

Stray - Siena, Year 6, VIC

Cats meowed.

A door opened.

A human walked to my cage, followed by another.

One of the humans, a tall male, glanced into my cage, his eyes cold. I cowered at the back of the cage, my ears pinned back.

“I’ll take this one,” his soft, cold voice said.

I tried to look at the human, but all I could see was his frowning face and cold, uninterested hazel eyes.

The woman that took care of me finally spoke up. “Latte is a handful, are you sure?”

“JUST GIVE ME THE DAMN CAT!” he shouted, raising a fist.

The woman flinched, nodded and opened the cage, carefully dragging me out. The human threw me into the little carrier he was holding without even looking at me, and it stung. I meowed; I didn’t like this human. I licked my back, and meowed again, tightly shutting my eyes.

The meowing didn’t help. He slammed his fists on the cold bars as it rattled and shivered. I almost meowed, *almost*, but if I meowed again, while I was outside of the cage... I shivered. The human spoke again, muttering to himself, “I swear if Abbie doesn’t like this cat.,,”

My eyes widened. I wasn’t used to humans, but I felt deeply threatened. The cage smelled of fish, and the ground was a cold dark grey. It reminded me of the mood I was in. The cage rocked back and forth as I closed my eyes tightly. The next second I opened my eyes as the cage was lifted up, not gently but hard and forcefully. I dared to peek out of the cage and saw an orange house, standing tall. As the human reached for something, I stumbled backwards, afraid he was getting something to harm me. But no, it was a tiny metal thing that had sharp edges. He stuck it into the rectangular object as he twisted the metal sphere. The rectangular object swung open and I crept back to keep myself hidden. A human girl was standing there, brushing her golden hair out of her face and smiling broadly.

“Did you get me a cat?! What is its name? Oh Jasper, thank you!” she threw her arms around him.

The male, Jasper, grinned. “The woman said its name was Latte. I hope you enjoy it.”

He opened my cage and pulled me out, presenting me to her. Her face instantly transformed.

“*JASPER!*” she spat, “it has *one* eye! What a disgusting thing!”

Jasper threw me on the red, soft, floor and I just lay there, my head pounding.

“I’ll get another one!” Jasper snarled, “throw that one in the trash!”

“I’m not touching it!” Abbie howled, as the rectangular object slammed closed.

I sat up and gave a hopeful meow. The house was clean. It smelt nice, maybe she was just being rude to impress Jasper?

She kicked me, *hard*.

I fell to the ground again, shutting my eyes tightly.

Do I deserve this? Is it my fault?

And all I could think at the time was - *yes, yes it is*.

I opened my eyes and blinked slowly. I was outside, buried in leaves, and I hurt even more. Abbie was towering over me. I cowered.

“Leave now. No human deserves a cat like you. You’re a stray. A filthy, disgusting, *stray*,” she exclaimed coldly.

I blinked, confused.

Was this affection? The humans talked about affection at the shelter, telling us our new owners would give us all the affection we needed, I never experienced affection, so I couldn't tell.

But her voice?

It *scared* me.

And a stray did not sound like a good thing.

I crept away, Abbie’s glare following me.

#

The city was loud, everything was cold, cars were loud.

Humans were worse, they kicked me and didn't care that I was hungry and hurt. As I dodged humans' feet, I spotted a dog, smiling slyly and walking towards me. It was thin and tall, all of its grey fur bristled. I backed away, worried. Something was wrong with that dog, I was sure of it. I broke into a run, the dog sprinting after me. I dashed, slipping through the crowd as the dog howled, "come back here little stray!"

I ran fast, turning a corner, and the barking stopped. A cat, the colour of vanilla peered at me with its yellow and blue eyes.

"Another stray?" his patient voice asked quietly.

I nodded and whimpered, "I hurt..."

His eyes widened in shock and he threw me a mouse. "Eat that, it'll help."

I nodded, crouching down in the dark, cold alley the cat called home. I took a bite, and he wrapped a leaf around my stomach.

"I'm Vanilla," he whispered, "what happened?"

I took another bite of the mouse. "Humans. They hurt me."

He blinked. "So, you're a stray now?"

I looked up at the sky, which was turning darker, and swallowed. I hated the word '*stray*'.

"Yes," I replied, finishing the mouse.

He smiled, putting something on my head. "You remind me of my owner - my witch."

Witch?

I stared at him. The thing on my head warmed me, so I didn't complain.

"A witch is a human who practices magic and understands cats, but witches? Surprisingly, they can die. I wish to heal cats, so they don't have to go through what my witch went through. Losing everything, even her life, which scared me." He sighed, "and that's why *I'm* a stray."

I snuggled up to his flank, and closed my eyes, letting myself close my eyes and fall asleep. He smiled and licked my head as I began to drift off.

“Get rid of it!” Abbie hissed, hitting me again and again.

“FINE!” Jasper snapped, kicking me.

I cowered, pain stabbing me.

The humans looked at me and sighed disgusted, glaring down at me.

“Leave now. No human deserves a cat like you. You’re a stray. A filthy, disgusting, stray.”

The words bounced off the walls, echoing as if taunting me.

Jasper suddenly ran at me, scooped me up and threw me against the wall.

#

I woke up, my breathing heavy, curling into myself more, the object had fallen off my head.

I'm a stray, a disgusting, horrible, stray.

Vanilla woke up and put the object back on my head.

“It's okay,” he whispered, “you're okay.”

#

Over the next few weeks Vanilla taught me the ways of a stray and I got a hang of the city, and Vanilla made me feel safe, as if he was the father-cat that I never had. The city was big and noisy, far too scary. It reminded me of my past.

“We could go out exploring!” He smiled, “I know a hill not far from our alley!”

I frowned. “But if we find a good spot, won't you miss your alley?”

Vanilla grinned and did a little spin, making sure to make his tail sweep my face. “Oh, I don't mind! It was just for now anyway.”

He broke into a run, and I chased after him, fear sweeping over me.

What is he doing? Is he trying to run away? Wait. Oh! He's leading me to the hill. Whoops.

We ran for a while, dodging human feet, until we entered a forest. I gasped; I had never seen a forest. Vanilla smiled and kept running. Despite my reluctance, I followed him. The forest

was full of animals, fallen branches, and a scent so natural it made me feel at ease, as if I wasn't ever a stray.

I was still glancing around, drinking in the forest when we went uphill and Vanilla abruptly stopped. "We're here," he breathed, his voice cracking.

I came up beside him. "What happened?"

"This," he whispered, "was where my witch passed away after doing a spell on herself, as if she knew that was going to happen, as if she hated me being there."

I frowned. "Maybe this place made her happy? Maybe it was an accident, or even if it wasn't, she led you here to show that she'll always watch over you here?"

Vanilla looked at me, his eyes beckoning me to say more.

I took a deep breath. "Maybe, instead of us being 'strays' we're 'free'? Maybe instead of having to rely on humans - and witches - when we're abandoned, maybe we're just free? Maybe we can finally be ourselves, and run wherever we wish?" I sat down, suddenly embarrassed.

Vanilla chuckled. "Latte, that is one of the best things I heard, and you're right."

I smiled, and he smiled back, it felt as if something was lifted from my shoulders when I realised. Vanilla had taken the object from my head, which is actually called a witch's hat, cool right!

"HEY!" I screeched, and chased him around the hill, laughing and smiling.

Vanilla wheezed as he gave my hat back.

I grinned. *Finally, we're free.*

And we always will be...