

Cops and Robbers

A commission for Aardvark

By Pappy Wolf

The Alabama foothills were green and lush. Life flourished in all directions, from the tops of the maple trees to the bellies of the blind fish that crawled through underground streams. The Gem Hollow Correctional Facility was a stony knife through the heart of this paradise. It was ugly and it was cruel, and it made no attempt to disguise that. The spiked walls and guard towers encircled a sprawling seven-story building resembling a stepped, heptagonal pyramid. Windows were minuscule and sparsely allotted. It was a private prison, beholden to no authority except what little it chose to cede to the state through its contracts.

Jonah and Ezekiel sat tensely in the back seat of a company car as they were ushered through a series of gates. Overly enthusiastic air conditioning blasted at them. Their scrawny, hairless bodies shivered beneath their khaki pants, voluminous canary yellow long-sleeved dress shirts and clip-on ties. The lads identically clutched Bibles and identically feared the Lord. Already, the underdeveloped eighteen-year-olds were veterans at ministering to people in need of God's word, but they had never spoken with prisoners before.

Tall, gaunt Ezekiel brushed his fluffy chestnut bangs away from his eyes and tried to concentrate on his opening remarks. The prison official who had reached out to their youth group had promised him that they would only be in contact with the youngest inmates. His father approved of their visit, wryly noting that the boys were safer in the facilities of a wise, efficient corporation than in some socialist state-run jail.

Ezekiel was a little relieved to hear that. And of course, he knew God was his armor. Still, he had to confess that he was frightened of interacting with hardened criminals. Psalm 73:26 helpfully came to mind: *My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.*

Ezekiel was proud of his skill with quoting Bible verses. He wanted to preach like his father did. Going out among the sinners, building a following and expanding his legion of believers into a flock big enough to fill a megachurch would be a thrilling adventure. It was one he looked forward to. His father would no doubt give him a boost with his connections and his fortune, but that was just family helping family. Nothing sinful about that! Feeling lighter, he arched his swanlike neck to peer at the heavens through the upholstered ceiling of the vehicle and felt his posture stiffen back up into its usual ramrod

straightness. He glanced over at his fellow Christian soldier. The boy tried to imitate Ezekiel's pose, but he looked terrified.

Jonah felt his sweat attempting to soak into the synthetic fabric of his shirt, a poor imitation of Ezekiel's twill one. Perspiration pasted his shaggy blond bangs to his forehead. His short stature and pipe cleaner limbs conspired with his weak chin and large eyes to make him look years younger than he was.

He didn't know how the prisoners would receive his visit. Ezekiel's dad had warned the boys, in detail, about the kinds of things prisoners got up to if they hadn't received the Lord's word. The preacher spoke fervently about pretty much everything. But this time, he had been especially animated. Jonah had listened obediently, frozen in terror, while silently praying for the lecture to end. Confusion about *why* he wanted to move on still tormented him. Maybe he had wanted to stop thinking about the dreadful things the preacher had described. But maybe he had been in a hurry to contemplate them *in private*. That is what he had done, after all.

Unlike his friend, Jonah had a past. Ezekiel had been raised in the church. Jonah had run screaming to it. His dad had died when he was twelve. Early adolescence was a downward spiral of delinquency culminating in a wild weekend at age fifteen. He'd gotten wasted, stolen a car, and driven it off a bridge. He'd nearly drowned. Ezekiel's church offered him discipline and a community. He clung to it like a life raft. His mother wasn't entirely thrilled with his choice of a fundamentalist sect but seemed relieved he had found any kind of structure at all.

In some ways, Jonah felt more mature than Ezekiel, because he'd had genuine difficulties. But the liquid courage he'd depended upon in his early teens was terrifying to him now. And he couldn't find the strength to be comfortable by himself around strangers. That's what God was for, he understood that. But the Lord had never yet given him anything like what he had felt from alcohol. In his apparently perpetual state of despicable weakness, he was grateful for Ezekiel's companionship.

The driver, a dour man in a black suit, finally parked and opened the door for them. Ezekiel put his thin hand on Jonah's bony knee. "Ready whenever you are," he smiled.

Two beefy guards greeted them. The security officers were both well over six feet tall and insanely jacked. One was an olive-skinned gentleman with short, curly black hair razored into a broad mohawk. His considerable muscle was slathered in a generous layer of flab, with a firm, round belly. The other guard, far leaner, his gains on full display, was a graying redhead. His moderately longer locks were combed back and slicked down with a shiny pomade. Both wore light gray trousers with dark gray stripes running down the outside of either leg, along with short-sleeved dark gray shirts. A patch on the left sleeve displayed the logo of the prison. The right sleeve bore a patch featuring the logo of the

parent company, Seven Princes Security. There was a surprising amount of black leather as well: garrison straps and thick belts loaded with weapons, knee-high boots, and elbow-length gloves. Name badges clipped to their front pockets identified the redhead as Plowman and the dark-haired guard as Lombard. The duo smelled strongly of cigar smoke as well as a general funk that Jonah found strangely familiar.

The company man exchanged a few words with the guards, then turned to the boys and smiled. The mirth was confined to the lower half of his face. His eyes were just as dull and inscrutable as they had been when he had picked them up that morning. “Lombard and Plowman here will get you boys to where you need to be. Just follow them.”

Ezekiel began one of his unctuous speeches, but the man ignored him and climbed back into his car. Jonah stifled a giggle. He knew that Ezekiel hated it when people didn’t indulge his need to impress them with his verbal gymnastics. With a sigh, this flash of lightness in his heart flickered out. He could feel his customary terror crushing down on him again.

The guards clapped their hands on the boys’ shoulders and led them into the building. It reminded Ezekiel of how his father would get physical with him – squeezing his shoulder or his arm, sometimes painfully tight, and forcing him to walk where he wanted him to go. Lately, his father had also taken to putting his hand on Ezekiel’s back. The hand would move lower as they walked. When it had reached his ass, the nature of the touch would change from a firm touch into gentle stroking. The old man’s way of showing affection, Ezekiel supposed. He was proud of that. It showed that his father was starting to see him as more of an equal. More of a man.

Jonah glanced over at the leather-clad hand on his shoulder. The leather smell was heady. The rank odor of stale cigar smoke was even stronger, but the blend of smoke and leather was somehow nicer than either smell alone. He tried to think if he had ever seen any prison movies where the guards wore gloves. He couldn’t recall any. But this was a private prison and they surely had reasons for any improvements they had made over the old ways.

The guards maneuvered the boys into a darkened lobby with some uncomfortable-looking metal chairs, a stained concrete floor and an imposing reception counter made of ebony wood. It was staffed by two men attired like the driver. Small recessed lights, parsimoniously placed, created narrow shafts of luminance. The men drifted from spotlight to spotlight, disappearing and reappearing like specters. One of them took their phones while the other mutely shoved a guest book and a pen at the boys. Ezekiel signed his name in a hurry and Jonah did the same. The first man, brandishing a stamp, instructed them to hold out their arms. After stamping the backs of their hands, he flashed a grimacing smile and said, simply, “Welcome.” The second man kept glancing fearfully at Lombard and Plowman. He whispered something to his coworker, who shushed him. The guards chose that moment to manhandle the boys

away from the desk. From there, they passed through another portal staffed by more guards, into a featureless and winding gray hallway.

Ezekiel realized that he hadn't seen a single metal detector so far. Maybe the prison used some kind of advanced technology, he thought. Or else, they had such a rigorous screening process that it wasn't a problem.

Lombard and Plowman were not very talkative. Between their random comments, the only sounds they made were the creaking of leather, the heavy footfalls of their boots on the concrete, the clicking of their weapons striking together, and their heavy breathing. Ezekiel clutched his Bible harder. He had to admit that he was somewhat comforted by the brutes' sheer mass; certainly, none of the prisoners could be this tall or broadly built.

Jonah wished that the prison had sent normal-sized ambassadors to help them. Their slab-like bodies were unnerving, their grim faces oddly primitive. Like cavemen who were also MMA fighters. Broken noses, cauliflower ears and facial scars along with beetling foreheads and jug ears. Meanwhile, both of the boys' hands had started to itch where they'd been stamped.

They were given a tersely narrated tour of shadow-filled administrative offices. More furtive men in plain black suits shuffled between cubicles. Plowman started talking about the importance of hierarchies. He told them there was a Southeast Regional Director of Prisons at the federal level ("One of our guys," he smirked) and below him, the warden, who was essentially a CEO.

"That means he can do whatever the fuck he wants," Lombard added with a wink. Jonah winced at the profanity. Lombard snickered. "That's just how it is here, kid," he grunted. "Get used to it."

Abashed, Jonah looked down. The itching on the back of his hand spread out into a general warmth. He could see where the skin was turning pink, the ink blurring into a raised, reddish blotch. Fear needled his spine but he didn't dare say anything.

Plowman went on to talk about the Associate Wardens, who presided over various departments within the prison. Then there were the Executive Assistant and several Department Heads. The whole prison was like a city, he said, although he made it sound more like a kingdom. "Naturally, there's another guy over all of them, controlling everything."

“The Director of the Bureau of Prisons,” Ezekiel interjected. “Unless you mean the Attorney General.” He had done his homework and was thirsting for some kind of recognition.

“Shut up,” Lombard spat. “I didn’t say you could speak, did I?”

Stunned, Ezekiel let his mouth gape open for a moment before forcing himself to close it again. *The meek shall inherit*, he told himself.

Plowman continued, “Anyway, you’re wrong. I’m talking *way* more powerful than *that*.”

Ezekiel permitted himself a modest smile at this and cast his eyes heavenward. He knew what the guard meant. It was a real pleasure to meet a lawman who understood they were all in the service of the Lord.

The ginger guard went on to lecture them about the prison’s importance to the local economy. “The prison has to maintain the inmate and staff populations at a certain level, or else the whole thing falls apart. It’s like a machine. Lose even a few moving parts and it’ll stop working.” He looked over at Lombard.

The curly-haired giant added, “You may be wondering what we produce here at Gem Hollow. That’s classified. However, I can tell you that it involves the telecommunications industry.”

As Ezekiel listened, he scratched idly at the back of his hand. The itching was subsiding, leaving him with a cool sensation as it faded away. Glancing down, he noticed that what he’d thought was the company logo looked more like the body of a black widow spider. As he watched, spokes of ink pushed out from the abdomen and bent into the shape of crooked legs.

Lombard’s hand was on his shoulder. “Move it along, asshole,” he snapped. Ezekiel was so startled by this that he forgot about the peculiar stamp.

The guards blessedly released their grips on the boys when they exited the administrative section, allowing Ezekiel and Jonah to simply follow behind them. After navigating another maze of hallways, Jonah saw a sign with an arrow pointing ahead, with the legend reading “Cell Block Entrance.” He immediately became nauseous. The idea of seeing jail cells was too much for him.

He wrapped his arms around himself out of instinct — his mom had always been ready with a hug. But the limbs didn't feel like his own. They were a bit thicker, with hints of muscle under a layer of fat. He could even see the difference since he was wearing a short-sleeved dress shirt... that he didn't know he owned.

His round little tummy grumbled. He was a stress eater, that was true. He just hadn't thought he was capable of gaining weight. He seemed taller, too. Where he used to be a whole head shorter than Ezekiel, now it was more like half a head. And Ezekiel was a fucking giraffe.

A late growth spurt, then. Finally. High school was hell when you looked like you were four years younger than everyone else. Thank the Lord, that was years ago. Now he was... twenty-two? Twenty-three? That part was fuzzy. He rubbed his square jaw while he thought about it.

At any rate, no one in their right mind would call him a shrimp. He just wasn't sure he could win in a fight against a convict. Those apes did nothing but lift weights. He raised his arms. They were pink, like he'd been sunburned. And there was a bump on the back of one hand. It throbbed. It was baffling; he couldn't recall how he had gotten it. He just hoped it wasn't a spider bite.

Ezekiel had the impression of his skin fracturing from the stamp outwards, crazing over his arm like cracks from a bullet hole. It was ink, he realized, spinning a web for the spider on his hand. Tattoos didn't seem like his thing. And even if he had gotten inked, he wouldn't want to flaunt that bad decision by wearing a short-sleeved shirt. He remembered the taunts that boys from other schools had thrown at him whenever they found out his dad was a reverend. "Preacher's kid," they called him, and said it was only a matter of time before he rebelled and turned into a hard-partying burnout.

He'd always hated them for that. The Lord said "Love thy neighbor," but his father's church understood that "neighbor" only meant "fellow member of your congregation" so he was in the clear.

He wondered if the tats were his way of getting ahead of the narrative. He'd seen plenty of youth pastors who had gotten inked as a way of connecting with at-risk youth. Yes, that was probably it. The tattoos on his forearms marked him as formidable. So did his muscles. A year at the gym was beginning to show results. And his gains were solid, with his veins starting to really pop. He'd even swapped out his old boyish high school haircut for a buzzed pate, giving him a military flair. It was easy to dominate the sinners, looking the way he did.

All these thoughts were relegated to his subconscious, though, because he could not stop staring at Plowman. The guard's trousers were alarmingly tight. He could see the globes of the guard's ass clearly as they jiggled, testing the strength of the fabric meant to hold them in check. It was hypnotic.

Jonah looked at his hand again. The bump seemed bigger, and the throbbing was getting worse. Numbness crept into his digits. The Bible eluded his grip and thumped onto the hard floor. Nobody else had noticed, so the group just kept moving. Longing to speak but with no clear option on how to do it, he tentatively raised a hand. Like he was still in school, hoping the teacher would call on him. He felt foolish. He shook his head in frustration. Long, curly blond locks fell over one eye. And then onto the floor, just like his Bible had. He clapped his unaffected hand to his scalp. He was imagining things, he knew. His hair was styled in a mature undercut, buzzed on the sides and back with a scant few inches of wavy hair in top. That's right. He'd updated his look in his sophomore year of college.

Lombard glanced over his shoulder at the two of them. Ignoring Jonah's raised hand, he flatly remarked, "I hope you boys like walking. 'Cause we'll be doing a shitload of it." With that, he swiveled his Mastiff skull around once more.

With a dry mouth, Jonah emitted a tiny throat-clearing noise. Lombard turned his cold eyes on him. Meekly, Jonah showed him the insect bite.

The guard sighed, elaborately. "I guess I better take care of this," he frowned. He told Plowman to continue on his way with Ezekiel. Seizing Jonah's arm once more, he took him down a different hallway.

Ezekiel had a sudden urge to walk alongside Plowman. He quickly checked it. He wondered when he would get to meet the young inmates he'd be witnessing to. The guard seemed to be in no mood to answer any questions. Slowly, the young man lifted his index finger to his mouth and gently bit at it. It occurred to him that he hadn't indulged in this habit since he was six, when his father had beaten it out of him for his own good. Lost in thought, he let his thumb brush against his chin. It encountered several short, downy hairs. He rubbed his face and found similar fuzz on his upper lip and on his upper cheeks, just alongside his ears. He'd never had to shave before. This was a welcome surprise.

Grinning, he trotted behind Plowman like a puppy. The hall consisted of nothing but gray walls, frosted doors and security cameras. The monotony led him to concentrate on the back of Plowman's head.

The guard's slicked-down hair seemed longer than he had thought. Instead of stopping at the nape of the neck, it nestled within his collar, breaking apart into greasy waves. As the man walked, his

regimented gait softened into a swagger. His bubble butt seemed bigger than ever, straining the fabric of his trousers to its limits.

Despite himself, Ezekiel grunted. A low trumpeting of raw, lustful pleasure. He licked his lips, feeling the soft, dense stubble that framed his mouth. Just then, Plowman looked back at him. Gray mutton chop sideburns and an extravagant soul patch had materialized on his stern face. The side of his neck now displayed a tattoo of a vampire bat, all in blue ink. He winked, as though they were sharing some forbidden secret. "You must see something you like," he said, his low voice taking on an oily, insinuating tone. "I knew you were one of us."

Ezekiel stammered the beginnings of various words for several seconds, before settling on "I'm afraid I don't know what you mean, sir."

"Sir—!" The guard broke into a full-on cackle. "No need for formalities, brother. You and me are in the same boat."

Plowman's pace gradually quickened. Ezekiel hurried to catch up. The guard rounded a corner and disappeared from sight for a minute. When Ezekiel found him again, Plowman had apparently removed his gloves. More tattoos decorated the man's furry forearms. They were all of predatory beasts. Scorpions and lions and sharks... a menagerie of murderers. And all in ballpoint pen blue ink. Prison tats. Ezekiel looked around to see where the man had stashed his long gloves. They weren't on his belt or anywhere else.

Just the idea of tattoos got him off. It was warmer in this section of the prison, but even if it was cooler he'd still be sweating. He undid yet another button on his shirt, thankful he hadn't worn a tie today.

They kept walking. The miserly lighting shifted in color, growing more yellow. It made Plowman's gray uniform look beige, and then a warm yellow, ripening into orange. The guard's wavy hair fell to his middle back, with a series of rubber bands gathering it into a bad impression of a braid.

Ezekiel huffed the air, trying to get as much of the guard's musk in his nose as he could. The notes of leather faded away, along with the leather itself. The lights were spaced further apart now, with some flickering or not working at all. They traveled through pools of darkness. Every time Plowman reappeared, something had changed. The weapons winked out of sight, then the belt. The boots gradually shrunk down into loafers. The tantalizing cigar smoke was completely subsumed by Plowman's deliciously unwashed odor.

Ezekiel snorted and shook his head. He was acting crazy... he didn't even like guys. No wonder he was seeing things! And even if he *was* a fag...! His father had constantly lectured him about the evils of homosexuality. Made him scared shitless over the very notion of it. But then, that was years ago. And he hadn't even seen the old man since... since...

He reached for his gold crucifix. All he found was a fluffy thatch of chest hair. He looked down to see his shirt pockets and buttons receding into the fabric. The same thing was happening to his trousers. His shoelaces were gone now, the shiny leather softening into orange canvas. He was wearing scrubs. No, not that. It was the uniform of a...

Panic launched hot bile into his mouth. Choking, he hunched over, one hairy hand clutching a powerful thigh, the other gripping his Bible for dear life.

Plowman, also dressed like an inmate, spun around and shot him a dubious glance. "First time?"

"This ain't — *isn't* happening," Ezekiel gasped. The statement ended in a sour belch. He peered miserably at Plowman.

The old reprobate regarded him with disdain. "Fucking hell, Zeke! I thought you were supposed to be a big shot. Go figure! You're just another bully who falls apart when shit gets real."

Zeke let the Bible drop and clapped both hands over his ears. Like a pussy, he knew, but he didn't care. He could feel the skin on his palms thickening, growing scaly and calloused. Then the ugliness spread onto his ears as the cartilage broke and bulged outward, making them look like globs of fungus. He dropped his hands and stared down at them, then at his fellow inmate. Sniffing, Ezekiel retrieved his Bible and made himself stand upright. He had a reputation to maintain. A reputation *as what*, he couldn't say. Rubbing his nose, he encountered a bushy mustache. He ignored it. In a hushed, gravelly voice, he asked, "How the fuck did we get *out here*?"

Plowman scoffed. "You're the prison expert, Zeke. You ever hear of a *trustee*?" With that, the prisoner turned and stomped around another corner.

Zeke wasn't familiar with the term. Holes were opening up in his memory and his education, quickly growing into chasms. Scratching his hairless pate, he followed and found himself at the Cell Block

entrance. It consisted of cyclopean metal doors etched with countless mysterious symbols. For a moment they seemed like the text of a magic tome in a fantasy film. But then he realized they were all indicating different forms of currency. Guards stood on either side. One guard pressed buttons on a keypad, causing the doors to swing open. The other took the Bible from Zeke's grasp. "Don't know how you got hold of one of these," he said. "He wouldn't like it if you got yourself ideas."

The first guard made a gargling noise that suggested laughter, then glared at Zeke. "You waiting for an engraved invite? Get on inside, sweetheart."

Zeke obeyed, but looked over his shoulder to see if Plowman was coming with him. But the inmate was gone.

Jonah clutched his ruddy arms. The numbness and the bump had faded but he still felt warm. And puffy. He kept stumbling, haunted by the notion that the floor was further away than it should be. And growing even more distant by the minute.

Lombard had taken him into a stairwell. When the door slammed shut behind them, Jonah had glanced back to see "Level 5" painted on it. He wasn't sure why the ground floor of a five-story building would be the fifth level. Unless they were counting from the top.

They walked down the stairs. At the landings were plaques indicating departments such as Surveillance and Janitorial. After that were things like Marketing, Customer Service, and Technical Support. The deeper they went, the signage became inscrutable. Jonah saw signs labeled Induction, Inversion, Erasure, Transposition...

The air got warmer and more humid. The scents of leather and smoke intensified. The stale tang of Lombard's sweat became overpowering. Jonah's eyes watered. Through tears, he focused his gaze on the man leading him Who Knew Where. Lombard was an irresistible beast. The tree trunk limbs, the fat rump swinging like a pendulum, the badass mohawk contrasting with the militaristic uniform... Jonah's hefty dong was rock-hard just from looking at him. With the musk added in, well... he was afraid he'd cum in his jock right then and there.

Too much, too much. Jonah tightened his grip on the handrail and forced himself to stop. The words of Ezekiel's father came crashing back into his brain. A men's prison is like a pirate ship or a hobo camp, he had said. Desperate, Godless men, led around by their own genitals, doing anything to satisfy their base desires.

Concentrate on the task at hand, he scolded himself. *You're a lawman. Act like it.*

Even that thought didn't feel quite right. But he was ill, clearly, and he needed to take care of it. He tapped Lombard on the shoulder, ignoring how flushed and hairy his plump arm appeared. In a weirdly high-pitched peep of a voice, he asked, "Are we going to the nurse's — um, I mean, the infirmary?" His voice thankfully cracked in the middle of the question and dropped a full octave, so he sounded more like himself.

"Holy hell," Lombard whooped. "Were you really gonna ask if I was taking you to the goddamn *nurse's office*? What are you, in high school...?"

Jonah laughed. Weakly. A nasty taste coated his tongue. Tobacco and halitosis and... something else...

Lombard fished an object out of a front pants pocket and handed it to him. "Here's what *you* need, big guy," he said, wiggling his furry eyebrows.

It was a flask.

As soon as the metal touched Jonah's palm, it felt like the most natural thing in the world. He took a deep breath, feeling his broad chest puff out with the intake of cool air. Vertigo overtook him. Grasping the railing with a brawny hand, he limped to the next landing. "I gotta sit down," he grunted.

"Fair enough," Lombard shrugged. He sat down on a step, right next to Jonah, and put his arm around his shoulder. Their shared bulk filled the space. Jonah regarded the flask, thinking about that crazy bender he'd gone on as a teen.

It had been bourbon back then, too. Right from his dead dad's liquor cabinet. Before that, he'd been strictly a beer guy. Cheaper and easier to get hold of. With a trembling hand, he unscrewed the cap and smelled it. It was a sharp, manly odor — he liked those — and it made the short, bristling hair on his scalp stand on end. Damn, but he missed that aroma. That was enough, maybe. Just smelling it. He treated himself to another inhalation.

A wet, crunching sound startled him. His nose ached. He touched it and found a shapeless, dented blob.

Lombard looked at him with concern. "That busted honker still bothering you? The thing got broken years ago!"

"I don't like it," Jonah pouted.

"That's why I always told you to lead with your jaw in a fight. Your chin is pretty much a battering ram." He tapped Jonah's chin for emphasis.

Jonah hesitantly felt his chin. It was a thick, knobby behemoth, hard as granite and protruding like a fist, carpeted in sandpapery stubble. A bullfrog sack of a neck drooped behind it. He felt like he was touching a stranger's face.

The more he tried to make sense of it, the harder it got to think at all. He'd had a dream like this once. It was after his near drowning. In his nightmare, he saw a future where the experience had broken him so thoroughly that he'd become a church-going wuss. Maybe it wasn't a dream. But it seemed more like he'd kept partying after that and covered his ass by going into law enforcement.

It was dark in the stairwell and growing darker. Maybe that's why his canary yellow shirt looked as gray as Lombard's uniform. It didn't explain the stripes on the side of his khaki pants, though.

The sense of *wrongness* slapped him in the face. He felt like he was shrinking again, becoming like the kid in his dream.

"You like being a guard," Lombard prompted. "Don't you? Being big and tough, bossing a bunch of assholes around, doing whatever the fuck you want with no consequences... that's the life, am I right?"

Warm liquid spurted from the tip of Jonah's rod. Pre. His bull balls ached. Absently, he nodded. He wanted to believe that. But none of it felt real. And anyway, he already had a source of strength. He reached for his gold crucifix necklace.

It wasn't there. When he asked Lombard if he'd seen it, the guard pursed his lips. All jollity evaporated. He exhaled, at length. "Jones, buddy," he muttered. "C'mon."

The young man wanted to ask why Lombard was calling him “Jones.” Instead, he could only whimper, “What...?”

“A crucifix—? *Here?*”

Jones was speechless. He could picture the helpless, no doubt idiotic look he was giving his hot friend. He berated himself for being so clueless.

Lombard leaned in closer, his leather crinkling loudly in the swampy atmosphere of the stairwell. “All I’m saying is, y’know,” he whispered. “*You can’t serve us both.*” The phrase was familiar. But before Jones could place it, Lombard had grabbed the flask and was pouring the liquor down his throat. “Gotta do everything myself, I guess,” he murmured.

Jones reeled from the fire igniting in his gut. He could sense his belly bulging out further, blossoming into a full-on beer gut, straining the garrison strap that connected to his weapons belt. Lombard pulled his oafish body up and offered a black-gloved hand.

They trudged down more flights of stairs. Jones was feeling stronger now. Literally. Dense muscle tissue accumulated under his flabby pink flesh. Biceps like melons, thighs like bowling balls, traps that humped up from his back like huge t-bone steaks. His own sweat roiled the air, making him giddy. At last, he recognized the secret ingredient in Lombard’s musk: alcohol.

He wondered why he had felt so small and vulnerable earlier. He was a monster. 6’6”, 375 pounds... not many convicts would have the balls to fuck with him. He took another slug from his flask and howled, slapping his head with his leather palms, and furiously rubbing his horseshoe flattop.

“There’s my guy,” Lombard said, with what sounded like genuine pride. “Our stop is next.” The radio on his belt crackled. The guard put it to his ear and gestured for Jones to go ahead.

The plaque on the wall read “Security Recreation.” That sounded great. But Jones paused when he saw what was painted on the door: “Level 212.”

How long had they been walking? It was a mistake, it had to be. No structure on the planet was this deep. He trotted up to the next landing to find Lombard, but the guard was nowhere to be seen. His simian brow furrowed in consternation, Jones went back and pushed through the door.

Zeke was in a vast, open room, even darker than the hallways. It was seven-sided, like the exterior of the prison, with six walls dominated by cyclopean, symbol-covered doors outlined in a red glow and protected by guards armed with rifles. He couldn't see the ceiling, but there seemed to be dozens of levels above this one, all with small cells, connected by metal stairs, all of it slipping into darkness at the upper reaches. In the center of the room, prisoners sat tensely at small tables with weak LED lighting or on couches. One of the giant doors opened, revealing more darkness. A grim convict emerged and was escorted to a chair by a guard. That same guard spoke to someone on his radio before fetching another inmate and taking them back to the door.

The prisoners were a motley, sleazy-looking bunch, but their homely mugs brightened when he passed by. Some stood up and hugged him, others shook his hand or gave him a high-five. Every time, a guard would holler, "No touching!" But this seemed to be one rule they felt free to ignore... at least with him.

He heard his name whispered. Some called him "Z-Man" or "Zero." Their adulation fueled him, made him even bigger. He felt his muscles swell further, his body fat dwindling until his flesh attained a crispy, over-defined musculature. His broad neck a trapezoid, traps like wings, delts like armored plates. His shirt grew tight, rising inches above his waist as his height rocketed to six-foot-nine. Growling, he ripped off the sleeves and then tore the useless bit of fabric right down the middle to free his massive chest. He saw now that his tats covered his entire torso. As soon as he glimpsed them, though, his chest hair thickened up into an ursine pelt, obscuring them. An itchiness spreading from his upper lip down the sides of his jaw heralded his bushy porn 'stache evolving into a mammoth horseshoe that covered his upper lip and half of his cheeks.

That settled it; he knew exactly who he was now. He walked like a god among the mob of degenerates, soaking up their twisted love. "He's back," he heard them whisper.

"Can't keep Zero down," remarked a wiry little creep with his hair in pigtails.

"Fucker's unbreakable," agreed a chubby, effeminate dork with patchy whiskers. "Solitary didn't make a goddamn dent!"

Zero. He recalled how he earned that nickname. Zero tolerance for bullshit. A heart as cold as absolute zero. He was in for armed robbery. His last job ended in manslaughter. When they sentenced him, he didn't bust out crying or throw a tantrum. He just stared at the judge, stone-faced. Like a man.

The convicts began to look familiar. He could attach names to most of them. He could see Dingle, one of many rats he'd beaten up. Nearby was Krantz. He fucked him in the showers most Fridays. And he saw Whitey and Gunk and Dobie and...

"Ezekiel." The voice calling to him had a SoCal drawl and it was hoarse. From Zeke choking him out so many times.

"Fox," Zeke grunted. A nervous, runty albino with a chinstrap beard and a man-bun. Even in the crepuscular atmosphere of the cell block, the pasty fucker looked like a ghost. Reluctantly, he turned to face the squirrely bastard. Nobody liked him. He'd apparently fried his brains on LSD or some shit, because he was always hectoring the other inmates with weird conspiracy theories.

"Ezekiel," Fox whispered. "You have to listen to me."

While Zeke stood there with his arms folded and a scowl on his face, the irritating little cocksucker babbled some nonsense about how a guard and a convict had killed each other and how Zeke and another guy had been lured to the prison to replace them.

"Thanks for the news flash," Zeke said, already wanting to slap the hell out of him. "Tell me what guard, then. What prisoner?"

Fox leaned in, his parched vocals getting even quieter. "The guard was Lombard. Big dude, curly black mohawk. Prisoner was a redheaded biker called Plowman. He was bad news. He knocked over a bank and a teller got killed. And you, you're just a teenager, see, and..."

Zeke leaned in closer, letting his hot, rancid breath fill the punk's ear. "Riddle me this, shithead. How come I ain't never heard of either one of them before?"

Before Fox could reply, a guard shouted, "No touching!" A baton pried Zeke and Fox apart. The pig told the trembling Fox he was going to Solitary. To Zeke, he said, "It's your cue, superstar. Report to Door Four. Now."

The rec room for security guards looked like a ballroom-sized bachelor party. A huge, open room occupied by brawny fuckers in crisp uniforms, and all of them drinking and smoking. "Jones," they all shouted when he walked in. There were bars and arcade cabinets and glory holes lining the walls, a couples of pool tables, and cozy club chairs all around.

It was disorienting at first. But the more he talked to the other guards, the more he remembered. He'd been on vacation after a messy divorce. His pals gave him sloppy hugs and slapped him on his titanic rear. They called him nicknames like "Big Guy" and "Bruiser" and "Tank." It almost felt like he was still growing, past 400 pounds, up to 425. His belly was a stewpot, straining his shirt past its limits. A button popped off. Jones hurriedly undid the other buttons on the top half of the garment. His furry tits almost popped all the way out of his uniform, but it was worth it.

A guard called "Tex" thrust a double bourbon, neat, into his gloved paw. Brandt, another guard, proffered an 80 ring cigar and even offered to light it for him. Jones accepted.

The pair puffed on their cigars for a minute. Then Brandt asked, "Did you seriously take the *stairs* down here? You know there's elevators, right?"

"I think I'd remember if I took the goddamn stairs," Jones shot back.

Brandt shook his head. "Speaking of trips... how did you like Vegas?"

A fresh memory took root in the stony soil of his mind. "Fucking nightmare," he sighed. "Don't get me wrong; the rent boys are top notch, but I lost about twenty grand at the blackjack table." He drained his glass, feeling suddenly blue.

Tex took the glass and told him he'd secure a refill. "Your luck is turning around," he added. "Brandt, show him the gift we all chipped in to get you."

Brandt produced a gleaming gift card plated in real gold. Jones could tell what it was right away. His ruddy complexion turned vermilion. "Get the fuck outta town," he cried. "Those cost a damn fortune!"

"Nothing's too good for Gem Hollow's number one ass-kicker," the guard grinned. "Six whole hours in a fuck vault with whichever inmate you choose."

Jones' fat face acquired a demented smile. He grabbed his crotch. "You know there's only one of those animals up there big enough to take *this* shaft."

Zeke entered the vault and waited under his designated spotlight. That was the worst part. The waiting. They never knew who the client would be, if they were going to fuck or get fucked, or anything else about their session. All you could do was wait and wonder.

Most of these jokers couldn't handle it. He'd seen his share of tough guys strut into a vault and emerge weeping. Not him, though. Never him.

He had a clear head about the job. The prison told them it was a virtual reality situation. Horny assholes with money to burn using VR gear to remotely operate the vault. But he knew there was nothing scientific about it. Because he could feel the thing that always shared the vault with him and his johns. Worse, he could hear it.

Its tone was soft and fluttering most of the time. He'd concentrated on the voice many times in the middle of a screw. It was like dry, scuttling leaves in an October gale, he'd thought. But as he'd kept listening, he'd realized the sound was paper. And finally, he'd understood that it wasn't being blown about by a breeze. It was getting sorted. By a money counting machine.

When the thing was angry, its voice was loud, staccato and metallic. Coins spilling down a metal shaft.

Another familiar voice, deep and vibrating flabbily, called out to him from the darkness. "Hello, *killer*," the guard sneered. Flirtation and derision, all at once.

Jones.

Perfect.

The nameless thing snickered. It sounded like clattering poker chips.

Zeke lazily spun around and eyed his client with practiced boredom. The pig was under a second spotlight, drunk like always, shirt and belt and zipper undone, wobbling in his boots and clumsily groping his own tits.

The prisoner spat on the floor, then said, "What game we playing this time, *bitch?*"

Still locking eyes with his quarry, Jones stuck a porcine paw down his pants and brought it back up to his mouth so he could lick his own pre off his digits. "Same game as always, bitch," he shot back.

Zeke said the rest of the sentence with him: "Cops and robbers."

Hazy forms bloomed all around them, watercolor splotches bleeding into one another before solidifying into a tangible dreamscape. Zeke wondered how the nameless thing did it. Magic, no shit, but whether it was a shared hallucination or the creation of an actual reality, he couldn't guess. Anyway, thinking too long about the thing always brought on a punishing migraine, so he made himself relax and let go. The scenario splashed into him, feeling like warm seawater. He calmed his mind and luxuriated in it.

They were in a bank. *The* bank. That was ballsy.

It was a little mom-and-pop outfit in a tiny hick town off Route 14 near the Mississippi border. There were no customers cowering on the floor this time. None of his biker brothers backing him up. No over-the-hill guard with a jammed revolver pissing his pants in the corner. Most likely, the teller who'd suffered a heart attack after he'd slapped him around wasn't lying dead behind the counter, either.

Zeke was standing just inside the door, arms outstretched, a pistol in his hand. That was strange. He didn't remember toting a pistol to this job. It had been a sawed-off shotgun. Then he looked down at his clothes.

Blue short-sleeved button-up shirt with a narrow black tie, tan trousers, brown lace-up boots, a radio with a spiral cord clipped to his belt... and a badge.

Holy shit.

He was the cop. And he knew just where the robber would be. Behind the counter, trying to hide while he desperately racked his brain for an escape route.

Zeke thought Jones looked pretty goddamn comical in his old clothes. Black leather biker gear, a black mock turtleneck and gloves to hide his tats, and a rubber "Venom" mask. He remembered how hot it had been in that get-up. With Jones, everything was too small. The shirt rode up over his stupid blob of a gut, the vest pinched at his flabby armpits, and his Jay Leno chin protruded from the mask.

His horse dick already stiffening from anticipation, he cocked the gun's hammer back and shouted, "Freeze, asshole."

"Oh no," Jones yelped, coquettishly.

"Weapon on the floor," Officer Zeke growled. "Now."

The guard pulled the mask off his fat head, with effort. The douchebag was soaked in perspiration. Zeke inhaled the delectable stink of hot rubber and unwashed flesh. Jones always did smell, and the scenario had somehow doubled the intensity of it. His tiny eyes narrowing, the guard grinned and shouted, "Fuck you!"

Zeke rolled his eyes. "This is bullshit. I didn't take my mask off."

"I'm making it better," the guard slurred.

"The fuck ever...! Alright, seriously, weapon on the floor. And no funny business." *Even though that's all this ever is,* he thought ruefully.

“You’re still not taking me without a fight, copper,” Jones replied as he slid the shotgun across the linoleum floor.

“*Copper?* Is this the goddamn Roaring Twenties--? Nobody talks like... *FUCK!*” He knew what Jones was doing. Working him up on purpose with his alcoholic nonsense. The bastard loved angry sex. And wrestling. Fine, he was the boss.

Zeke obligingly holstered his pistol and advanced on the overstuffed guard. Jones tottered to his feet and attempted to charge at him like a bull, headfirst. Zeke threw a meaty fist and decked him, sending him flying into a cabinet. Then he was on top of the fucker, clawing at his leathers and his tight turtleneck. Part of him was truly incensed at seeing Jones dressed up like him. The pig didn’t deserve to wear his gear.

Jones put up minimal resistance. Enough to make it fun but not so much it took away from the main event. Soon enough, Zeke had the guard naked and bent over the bank counter, his tatted arm around Jones’ fat neck, berating him, belittling him, breaking him down mentally and emotionally while he peppered him with kisses and bites.

Zeke had a set of handcuffs on his belt, but there was no way Jones’ blimp arms were going to fit behind his back. He had to settle for ripping the cord from a box fan and binding him that way. His tongue wasn’t quite long enough to reach the pig’s loose hole. It never was. Still, he made a valiant effort. His dense, furry mustache brought delicate little yips and moans from Jones’ lips, so he teased him this way for a long while. Still hurling insults, he slipped a mighty hand between Jones’ butt cheeks and started working his fingers into the loose hole. Fully inserted, he made a fist and started punching. The guard screamed. More than anything, that sound got Zeke off. A man in agony. His own personal aphrodisiac.

The nameless thing whispered suggestions. Sometimes he listened; sometimes not. He could be monstrous enough on his own. The thing seemed to respect his rebellious nature. At least, he hoped it did.

He pummeled Jones’ ass until his wrist began to cramp. Then it was time to switch to using his cock. Through the fake windows, he could see the fake sun setting. It was hard to gauge how long a session in the Fuck Vaults lasted, but he had the suspicion they had been in here for hours. That almost never happened. He rode Jones with only his own ejaculate as lubrication, doggedly pounding away until the fake stars came out. When the guard at last slumped over, exhausted, Zeke pulled out and stepped away. His rod was bright red, glistening with various juices, and a little sore. With a disparaging eye on the pig, he muttered, “You’re welcome, by the way.”

Jones woozily turned around, head lolling, and smiled moronically. His gargantuan legs trembling like a newborn fawn's, he abruptly collapsed onto the floor. He fixed Zeke with an oddly triumphant look. "Reset," he mumbled.

Zeke was standing in the lobby again, pistol drawn, the sunny blue sky behind him.

He was furious. But there was nothing he could do about it and he'd be damned if he'd let Jones know. Rubbing his crotch, he looked down at his equine bulge and said, "Ready whenever you are."