

Escape Clause

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I was just tidying my bench for tea break when the intercom buzzed in the next cubicle. Fernbark's cubicle. Again. Now I'm not the nosy sort, but the boss has a loud voice and the words came through the cheap plywood like bullets.

'One more cock-up like that and you're history!' he yelled, his deep voice rattling the intercom on my desk.

Ferny mumbled a reply, but even though I leant back on my stool I couldn't hear the words.

'Listen to me, you no-good slacker,' boomed the voice again, shaking the wood against my ear. 'I got some brat's parents on the phone, chewing me up but good. Nothing pisses me off more, understood?'

Mumble mumble.

'Half rations for a month. One more slip and you're mucking stables, got it?'

Mumble, groan.

There was a crash as the boss hung up.

'Half rations, you cheapskate,' hissed Ferny, suddenly close. 'I'll teach you!'

Blam! Something smashed into the other side of the thin wall, slamming it into the side of my head. I was thrown off my stool and halfway across my narrow bench, scattering scissors, tape and spools of ribbon.

I bounced up, hand clamped to my burning ear, and had only just regained my stool when Ferny poked his head over the partition.

'Hi Pru,' His eyes were bright, his narrow face flushed. 'I suppose you heard?'

'Ow. Yeah, I heard.'

'He's gonna get his, one of these days,' muttered Ferny. 'I'm gonna—'

'Shhh!' I glanced around fearfully.

'You on your break yet?' asked Ferny.
I glanced at the clock. 'Just about.'
'Let's get a breather.'

* * *

We left through the main gate. It was chilly outside, and we made our way up the hill towards the copse like a pair of tiny, puffing steam trains. We didn't have time to go to the village and back, but I'd brought along a flask of coffee and half a pack of biscuits, and there was a dilapidated picnic table near the trees, with a neat new bin for the litter.

Halfway up, Ferny put his hand on my arm. 'Here.'

I looked around. 'Here what?'

'Safer in the open. Nick the Prick might have someone hiding behind a tree.'

'You're looking for trouble, aren't you?'

'I don't know about looking, but I keep finding it.' Ferny was taller than most at the plant, and when he'd first arrived there'd been rumours of a human or two in his ancestry. A scuffle or two later the rumours became hurried whispers, and then died away completely. Now he was one of us, but there'd always been an edge to him.

'Well don't go calling him Nick watsit. He'd explode if he heard that one.'

'Good. I'd like to see his fat carcass spread out for vulture food.'

'You're terrible,' I said, wincing. 'Look, he was serious about the stables. Once you're in that dreadful place you never come out. The smell of manure follows you like an invisible cloud, and the boss won't risk tainting the merchandise.'

Ferny laughed. 'Pru, I'm not going to the stables,' he said. 'I'll see fatso in hell before that happens.'

'What do you mean?' I asked nervously.

Ferny glanced around, then drew something from his pocket. It was a wicked-looking automatic, only a small gun to a human but it looked like a cannon in Ferny's hands.

My blood ran cold. 'Is-is that a toy?' I asked.

He ejected the magazine with a practiced flick of his wrist, then showed me the bright bullet nestled in the top. 'Nick suppressant,' he said.

'You're mad,' I breathed. 'It'll be worse than the stables, they'll lock you up and throw away the key.'

'The magazine holds eight rounds,' said Ferny.

'Oh?'

'Seven for him, one for me.'

The metal cap rattled against the rim of the flask as I unscrewed it with shaking fingers. My brain was racing, knowing that I not only had to stop Ferny but save him at the same time. How?

Ferny looked at me. 'How what?'

Lawks, I'd spoken aloud. 'Er, how would you like the coffee?'

'In a cup?'

I poured the dark liquid into the metal lid, then handed it over. 'Bullet?' I said, holding out the packet of biscuits.

Ferny laughed. 'You should see yourself.'

'See myself?' I threw the packet aside, tears blurring my eyes. 'You're standing there, cool as ice, telling me you're going to kill someone. Someone who pays our board and wages, who—'

'Someone with no compassion, with no morals and no—'

'What about the charity work?'

'Tch. Public relations. Maintaining his image.'

'But humans love him – and what about the kids? You'll break their hearts.'

'The kids? Maybe in the old days.'

'But you can't do it. You can't.'

Ferny put the gun away. 'I'm not saying I will. But if Santa gives me any more lip, he's history.'