

THE QUARRY

Welcome to the Jungle

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Rex's Tuesday morning went slow, but he enjoyed it, nonetheless. He woke up with the sun and went for a walk, always interested in all the new sights, sounds, and smells of the new day. He caught the train into the city instead of driving; he never invested in a car as he enjoyed being around people and saying good morning to anyone he sat next to. He'd stepped onto a quiet carriage once by accident, because he got distracted by a toy a mother was showing her cub and got some looks from the big cats when he tried to start conversation. The odd glare finally clued him in, but up until then he thought it was just because they were tired, considering they had heavy dark circles all around their eyes – perhaps the night shift.

Rex had been working as a paralegal for a few years now; he'd changed careers during a midlife crisis. Usually it's a boat or a car, but Rex wanted to challenge those old dog stereotypes, and he learned some new tricks. Rex saw the world in shades of grey, and he figured that's what big, scary law firms needed: the input of the everyday mutt, not just more of the pedigree; they already control the status quo. He was the only Great Dane in his finishing year. He sped through his retraining and quickly found a place at the best firm in the city. The law office culture was a shock though. He knew the stereotypes, but it really was like stepping into the jungle; the food chain hierarchy, the behaviour being truly animalistic.

After leaving the public service working as a tax agent, he wanted to help his community and stick up for the underdogs who always get trampled by the herd. Law was

how he was going to do it. It had been tricky, but he found his place alongside the spry young scamps at the top of their game in the courtroom.

Every morning when Rex got to work, he walked slowly through the building saying hello to all his colleagues, regardless of how close they were. He believed everyone deserved to have a smile on their face in the morning. Even the big sharks on the top floors would get a wide toothy grin, jowls dragged upwards.

The lunchroom was hectic, where people from all over the firm would gather at the closest watering hole to refuel for the rest of the day. Everyone sprinted to get to the coffee machine as quickly as possible. The biggest, tallest, strongest, got in first and got the best pickings. The freshest fruit and crispest water out of the fridge, and everyone else got the leftovers. Those in Rex's mature age group were the slowest to get there and were tied with the meek. Rex was scared they would get eaten alive by the sharp-tongued lawyers. They were always ready to run circles around anyone they saw any weakness in, slowly squeezing out any confidence. The new intern, Josie, had borne the brunt of this in the office for the last week. Rex had only seen her once in the lunchroom. He was passing by when he saw her trying to talk to people. Disappointed he couldn't stop by to help, he hurried to his meeting.

Josie had made it to the lunchroom first that day, ready to smile and greet everyone that walked in. Her sweet plan didn't quite work though, as most towered over her small stature and didn't even notice she was there. She hopped up onto a chair to elevate her chances of getting noticed, but despite her cheery hello's, no one heard her. She tried making eye contact as a different approach, but the simple fact of everyone else's eye level being far above her was an insurmountable obstacle. Finally, he scuttled Harold from IT; conversation was easier but still a challenge. He was quiet and about the same size, so Josie was able to keep up with him. But whenever he turned to grab a tissue, Josie had to hop back to avoid being skewered by his spines.

It really was a rude shock when Josie went to get a snack on that first day. With a big family, she was used to busy kitchens at mealtimes, but it was a little trickier when you're significantly smaller and more fragile than everyone else rushing around. Josie's small frame

and soft paws could get squished in any wrong move. It was quite the safety risk, so she just stood back and witnessed the melee. Heavy clip clops, huffs and snorts, grunts and munches filled her small ears as the swathes of employees fought for the freshest fruit and savoury treats. The loud chatter amongst friends and colleagues rose and fell as everyone grabbed their fix and made their way out to find somewhere to sit and graze.

When the coast was clear, she scampered in to get the last of the brewed coffee and sat down next to the only one left in the room: good old Rex. Josie's soft brown fur had flopped over her eyes, so she kept flicking her head to try to restore her sight. In between fur, she caught glimpses of the warm smile Rex was offering her. She could finally let out the breath she didn't realise she was holding in.

'What type of practice are you interested in?' he asked gently.

It took her a second to gather herself to answer.

'Family law. It's always been important to me. Got a big family. You know it's true, we really do breed like rabbits my grandma used to say.'

'Well that sounds lovely, and this place will give you a great start. And don't let anyone here get you down, they're all just big cuddly bears deep down, eh?' He offered her his muffin. 'I can't have the choc chip, so it's all yours.' Rex assured.

It was late on the Friday of her first week when Josie sat in on a meeting run by Leon Major, the associate partner of the firm, and a real pig. Every second sentence ended with a crude joke which was followed by his own snorting laugh, gaining the approving giggles from the inner circle who all worked on the top floor. They were like hyenas the way they milled around together and picked up any scraps Major deigned to throw them: a clan of greedy dogs.

Diligently taking notes, Josie didn't notice Major's beady little eyes fall upon her.

'Fresh meat,' a grunt got Major's attention.

'Well, gents, who do we have here?' His lips dragged up over his teeth into a snarl, encouraging the rest of the conference attendees to turn to Josie. She finally looked up and froze under all their gazes.

'Josephine, or Josie, my mum always liked Josie, I'm new, hello,' she managed to stutter out.

'Aw your mummy likes it?' a snide voice piped up, getting some snickers.

‘That’s not what your mum said last night!’ Another wave of taunting giggles washed over her, bringing her close to tears.

‘Wittle wabbit gonna cry?’ The quips kept coming, and in a futile effort to escape them, Josie slowly backed up into the corner of the room. She tried to negate the questions, but no sooner had she turned to one voice, another chimed in.

The sound of the glass door creaking open was masked by the many voices in the room, so Josie jumped when Rex’s grey head appeared in front of her. He barked at their vulturous behaviour, demanding they stop at once – they were scaring the poor girl!

‘Oh no, watch out! She’s got her guard dog! Wouldn’t want him to maul us or something, you know how aggressive this guy is!’ The howling continued, snorts, whinnies, and hisses, until a thunderous bark quietened them to whimpers. Josie stood there frozen, staring at Rex.

‘Well look who finally grew back a pair!’ Major pushed his way through the huddle and clapped a trotter on Rex’s shoulder. ‘We always like to see grit like that in these offices, keep that bark up and maybe you’ll get somewhere.’ He nodded his encouragement.

‘With all due respect, sir —’

‘And he lost it again!’ Major cracked to the conference room. Bored of their target, they all huddled again and returned to making each other laugh. Josie was left alone, still frozen in the corner.

‘You alright, dear?’ Rex approached slowly, as not to spook her. She slowly twitched her nose and scratched her ears as she came back to herself.

Rex guided her out of the conference room and started showing her down the corridor.

‘How have you been here so long? That was awful,’ a shake in her voice.

He made sure to slow down every so often so Josie’s little hops could keep up with his lanky strides.

‘They’re not that bad, you just have to get to know them. It’s all a front, I promise you. Once you figure out what they like, you can have a conversation with any of them,’

Stopping in front of a glass door, he nodded with his snout for Josie to look inside.

‘Take Bruce, he really is a great shark.’ They watched as he sat, swivelling in his chair, chatting on the phone. Absentmindedly he fiddled with a tiny basketball between his fins, and as he laughed at what was said into his ear, he threw the tiny ball into a tiny hoop stuck on the wall. Rex chuckled to himself at Josie’s shock as she stared at his giant smile showing rows of teeth.

‘Ask him about any sport and he’ll be happy to talk your ears off, he’s really good at golf too. If you ever see him around, just ask him about the game last night.’

‘Which game? I don’t really follow any sports, sorry.’

‘You won’t need to specify, there’s always something he’s watching, and he always loves venting about whatever the score was. Let’s keep going.’ They carried on down the corridor to stop in front of another office. It was dark with a bright lamp on the desk, illuminating an intricate miniature forest.

Rex’s voice lowered a little. ‘Remember Harold? He loves making models, any kind really. I’ve seen him do cars, armies, houses. At the moment it’s landscapes, I think this one’s the woodland his family is from in England.’

Josie hopped along with a renewed enthusiasm. ‘Who’s next?’

Rex took two steps to get beside her. ‘Geraldine.’ He smiled. ‘She’s really involved with charity work around the city, even volunteers at shelters on the weekends.’ The orange and black stripes made it look like Geraldine was pacing way too fast for the limited size of the square office, and Josie was worried she’d soon walk right into the wall.

‘Gerry’s tough, don’t get me wrong, but once she knows you work hard, she’ll have your back.’ Rex was nodding and his ears bobbed along, fondly remembering. ‘She’s helped me get out of a few tricky situations before, she just wants what’s best for our clients.’

‘So, everyone’s actually really nice then?’

Josie jumped when the office door clanged open as Geraldine stalked out. Josie tried a smile and a wave, but the black and orange was a blue before she knew it. Turning to Rex, Josie’s face was awash with naivety. Devastated, he had to crush it.

‘Well no, but you just need to figure out who to avoid. Come with me.’ He led her to the other side of the floor where the fluorescent lights flickered intermittently. Rex made sure to stay in front of Josie, easy since she hardly made it above his knee. He slowed and his steps became softer. She peered around his legs, whiskers twitching, wondering.

‘What is it?’ She was promptly hushed.

Spanning the length of the office, there were connected grey cubicles with feathery heads jutting up above the walls. They were facing away from them, sitting with excellent posture, staring at their computer screens.

‘Human resources. You need to watch out for these guys, they really give a hoot about the smallest thing.’

At the sound of voices, feathered heads spun around a near 200 degrees with unexpected ease. No one stood up or shuffled their chair, but unblinking eyes stared at Josie

and Rex. They were silent. When they were satisfied the noise had ceased, the unnerving reach of their eyes returned to their work. Eager to get out of ear and eye shot, Rex and Josie hurried back to the noisy side of the floor.

‘I know you’ve had a rough start to your time here but give it time.’ Rex guided Josie back to the lunchroom, empty before home time. He leaned up on the counter and found the last two muffins of the week.

Josie hopped up onto a chair, big enough for her to sprawl out exhausted. ‘It’s just tough when you’re the size of some of your colleague’s hands,’ she huffed.

‘It’s all about finding common ground.’ He chomped into his blueberry muffin. ‘Then you’ll have a friend in everyone around the firm.’ He offered her the chocolate one.

Monday morning rolled around far too quickly, as it always did. Josie was eager, and right away started using her new intel to spark conversations around the office. She even asked around for more hints on her colleague’s interest. This was a far more successful technique, having a topic to jump into right away instead of just her simple and sweet greeting. The hustle and bustle of the firm was far more accommodating of pointed chats over small talk. By Friday she nearly had it all down pat; only a keen nose would notice her clever plan.

Rex made his way to work on Friday morning with his trademark chipper attitude, greeting everyone he passed. He made a point to visit Josie that morning to check how she was getting along and was pleasantly surprised when he turned the corner. The usual empty corridor was buzzing with chatter – and not broken up with mocking sneers this time. As he padded closer, he could hear Bruce, of all animals, hammering on.

‘I was on the edge of my tank, I swear! And the ref, oh don’t get me started. It was a clear violation, but that absolute bonehead probably hasn’t seen a golf ball in his life!’

‘Tell me about it, he definitely wasn’t looking!’ a tiny voice piped up. ‘Hey, I’ll see you at lunch, we’ll talk about that other game of – uh, yeah see you then!’ Josie hopped out of the crowd over to a spiky ball waddling past Rex. ‘Harold, just who I wanted to see! I was just wondering which brand you’d recommend. I was planning on getting a model plane for my dad but there’s just so many to choose from!’ This stopped the old hedgehog in his tracks, astonished at such a clueless question.

‘Freedom Models, obviously. They use higher quality materials. If you go with any other brands, you really can’t be surprised if they just fall apart,’ Josie nodded along, feigning concern.

Rex watched, amused and really quite impressed. Hopping from one colleague to another, Josie started conversations more niche than the last, with the ease of someone who’d been working there for years. A thumbs up and a wink, and Rex was off to his office to start his day. She’d done her research. She’d be just fine.