

THINGS TO DO IN PRISON

Most of the role-playing opportunities in prison come in the spaces between the rigorous markers of head counts, meals, and time in cells: the whispers in the yard, the fights in the showers, the deals made to smuggle those cigars past the guards. Here is where a prison setting really comes alive, and where imprisoned characters face challenges as engaging as any in the outside world.

Politics

Prison engenders its own form of Machiavellian politics, where power is a premium and the rules which govern outside society are nonexistent. Inmates must survive in an environment where they have no rights, where violence and abuse are routine, and where long hours of boredom are rife with potential conflict. Sights and insults can balloon into lasting grudges as the offended con stewes upon what was said and done, while perceived favoritism or extra privileges can spawn lethal resentments. Conflict is also a form of resistance — it shows the world that they're not totally beaten yet, and that they will fight back if pushed too hard. In such an environment, those who display any signs of weakness are open for attack. The law of the jungle dominates.

In that light, prison society becomes a perfect breeding ground for the most bare-knuckle politics known to man. Cons compete with each other for easy work details, for spots in the chow line, and for treasured possessions. They create enemies and form alliances aimed at bettering themselves in the pecking order. When attacked, they retaliate; those who don't risk being perceived as weak, reducing their life to an endless nightmare of exploitation and bullying. Cons must learn to get along with each other, but at the same time must fiercely defend what they perceive as theirs. The political games never end in prison; those who thrive are allowed retain some small measure of creature comforts and perhaps even a modicum of human dignity.

Politics in prison is much the same as it is in more civilized forums; it simply lacks any precepts of morality, existing in the realm of pure Darwinism. Benevolence doesn't exist, though a strongman's underlings and allies will likely be rewarded. Everyone acts out of self interest, favors must be returned in kind, and power is only retained as long as it can be defended. At the same time, a strange code of etiquette arises; cons often take great pains to avoid insulting or offending someone unnecessarily. Perceived toughness is lauded, and "honorable" cons are afforded the respect of their peers. Smart cons mind their own business and stay out of everyone's way, but even that will generate enmity, and may require a few new allies. One way or another, every convict in prison is playing the political game with his fellows. His survival quite literally depends on it.

Contraband and Illicit Trade

Prisons have their own economies — self-contained and limited, but thriving nonetheless. Drugs, alcohol, illegal food-stuffs, and even weapons are smuggled in by visitors or staff members, and then traded throughout the prisoner community. Those who control the flow of illicit items hold a great deal of power in the prison yard, and can often bargain for favors in exchange for a coveted item.

Tobacco is often the currency of choice within prison walls. It's easily transportable, usable on a moment's notice, and generally permissible from the guards' standpoint. Prisoners trade cigars and cigarettes for food, chewing gum, and other small luxuries. More exotic materials, however, require cash: either straight bills or deposits made by outsiders into bank accounts. Drugs and alcohol can sell for a considerable markup in prison and outside forces can make a huge profit on the illicit trade inside. Most of them require a little more than just a packet of smokes in payment, however.

Obtaining contraband is fairly easy on the outside; with the exception of drugs, most are available at any market or general store. But smuggling it in requires some finesse; if the guards uncover it, the prisoner will be written up and punished. The most common smuggling method involves visitors passing it to the con surreptitiously in the visiting room. Some prisons separate visitors through screens and glass doors to prevent such transfers. Other prisoners will enlist the help of outside staff, smuggling the goods in with shipments of regular supplies. Guards can be bribed to bring in items as well (though it often gives them leverage over the prisoner since they now know what he's carrying).

Such a network, once established, becomes a regular hub of trade; the more a prisoner can bring in, the more he profits and the more influence he has with the other prisoners. The best "merchants" in the stir have well-established means of getting what they require and can shift to alternate sources if one is compromised or dries up. Once the contraband is inside the prison walls, the prisoner must concern himself with holding onto it. He must secret it away in a secure location, where the guards won't find it and other prisoners won't take it (though guards rarely kick up a fuss for modest items like food or smokes). Some prisons have lockers where the inmates keep personal possessions; other places require more creative thinking. Hollowed-out bricks, mattresses, and the areas behind steam pipes all make good hiding places, as do secretive areas near the con's work detail. Once he's secured it, he needs to find a buyer... which shouldn't be a problem so long as the con keeps his inquiries quiet. Many items of contraband are consumable, guaranteeing both an easy means of disposal if necessary, and plenty of return customers in the future.

Naturally, access to contraband is fiercely contested; control of such resources is a form of power, and rival "merchants" will go to great lengths to protect their connections to the outside. Gangs of convicts representing outside criminal organizations will seek to monopolize the trade in drugs and other contraband, just as they would on the streets. The competition often leads to acts of intimidation and violence as rivals seek to defend their "turf."

THE EDGE OF MIDNIGHT

Similarly, contraband can be a testing point for unproven convicts, as other prisoners try to claim a new fish's possessions for themselves. If he doesn't thwart their challenge, he won't survive long; the pecking order of many prisoners can be determined by who has the most contraband, and how well they can defend their belongings from attack.

Gambling

With any kind of currency comes the desire to bet it all away. While card games are sometimes allowed in prison, playing for stakes is strictly forbidden. Nevertheless, many prisons have flourishing poker matches, played for cigarettes or other forms of contraband. An even bigger practice is sports betting — a passion among the incarcerated and the cause of as much violence as drugs or alcohol. Prisoners will bet on ball games (especially important games like the CL Series), horse races, and championship prize fights. Prisons will often run radio broadcasts of such events live through the speakers, allowing the entire populace to listen in.

Tension during broadcasts is unbearably high, as the outcome of the game exacerbates the already stressful prison environment with its inbred team loyalties, betting interests, and the passions of the moment. Vineland Prison north of New Eden witnesses a few new fatalities every baseball season, as inmate fans of the New Eden Grays and their crosstown rivals the Brenton Haporth vent their frustrations at each other. One memorable CL Series five years ago — between the Grays and the New Eden Gallants — sparked a riot which lasted nearly four days. But despite that, most prisons continue to allow broadcasts of important events. Doing so merely raises the *possibility* of trouble; denying prisoners access to the game will guarantee it.

Gambling debts are serious business in prison, even more so than on the streets outside. Welshers and those unable to pay are often targeted for violence; beatings and killings increase exponentially after matches, when losing gamblers have to face the music. Even low-key inmates will often wager a few cigarettes on a game, out of sheer boredom if nothing else. The high rollers actually maintain outside bank accounts, where free friends of the losers can send the funds. Illegal trade dominates the prison economy, but gambling is almost as lucrative, and just as hard to resist.

Fun with the Guards:

Punishments and Rewards

Every prisoner is beholden to the guards on duty, and required to obey their orders at all times. Most of the time, guards are just punching a clock; they want to get through their shift as quietly as possible, and act only when trouble rears its head. They tend to come down harder on those with a history of acting out, using their authority and an elaborate system of rewards and punishments to keep the cons in line. The cons vastly outnumber the guards in every prison, meaning that offences or perceived rebellion must be snuffed out immediately.

Guards routinely toss cells looking for contraband and similar forbidden items. Ostensibly it serves to keep the prison free of illegal items, but it also serves as a tool for control. Prisoners have very little privacy, and searches from the guards vio-

late every facet of it. They enter the cell — sometimes while the inmate is away — and root through every corner, tossing the inmate's meager possessions out into the hall. Objects may be seized for no reason and never returned; if contraband is found, further punishment may be instigated, such as a loss of library privileges or time in the hole. How and when the guards choose to toss cells — and whose cells they choose to toss — is a subtle form of control in itself. Troublemakers find their living quarters searched on a regular basis, while model prisoners are roused less frequently, and often allowed to keep any minor contraband uncovered.

Prisoner beatings are a more direct form of coercion: though officially disparaged, they take place with appalling regularity. Public beatings occur only when the guards need to make an example of someone (and are sure they won't cause a riot); more often, prisoners are taken when they're alone and less able to fight back. In every case, the prisoner is informed of just why the beating is taking place, in hopes of correcting the aberrant behavior.

Finally, there's the infamous "hole," or solitary confinement. Prisoners who violate the rules will be stripped of their uniforms and tossed into a windowless cell for a marked period of time. If they're lucky, they have a single light by which to see; more often they're kept entirely in the dark. There they remain for periods ranging from a few days to a month or more, left only with their own thoughts as company. Food arrives through a slot in the door three times a day; that's often the only means a prisoner has of telling time. Otherwise, they can do nothing but count the bricks, befriend the vermin, or talk to themselves. Long stints in the hole are marked by borderline delusions, lengthy monologues delivered to no one, and outright hallucinations. Most cons will do anything to avoid it.

The guards and prison administrators are free to deliver any punishment they see fit with near-impunity. Oversight committees occasionally hand down rebukes for behavior that crosses the line, but they are few and far between, and only come about when prisoners or others complain. The guards remember those who turn on them, and they always have the edge when it comes to dispensing payback. Convicts who inform on abusive keepers often find themselves constant targets of punishment and humiliation.

Having said that, it is possible to curry a mutually beneficial relationship with the guards. Though hard-nosed hacks will always be a problem, most guards simply want the prisoners quiet and orderly, and a few will even go out of their way to lend a hand. They'll let harmless contraband slide, arrange for special privileges, or just look the other way when the prisoner needs them gone. Of course, such favors never come free. Guards expect those they help to make their jobs as easy as possible, and often demand much more as well: information on other prisoners, for example, or flat-out bribes. Indeed, bribery is one of the easiest inroads to the guards' favor, because their salaries are very low and a few hundred dollars can make a huge difference. Prisoners must always guard themselves against growing too close to the guards, however; no matter how much their favor might ease life behind bars, the other cons are always watching, and they have little mercy for those who conspire with the "enemy."

GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

Fights, Assaults, and Riots

The stress of prison life is unbearable. Tension among the inmates, threats from guards or higher-ups, and year after year cooped up in the same enclosed place takes its toll. Violence is an inescapable reality in prison, as much a part of life as the bars and the walls. When it comes, even the meekest inmate had better be prepared.

Sometimes, an attack is pre-planned, as when a con plots to harm or do away with an enemy. Such attacks are often worked out well in advance, and conducted so that no one can identify the assailant (killing another inmate can tack a life sentence onto the time you're currently serving, while killing a guard makes you eligible for the death penalty). They always take place in secluded areas away from people, or somewhere where the target's friends can't come to his aid. And they invariably serve some larger purpose, even if it's only to teach the target his place in the prison hierarchy.

Pre-planned attacks are more the exception than the rule, however. More often, violence explodes spontaneously, as a convict pushed to the brink suddenly releases all of his pent-up hostility. Attacks can come for any reason — someone looked at him funny, his parole hearing was deferred, the cafeteria was serving Jell-o that day, etc. — and often foster grudges that last for years afterwards. Fights are rarely lethal (though they may involve lethal objects), but they often cement the participants' reputation among other cons. Those who acquit themselves well are afforded more respect, while those bested quickly are marked as weak.

Fights also incur a lot of noise. Nearby cons will quickly cluster around a disturbance, shouting and yelling at the top of their lungs. Those in nearby cells will bang cups and dishware against the bars, while others will fling dirty water (or worse) upon the combatants. Because such disturbances can escalate, guards will move quickly to quell them, instituting prison-wide lockdowns and threatening to remove privileges for the entire block.

Occasionally, cons will engage in arranged fights for entertainment purposes. Combatants will meet in a makeshift boxing ring, with an audience gathered under the careful eye of the guards. Provincial prison systems often have their own boxing leagues, and rival gangs will sometimes pit their respective "champions" against each other for bragging rights. Ostensibly, such matches follow strict rules, though dirty tricks are hardly unusual. Prison administrators aren't thrilled with the fights, but it lets the cons blow off steam, providing a controllable outlet for otherwise dangerous aggressions. Betting on sanctioned prison fights is often heavier than sporting events outside the prison walls.

Almost every fight in prison entails cons vs. cons. Inmates have few options when it comes to resisting the guards, who can make their lives miserable in an endless variety of ways. Striking a guard can lead to extended sentences, as a new assault charge is laid on one's previous conviction. If you actually wound a guard, his colleagues will be sure to exact a nasty revenge, for their authority must be maintained, even if the wounded guard was disliked or had few friends. The main

weapon of resistance against the authorities is the passive variety. Work strikes can prevent the prison from functioning properly (maintenance and janitorial duties are almost always filled by cons), though unless it takes place on a large scale, the warden will simply "fire" the convict and replace him with another one. Hunger strikes can be somewhat more effective, especially if the press gets word of it. Other forms of passive resistance include "slow playing" (obeying orders from the guards in a deliberately lackadaisical fashion), ignoring orders, or filing lawsuits against the prison. Anything which paints the authorities in a bad light — a negative news story, an official protest lodge in court, and the like — can be used to fight back without directly attacking the guards.

The most dangerous form of prison violence by far is a riot, involving large numbers of cons in open revolt. Riots are inevitable in the U.C.'s prison system (no matter what steps are taken to curtail them) and every one is extremely dangerous. Some of them begin when gang tussles get out of hand. Others are spontaneous acts of rebellion by the prison community, sparked by incidental conditions such as a random beating or a lack of air conditioning. Seasoned cons can sense a riot coming, and even new fish can feel when conditions are ripe for an uprising. When it comes, there's little to do but ride the wave: thrash the guards, overwhelm the security measures, and try to seize as much of the prison as possible.

No riot in the history of the U.C. prison system has ever succeeded. The authorities will go to any lengths to restore order and while prisoners may seize an entire facility, they usually have little means of escape. Police and army units will be called in once the violence gets past a certain stage, maintaining a strict perimeter until they can retake the prison by force. Riots are usually more concerned with payback — a demonstration of what little power the inmates have, lest their jailers grow too complacent. Inevitably, however, the prison is retaken, and the rioters are punished severely for their would-be revolt. Lengthened sentences are standard punishments, and prisoners who kill guards in the riot are often eligible for the death penalty — to say nothing of the months and years surviving guards have to avenge themselves upon the prisoners in their care...

That being said, prisoners can still cause a great deal of damage during a riot. Furniture will be overturned and destroyed, gates and doors wrenched off their hinges, and even concrete walls subjected to damage. Rioting prisoners can set a surprising number of things on fire, from their own mattresses to the wooden shingles of the roofs. They will often use chemical cleaning products as fire starters, which also serve as crude Molotov cocktails during the authorities' inevitable attempt to retake the prison. Conditions in the areas the inmates have seized is appalling, even for a prison — with hostages subjected to tortures and executions of the most savage kind. Organized inmate leaders can rarely control such violence; they can only hope to steer it in less destructive directions. Hostages seized from the guards and civilian workers are the only bargaining chips prisoners have; killing them lowers their chances of surviving the ordeal.