

PRISON LIFE

SUDDENLY, the pitch black room was flooded with an extremely bright light emanating from the ceiling, accompanied by the persistent noise of an over-amplified clanging bell. Then a moment of dead silence reigned before the room was drowned in a low, repetitive, monotone voice. *'All prisoners vacate cells within 3 minutes... All prisoners vacate cells within 3 minutes.'* Every day for the past five years of his life-term incarceration, Jackson Jensen had tolerated this same irritating wake-up call.

He stirred reluctantly from his prison bunk, running his fingers through his tousled hair, waiting for the next routine direction to be broadcast. A tall and wiry man, now in his early thirties, with an olive complexion and thick dark hair, Jackson had changed little in appearance over the years. Standing in his grey prison-issue pyjamas and surveying his all-too familiar surrounds, it was only his dark brown eyes that burned more intensely than ever.

Like all the cells in this massive complex, Jackson's small lockup was bland, totally secure and indestructible. It was windowless; the entire prison building being housed below the planet's surface and extending vertically three hundred feet below the ground. And it was encased by three six-inch thick, titanium-reinforced, concrete walls, the fourth wall a solid, sliding titanium exit door operated by the Control Room on the second level.

As the titanium door slid open, the next message sounded. *'All prisoners vacate cells... All prisoners vacate*

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cells. Jackson stepped onto the open walkway outside his lockup and joined the stream of look-alikes, wiping the sleep from their eyes as they were herded to the shower blocks by black-uniformed prison guards. The walkway opened onto a huge, central, circular core, eighty feet in diameter, channelling natural light into the complex and providing a clear view of the walkways on the floors above and below where close on two hundred male inmates were all doing the same.

“Morning, ladies! Lovely day!” Jackson called sarcastically to the guards, as he always did.

The prisoners' working day started at 06.00 hours. Emerging from their morning ablutions in bright-orange prison-issue overalls, they were escorted to the prison cafeteria to be fed a tasteless porridge. By 07.30 hours they were ready for their day's labour – rostered, if lucky, for general maintenance, internal transportation or kitchen, laundry and library service and, if not, for the dreaded task of mine labouring.

Located on the remote and inhospitable planet, Terra Upsilon, the penal colony had been established to isolate and contain Earth's most dangerous offenders, those with violent tendencies who could not be rehabilitated. The prisoners provided the manual labour for the only other activity on the planet – the underground mines – working in filtered-air caverns deep below the planet's surface. Terra Upsilon was being mined for essential raw minerals by Earth's Mining and Engineering Resource Industrial Company, MERIC.

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There was nowhere to run or hide. The surface of the planet was subjected to destructive sandstorms. Breathing apparatus and heavy protective clothing could shield the wearer for short periods of time, but silt-covered skeletal remains scattered on the planet's surface were constant reminders of desperate or foolish prisoners who had attempted to escape while on mining detail.

Wherever they were, in the mines, in their cells or throughout the prison complex, the prisoners were under constant surveillance. They were scrutinised by security cameras and monitored by bar-coded micro-chips implanted in the nape of their neck, hard-wired into their nervous system. If a prisoner strayed outside their designated area, the multi-functional chip automatically delivered a sudden electrical jolt causing excruciating pain. Using a device on their utility belt, the guards could also trigger an electrical shock to curtail unwanted prisoner behaviour. The prisoners were captive and controlled.

As Jackson began his catering shift, he joked to the others working the ovens, "Just another day in Paradise."

As a prisoner, Jackson was unique. He wasn't a hardened low-life like most of them. In fact, he was quite the opposite, well-educated, an intelligent professional and former corporate director who had been imprisoned for conspiracy and murder.

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While biding his time on Terra Upsilon Jackson had continued to be ever-vigilant, maintaining his physical fitness through regular use of the prison gym. He kept his body toned, honed his fencing and martial art skills and sharpened his boxing prowess. He also maintained a sharp mind. He spent some of his free time in the prison library digesting information, studying spacecraft design and operations and keeping up to date with the latest technological advancements and industrial developments on Earth. He kept a constant eye on Earth's current affairs, watching the latest news on the monitors in the Recreation Room.

In the face of gang rivalries amongst the prisoners, Jackson had managed to gain a position of safety and high status. He adapted his business acuity into street-smart cunning, making a lucrative enterprise from contraband. He dealt in drugs, cigarettes, alcohol, small-bladed weapons, confectionery and luxury food items smuggled into the complex from visiting transporters. Jackson's personal body guards watched his back while he conducted 'business' with the inmates and prison guards.

The prison warden, Commissioner Daniel Davies, who had been in charge for some seven years, was aware of Jackson's smuggling operations. But, turning a blind eye, he used Jackson's influential status to keep him informed of what was happening amongst the prisoners and to assist him in keeping relative peace. In turn, Jackson used Davies to extract information about planned prison activities that might affect his business dealings. Commissioner Davies often invited Jackson to his office for an 'informal chat'.

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And, this morning, Davies had something of importance to relay to Jackson, summoning him from his kitchen duties.

If Jackson wasn't the typical prisoner, then the Commissioner wasn't the typical 'Company man'. He was rather short in stature and quite rotund, reflecting both his over-indulgence in confiscated food contraband and a lack of physical exercise. But he was a stickler for protocol. He dressed in the corporate charcoal uniform, his blazer adorned with black velvet collar and cuffs and studded with silver buttons at the front. His uniform was immaculately clean and well pressed and his black leather boots were spit-polished to a shiny, glazed finish. He kept his black hair cropped short and parted to one side and he was always clean-shaven, exposing his anaemic moon-face. He was constantly peering over his half-rimmed, wire reading glasses which he wore habitually and he spoke in a high-pitched tone in short, sharp bursts of sentences, sounding as though he was always in a hurry.

Seated at his clear glass-panelled desk Davies continuously shuffled papers from his desktop to one of four neatly-stacked trays on his left or from these trays to neat piles on the desktop. Nothing was ever orderly enough for this fastidious man, which was an annoying distraction for visitors trying to engage him in conversation. Perhaps this anal-retentive quality was one of the criteria the Prison Board sought in a prison administrator destined for isolated penal colonies? Under the command of a warden who was precise to the point of pedantic, all would run efficiently. And, for a warden who was busy attending to his own

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obsessive needs, the seven year tenure would pass more quickly.

“Yes, yes, come in, come in,” said Davies when the alert chime was pressed by the guard at the armour-plate door. Activating the entry control from his desk, Davies rose to his feet as the door slid open. “Sit down, Jackson. Tea or coffee?”

“A glass of your single malt thanks Dan,” said Jackson, provocatively.

“Don't be ridiculous Jackson,” replied Davies, taking the bait. “We don't run a hotel here. This is an institution for criminals who have forfeited such privileges.”

“Yeah, yeah, alright Commissioner, stop the lecturing. Why don't you sit down and tell me why I'm here?”

Davies followed Jackson's instruction unconsciously and, when seated, beamed at Jackson like a Cheshire cat. The smile was uncharacteristic and Jackson was curious.

“Alright, Dan. Why are you looking so smug and happy with yourself?”

“Guess what year this is Jackson?” asked Davies, eagerly.

Taking his time and pretending to ponder in thought, Jackson decided to play the cat-and-mouse game to amuse himself and to frustrate Davies. Jackson knew Davies could be just as cruel as he could be friendly and he didn't want to change Davies' mood to one of retaliation. Jackson had learned just how far he could tease him without causing a mood swing, keeping Davies squirming like a worm on a fish hook.

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“This is the fifth year of my incarceration,” replied Jackson with tempered sarcasm, “and I don’t think it’s anything to smile about Davies, unless you intend releasing me for good behaviour.”

Davies leaned forward on the table, resting his chin on clasped hands before saying, “My, we are in a humorous mood today, aren’t we?” He paused momentarily, relaxing back in his chair before smugly announcing, “No Jackson, this is the year I retire.”

Jackson was taken completely by surprise. He was usually aware of everything that happened in the complex but he hadn’t seen this coming. While his mind raced with myriad thoughts, he maintained a poker face, giving nothing away to the Commissioner. Jackson listened intently as Davies continued his gloating.

“I’ll be departing this isolated hell-hole to return to the real world, leaving the scum behind me. I can tell you this; your new master will not be as lenient or tolerant as me. *He* won’t let you get away with the use of contraband or briberies and there’ll be no liberties.”

Jackson didn’t stir at Davies’ words. He knew Davies was right. A replacement taskmaster would undo the ‘business’ network he had taken years to establish, and a new Commissioner might also change prison systems in a way that would set him back years in his plans of escape. Jackson was focused on working out a way of extracting the information he needed to use the Commissioner’s arrival to his advantage. He leaned back casually in his chair and placed his hands behind his head.

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“So Dan, when do we throw the farewell party and pop the champagne? After all, we've been through a lot together and I've enjoyed our rather unique business relationship. I think I'll miss you and I'm *sure* you'll miss me.”

“No Jackson,” said Davies with a look of disgust, “I won't miss you or your sarcasm, but I'll have a small farewell celebration with some of the guards the day before I leave. You'll be invited of course, just to give you a taste of what you'll *never* have again.”

“I'll need to consult my diary to see it doesn't clash with my other social engagements,” joked Jackson, hoping to pry from Davies the time of the farewell event.

Without thinking, Davies played right into Jackson's hands. “I'm sure you won't be busy on Sunday night Jackson and I'll have my guards escort you personally to the party.”

It was just the information Jackson needed. *Seven days. Perfect!* He maintained his cool façade. “Thanks for the invite Dan. So, who's the new Commissioner?”

Davies answered with a wry smile. “Captain John Tanner, retired ex-army officer from boot camp, chosen specifically for his successful methods of churning out disciplined, mean, lean soldiers. The Board felt this place needed some smartening up and Captain Tanner won't tolerate the crap you lot have been giving me and my men over the last seven years. He's just what the doctor ordered to give you low-lives a dose of your own medicine. He *won't* be bribed or threatened. No Jackson, you're in for a rude awakening and so are your cell mates. And I think this ends our conversation for today. So you can tell your buddies

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they'd better be on their best behaviour when my replacement arrives or they'll wonder what's struck them."

"Thanks for your consultation and pearls of wisdom, Dan," responded Jackson, sarcastically. "I'll pass on your advice and I'm sure my colleagues will comply with your thoughtful considerations. And what should I wear to this special black tie occasion you've planned? My tux?"

"Just wear your same old smarty-pants Jackson, they really suit you," said Davies. "Guards, escort this worthless prisoner back to his cell!"

As Jackson rose from his chair, the two guards seized his arms and removed him from Davies' office, Jackson grinning smugly to himself. *My window of opportunity has finally arrived, even if sooner than expected.*

In his former life, Jackson Jensen was not only a corporate director but also heir to the MERIC empire. But, while being groomed to take over his father's company, Jackson's lust for power had got the better of him. Following MERIC's discovery of the powerful resource Xytrinium on Planet Terra Iota, Samuel Jensen wanted to declare the finding immediately to Earth's governing body, the World Assembly, and accept their direction about how it should be used in mankind's best interest. Jackson was frustrated by his father's 'archaic' protocols, wanting exploitation of the potent resource for MERIC, *and* for himself.

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His attempts to take over the Company were hampered by a MERIC engineer, Kyron Shield, a man Jackson despised as his father's confidante. In a ruthless and cold-hearted rage the selfish and extremely determined Jackson arranged not only for attempts on Kyron's life, but also for his father's death. When his father was killed in an 'accident', Jackson took control of MERIC, determined to govern all mining operations and hold the World Assembly to ransom.

However, Kyron proved a difficult target, surviving Jackson's hit-men and exposing Jackson's conspiracy as well as his involvement in Samuel Jensen's murder. With the help of elite, Tzuracian 'super soldiers' called Sentinels, Kyron saw Jackson captured, sentenced and banished to Terra Upsilon for the rest of his life. Jackson seethed with jealousy when he learned Kyron Shield not only had Sentinel blood, but also had been bequeathed ownership of MERIC.

Five years in prison had fuelled Jackson's bitterness. As he watched the expanding progress of *his* company he became determined to escape and return to Earth to exact revenge and reclaim his inheritance. He also became obsessed with the notion of finding a source that would give him the power necessary to match Kyron Shield and his Sentinel allies. He had learned the key to the Sentinels' enhanced powers and extended life was DNA infusion with Xytrinium. Jackson realised if he were ever to overpower Kyron Shield he would need to find the long-lost formula and infuse himself and an army of faithful followers.

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Jackson had been devising a plan since his arrival on Terra Upsilon. Over time he had built up an army of loyal supporters among the prisoners and guards, promising he would lead them to freedom and give them the elixir of life. He hand-picked fearless prisoners experienced in combat – misfits from all walks of life including ex-military, deserters, mercenaries for hire and trained assassins. All were physically fit, shared a hatred for government authority and needed no excuse to fight. One by one, Jackson recruited them, convincing them it was only a matter of time before an opportunity to escape would come.

He also befriended some of the prison guards who had previously worked as his security officers at MERIC. Having rewarded them well at the time, Jackson now regained their loyalty. With their cooperation he gained access to the blueprints and schematics of the Control Room's operating systems. He monitored the internal operation systems as well as the arrivals and departures of supply ships, ore and prison transporters. Secretly, he studied blueprints of the prison complex and guard rosters. He also had a tech-savvy ex-terrorist, CT, work covertly on developing portable devices to temporarily disable the deadly implanted micro-chips. These devices would permit the chips to be momentarily disabled before being permanently deactivated from the Control Room.

Over years of careful planning and painstaking development, Jackson had almost perfected his plan of escape. Now, with a more ruthless Commissioner set to take charge within the week, Jackson had no choice. He had to

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bring the escape plan forward and take full advantage of what might be his one and only opportunity.

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