



'Do you know who I am?' I said.

One thing you learn. It isn't what prisoners say that tells you most about their guilt. It is their silences.

The man said nothing.

'Do you know who I am?' I repeated.

The man glared at me rudely across the desk. 'I know who you think you are,' he growled.

I pushed the tray of his possessions towards him. The various trinkets rolled and rattled and glistened brightly among the scraps of newspaper. I could see his eyes follow them like a cat's.

'These are yours?' I said to him. He nodded. I could see how badly he wanted to hold them. People are like that with objects. Personally, I've never really cared for that kind of thing, but people cram their pockets and their lives with memories of no value to anyone other than themselves. I had nothing like that. Not now.

I nodded to Bentley, and she walked across my

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office smartly. I handed her the tray.

‘These are Prisoner 428’s personal effects,’ I informed her. She inclined her stiff neck curtly. Bentley possesses two attributes – stiffness and sourness. Like a lemon meringue. The absurd image amused me and I smiled despite myself. Try as I might, I never can quite get on with Guardian Bentley. Whatever I do – it’s never quite good enough for her. But she has her uses. And I knew that she would like me to be strict. I was here to show Prisoner 428 that I meant business.

I indicated that she should take the proffered tray. ‘I have taken possession of Prisoner 428’s personal possessions,’ she told me formally, making no effort to find another word to provide any variation in the sentence. Bentley was like that. Her speech was as dry as the manual, and just as correct. Her uniform, her shoes, her haircut. Everything about her was frostily neat.

‘Very good, Bentley,’ I nodded to her. ‘See that they have an accident on the way back to storage, will you?’

Prisoner 428 was on his feet, yelling that I didn’t understand or something. That was a mistake. At the first sign of protest, a Custodian swept forward from the wall, its claws clamping into his shoulders. To give him his due, Prisoner 428 didn’t cry out, he just winced, turning on the robot with fury. ‘Let me go,’ he snarled.

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That cut no dice with the Custodian. The things were built without even a semblance of a face, just a solid cylindrical body and various sharp appendages. People got tired of shouting at them because there was nothing to shout at. Most lacked voice processors, so they could not answer back. They were completely cold metal and even when they were hurting you did so without giving off the slightest response. My first girlfriend had been exactly like that. Once, long ago.

Prisoner 428 was struggling loudly against the Custodian, which was stupid. The more you did that, the tighter the Approved Safe Restraining Hold became. 428 must have been in a fair amount of pain, but he just looked angry, his manacled hands waving away the pain like it was a buzzing fly.

‘Those things are important, man, just look at them,’ he said, making direct eye contact with me. Which was remarkable. No one here looks me in the eye. Even Bentley (who is allowed to) avoids it.

‘I have examined them,’ I informed Prisoner 428, allowing just a trace of tiredness to leak into my tone. ‘You have nothing of any value. Baubles, gadgets and scraps of paper.’

I picked up one object from the tray Bentley held, a tiny pen-like thing and tapped it against my teeth, smiling back at Prisoner 428, enjoying the eye contact. He had a face made for fury and was making the most of it.

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'Paper? You've clearly not looked at any of it!' snarled Prisoner 428. 'Get this thing off me, stop being an idiot and let's have a nice chat, shall we?'

Bentley blinked. I think even the Custodian winced. No one talks to me like that.

Sensing the awkward silence, Prisoner 428 glanced around. 'What?' he snapped.

'You would like me to read these documents?' I asked him, reaching towards the tray that Bentley extended.

'Yes,' snapped 428. 'I don't suffer fools gladly. Pick up a piece of paper, read it, and save us all a lot of time.'

The moment held. I picked up a scrap of newsprint. It had a headline about troubles on HomeWorld. I dangled it neatly between my finger and thumb and then let it fall back. With a smile.

'You will address me as 'sir',' I informed him hotly. I was surprised at how angry I sounded.

His stare didn't waver. His face may have been made up of storms, but his eyes were a wonderfully clear blue. His rudeness was almost refreshing. Because I'm so important, no one is ever quite themselves around me. But Prisoner 428 was clearly out to be different and I was prepared to enjoy it. For a while.

'Stop being an idiot, *sir*,' he replied, flashing me a rather lovely smile. 'Just read the thing, and then we can all go home.'

I snapped my fingers and the Custodian released

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him and retreated, gliding back into its alcove. Prisoner 428 tried rubbing his shoulders, but his manacles wouldn't allow him, so he settled for pummelling his shoulders with his fists.

'You know,' 428 considered, 'as a massage, that was rather bracing. Come up with a good name for it, and you could clean up in health clubs. Mind you, you don't even really have to bother with a good name. I mean, take Zumba.'

After this puzzling remark, he shook himself down like a wet dog and then settled back into his chair, throwing one chained leg over the other and stretching. Then he pulled his face into an expression of contrite humility.

'See what I'm doing? I'm making an effort to make a good impression on you, sir,' he said almost sweetly.

'It's a little late for that,' I replied.

'Oh, I know,' Prisoner 428 nodded. 'But honestly, I really do always give people every effort. No one ever just listens to me. Which is a shame. I dunno about you, but I've always fancied knocking off early for a quiet night in with *Call the Midwife*. Do you get that here, sir?'

'No,' I told him. For some reason a smile was stuck on my face and it was taking an effort to shift it.

'Pity,' he sighed. 'It's a lovely show about babies and bicycles. I like both these things. If only real life was that easy, eh?'

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I coughed.

'... sir,' he added dutifully, then looked up, almost puppy hopeful. 'See? We're getting on better, aren't we, sir? I don't suppose I could prevail upon you for my valuables back, could I? As valuables go, they really are valuable.' A pause. 'Sir.'

With a smile, I shook my head.

'Last chance,' he said, 'Look at my papers. You'll understand.'

I hesitated.

428 gave me an encouraging nod.

Then I clicked my fingers.

Bentley opened an incinerator hatch with casual ceremony and slid the contents of the tray rattling into it. Prisoner 428 looked as though he was going to protest, and then watched them go with rapt silence. 'Well, that's a pity. That would have saved a lot of time.'

There was a waft of heat as Bentley closed the incinerator hatch and turned back to me. 'I regret to inform you, sir, that the personal effects of Prisoner 428 were lost in transit.'

'Remiss, Bentley, most remiss,' I tutted.

She nodded, seemingly taking the reproof seriously, and then, with a rigid bow, departed. I may not like Bentley, she may not like me, but I do think we are both very efficient in our own way. Bentley's way is more rigid. Everything about her reminds one of this

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fact. Constantly. Bentley gets things done.

By contrast, Prisoner 428 was slouched in the metal chair, wriggling himself comfortable.

'Now then, Prisoner 428, where were we?' I leaned back in my chair, making the most of its padded luxury. Prisoner 428's chair was, needless to say, a sheet of metal bolted to the floor.

'You were asking, sir...' 428's tone was a little dead. Did I detect the first signs of defeat? 'You were asking if I knew who you were, and I was merely raising a valid query about the nature of identity. It's a sliding scale,' he shrugged. 'I should know. Sir.'

'I shall repeat the question, Prisoner 428. Do you know who I am?'

Prisoner 428 had done surly, angry, rude, and chummy. Now he yawned. 'Yes, sir. What you want to hear is that this is a prison on an asteroid in deep space. You're the Governor of it.'

'Very good, 428,' I said encouragingly. 'Not a prison. We call it *The Prison*. And only the very worst criminals are sent here. I'm reliably informed that you're the worst of the lot—'

'Well, I'm innocent,' flashed 428 with fury.

'You all are, I know,' I tutted. 'Please do not interrupt me again, or I'll have the Custodian sever something. I was going to say that I am informed that you are the very worst criminal in the sector, guilty of heinous crimes against the HomeWorld government. But,'

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and I made myself appear as casual as 428 was, 'let me tell you something – I'm not interested in the details of your crimes. That's all in the past. While you're here, you're under my care. I view all of the prisoners here as my friends. And I'd like to include you on that list. Can I, 428?' I leaned forward just a little. And smiled.

428 considered the offer. 'I'm not in the habit of calling my friends "sir".'

'Make an exception, there's a good fellow,' I told him. 'You're in a lot of trouble 428 and—'

'Oh, can we stop all that?' snapped Prisoner 428. 'My name's the Doctor.'

'It sounds like a criminal alias. And names are not allowed here.'

'Well, tell you what, since we're friends, let's both make exceptions, shall we?'

Sometimes you have to bend Protocol in order to achieve a positive outcome. I was glad that Bentley wasn't here to see this. She really wouldn't have approved.

'Very well then, Doctor,' I said with my warmest smile. 'Do you know why I had you brought here?'

428 considered. 'Was it about the escaping?'

'Correct! Very good, 428, it was about the escaping. You're a new arrival. You have a lot to learn. You can't escape from The Prison. Even if you continue to get out of your cell, there are the Custodians, Bentley's guardians, the walls, the fences, the external defences

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to get through and then, finally, a very long walk home through deep space. In case you've missed it from the view as you arrived, we're on an asteroid at the edge of the system. We get few supply ships. There's honestly no way out, and yet you keep on trying.'

'Oh, I do,' 428 nodded warmly. 'Call it a vocation.'

'Some inmates weave baskets. They find it very calming.'

'I've never had much time for wicker,' muttered 428. 'I'll just carry on escaping, if it's all the same to you.'

'Of course it is. Be my guest.' I waved the idea away magnanimously, reached across and patted him on the shoulder. I noticed with pleasure that he winced slightly. Clearly it was a little sore. 'Escape as much as you want, my friend. I'm fully confident in my team's abilities, but I'm sure they appreciate the practice. And, thanks to you, they have had a lot of practice of late.'

'I do try my best,' Prisoner 428 said smugly.

I toyed with the idea of cramming him down the incinerator, but beamed instead. 'Well then, everyone must have a hobby, I suppose.' I stood, indicating he was dismissed. 'Off you trot, 428, back to your cell, and enjoy your escapades.'

'You don't understand,' the Doctor – 428 – didn't move.

'I beg your pardon?'

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'You don't understand, sir,' Prisoner 428 repeated. 'I did all the escaping for one purpose only. So that I could meet you.'

'Did you now?' I paused. I gave 428 another silence to tell me more about him. 'You wanted to meet me?' I leaned forward, interested.

'Yes,' he said.

'Well, I'm pleased to have unlocked that particular achievement for you.' I nodded, satisfied. 'Perhaps you could learn a language next?' I beamed, and motioned to the Custodians. 'Take him back to his cell.'

'No, you idiot... sir.' The Doctor was on his feet, leaning across the desk, eyeball to eyeball with me, yelling fiercely as the Custodian sliced from the wall and wrapped electrified tendrils around him. 'I had to meet you!' he cried furiously, ignoring the pain, 'Because I had to warn you. You have no idea what's really going on here, do you? Unless you listen to me, a lot of people are going to die.'