

'Hey, you – prettygirl curlylocks,' Grey leaned around the fire and fixed her eyes on Ottie. They were small, sharp, and dark. 'Fix me another bowl of stew.'

Ottie straightened up. Grey held out her bowl. Her arm rippled in the heat.

'I'm sorry?'

'You heard,' Grey jabbed the bowl in Ottie's direction. 'I'll give you ten seconds to get your idle arse over here.'

Ottie glanced at the faces around the fire. Nobody stopped eating. Green smirked. Orange, his face streaked with dust and tears, began to cry again. Red stopped by the mule, her eyes glazed.

'Get your own,' said Ottie, her voice weak.

Grey whistled through her teeth. 'Get that guys?' she glanced around the fire. 'The newbie doesn't like to help.'

Grey stood up slowly. She towered over the fire. Her shoulders were as broad as a man's, her limbs thickset. She'd peeled back the top half of her suit so that it fell around her waist like a flayed skin, the empty arms flapping at her calves. Grey's arms and chest were covered in tattoos, some of them intricate works of laser-art that pulsed and writhed like animated cartoons, others holograms that sensed her mood and leapt into the air fizzling and crackling in the firelight. The tattoos on her knuckles looked as though she'd done them herself with a hypodermic and bottle of ink left over from the old world. Ottie felt her throat stick itself together and her mouth go suddenly dry. Grey began to walk around the fire towards her.

Ottie stirred the stew on her lap, but her hunger had vanished into a fearful queasiness that she last remembered feeling when she'd been caught with the tags in the mall. Something blocked out the heat and light, and Ottie pulled her eyes from her bowl and traced up Grey's thick legs, past the bulky torso to the folded arms. A holo tattoo of a blood-soaked warrior smirked at her from Grey's forearm. It began to chant: 'You're going to die! You're going to die!' in a lispy whisper. Ottie's bowl slipped off her knee and landed in the dirt by her feet. Underneath it,

something squealed and wriggled off under the leaf mould, leaving a trail of upturned mulch in its wake.

'I said I wanted a refill of stew, Yellow, you deaf bitch. Now go get my bowl from my seat and refill it for me.'

Ottie swallowed. Her throat jammed up.

'No,' she whispered.

*What?*

Grey bent forwards and pushed her face into Ottie's. The skin around her eyes wrinkled with fury, reminding Ottie of the lizards in the Zoological Zone, the ones that'd been caught on the tallest vine tips and raised in captivity.

'I'll ask you one last time. Go fetch my bowl and fill it, or I'll mash your face in and string you up in the vines, fucking retard.'

Something moved in the leaf litter beside Ottie's foot. In one deft movement, she twisted sideways and thrust her hand into the dirt. She grabbed whatever it was. It squealed shrilly. Startled, Grey shot upright. Ottie lifted the thrashing creature and threw it into Grey's face. Grey roared. Scraps of leaf mould rained around her like black confetti and she staggered back. The thing clung to the bridge of her nose by its pincers, its long, segmented body writhing like a child's solar-powered toy. Blood dripped down Grey's cheeks and she tottered backwards into the fire, screaming and falling out of it again, showers of sparks and fiery detritus whirling around. Grey's hands rose to her face, first pulling at the tail of the creature, then clawing her ears in pain as it gripped tighter the more she pulled. The shocked tattoos leapt from her forearms and gathered in a defensive cluster, yelling abuse at the creature, stabbing it with vapid knives and axes.

'What the fuck *is* that thing?' somebody hissed as the others crowded closer.

Grey rolled around in the leaf mould howling with pain, her cheeks a mask of red. The thing on her face stopped thrashing, and arched its tapering rear. It paused, as though aiming, then brought down the tip of its abdomen onto Grey's

neck again and again with savage stabbing motions. Each movement was accompanied by a howl from Grey, whose voice became progressively softer. The tattoos began to blanch of colour and slow down, their voices dying away. One by one, they returned to their places on Grey's pallid skin and lay down, motionless.

'It's stinging her,' said Red, inching closer and stooping over Grey's prone body. 'Fucking thing is stinging the bitch to bits...'

Ottie began to sob. Grey's heel dug into the earth and she inched herself backwards feebly. Her leg flopped over onto the ground and she stopped moving.

'Mule, we need help over here,' yelled Orange, his delicate voice showing surprising control. 'Medical emergency!'

The mule's ear swivelled, but it made no response.

'Mule,' snarled Blue, 'we need some fucking help.'

'Please.' Ottie's voice was weak and squeaky.

Above the camp, the silhouetted figure of the Overseer watched from his bivouac window, hands on hips.

'He's seen what's happened,' Ottie blurted, pointing.

Somebody pushed her out of the way and she fell. Red knelt by Grey's prone body and put her hands to the creature. With a deft twist, she dislodged its pincers and threw it into the surrounding undergrowth, still writhing. Grey was bathed in shadow, her tortured features barely visible. Ottie pulled the closest lamp out of the ground and hurried to Grey's side. She knelt and held it over Grey's face. The woman's features were barely recognisable. Shreds of skin hung from the bridge of her nose and forehead, and her neck was swollen to twice its size. Her eyes were bruised shut, the lids fleshy paps. Ottie stuck the lamp shaft into the earth. It toppled, casting a cold laser of light across Grey's body. Ottie scrambled to her feet and grabbed Grey's boots.

'Help me,' she panted, 'get her to the mule.'

Somebody grabbed Grey's torso and two others her arms, and together they dragged her back into the clearing, past the fire pit, whose base had splurged beyond its confines. Bits of burning flotsam glowed from the closest box-seats. Ottie dumped Grey's heels at the foot of the mulebot and straightened up, gasping.

'Please help,' she said.

The mule's sensor eyes flickered as though mulling it over.

'Please,' said Ottie. 'This is my fault... I never meant to...'

A mini-scan protruded from one of the mule's metal nostrils and extended over the woman's prone body.

'Grey has sustained a nasty bite and several stings,' it said. 'The scan results will help me to understand the full extent of the damage.'

The scanner beeped and sent holograms spinning around the mule's head. The readings went into the red zone and flashed alerts so bright they made Ottie flinch.

'Venom,' stated the mule. 'While we have not identified every species of venomous creature on the forest floor, we have the ability to assess the venom and to produce an antidote. There are a finite number of toxins known to humankind. This particular blend will cause multiple organ failure within ten minutes if left untreated.'

'No fucking way,' Green said with enthusiasm. 'And you threw that thing into her face?' he addressed Ottie, brows furrowed with something that could've been disgust or equally, awe. 'Fucking evil bitch. Remind me to laser lock my hammock tonight.'

Ottie opened her mouth to speak then closed it again. The mule's scanner arm morphed into an injector, and administered a shot to Grey's neck. She didn't respond. Her eyes were closed, the lids flooded with blood, her skin strangely sallow in the silvery flare light. The tattoos lay flat and lifeless on her skin.

'Move aside, team,' the Overseer pushed through the bodies, voice heavy with resignation. 'I saw exactly what happened. Clear the way.'

'Then why didn't you fucking help?' Blue snapped. 'I mean, she could be dead, y'know?'

The mule's eyes flickered white, and Blue gasped and hit the ground with a thud.

'I don't take kindly to bad language, especially when directed at me,' said the Overseer. 'Let that be a lesson to those who forget you all wear a collar for a reason.'

Blue lay in the leaves on his side, writhing. His hands reached gingerly to his neck. He gasped and coughed. Slowly, he pulled himself to his knees and staggered up.

The mule's head split open and a surgical unit slid out. It positioned itself over Grey's head and shone a light into her face. Several thin prosthetic limbs began swabbing and stitching. The team's watching faces were up-lit, transformed into sinister mannequins with sallow flesh and hollowed eyes. Ottie winced as Grey began to bleed again. Red leaned closer, enraptured. Orange began to recite a children's prayer.

'You – you touched that thing,' Ottie whispered to Red. 'How did you get its pincers off?'

'I've dealt with worse,' hissed Red.