

PRISONERS IN WAITING

by

DAMOND FUDGE

His first thought – his first feeling – was *pounding*. There was just darkness and pounding, as if someone was performing an extensive remodel in the deepest recesses of his skull. The only sounds were a light dripping and occasional swishing, both muted as if coming to him through several feet of sand.

It was a little while before he realized the blackness wasn't because the lights were off, but because his eyes were shut. Almost glued shut, in fact, by the layer of gunk and crust in his lashes. It took quite an effort, along with several fingers, to pry them open. Jesus. How long had he been out? Not wanting to risk any vertigo-induced problems or injuries, he made the decision to stay right where he was, flat on his back.

He could tell there was some kind of bed under him. Probably a cot, given the cement nature of the ceiling he was staring at, watching its spinning gradually slow. His hearing was clearing up, too, and the dripping was much clearer now. Wherever this was, it was dank.

That's when the smells finally hit him: Mold, body odor, waste, rust. An exotic cocktail that could only be created by a Third World jail cell, served on the rocks. Literally. The smell of damp stone covered the rest like a heavy blanket.

Eventually, he began to make out shapes in his peripheral vision. Some were static, some were moving. He decided the swishing sound had to be coming from the moving objects, probably other prisoners, if this were indeed a jail. He risked tilting his head slightly to the right, and the bars he saw confirmed his theory. Moving his head didn't bring the pain he figured it would, so he took a bigger risk and turned his head completely to the right.

Sure enough, he was in a crude jail cell, one of six, three on each side of the room, with a path about twice as wide as the average person. One end of the path simply ended in a blank stone wall. The stones on the other end were broken up by a heavy-looking metal door. The stones themselves were old, damp with the moisture that hung heavily in the air. Patches of rust dotted the bars and peaked out around some of the bolts holding them to the ceiling. His current residence was not an original part of this structure, but it was in no way a recent addition, either.

Best guess: A castle or temple, somewhere within a hundred kilometers of the Equator, and if Central America was on the other side of that door, he hadn't gone far.

The three cells on the opposite side of the room were occupied, one person apiece. They were each dressed in similar olive drab jumpsuits. He raised an arm into his line of sight to confirm his own attire. The swishing he was hearing was coming from the prisoner in the cell farthest from the door, who was pacing and biting his nails as if they were his last meal. The middle occupant was lying in his bed, maybe asleep. It was hard to tell. The guy directly across,

in the cell nearest the door, was sitting on his bed with his back against the wall, eyes closed, muttering to himself.

He decided it was finally safe for him to at least sit up, so he gingerly swung his legs around and set his feet on the floor, which was so cold under his bare soles. He took note that the other two cells on his side had yet to receive residents. He leaned forward to put his head in his hands, which was when he noticed the tray on the floor. A clear plastic glass, the kind you find in cafeterias, stood next to a paper cup. He hoped that, despite its light tan color, the liquid in the glass was water. A bowl of what was probably oatmeal accompanied them. There were no utensils.

He reached out with his right leg and hooked the edge of the tray with his toes. He carefully pulled it toward him, trying to spill as little of the fluid as possible. Even if it wasn't water, his cottonmouth demanded some form of relief, and as much as it could get, too. When it was close enough to reach, he saw some white pills in the bottom of the paper cup. He picked up both glass and cup, relieved to see the familiar Tylenol brand name on the four pills. He took a mouthful of water (gritty, yes, but indeed water), tilted his head back, dropped in the pain killers and swallowed.

As he dipped his fingers into the oatmeal (once again, gritty, but what it appeared), he studied his fellow prisoners. With Middle curled up half-fetal, the only faces he could clearly see were Far and Near, and neither of them looked very sociable. That was fine, since he didn't really feel like chatting, himself.

The only indicators of time were the bottom of the door, where a miniscule gap glowed with light during the day, and the three points when a fresh bowl of oatmeal was brought to them. By that clock, he was conscious two days when the new guy arrived. He was awakened by the sounds of men struggling as they carried the unconscious person through the door, each man holding the prisoner under an armpit so his feet dragged. The guard in the lead unlocked the cell next to him and held the door open while the other guards hefted the limp body onto the cot. They exited without uttering a word.

New Guy was young, no older than twenty-five. He had one of those baby faces where he would still get carded at bars well into his thirties. If he lived that long, that is. He wondered if he had been brought in the same way, tossed onto the bed like a duffel full of clothes.

The door opened again, and a guard came in carrying a tray exactly like the one he found when he woke. He was surprised how much it startled him when the door was unlatched, he wasn't normally that jumpy. Then again, this wasn't a normal situation, was it? The guard slid the tray through the small space at the bottom of New Guy's cell door, then exited. He rolled over onto his back and had returned to sleeping soundly within minutes.

* * *

He dreamed of home.

The day was beautiful. Not too much humidity. A light breeze coming in from the ocean, disturbing the silk deck curtains just enough to give them that beautiful ethereal float.

He sat in his favorite chaise lounge, shaded from the Costa Rican sun by the oversized umbrella, reading—or more accurately re-reading—*The Ipccress File*. Side A of Williams' beautiful score to *E.T.* was on the turntable.

The tea kettle whistled.

He rose, gently laying the open book face down on the chair. He went into the kitchen and removed the kettle from the stove. He poured a small amount into his tea pot, placed it back on the stove and put the lid on the pot. His mother would rise from her grave if he ever forgot to properly warm the pot.

He spooned the leaves into the strainer, poured the water out of the pot and placed the strainer inside. By this point, the kettle was whistling again, and as he poured the boiling water into the pot, the record ended. Perfect timing. Setting the pot to the side to steep, he moved to the turntable. He lifted the vinyl disc up so the light illuminated any dust, blowing on it lightly to get rid of the few particles.

He had become too comfortable in this idyllic surrounding.

He should've heard them.

He felt the pinprick in the flesh of the side of his neck.

The album bounced once before shattering.

He turned around, streaks already appearing in his vision as the drug quickly took effect.

Several soldiers in jungle camo were in his house, weapons trained on him.

Then...black.

* * *

"Fuuuccekkk."

New Guy was finally awake.

Ever since he himself had awakened, he had been laying there with his eyes shut, hoping his body would maybe grant him with a little extra sleep. It rarely happened, especially with his bladder, but one could wish.

"Hey."

If New Guy was trying to get his attention, he ignored him.

"Hey, buddy. You awake?"

He still didn't answer the kid.

"Hey. I just want to know, is this stuff safe?"

Eyes still shut, he replied, "We've all been eating it."

"Cool. Cool."

Seconds later he heard sputtering and, "Gaaahhh!"

He chuckled. "You get used to it."

"I almost hope I don't."

"Just don't let it spend any time in your mouth, you'll be fine."

New Guy went silent for a bit, the only sound what little one could make eating oatmeal with no utensils. He kept his eyes closed, until...

"My name's Jason."

This is officially a conversation, I guess, he thought. He opened his eyes and saw a hand sticking out between the bars. He swung himself around so he was sitting up and shook the hand, introducing himself.

"Nice to meet you." The kid took in his surroundings. "Where are we?"

"No idea. Somewhere tropical, as far as I can tell."

"What do they want with us?"

"Again, no idea. Guards aren't very talkative. Neither are our mates over there."

"How long have you been here?"

"Three or four days, if I take how long you've been out as the average."

"How long was I out?"

"Day and a half, or so."

The kid put his head in his hands, massaging his temples. "How long does the headache last?"

"Mine lasted the better part of a day."

"Fuuuccckkk."

* * *

Three nights later, the guards brought in the occupant for the last open cell. The procession was the same: One guard held the cell door open, while two others carried the man. When they got near the cell, the new prisoner suddenly swung his feet up, using the duo for leverage, and kicked the lead guard square in the chest, knocking him back against the wall.

The guards holding his arms were naturally taken by surprise. The instant the prisoner's feet landed back on the floor, he shoved the guard on his left, who lost his grip and smacked into the bars of Jason's cell. Then he swung the other guard around, throwing him into his companion before he had a chance to recover.

The prisoner ran out the door, but the guards were up on their feet quickly and took chase. Moments later, gunfire: Not a random spraying of bullets, but the confidently accurate sound of single shots. Seven gunshots later, someone cried out in pain. The stuttered mewling continued for only a few seconds before being silenced by one final shot.

Slow, deliberate footsteps could be heard approaching. The lead guard entered the room, his .45 clutched in his hand, a thin smoke trail snaking from the barrel. He glared at the prisoners, slowly moving his stare from man to man, then stepped outside and closed the door.

* * *

"Do you think we're going to get another cellmate?" Jason asked, out of the blue.

It had been four days since the escape attempt. He looked past the kid at the empty cot and shrugged, "Who knows?"

He still hadn't been able to figure out all of the questions he had: Why were they here? Who was holding them? What, if anything, connected them? Were these soldiers affiliated with a specific country or independent?

They were soldiers, of that he was certain. They were too professional. They never spoke when they were in the jail and, even though the door was so thick most sound was heavily muted, he never heard voices come from the outside.

In his line of work, he never made any move or went ahead with any job unless he knew every tiny detail, was certain every piece was in place and was satisfied he had a plan for every contingency. He sincerely believed it was one of the reasons he'd been able to keep out of places similar to, or even worse than, his current residence.

He certainly had plenty of warrants out in his alias, and he knew that most major law enforcement agencies suspected him to be said alias, but he had worked tirelessly to make sure any connection between his real identity and his alias was tenuous, at best. If these people knew for a fact who he really was, he needed to know who they were and how they came about this information. Once he was satisfied he had the truth, he had no choice.

It was them or him.

He finally realized the hair on the back of his neck was standing up, and he knew why. He looked over and saw Jason staring at him, again. He had been doing this a lot since the escape

attempt. He raised his eyebrow at the kid, who said, "Sorry," then looked away, hanging his head in that kicked puppy look.

He couldn't believe it, but he actually felt a pang of guilt. Did he really care if he was a dick to this kid? True, they were in a shit situation, but that didn't mean he wanted to make friends. Then why should he feel bad about pushing him away?

Before he consciously knew he was going to, he asked, "What's the deal?"

Jason looked up, his face a mixture of confusion at the question and surprise that the older man instigated a conversation. "Huh?"

"What's the deal? Why do you keep giving me the eye?"

"Oh, yeah, sorry. It's just...I don't know. I mean, you..." He appeared to be carefully choosing his words.

"I what?"

He could actually see the kid physically working up his courage. "You look very familiar, and I keep trying to figure out why."

"Well, I don't know why that would be. I can tell you with complete confidence that we've never met."

"No. Yeah, no, we've never met. Not face to face. I'm sure of that, too. I just get this feeling..."

As his voice trailed off, Jason started intensely studying his face. Really taking it in, as if mentally mapping every detail. This time, he just let the kid have at it.

* * *

The next night was the first night they came.

Three guards—always a trio, he noted—entered the jail and went directly to the cell across from his. They had to kick Near's cot a couple times to rouse him. The other day, he had noticed Near was eating less and less from his bowl, probably in an attempt to starve himself. The man offered no resistance when the guards lifted him, and he hung weakly from their grasp as they dragged him outside.

After the door was re-latched, Jason muttered, "Guess that answers the sixth cellmate question."

* * *

Near's cell was still empty in the morning.

It stayed that way.

* * *

A day later, he woke to find the kid sitting on his bed, staring at him, a big grin on his face.

"What?"

"I figured it out."

"Figured what out?"

"Where I know you from. Came to me this morning. You know, in that period when you just woke up, but you're still kinda asleep."

He rolled over and sat up with a groan. "This ought to be good. OK," he gave the beckoning motion with his hand, "hit me with it."

Jason moved right over next to the bars and whispered, "Interpol."

He didn't know what he expected as an answer, but it definitely wasn't that. He pulled back and hissed, "What the...?"

Jason quickly held up his hands in defense. "No, no. It's not what you think. I'm a hacker. I go by Kid Deckard, all one word, a number one for the 'I' and a three for the 'E.' Maybe you've heard of me?"

He had, but he wasn't going to give him the satisfaction. "Go on."

"OK," the kid was obviously still nervous from his reaction, "well, I like to hack into law enforcement systems, keeping tabs on my status. Seeing if they suspect me in any of my crimes, or any that aren't mine. Generally watching my back."

He nodded, "I get it." It was a good idea, but incredibly risky.

"That's where I've seen you. Interpol's top ten. You're The Gentleman, aren't you?"

Shit, he thought. "I don't know..."

"Let me rephrase. You're their top pick for who The Gentleman really is."

He had no idea Interpol was so close to fingering him. Maybe he *should* look into hacking their servers. "Is that so?"

Jason nodded, then lowered his voice to a volume just above silence and leaned in close. He gave an imperceptible nod toward the cells across the way and said, "I've seen those guys on Interpol's site, too. In fact, that one on the end...top five."

He gave Far a cursory glance over the kid's shoulder. "Really? Him?"

"Oh, yeah. All three of 'em are like us, but they also have things on their sheets worse than hacking.' He raised his eyebrows for unnecessary emphasis. "*Way* worse." Jason leaned back against the wall, hands behind his head, smiling. He kept his voice low, but it was filled with vibrant giddiness. "I can't believe I now know The Gentleman."

"I didn't confirm that."

"You didn't *not*."

His turn to smile. "Touché." If their situation was as he thought, there was no reason to deny the truth.

"Man, you're a legend."

"You say that like I don't have the internet."

The kid chuckled, "Yeah. Right. Sorry." He scooted back to the cot's edge. "Tell me, why did you become a hacker? I mean, cat burglar is so cool. You were a real-life Cary Niven."

He laughed to himself. "You're combining two different actors. Good try, though."

He took a moment to gather his thoughts. He'd never told his story. Too dangerous. It felt...odd. Interesting, but odd.

"It was an almost logical transition. As security systems became more complex, it was almost a form of hacking, itself. Besides, with burglary, if something goes sideways, the police are right there. Your haul is in your possession. Busted means busted. Fencing was also getting more difficult in the digital age. So many ways to track property. With hacking, it's just data. Numbers. Plus, I like the many options for distance it allows." He was genuinely surprised how easily he opened. "You?"

"Ah, you know, bored kid. I experimented by hacking my friends and family. Small things. Changing screensavers or wallpapers. Rearranging their desktops. Did the stereotypical changing of grades. Kept it up through high school and college, took on bigger and bigger challenges. Eventually found I'd gotten damn good at it. The old Practice Makes Perfect. Well," he rapped a knuckle on a bar, "until now, of course."

He looked around at their surroundings and replied, "Exactly."

* * *

They woke the next morning to find Middle was no longer in his cell.

"Jesus," said Jason, "they didn't even wake me. Did you hear anything?"

He stared at the empty bed for a long time before answering, "No."

* * *

They came for Far that afternoon.

At the sound of the unlocking door, he subconsciously looked at the poor guy. He could see the fear beginning to percolate behind those eyes. As the guards neared the cell, the fear boiled over, becoming abject terror by the time they opened his door.

Far put up a hell of a fight. He backed as far into the corner as physics would allow. He tried to hold onto the edge of the bolted down cot once they had ahold of him, but their strength was too much for his malnourished grip. He screamed and flailed as they carried him away, doing nothing to shut him up. No Tasers. No batons. Not even chloroform.

The kid had also watched this display in silence, his mouth slightly open. The instant the entrance door latched, he freaked out, "What the *fuck*, Man?! Shit! Fuck! Shit!"

"Calm down."

"Calm...wha...c-calm..." He ran his hand through his hair. "How...how can you say that? Now that he's gone, you know what that means, right?!"

"I'm aware." *Actually, there are two options*, he thought, but wasn't about to tell him that.

"What are we going to do?"

"Honestly, there's nothing we can do except wait. So," he tried to make his voice as gentle and soothing as possible, "just try, as best as you can, because I know it will be difficult, but try to stay calm. All right?"

The kid took a few breaths and said, "All right."

"All right, then." They both sat down, and he turned his gaze to the door, thinking only one thing:

They didn't do anything to shut him up.

* * *

It was his turn that night.

When he heard them working the door latch, he stood in the middle of his cell, hands to his side and slightly away from his body. He looked at Jason, who was nearly shaking, and said, "I'll be fine."

Outside the room was a large courtyard flanked by tall stone walls. The thick foliage visible above them verified a jungle setting, but offered no other clues. Set at even intervals along the walls were archways, and the guards angled him toward one of these. The path they walked down led to a doorway that opened on a stairwell that they took down to another door that opened to a room that had been turned into a makeshift office.

The man behind the desk sported an obnoxiously thick mustache, and he was looking at something on one of those heavy-duty laptops used by people who work in extremely rugged conditions, like those in the military. The man motioned to the only other chair.

He sat and waited for Mustache to finish what he was reading. He took the opportunity to survey the room.

Without looking up from the computer, Mustache said, "You have an interesting file. Quite the entertaining read. Ever thought of writing a memoir?"

"Whatever it is you want, I'm in."

His bluntness shocked Mustache so much his eyes literally widened. "Excuse me?"

"I'm in."

Mustache sat back in his chair, laced his fingers together and placed his hands on his stomach. "You haven't heard what it is, yet."

He shrugged and replied, "Doesn't matter. The way I figure it, if I refuse I'll suffer the same fate my three former cellmates did, which, if the slightly cleaner areas on the wall and floor to my left are any indicator, is not pleasant. On the other hand, I'm guessing whatever the job is, there's a high probability I won't survive, otherwise you'd be more concerned with hiding your identities. You were also probably going to try to sweet talk me, thus explaining your men's lack of physical force. All Good Cop, no Bad. How am I doing, so far?"

Mustache said nothing, and had his reactions under control.

"It also appears you're getting down to crunch time," he continued, "since you took three of us so close together. Once again, I'm guessing here, but you probably took too long looking

for a replacement for that one who tried to escape, so you need to get the ball rolling in the next couple days, or you're out of luck. While I can't speak for the skills of those other three, *I* can personally guarantee the chances of a successful outcome will be very high. I hope that would be something you might consider when deciding my post-job fate. Another thing to consider is how long I've been working without getting caught. I know how to stay hidden, which you know, since I'm betting even with your resources it was difficult to find me. On the rare occasions I've worked with others, the job's gone smoothly and no one was caught, except for that time in Dresden, and that was the fault of a last-minute replacement. Yet, still, no one did any time and the police had no case, thanks in part to my skills at deception and hacking. Without ego, I can honestly say I'm the best person to have in your corner for whatever it is you need done." He paused, purely for dramatic effect, before asking, "So, what do you say?"

Mustache took a long moment for himself, the only movement from his eyes as he shifted his gaze between the man before him and the laptop screen. Eventually, he took a deep breath and said, "Welcome to my team." Mustache stood up and held out his hand.

He stood and shook it.

Mustache pointed to the guard by the door. "You will be shown you to your quarters. You were quite right, we are under the gun. We will get started bright and early tomorrow morning."

He started to follow the guard, but stopped and turned to Mustache. "I have just one request, and I promise this will be the only one."

Mustache raised an eyebrow. "OK. What?"

He squared his shoulders and stood firm, looking Mustache straight in the eyes.

"The kid comes along, too."

The End