

THE QUARRY

Shelter

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5:00pm. closing time.

Spot's brown paw flipped the closing sign. Though it was time to close the shelter it wouldn't be long before Scarlet Ebony arrived for her scheduled appointment. Though Spot did all he could to avoid her appointments it was inevitable since she was the only source of money keeping the shelter afloat. Spot hated that he needed her help to support his cause to find good homes for humans, but she was the only consistent source of income the shelter had. Spot was in no place to be picky about how he received an income.

His shelter was hanging on by its bare bones to stay alive. With each breath the shelter showed how weak it was becoming. Cracks framed each of the walls. Their fingers reaching out to hug each and every corner of the shelter. The vinyl floor was starting to show its true age. In areas it was peeling itself from the floor showing the concrete underneath. The darkness of the vinyl couldn't hide the wet spots forming due to the repeated showing of human to potential customers. Some have been treated that barbaric by animals that the mere sight of one causes the human to enter melt down mode and remove all it can from its body.

This act alone, with the issue of overcrowding, gave the shelter its most distinct feature, a smell that no matter how hard you try to block your nose demanded you to smell it. Odours of urine, shit, blood, and bleach swirled together into the nose of all who entered. Not matter how much bleach Spot used to clean the place the other odours also found a way back to the shelter. Due to his long hours Spot had become used to the smell. Though others gagged at the smell upon entering the shelter, Spot welcomed it like a friend, a reminder of why he was at the shelter. Spot had an hour before Scarlet arrived to groom his latest offering of humans to her. In their time together Spot had learnt to keep his thoughts to himself and in a twisted way, be grateful she was clearing out space.

Closing the last of the beige blinds, Spot made his way to the reception desk. Pulling out his To Do list Spot checked what was left. His eyes narrowed down on the two tasks left to complete for the day.

9. Move Alex into the death row.

10. Groom humans for Scarlet's arrival at 6:00pm.

Task nine was a daily reminder of the reality of the shelter. For every human who finds a home two are sentenced to death. Death can come in one of two ways: A trip to the shelter's death row or a place in Scarlet's newest closet.

Checking his watch Spot noted the time to be 5:14pm. He had exactly forty-six minutes to complete both tasks. Placing the notepad into his pocket Spot made his way to the room which held the aggressive humans. The slightest sound of footsteps would cause an eruption of chaos, so Spot started trying to muffle the sound of his approaching paws. Howling, screaming and barking came from every cage. The sound echoing from one cage to another looking for a path to escape. Spot's path to the isolation section followed a path few animals were allowed to see.

For appearances sake the cleanest, youngest, bright eyed humans were kept near the front display windows. The further into the shelter you traveled the more aged, scared, and aggressive the humans got. Every human in the shelter was the result of animals wanting a pet human until they realised how much care was required. Each human Spot passed was either brought in here, left, or abandoned at the shelter's door in the early morning hours. Either way they have all been neglected, abused, or mistreated and deemed too old, dangerous, or unwanted.

Since Spot had taken over Green Hills Human Shelter, the number of humans calling the shelter home had astronomically risen. More and more animals were now leaving their humans at shelters as they weren't bothered to properly care for them or didn't realise just how much care was involved. In extreme cases the humans were aggressive, dangerous, or just simply weren't safe for the owners to have. On his first day, Spot's bright eyes told of a dog ready to help and care for the humans, but soon the reality of the shelter shattered his innocence. Now he was forced — by the multiplying number of humans in the shelter — to resign himself to only helping those that could be saved.

The door of the isolation room had metal plating along its bottom. Its need to keep the human locked behind it required Spot to use extra force to open it. As Spot's shoulder forced the door open its metal based scraped against the tiles. To any who entered a feeling of doom meet them at the door like a crushing wave. Even the humans who ended up in this room couldn't escape the pull of the doom's tide. Here is where the shelters worst of the worst ended up. Due to the large number of humans to care for, most in this room were left tied up, dirty, and hairy. They were either not lucky enough to be adopted within four months or were too aggressive to be left anywhere else. Alex was three cages from the door and required a muzzle over his month. In his first month here he had bitten a staff member and constantly lashed out at anyone walked past his cage. With the cage door closed and locked Alex had kept charging at the door wanting for it to pop open. To keep him contained iron chains were locked tightly around his wrist and ankles to restrict his movements to a few feet. Stopping at his cage door Spot crouched down to be eye level with him. It was the least he could do considering where he would be taking him. A metallic order lingering in the air cased Spot to notice dark red drag marks covering the tiled floor. Moving his eyes up the floor to the back-wall Spot gazed at Alex.

He now wore the same look as the night Spot found him. The sight of Alex on that night was something Spot had trouble forgetting. The memory of that night burnt itself into the back of Spot's eyelids.

Spot had run to the backdoor to be met by a horrific scene, lying on the floor was a barely recognisable human. A thick layer of matted hair and what could only be assumed to be dirt covered every inch of the human's body hiding it's gender and skin tone. If it wasn't for the coat of dirt, the human would have been completely naked. A white shard sticking out of the human's right leg caught Spot's attention. Bending down to take a look, Spot noted it to be bone. The contours of goose bumps didn't hide the bloody rivers forming between the

flesh mountains. Taking a step towards the human saw it take up a defensive position, ready to attack. Spot needed to bring the human inside in the calmest way possible. Lifting his paw, he had gently stroked the humans head, 'It's okay, it's okay. No one will hurt you.'

A bath had revealed Alex to be male. He wasn't too old, but apparently he had developed the response to attack anyone who wanted to help him now that the dirt wasn't restricting his movement. Whoever his past owner was treated him with such disrespect that all animals, to him, were a threat. The poor bastard needed to have his hair shaved off, bones reset and plaster enclosing his whole right leg. His bones did heal but his aggression never went away. His iron cuffs had dug into his skin which made him look as though he was wearing red bracelets. An unprovoked attack on a staff member was Alex's last chance gone. In an ideal situation, Alex would have been given time to settle into his new surrounding but in a place where overcrowding was a problem putting aggressive humans down was the quickest solution. Dread radiated through Spot's body, the sooner the task was complete the sooner it would be over. Spot slowly inserted the key into lock.

Ding-Ding.

The ding of the bell echoed through the shelter's halls to the isolation room. It couldn't possibly be her yet. Spot turned to look at his watch which read 5:54pm. Shit, Scarlet was here and Spot hadn't groomed the humans. Panic jump-started Spot's need to figure out how to explain to Scarlet why the humans hadn't been groomed. Throwing the key back on its hook Spot raced through the shelter to the front reception. How the hell did forty minutes pass without him completing a single task? Better yet how the hell was he going to explain the humans not being groomed? Scarlet was the type to show up promptly but not early and expected all of her demands whether they be simple or difficult to be met.

'Sorry to keep you waiting,' panted Spot. The last thing a smart animal did was keep Scarlet Ebony waiting.

'And here I thought dogs waited by the door for their master to show,' purred Scarlet as pointed red nails removed black sunglasses from her face.

She was an animal whose reputation did little justice to physical presence. A black cat with perfectly groomed fur and manicured, red paws. She demanded attention into every room she entered with power and control radiating off her body. To close associates she was known as The Collector, since she only ever wore the finest of things. The echo of her designer heels warned of her coming and they were also great for stepping on those who

dared to disobey. She only ever wore designer clothes and topped off her look with a coat woven of blood.

‘Nice coat,’ remarked Spot. Scarlet twirled at the mention of the coat. She was one who always made a point to show off her “fake” human leather clothes. She smiled, making sure the irony in her voice dripped off her tongue, ‘It looks like real human leather.’ Her red nails followed the stitching of the leather jacket. Spot placed his hands on the reception desk. He had to control himself. Those with a sensitive nose could tell you exactly how real the leather was. Cane in one hand she strutted across the vinyl floor ensuring with each step who held the power in this meeting.

‘How many humans do you have today?’ she purred. She was one to skip small talk and get straight to the point.

‘I have over twenty to look at but be warned I haven’t had time to completely groom them.’ It was best to admit mistakes early on in the meeting.

Her soft-spoken voice demanded attention as listeners were forced to lean in to hear her words, ‘Your incompetence knows no bounds.’

‘I ...’ Scarlet’s stare stopped him.

‘Spear me your excuses,’ disdain dripped from her voice. ‘I thought you of all people would value my business,’ she continued. Spot’s paws started to sweat.

His answer was make or break, ‘It won’t happen again.’

‘No, it won’t or next time your face will be closely acquainted with my nails.’ Though a smile graced her lips, the words couldn’t hide the threat they contained. Deep down Spot knew that the only reason Scarlet came to his shelter was that it was the cheapest, quickest, and most illegally convenient way for her to obtain humans. However, he also knew she was someone not to cross. Scarlet was known for her impeccable taste in collecting and this was not different for when she was shopping for humans. Normally when Spot was selling humans to animals there was an underlying sense of joy since it would be adopted, but selling humans to Scarlet always left Spot with an inescapable chill. All he could do now was continue the exchange as to not piss her off and get her out of here as soon as possible.

‘Are you after any particular types of human today or are you just browsing?’

‘I will inspect each on offer and see which ones are acceptable.’ The menacing nature of her voice told Spot what she really meant, *I will personally scan over each and every inch of*

the humans you are presenting noting each and every imperfection they have. Spot pushed the pedal that opened the gate that separated the main part of the shelter from the reception area.

‘Right this way.’

Spot lead Scarlet to the section which held the human he was hoping she would take. He hated himself for agreeing to do business with Scarlet, but it was the only option he had left in dealing with the shelters overcrowding problem. Though he knew vaguely what Scarlet did to the humans she took he always though better her than ask. Before anyone judges know that for Spot it was easier to hand the humans over to another than killing them himself on a cold metal bed.

Entering the section row after row of humans spilled out of small, dark cages. Overcrowding caused elderly and adults humans to be forced to share a cage. The baby and toddler humans were forced into tiny cages which looked like a blue and silver Tetris game against walls. The cages were cramped, cold, and barely able to provide the humans with their basic needs. The only way they can find room was to stick whatever limb they could through the cage’s narrow bars. As soon as they entered the room its unique perfume hit them. The mixing of bleach, blood and urine made Scarlet turn her nose up at each human she strutted past. The clicking of her heels on the tiles was enough to alert the humans to retreat to the back of their cages and play dead. Somehow the animals had learned to recognise the echo of her heels. With each click of the heels bonding off the walls the humans welcomed the cages back wall to swallow them up whole. Spot lead her to the very end of the section.

‘Here are the humans I personal selected for you to look at.’

Scarlet intensely gazed over each human then approached one to start her detailed inspection. All the humans looked decent but lifeless, hair tangled but mostly groomed, and eyes wide open but bloodshot.

To give her room, Spot moved back and just watched. Scarlet was very thorough with her inspections. She would only take what she deemed to be the best. She ran her claws along every bit of skin the humans had, her eyes narrowing to find the smallest scare, bruise, or skin mark. The tiniest of blemishes saw the human tossed aside. During her inspection of a young man she threw the human against the wall of the cage for having the smallest of scratches. The thump instinctively made Spot take a cautious step forward. Though he

wanted to help the human he knew it was dangerous to interfere. One wrong move and that cane of hers would fracture his bones.

Her next victim was a young female blond. ‘My what pretty hair you have’ she stroked her claws through the hair, ‘I have been needing a new blonde wig’. Her perfectionist tyranny continued well into the next. Though Spot just watched he didn’t think about leaving the room.

After the last human meet her critical eye she rose to her feet.

‘I will take her, him, him and her’ her cane indicating her new purchase. The finality in her voice made it clear that only those four meet her criteria. Spot led Scarlet back to the reception area. From her designer bag Scarlet pulled out a white envelope and handed it to Spot.

‘My associates will come past tomorrow night for pick at 7:00pm sharp. Make sure the humans are groomed and restrained for the journey.’ She made sure her eyes narrowed in on Spot’s for her next words, ‘if any of them gets the tiniest of marks in the next twenty hours it will cost you.’ She held the gaze long enough for Spot to take the threat seriously.

Nodding to accept her request Spot held the bloody envelope in his hands. Turning she calmly walked towards the door before briefly stopping. With her hand around the door handle Scarlet paused for a moment.

‘Spot’ her small yet controlled voice spoke. The lingering silence meant he was listening.

‘I expect my next trip to be more fruitful.’ He knew what awaited his next meeting with Scarlet. A good beaten unless he presented more humans with flourless skin and luscious hair.

Bang.

The door closed, its glass still shaking.

Spot disregarded the envelope into a filing cabinet. He had to account for the money before the shelter opened for business. Grabbing the nearest pen Spot started his to do list for tomorrow.

1. Groom Bob, Sandy, Tammy and John.
2. Put their documentation aside for ‘adoption’.

With the scribbling of the last word Spot flipped back to today's list. The joy of removing humans from the shelter was short lived for Spot when he remembered where they were being taken. Task ten was now crossed off his list. Only task nine remained incomplete. Spot slowly walked to the isolation room and took a leash off the wall. The short ten paces to Alex's cage felt like a marathon. Hearing movement Alex lifted up his head. Spot placed the leash on the floor and looked straight into Alex's eyes. He knew there was only one way to get Alex out of the cage with little trouble.

'Time for a walk boy.'