya's hair. Like guitar strings he ran his fingers through her ebony strands.

'To see *The Polish Rider*.'

'You would travel all the way from Portland just to see a painting?'

'Mmmhmm.'

'What's so special about this painting?'

'It's believed to be of a soldier that defended his country against invasion. He stands tall even though he faces an enormous faceless danger. He is completely unfazed by fear as he sits upon his white stallion. The mountains behind him are bare and barren, and there's an esoteric building behind him. I've always thought it was a fortress. Somewhere he could go to escape whenever he did feel a little scared. There's dark, deep water surrounding him, and off in the distance there is a fire that burns.'

'It sounds like quite a painting.'

'It is. Can I tell you something?'

Noah's nose brushed up and down against Anya's hair, so she knew he was nodding.

'I'm so glad I haven't been to The Frick yet.'

'Why?'

Anya turned around so that her nose almost touched his.

'Because it means we can go together for the first time. And then you'll see that *The Polish Rider* wasn't unknown at all. The faceless painting has just one face, and it's yours.'

Bang.

Someone was knocking at the door.

Bang.

Anya walked to the front door of the gallery, uncertain of who was waiting on the other side.

Anya opened the heavily brandished oak door.

He stood in front of her. His once dark curly hair had been shaved so that there was only a thin layer of hair left. His scalp was scratched and bruised. There were scars on his left cheek, as if someone had attempted to claw off his face. His thin frame was engulfed by the tattered and torn brown trench coat that trailed behind him on the floor—muddied at the hems. But his eyes. They were the same. An unchanged blue. The same blue that used to be the sky.

Anya was about to say his name when he reached into his trench coat pocket and pulled out a scrunched-up handful of bills. He shoved it towards her. He didn't recognise her.

The rain had stopped.

Anya's ears rang.

Anya took his outstretched hand and placed it back beside him, his fingers still gripping the money. She took his other arm and led him inside. She led him past the West Gallery and into an upstairs bedroom.

Noah looked at Anya. The fire in his eyes exploded into the room. His chest lit up in the places that her fingers touched. The colour reflected the orange of the fire. Noah began to kiss Anya and she let him. He began to unbutton her dress. She let him. The fire spread across the room. She could see the figures in the artworks running as the flames began to engulf the room.

The ringing in Anya's ears transcended and deluged the room. It was as if a thousand alarms had gone off at once, and there was no switch she could flick to silence them. The ringing crescendoed. Anya barely registered Noah removing his shirt. All she could see was the stars that had descended upon the ceiling. The fire licking at them as they multiplied. Anya closed her eyes and lifted her hands to her ears. She pressed hard against them until it hurt.

Hours later Anya slipped out of the bed and sauntered down the staircase. She entered the West Gallery and stood in front of *The Polish Rider*. She thought of Noah's limp body in the bed above her. She didn't want to be a part of it anymore. Anya was buried under a weight she thought would keep her safe.

'I've been sleeping for so long, but now I'm more awake than I have ever been before.'

Anya lifted her hand and reached for that of the rider's. He leaned forward and took her hand, pulling her towards him.

There had always been a choice and she was choosing to leave. She wanted to be in the sunlight again, where she could be herself. Where her fingers could be used to paint again.

Anya was *The Polish Rider*. She unfroze from her stance upon the white stallion and removed her fur lined *kuczma*. Her long raven hair flowed as wildly as the wind that coursed through the dusty mountains behind her. The wind carried droplets of water from the lake through the air. Anya stuck her tongue out and let the droplets fall on her tongue. The subtle saltiness tanged on her tongue.

'Go.'

The stallion galloped through the mountains towards the fortress on the hill. However, she didn't stop to talk to the people gathered inside its sandstone walls.

Anya urged the stallion to gallop even further, and even faster until the fortress and its people, until the mountains and the lake, and until the world cloaked in night, had transformed into little blots of paint in her periphery. Rembrandt's brush strokes moved as Anya cantered towards the *Village Among Trees*.

White clouds danced above a brown cottage that was nestled in a clearing amongst green grass and variegated leaves of oak trees. The chirping of birds filled the air. Anya got down from the stallion and watched as it trotted away and started munching on some grass. Anya simply stood. She wiggled her toes, letting them feel the blades of grass rub in between them. The air she breathed in was fresh and smelt of roses. Anya looked up. The sun was blazing above her, and the cerulean sky gleamed down upon her. Anya smiled. The ringing in her ears had long gone.