

# THE QUARRY

*Amy*

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Amy awoke in a cold stupor. The hardest effort was to open her eyes the first time, when the dizziness was still letting her go. Something had pierced her thoughts, a pain growing, and now seemed to linger, bringing her head to sway like a bauble on a loose fitting. She blinked away crusts of sleep, let her eyes adjust to the dark.

This was nowhere, everywhere. Somewhere cold. At first all sleep-addled, she thought she'd landed in a void, some mystical realm robbed of the reality of colour. Then she eyed bright, square patches somewhere to her right, beyond in the river of black. Underneath them a table, below that still a haze and cloud of lime smoke, receding.

Already she missed the sky, the gentle caress and flow of the beach afternoon robbed of her. She tried to move over, to be somewhere that promised warmth and clear existence, when her arms drew behind her, and she heard a rattle as the chains went taut.

The shackles themselves were short, feeding down into a grate. Less than a half metre of reach, with the steel reminding her of its tug before she could stand.

'Awake I see.' said a voice, echoing from some unseen nook. A door screeched, and Amy jerked in place, her body pinned too tight to the ground to turn and see. No scent identified him, all fragrances suffocated by polyester and rubber.

Amy felt a rising pain in her heart, drawing in each breath like she were being choked. Maybe it was the trauma, but the afternoon has gone foggy, and she couldn't recall her morning flight. This wasn't how one day was supposed to end, it was the mockery of one, turned bitter and sick.

A shape drew out from the dark, the figure a mix of glints and refracted light.

'Hello Amy.' he said. 'How do you feel?' In shadow there was little more to see than the gleam of his glasses and the tip of his forehead. Then a short flame burst to cover the stretched-out silicon glove on his hand, the light blowing from what looked like a red stump.

'Curious?' the man questioned. 'It's a devil's finger. The bastards don't give them up easily, but set alight they're bright, and they don't stop burning. Not nice to eat, either.'

Amy flinched away. She didn't want to think how he knew her name or know how a stumpy pound of flesh could act as an incendiary. How had she got here at all? She'd been taking the route up toward the cliff face when...

'When I ask a question, I would appreciate an answer.'

'Tired, dizzy. Thirsty.' she said. In the moment she hated herself. It was a sort of betrayal to list her needs, but the pain in her wrists was starting to grow, and the headache was killing her. This had all started so recently, and yet already she wanted it to end, to take her afternoon strolls where there was no competition and give in to relief. 'I'm meeting my Mother tomorrow.'

A hard plastic pressed to her lips, the hint of wet splashing at her lips. 'You should drink.'

The styrofoam was tipped, and Amy began to gulp and choke it down, gasping when the cup was empty. A series of heavy rasps and her breath was back. 'Thanks,' she said, wishing she had a free hand to wipe her dripping chin. 'But a drink doesn't entitle you to—'

‘If you have questions,’ he interrupted. ‘I’ll answer them later.’ The tips of his fingers caught in the light, holding something. ‘Now, try to hold still for this.’

The jab came fast, so quick Amy barely felt the needle. It stayed in the flab of her arm another second while the barrel was pulled and blood was sucked from within, then drawn out.

Amy gasped. Now it was hurting. ‘What did you...’

Already the man was walking back into the dark. He made several steps, and then the flame in his hand lit the wicker of others, revealing a wall of similar, creeping little torched stumps, and Amy was certain they were wriggling in place. The light burnt bright, but there was not enough to share the details of the room, and a squat darkness enveloping anything more than ten metres away. The room was tiled with flat, ceramic flooring, while the ceiling was left a question of overhanging black.

The man made his way toward a table. Amy saw what she initially thought was a green shade came from a kind of apparatus. Goblets, flasks, vials, all bubbling away, the colour of a fetid marsh. Plastic in strange shapes, leading down and through spirals and odd curves from one container to the next. Housed on table as a collective, they seemed a complete engine, all cogs of a greater machine. Her captor was not far away, back to her, a white coat cloaking much of him bar his shoes, what limbs he did show thin and spindly. He held the offending syringe in one hand, the stopper pulled taut and swimming fresh with her blood. If she’d ever learnt anything about who she was, having any of the stuff out of her system was never a good sign.

With a shaking finger the man squeezed her blood into a wide beaker on an overarching spire of the structure and left it to chug through the spirals of glass and mix with various vials of green and grey substances. Not once did he look back at her, always the focus on the glass.

‘I’m sorry to put you through this dear, but I have to test something.’ He said, turning back to her. His hair wasn’t much more than a black cap, a salt and pepper beard caking his chin. His nose held an ugly point. He studied her intently, circling the vapid haze of chemical gunk, as if she were a puzzle to be solved. ‘You see, there’s a chance you’re a regular schoolgirl, who’s experiencing quite an unfortunate afternoon. But going by the sightings and my own research, there’s also the possibility you’re something much more.’

The glasses on the table blew out fumes from the many air holes stabbed through their system. A dark accusing look to her, then, unhurried, her captor skulked over. In its long journey through the tubes the red had changed from bright orange to the clearest white, and dropped into the final beaker a dark colour, cascading and breaking out in flashes, blue like a gem vein trapped in stone, a mass of chlorine.

From a rack he pulled one vial from an empty hundred and rushed back over to fill it with the final mixture. Then he brought it over, sparkling in his hand. He shook it experimentally, and Amy recoiled as the contents crackled like lightning in a rooftop storm. ‘Oh, Amy.’ He laughed, eyes lit with understanding. ‘I know exactly what you are.’

His figure slouched and skulked closer, anxiously, nervously close.

He retreated from the certainty of the light and began to circle her. Then a hand pressed, cold and clinical, into the centre of her back, as if to groom, pressing between her shoulder blades in a grotesque search of cold latex and plastic. Her first reaction was to gasp at the chill of his hands, and then to struggle and shift away so he wouldn’t find them. But when his hands grabbed at the lumps around her shoulder, she knew it was over.

‘There’s no use hiding them anymore, Amy, if that even is your real name. Unfurl them. Now.’

‘It’s not what it looks like.’ The girl said.

Her captor ignored her pleas and swiped for a hold on her, and with her limited reach huddled back into the dark. He began to grunt and turn furious and when she made to dodge his grip again he caught her by the hair, and her grunts of resistance turned to strains of agony.

‘Enough!’ he roared. ‘Show me what you really are.’

Reluctant, Amy obeyed. They came loose slow at first, edging through hidden slits in her shirt as short, hazel-flecked feathers; at their full height they were long, crescent like things that became iridescent in the heavy, clinical light of the theatre. Three flaps to show them off, as if the act there might be enough strength to break the chains and carry her free. A wild flurry of forest debris and plumage flew out as she flapped, and the faint tang of ocean salt and beachside herbs released in the unfurling.

‘Beautiful.’ The man said, stroking the feathery down of her right wing. She felt her wings being prodded delicately in cautious touches, as if they were made of soft tissue like collage, but then he found her win

g bones, and clutched at them like they were an elephant’s tusks, audibly awed at their strength for something hollow.

It would do her no good, pinned as she was, to use that strength against him, to send him keeling to the ground in a heap of coat leather and spectacles. But she considered it.

‘To think there really was an Angel visiting earth, fascinating. I’ve encountered a few demons in my time, they probably think this world is home by now, but Angels? You really are an enigma.’

‘You’re wrong. It was an experiment I’m really not a—’

‘You’re a little too divine to be good liar, Amy.’ he interrupted. ‘Try to be patient, you can be free soon enough.’ With a harsh tug he plucked a handful of plumage from her wing, and several stray hairs from her head.

‘What are you—’

‘Procuring my final ingredients.’ Her captor said, carrying his prize away to the table.

The wing down and head hair funnelled in until they made a splash and boiled and churned through the glass, being crushed and melding with the mixture as it made to meet the final product.

‘I apologise for the measures I have used Amy, but they are necessary. By Monday you’ll be flying free, and this will just be an unpleasant experience.’ He dropped new ingredients into the vials as he spoke, purple furs, a red stained hair, a mangled eye, little pieces of animals, dribbled down as if squeezed recently through a grater.

‘What are you even trying to make?’

Her captor chuckled. He turned and continued to monitor the vials, tapping them as if the chinking it produced were some vital data.

‘Perhaps the one upstairs didn’t tell you. Everything in this world is quite rotten, but with you that can change; one of his own holds the key. Imagine everyone empathetic and

thoughtful of those around them, everyone as clever as Socrates, disciplined as Aurelius.’ He brought his hands out in a gesture of grandiosity. ‘I’m trying to make something great.’

As they continued to wind and boil through the glass work, the eyes and hairs mixed and corrupted down the vats, and in their spiral descent turned to a colour black as death, mired and bubbling.

The lab-coat man was by the table’s side in an instant, tipping the beaker so that the black pitch seeped perfectly into the blue vial. A laugh, a long and broken cackle as the man swished the mixture together; the colour eroding to swampy swathes of deep, dark ocean blue.

‘I’m not what you’re wanting, I wasn’t born with these, these things. Whatever that is, it’s not going to work.’

‘You give yourself too little credit. There is a power in you, Amy. An infinity; the potential of a god. And I intend to draw it out.’ The vial cupped intensely in his hand, full of promise. ‘Now, let’s see if the myths about your kind are true.’ and he tipped the vial by degrees into his mouth, until a single drop leaked out.

The initial reaction seemed the most promising. It reminded Amy of natural divinity, river sprites and spirits who worked to heal out of benevolence. A life-like force had encircled her captor, transforming veins from blue to an ethereal green. The grey of his beard became a defined brown, and his flesh shrunk what few wrinkles and creases marred his body until he was scoured clean. An undeveloped imitation of her own wings crept out of his back, with a short, feathery down, feeble like a chick’s.

He drew breath, then exhaled with an unnerving calm, as if he had lived his whole life paralysed, and now every vein and nerve was moving free at last.

‘Thank you, Amy.’ he said. ‘Because of you—’

And then he stumbled in his speech. A terrible darkness welled like ink out of his chest, staining his coat, dripping to the floor. His jaw set rigid, unmoving when he tried to ratchet it

back in place. All the freshness in him from the previous minute seemed to revert, and he began to stammer out a series of retches, harsh and churning.

He tripped as he rushed to her, his legs now brittle and little more than sticks, falling to the ground beside her. The wrinkles and age that claimed him accelerated in their corruption, quickening with their initial taste.

‘You were supposed to make me perfect!’ he lisped through his broken jaw. ‘This world perfect!’

Amy screamed, retreating from the flesh that dripped from his slowly whitening skull. It was with horror and a gross hatred of the man that she kept watching, and saw how the ooze in his eye and the cartilage of his nose burned in tandem with the black of his chest.

All her captor could offer was a quizzical look, a denial that he’d been duped, as he reeled, jaw setting fully, and roaring without a mouth to scream. The fire continued to burn inside him, and its pressure changed something in his system, broke the very foundation of his being, for his skin began to fade and drift away, until all that was left was his lab coat blanketing the rest of his clothes.

In among the remains, Amy searched with a leg outstretched, hoping, praying there was something there. And then, her foot passed over a jingle of metal, and her shoes pressed the remains of the lab coat closer. Enough careful manoeuvring had them by her feet and after searching deep in the jacket pocket, retrieved the keys.

The chains gave easily after that. In her first moments of freedom Amy swiped up a devil’s finger and dashed for an open door. The first she found yielded to a steel corridor smelling of fungi and dank moss. A bright orange like sunlight gleamed from the furthest reaches of her vision. Down she raced, charging with all her might.

The feeble, aluminium door casing blasted away, and Amy was enveloped by the going light of the afternoon. She was somewhere near the top of a cliff, overlooking a town she’d never seen, coming out of what appeared to be a lighthouse, broken and windowless at its upper tiers. Peering down, she could see jagged rock pools at the bottom of the cliff, roiling under the crash and lick of the waves. It seemed the world had lit itself perfectly to meet her.

She couldn't wait to put the horrors of the day behind her. Really, it had been just a minor setback. Her Mother would have been missing her a few hours, but that could be fixed. They had talked of migrating soon, before the beachside towns became too cold to sleep in.

A chill laced with the wind to batter her, howling to greet her as it scurried up the mountain. Prepared and fully unfurled, she perched upon the rail boundary at the cliff edge, and dove down towards the sea, ready to ride the thermals of the afternoon.