

Strays

by Lily Heppell

I was running through the alley, as fast as my paws could take me. Every turn I took, the pound was gaining on me. I was scared. I didn't know people could run that fast. I kept turning corners, trying to lose them. I didn't know where I was going. I turned left, hoping I would be back on the streets. It would be harder to find me there.

I was wrong. It was a dead end.

I panicked, looking for a place to hide, but the pound had already caught me. I tried to act brave.

"You don't want to mess with me," I said in a voice that wasn't as brave as I hoped. "I'll tear you to shreds." This probably didn't sound threatening coming from a golden retriever. They lunged forward and grabbed my scruff; I tried to move away, but they were too quick. I bit their hands, hoping they would let go, but they didn't. Their grip was like steel; I couldn't break free no matter how hard I tried. I waited. They started talking on these glowing blocks. I couldn't understand them. After they started talking, a van pulled up. It was white with tinted windows and a lot of words and numbers I couldn't understand, and they pushed me into the van.

The van was gross. The smell was worse than death; I could even taste it. I held my breath, but that didn't last long. The drive was forever! I didn't even last seconds. I was already about to throw up, but the sight of the pound made it worse. There were all kinds of animals: dogs, cats, even birds. *Why?* The cages were so small, *and* you had to share with others! I was put in a cage with four other dogs: Coco, a small shi-tzu; Rocky, a border collie; Marshall, a pitbull; and Martha, a black Newfoundland. I introduced myself as Lucky, a golden retriever (that was the name my humans gave me). I looked around the room, but everything was so dark, even Martha looked invisible. The room was empty except for the cages. There was one small door at the front of the room and no windows.

When our food came, it looked worse than what I ate as a stray. It was beige in colour, smushy, and smelled like vomit. All the other dogs seemed to scarf it down, so it couldn't be that bad, right? Correction, yes it can. The food tasted really bland with a really bad tinge to it. I had a few bites but decided I couldn't take it, so I just gave it to Martha.

"How can you even eat this?" I asked Martha.

"You get used to it after a while," she told me.

I don't think I'll ever get used to it, I thought.

The night was worse than the day; it was cold when you slept in a squished cage. When I woke up, the

room was hotter than usual. I hadn't thought much of it since I got here. It might've been outside. I walked over to Rocky. He looked scared.

"What's wrong?" I asked him.

"I don't know," he said. "It's never been this hot."

"It's probably just hot outside," I assured him. He didn't look positive but he agreed. I sat down. "Isn't the food supposed to be here by now?" I asked him.

"Yeah, but it's always late," he said, looking sad.

I got up to walk away, but before I could stand up, I heard a loud *boom!* I was shocked. I didn't think that was part of the daily routine. The room was already hot, but it started to heat up really fast. A fire started spreading around the room quickly. I was scared we were all still locked in our cage. I tried to break the bars, but they wouldn't budge. I looked at everyone else, but they looked just as confused as I did. The fire was still spreading. Soon, it would reach us. I looked around to see what was causing the fire, and I saw one of the food processors burnt in half and in flames. The room was now really hot; I touched the cage bars, and it felt like putting my paw in a volcano. The bars started melting after I took my paw off it. Soon they were just piles of goo. Me, Martha, Coco, Rocky, and Marshall carefully avoided the melted bars and ran out the doors that were now open from all the people running in and out.

The pound owners chased us for a few blocks, trying to bring us back to the pound, (which was now up in flames), but they eventually gave up and went back to deal with the fire. We kept running for a few blocks to make sure they left then stopped to catch our breath.

"Where should we go now?" I asked everyone.

"We have already planned that," Marshall said.

"We are going to the forest!" Coco added.

"But isn't the forest really far from here?" I said.

"Yeah it will take a while, but we can do it!" Coco said excitedly.

We headed west for the forest, the opposite direction of where we had just come from. We started off in a nice sprint but slowed down to a walk. We made it out of the city as the sun started setting, so we found a nice spot in a little meadow and laid down to rest for the night. When I woke up, I found everyone crowding around a dead rabbit.

"Where did you find that?" I asked.

"Marshall went out hunting before you woke up," Martha exclaimed. We divided up the rabbit before we ate. The rabbit was surprisingly filling considering the small portion I got. After everyone had finished their part of the rabbit we started walking again. The forest was still far away from where we were.

We travelled for a few hours until we stopped at a lake near a mountain. The lake was pretty clear with tons of rocks around it. The lake was on a bit of a slant, but the rocks kept the

water from escaping. I started drinking the water. It was cold and drinking it cooled me down. After I was done drinking, we started climbing the mountain. We were all jumping from rock to rock up the mountain.

Coco was the only one having trouble climbing the mountain because she is smaller than the rest of us. We found a place with less rocks to wait for Coco to catch up. When Coco caught up with the rest of us, we started going up the mountain again. It was a lot easier to climb when all the rocks were gone. Coco didn't have any more trouble climbing the mountain so we could go a little faster than before.

The top of the mountain was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. You could see everything from the to the city where we started our journey, a farm in a meadow, and another mountain that I could barely see.

"The forest is on the other side of the mountain," Marshall said to me. "What are we going to do when we get there?" We all glanced at each other.

"We don't know yet," the others said in unison.

We started walking down the mountain which we found easier than walking up. When we got to the bottom of the mountain everyone seemed tired, and it was getting dark, so we found a place to lay down for the night. We found a grassy part at the bottom of the mountain that was perfect. When I woke up everyone was still asleep. I tried to go back to bed but I couldn't. After about ten minutes, everyone woke up.

When everyone was ready, we started walking again. I was glad not to be on the mountain anymore, even though it was pretty. We walked through the meadow for a while, and by the time we got to the farm it was already getting dark. Nobody seemed tired so we just kept going. When the moon was at the top of the sky, we all sat down to rest.

"We're so close!" Coco squealed.

"Just a few more days," Martha added. After a while everyone went silent.

I guess they're asleep, I thought. I laid there awake staring at the stars, until I eventually fell asleep. When we were all awake, we headed towards the next mountain. *We are so close*, I thought to myself. "I wonder what the forest is like," I mumbled.

"Oh, it's amazing!" Coco squealed. "Well, I have never actually been there, but Marshall has said so many amazing things about it!"

The next few hours we walked in silence. We got to the bottom of the next mountain, and I started jumping up the rocks. "Do you want me to carry you up?" Marshall asked Coco.

"No, I'm good," she replied.

We made it halfway up the mountain when Coco suddenly slipped and started sliding down the mountain. Before she got past everyone Marshall grabbed her scruff. Marshall held her scruff until we made it to the top of the mountain. As Marshall let go of her scruff, she started

jumping around.

"Thank you—thank you!" she squealed.

We started heading down the mountain, towards the forest which was now close. Going down the mountain was not easy, it was steep, it went straight down. I almost fell many times. It took almost ten minutes to walk six feet; it took hours to make it to the bottom. When we made it, everyone looked exhausted, but it was still light out.

"Let's just take a break," Rocky said between breaths. We all sat down in the grass while Marshall took Rocky out to help him hunt.

When Marshall and Rocky got back, they caught one rabbit and two mice. We evened out the food. I got a small piece of rabbit and a piece of mouse. After we ate everyone seemed ready to walk again.

"Another hour or two," Rocky told us. We walked in silence for about an hour.

"I'm tired," Coco complained.

"Do you want me to carry you?" Martha asked her.

"Yes please!" Coco said jumping onto Marthas back. After Martha and Coco were ready, we kept walking. We were now about an hour from the forest. Everybody seemed excited. Coco was jumping around on Marthas back and Rocky kept pacing whenever we stopped. The only person who didn't seem exited or nervous was Marshall.

"How are we going to survive in the forest?" I asked Marshall.

"The same way we're surviving now," he replied. "We'll find shelter and hunt for food."

The forest was nothing I would have imagined, there were trees everywhere. It was nothing like the city, there were no buildings, cars, or anything. The dirt was wet and squishy under my paws. The forest was cold and wet, but in a nice way. We went deeper into the forest, to look for shelter to build our home.

"Well, here we are," Marshall said.

"The forest!" Coco squealed in excitement. We kept walking until we made it to a cave that looked perfect for a home. The cave was huge and decently hidden, so no others could find it.

Marshall and I went to look inside to make sure there weren't any animals living in it. The cave was gorgeous. The inside was massive, and perfect for a home. There weren't any other animals in the cave, so Marshall and I went out.

"There weren't any animals," I said.

"Great," Martha replied.

"But what if it is someone else's home?" Rocky asked.

"I doubt it," Martha told him. "No animal would leave their home in this weather."

So, we all built our home in the cave and were never bothered by anyone again.