

Artifice



2013

Halloween

Episode

Artifice: 2013 Halloween Episode

Copyright 2013 by K. P. Alexander

Chapter 1

“Don’t we have backup generators?” Nolan asked, more than a trace of exasperation in his voice. “Why am I running around here half-blind? Please don’t tell me you forgot to requisition gas for them.”

“Look, whatever that fool Ganz did, he managed to fry the circuit that switches the power over to the backup, and it’s gonna’ take me at least half an hour to swap this piece out,” the voice in his ear replied. “You’ll just have to make do with the emergency lighting for now.”

“Fine,” growled Nolan, “Just let me know as soon as it’s back up and running again.”

Moments later, Nolan turned a corner and saw the door to the main lab directly ahead. Drawing closer, he also noticed that the door was slightly ajar and that Jensen was nowhere to be seen. Not the type to abandon his post, he assumed that Jensen must be inside helping Ganz unplug his coffeemaker or whatever else had caused this whole mess.

Getting closer, he also noticed the strong smell of smoke and burnt electronics coming from inside the lab. He ran faster.

Unholstering his weapon, he kicked the door open and took stock of the situation.

Directly in front of him, he saw Ganz sprawled out on his back, a pool of blood surrounding his head. Jensen was still nowhere to be seen. Every piece of electronic equipment in the room was either emitting smoke, or had a small fire erupting from it. Looking to the opposite side of the room, he saw several large vats which looked like they were leaking their contents on to the floor.

Not caring to spend more time than he had to with potentially toxic fumes or chemicals, he raced over to Ganz’s side to see if the scientist was dead or simply unconscious.

Kneeling, he heard a groan coming from Ganz’s mouth before he could even check for a pulse. Opting to take the quickest possible path to consciousness, he unceremoniously started slapping the scientist with one hand, while propping him up with the other. “Ganz! Wake up!”

“Wha’? What’s going on?” he finally responded in a groggy voice.

“I was hoping you’d tell me,” Nolan muttered. “Come on, stand up and let’s get the hell out of here.”

“Okay...,” replied the scientist, standing up on shaky legs. “I... wait!”

“What now? You forget your pocket protector?”

“No! Subject Fifteen!” Ganz half slurred and half shouted, pulling Nolan towards a door in another corner of the lab. “Quickly!”

“What! Look, you must be out of your mind if you think I’m evacuating him too!”

“Wha’? No! You don’t need to... Just make sure it’s still there!”

“Okay, doc. You’re not making much sense here,” Nolan replied, a trace of frustration making its way into his tone, “You’ve got a pretty nasty gash and bump on the back of your head. We need to leave and get you checked out!”

“You’re not listening to me!” Ganz replied, equal amounts of frustration finding its way into his voice as well. “I think Fifteen’s escaped!”

“How, exactly? Did someone sneak him a grenade launcher, tucked away inside a cake?” Nolan snarled. “Because that’s what you’d need to smash your way out of that cage!”

“Look, we’re here already,” Ganz said, as they stopped in front of the heavy steel door. “Just open it and check.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, the whole facility’s got no power right now,” Nolan said. “What sort of magic are you going to use to get the keycard reader to open the door for us?”

“It should already be open,” Ganz said. “The failsafe unlocks that door in case of a power loss, while keeping the cage inside locked.”

Pushing against the door with his foot, Nolan found Ganz’s information correct, as it easily swung inwards to expose a pitch black room.

“Of course there wouldn’t be any emergency lighting in here,” Ganz muttered. Switching on the flashlight on his pistol, he scanned the room.

Not good. Not good at all.

One side of the reinforced glass cage had been completely shattered, and Subject Fifteen was nowhere to be seen.

“All units!” Nolan said, pressing the button on his collar. “Wake up! Subject Fifteen is on the loose! Whereabouts unknown! Lock down and secure all exits immediately, then send in search teams to round him up! Also, unknown chemical spills in here, so use oxygen masks!”

“How the hell did it smash that cage?” Nolan asked, turning to the scientist.

“You’ve got me,” Ganz groaned. “We’ve measured its strength quite a few times, and it shouldn’t be anywhere near strong enough to break that glass.”

“Did anyone else go in that room recently?”

“I was the only one in there all day. Even Jensen didn’t come inside.”

“Where is Jensen, anyway?”

“Huh? I thought he was outside waiting for you,” Ganz said. “All I remember was every piece of equipment overloading at once, then what I’m assuming was Subject Fifteen blindsiding me.”

“Why did you think it was Fifteen breaking out, and not someone else breaking in?”

“Well, I didn’t get too good of a look before getting knocked out,” Ganz admitted. “But, unless the intruder decided to wear a Halloween costume, I’m pretty sure I can make an accurate hypothesis as to what happened.”

“Well, considering that you’re still alive, chances are that Jensen came inside to check on you when the power failed, and probably interrupted Fifteen after it knocked you out,” Nolan said. “Chances are that he’s still chasing it somewhere around this damned place.”

“And if not?”

“Then he’s dead.”

Ganz gulped. “... I see...”

“You asked,” Nolan said, grabbing Ganz and hurrying to the door. “Let’s just get out of here before these fumes do us in.”

“No argument from me,” Ganz replied. “You said that power’s down to the entire facility? Even the backup generator’s not running?”

“It’s running, but something got fried somewhere, and it’ll be a bit before they can

get it hooked back in.”

“In that case, I should probably tell you about the other failsafe that was just put in place...”

“Do I even want to know?”

“Probably not, but you should,” Ganz said. “In the event of total power loss, the emergency ventilation shafts unlock themselves and the fans start running.”

“What? And how are the fans running if there’s no power?”

“Each fan has an independent battery that can power it for up to six hours.”

“I should’ve never taken this assignment,” Nolan groaned. “So you think this thing can escape up one of the shafts?”

“Definitely.”

“Won’t the fans just shred it to ribbons?”

“Well,” Ganz started, a little sheepishly, “there’s emergency cutoff switches on either side of each fan.”

“What!” Nolan exclaimed. “And who’s bloody idiotic idea was that?”

“Mine,” Ganz admitted, shaking his head. “Considering all the chemicals we’ve got down here, I wanted to make sure everyone could evacuate in time, and that they didn’t suffocate before they could get to the surface. Or, that they’d have a way out in the event that they had to make their way up those shafts. I mean, this place was built in the sixties. I don’t even know what the workplace safety standards were back then!”

“Idiot,” Nolan muttered, hitting the button again, “All units! The emergency ventilation shafts are open! Secure them immediately, and close them if possible!”

“Any other fun facts you neglected to tell me?” Nolan asked, dragging the somewhat shamefaced scientist behind him.

“No, I think that’s about it.”

Chapter 2

“Power should be coming back up right about... now! The security camera archive should be rebooted and ready to go in another few minutes.”

One by one, the various security monitors started blinking back to life. “Yep, the live feed from the cameras are back now, save for a couple around Ganz’s lab,” Nolan confirmed with the engineer. “Take a look at those and check if they’ve been damaged. Also, see if you can get the primary generator back online again, too. If the backup cuts out, we’ll be in the same mess again.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” the voice in his ear said tentatively, “but that’s looking like it’s a write-off. I think the whole generator’s going to have to be replaced.”

“Fine, then. Radio in and have them ship us another one.”

“Okay, you got it.”

“Tessa? You there?” Nolan said, pressing the button on his collar again. “You should have lights again down there.”

“They just came back on, sir, and we just finished our sweep of this floor,” Tessa replied. “We’re heading down to sub-level four now.”

“I’m picking up no motion on the cameras, so it’s probably hiding in a storage closet somewhere. Keep me apprised.”

“Will do.”

Looking at one of the monitors, Nolan swore. It showed active feeds from all the security staff, save Jensen. It was possible that his radio could have simply been damaged in the scuffle with Fifteen, but Nolan realized that he was probably very much dead. At the very least, he would have already used one of the intercom systems in the hallways to call for backup and report his position, once power had been restored.

Nolan was fairly confident that the creature hadn’t escaped to the surface. All the exits were still sealed, save the one Nolan himself had used to retrieve Ganz, and that one had been guarded from the outside the entire time.

There had been at least a bit of good news with regards to the whole ventilation shaft fiasco. Thankfully, whoever had setup Ganz’s failsafe had had the prudence to

lay strips of fragile filament in a grille pattern across each of the hatches, effectively creating a sort of tamper seal.

Examination of the seals had thankfully shown all of them to be unbroken. Or rather, fairly unbroken. One of the seals had a damaged area the size of a small rock. However, unless Fifteen had managed to shrink itself down to miniscule size, chances are that one of the many rodents on the island had taken advantage of the open hatch to try to scavenge some free food.

That only meant one thing. The creature must have ran off to hide in one of the lower levels, which Tessa's team was now combing.

Still, it didn't hurt to be certain. *Hell, the creature wasn't even supposed to be able to escape from that cage. Didn't hurt to take precautions, just in case,* Nolan thought.

"Gruber?" Nolan said, putting a finger to his collar.

"I'm here," came the reply.

"Take whatever staff you can spare, give them lanterns, and have them comb the grounds to make sure there's nothing odd going on."

"I'm on it."

"Ganz," Nolan began, turning around, "now's the time to start explaining what happened."

The back of his head now bandaged, Ganz had been sitting back quietly in a corner. His eyes opening and turning to Nolan, he retorted, "Whoa, hold on a second. You think I caused the power outage?"

"Considering that you were the only one in the facility at the time..."

"I was only doing a routine data analysis when it happened! Besides, even if one of my machines did blow a fuse, the secondary generator wouldn't have been affected!"

Nolan furrowed his brow. "You're claiming sabotage, then? By who?"

"Hey, you're the security expert. You tell me."

A ding from his console indicated that the recorded security footage was now available for playback.

"Fine," Nolan said, tapping away at the console, "Let's start by seeing how Fifteen

managed to break out of that cage.”

Rolling his chair closer, Ganz looked at the security monitor as Nolan fast forwarded through the recent footage.

So far, the camera only showed the creature sitting down sedately in the centre of the cage, eyes closed.

Roughly humanoid in appearance, the creature definitely wouldn't be able move around in the general populace unnoticed.

Covered in large greyish-blue scales, the creature's rocklike skin was accented by large curved spikes protruding from the brow and crest of its head. Its arms also carried a row of spikes on each forearm, as did its shins.

“I'd not care to get into a fistfight with that thing,” Nolan mused. “Ganz, now that everything's gone to pot, you mind explaining to me exactly what this thing is? Where did you even find it? Or is this some monstrosity you eggheads cooked up in a lab?”

“Huh? No way. All I know is that one of our mining teams found it somewhere in South America, while doing some prospecting,” Ganz explained. “At first they thought it was just another pile of rocks, but I'm guessing the arms and legs quickly convinced them otherwise-”

“Okay, fine,” Nolan said, cutting him off, “How did a group of miners end up capturing it, anyway?”

“From what I understand, the creature must have been dormant or something,” Ganz replied. “They were able to restrain it with a bunch of chains before it started to wake up. Thankfully, they decided to call the head office instead of the tabloids. By the time we managed to get it in that portable glass cage, it looks like it was almost fully conscious.”

“I see,” Nolan said. “So it's some kind of prehistoric monster or something?”

“I... don't think so,” Ganz said. “The samples we were able to get from it showed a few strange things. First, it seems to have quite a large amount of human DNA-”

“So, it's some kind of human mutant?”

“Not quite. Or, at least, I don't think so,” Ganz repeated. “There's also some other strange DNA in there that I still haven't managed to pin down. My best *guess* is that

this thing was a human at some point in time.”

“How’d he manage to get turned into that thing, then?”

“Well, that brings up another point,” Ganz said, rubbing the back of his head. “I think *he* was actually a *she*.”

“Okay,” Nolan said. “And this helps us how? You’re planning on appealing to its maternal instincts?”

“Huh? What?” Ganz said, still rubbing his head. “No, I just thought I’d let you know. In any case, my theory is that she was infected with some kind of weird parasite or something along the way. I haven’t been able to sedate the darned thing to confirm, though. So far, it’s shaken off enough tranquilizer to knock out ten elephants! All I have to work on are preliminary x-rays that were taken during the initial transport, and tissue analysis.”

“So, what you’re saying is that you have no idea what we’re dealing with?” Nolan asked, annoyance in his tone.

“Hey, I was doing my best in there!” Ganz defended himself. “I don’t know why the company decided to study this thing themselves, instead of turning it over to the government or something-

“Agh,” Ganz groaned, hand quickly going back to his head. “Is my head supposed to kill like this?”

“You’ve probably got a concussion,” Nolan said, “which is still a damned sight better than having a case of dead. In any event, I’ve already called for a chopper to evacuate you. I’ll let them know to take you to a hospital on the mainland.”

“Thanks,” Ganz said, closing his eyes.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Nolan cautioned him. “Try to stay conscious. You want to keep blood circulating to that giant head of yours. Now, one more thing – what are the chances of this thing swimming away?”

“None,” Ganz said. “Fifteen’s body is way too dense to float, and one of the few things I do know is that it does require air. So, unless it can hold its breath while walking on the ocean floor for a few hundred miles, I wouldn’t worry about it getting off the island.”

“That’s something at least,” Nolan muttered. Seeing movement on the monitor, he

slowed down the playback to realtime, “Here we go, let’s see how you managed to break out.”

Slowly, the creature on the screen got up. After a minute of standing still again, and just as Nolan was about to hit the fast forward button again, the creature suddenly threw its arms in the air and started emitting an unearthly shriek.

“You didn’t hear that earlier when you were in the lab?” Nolan asked. “You were right outside that bloody room!”

“Hey, I had them soundproof the separating wall the second night that creature started doing that. Maybe not one of my better ideas.”

“You think?” Nolan said, watching the creature on the monitor.

After another few minutes of shrieking, the creature started wildly flailing away at the glass sides of the cage.

“I thought you said that creature couldn’t break the glass? Are you sure you measured its strength properly, Einstein?”

“Hey, that experiment was conducted flawlessly. I had pressure sensors inside the cage, along with tension meters on the chains before we cut it loose!” Ganz said in defense. “However, seeing as how this situation is pretty much unprecedented in human history, I think I deserve a little leeway.”

“Remind me to explain the difference between *little leeway* and *massive screwup* to you sometime.”

The wild thrashing continued for another five minutes, then stopped as abruptly as it had started.

“That’s odd,” Ganz said. “So it didn’t bash its way out of the cage then?”

“Hold your horses, before you start vindicating yourself too early,” Nolan said. “It’s probably just taking a breather. There’s still over ten minutes of tape left.”

For the next couple of minutes, both men watched as the creature resumed its idle stance in the cage.

“Looks like the creature’s facing the door,” Nolan commented. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say it was trying to get our attention.”

“Or maybe checking to see if we’re watching? Who knows? Maybe it’ll start doing

funny faces next,” Ganz said with a yawn, then putting a hand to his head with a wince. “Agh... note to self: don’t yawn.”

“You might be right about that one,” Nolan said, staring off into space.

“About the yawning? Trust me, I’m right.”

“About the creature, you idiot,” Nolan grunted. “It may have been checking to see if we were asleep, or actively monitoring it.”

“Speaking of which, and I’m totally not assigning any blame here, but why weren’t we?” Ganz asked. “Actively monitoring it on the security cameras, I mean.”

“You can thank John for that one,” Nolan replied. “I’ve barely got enough personnel to maintain round-the-clock patrols and keep this relic of a place operational, much less maintain constant watch on a *supposedly* unbreakable cage!”

“Okay, okay. Point taken.”

Any further belaboring of the point was put on hold, as both men were both slightly shocked at what the creature did next.

Slowly and methodically, the creature stretched out its left arm. Then, using the spines on its right, it quite deliberating sliced its skin open for almost the entire length of the inside forearm.

“What the hell...” was all that Nolan could say, while Ganz could only stare at the screen with a half-disgusted, half-curious expression.

What the creature did next did little to offer an explanation. Using the butchered arm almost like a squeegee, it began painting a section of one wall of the cell with a thick, almost black blood. After a half minute of its gruesome artwork, it backed off to the opposite wall, cradling the wounded and still bleeding arm almost like a baby.

“That’s... wow...” was all that Ganz could now say.

“What do you think it’s doing?” Nolan asked.

“I wish I could tell you,” Ganz said.

After another minute of staring at the bloody painting, the creature hunched itself over, then launched itself at the smeared wall.

The glass shattered.

“What the hell?!” Nolan exclaimed. “How did it do that, Ganz?”

Ganz’s face, however, showed that he could offer no explanation. “I honestly don’t

know. Looks like something in its blood was able to weaken or eat away at the glass.”

“Ganz,” Nolan began, “exactly how intelligent is this thing?”

“As far as I could tell, it’s no smarter than any wild beast.”

They looked on as the creature gathered itself off the ground, and started picking the pieces of glass off its scaly hide.

“I still don’t understand why the power kicked out,” Nolan said. “There was no sign of sabotage at the generators, and our loud mouthed engineer said that the surge came from inside the facility.”

“Someone sneaked in here, you think?”

“No,” Nolan replied. “No motion or heat signatures were picked up on any of the cameras.”

“I... oh... oh crap,” was all he heard Ganz say, a sudden look of realization in his eyes.

“What?” Nolan said, his pistol already half drawn.

“Keep watching. I think I know what might have happened...”

Satisfied with its grooming efforts, they watched as the creature made its way not to the reinforced door, but to another wall of the room.

Raising its good arm, the creature then quickly started slashing at the wall using its forearm spikes, and the two men watched as bits of plaster flew onto the floor.

“What the hell...” Nolan said, the veins in his brow starting to pulse. “Is that drywall?! I thought this whole facility was made of concrete!”

“Part of the retrofit when we moved in,” Ganz explained, wincing. “There used to be a fusebox there, which wasn’t necessary when we put in the generator. So, your friend the engineer took it out, bypassed it, and had it patched with drywall. In his defense-”

“No. No, I really don’t want to hear it,” Nolan said, cutting him off and putting a hand to his forehead. “Why me?”

“So this thing smashed the electric cables?” Nolan asked, looking back at Ganz.

“That’s the part I’m still not sure of,” Ganz shrugged, watching as the creature finished demolishing the drywall. “The backup generator shouldn’t have been

affected.”

Now finished demolishing the wall, the creature looked into the hole, which the camera revealed to contain three large power cables.

“Two of those should be the live wires from the primary generator,” Ganz explained. “The third one’s from the backup.”

Nolan said nothing as he watched the creature rip at each of the three cables until they finally broke. The camera showed two of the cables discharging a copious amount of sparks. Finally needing to use its injured appendage, it slowly raised its left arm and carefully grabbed one of the sparking cables. Holding it away from itself, it then grabbed the other live cable using its good arm.

“So, no more intelligent than a beast, eh?” Nolan grunted.

The creature then carefully touched the cable in its right hand to the dead cable leading back to the backup generator, holding it there while sparks and puffs of smoke started coming off the cables.

“Well, that explains what happened to the backup generator,” Ganz said. “That switchover circuit probably can’t handle that much current flowing through it, much less from the other direction.”

About another ten seconds passed, then the creature pulled back the cable in its right hand. Then, holding both live cables at arm’s length, it then touched both of them together.

The camera feed went dead.

“And that must’ve been how it fried the primary generator,” Ganz narrated.

“Ganz?” Nolan said in a soft voice.

“Yes,” Ganz said, a little hesitatingly.

“Why does this thing appear to also be a better engineer than the one I currently have?”

Chapter 3

Carol held her lantern up high, as she continued her patrol, all the time wondering what exactly was going on. A week ago, she had been happily working away at her executive assistant position, her days in the navy over and done with more than three years now. Then, orders from up-high had called for a small group of trustworthy personnel to work a hush-hush job for a few weeks. Former military employees had been given first crack apparently.

Not seeing anything wrong with what should have ended up being a tropical vacation, she accepted. Now, here she was, stuck on an island in the middle of the Pacific looking for what she could only assume was some kind of escaped alien. What they had initially thought to be some sort of stone-age monster had been revised a few minutes ago, when Nolan had informed everyone that the creature appeared to be intelligent, and had been responsible for the generator malfunction.

Shaking her head in frustration only chafed at her neck and served to remind her of her ill-fitting camouflage fatigues, as an incident with a mud puddle had sent her last set of clean clothes off to the makeshift laundromat earlier the previous day. Then, a tropical rainstorm had decided to soak everything on the clothesline for a second time.

On top of all this, there was fog. The cold rainstorm had been followed by a warm front, which had resulted in a nice layer of mist over the small island. *Some tropical vacation this was turning out to be.*

Her mental meandering came to an abrupt halt, as she looked at the illuminated area directly to her left. Next to a grove of coconut trees, she spied a body sprawled out on the ground.

Not wasting time, she hit the button on her collar, unholstered her pistol, and started running to examine the scene.

“Sir, I’ve got something here,” she said softly.

“What is it, Carol?” she heard Nolan answer back.

Getting closer, she saw who it was, “Body on the ground. Looks like it’s J.P. Nothing else in sight.”

Checking for a pulse, she added, “He’s alive. Trying to revive him now.”

Her method of revival was no less gentle than the one Nolan had used earlier on Ganz.

“What? Carol?” J.P. groaned, opening and focusing his eyes, “What happened?”

“You tell me,” Carol replied. “I just found you here. Thought you were taking a dirt nap. Were you attacked by Fifteen?”

“Er... no,” J.P. admitted with a groan, coupled with an embarrassed look, “My own fault, really. Tried climbing one of these coconut trees to get a bird’s eye view. Already did it a hundred times before to get coconuts for you guys.”

“Yes, yes, I remember. What happened this time?”

“Stupidity. Got jumped by a rat or something at the top. Surprised the hell out of me, and ended up mostly falling all the way back down.”

“You get that, sir?” Carol said into her collar. “Also, looks like he’s got a nice gash on his head.”

“Got it, Carol,” Nolan responded. Though he sounded understanding, Carol could hear the exasperation starting to eek its way into his voice. “Take him back to quarters and help get him patched up.”

“Will do.”

“Great,” Nolan muttered. “Jensen missing in action, and J.P. injured. I’m fast running out of real security personnel.”

“Huh?” Ganz asked. “What happened to J.P.?”

“Looks like broken heads are somehow starting to get contagious around here,” Nolan grunted.

Not sure if the statement was meant as a veiled threat to keep quiet, Ganz took the prudent route. However, any potential awkward silence was broken, as Nolan continued to speak, “Looks like this whole operation’s gone south. I’m tempted to call John and ream him out for not letting me bring a full squad of my boys over. Instead, I get a dozen volunteer soldiers, an ill-tempered mechanic, a mad scientist, and six actual security staff - two of which are currently incapacitated!”

“Insubordination aside, I don’t think the big bossman’s going to be happy if he gets

that phone call,” Ganz cautioned. “Remember, he wanted to keep as many of your boys in the field to allay any suspicions. Couldn’t pull them off their current contracts without anyone noticing. No telling what’s going on in the cutthroat world of corporate espionage these days.”

“Well, let’s just hope that I don’t have to put *my* contingency into effect.”

“What’s that?”

“If Tessa’s team can’t locate Fifteen, I’m going to blow the whole facility,” Nolan said grimly. “If that thing’s hiding out in some forgotten nook or cranny somewhere that we can’t get to, a few thousand tons of rubble should be enough to put it out of commission. John can send another mining team if he wants to retrieve whatever’s left of it again.”

Ganz gulped, “But what if it’s escaped, and already loose on the island somehow?”

“Part two of my contingency is to napalm the entire island,” Nolan said, “You said that that thing can’t swim, so it’s only way off is to figure out how to build a raft, or cling to a tree and float away. Given what we’ve seen of its intelligence so far, I’d say that it’s fully capable of doing that. So, even if the napalm doesn’t kill it, I’ll just make sure there are no trees left.”

“Wow,” was all Ganz could say. “How are you planning to explain napalming the island though? In fact, where are you going to get napalm from? I don’t think the company’s that well stocked?”

“Disease outbreak,” Nolan replied calmly. “I’ll call up a few friends stateside, and the military will do it for me.”

“Remind me never to tick you off,” Ganz said, gulping again. “Well, let’s hope Tessa manages to catch that thing.”

Chapter 4

Well, this was more than a little anticlimactic, Tessa thought.

Her team had finally located the runaway creature, hidden away in one of the many cobweb-ridden rooms in sub-level five. Or, rather, they had located its apparently lifeless body.

Hunched over in a corner and cradling a mangled arm, it was almost a pitiful sight. Not that Tessa had been praying for a firefight, but it almost made the whole frantic chase seem like a wasted effort. *Should've just brought a couple of janitors on the expedition, and let them go to the trouble of finding the body.*

Still, they had taken the precaution of chaining it up before they laid it down on the cart and made their way to the elevator. *Either way, thank goodness the power's back on. I'd hate having to lug this thing up the stairs.*

“Well, doc?” Nolan patiently asked. “Is it dead?”

“I... think so,” Ganz said.

“Ganz, there's either dead or not-dead. No in-between.”

“I still don't know enough about its biology to be a hundred percent sure,” Ganz replied. Then, seeing the look on Nolan's face, he quickly added, “But, there's no respiratory or nervous functions happening in its body, as far as I can tell. So, unless it's a descendent of Lazarus, I wouldn't bet on it coming back to life.”

“Good enough, then,” Nolan said, shaking his head. “I'll send for a freezer for this thing, before it starts to stink even more than usual.”

“There's, well...” Ganz began, hesitating.

“Huh? What now?”

“Doesn't it seem odd that it would go to all that trouble to escape, only to pointlessly die in the attempt?” Ganz pondered. “Plus, why did it head further into the facility, rather than making for an exit? It's not like it didn't get a good look around when we wheeled it in.”

“Okay, what's your point?”

“Remember how I said that this creature probably used to be human?” Ganz asked. “What if it... well... infected someone else before it died?”

Nolan quickly put two and two together. “You think it infected Jensen, and that he’s loose somewhere or hiding out?”

“Makes sense to me,” Ganz shrugged. “Why else haven’t we found him? Tessa’s team finished sweeping the last few sub-levels, and found no trace of him.”

“That’s it. Not doing any more of these crazy missions for you, John,” Nolan growled. Hitting the button on his collar, he said, “All units. Commence a fresh sweep of the facility and the island. Find Jensen. Take the place apart, if you have to.”

Looking back at Ganz, he asked, “Got any more good news for me? Or any insights that can help us?”

“Well, only one,” Ganz admitted. “Now, this is just a theory-”

“Fine, fine. You’ve got the disclaimer out of the way. Now, what is it?”

“I suspect that the creature may be able to sense, and hunt using, electric fields.”

“Like a shark?”

“Exactly! It’d certainly explain how it knew where that junction box was. How it knew to use them to blow up the generators, well, that I’ve still got no explanation for.”

“So, what you’re saying,” Nolan said. “Is that we’d probably never be able to sneak up on Jensen?”

“Well, assuming that I am right about all this, there’s no telling how long the transformation takes. I’d say there’s a chance he may still be, well, evolving right now. So, hurry up, and you may still have a chance to catch him off-guard.”

“Good enough. Also, remind me never to work another job with you again,” Nolan remarked. “Now, let’s get you and J.P. out of here. The freighter sent out a chopper to get you two to a hospital. It should be landing in about ten minutes.”

“And not a moment too soon,” Ganz said. “Are you sure a concussion is supposed to hurt this much?”

“Would you like a broken limb to compare it to?”

“You’ll refuel back at the freighter, then head back to the mainland,” Nolan informed the two injured men. “Carol’s made arrangements for when you land. After you’re cleared medically, they’ll send you back stateside.”

“Thanks, sir,” J.P. replied. “Good luck finding Jensen. I hope he’s okay.”

“On that note,” Ganz added. “If you manage to subdue him, get him back to a cell on the freighter, and send for me. Hospital clearance or not.”

Nolan raised an eyebrow.

“I can’t say I don’t feel more than a little responsible for all this,” Ganz said, his tone apologetic. “I’m hoping that if I get to him in time, I just might be able to save him.”

“Well, I can’t say I don’t appreciate the sentiment, doc” Nolan admitted. “I’ll let you know what happens.”

“Thanks.”

As soon as the helicopter was in the air and safely away, Nolan turned around and headed back to the main facility. With no more loopy scientists to babysit, Nolan could now join in on the hunt.

Halfway there, his earpiece beeped and he heard a voice, “Sir, this is Tessa. We’ve found Jensen.”

“Alive?”

“Er... not exactly. We ended up having to use his dog tags to identify him.”

“Come again?”

“We were doing another sweep of Ganz’s lab, and checked on those giant tanks of goo he’s got in there. We fished Jensen out of there. Looks like whatever was in that tank did a good job of dissolving the top layer of skin right off.”

“Good work. Just to be sure, secure the body with chains, then see if you can hose off most of that slop.”

“Will do, sir,” Tessa confirmed. “But, to be perfectly honest, I don’t think he’s coming back to life. His legs aren’t even attached to his body anymore.”

“What?”

“Looks like the creature ripped them off, so that he’d fit in the tank.”

“I see. Well, chain him up, anyways, then package him up in a freezer. Let’s get off this blasted island.”

Chapter 5

The progeny still couldn't understand the outsiders' language, but they could guess as to what was happening.

Safely concealed, they had followed their mother's instructions to the letter. She had tried to impart as much knowledge of this world as she could to them, before she had sacrificed herself to cover their escape.

Despite possessing an alien mindset, they still experienced the pangs of sorrow that any child would feel at the passing of its mother. She had explained the necessity to them, though that did little in making it any easier to accept. Possessing no memories of her own mother, she had made it a point to tell them of her earliest recollection. At the very least, they would somewhat learn about their origins.

Her earliest memory had been one of simply waking up and scuttling across a wooded landscape. There were strange lights everywhere in her field of vision, many of them moving. Hiding and observing, she had quickly puzzled them out to be indications of other creatures, though why they were all glowing was currently beyond her understanding.

Interestingly enough, she had seen many creatures hiding and successfully avoiding detection, yet the glowing should have made them sitting ducks for predators. Perhaps none of them realized that they were glowing?

Using her newfound talent, she quickly copied the motions of the other small animals and learned to avoid predators, though she almost ended up as a snack more than once.

Eventually, she came across a curious creature laying down in a patch of grass. For some reason she couldn't explain, this creature fascinated her, though self-preservation kept her from revealing herself. Concealed in the bushes, she spied on the creature until the sun went down, but, possessed by an unknown calling, continued her surveillance of the unmoving creature.

By morning, the scavengers had started to appear. The creature had been dead the entire time.

Yet, the fascination persisted.

Finally unable to contain herself, she made a beeline for the creature. Instinct now completely overwhelming her, she found herself at the head of the creature. Finding the back of the creature's head split open, she quickly crawled inside.

Still not sure why she was doing all of this, she found herself flattening her body against the creature's brain, and falling into a deep sleep.

Waking up, she had no idea of how much time had passed. However, and more alarmingly, she found that she could not move. Her body was now flattened and doubled in length. What had been her legs now appeared to be elongated tendrils that entangled the creature's dead brain. Her eyes still seemed to work, though. While no light penetrated her prison, she could still sense small glowing objects flying in the distance.

In fact, there didn't appear to be any creatures nearby. It looked like the scavengers had opted to simply leave their meal behind. Strange.

What was also odd was the fact that the creature's brain had also started to give off a faint glow.

However, she had no time to dwell on that thought, as a jolt of incredible pain shot through her body. She blacked out.

She opened her eyes and looked around, before she apprehended what she was actually doing. *These are not my eyes*, was the first realization. The second realization was that she was also not in her own body.

Willing herself to move, she sat up and realized that she now inhabited the body of the strange creature. Using her new eyes, she examined her altered form. The creature's skin had turned completely dark, and scales were now starting to grow everywhere. More importantly, all the damage caused by the scavengers seem to have been completely undone.

And, speaking of the scavengers, she looked at her surroundings. She was completely surrounded by a mass of dead animals, the same scavengers that had been feasting on her new body. Strangely, they all seemed to have had their stomachs dissolved from the inside out.

However, she didn't dwell on that, as she also recognized another sensation. Hunger. Incredible hunger.

Not pausing, or even caring how or why the animals were dead, she grabbed the nearest one and started gorging herself on it.

After about an hour of feasting, she felt her senses starting to dull. Unceremoniously, she collapsed and blacked out.

She would periodically awaken, but was unable to move. She remembered seeing the cold, white, solid rain come and go several times, but had no way of knowing how much time had exactly passed.

Not that she cared. The new dreams haunted her. She would see herself walking through large settlements of the strange creatures. Unable to understand the words they said, she could only piece together a rough idea of what was happening. She did understand, however, that the inhabitants were not embroiled in a constant struggle for food and survival. Not like her old life on the forest floor.

She needed to find this place.

She assumed that these dreams were flecks of memories pulled from her formerly dead host's brain, as she would also get vivid flashes of knowledge. The strange creatures seemed to be able to harness the power of the strange glowing lights that she could see. Furthermore, her host appeared to have been some sort of specialist in that area. If she really concentrated, she could try to pull pieces of rudimentary knowledge regarding the creatures' use of the glowing fields.

Yes. She would find this place, and prove her usefulness to them.

She would no longer be alone.

Things had not gone according to plan.

She had finally awoken, and regained the ability to move. Her body was now fully transformed, with scales now covering her entire body, and rows of spines on her forearms and shins.

Now mobile, she had set off to find the settlement she had seen in her dreams.

She had found it three days later.

Excitement had quickly turned into confusion when the initial group of creatures,

upon spying her, ran away screaming.

That confusion turned into blind panic when a second group of the creatures ran out of the settlement and started pointing long shiny sticks at her.

A loud noise followed by incredible pain was enough of a prompt for her to start fleeing for her life.

She had now been running for hours, but the creatures still relentlessly pursued her.

Exhausted, and now dejected, she was almost to the point where she considered giving up and letting the creatures just kill her, so that she could finally be done with the futility of her existence.

Before she could act on that impulse, she noticed a cave opening in the distance. Nothing to lose, she ran towards it and started making her way through what turned out to be a vast network of subterranean passages.

A safe distance away, she soon heard the sound of her pursuers. They appeared to be arguing with each other, but none of them had appeared to have followed her inside as yet.

Soon, the sounds died down. Still, she stayed put, unsure of whether there was an ambush waiting for her outside.

However, a few moments later, an incredibly loud sound filled her eardrums, as the cave started collapsing around her.

She blacked out.

She heard voices.

All she could do was weakly half-open one eyelid. She did not know how long she'd been unconscious, but she noticed the creatures attempting to dig her out.

Perhaps these ones were different? They would help her. All would be okay.

She blacked out again.

When she awoke, she was quickly disabused of that notion. Trapped underground and forced into what could have been a permanent hibernation, her rescuers had ended up being exemplars of the same bigotry that she had previously experienced. Bound in metal bonds, she could not escape.

Now, trapped in this strange transparent cage, she resigned herself to a fate of persecution.

That is, until she realized that there were young ones in her.

She didn't even want to think about what these belligerent creatures would do to her offspring. Lamenting her fortune, she was astonished to feel a pang of concern coming from her abdomen.

Quickly, she discovered that she could communicate with her progeny. Not wishing her fate on them, she had imparted what little knowledge she held, and tried to formulate an escape plan.

Forcing herself to examine her current host's brain for any usable information, she was surprised to find that the knowledge came more freely than ever, despite her not understanding the underlying concepts of much of it.

In the end, she came up with a plan that would allow her progeny to escape, and avoid being hunted for the time being. It would, however, involve the ultimate sacrifice, and it was obvious that her offspring were distressed about that part.

She would use the creatures' reliance on the glowing fields against them. She would shut down their habitat, forcing confusion. She would escape in one direction, forcing them to hunt for her while her progeny escaped to freedom.

The plan had worked.

The progeny mourned the loss of their mother, and steeled their hearts against the creatures that had taken her from them.

The plan had worked better than anticipated, actually.

After escaping her cage and disabling the source of the glowing fields that seemed so critical in the workings of this habitat, their mother had attacked the creature outside her cell. Taking care not to kill him, she had rendered him unconscious, then slashed the back of his head open with the spikes on her right forearm.

Their mother then placed her first child next to the creature, and watched as she made her way into the creature's head through the makeshift doorway. Flattening her body, the child worked her way in further until she was no longer visible from outside the wound.

As the child settled into its new lodgings, their mother smelt something in the air. Outside. She smelled the outdoors. Following the source of the scent, she finally spied a round vent in the ceiling.

Altering her plans, she threw her second child on to the ceiling and watched as she scuttled toward the vent and disappeared upwards. Should her first child be discovered, she hoped that the second could, at the least, secrete itself in the surrounding jungle until it was safe.

The second child had managed to climb out of the creature's habitat, chewed her way through a thin mesh, then escape into the surrounding forest. Though, she did have a scare when one of creatures had decided to climb the very same tree that she had concealed herself in. However, that encounter had ended up also providing a similar hiding place for her as well.

Now, both of her children were now safely hidden away, and were now being taken away from the island by their unwitting hosts. Learning from their mother's experiences, they had willed themselves not to merge with their hosts' brains, and would seek out more secluded targets to complete the last part of their mother's plan.

During her shortened and tormented life, their mother had learned one alien concept from her host's brain. That one concept had been taught to her progeny, and was now ingrained in their minds. Until death, they would not stop or slow until it had been enacted.

Revenge.

Message from the Author

Hi, folks.

As promised, here's a bonus Halloween Episode to snack on while you wait for Episode Three.

Remember, this Halloween Episode is non-canon. That is, while the characters are for the most part familiar, none of these events actually happen in the main Artifice universe. Just like how Homer wasn't actually a vampire in the next normal episode of The Simpsons.

In any case, I hoped you've enjoyed reading this.

Also, I'd really appreciate it if you'd leave a review for any of my previous Episodes on whichever retailer's website you've downloaded it from. Those reviews really mean a lot to me. They give me a better idea what you guys like and don't like, plus they give me more visibility among all the other ebooks out there. In fact, many of the larger ebook advertising sites and lists will not run an ad for your book unless it's got a minimum number of reviews, along with a certain average.

So, to sum it up: More reviews = Ability to advertise = More visibility = More people downloading my books = More people potentially buying my future books = More income for me = Less hours and overtime at my day job = Faster episode turnover = Happier readers!

We all win. :)