



Breakout (The Dred Chronicles Book 3)

By Ann Aguirre

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All hell is breaking loose in the edge-of-your-seat follow-up to *Havoc* and *Perdition* from *New York Times* bestselling author Ann Aguirre...

The prison ship *Perdition* has become a post-battle charnel house with only a handful of Dred's soldiers still standing and now being hunted by Silence's trained tongueless assassins. Forging an uneasy alliance with mercenary commander Vost—who is their only chance at escape—the Dread Queen will do whatever it takes to end her life sentence on *Perdition* and keep the survivors alive long enough to cobble together a transport capable of getting them off station.

If Dred and her crew can win the deadly game of cat and mouse, the payoff is not only life but freedom—a prize sweeter than their wildest dreams. Yet the sadistic Silence would rather destroy *Perdition* than let a single soul slip from her grasp...

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for the Dred Chronicles:

"There's so much action, so much adventure, and more than that, it's great writing."—*USA Today*

"Sirantha Jax fans may be intrigued to see what befell Jael after his ill-considered actions there, and new lead Dred is a strong linchpin for a promising new series."—*Publishers Weekly*

"Spectacularly and spell-bindingly perfect with high octane action that keeps you on the edge of your seat and a romance that is surprisingly sweet and tender in a harsh and unforiving setting...This is honestly one of the best SF romance series I have read." —*Book Pushers*

About the Author

Ann Aguirre is the author of several other popular series: Sirantha Jax (*Endgame, Aftermath, Grimspace*); Enclave (*Horde, Outpost, Enclave*); and Corine Solomon (*Agave Kiss, Blue Diablo, Devil's Punch, Shady Lady*). *Havoc* and *Perdition* are the previous books in The Dred Chronicles.

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Slaughterhouse Six

Chaos reigned in Queensland, and Dred was too tired to come down with an iron fist. There were occasions when even the Dread Queen couldn't salvage a situation. As Dred surveyed the damage in the main hall, she concluded this was one of those times. There were only twenty men left, and half of them were already wounded.

If they were in better shape, they'd probably argue about the alliance with Vost. But making a deal with the merc commander offered the best chance of surviving Silence's retaliation. She reflected that the chances still weren't good, considering that Vost only had two soldiers left.

Currently, they'd set up a microcamp on the other side of the room. Her own men gave them a wide berth as the unwounded ones tried to clean up. The smell of blood was overwhelming. *I'm so tired.* But she couldn't show her exhaustion as Tam strode up; over the past turn, she had relied on him for intel.

"Report."

"Casualties were steep, and our defenses are compromised. We can't hold here long term."

So they needed to consider a strategic withdrawal. Strange, not so long ago, she was struggling to hold the territory she'd claimed. Now she had to cede it.

“Any word on how Silence fared in the last battle?”

Tam shook his head. “I’m sure there are more than I saw on my last run, but many of her killers have gone to ground.”

With a sigh, Dred beckoned the rest of her advisors though calling them friends was probably more accurate. Calypso reached her side first. The former mistress of the circle was bloodstained, but she looked as steady as ever, filling Dred with gratitude. Martine came next, a small, sharp-toothed woman that Jael called “bright eyes” because even Perdition hadn’t been enough to break her. Jael strolled up last, and her heart twisted at how weary he looked. Somehow, his exhaustion was harder to bear than her own.

“We’ll work on it more tomorrow,” Calypso said, surveying the wreckage.

Jael glanced around the hall. “We’ve done what we can for now.”

Martine traded looks with Tam, then said, “I’ll leave a skeleton crew on watch. Tam, dismiss the rest. They need sleep, or they won’t be able to fight later.”

“On it,” Tam said, moving toward the men who looked the worst.

Dred registered the way Vost watched, almost as if he could hear what they were saying even at this distance. “Warn the sentries to be wary of the mercs.”

“Roger,” Martine said.

“Everyone report to my quarters once you’re finished here.”

A series of nods came in response, then Dred headed off. She wanted first crack at the san. It felt like forever since she’d bathed, longer since she’d slept. Jael followed her, a quiet guard at her back that gave her more security than she’d cared to admit. Vost watched their departure with a laser gaze, but Dred didn’t give him the satisfaction of turning.

That’d be like acknowledging he’s a threat.

By the time she finished, the others had assembled. Dred checked the lock on the door, then she settled on the bunk. Jael flung himself next to her while the rest took turns in the san. She started a little when he rested his head in her lap, unaccustomed to his unfaltering affection. Dred stared down at his fair hair, then, slowly, she lowered a hand to rest on the nape of his neck.

“Sweet,” Martine teased, but the other woman was smiling.

Tam sounded tired when he admitted, “I don’t have a contingency plan.”

The door chime sounded before she could respond. Keelah was outside, slightly wounded but bearing up better than Dred expected after the loss of her mate. “May I come in?”

“Of course.” She stepped back and activated the lock again.

“I wanted to waste no time in lodging a protest against this alliance. Vost and his thugs cannot be trusted,” Keelah said calmly.

Calypso and Martine were nodding.

“He has docking codes.”

The debate went on for an hour, and Jael dozed off in the middle. Finally, Dred said, “Enough. The decision’s made. I won’t recant or apologize.”

Keelah stirred, as if to leave, but Dred shook her head. “It’s safer here. Get some sleep while you can.”

Despite her own advice, she was the last one to doze off—and the first to awaken at the sound of shots fired.

Since there were so many people crashed out on her floor, it took longer than it should to arm up and stumble out the door. At first, she thought her men were attacking the mercs or vice versa, but in the corridor, she recognized the thin, silent shape of Silence’s killers. Dred chased one down the hall, chains ready, but the man slipped away into the dark. Every which way she turned, the murderers retreated, refusing to do battle.

The others joined her, rubbing sleep from their eyes.

Vost and his men had chosen to sleep in the main hall, so they’d downed a few of the assassins, but the dorms . . . as Dred stepped in, her stomach turned over.

In complete silence, her people had been slaughtered. The tongueless killers had cut so many throats during downtime that the floor was awash in red. Most died clean, but a few held on for hours after, choking on their own blood. There was no medicine, nothing to ease their pain, and Dred moved among them with grim determination, performing so many executions that she thought her name hereafter must surely be Mercy-Killer.

I have lost everything.

When the dying stopped, there were only a handful of survivors. In this instance, Dred’s favor had literally saved their lives, so Jael, Tam, Calypso, Martine, and Keelah lived while good armor, reflexes, weapons, and mods saved the mercenaries. *Everyone else is gone.* If she weren’t so numb, she might be brimming with self-recrimination, but the sentries had no chance against such practiced stealth. Before, there were traps and mechanisms left from when Ike set defenses in place, but the mercs had destroyed or disabled them all. It was hard not to hate the surviving mercs when they emerged a few minutes later. She bit back a curse and went to do what she must.

The clanging of the pipes had never seemed so loud to Dred before. With so many voices permanently silenced, her territory felt cavernous. Dealing with the dead was excruciating, exhaustive work, and they struggled with it for hours. Many of the bodies, she shoved down the chute without knowing their names or stories, if they’d left families behind or whether those they’d known before had forsaken them when they were judged too dangerous to walk free.

Beside her, Jael swiped a trickle of sweat and left behind a dark streak that was part corpse blood, part grime from the murkiest seams in the station. “Almost done.”

She nodded. There was a stack of ten dead Queenslanders behind them, and she heaved silently alongside him until the last of them disappeared. Dred dusted her hands, knowing she wouldn’t feel clean even after she showered. Certain things crept down beneath your skin, leaving a stain that could never be scrubbed away.

“What now?” he asked.

It was a good question.

While they'd added Vost and his two mercs to their numbers, it was still laughable when she considered the scope of the turf she'd claimed. "We have to pull back. Find somewhere defensible while we're looking for parts."

"You think he really has launch codes for the secondary docking bay?"

Though Dred had spoken up for Vost in light of Keelah's objections, she lifted a shoulder. "If he doesn't, he'll die alongside us."

A wry smile quirked one side of his mouth. "That's scant comfort, love."

"Sorry, was I supposed to dip the truth in treacle for you?"

"Nobody ever has, can't imagine I'd enjoy it now."

"Then stop complaining." Though her words were sharp, her tone was almost . . . affectionate. That was the wrong word, maybe. She shied away from stronger ones.

For an instant, he looked as if he wanted to touch her, but she would've knocked his hands away. She knew exactly where they'd been, and she didn't want the decaying cells of a hundred dead men caressing her cheek. Exhaling slowly, she led the way back to where the others were camped out; nobody cared to separate after the bloodbath. That seemed like an invitation to let Silence's tongueless assassins pick them off one by one.

Dred found the survivors in what had been the common hall. From the holes blown in the walls showing tangles of wire along with scorched flooring, it looked like a war zone. Her gaze touched on the few she had left: Keelah, Tam, Martine, and Calypso. Vost and his men had retreated to the other side of the room, as if they didn't trust their new allies. She didn't blame them, as the converse was certainly true. Their situation was born of convenience and mutual need.

"How's everyone doing?" she asked.

"Tired," Martine answered.

"Hungry," Calypso added.

"I'd like to let all of you rest more, but we don't have that luxury. Pack as much food and gear as you can carry. Queensland is—"

"Lost," Tam said.

Not what I was going to say, but there's no point in playing the Dread Queen anymore. With a wider audience to impress, she once would've fixed a hard stare on Tam and rebuked him for interrupting her. But relief swelled when she realized that was done. Considering it came at such cost, that was unworthy of her, but she couldn't deny the truth. With only six people left from her former kingdom, including herself, there was no point in maintaining the persona. Vost and his men wouldn't be impressed by such chicanery, either. If she earned their respect, it would be through good decisions and martial prowess.

"Agreed," Jael said.

"I know somewhere that might be safe." Keelah's soft words were barely audible over the hum of aging mechanisms that kept Perdition in orbit.

“Show us, please.” Dred wouldn’t have added that a day before.

The alien female nodded. “Let’s meet back here in a quarter hour. Don’t bring more than you can carry through the ducts.”

One of the mercs muttered, “Is she serious?” and Vost cuffed him on the side of the head.

“Guess that’s our cue.” Calypso shoved to her feet.

Walking down the hall toward her quarters for the last time felt so strange. When Artan was alive, this was the worst place in the world, but after she took Queensland, it became a sanctuary of sorts, space she’d carved out with blade and wit. *Now I’m leaving. It’s funny how so little can come to feel like home.* Jael’s hand on her shoulder drew her attention, and as she glanced back at him, she realized at once how dear and familiar he’d become, a necessity even in hell. A shiver went through her.

“We can endure this,” he said. “We’ve been through worse, both of us.”

“Done worse, too.” She keyed in the code, and as the door swished open, he wrapped a hand around her arm.

“Are you saying we don’t deserve to get out? Because that’s a poor argument for anything, right? I never heard of anyone in this life getting what they have coming.”

Dred smiled. “Except Artan.”

“The way I hear it told, you did for him. That’s not the same thing as being struck by lightning for your crimes.”

“Let’s not wax philosophical. The others are waiting for us to pack.”

“It won’t take long, I only have what I’m standing in.”

“More than you had when you came in.” She studied the charred spots on the merc armor. The damage told a compelling story about the pain he’d suffered, fighting for a few meters of rusted metal.

This place’ll hurt you worse before it’s done, grind you up and spit you out. Truth was, Jael wasn’t invincible as he’d been when he arrived on station. Because Jael had given her a primitive blood transfusion in saving her life, Dred now had half his healing swimming around her veins, somehow, and while that was good for her, it also chewed a foreboding hollow in her gut. She suspected there would come a point when he regretted saving her because there was always, always a cost for kindness. Especially in a place like this.

In the end, Perdition always wins.

• • •

JAEL could tell something was eating at Dred, but she wasn’t talking. Instead, she silently bundled some gear into a blanket and created a makeshift pack with enough proficiency to make him think she had experience sleeping rough. Now that was a sweet mental picture, imagining her free and easy beneath a night sky. The constellations wouldn’t come into focus, but that didn’t matter. The abstract was enough.

Once she was done, he followed her back to the others, keeping one eye out for an ambush. This would be the perfect time for Silence to finish them off, but he hoped she had been sated by the recent slaughter. *If I’ve any luck at all, she’s reveling in her triumph.*

Everyone else was ready to go when they got to the common room, and Keelah led the exodus. They passed through what used to be the eastern barricades, now just a jumble of shrapnel. Blood spattered the walls, and biological material had dried in crusty chunks. The stench was similar to massacres he'd survived, and the smell carried him back to the killing fields on Nicu Tertius, where the marshes sucked at his boots and swallowed the dead. That fast he was lost, fog everywhere, separated from the few mercs who had survived the butchery some idiot noble called a battle, and a child's face leapt out of the whiteness. He bent to check for signs of life, but this girl was more than two days dead; her eyes didn't blink at his retreat, the mossy foliage, or the large, green-backed fly that landed to sample her remains.

He stumbled forward, and Dred was in front of him, eyes narrowed. "You sick?"

Only of the killing. The dying. The dead. Their ghosts were always with him. Sometimes it felt as if he had a spectral army at his back, and now it wasn't just the ones he'd murdered but also the ones he'd chosen not to save.

"Not exactly," he said.

She aimed a hard look at him and let him pass her before she fell in at the rear. *Guarding my back.* The idea filled him with so many conflicting reactions that he couldn't name the emotions, and it was enough that some of them were good. Keelah took them into the ducts before any of Silence's people attacked; that didn't mean they weren't watching, of course. But once they vanished into the walls, they could reappear anywhere.

The route was dusty and winding, and the lack of footprints made Jael think the aliens hadn't used these passages much. He lost all sense of direction along with concept of time; the narrow space, people ahead and behind, it hadn't seemed nerve-racking before—when they had a whole settlement waiting for them to return. Now, everything was different, not a recon mission but a group of refugees fleeing for their lives.

At last, Keelah guided them into a small room hidden in engineering. At least, that was how it sounded, soon confirmed by a glance at a faded Monsanto sign, left from the days when this place was used for deep-space mining. There was machinery everywhere, but the noise came as a welcome change from the echoing silence in Queensland. Space would be at a premium in here, but he could see how heavy the door was across the room, and there were two bars across it, presumably to keep inmates from getting inside.

Keelah followed his gaze with her own and nodded. "They likely counted on the prisoners killing one another in the first turn. They didn't think we'd make alliances, take territory, and explore as deeply as we did."

"Your people charted the station far more than they fought," Calypso commented.

The fur on Keelah's neck puffed up. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's a big help now," Jael cut in.

Dred nodded. "If they stumble on us, we'll have time to prepare. That wall panel doesn't come off quickly or easily."

Tam crossed the room and knelt, inspecting the security door from top to bottom. "This doesn't seem to have a panel that can be hacked. It would take brute force or heavy weapons to break it down."

"This is a rat hole where vermin go to die," one of the mercs mumbled beneath his breath.

Jael had heard that particular slur aimed at Keelah's people before, so he took offense before she did. "Do we have a problem, mate?"

The merc took a step toward him. "Dunno. *Do* we?"

Vost spoke for the first time in what seemed like ages. "Enough. Think of this lot as your new squad."

The second merc spat on the rusty flooring, tipping his head at Dred. "And she's our new CO?" His tone said *Hell no*.

Jael tensed, but before the scene could turn ugly, she answered, "There are so few of us left . . . we don't really need one. An oligarchy makes more sense at this point."

The two mercs looked blank. Vost laughed. "It's a committee that runs a country, you idiots. Look at something besides porn-vids now and again, why don't you?"

"Can't even get porn, here," the taller one complained in an undertone.

Calypso smirked. "Welcome to *my* world." She took a step closer and scrutinized both of them. Then she tapped the side of the short one's helmet. "What's your name again?"

"Duran."

"You're with me. We'll stand watches together, and if I'm in the mood, you'll do for a warm body in my bunk."

The merc stared, openmouthed.

"She's not kidding," Tam said helpfully.

Deciding this could be fun, Jael put in, "She'll most likely kill you if you decline."

Calypso tilted her head, playing along. "I might do. Rejection is painful."

The merc took a long look at her, then grinned, his teeth white in a filthy face. "Done worse. I can muster up some enthusiasm for *you*, goddess."

"It makes sense to divide up the watches that way, one of us with one of them." Martine spoke low enough that only Jael could hear.

He nodded at the former mistress of the circle, now laughing with the merc she'd claimed. "I highly suspect that's her plan."

Bad enough that Silence is out there, but we also have to worry about having our throats cut in the dark by one of our own.

Come to think of it, that summed up every other night he'd spent in Perdition.

For the next two hours, Dred supervised the allotment of space and the allocation of resources. Really, that was deceptive. It wasn't like there were suites available or even bunks like employees would use. Instead, they had to set up camp and each of them claimed a section of the room. Tam and Martine chose a spot together, while Vost and his men went to the far corner. Dred should probably have been worried about that, but she wasn't here to turn this crew into a happy family.

No, we just have to survive long enough to get off Perdition.

Easier said than done.

She had taken enough from her old quarters to craft a comfortable nest, but she couldn't help think that it was poetic justice for the once Dread Queen to live like an animal in her final days on station. It might be nothing but intuition that told her this would end soon, one way or another. If Silence didn't kill them, it was only a matter of time before the conglomerate sent more troops to finish the job.

Jael watched her. She was aware of the weight of his regard, his gaze prickling on her skin. But she didn't say anything as she worked. The destruction of Queensland might just be hitting her harder than she'd expected. Though the place was a hellhole, it was one she had built from the ruins Artan had left behind.

"I think we're safe for now," Tam said, still studying the door.

Vost nodded. "Let's divvy up the watches and get some rest."

"We should eat first," Keelah said.

The alien had a point. Nobody had any particular skill in cooking, so they drew lots, and Tam won . . . or lost, depending on your definition. Martine helped him, and before long, they had a basic soup bubbling. Dred didn't know where they'd scavenged the hot plate, but it was a good thing. Without the Kitchen-mate and hydroponics garden, it could have been much worse. In this scenario, they could've ended up eating raw station rats until they died of internal parasites.

Conversation was sparse. That was to be expected. This was an uneasy alliance at best; it would be a miracle if it held long enough to construct a ship. Now that they had access to previously locked-down areas of the station, it should be possible to cobble a shuttle together, given sufficient time and expertise. Given their predicament, Dred was more worried about the former than the latter. Tam had predicted, and Vost confirmed, that if his team didn't return victorious, his employers would hire another band of mercs. For whatever reason, they wanted Perdition cleansed.

We can't withstand another tactical assault. Hell, Silence is likely to kill us before the second strike team arrives. She let out a near-inaudible sigh.

They drew straws one more time to determine the order of the watches. Tam and Martine took first, then Calypso and Duran got the second. Dred volunteered to work with Vost on third, which left Jael, Keelah, and Redmond on duty together for the last shift. While she didn't expect any problems so soon, it was best to be prepared. The merc commander apparently shared that opinion.

The corner she had chosen was behind a tall, rectangular machine, giving the illusion of privacy. Her head teemed with inchoate fears as she rolled up in her blanket. Jael didn't speak as he came in behind her, and maybe she should cut ties with him immediately because it was *so* unlikely that they'd both make it out of here. Better if she iced over now in preparation for that moment of parting. Yet she couldn't protest as his arm went across her side, and his heartbeat against her back was the only reason she could sleep.

Calypso woke her with a toe in the ribs. Dred was out of her bedroll with knives out by the time she realized why she was awake. The taller woman smirked at her. “Whatever time, and all’s well.”

“No problems?”

“Just Redmond’s snoring,” the other merc said.

“Vost is up already. We’ve been sitting near the duct-access panel, seemed like the most probable breach point.”

Dred nodded and headed over to join the merc commander, who had a rifle propped across his knees. She frowned as she sat down on the other side.

“Something wrong?”

“You’ll kill us all if you use that thing in here.”

“Yeah, well, somebody stole my pistol.” He aimed a pointed look at her, and she suppressed the urge to snicker.

She managed, “That’s a shame. I don’t know what this world is coming to.”

He aimed a wry, green-eyed look her way. His hair was all spiky, salt-and-pepper dishevelment, and the lines about his eyes and mouth suggested he carried a heavy burden when he wasn’t killing criminals. The icy shiver of curiosity felt like sensation returning to a long-paralyzed limb, and Dred didn’t know if it was welcome or painful. She flexed her fingers and chose not to ask.

Best not to get personal.

“How long do we have?” she asked.

“Until . . . ?”

“The next squad arrives.”

Vost shrugged, and his expression made her think he wasn’t holding back. “I don’t know what they want with this place, so I don’t know how urgent it is. You know Conglomerate types.”

“Not really,” she said with a certain irony.

“I guess you didn’t mingle in the corporate world much.”

“Not unless I was hunting someone who had a desk job. Most monsters don’t keep regular hours.”

A few did, though. They had wives and children, almost like camouflage, and wore normal like a skin they could peel off to reveal the red and oozing truth, etched into the curl of sinew and meat. The worst of them listened when their inner voices told them to do terrible things. Turns ago, she’d nearly lost her soul as a vigilante, stalking serial killers that ran beneath the radar, not that society thanked her for it. Instead, the authorities clapped her in chains and proclaimed her the worst of the lot.

I never asked to be Psi. The thought came faintly flavored with bitterness since the empathic gift came at such a high price. It had driven her into the dark like the fiends she hunted.

For the first time since she'd made the deal with the merc commander, she opened her senses to take stock of the survivors and got only softly sleeping yellow from most of them and a muted blue worry from Vost himself. Of Silence's killers, there was no sign. No black of malice or red for impending violence, not even skimming the edges of her perception.

If I had been awake, I might have saved them.

He watched her with an inscrutable expression. "Sometimes you speak such madness with the saddest, sanest eyes I've ever seen."

"Yes," she said, unsmiling.

It was the last word from Dred for the rest of their watch.

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ONCE everyone was awake, and they'd eaten, Jael mentioned what he'd remembered in the night. "Where's Ike's RC unit?"

A host of blank looks met the question.

Finally, Tam said, "I have no idea. I lost track of it in all the chaos."

Martine shrugged. "Is that important?"

"Aside from the fact that the bot is handy, you mean? It is indeed, bright eyes." He reminded everyone of Ike's message about the supply caches.

"Thank Mary." That wasn't an expression he often heard from Dred, and he appreciated the swift kiss she planted on him more. "There's no telling what it could be. Parts, food—"

"Both," Calypso put in with a palpable air of excitement.

Redmond stretched as he clambered to his feet. "What are we waiting for? We should hunt the droid down."

Dred shook her head before Jael could speak. "Best for all of us not to go. Too much movement, and Silence will find us for sure. You saw what she's capable of, and now we're certainly outnumbered . . . by what margin, I can't even guess."

"So who gets the mission?" Duran wanted to know.

"I'll go," Jael offered.

"I should as well." He was surprised to hear Keelah volunteer, but when he considered, it made sense. Her people had survived by sneaking around the ship longer and better than anyone else, and without her as a guide, he'd probably wander the ducts for days.

Dred's gaze met his, silently asking if he was okay with that. He inclined his head slightly. *I don't hate all aliens. It's only Ithtorians that get under my skin.*

They left shortly thereafter.

He didn't speak as they moved through the walls, like ghosts or rats or the ghosts of rats, eaten long ago by Mungo's ghastly horde. He focused on Keelah's breathing, and listening harder, found her heartbeat. She was nervous; it came in the rapid patter of her pulse, in the musk lingering on her fur. But he would be more surprised if she were completely calm.

That'd make me nervous.

They paused to take a break halfway, and Keelah produced a flask from one of her many pockets. She took a sip and offered it to him. Jael wasn't familiar with her customs, but it seemed best to assume a refusal might offend. Besides, he needed the fluids. The water was tepid and brackish, but no toxins prickled his tongue. That was a handy skill, one that had saved him from many a poisoning.

"Are you still seeking a good death?" he asked softly.

She'd said as much after her mate, Katur, died, but so far, she hadn't found one. Her alien eyes were wide and glimmering, looking at him and *not*, somehow, at the same time. At last she said, "That's what we're all waiting for, ultimately, and not all of us find one."

He thought of the dead children on Nicu Tertius and the bodies of the cannibals still rotting on the lower levels of the station. "Disturbing yet true."

"Come, we have a good deal more ground to cover before we reach Queensland again."

It felt like hours, but in the dark, Jael couldn't be sure. Eventually, she paused near a vent and cocked her head, ears swiveling. Her whiskers twitched.

"Problem?" he breathed.

She held up a small hand, motioning him to silence. A few seconds later, he heard it, too, no more than a whisper of sound. Straining, he translated it to the scrape of murderous feet, clad in grisly, real-skin slippers. He tilted his head and stared out through the slits in the metal, barely breathing. A company of five passed just in his line of sight, and from their movements, he could tell they belonged to Silence. It was unlikely there were other survivors though her men were probably sweeping the station, just in case. *So this is how it feels to be hunted.* He'd been chased before, but with his abilities, he'd never felt like prey. No injury had been too grievous, no stunt too insane if it offered a chance at freedom.

Jael counted to a thousand after they disappeared from sight before risking a whisper. "Safe to move?"

"It should be, I don't hear anything. Stay close."

It was strange to travel with someone whose senses were sharper than his own; that almost never happened. But he merely nodded and followed her into the wreckage of Queensland. It seemed unlikely that—

The attack almost caught him off guard. *Almost.* But he smelled the killer before he saw him and sensed the stirring air behind in time to avoid the garrote. Likewise, Keelah had her shiv out and was crouched low, a small, ferocious target. Her front teeth were long and sharp, perfectly designed for gnawing, but they'd also sink deep into an assailant's flesh if the idiot got close enough.

In hand-to-hand, he had the advantage. His opponent excelled in sneak attacks, but he didn't have the strength or reflexes for a long battle. Jael rushed him and slammed him to the ground. *I know, mate. I'm stronger than I look.* Vicious anger rushed through him, and he crushed the asshole's larynx with his heel. Keelah opened an artery in her attacker's thigh, and he bled out while she darted away, whiskers flexing.

“This is better than a good death,” she said with dark relish.

“We gave them better than they’d have offered us.” Dead revulsion crawled over him, imagining what Silence might have in store for any captives she took. Death wasn’t always easy or quick, after all.

“Come,” Keelah said. “We don’t have long before these two are missed. Let’s find that RC unit.”

3

Scavenger Hunt

While Jael and Keelah were gone, Dred felt the walls closing in. The space they’d chosen was barely sufficient for their number, but it was well hidden and defensible. She inspected all the machines to see if there was anything worthwhile, but she didn’t know enough about ship mechanics to be sure. Plus, stripping some vital part in here might compromise the station’s systems, killing them before they were ready to take off.

Mary, I hate feeling useless.

So she was beyond relieved when the two returned . . . but Jael was *carrying* RC-17. That didn’t bode well.

He handed it to her before climbing out of the wall panel, and she checked it for damage. The scorch marks on the casing looked like it had been shot, but she didn’t think any of the prisoners, apart from her crew, had managed to steal rifles or weapons. Dred turned an icy look onto Vost and his men. The shorter merc, Duran, shifted uneasily. Both the grunts were younger than the commander, probably by as much as ten turns. Redmond had curly black hair and medium brown skin while the other was pale and freckled. Duran seemed to be the youngest of everyone, and he exuded a boyish air that was probably what drew Calypso.

“Something you want to tell me?” she prompted.

“Yeah, about that . . .”

“Spit it out,” Vost ordered.

“Sorry, sir. When you sent us out to gather supplies a few days back, we ran across that unit. I thought it was scouting for our location, spying on us, so I blasted it.”

“Why didn’t you say something before?” Jael demanded.

Duran gave him a dark look. “You know how many cleaning bots I’ve run across up in this orbiting scrapyard? How would I know the one I shot is the exact droid you’re looking for?”

Tam shifted through the bodies crowded around the broken unit to take a look, and Dred handed the metal carcass to him. With Ike gone, he likely knew the most about maintenance and repair. A few minutes later, he let out a sigh. “The battery’s completely fried. I’ll need to cannibalize another unit to get this one operational again.”

“How’s the memory core?” Martine asked.

That was the key bit. If that was damaged, too, they could forget about ever finding Ike’s stashes. And that

might mean the end of their escape plans. Dred leaned in, along with everyone else, until Tam motioned them to get out of his light. Sheepish, she fell back a step.

He poked around a little more before pronouncing, "It looks intact, but I won't know for sure until 17 powers up."

"So before we start scavenging for ship parts," Redmond muttered, "we have to find droid parts."

Calypso sighed at him. "Why is your brain so limited? There are nine of us. It makes more sense to figure out what we need, then divide into search teams."

"Like a scavenger hunt," Martine said.

Jael offered a twisted smile. "Serious sodding hunt, bright eyes. The prize is freedom, the penalty for failure is execution."

"I always liked a challenge," Vost put in.

Since the plan made sense, nobody argued with Calypso. Instead, with heavy input from Tam and Vost, she created a master list for the ship and a shorter one devoted to RC-17. Possibly fixing the bot would lead them to some caches that would tick some items off the other list, but they couldn't count on that. Dred knew that Ike had been a genius, but he couldn't predict the future. So his lifetime of accrued treasures would probably be random, gear he'd deemed too precious to use straightaway, but it might not help in their current circumstances.

"There's one small problem," Vost said, once they finished.

"What?" Dred tilted her head, thinking she already knew, yet she was curious if their minds worked in a similar fashion.

"Keelah is the only one who can find this room without fail. So every team moving without her will be handicapped and might not make it back, enemies aside."

"It's a problem," Dred agreed.

Keelah found an exceptionally dirty part of the wall and beckoned them over. "I'll map the route. If you can't remember later, it's not my fault."

Everyone paid close attention, memorizing the turns and landmarks she gave, most of which would be glimpsed through the vents. Keelah also listed some scent tells, but they would be of limited use to anyone but herself and Jael. By the time she was done, the mercs looked nervous. They were used to having the advantage of good gear and numbers; they had less experience in hiding, sneaking, and relying on luck and timing.

Dred decided to be blunt. "We don't have the food stores to sit around for another down shift. Ideally, Ike has some crates of paste hidden away."

Vost nodded. "Since we don't have to cook it, there's no scent to pass through ventilation and give away our location."

"Now we just need to decide on teams, split up the list, and move out."

“Same as our watches?” Calypso asked.

Duran grinned at her. “Fine by me.”

Dred didn’t want to go out with Vost, and he could probably tell, because the merc commander said, “Unless you object, we’re better off together. He’s used to me and vice versa.”

Redmond agreed, “We’ve been fighting together for a while. We won’t hide anything we find, guaranteed. Nobody’s getting out of this hellhole unless we’re square with each other.”

“I’ll go on my own,” Keelah said quietly.

While Dred wasn’t positive that was a good idea, she couldn’t force the female to join another team. Plus, with her experience, Keelah *might* be safer alone, less likely to be caught by Silence’s maniacs. So she only nodded. Unsurprisingly Tam and Martine partnered up, which left Dred and Jael.

Exactly what I wanted.

They staggered their departures to reduce the noise, so only Vost and Redmond were left when she and Jael slipped through the wall panel. The route back to safety burned in her mind’s eye; wondering how long she could hold it there, Dred pushed forward into the dusty dark.

• • •

JAEL had always been good at navigation, one of the reasons he’d survived battles that annihilated everyone else. His uncanny healing was the other, of course. But it didn’t hurt that he could glance at a map and orient himself instantly. So he led the way from the bolt-hole, with Dred close behind.

The route took them through their old territory, above it, anyway, and he paused the instant he saw Silence’s men. Dred pressed closer, barely breathing, as they watched some kind of death ritual. *Those are the two Keelah and I killed. Now they definitely know some of us survived the Queensland massacre.* Five killers stood in black rags, adorning their faces with blood and ashes. In eerie quiet, they traced brow ridges and noses, mouths and chins, until their features were disfigured with the embellishment of death. Their eyes gleamed yellow at this distance, and they swayed as one, like ocean seaweed caught in a strong current. To Jael, it almost seemed as if they were dancing to unheard music, and they weren’t grieving, either. This was a kind of awful ecstasy, a celebration, even. Everything about it made his flesh creep.

They’re not human anymore. She’s changing them somehow. It was a ridiculous, primitive thought, because Silence was *not* death incarnate, just a madwoman given too much power inside Perdition. But the idea rooted inside his brain, digging in like a barbed parasite to keep common sense from dislodging it.

He glanced over at Dred, but he couldn’t read her expression in the half-light. Jael jerked his head, silently telling her they needed to move on. She agreed with a lift of her chin, and they both came away from the vent. He headed down, as they were bound for the recharge closet where the cleaning units went to power up. Their team had received the primary task of finding parts for RC-17, and in all honesty, Jael didn’t mind. He looked forward to following the bot although it would be dangerous. Droids didn’t think about opposition or danger; they just took the most direct route. So Ike’s caches would probably be the riskiest mission.

Fine by me.

They didn’t speak until they had put a fair amount of distance behind them, then Dred signaled her desire to pause by tapping his ankle. He couldn’t turn fully because the ducts had narrowed, but he glanced over his

shoulder.

“You all right?”

“Just . . . spooked.” The somber tone told him he hadn’t been alone in what he felt, watching those crazy, tongueless bastards.

“It’s different now,” he said.

“With what she did to Queensland . . . she seems larger than life. I’ve been afraid before, but . . . not quite like this.” The words were barely a whisper, and they roused an answering prickle of gooseflesh on his arms.

“I know. There’s run-of-the-mill evil, like Priest and Mungo. And then there’s Silence.”

“It’s like she can do worse than kill me. Rationally, I know that’s not true—”

“But it’s uncanny the way she’s last one still standing, moving through the carnage.” He didn’t say it out loud, but he thought, *Like Death itself*.

Dred nodded. “I’m still here, too, but I’m not the Dread Queen anymore.”

“If it’s any consolation, I don’t miss her.”

“Me either,” she whispered.

There was no space to touch her as he wanted to, and it wasn’t the time anyway, so Jael continued on. They slid out of the ducts near the closet, but when he opened it, there were no droids plugged in. He choked out a curse. It was impossible to predict when a bot would come back, and it was dangerous to wait out in the open. They desperately needed some intel about how many men Silence had left, how often they patrolled, and where, but with manpower as scarce as it had become on their end, recon had to wait.

“Back up?” Dred whispered.

He nodded. This time, they found a way in that gave them vantage over their target, so they’d know when a bot returned. He’d just finished fitting the vent panel in place behind them when he heard the familiar, shuffling sound of Silence’s men. From her expression, Dred registered it, too, and she practically stopped breathing. The fact that her killers were roving freely must signify that she believed herself the undisputed ruler of Perdition.

When they rounded the corner and came into sight, he stifled a surprised sound. This group was huge, compared to the usual numbers, ten this time, and horror jolted through him like lightning when he realized they were carrying a human-sized bundle. They’d wrapped their captive in dark fabric, so he couldn’t tell anything about the person, but the worst part was, he or she was still moving, thrashing against his bonds.

Who is that? And why the hell would Silence want someone taken alive?

Dred’s eyes were wide with the same question. She tilted her head, asking with that gesture if they should intervene. *It might be one of ours*. Quickly, he calculated the odds. With a sneak attack, they could probably take them though Dred wasn’t wearing her chains since this was supposed to be a secret, bloodless run. That meant her odds of being wounded were higher, but she’d recover. *So will I. And we’re far enough from our hideout that an attack here won’t draw them to us*.

Jael nodded and gestured, hoping she could figure out his meaning. *We have to get ahead of them. We missed our opportunity here.* When Dred fell in behind him, relief surged through. It was delicate work, scrambling alongside them light enough not to draw their notice, but the station sounds covered most of the movement though Silence's murderers glanced up now and then. Jael made out the occasional moan from their hostage, and his determination ratcheted up.

Silence won't have you, whoever you are, why ever she wants you.

Now, he mouthed at his partner. As one, he and Dred dropped out of the ceiling and onto their targets.

4

Must Be a Hex

Dred landed on top of two of Silence's men and jammed her knife in the first one's neck before he could react. The other slashed at her, and she blocked instinctively with a forearm, half expecting her chains to mitigate the damage. Instead, the weapon sank in, almost to the bone. The pain screamed along her nerve endings as the bastard twisted; someone less accustomed to it might have folded. Instead, she clumsily tossed her weapon to her other hand while her attacker yanked the blade out for another strike.

The person they were carrying hit the ground and thrashed, but Dred couldn't do anything until she dealt with the four killers who wanted her head. Two male, two female, all dedicated to Silence's death cult. *They probably think they're doing me a favor.* They rushed her in a blur of spiked bludgeon, garrote, and knives. Fighting this many at once without her chains meant for every strike she dodged or blocked, she took a hit somewhere else. Soon Dred had slashes streaming on her arms and shoulders, bruises on back and thighs that trickled blood from the spiked weapon. Silence's killers weren't tremendously strong, but they *were* fast.

Gritting her teeth, she changed tactics and slammed the club-wielder into the one who kept trying to get behind her. They stumbled but didn't fall, and she took the opening to stab the first in the kidney. Her knife went in clean, and she aimed a ferocious kick at the other's kneecap. It popped sideways with a satisfying twist, and the killer screamed. She cut the cry short by jabbing her knife through the man's eye socket. When she pulled her blade back, it was bloody, and she only had two women left to kill.

Their faces were both painted in the disturbing art of death they'd witnessed earlier, eyes ringed in blood and soot. Their teeth glowed a garish yellow against the white-ash paint that covered the rest of their faces. Both seemed at ease with their blades, and they came at Dred simultaneously. One sliced at her throat while the other tried to disembowel her. She swept the legs out from under the first while spinning away from the side strike. Dred came up off-balance, her right arm streaming blood, and the first woman slipped in it. She lashed out, spiking her blade up through the underside of the killer's jaw into her brain through her palate. That gave her last opponent the chance to stab her in the side. It was a good hit, nearly crippling.

Damn, I miss my chains. I've gotten sloppy.

She wrenched away before the woman could yank her knife out. *That'll buy me some time.* Clumsy from pain and blood loss, she circled. Her left hand wasn't as accurate as her right, but she had to take this last one out before she fell over. Before she could decide how best to do it, the fabric wrapped around the captive finally gave way to the frantic pulling, and a small person crawled out. Without hesitation, the hostage grabbed the bloody garrote and wrapped it with full strength around the nearest killer's knee. The wire bit through meat to the bone below, and the woman's mouth opened in a soundless scream. Dred ended her pain

with one thrust of her blade. Breathing hard, she turned to see how Jael was doing, just in time to see him drop the last of his enemies.

He'd taken some damage, too, and was liberally smeared with red. He caught her eye, then they both turned to whoever they'd saved. On closer inspection, the person didn't seem to be human, but she'd never seen anyone quite like him . . . her? Before. Silently, she checked with Jael, and he shook his head. They'd rescued someone just over a meter tall and proportionately delicate, with long, spindly fingers that ended in tiny suction cups. The head was elongated, black eyes set pretty far on either side. No nose, flat features, and a small mouth, almost perfectly round. The alien was pale, somewhere between gray and blue, with lined, hairless skin.

It was also in a hurry. "We should get the hell out of here."

Jael nodded. "Introductions and stories can wait. The first order of business is getting away from Silence."

"No shit," the alien said.

"What about the droid?" Dred asked.

"I'll stay here, return with the battery whenever an RC unit comes back to charge."

"How? They'll be crawling all over this area—"

"I'll be fine," Jael cut in with a half smile. "I always am."

That was before. But she didn't say it aloud. While there might be emotional ties between them, she couldn't let them interfere with their escape plans. So she only nodded and limped back toward the access panel. It would be better if she could clean up, as the blood trail might give them away, but there was nowhere safe to stop for first aid. Her skin crawled at the idea of Silence's killers using it to track them.

The alien waited until they'd retreated to the ducts to say, "Did you know you have a knife stuck in your side?"

"Yeah. If I remove it right now, I might bleed out."

"Huh. But doesn't it hurt?"

"Like hell," she admitted through clenched teeth.

"Where are we going anyway?"

"Someplace safe, provided I don't pass out before we get there." And assuming this creature didn't eat her brain while she was unconscious. "What's your name?"

"They call me Hex."

"I'm Dred."

"I won't say it's nice to meet you, but I'm glad you came along."

"How is it you've survived on your own? Didn't you choose a faction?"

Hex shuddered. “Hell no. If I explain that, I reveal *way* too much to a complete stranger.”

“Then I’ll ask once you know me better,” Dred said.

“Eh. Dunno how long I’ll hang around though I will make sure you get where you’re going. No offense, but there’s trouble in numbers.”

Famous last words.

“None taken,” she said.

• • •

JAEL found a decent hiding spot farther along the corridor. The door had rusted shut, so he had to go in through the ceiling. This room was a scrap heap, with broken furniture and old electronics, probably left over from Monsanto’s day. It didn’t reek of biological waste, unlikely any prisoners had found their way in. Most wouldn’t bother. A cursory inspection wouldn’t reveal his location though if they did an exhaustive search, he’d have to bolt and run.

His wounds were barely clotted and still hurt like mad; once, they would’ve been healed already. Checking, he found the edges of his chest wound already puffy. *Those rotters like their poison, don’t they?* He’d been paralyzed by one of them and nearly died, but likely not all of the grunts carried the most powerful toxins. Since his nervous system hadn’t shut down, he should be strong enough to defeat it though it might get painful and dicey for the next few hours.

Hope I don’t black out and miss the bot.

While he waited, Jael prowled through the wreckage and came up with a processor panel that might come in handy. After he had cashed out his last turn as a merc, he’d worked salvage for a while, so he had some experience in spotting overlooked junk. It helped that the other convicts had been looking for gear that could be weaponized or eaten, but ships required a lot more complex systems, and the idea that they could build one out of scrap seemed impossible.

But the alternative’s waiting for Silence to pick us off.

The poison spiked him into a fever, so his perception skewed. Objects seemed too big and too close, and everything seemed painfully bright and loud. Shivering, he huddled against the rusted wall and rode out the pain of his joints knotting up. Whatever this was would probably kill anyone else. He blinked, and the station was gone.

The white walls of the lab formed around him and scientists in gray jackets moved about, making notes and consulting with one another. “Should we raise the voltage?”

He couldn’t move, immobilized by the wires in his spine. *They* could stimulate his nerves and force a reaction while he hung helpless, but there was no way to fight, no way to free himself. JL489 had no choice but to endure.

Dr. Jurgin Landau moved closer to determine their next move. “Yes, do it. And time this, he’s healing faster than the others. We need to document and discern why we’re getting different results from the same batch.”

The lab tech got a metal implement, electrified on one end. She hefted it casually, as if she wasn’t about to maim. *I’m alive. I’m not a thing. I’m not.* He made a sound of protest deep in his throat, an animal noise, but

he couldn't move his lips or tongue to form the words. *Why are you doing this to me? Wh—* His vision flashed red, and pain screamed up his arm where they burned him. Electricity ate through his skin and into the meat below; he couldn't writhe or thrash, apart from the involuntary twitches.

"Look at that," the tech marveled.

"Already regenerating. If this was manifesting in one of our more tractable batches, I'd be so elated right now. But I'm pretty sure this group is flawed."

"Maybe. Shall we see how much tissue it can replace?"

Landau nodded. "Start with the eyes."

Jael came back from fever town with a scream choked in his throat. With trembling fingertips, he touched his face. *Cooler. I'm not dying today, it seems.* He felt weak and shaky, but the worst had passed. There was no way to be sure how long he'd been out; a few minutes after he came to, he heard two things at once: the sound of another group of Silence's men and the low-grade whir of an RC unit coming to charge up. It would take a while for the bot to power up, so it made sense not to move. He wished he could see what they were doing, but there was no vantage, and climbing into the ducts might draw attention.

I need some downtime before I fight again. Must be getting old. Wry amusement colored that thought since the Corp had tried to market their Bred creations as unstoppable, tireless killing machines with the added advantage of being biological, so they never broke down. Because the results were so unpredictable, however, they never did manage to sell the idea of mass production of Bred soldiers. Briefly, he wondered if there were any survivors out of the twenty that survived the escape run, if they'd ended up better off.

Somehow.

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