

# PROLOGUE

Like most people, Martin Shimura never wanted to go to prison. But when Paul Tarkington asked you to do a job, you didn't say no.

Martin ran down the long, blank-white-walled corridor, doing his best not to panic as the walls reconfigured themselves around him. No matter how many times he witnessed it, the flexing and reshaping of the surfaces always unnerved him to his core. The world simply wasn't supposed to behave like that. But that was why the agency had built this place that way: to freak out the prisoners inside as much as possible.

Martin had arrived as a guard, but now he saw how easily one could lose that status.

None of this was supposed to go down this way. When he'd agreed to take this assignment, Martin had thought he was just doing a favor for a paranoid old friend. Sure, I'll rotate into a blue site on Venus for a few months. Never been, be nice to see a new planet, how bad could it be inside? It's still run by the good ol' U-S-of-A, right? We are a nation of laws, not men, and all that jazz?

He should have known better. They all should have known better.

Martin finally found a door that actually looked like a door, with a visible handle, and he grabbed it and levered it downward. It turned

and clicked like he expected a door handle would, and he pushed the door open, stumbling forward before looking inside the new space.

Rookie mistake, he admonished himself as his eyes adjusted to the dim light in this room and he saw the last people he wanted to run into right now.

"Well, now, Number Forty-Seven." The tall, dark man who called himself Number Nine—but he did have a name, Martin knew his name, why couldn't he remember it now?—stepped forward, bringing with him the scent of cinnamon. Martin remembered that. He knew what that smell meant—or at least he used to know. Why couldn't he remember? Why couldn't he seem to recall anything important right now?

"You know you're not supposed to be down here, don't you?" Number Nine asked.

"Fuck you," Martin said, grateful that he could still swear. "I'll go where I want. And I'm not a number, I am—" He suddenly couldn't summon his own name to his lips, and he quickly settled on saying something else, hoping his hesitation wasn't too obvious. "—a free person."

"Free?" Number Nine's mouth curled into a snarl. "We're none of us free, Number Forty-Seven. Certainly not in this place."

"But that's going to change soon, isn't it?" Martin spat.

"Is it?" The smell of cinnamon grew stronger every time Number Nine exhaled, and it was starting to feel suffocating. "Loose lips sink habitats, you know."

"You don't need to worry about me. I signed the NDA."

"All the same." Number Nine waved a hand, and something rippled in the darkness behind him. "Before you leave us, we're going to need you to conduct an exit interview with Rovor."

The thing slid out of the darkness, forward into the dim light from the corridor behind Martin, wobbling closer as Number Nine moved out of the way. Martin opened his mouth to scream, but he couldn't do that, either.

As he was engulfed, before he lost consciousness, Martin had time to wonder how long it would take for Lasher to send someone after

him. And whether it would be too late for them to do anything about  
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What was it, exactly, that Martin had been sent here to find out,  
again?

And then he blacked out, and there was only Rovor.