

# THE QUARRY

## After Life

Caitlyn Radice

Ink stared down at her exposed metallic forearm. Her eyes travelled up to the jagged scar at her wrist, and she wondered if it was still considered a scar if the skin was synthetic. Frowning, she touched her wrist, and tried to remember if it felt the same when she was human. Her blue eye zoomed in on her elbow joint, focused on the dust that had collected. She decided to clean it properly later on.

Picking up her satchel and slinging it over her shoulder, she shifted a heavy, metal vase so it sat more comfortably against her side. It clinked against a set of little, glass bowls. Today, she had been fairly successful in her search. That is what she did each day: searched the suburban ruins for anything of value. She often found frames with ruined photos. Ink would always stare at the faces in them, despite how sick it made her feel. Leaving these alone, she would collect other household belongings. If she was lucky, she would find jewellery.

Ink had managed to find a paperback today. The pages were yellowed with age and dirt, and the cover looked as though it had been heavily buffed with sandpaper. The title was barely

legible: P de & re udi e. Due to the phasing out of physical books towards the start of the war, one in such good condition would be worth a lot. But Ink would not trade it for anything.

Tugging on the strap of the satchel, she decided that she had searched enough of the suburban ruins for the day, and headed back into the city. The sky behind the remaining buildings was orange with the end of the day. The small number of cyborgs who now inhabited the city had cleaned it up as best they could after the war, but they had not yet been able to rebuild. The skyline often gave Ink the impression of decay. It often felt weirdly hollow.

As she made her way through the crumbled structures of the central city, her reminder popped up in her vision: feel. Two parts of her mind argued with each other, one groaning about how stupid her reminder was, and the other reminding her that she had set it up because it was important. Stopping her walk, she let the breeze trail over her skin and through her hair. She focused on her skin, and tried to feel the heat from the setting sun. Ink thought she felt warmer, though she was unsure if she was only imagining it. She had spent plenty of time in the sun as a human, often in small hidden beaches. The oceans were now completely toxic with waste and chemicals.

Ink swiped away the reminder, feeling a longing for salt and sand. She felt a tug on her bag and immediately spun around to attack the offender. Z, expecting this, grabbed her wrist and stopped her from blowing him up.

‘Easy there, Lightning,’ he gave her a grin.

‘Why do you always do that?’

Z peered into her satchel. ‘You know, there’s no prize for finding the most stuff in one day. What happens when you find all the things there are to be found? What will you do then?’

‘Maybe I’ll make it my personal mission to annoy you all day, as you seem to do for me,’ Ink pulled the bag out of his grasp and continued her walk.

Z laughed and fell into step with her. ‘You headed to Nova’s?’

Ink nodded, and let Z ramble about the day’s happenings. Everything was always so exciting to him. She wondered what the inside of his head might look like. Ink noticed that his brown hair flopped down over his forehead, slightly obscuring his vision.

‘Why do you style your hair that way?’

Z took a second to catch on. ‘I like the way it looks. Don’t you think it looks good?’

Ink shrugged. 'Does it matter how it looks? Doesn't it bother you?'

'No, and no,' Z said with an easy smile. 'Not everyone is as practical as you.' He gestured to her cropped black hair. 'And it took me ages to grow it to this length. Before, I used to have to get a haircut every fortnight.'

'Hm,' Ink replied, looking at him with her natural brown eye. Her right eye—the robotic one—contrasted greatly with it, glowing bright blue. Z's eyes were both blue. The right was the same glowing blue as Ink's, and the left was a natural sky blue. He looked almost completely human in the sunlight.

'Don't act like you don't care about your appearance,' Z said. Ink sighed. 'If you didn't care, why would you get your ears pierced? And don't think I can't see your eyeliner.'

'I get it, Z.'

When Z spoke again, it was with a softer tone than Ink was expecting. 'I know you're mad about your arm being exposed like that.'

Frowning, Ink looked away.

'Hey, I hear the scientists are getting pretty close to testing skin repairs. They'll be able to fix it soon.'

'Yeah, maybe.'

After a few moments of silence, Z said, 'I like your arm the way it is. So does Nova.'

Ink did not respond to this, and they walked in silence to Nova's shop. The shop was a tiny place, located on a narrow street deep in the central city, squashed between two destroyed buildings. Nova lived in the loft above the shop. On the left side, a makeshift food trade was set up in the remains of a restaurant. The other side was only the foundation and one wall of a building. Travellers often set up there to trade. When it rained, weeks would go by without anyone passing through, leaving all of them bored and Nova's store packed with the valuables Ink had collected. Ink and Z were about to let themselves in before they heard a shout from above.

'Nova?' Ink called.

'Up here!' Nova was perched on the gutter above them. 'There was a hole in my roof, I just finished patching it up.'

Nova's store was mostly undamaged, though she had done a lot of repairs since settling in.

'Good, come down,' Ink said, 'I brought you a gift.'

Despite being able to jump down from the roof, Nova climbed down slowly. 'So, you know that hideous floral cat thing? The one that ornament guy gave me a few months back?'

Ink and Z both laughed. Once, a man with only ornamental animals to trade had stayed on the foundation for over a fortnight. He would exchange the ornaments for food. They all found him extremely odd, as he hardly blinked and thought that only prepackaged food was worth trading for, despite it being bad for their bodies.

'Of course,' Z said. 'Completely unforgettable.'

'Well,' Nova hopped down to the ground, 'I *finally* got rid of it today!'

'Did you toss it in the trash, like I told you to?' Ink asked.

'No, someone actually wanted it,' Nova shrugged.

'I wonder what kind of nut-case...' Ink mused, digging through her bag.

Nova peered into the bag with wide eyes, looking more childlike than usual. 'What did you find?'

Ink held up a finger, finding the book beneath the metal vase. She presented it to Nova with false dramatics, before giving her a soft smile.

'No way... Where did you find this?' Nova gently leafed through the yellow pages. 'It's in such good condition... Thank you!'

'It's no big deal, Nova,' Ink said.

Nova shushed her. 'Yes, it is. I'll be right back.'

Ink and Z followed Nova inside the shop, a little bell tinkled as the door opened. As she skipped down through the shelves to put the book with her collection, Ink watched her blonde head disappear into the back room.

Z chuckled. 'It's no big deal, Nova,' he repeated, doing a poor imitation of Ink.

'Shut up, Z,' Ink glared at him.

'You make it so easy,' Z laughed. 'Going all soft when you see her.'

Ink huffed in response.

‘Don’t be mad, at least you have someone.’

‘I do not *have* someone,’ Ink felt exasperated. ‘I just care about her.’

Z rolled his eyes. ‘You do have—’

Ink shushed him as they heard Nova shut the back door. ‘Hey! Guess what Chef brought me today! Ever since they were able to get stable crops growing, he’s been experimenting with recipes.’

She returned carrying a bowl of biscuits. ‘They’re delicious, you have to try one.’

Ink eyed the bowl suspiciously. Z immediately grabbed one, and gave her a look. ‘Oh, come on, Ink. You’re still not doing that anti-food thing, are you?’

‘I’m not *anti*-food,’ Ink said defensively. ‘I just don’t see the point. Just because I have a functioning digestive system doesn’t mean I have to use it.’

‘The point is,’ Z managed around a mouth full of biscuit, ‘that they’re delicious.’

‘You don’t have to have one,’ Nova said, ‘but they are really good.’

‘Come on,’ Z dragged out the words, ‘you’re gonna die of starvation.’

Ink snorted. ‘That’s literally just not going to happen. Unless those biscuits are hiding powerful explosives, none of us are going anywhere.’

Z sighed theatrically, holding out a biscuit to her. ‘Enough with the doom and gloom. Just eat the damn biscuit.’

‘Only to shut you up.’ Ink took it from him. She took a tentative bite. It was crumbly, with a citrusy flavour. Lemons. It was not really sweet nor savoury. She thought it may have been something she would have enjoyed before. Both of her friends were looking at her expectantly. Ink shrugged. ‘It’s good.’

Z cheered dramatically. Ink rolled her eyes at him. Nova caught her eye and smiled.

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When the sun had long disappeared beyond the horizon, Nova was immersed in her new paperback and Z was looking through a deck of faded tarot cards. Ink, having finished stocking the shelves with her latest finds, climbed up to the loft and helped herself to another biscuit.

Z pulled himself up and stretched. 'Time for bed.'

'Do you want to stay here tonight?' Nova asked.

'Nah, don't want my neighbours to worry.'

'Ink? Are you going to stay?' Nova asked both of them to stay almost every night. Ink thought that she might not like staying by herself, or that she worried for them. Either way, Ink usually declined.

'Um, yeah,' Ink said, 'if that's okay?'

'Of course it is.' Nova's smile was bright, but Ink was sure she saw a glimpse of relief in her eyes.

Z raised his eyebrows at Ink from the doorway. 'See you tomorrow.'

'Bye, Z!' Nova called as the door swung shut.

Ink sat by the window and watched him walk out into the quiet main street. She considered what he had said earlier, about her having someone, and wondered whether that was something he thought about often.

'Tea?' Nova had moved to the small kitchen.

'Please.'

Ink watched as Nova filled the kettle. 'Will you be alright on the couch?'

'Yeah, that's fine,' Ink nodded. She was unsure about whether she would sleep. She just knew she did not want to be alone after the nightmare she had suffered through the night before. Ink had seen herself waking up, being addressed by her code: NK653, and told that she had completed the transition from human to cyborg. The scene changed from a man thanking her for her service, to her standing in the middle of a burning city, sending buildings crumbling with blue heat from her palms. She remembered hearing a voice inside her begging her to stop. The dream ended when her attacks turned to people, and it had shocked her awake.

Ink's system shuddered at the memory.

'You okay?' Nova asked, handing her a chipped mug.

Ink nodded. Silence settled between them as Nova went back to her book. After a long while, Ink decided to ask what was on her mind. 'Do you ever... feel bad?'

Nova gave her a questioning look.

'Like, guilty? For things you did?'

Nova thought for a moment, then closed the book. 'Sometimes, but it's not our fault.'

'Isn't it?' Ink asked. 'We signed up for it.'

'We did,' Nova nodded, 'but we couldn't have known it would end up like this.'

Ink shook her head. 'We should have known. There was no other way.'

'The humans set off the En-X, not us. They destroyed themselves, and we were under their control. We didn't know what we were doing.'

'But we did,' Ink argued. 'I knew when I signed up. Just because I, personally, didn't set off the gas doesn't mean I didn't play a part in it. I can't sleep without seeing the horrible things I did. The faces of people...'

'You can't blame yourself for the whole war. Everyone thought they were doing what was right. Just because it turned out like this doesn't mean it couldn't have turned out differently.'

Ink started to feel irritated. 'But it didn't turn out differently. We helped cause Earth-wide human extinction. We are responsible for that. I can't just *pretend* to be a human when I killed them.' Ink looked down at her metal forearm. 'I'm not even human. None of us are.'

'Okay, so we're responsible for it,' Nova said. 'There's nothing we can do about it now. We were human. Before this. Part of that is still in you.'

Ink did not have a response to this. Nova got up and sat next to her. Grabbing one of Ink's hands, Nova held it tight and looked her in the eyes. Ink ignored the glowing blue on the right and looked into Nova's hazel eye.

'I know you don't see the point,' Nova said, 'but we're what's left. It's not all bad, so why shouldn't we try to make a life? We can't die, we can't have children, it's just us. Unless a meteor hits the earth and destroys us.' Ink cracked a smile at that. 'Don't put so much pressure on yourself to feel a certain way.'

Ink nodded. *It's not all bad.* She mulled over this, wondering if it were true, and let the silence settle for a few long moments before breaking it. 'Do you remember much about being human?'

'Some things,' Nova paused for a moment. 'I remember collecting stuff. Books. Candles. I had so many candles. I used to have this one that smelled like cherries and flowers and sunset. I never burned it because I wanted to save it for a special occasion.' Nova cuddled herself closer to Ink. 'Do you remember anything?'

'Some things,' Ink repeated. 'I used to love soaps. And lotions. Anything that made my skin smell nice. And I never wanted kids. Just pets.'

'That sounds nice,' Nova smiled.

Nova made more tea, and they spoke until the sun started to rise. Ink found herself pulled into Nova's arms, her head resting against Nova's shoulders. Nova eventually fell asleep with her empty mug in her lap. As Ink planned where she would go that day, the sinking feeling of guilt washed over her. She would have to see their destruction. Possibly her own destruction.

Placing her empty mug on the window sill, she found a rag and started to clean her exposed elbow joint. As she polished it, she contemplated not going out to the ruins, and doing something different with her time. Ink gazed out the window as the sun climbed into the sky, and thought that maybe Nova was right: it might not be all bad.