

The Chase

By Katelyn Heyboer

The dog woke, one of his front legs throbbing painfully. Stones and pebbles were crushed underneath him, and when he moved, they smacked together, sounding like marbles hitting one another. He stood, biting back a yelp as a dislodged pebble bounced off his injured paw, and hobbled down the rocky trail. He had no memory, no memories except these: the word Rusty, which he assumed was his name, and a strange number: 42. Rusty continued along the path, and stopped at the edge of a ridge. The sky was splashed violet, and the sun was setting, casting long shadows along the ground. The moon started to rise, sending its silvery glow on everything, making the trees look touched with tinsel. Rusty marveled at the sight and sat down, the long grass swaying in the soft, cool breeze. The dog sighed. As the moon reached its peak in the night, he decided to continue moving, and he padded into the darkness.

Rusty's ears perked up as, near noon the next day, he came in sight of a small town, nestled between two hills. The faint smell of food entered his nose, and Rusty felt like he was floating towards the scent. The town was still quite a ways away, and it took the dog a good hour or so to reach the town. He marched up to the entrance of it, and trotted in, following his nose towards the smells of the food he desperately needed. And yet, he had taken but five steps into the town, when a strong hand gripped his neck. Actually, Rusty noticed that the hand was gripping something around his neck. He craned his head around, half to see his captor, and partly to see what he was holding onto. The person was a man, tall and muscular, and his features were hard but kind.

"Not in here, pup."

Rusty yelped as he felt himself being yanked backwards by the thing around his neck, (a collar, made of leather as Rusty later noticed) and the next thing the dog knew he was sitting in a patch of grass, trying to pull away from the man holding him.

"Let's see..." the man murmured, ignoring the dog's barks and yanks of protest, "42 Melvott Lane. Why, that's but a mile from here!"

Rusty stopped pulling at this. He had no clue what '42 Melvott Lane' was, or why it was on his collar, but he did know that a mile was not that far to walk.

Suddenly, the dog's eyes dilated.

Sean Howard. Age 39. Male. A robotic voice droned in his ears.

Rusty leapt back from the man with such force that his collar snapped in two. He tumbled head over tail into a tree, and everything went black.

Rusty awoke, laying on the grass outside the town, beside the tree. He stood and stretched, feeling better than he had before the knock on the head. He knew what

he was, and where he was going again. He was a Drobot, a highly engineered dog-robot. Well, more robot than dog. But dog was in there somewhere. Rusty remembered leaping out of a car window. A car marked with the symbol of the place that made him: *The Organization*. He remembered going to find *him*. He remembered two workers telling Rusty about their nephew, who, if Rusty ever escaped, would care for him and let him be a real dog. So Rusty escaped. And he was going to 42 Melvott Lane. And he hoped beyond hope he would get there. He hoped *they* wouldn't find him.

Rusty braced his legs on a thin wooden board, praying he didn't fall off. He needed to enter that town, so he leapt, rather foolishly, onto a piece of wood floating on a rill. He ended up in a sewer. Rusty screwed up his nose, trying to, or rather *not* to, smell the sewer. As soon as the river ended and the wood plank got close enough to the side, Rusty leapt off, his paws scabbling on the dirty, slimy cobblestone paths. As soon as he got his footing, he bolted down path after path, as fast as he could without slipping or falling into the water. He came close a few times, skidding to a halt at a dead end or at the edge of a platform he hadn't meant to come to. Eventually, he found a sliver of light, and he managed to wriggle through steel bars, and emerged into the sun. Well, the rain. It was pelting down. To Rusty it felt like stones smacking his head multiple times. Rusty darted back into the sewer, and huddled near the entrance. A newspaper blew in and landed on his face. He sneezed; the paper was very dusty, and it blew off, fluttering a bit before dropping at Rusty's paws. He nosed at it, and as he pawed through it, something caught his eye. He flipped it over by pushing a paw underneath and sliding it over, seeing just the thing he needed. A headline, wet but readable that said:

CATS RESCUED BY THE DOZENS NEAR THE MAIN SEWER

Young boy at 42 Melvott Lane finds stray cats and rescues them with the help of his family and shelter workers.

The rest of the article was illegible, but Rusty found what he needed. He snatched up the paper and was about to slip through the bars when heavy footsteps sounded on top of the sewer.

"He's down there, I'm sure of it." a man's voice said.

Rusty cringed. It was the Organization workers. They found him.

"Let's search it then. What are you waiting for?"

Rusty looked around wildly for an escape. As the *clunk, clunk, clunk* of the footsteps got closer and closer, Rusty was about to give up, when the lights flickered.

They flickered once, twice, and went out. When they came back on, the dog was gone...

Rusty was panting hard as he sprinted through the streets, skidding around corners and leaping over curbs. He glanced behind him, cursing himself for being so reckless. The Organization people were right on his tail, and Rusty cursed himself

once again for being so foolish as to look behind him. He was now stuck in the middle of a wide road. Cars sped towards him, and the Organization employees were cursing angrily from the curb. Rusty paid them no attention, and as a red truck sped towards him, he squeezed his eyes shut and leapt into the air, landing on the hood and jumping to the next car and the next until he reached the other curb. He dangerously slid to the edge of a hood once or twice, but he made it.

He leapt up onto the curb, tumbling onto the sidewalk at a boy's feet. He looked up, knowing who it was even without the robot voice in his head.

Joel Murphy. Age 12. Male.

Rusty ignored the information, and he assumed the boy knew who he was, too.

"Oh, Rusty!" he cried. "I remember my uncle talking about you! White spot at the base of your tail."

By this time, the Organization workers had made it across the road.

"You! Boy! That's *our* dog!"

"He's mine now!" Joel shouted. "He doesn't want you, he came to me!"

One of the men pulled out a gun. "Give. Him. To. Us." he snarled. "This dog cost us millions." "All you see is the money!" Joel spat. "You know what I see? An animal, cold and alone, that is lost, and being hunted like a fugitive."

"He's almost fully *robot* boy. He's emotionless."

Joel laughed. "Emotionless? He seems pretty angry now."

The boy was right. Rusty's ears were shoved back, his teeth were bared, and his fur bristling. A low growl sounded from his throat.

The man with the gun stepped back once, before raising the gun and firing without warning at Joel. Rusty snarled and slammed into Joel, knocking him away. The bullet hit Rusty in the shoulder, and he reeled back and fell, but not before lunging at the man and clamping his jaws down on his arm, knocking the gun out of his hand. The man screamed and wrenched his arm away, running at full tilt with his comrades towards their car.

Rusty collapsed on the ground, and once again, everything slipped away into blackness.

Rusty lay on a wooden porch, basking in the sun. He had his front leg in a sling, and his shoulder was bandaged tight, but he was happy, happier than he had ever been. A butterfly landed on his nose briefly before flying away, and Rusty sighed, smelling the wonderful food Joel's mom was preparing inside. Joel came up to the porch and sat, stroking the dog's ears. Rusty was finally safe, and with safety comes something else.

Home.