**Prisoner 164**

Prisoner 164 did not particularly enjoy playtime.

He recalled a time when he once had, a time when stepping out into the open yard had been liberation from the confines of rusted bars and stained walls, when interaction with his fellow inmates had been a game, and best of all, a challenge – that flash of anger and impulse and pride that flickered behind their eyes.

But now, it was always the same. Ever since the incident, it had always been the same. The looks that met him contained none of the aggression and defiance that was practically hardwired into these men. It was fear. It was fear that followed him through the prison, his own personal demon that was, in its own way, more terrible than any of the criminals surrounding him.

For fear brought isolation, that constant cloud of nothingness, the darkness of solitude that left him empty and lost. And this, though he would scarcely admit it, was the root of the problem. He was lonely.

As utterly repulsive as he found his fellow convicts, the company of animals was surely better than the company of none. He found himself longing for their crude humor and frenzied laughter, their fierce, if fleeting, friendships, that savage camaraderie that existed between them. But it was far too late for that. He had shown them what he was. He had crossed a line of violence that even they dared not tread. He was an animal even to the animals.

Prisoner 164 shook himself out of his self-pity. It did no good to lament the past. He had done what had had to be done. He would bear the consequences without regret.

Besides, he relished what he had now. It was power, far and vast, power in its purest form – not of bargain or bribery, but of threat and violence, the means by which the alpha male achieved dominance in the most primal of societies.

But the alpha male usually had a female to keep him company. A family whose genes he was passing to the next generation.

Prisoner 164 knew about family. He had been there before. He had experienced love and warmth and kindness given unconditionally, without reason or expectation, no bargains or trades. And he had had a name, a proper name – all letters and no numbers. And he knew that if he reached far enough into the back of his mind he could retrieve it from the forgotten chambers of his old life. But he didn’t want to. Jonny Smith or Bernie Bradson or Alan Lennard just didn’t quite have the same ring to it, didn’t carry that tinge of fear that *Prisoner 164* did when it rolled off the tongue. It wouldn’t help him survive.

For he had realized, when he had arrived at the prison, that survival was the most critical function of the human soul. His old way of life seemed senseless in hindsight.

It was foolish to give without receiving; to subvert part of one’s existence solely to the appeasement of another was subservience and inferiority. And to do so when circumstances did not demand it, in the name of hollow and fickle emotions, that was the greatest human delusion of all, he had decided.

Because when the artificial layers we have built around ourselves are stripped away, when we are forced to exist without even the most basic of securities to keep us company at night, we are nothing but savages. The human mind is but a mere step above those of baboons and chimps who eat their young and kill with their bare hands to survive. We may be born in stainless hospitals, but our origin is that of the feral grounds, and it is inevitable, at some point, that we should revert to our most primal and basic nature. Those who forget that, those who are fooled by our illusions of comfort and sentimentality, those are always the first to die.

And he believed it. With all the conviction and faith he could muster, he had made it into his own fundamental decree, the very core of his existence that defined his every action and thought.

It had begun as a coping mechanism – thoughts and words he would repeat to himself day in and out to grant him the will and purpose he needed to survive. But what he had once acknowledged subconsciously as cynical untruths, prison had shown him to be stark and unwavering reality.

And so it was this that drove Prisoner 164 to do as he did, to adopt a level of brutality and violence that exceeded criminal – it was truly psychopathic. Both convicts and guards saw this and stayed clear out of his way, for they knew that the most dangerous enemy was one who would go any length and more to cause pain and destruction, who had no regard for himself or his opponent.

But Prisoner 164 knew the truth. He was no psychopath. He took no joy or pleasure in harming others the way he did. He was merely convincing. He knew how to sell the tale and had the guts to do it – that was all. It was this that had brought him to where he was now, the alpha male of a pack of savages, the apex predator that not a single soul dared to challenge.

And all of this was true until he felt the blow, sharp and sudden, snap across the back of his head.

He staggered forward, partly to distance himself from the attacker, partly because it had actually hurt. He cursed himself for being so careless. If his assailant had truly wanted to harm him, he might be dead by now. As it was, he saw as he spun around, it was a newcomer, someone who hadn’t yet learned the hierarchy at Mas Eros Penitentiary, or perhaps, was perfectly aware of it and had decided to make a statement by striking at the top of the food chain. Probably the latter.

Prisoner 164 scanned the yard. No one was noticeably watching, but the distant chatter had died down slightly and heads turned just enough to catch him in their peripherals. Everyone was watching.

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Prisoner 164 panted and spat blood from his mouth. It wasn’t his. What had once been a hundred-and-eighty-pound man now lay in a bloody heap on the floor, permanently disfigured in more ways than one. As he had expected, the others made no indication that they had seen what they had seen. But he was perceptive. He saw the stiffening of shoulders, the slight tremors amongst those less anatomically inclined, the furtive glances averted as quickly as they were cast. And though part of him was revolted by the sight lying at his feet, he couldn’t help but grin in triumph.

An ironically melodious tune sounded through the air, hailing the beginning of a prison announcement. It was just like them to punish violence rather than prevent it.

“Prisoner 164,” spoke the automated female voice.

“Prisoner 164, please return to the detention center at once. Prisoner 164-” a burst of static interrupted the loudspeaker. Prisoner 164 looked up. Now this was new.

The static grew softer and softer until he realized that it was being drowned out by the sound of approaching helicopter blades. He squinted at the sky and saw it, a black dot against blue, growing slowly in size and detail so that he could make out a silhouette and its multi-faceted protrusions.

“Prisoner 164!”

This time, the voice was not mechanical. It was a male’s, gruff and hoarse. It came from the helicopter.

“You are, by decree of the Intergalactic Special Forces, to leave this detention facility with our escort. You should consider yourself lucky. You’re being freed.”

Prisoner 164 furrowed his brow in confusion. As far as he could remember, there was no amnesty for life imprisonment. Had the laws somehow changed in his time behind bars? No, he doubted it. It had been a mere five years, and legislation like that took decades, sometimes centuries, to pass. But the helicopter had now settled on the ground, and no one was objecting. Prisoner 164 shrugged and walked towards it, stepping over the body on the way.

A soldier came out to greet him, smiling. He seemed genuine enough.

He shook Prisoner 164’s hand.

“Welcome aboard.”

Prisoner 164 had no idea what he meant, but he stepped inside anyway. He found an empty seat and sat, in the company of fully-armed men wearing cheerful and disarming smiles. Either they were very happy or they had practiced this look a lot.

The chopper blades started spinning. As the craft lifted into the air, the prison compound and its little specks of people grew smaller and smaller. And Prisoner 164, surrounded by half-friendly men, began to think.

After some time, he spoke.

“Raaj. Raaj Ehraad. That’s my name.”

The soldier in front of him nodded, but Raaj didn’t notice.

He hadn’t been talking to him.