



## **Chapter 9**

A bell rang.

Alex, still half asleep, was surprised to see it was light. His cellmates were noisily getting themselves up and locking their up against the wall. Kym, he noticed, was ready to walk out the door.

"Hurry up," Cam blurted. "You need to be ready for morning presentation." Alex obediently heaved his lethargic body out of the bed, quickly tidied the bunk and latched it up to the wall, just as a guard unlocked the cell.

"Morning Mister Wardle," Gordon managed.

"Don't you ever sleep?" Filch asked cheekily.

Filch was rewarded with a furrowed brow and suspicious stare. "No, as a matter of fact," his voice devoid of any emotion. "Fulwood, get moving."

Kym nodded and scurried out the door.

Wardle gave each bunk a thorough going over whilst a second guard stood at the door. His face lit up when his hand came across something under Filch's mattress. "What do we have here? *'Pagan Religions'*? Mister Psarras, you should know that Warden only allows you one book in the cells, and that's the Good Book. Definitely not this blasphemous rubbish. What're you doing with this anyway? Who's it for?"

Filch was quick with the reply. "It's for me, I'm studying foreign cultures."

Wardle wasn't convinced. "I think Mister Potter will want a word with you when he gets back from the morning service. Until then, you can have a few hours in isolation. Move it."

Filch moved like he had been through all this before. Wardle assisted him with a little push with the tip of his truncheon, where he almost ended up in the arms of his colleague.

"Right, the rest of you, move it. Bathgate!"

"Yes sir?" Alex stopped in mid-stride as the rest strolled out.

"Your work assignment. You'll be at the railroad, getting some lovely fresh air and plenty of exercise."

"Yes sir."

Wardle departed.

“Well, looks like you'll be with the rest of us,”  
Gordon said as they headed to the washrooms.

“You're all working on this new railway project?”  
Alex enquired.

Cam nodded. “For the last month now. It's one way to make the prison more self-sufficient. Warden Potter hires us out as cheap labour, and the money is put back into the prison...”

“After Warden takes out his 'fee',” Gordon added sarcastically.

“It's a wonderful scam. Claims it's helping 'progress' when he means his pockets. Yet we're the one's who're behind bars,” Cam finished.

“Preaching to the converted,” Gordon stated.  
“There's nothing exciting about laying sleepers.”

Two guards with bored expressions watched the prisoners. None of the stalls had doors, but thankfully the guards weren't that nosey. Alex finished his business and joined the rest of them outside.

“Sleep well?” enquired Gordon.

“Mostly. Kept on waking up during the night wondering where I was,” Alex replied.

“Sure it wasn't Josh snoring?” Gordon asked.

“You should talk,” Josh muttered.

The group laughed.

“Should get Filch to get you some ear plugs,” Cam advised. “I don’t hear either of them.”

“Looks like porridge for breakfast,” said a voice up ahead of them.

“No surprises there,” Gordon said, grabbing a tray.

Kym was once again behind the counter, doling out spoonfuls into bowls. “Where’s Filch?” he asked.

“Wardle found the book he got for Zig,” Cam replied, sliding the tray along the rail.

Alex followed suit, and a filled bowl was dumped on it. Another inmate dumped a spoonful of brown sugar in the goop whilst another dropped a dry piece of toast on the tray. “Juice thanks,” he said to the last kitchen hand in the line, and he was handed a battered white mug with some brownish liquid in it.

On stage, a man with brown, greying hair in priestly robes was reading from a large book. He read without any feeling, pausing briefly only to turn the pages as he peered at them through his spectacles. Alex could see that he, at some time, had been quite

handsome, but like most of those inside the walls, had developed a rather weather-beaten face.

“Who's the priest reading the scriptures?” Alex asked as they sat down at a half empty table.

“Father Kilkenny,” Gordon said. “Rumour has it he had gotten too friendly with a parishioner.”

“And he ended up here. Poor man,” Alex said.

“It's his punishment. Warden gets him to read from the book every Sunday morning for breakfast. Then he has a little service for those who are that way inclined,” said Cam.

“Does he get many takers?”

“A few,” Cam responded. “I go. You can come along if you like.”

Alex nodded. “It's not as if we have much else to do.”

The group laughed heartily. A couple more inmates sat down beside them. One of them was a rather short but stocky man with a thick mop of scraggly black hair and a bushy beard. The other had short cropped black hair and wore spectacles with circular lenses.

“Where's Filch?” the latter asked.

“Isolation,” replied Gordon. “Wardle took your book.”

The man muttered something in a foreign tongue and then said “Maybe next time then. Who's the new man?”

“Oh, Zigis, Gunn, this is Alex. He got transferred in late yesterday,” said Gordon. Alex put up his hand to acknowledge them.

“Welcome to His Majesty's den of religious intolerance,” Zig said. “What are you in for?”

Alex told him.

“Multiple offender. Well, I'm impressed. Don't meet too many pirates.”

Over the next hour Alex found out a lot about those incarcerated with him. Zig, as he soon learnt, was a member of an underground religious sect, and arrested on charges of sedition. Gunn, who was a cheery, boisterous soul, was a former miner who had fallen foul of local authorities when he had refused to pay taxes. Filch was a convicted pickpocket and thief. Josh was an unsuccessful fence and con-artist. Cam, had been a tailor and a teacher at a Lowden Technical College who, according to his version of events, was

seduced by a younger female student. Kym, a minor government official, was arrested for treason.

Only Gordon wasn't so open about his crimes. Arson and manslaughter was all he would offer.

"Don't worry about him," Cam said when they wandered off for the morning service. "He took a great fall when he was locked up."

"He must have had his reasons," Alex said. "He doesn't seem the type to deliberately set fire to a building."

"This prison has quite a few people who don't seem the type," Cam said.

The priest's service was held in a small chapel behind the dining hall. He was a bit more upbeat than his monotonous readings over breakfast. Alex counted about thirty attendees, including one or two of the guards. The group sang a couple of hymns, there was a more personal reading from scripture, and small sermon from the priest himself. At its conclusion he walked over to a couple of convicts and offered a quiet word, giving them a reassuring pat on the back and a blessing.

"Good morning Cam," he said as he strolled over to the pair.

“Morning father. Thank you for the service,” Cam said. “This is Alex. He joined our extended family last night.”

Alex offered his hand, and the priest shook it. It wasn't much of a grip. “I have heard a little about you. I must say I don't meet many pirates.”

“A lot of people say that.”

“Well, if you want a little talk, my 'office' is just through there,” and he pointed to a door to the right of the small stage. “The door is always open, and it's not that I have much else to do. But you'll have to excuse me. Warden likes to be kept apprised on who attends each Sunday service.” The priest ended with a sigh.

“He keeps track of this?” Alex was surprised. “Why?”

“Various reasons, but you didn't hear it from me. I look forward to seeing you both again. Try and stay out of trouble.”

“Pretty hard to in this place,” said Cam, smiling.

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The rest of the morning Alex spent talking to his cell-mates.

The prison population, he learnt, was made up of various types of felons. There were a number of thieves, fraudsters, con-artists and fences, but for every one of those, there was someone in for assault, rape and manslaughter. Most were from Lowden and it's immediate surroundings, but there were a few locals and inmates from other districts. In a special section of the prison, there were murderers who for some reason had not been executed.

There were easily several hundred convicted criminals in here, but it was less than Alex had expected from the size of the place. When he enquired, they told him that the prison was expecting to expand to five times it's current size within the next year or so.

Lunch was little better than dinner the night before. Dry vegetables, slightly burnt sausages, and a large slab of uneven bread. Kym was again in the servery. When the group had seated themselves, the talk centered around trusties.

"Kym is an unusual case and was given trusty status straight away. Didn't have to ingrate himself with any of the guards or Warden Potter," said Gordon.

“Perhaps he was owed a favour. Strings got pulled,” offered Cam.

“Only has to work five days as well,” said Josh. “Kitchen would be a nice job, instead of the cleaning.”

“Laundry isn't too bad,” Cam said.

“Give me the library,” Zig said.

“Infirmary was okay,” said Gunn. “Apart from that bugger Payne.”

“Payne? Who's he?” queried Alex.

“Someone you don't want to get on the wrong side of,” said Gordon. “His first name is Rufus, and people call him 'The Dentist'.”

“What's he do?”

“Well, he was a dentist, but works as a doctor of sorts in the infirmary. But Payne by name, pain by nature,” said Gordon.

“His healing techniques leave a lot to be desired,” said Gunn.

“Unorthodox I think is a better word,” Cam offered.

“Whatever you call it, try not to get sick in here,” Gordon warned. “You might end up worse off.”

Alex headed to the library after lunch. It was small, and most of the books were battered and worn

and often patched. There were technical manuals, horticultural and historical texts, religious materials and a few popular novels. There were even some old magazines and newspapers, but most of them well out of date. He managed to find a couple of geography books about the colonies and settled down in a corner to read.

Looking at his old home on the map was a little melancholic. It didn't look as though he had come far, but there was no turning back now. No winding back time and starting all over again. What had been done, was done, and there was nothing he could do about it. He hated to admit it but if he hadn't taken that money, he wouldn't have seen half the things he had seen. His brief time in the wild blue yonder would be great story to tell to his children. If he was ever to have any.

Dinner was something different. The prisoners were served roast lamb, with roasted potatoes and pumpkin. Gordon had called it 'the Sunday treat', paid for, he reckoned, by the monies generated by their labour on the railway.

The evening routine didn't change from the night before, but the guards had. All too soon, it was "Lights out!"

In the dark, Josh quietly said “One day down, 3649 to go.”

Alex sighed, and slowly drifted off to sleep.

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Filch had not returned when Alex, Gordon and Gunn were escorted off for the railroad work detail the next day. The trio marched in line with the rest of the group to their transport. Alex soon discovered that the decrepit wagons, like the horses, were all purchased second hand. There were two wagon-loads of prisoners, and a third carrying tools. Three guards were aboard each wagon eyeing off the prisoners with a fourth beside the driver. Each of them carried a loaded crossbow and had a heavy truncheon strapped to their belt.

Late autumn frost was still heavy on the ground and trees, and the water puddles were frozen over. The slow cold trip took half an hour and was made mostly in silence.

They arrived to find a small group of workers already labouring away. The guards separated the prisoners into groups. One group started lugging

railway sleepers and iron rails off the carts to the new track while the second were to shovel gravel into the marked areas. A third proceeded to put the sleepers and rails in place and bang the nails in, and the last, including Alex, Gunn and Gordon, went to work filling in a large gully over which the track had to pass.

Gunn joined the procession carting rocks to build the structure while Alex and Gordon were set to shovel bluish pebbles and dirt as fill. One rather large and bulky dark-skinned man worked continuously, hauling the larger stones to the site and dropping them in place with ease.

“Who's the tall black guy?” Alex asked during a brief lull.

“Tallin, I think. Don't know where he's from. He doesn't say much. Word has it he's in for armed robbery and assault,” Gordon replied.

Despite the cold, Alex was soon sweating. He was quite relieved when eventually the guards called lunch break. He was sore, had blisters on his hands and his muscles were aching.. Most of the group collapsed to the ground. Alex wandered off towards the trees. “Going somewhere?” one of the guards bellowed.

Alex turned to find two crossbows pointed straight at him. "Umm, I was just going to take a leak," he responded nervously.

"Ask next time," the second guard barked from the back of a wagon. "Do it where we can see you," he added. He was quite tall, but had obviously let himself go, having developed a noticeable paunch. Alex could just make out the name 'Torpid' on the uniform.

"You're lucky he didn't wing you," Gordon said as they queued for lunch.

"Seriously?"

Gordon nodded. "Prisoners have died on his watch, mostly because he doesn't like to get too involved. He'll let cons duke it out until they both drop, or when someone higher up the ladder shows up. And it wouldn't be the first time he's fired a bolt because he was bored."

Lunch was a runny stew and yet more bread. Alex didn't care, and just ate. The afternoon was more of the same, with some prisoners now felling trees and removing stumps from the next line of the track. Others were digging a drainage ditch. By the time they had finished for the day, Alex felt his arms and legs were

going to drop off. He almost fell asleep on the wagon ride back to the prison.

“Get used to it,” Gordon said, wiping sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. “We have another five days of this before our week is done.”

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The weather changed for the worse, and next morning it was pouring down outside. Gordon hopped out of bed with a smile. “No railway for us today!”

Another large, stone face guard with a double chin appeared at the cell door. Beside him was a rather scraggly looking Filch. “Tanner, Bathgate, you're to the storeroom after breakfast to help unload the food delivery.”

“Yes sir Mister Windsor,” Gordon said, then turned to fold up his bunk.

Breakfast was watery scrambled eggs and shrivelled bacon. Gordon picked up a slice and snapped it in two. “Perhaps it will taste better smothered in egg,” he mused.

Alex found about twenty inmates at the store room. Four guards, including Wardle, watched them

through puffs of cigarette smoke. When the wagons finally did arrive, the prisoners took their time unloading but the guards elected not to hurry them along.

When the last crate of vegetables was finally in the cool room, they were all dismissed. "Don't forget to thank the good Lord for your extra free time," Wardle said.

"Yes sir" they replied, pleased to be leaving.

"What are you going to do now?" Alex asked.

"I think I'll go have a chat with Father Kilkenny," he replied.

"I didn't think that you were the religious type."

"I'm not, I just like his company. I'll see you at lunch."

Alex returned to the dining hall, and was surprised to see a couple of prisoners enjoying a game of chess whilst others were playing cards. Josh was sweeping the floor but a guard ordered him to get back to work when Alex stopped to talk to him..

A sign pointed towards the gym, but as he passed the hallway to C block, he heard some voices.

"Where's me pills?" a gruff voice demanded.



"Greg, I told you, it didn't come with this delivery. Just be patient," the second voice sounded like Filch.

Through a door, Alex saw a very large prisoner standing tall over a rather nervous-looking Filch in a room filled with cleaning equipment. The man was completely bald, and red faced. He picked Filch up clear off the ground by his shirt and then rammed him into the wall so that some heavy tins fell off a nearby shelf and crashed onto the floor.

"Not good enough," he growled, and raised a fist with a vicious sneer.

"Hey!" Alex butted in. "Put him down."

Greg turned his head. There was scar running across the left side of his face from nose to ear.

"Who're you?" Greg thundered as he rammed Filch against the wall once more, sending more tins clattering to the floor. The unfortunate Filch slid down the wall as he was let go. "Ngggrrrrr," Greg snarled, hands outstretched. Then, with a speed that surprised Alex, he charged.

Alex dropped his shoulder, collecting Greg square on the chest. His head collected something hard, and he was sent sprawling backwards from the

impact, thudding into the wall. He felt his nose; it had been broken, and there was blood on his tunic and that of his assailant, who stood over him, smacking his clenched fist into an open palm.

"No one tells me what to do," he growled. Alex rolled just as Greg struck, howling in pain as his fist hit the stone wall. Then he cruelly stood on Alex's left arm. "Now you pay." Alex swung desperately with his free hand, but it was smothered in one of Greg's oversized palms. He sniggered at the token resistance.

Suddenly, a tin struck Greg square on the forehead. He stumbled back, falling over Filch. Standing in the doorway was Gordon, with another heavy tin in his hand.

"At this range, I won't miss," Gordon warned.

Greg snarled from the ground. Filch had picked himself up and was holding a broom handle. Alex was now back on his feet.

"What's the matter? Afraid of the odds?" Alex muttered.

"I'll get the lot of you," Greg spat, blood trickling down from his forehead.

"Not today," said Gordon, and motioned to throw the tin at him. The bully stuck up his hand to protect his

face, but Gordon just casually tossed it on the floor. "Let's go, quickly." He herded them down the corridor away from two approaching guards.

"Where to?" asked Filch.

"The laundry. Cam can get Alex a new shirt and can clean this one," Gordon replied as they walked. "We don't always have weight of numbers," he warned "Greg has a few cronies of his own, and is right pals with Windsor, who's probably the worst of the guards."

"Thanks," Alex said, his head held back and fingers clenched on the bridge of his nose to stop the bleeding.

"Don't mention it," Gordon responded.

"If it wasn't for you guys, I mightn't have been walking for a while. Name it, I'll get it for you." Filch offered,

"Earplugs," Alex replied, quickly.

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Filch was good to his word. The earplugs arrived the following Friday, along with the item he owed Greg. It was delivered via a third party.

Thankfully, Greg had been assigned work on the prison farm, so avoiding him wasn't much of a problem except for meals. Gordon was quick to point out a few of Greg's associates, but even they weren't stupid enough to try something with all the guards about. Alex was used to being on the defensive. He even noticed a few eyes watching him on occasions, even out on the railway.

By the end of the week he had gotten to know the group quite well, including Gunn, and had even managed a word or two out of the large Tallin.

"Don't worry about any of those buggers startin' something out 'ere," Gunn said as they carted sleepers one morning. "They know not to mess with me, or the big fella. You'll be right."

After two weeks behind Flagstaff bars he felt was finally getting used to the routine of the place. He definitely knew who to avoid, where to avoid, and most important, how not to become a creature of habit. Gordon was a helpful guide and a fountain of wisdom so Alex was glad that they were cell-mates.

The nights were still hard to get used to. Conversations after lights out were but brief whispers, lest they drew the ire of the guards. On some

occasions, Alex could swear he could hear one or two people crying nearby. He tried hard not to follow suit, but on occasions he'd wake up with watery eyes that had to be wiped before he could face his cell mates.

On the positive, the doubtful food and the work he was doing on the railway was definitely having an effect on his physique. He was losing weight while building up muscle. The calluses on his hands didn't bother him any more, and neither did the occasional splinter.

Despite the frequent rain, the track had reached the outskirts of Flagstaff town.

The Warden made a special announcement before the evening meal on the third Sunday. He said that the prison had earned a bonus for achieving the work ahead of schedule. The conversation that night was guessing how much the Warden had pocketed as a result.