

THE QUARRY

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Until the Light

A bleak morning shadow loomed over the city; countless sleepless lights lost within silence. Once, every candle and streetlight would dance in a warm blaze; twirling to a jumbled, disruptive symphony... But that was a long time ago.

'That time again?'

Darren snapped up from his boots, smiling slightly at the young woman standing over him. 'Amelia...'

'I know. You gotta do what you gotta do, right?'

Darren scoffed. 'Doesn't make it any easier.' He sighed as he tied the last knot firmly. 'Maybe I can bring something nice back this time? You want anything?'

Amelia gave a smile and shook her head. 'Just some bread.'

Darren watched as she walked away, past the dining table. He glanced sadly at the vase that sat in the centre; a tall, beautifully crafted piece that had been empty for almost a year. She always asked for something simple. Something necessary. Never anything for pleasure's sake.

'Alright, I'm off!' No sooner had his hand touched the knob did a tap grace his shoulder.

'Here, you can't forget these.' A dull sensation reawakened in Darren's temple as he took the objects out of Amelia's hands. Indeed, he could not. Not the small grey cloth that wrenched across his mouth, the cords that dug into his hair as they fastened tightly together. Not the thick, clear gloves that dragged his fingers in and squeezed his hand.

With content, he sank into Amelia's arms. He trembled and smiled behind his mask as her soft lips brushed his cheek. He gave one final wave before closing the door. The tremendous, dull bang of the mahogany clashing against the doorframe echoed through his head as he floated down the stairs. Each flight felt hours long until he reached the basement car park.

The old girl sputtered and fumbled before roaring to life, her heavy tyres screaming as they crawled out onto the road. On most days, the drive to work felt like cruising through a ghost town. But not today. Darren's eyes widened as he pulled up to the lights, car after car rushing past him as the light turned green. Although glad to see them, his mind was consumed by a disturbing thought.

When was the last time there was this many cars out at once?

Darren shook his head as he turned on the highway. *No time for that, let's move!*

However, a long, terrible screech caused him to flinch, slowing to a crawl as the car ahead of him suddenly stopped. He groaned as he rolled up to join the long queue of cars waiting for their turn - the most irritating obstacle on this trip.

The Checkpoint.

A long concrete blockade that affirmed the district border, barely enough space for one car on either side to come through at once. Stationed on each side was a small company of officers, some in black and blue, others in green and brown. All noticeably armed.

Darren's grip on the wheel tightened, knuckles whitened as he watched car after car pass through. *The sun's barely up and already these people have decided NOW was a good time to try their luck?! A queue that usually lasted ten minutes slowly rolled into thirty.*

No. Settle, Darren. Settle. Remember: 1, 2, 3. 1. 2. 3. 1... 2... 3.

'Identification, please.'

Darren smiled at the officer in black, reached down for his wallet, which was sitting on the passenger-side seat.

He fished out and handed over both his licences. First, his standard NSW driver's licence. Then, and more importantly, his Sanctioned licence. A small, blue card with his photo, name, and a bar code that spanned the bottom edge.

The officer eyed him sceptically. 'Sanctioned Code, please.'

'Sanctioned Code T26-N19570.' Darren replied robotically. 'Designation: Food storage and procession.'

Every Sanctioned licensee was expected to memorise their code. Precautions to distinguish the safe from the scum, as general opinion had it. The officer handed the licence to his partner, who swiped it through a mobile scanner. A few seconds later, both officers nodded, and Darren got both his licences back.

'Alright, you're good to go.'

'Thank you, officer.'

'Be careful out there. Don't go causing trouble.' Darren nodded as the gates slowly swung upwards.

Once through, the world once again passed him by, except now, cars were fewer and farther. Every McDonalds, every KFC, every car repair and everyday shop - they all flew by, utterly invisible. The cries of car horns, a distant memory. Time was ticking and there was road to burn.

It took ten more minutes to reach his destination: what was once a grand shopping centre, full of life, was now as cold and dead as its walls. Darren hurried into the carpark, only to face another Checkpoint, where a grouchy-looking guard shook his head.

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'You're late.'

Darren rolled his eyes at his manager, Mr. McCann, who didn't even bother to glance up from his desk.

'Only by a few minutes, sir. Sorry. Traffic was... surprisingly hectic today.'

'Yes, I noticed. It's been like that since 5.'

It's been like that for three hours? The hell's going on?

'Cormac!' McCann snapped. 'Listen. Today's the same old, understand? Some disturbing rumours are going around, and I don't want them to continue.' Darren nodded before leaving the office.

He busied himself with his work routine, inspecting the produce in the stock storage to ensure the fruits and vegetables were satisfactory for purchase. The new kid, Ryan, ran over.

'Hey, did you hear? There's gonna be a big gathering in the streets today.'

Darren held back a sigh. He had always liked Ryan. The kid always brought a smile to his face, his sheer energy was something this world dearly missed. Every day they were rostered together, the pair would spend their breaks discussing video games or making the most absurd theories about the strangest television shows.

Like Darren, Ryan had good reason for joining the Sanctioned. Every shift, he would come out in place of his parents. If he was not discussing the weirdest, nerdiest topics, then you could never get him to shut up about his sister. A little girl, no older than six, with her big brothers' golden hair, blue eyes and bright smile.

'Where did you hear about this?' Darren muttered as he started counting the fruit boxes.

'In chatrooms. On Twitter. You know, everywhere.'

Darren shook his head. 'Ryan...'

'Look, hear me out, yeah? Most people are tired of all the restrictions the bloody government's putting on them. I mean, only *one* person per household *once* every two weeks for food and meds? It's ridiculous.'

Darren didn't respond, the taste of iron in his mouth. He had heard these arguments countless times over the last year. In video after video, people would spam all social platforms to rant and rave. Faces creased like prunes, screaming about the 'Injustice of Isolation'. After a while, watching paint dry didn't sound so bad.

'Hey, maybe we should join it too.'

Darren stared blankly into those eyes, those young wide eyes, trembling, pleading, before turning back to his checklist. He heard Ryan's fading footsteps as he scanned the boxes of potatoes, making sure his counts were correct.

He smiled as he filled the last spot on the checklist. Everything was under control. Now it was just about checking to see which tables needed filling and which could wait. However, his smile became a frown when he stepped back onto the floor. The quiet, empty floor.

Darren narrowed his eyes as he checked each untouched table. Barely anything had been taken, but the shop had been open for at least an hour. He left the produce section and took a lap past each of the aisles. Virtually nothing on the shelves had been taken, at least not compared to every other day. Every co-worker he passed looked just as confused and concerned as him. Even the few customers in the aisles, who should be rushing to get supplies as fast as they could, were perplexed by how... easy that day was.

Suddenly, there was shouting outside. Without a second thought, he raced towards the front registers, where McCann was talking to a lone security guard amidst the thundering shouts that echoed in from outside.

The shopping centre hallways seemed like a tomb. All the other grocery shops were dark behind shutter doors, and those few clothes and accessory shops that were still open had employees standing out at their entrances, waiting for that first wave of customers while trying to make sense of the shouts.

'Your whole team's outside right now?' McCann asked the guard.

'Yes. Only a few of us stayed behind to watch the store entrances.'

'What's going on?' Darren said, walking up to the pair. 'What's all that noise about? Where is everyone?'

McCann sighed, rubbing his temple. 'The rumours...'

Darren's eyes widened. He turned to find the rest of the staff had gathered at the front, some confused, others curious, all trying to work out what was going on. All but one...

'Where's the kid? Anybody seen Ryan?'

'What about Ry– HEY!' Darren ignored his boss' question as he bolted down the empty hallways. Profane thoughts cleaved through Darren's head as he ran; the echo of each of his footsteps was quickly drowned out as the centre front door got closer.

Before he even opened the door, he could hear them. Countless booming voices clocked his ears as he stepped outside, bearing witness to the vast but burgeoning parade of people standing in the street in front of the centre. If not for his hanging mouth, Darren would have rolled his eyes at the countless voices, screaming and shouting over each other to the point where he could not even understand them. Slogans like 'Bring down the Walls', '#FoodForChildren', and 'This is a Government Scam' seemed to be the more tactful slogans that were sprawled across the signs.

HONK!

Oh no...

The blaring car horn seemed to calm the crowd, at least enough for Darren to find the source. A red two-seater sat in the middle of the street, surrounded by a ring of similarly sized cars. Each one had a young person, mid 20's at most, standing on the roof. They had small black boxes at their feet, faced out towards the crowd.

And there, standing on the roof of the centre car, was Ryan.

Ryan raised a hand, lifted it to his face, and tore off his mask. Seconds of silence rippled out over the street, before an old but familiar sound came faintly over the crowd. Sirens.

'Listen to them!' Ryan's voice roared into the streets like thunder, 'The cops are on their way!'

Murmurings began to rise. Looks of anger, worry and even panic came across the face of the protestors as the wails grew louder and louder. 'People! Listen!' Ryan called their eyes back to himself. 'This is what we came here for. The cops, the army, they just want to bully us, to push us into our homes. To keep all the food for themselves. All in the name of some 'pandemic?'

The murmurs began shifting towards agreement. 'We cannot let this stand! They can't keep us away from the world! My little sis, she...' Ryan paused for a bit, taking a moment to breathe before he spoke again. 'She can't even go to school. She can't see her friends unless I pay for her to 'see' them through a screen!'

The murmurings grew louder as the signs began rising. Darren shook his head, staring in disbelief at this boy who would use his position as a Sanctioned, and his own kid sister, to rile these people up. A loud beep cut through the noise. The signs lowered just enough for Darren to see one of the boys standing on the cars holding up a card. A card that was flashing red.

Every non-Sanctioned family gets one civilian card, a card that only lasts three hours. Three hours to get whatever rations you can for two weeks.

He turned to Ryan, who nodded back. With a defiant roar, the boy threw the card toward his feet and smashed it beneath his heel. The cheers were slower this time, but louder as people began to follow suit, lifting their cards and throwing them onto the pavement.

'Yes! Yes! No more restrictions! The government would only Sanction a few of us, enough for them to monitor and enslave while everyone else waits for scraps! NO MORE!'

'NO MORE!' The first unanimous cheer.

For two long minutes, Darren watched the parade, shaking his head at everyone who looked back at him. He sighed as countless cars flooded the surrounding roads, dazzled in a red and blue disco. Within moments, thunderous footsteps shook the streets as lines of uniforms marched towards the crowd, the morning light gleaming off their riot shields.

'Attention, citizens! Attention! This will be your only warning. Complete your shopping or return to your homes now! Failure to comply will result in the use of force!'

Darren could barely hear the announcement. The crowd just kept getting louder as Ryan and his friends called for them to march against enemy lines. As the crowd between them thinned out, Ryan finally met Darren's eyes. A joyous look came across Ryan's face as he called out - called out to his friend, his mentor.

But Darren gave no response. Only turned around slowly and headed back inside, closing the door as he heard the first bang.

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Darren sighed as he wandered to the near-barren bakery. Silence had plagued the rest of the day. Even when the afternoon bustle began, smiling still seemed taboo.

It was always difficult to find a good loaf by closing time, but, just as he found one, something caught his eye. Bouquets of roses, rich as scarlet, radiating from the flower stands.

Darren's mask hid his wide grin; he knew who loved red roses. They always reminded her of her favourite childhood film.

'Not quite our anniversary... but just one can't be too selfish, right?'