

# THE QUARRY

## Beau and the Beast

Annie Tooby

The village was nearly deserted at this hour. He stopped and listened. The night was dark. The moon vacantly stared downward, the clouds like eyelids blocking out its glow. Those who were still outside immediately abandoned their nightly tasks for the security of their homes. They called him ‘the **Beast**’. They hated him. He was wild. He didn’t belong.

His gaze lay upon each of the inhabitants, for quiet as they were, the night was quieter, and his sensitive ears located every movement. He twitched at each closing door, his head snapping toward each sound. Suddenly he was still, focused on something different. A straggler, unaware of his presence. How foolish.

She stood at the foot of the town well and continued to scrub at a stubborn stain on an apron, water sloshing, fabric grating against washboard. A good distraction. He approached his prey. His eyes were wide, his movements slow and calculated. One foot ahead of the next. He was but twenty metres away when the splashing ceased, and the straggler turned to hang her washing. A scream escaped her lips as she caught sight of him.

She ran.

He chased.

Her apron lay crumpled and dirty on the ground.

The door shot out a gust of wind as it slammed in his face. He growled and trudged back to the centre of the village, moaning and whining. Pawing at the earth beneath him, he blew out puffs of air.

Sabre watched him from the safety of her armchair, rocking back and forth in time with the passing seconds. Like all others, the house was darkened as to not bring attention to its inhabitants. But he, of course, was a spectacle. Threatening at most but not deadly, she believed.

She watched as the **Beast** chased her neighbour. She heard the scream; a sound which seemed to send a collective shudder throughout the town. She saw him stomp away, moaning and whining, agitated by his failure. She turned to her pet and stroked its long hair. Its body curled contently in her lap. She had rocked it to sleep, its breathing steady. They were safe behind the locked door, no fear of it being opened.

The **Beast** had a mouth on him; a voice that could howl for hours on end and a jaw that chomped violently. But after many months of observation, Sabre had watched his wounds close and his need for attention open. A glance, a glare, a yell – anything. She had watched him play on it: lunging at those who shuddered at his presence, growling at others who yelled at him to stop. He would smile as they filled with rage.

The **Beast** howled, a jarring cry from his gut, that woke her pet with a start. The pet shrieked, and jumped out of her lap in shock, its lips pursed in discontent.

Shaking her head, she smiled at her pet. What a silly little thing.

Sabre rose from the rocking chair and made her way toward the window. From the other side of the glass, she saw the **Beast** stamp a frustrated circle of dirt between the houses, whining every few steps.

She couldn't just sit and watch any longer. She knew that there was once some good in him. She would find it.

She reached for the door, quickly looking back toward her pet and motioning at it to stay. Before pushing the door open, she took a quick, short breath. This would change everything.

It was rare that anyone was exposed to the cool night air after dark. It was too dangerous they thought. But the only fear Sabre had that night was of catching a cold.

The village was shrouded in darkness, the inhabitants tucked away in their homes and the moon, still oblivious to the goings-on of the night. Her warm breath was the only thing that stood out in the darkness, as it formed pale grey clouds in front of her eyes.

Her breath being like a target meant it didn't take long for the **Beast** to locate her. He charged at her, kicking up dirt as he slid to a stop in front of her face. His breathing heavy, eyes wide.

Sabre stood perfectly still for a moment. She watched his lips tremble, his eyes waver. These weren't the reactions of a **Beast**. Then, she gently reached out and stroked the hairs on his chin, ignoring the gnashing teeth and the bushy furrowed brow that shaded his narrowed eyes. She made contact.

He quietened for a second, confused. Not for such a long time had the **Beast** been touched like this, being more used to the violence and cruelty inflicted upon him by the inhabitants. Ever since the incident with Niabi. He could still see her lifeless eyes. Ever since they destroyed his home, his family. This kindness coming from one of them felt strange and foreign, yet it quenched a thirst he wasn't aware he had. The tension in his brow released, his lips quivering with the echo of a growl.

He stared into her eyes, his own bright blue reflecting in her brown gaze. There was something almost familiar about her – a defiant spark perhaps? Their breath coalesced into a larger cloud and the anger and fear drained from his body. Was this a change? Was there finally someone here to accept him? His mistrust began to dissipate.

But it was short lived. His body was torn away from hers with such force that, as he hit the adjacent house, he cracked a wooden panel in two. He staggered back to his feet, trying to shake away the pain.

'Stay away from her, **Beast**.'

The **Beast** heard the noises uttered by the attacker, but his only understanding lay in the violence enacted toward him. He located the one who had thrown him, his instincts returning

immediately. He bared his teeth and swayed his head from side to side, surveying his enemy. The attacker's ears were large. They hung low. They would be the **Beast**'s target.

A loud crack disrupted his focus. It came again, sparking like lightning. The attacker waved a whip-like object attached to his person, the leathery grey appendage lashing around like a vine in a windstorm. The **Beast** tried to retreat but found himself pinned against the wooden wall of the house.

'That's enough!' Sabre's voice sliced through the tension. 'Leave him alone.'

'He's a menace. Everyone is petrified of him. It's time he's culled. **Beast** no more.' The attacker yelled louder. '**Beast** no more.'

The inhabitants heard the hollering of the attacker and were drawn out from the safety of their homes. They amassed into a flock of bellowing aggressors. '**Beast** no more.'

It had only taken one monster to turn these timid beings into creatures.

'**Beast** no more!'

They collected around the **Beast**, a cage of bodies closing in and shutting the door.

His spine was on fire, his ears ringing, echoing their chants. He shrunk toward the ground. But just before he closed his eyes, he watched the one that was trying to help him shield her body across his. Her orange hair stood up on end.

In his own inflicted darkness, he remembered Niabi. That stare. Those dark doe eyes. They haunted him.

She had been unlike anything he had ever seen.

He had called her Niabi and, although he could not understand her, she seemed to refer to him as Beau. They had been friends. He used to come and visit her most afternoons in the field just out from the village. She liked the dandelions there, but just the fluffy white ones. She liked the way they smelt, the way they tasted. She could not pick them, so one day he collected a bunch of them for her. He searched the entire field for them. Only when he was

satisfied that he had them all, he wove a basket out of the tough grass so that she could carry them home around her neck.

But then winter came, the worst they had ever experienced. His family – they had been hungry. No longer did they have enough vegetation to feed off. The last of it lay frozen under the ice.

The inhabitants were hungry too. Both took from either side. The only food they could source was each other. The inhabitants killed his mother. His heart had frozen over along with everything else.

He was angry. He waited in the field for Niabi, tears crystallised as they ran down his cheeks. Being young, he didn't have much in the way of hair coverage and the snow cut right through to his skin. As much as he now detested the ones that lived with Niabi in her village, he could not bring himself to hate her.

Within the mounds of snow, he found a dandelion crystallised by the cold weather. He lifted the icy object from its glacial bed and tossed it from palm to palm. Quickly, he placed the flower behind his ear and brushed the snow beneath him aside, before replanting the dandelion back into the earth.

A light scattering of snow sprinkled onto his face. He looked up to see Niabi, who tilted her head, grunting softly. Despite the cold, he managed a chuckle and brushed the snow from his eyes. She made him feel more like himself again. He smiled, his cheeks twitching as they struggled to hold his lips up.

His stomach growled in pain. It had been some time since he'd eaten anything. He bit his lip, his teeth easily piercing through the hardened skin. He tasted blood. It was salty, warm, and his body began shaking in response. He looked up at her. Niabi blinked slowly and brushed her head into his shoulder.

If she was there, he knew that he would be alright.

Suddenly she fell away from him. Her eyes glassed over, two perfect, icy balls. On the ground, her legs were splayed out like a deformed compass. She was still. An arrow gored through her chest. She was a beautiful, bloody angel against a cloud of white. Her tawny coat now one of red and white.

Shrieks and yells echoed around him. Relief. Satisfaction. He felt none of it.

His family gathered around the corpse. It had been an easy kill for them. They reached for their meal. But he couldn't defend Niabi for long and his malnourished body eventually gave up. They were starving. They carried her above their heads, out of the field and beyond the trees.

He trudged behind them. His toes were numb, his fingers shaking, his mind blank. Numb. All he felt, was numbness.

As he reached his home, he saw that his family had laid her out on the ground as they assembled a fire. He knelt beside her and pressed his palm to the fur on her cheek. He wanted her to come back. He wanted his mother to come back. He was alone.

The dandelion back in the field had been broken in two.

He went hungry that night. He no longer belonged with these wild ones and, surely, he had no place in the village. He felt stationary in a spinning world, like the sun could awake but he still would be trapped in the night. The moon was nowhere in sight as he sat watching everyone else sleeping comfortably under the black sky.

It was then, in a moment of complete silence that the inhabitants attacked the family.

He ran.

They chased.

The screams of his family were frozen in the night air. The smell of blood and fear saturated his senses. Beau was the only one who escaped their wrath, or so he'd thought. An elder of the village hunted him down, pinning him against a tree.

'This is the last time your kind hurts ours. You **Beast**.'

He recognised the face. The stripes of orange and white, the eyes edged in black tear trails.

The elder grappled his paw to the **Beast**'s naked hand. The other paw ran a claw down the **Beast**'s cheek, slicing the skin.

'Dad! Stop!' a small voice growled.

The elder released the **Beast** and turned.

The **Beast** briefly took in the image of the similar orange creature from which the growl came. There was an innocence in her eyes, a pleading, much unlike what appeared in those of the elder. Now was his chance.

He used her distraction to escape, sliding down the icy trunk of the tree and running. His getaway echoed with the dominant cries of the inhabitants. No longer was he Beau, but a **Beast**.

‘**BEAST NO MORE!**’

The scar across the **Beast’s** cheek glinted in the candlelight. The splintered wood jutted into his back. He gritted his teeth and opened his eyes again. This was it. After too many years to count, they would finally do to him what they did to his family. They would take him, like they took his mother, like his family had taken Niabi. He had nothing left. Really, he wasn’t even sure why he was still alive.

The only thing standing in their way was an orange body spread out in front of the **Beast**. Her striped orange tail looped aggressively, and her ears, pinned to the back of her head, were threatening.

The inhabitants charged toward him.

She stood firm.

He felt helpless. He had no claws to scratch, no sharp canines to bite, no wings to fly away. He wasn’t really a beast; not like they were. He curled into a ball and sobbed.

Sabre launched herself at the crowd but was quickly thrown aside. The strength of the pack defeating the lone assailant.

The **Beast** could feel hot breath on his face, drool dribbling onto his head, and whiskers brushing his cheeks. He dared not look his fate in the eyes. He took in what he believed to be his last breath.

A loud bang disrupted the tension. A door thumped against its house and a body ran through the crowd. A collective breath of shock blew into the **Beast’s** face and yelling from the body sent the inhabitants running. One by one the inhabitants flew back into their homes until only the original attacker remained.

From between the fleeing bodies, the **Beast** saw her. Two legs, two arms, long blonde hair and pale skin. She was like him. A **child**, she was a **child**.

The attacker stamped his foot into the dirt, ready to charge. They ran toward each other, the **child** grabbing onto his long ears and swinging herself up to his face. From one side to next the attacker swayed as the **child** clambered from eye-to-eye, pulling lashes as she went. She slid down his long, whip-like nose, tugging and pushing him in every which way until, disoriented, the attacker retreated, dragging his battered body to his home.

As he watched the grey giant lumber away, Beau let his head rest against the wooden panel behind him, his taut muscles loosened. He sighed and the shaking of his hands slowed. He glanced up as he heard a purr from the other side of the street.

‘My Pet, you saved the day.’

The moon awoke, its light finally shining down on the village. He saw her. Her orange body radiant in the moon’s glow.

The **child** ran up to Beau’s saviour and gently reached for her orange tail.

She looked from the **child** to Beau, and softly chuckled.

**Beast**, no more.