

Endangered

Chapter One

You're dead. Dead, dead, fuckity-fucking dead. My panicked thoughts, stuck on a one-note loop, drowned out the echo of my footsteps and ragged, panting breath. *Break out through the lower lab. Great idea! Mission accomplished. Now you're dead. Dead, dead, dead...*

Unprompted, the memory of the cold storage lab resurfaced. No matter how I tried those bleak, soulless faces watched me. I could make out every detail of their naked and withered flesh. Bodies, human and arranged neatly in makeshift freezer caskets, lined the room all the way to the emergency exit. I didn't know why they were there. Or why they were dead. And presently, I didn't care, because in a few precious minutes the power would restart and my body would join them.

Get a grip! The thought, a welcomed change from the endless loop of death and despair, jarred me back to reality. The logical part of my brain returned, at last. *No time to remember; just escape!*

I focused on the name of each door as I passed, trying to regain my bearings. I was past the records room and halfway through the southwest corridor. The equipment repair shop, my destination, was one level down and the third to the last door on the right. I rounded the final corner and darted down a long flight of stairs. The power jumpstarted as I hit the bottom tier. My attempt to short-circuit the system had bought time, but by now the entire outer perimeter would be on lockdown.

There were footsteps above me. They were still a ways off, at the top of the staircase by the sounds of it, but gaining fast. The image of the bodies crept back into my mind. If I didn't pull this off it'd be me dead and bloated on that freezer block. Spurred by this revelation, I flew past the first door and then the second; the third, fourth and fifth were all but a blur. My heart jumped when I saw it. *Equipment Repair - Faculty Only*—it spelled out in large, alien characters.

By the time I saw the sanitation bot and its pool of glistening slime, it was too late to stop. My feet hit the slick floor and shot out from under me. I landed face-first with a sickening crack and a burst of white pain flooded my vision. The hallway shifted out of focus as I attempted to regain my footing. My legs buckled beneath me, dropping my aching body back into the wet grime.

I froze, realizing I could hear the light, panting breath of my pursuer as he drew nearer. It was over. He'd caught me. Stifling a moan, I eased onto my knees and awaited the inevitable. To get up and run would be useless now. The beast was close enough to catch me. I was already dead. I didn't need to give him an excuse to make it any more painful than necessary.

"Put your hands where I can see them."

"Or what," I said, "you'll kill me?"

“Looks like you got that covered.” Despite his harsh tone, I detected a hint of underlying concern. Too bad it wasn’t enough to save me. The guard continued, “What’d you do to your face, Meatbag?”

“I slipped.” My fingertips gently explored the area around my nose. It stung, but I supposed it didn’t matter. After all, as my inner monologue kept so kindly reminding me, I was mere moments from going the same way as the rest of humankind. *Farewell meaningless existence. ‘Cause now you’re dead, dead, fuckity-fucking dead...*

He was close, standing over me from the sounds of it. “So?”

Ash wasn’t known for his sympathetic side. I wasn’t about to take it personally, either. The last thing I wanted was an eight foot, three-hundred pound alien consoling me. “Not that you care, but I think I broke my nose.”

“Seriously?” He was crouched alongside me now, gently pulling my red-stained hands from my face. “And you didn’t let me do it? How inconsiderate.”

I parted my fingers enough to glare at him. “Get your filthy claws off me.”

“I need to see the damage, Nix.” He spoke in a hushed, gentle voice. It was anything but comforting. No predator his size had any right to speak so soothingly. The guard’s gargantuan hands pried my fingers back. “You know it’ll be my hide to pay if you broke something.”

“Don’t touch me!”

Ash caught my wrists and mopped at the blood with the corner of his sleeve. “By Gwengrove’s hammer, will you be still? I don’t know what’s gotten into you, Meatbag.”

I lashed out with my legs, desperate to postpone the inevitable for even a moment longer. “I told you to back off!”

“What are you going to do, bleed on me?”

“You can cut the crap, Ash. I know about the bodies. I saw them with my own fucking eyes!”

A glimpse of alarm crossed his fearsome face. The head of security released my hands and settled back onto his haunches, draping his lanky arms over his knees. “You weren’t supposed to see that,” he admitted, after a pause.

“Oh really, you think?” An acidic burn crawled to the back of my throat and flooded my mouth. It took all of my willpower not to throw up right then and there. I didn’t, though. I couldn’t. I’d die clinging to whatever dignity I had left. “So what’ll it be? Are you going to off me right here or do you make me suffer first?”

“You can’t be serious,” he said, in that deep, monotonous fashion of his. “Is that what this is about? It’s not what you think, Nix. We didn’t kill them. They came to us like that.”

“You expect me to believe that?”

“The whole purpose of this damned facility is to protect the human species. Killing you might be a little counterproductive, don’t you think?” the guard said. “And in case it didn’t occur to you, it’s a whole lot easier studying the disease on something that’s already dead from it.”

His words took a moment to settle. And then I felt stupid, mortified even. Once again I’d overreacted, letting my paranoia get the best of me. I buried my face, too embarrassed to meet his stare. “Shit.”

“Stay put.” He rose and activated the communicator attached to his ear, waiting for someone to pick up the other end. “I found her,” he said at last. “Bleeding all over the place like someone gutted her, too.”

I couldn’t hear the reply, but that didn’t stop me from clinging to Ash’s every word.

“Me? No,” the guard said after an intermittent pause. “She tripped and broke her nose, I think. I don’t know. I can’t really tell.” His feline eyes roved back over me. “That’s not even the best part. She got out through the basement lab. You’re going to love what she saw.”

A part of me suddenly yearned for a swift death. Ash’s taunting aside, I was in deep. While it was not uncommon for me to attempt an escape now and then, I’d never gotten this far. Or, perhaps more importantly, short-circuited the security system in the process.

“Here.” The guard unclipped the device and shoved it at me. “Malvic wants to talk to you.”

I snapped it between my fingers. For such vital equipment, communicators were remarkably fragile. “It can wait.”

“That was brilliant, Phoenix,” he said, baring his fangs. “I wouldn’t push my luck if I were you.”

I was back to feeling my nose. “I think we passed that point when I fried the system.”

Evidently Ash was not in the mood to discuss it. “Can you walk?”

“I have legs don’t I?”

“I’m considering breaking them if you don’t get up this instant.”

Obediently, I bit back my tongue and stood. Dignity, alas, was simply not in the cards. I managed an entire two, shaky steps before the damn slime felled me a second time. With a sigh, Ash heaved my deadweight from the floor and helped steady my trembling body. A surge of adrenaline coursed through my veins. I felt my chest tighten. My heart pumped furiously as I slowly reached for the holster strapped to his side. This was definitely the stupidest thing I’d ever attempted.

“Hey Ash,” I said, “don’t take this personally, okay?”

“This is your second escape attempt this month, Meatbag. Since when have I ever taken offense?”

“You might this time.” I pressed the gun to his stomach and pulled the trigger.

Ash looked to the smoldering hole in his uniform and then back at me, all four eyes wide with disbelief. An agonized scream seeped from his clenched jaws as he slowly sank to his knees. The eight foot creature crumpled under his own weight, his body now strewn lifelessly across the bloody tile.

“Thanks, Ashy.” I snatched the keycard from around his neck and patted his muzzle. “The system rebooted faster than expected. There’s no way I could’ve gotten past this door without you.”

I slid his identification badge into the lock and slipped quietly into the darkness of the repair room. Every precious second counted now. The tranquilizer surging through Ash’s system was calibrated for a human. It’d only be a few short minutes before the dose wore off and then he’d be back on my trail, out for blood. I jammed the emergency exit open and for the first time in three years, stepped out into the cold night air.

The panicked thoughts picked up where they’d left off—*go, go go! Or you’re dead, dead, dead!*

My feet were heavy and my head throbbed, but I pressed forward. I crossed the cluttered maintenance yard and slipped through a tear in the fence, wincing as the broken metal prongs tore at my skin. I was on the lower docking platform now. Here, the larger projects sat waiting to be dismantled and scrapped for parts.

I sprinted towards a decrepit cargo loader, skirting the large, congealed pools of engine runoff that littered the platform. As the navigation unit was left rusting on the ground beside it, I doubted the loader worked. Still, I was desperate and running short of options. I yanked at the latch and the entire door slid free with a grating screech. I winced, knowing I’d just advertised my position to the entire platform.

“Found you, maggot!”

My heart leapt into the back of my throat as I looked up, spying the hulking shape that lumbered towards me. I dropped the hatch door and ran. The guard’s footsteps thundered against the platform as each powerful stride steadily closed the gap between us. I double-checked the firearm in my jacket, all while cursing management for not equipping their staff with something more powerful. While the tranquilizer was able to knock Ash unconscious, it would do little against this newcomer. The alien behemoth tearing after me was armored. It would take a well-placed shot between his scaled hide to have any effect, and that was an opportunity I wasn’t going to hang around for.

I didn’t dare look back. I knew he was gaining. Dark liquid sloshed underfoot as I crashed headlong through a pool of runoff. My foot plunged into a crack beneath the surface and I stumbled. Four scaled hands grabbed at my flesh as the alien hurtled into the puddle of murky slime on top of me. I screamed and thrashed but my efforts were useless against his enormous weight.

A heavy hand pressed onto my neck, forcing my face beneath the surface. “How the hell did you get this far outside?”

I opened my mouth to scream and got a mouthful of sludge instead.

“Did you actually think you’d get away?” he said, pressing harder onto the base of my skull. “Maybe this’ll teach you to stay put.”

I managed to shriek around the grime that clotted my mouth. It sounded no more than a gargled whimper. Panic set in. No matter how I squirmed, I couldn’t get my head back above surface. My lungs were on fire. Time blurred and my eyes flickered shut as suffocation enveloped me. Darkness was closing in and I could feel my consciousness slipping.

“Jenketh, let her up.”

The crushing weight lifted. My head shot upwards with a panicked gasp, sucking in air. I crawled out of the sludge and coughed black liquid from my lungs. Too exhausted to move any further, I collapsed against the cold pavement.

“What?” Jenketh snarled. “I was only teaching the maggot a lesson.”

“Your job is to prevent escape, not kill her.”

My captors continued to argue above me, but I lost interest. My head was swimming and all I wanted was to close my eyes. After that, everything grew dimmer.

“Nix?”

My eyelids lifted. I realized I’d unknowingly drifted off. It was quiet now. The arguing had stopped. Groaning, I rolled onto my side and strained to identify the blurred outline of my rescuer. “Oh, fuck.”

Ash’s green, feline eyes stared unflinchingly back at me. Wordlessly, the guard eased his body into a sitting position, keeping one hand firmly pressed to his midsection. The stun charge had done more damage than I’d anticipated. The weapon was meant to be fired from a short distance. Shooting him pointblank had obviously done more.

“I sent Jenketh to get a shuttle. We don’t have much time.”

I scrambled upright, but didn’t speak. I didn’t dare test him now. Injured or not, Ash was still capable of crushing me into the ground if he wanted.

“Give me the gun and identification badge,” Ash instructed through gritted teeth.

If anything, I owed him an unprotested surrender. I placed both objects onto the ground with care, as if it were a sacred offering.

He stowed them into his jacket with less ceremony, keeping his cold gaze fixed on me. “No one’s going to know about this. Neither of us would benefit if they found out what you did. I’d lose my title. And you, well I think you have a pretty good idea what they’d do to you.” Ash winced, lifting his hand from the dark burn on his stomach. “If you ever try something this stupid again I’ll cram you down the darkest, dankest hole I can find and leave you to rot. Understood?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“By Gwengrove’s hammer,” the guard cursed, applying a patch to the wound. “I should’ve let Jenketh drown your ass.”

“Ash.” I couldn’t explain the sudden twinge in the pit of my stomach. It’d taken years to build a rapport with him. Shooting the head of security had understandably destroyed whatever it was we shared. Of course it was the wasted time, not relationship, I mourned. “I’m sorry.”

“Save your apologies for Malvic.”

Neither of us spoke after that. The shuttle arrived and I let Ash put me into the back and adjust the restraints without a fight. I was already too numb to protest. It wouldn’t have made a difference anyways. The Sanctuary would always win. No matter how hard I tried, how cunningly I plotted and planned, they always caught me. I rolled my head back and watched the stars gradually disappear from sight, knowing it’d be the last I saw of them.