

THE QUARRY

Twenty Percent

Jasmine Aird

His body arcs through the air, slamming into the brick wall. I wince. The part of me that once felt pain is fairly certain that would hurt.

‘Bitch,’ he says, spitting blood on the asphalt. He glares at me, something that might have been more menacing if his eyes weren’t puffy and blue.

He rises to his feet and manages—despite the state he’s in—to pull a knife from his boot. Why can’t they ever just stay down? He stumbles towards me, half falling, like the drunks I see leaving the Serpent’s Nest at 3 am. I take pity. I’ll make this quick. I bring my right fist up and pop him squarely on the nose. Metal bites bone. He slumps down, face landing in a puddle. This time he stays there.

I pull out my pistol and shoot him once in the back of the head.

He deserves this, I remind myself, as I attempt to scrape off a stray piece of brain matter, which is sticking like gum to the edge of my boot. He’s one of them—a Purist. They all deserve this.

As I stand over the man's body, I catch my reflection in the puddle. At first, she looks almost normal: a tall woman in her twenties with choppy hair that falls to her chin. Then you notice something's off, something's different. Perhaps it's the lack of pigmentation, freckles and body hair. Or maybe it's the newly formed gash on her right arm stretching from elbow to wrist; the synthetic flesh peels away exposing the titanium alloy underneath. It's a good thing he went for my right arm instead of my left. If he had cut my left arm then he would have drawn blood.

'Well done Eve,' Alfie's voice chimes in my ear. If I turn the dial beneath my earlobe I can adjust his accent and language. Today he's British, tomorrow he'll probably be South African. These are the things I do for amusement.

'Maybe this time I'll get paid,' I say, as I light up a smoke, a habit that Alfie disapproves of despite the fact that it cannot harm the synthetic tissue in my lungs.

'I'm afraid that's unlikely, as 80% of your body is composed of Genesis technology, you are only 20% human and are therefore classified by state law as property. Genesis is not in the habit of paying its property.'

'I was being sarcastic, Alfie.'

'I am not programmed to detect sarcasm. I do however know several jokes. Would you like to hear one?'

'That won't be necessary,' I say, as I pull out a hipflask—another habit that Alfie disapproves of—and begin pouring the whisky over the body.

I close my eyes for a moment of silence. Like raising a glass or lighting a candle, this is my small way of paying tribute to the dead—whether they deserve it or not. Once, I might have crossed myself or bowed my head in prayer. But those days are over; I abandoned such beliefs shortly after my transmutation. It's difficult to hold out for an afterlife when my current state of purgatory isn't exactly heaven. So instead, I suck down the last draw of my cigarette, flick the lit end onto the corpse and turn away.

The alley falls behind me as I begin manoeuvring my way through a series of back streets. The night air brushes over me, raising hairs on my left arm—my human arm. There are no streetlights in this part of Eden, not that I need one. My cat eyes slip into UV vision, pouring over the alleyway, revealing its secrets, like the urine staining the vandalised brickwork and the semen spattered across the cement. I cringe. If I had a stomach it would be turning.

‘I’m sending you the coordinates for your next mission,’ Alfie says. ‘Your objective is to interrogate the merchant, Abel Zane. He’s a known Purist sympathiser. Genesis suspects he’s in league with your targets.’

‘Who’s the target?’

‘A Purist, who has recently been involved in the infiltration and destruction of a large shipment of Genesis tech. Your orders are to dispatch of the target.’

Dispatch. A small part of me, the part that’s still human, grows uneasy at these words. I swallow her down—along with a healthy nip from my flask—and nod my head.

‘And Eve, if you fail to complete this mission then according to Genesis protoc—’

‘You’ll pull my plug, I know, you tell me every time.’

I turn the corner onto the main drag. The City of Eden draws me in like a cigarette. My eyes are immersed in colour. The browns and greys of the alleyway peel away to reveal a world doused in LED light. High-rise buildings line each side of the street, their spires slice through the smog which hangs over the city like a bad cold you can’t shake. Billboards and digital signage layer the buildings like body armour. The flashing lights and whirling colours cloud even my enhanced vision. I feel a headache coming on. Yes, I still get those.

I begin walking down the street, wading my way through the sea of people. I’m not interested in what’s above, I’m interested in what lies beneath. The cacophony of the Night Bazaar cocoons me. Stall after stall is pitched on the pavement. Merchants stand to attention, exchanging goods for digits, hollering to anyone who passes. I see one woman examining a pile of crinkled silks and another man sizing up a heavy phase rifle. Illegal, yes, but who’s going to stop him? The police stroll by with their hands in their pockets; they don’t care what’s sold so long as the merchants give them their cut.

‘Eve, I urge you to take caution, recent data suggests that there is a strong presence of Purist sympathisers in this sector of Eden.’

‘You don’t say,’ I reply, as I notice a Genesis billboard above me. The fruit-bearing tree—which is Genesis’ corporate logo—has been vandalised. Splayed across the trunk, in blood-red letters, is the Purist motto:

FORBIDDEN FRUIT

Genesis will not be pleased—and neither am I. If I'm not careful, I'll be nothing more than a burning pile of circuits and wires. I unroll my sleeves, pull my hood down over my head and continue walking.

I pass a spice merchant's tent. The scents of sumac, saffron and garlic waft through the air. I wrinkle my nose—I still have one of those, though the sensory receptors in my nostrils more closely resemble a dog's than they do a human. I spy a hooded pair of men standing in a darkened corner between stalls, dealing in who knows what illicit substance. The underbelly of Eden comes to life in the bazaar. Anything can be bought here—for the right price.

'Love, who wants some love? Swallow this pill and you'll be swooning!' a man calls from his stall, as I turn into a quieter section of the markets. I stop and pretend to examine his goods. Bottled pills in every colour line his table, each promising a different emotion. And they say I'm the one who can't feel.

'How about some love for the lovely lady?' the merchant asks, stroking his beard.

'While I'm fresh out of love, that's not what I'm in the market for, Abel,' I say as I lower my hood.

'Just as well,' he sneers, realising what I am. His left hand disappears beneath the counter, probably in search of a weapon. 'Your kind aren't welcome here, mutt.'

'Come now, that's no way to make friends. All I want to do is talk, you have information I need.'

'I said you're not wel—'

'And I said you have information.' I reach out and wrap my fingers around his neck. If I squeeze tight enough his bones will pop. 'Drop your weapon.'

He obeys, his left-hand reappearing above the counter.

'Where are they?'

‘I don’t know wha—’

‘Where are they?’ I tighten my grip and his face turns red. A man from a nearby stall turns his head.

Abel’s mouth flattens into a hard line, an expression I recognise all too well. This one will be a tough nut to crack. I’ll have to try a different tactic. My eyes roll over the contents of his stall. Behind the counter—sandwiched between two bottles of neon green pills—is a picture frame.

‘She’s beautiful,’ I say, nodding towards the frame where a little girl, roughly five years of age, is spinning around in circles. ‘I bet she’s very dear to you.’

‘Okay, okay.’ He raises his palms up, pleading. I release him. That was easy.

He rubs his neck as he gives me the address. I lean in towards him, so close that I can smell his dinner on his breath. ‘Thanks for the tip-off. And remember, I know your face... and hers.’ Abel quivers as I turn away.

‘Now that I’ve given you what you want, can Genesis guarantee our safety?’ he calls after my retreating form.

‘I’m afraid not,’ I say, as I continue walking. ‘We don’t negotiate with Purists.’

I turn back onto the main drag, heading for the exit. I spot another cyborg as I’m walking. His legs move in stiff strides like a marching soldier, though he’s no fighter: his clothes are covered in plaster and dust. He’s probably a tradesman, a blue-collared worker. Maybe he injured himself once; had a bad fall or was hit by a bus. Then, some company swooped in and patched him up. Now he works for free, just like me. Though, judging by his parts—which are primitive at best—he’s no piece of Genesis tech, just a cheap knockoff. His head isn’t hooded either, so he’s easy to pick out of the crowd. And I’m not the only one who sees him.

‘Abomination!’ one woman screams.

‘Mongrel!’ another man spits.

I watch, from beneath my hood, as heads begin to turn and people start to notice him. They move forward, circling him, like a pack of wolves playing with its prey. He tries to push past them but it’s no use. They lunge at him: kicking, shoving and spitting. Even with his outdated parts he is stronger than them, not that it helps—he’s outnumbered.

I take a step forward.

‘I strongly advise against that,’ Alfie says. ‘If you were to proceed with that course of action I cannot foresee any possible outcome that would result in your survival.’

As much as I’d like to ignore this prediction, I obey, and step back, clenching my fists. I watch the cyborg struggle against the crowd; his outstretched fingers reach above them, grasping at the air as if he’s a drowning man who is trying to break the surface. Yet he only succeeds in being pulled further beneath.

‘I hate them, Alfie,’ I say, as one man draws a Hot Blade from his coat. He raises the weapon and slashes at the cyborg; the edge of the blade pulses with thermal energy as he brings it down, severing a metallic limb.

‘It would appear the feeling is mutual,’ Alfie says, as the man raises the prosthetic above his head, holding it up like a trophy.

The crowd cheers and rushes forward, following suit. They tear at the cyborg with anything they can get their hands on: knives, fingers and even teeth. Two officers stand off to the side of the rabble with their hands on their hips. They don’t move. They don’t intervene. They don’t have to. A cyborg is property, not a human. Property damage is punishable by corporate security, not the police. According to the law, no crime is being committed.

There’s nothing I can do here except stand aside and be useless, so I turn away and continue walking.

‘This is taking forever, Alfie,’ I say, as I drop my cigarette into the growing pile of butts that lay at my feet. ‘I should just go in.’

I’m hidden in the alcove of an old printing factory, which, like most of its kind, had shut down years before. Across the street, a number of shadows move behind a closed set of blinds. I can see them, but they can’t see me; I have the element of surprise. Now would be the perfect opportunity.

‘You overestimate your abilities, Eve. I am detecting a number of human beings present within the building. You have one target, not twenty.’

Movement stirs across from me. The doors open and a pair of men saunter out, heading for their vehicle. I recognise my target from the footage Alfie sent me; a tall man with shaggy blonde hair. The two men hop into their car, an old model that doesn't fly. I guess Purists don't get paid much either.

They start the engine and take off down the street. I follow their vehicle, which isn't difficult—I had placed a tracker underneath the rear bumper while I was waiting. After several blocks, I arrive outside a dingy building, which looks—in polite terms—like a well-functioning crack house.

'Eve, my data confirms that this property belongs to Abel Zane.'

'The merchant?' I say as I pull out my pistol. 'I guess they found out we spoke.'

I cross the street and slip inside. Despite the building's rough exterior, I'm standing in a typical family home, complete with children's toys and school photos.

'Please, don't hurt us, it wasn't my fault, they threatened my daughter!'

Bang.

I race into the kitchen, where, I can see, Abel has been shot. He leans against the wall, holding his side, which is bleeding heavily. My target is standing over him, gun raised and ready for round two.

I'm about to intervene when I spot the other Purist reaching beneath the kitchen table. He yanks at the ankle of the little girl, who kicks him in the face with a fluoro pink boot. I raise my gun towards this man and shoot. He slumps down onto the tiles, leaving the girl alone.

My target's attention snaps towards me, followed by his gun. He fires, which is a waste of time; the bullets bounce off my chest like oil from a hot pan. He fires again and again and again. I stand there and take it, like a boxer takes a punch, waiting for him to run out of ammo. He reaches the last bullet; it cuts through the air and slams into my left arm—my human arm. I cry out in pain, something I haven't felt since I was human. I stare down at the torn flesh. That's going to leave a mark.

I raise my gun and shoot. He hits the floor and stays there.

'My target is dead, Alfie,' I say, as I press down on my arm, applying pressure to the wound.

'Genesis requires that you dispatch of all the Purists present.'

‘And the kid?’ I ask, holding my breath.

‘She is not a Purist.’

I exhale and walk across the room to stand over Abel’s slumped form. He glares at me as I raise my gun towards his head. He’s still holding his side, not that this helps—he’ll bleed out within minutes without proper medical attention. I glance at his daughter, who is peering at me from beneath the table, her face wet with tears. I could still let him go, for her sake, if not for his. Perhaps, if he somehow made it to the nearest hospital—and Genesis didn’t already have someone else there waiting for him—he might live. I would die, of course. My dear friend Alfie would have my plug pulled in seconds. But maybe this is bigger than that. Maybe this is bigger than me.

‘Damn you, mutt,’ he spits.

But then again, maybe not. A part of me screams. I swallow her down and pull the trigger.