

The Sad Death of Saddler Villin

By Gareth Hanrahan

TRAVELLER

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The new *Traveller* adventure, *Prison Planet*, describes the hellish Tarkwall Prison. Player Characters convicted of a crime may be condemned to that irradiated pit and forced to remain there for long years until they escape (or die and are buried in the yard). Most Player Characters commit enough crimes to warrant a prison sentence six times before breakfast but if your group are morally upright and law-abiding and then the first part of this adventure will get them sent to Tarkwall.

In the second part, the character's erstwhile patron is murdered and the characters must find the killer before he comes for them, too. You can run the second part of the adventure for a group who are already in Tarkwall, in which case they may befriend Saddler Villin and then investigate his death.

Introduction

This adventure takes place in the Lanth and Rhylanor subsectors of the Spinward Marches (*The Spinward Marches*, pages 82 and 86 respectively). Tarkwall Prison is located on Keanou (0801/Lanth), an obscure desert world on the edge of Lanth, Rhylanor and Regina subsectors. It is assumed that the Player Characters have their own spacecraft and are looking for employment. Skills like Pilot, Sensors, Zero-G and Vacc Suit are needed in the first part of the adventure.

The Macene Bureau

The Macene civilisation is a ring of high-technology settlements carved out of the rocky asteroids. The belt's shipyards produce a sizeable proportion of the new civilian ships and high-tech components for Rhylanor and Lanth subsectors, especially jump drive cores (the belt is high in lanthanum deposits, a vital part of the drive). The system is home to several naval bases, including the sector reserve fleet. Macene is a key factor in the security of the whole Spinward Marches. The outer reaches of Macene have a less salubrious reputation – the belter population of the system were once involved in piracy and some older rocks in Macene still welcome raiders and 'ethically challenged merchants'.

Ishta Rahm is a naval counter-intelligence agent; her primary duty is to ensure that nothing interferes with naval operations. The Zhodani have tried to infiltrate Macene in the past; especially daring Vargr raiders covet the wealth and technology of Macene and there are always ambitious local nobles who might make trouble. Six months ago, Rahm discovered evidence of a conspiracy; old, worn-out naval components including weapons are vanishing from the Macene shipyards instead of being destroyed. This is a serious security breach – someone could be building their own warships or gathering information about the capabilities and readiness of the Sector fleet.

She was about to bring this information to her superior Hoster, when she noticed an alarming correlation between transactions in a watched bank account and Hoster's movements around the belt. If an Intelligence bureau's chief is corrupt, then... well, Rahm sleeps with a body pistol under her pillow, just in case.

Before she can make any such accusation, though, she needs proof of the conspiracy. Her mole inside the conspiracy has passed on a shipping schedule. A consignment of naval parts has been transferred to an old storage depot on the edge of the Macene belt. According to the computer records, these should be junk parts, useless to anyone. Rahm suspects that the computer records have been tampered with and that the parts in the depot are actually weapons components. With her superior under suspicion, she cannot use agency resources, so she has to use other avenues of investigation – specifically, a contact of hers named Saddler Villin.

Saddler Villin

Saddler Villin is an old spacehand a former merchant whose battered old free trader, the *Lunior Queen*, finally gave up the ghost ten years ago. He now lives in the remains of his ship, which is permanently stuck in orbit of a planet that the Player Characters regularly visit (Risek is a good choice). Villin makes a living as a broker

and informant. He has dozens of friends in spaceport bars across the Marches and he can put free traders in touch with patrons who need goods moved discretely. Villin has spent 50 years living on board the *Union Queen* and has grown rather eccentric. He sometimes has conversations with long-departed crew members and has a paranoid terror of leaving the confines of the ship. When he has to go planetside for business, he wears a vac suit and takes sedatives and whiskey. Despite his obvious quirks, Villin has a reputation for honesty and an encyclopaedic knowledge of the tramp ship network in the Marches.

Rahm has hired Villin to get a non-traceable ship and retrieve the components from the depot. If the cargo stored in the depot really is junk, then she's on the wrong trail. If Villins recovers weapons parts, though, then she has proof that there is a conspiracy afoot.

Ideally, the Referee should introduce the wreck-dwelling hermit to the campaign several sessions before running this adventure. The players should know and trust Villin before he contacts them with a new and curious mission.

Sadder Villin

STR4 DEX8 END6 INT9 EDU7 SOC6

Skills: Broker 3, Pilot (spacecraft) 1, Streetwise 2, Vacc Suit 1, Zero-G 1

Villin contacts the characters by radio if they jump into the same system as the *Union Queen* or else by leaving messages for them at the starports they frequent. He informs them that if they visit him in the next few weeks, he can put a highly profitable piece of work their way. He can't say any more except in person.

The Macene Run

When the characters arrive at the drifting hulk of the *Union Queen*, Villin signals for them to come aboard. He greets them in what was the common area of the ship, back when it was a ship and not a wreck. He keeps the gravity switched off to save power. The bulkheads are covered with star charts, notes on shipping timetables, computer screens and unidentifiable stains. Villin floats some foil squeeze-bottles of booze over to the Player Characters and pulls a sheaf of printouts out from what used to be an engineering access panel.

'Don't ask too many questions about this job, all right? The patron wants it kept very dark, very very dark. It's in the Macene system. There's a small rock there called, er, M129-AP-299. I guess that's a name if you squint at it. The patron's got a load of cargo sitting in a vault there. She needs someone to pick up the cargo and drop it here, without going through a starport or running into any patrols. I know the patron and the cargo's not illegal just... it has to be handled discretely, understand?'

The fee is Cr. 5,000 per ton per parsec and Villin says there should be around 10 tons of cargo at M129-AP-299.

A quick check of Library Data will alert the characters to the fact that Macene is primarily a naval outpost and that avoid patrols might be difficult. Villin replies that M129-AP-299 is on the fringes of the system and should be far from any naval patrols. The only tricky bit will be refuelling; Villin suggests either visiting Macene port first and filling up there or else skimming from the gas giant before heading into the belt. Either way, they should be ready to jump out immediately after loading up at M129-AP-299.

If the characters agree to the job, Villin gives them a data cassette with a code on it. This code will open the dock at M129-AP-299. Villin again emphasises that the job is totally legitimate and that he trusts the patron, although he will not reveal her name. Paranoid players may assume they are being set up, which is accurate up to a point – neither Villin nor Rahm is planning to betray the characters but events are about to overtake everyone.

A successful Difficult (-2) Comms check suggests that the code on the data cassette looks like an old naval code, probably years out of date.

Jump In...

The voyage to the Macene system is uneventful. If the characters refuel at either Macene starport or the gas giant, Hau, they spot several huge naval warships that dwarf their own vessel hundreds of times over, as well as dozens of smaller escorts and patrol boats. Most of the activity in Macene is concentrated around the moons of the gas giant and at the Trojan points.

...Grab The Cargo...

M129-AP-299 is 45 million kilometres from the starport, so it will take several days to reach the asteroid. It's a lonely speck of matter, a mix of ice and rock, sitting well outside the orbit of Hau. As the characters approach, they detect no other ships nearby but sensors do pick up a structure within M129-AP-299. The asteroid has been partially hollowed out to serve as a depot. There are two airlocks, one standard size and one larger portal for loading cargo. Transmitting the code on the cassette opens either airlock.

Inside, the asteroid base consists of only a few rooms. It is obvious that the base was carved out of the rock centuries ago and has been visited only a few times since then.

1. **Small Airlock.** This airlock can only be opened if the characters transmit the code from the data cassette. The airlock bears the words 'NAVAL PROPERTY – DO NOT ENTER WITHOUT AUTHORISATION'.

2. **Access Corridor.** The walls of this corridor are polished stone. There is no gravity but there are metal plates glued to the floor and walls every metre or so, allowing a character wearing magnetic boots to walk. There is no heat or atmosphere when the characters arrive but as soon as the airlock is activated, the environmental controls in room 4 switch on, heating the rooms and filling them with a breathable mix of gases. It will take several hours for the environmental adjustments to be completed.

3. **Central Chamber:** There are six exits from this cubic room, one in the centre of each wall. There are also vacc suits and a pair of unloaded accelerator rifles in a locker next to the access corridor entrance, along with extremely out-of-date medical kits and rations. While the equipment is functional, the lockers and other fittings are obviously very old.

4. **Fuel:** This automated fuel cracker melts the ice of the asteroid and converts it into hydrogen and oxygen, which are then stored in the fuel cells surrounding the cargo bay.

5. **Security:** This upper chamber contains a security robot, an autonomous combat drone equipped with an accelerator rifle. The drone will attack any trespassers unless the code from the

data cassette is transmitted to it. The droid uses a small thruster pack to move; the port-side thruster is damaged and fires with much less force than its counterparts, so the droid has trouble turning in zero gravity.

6. **Environmental Controls:** This chamber contains a small fusion reactor and other life-support systems. Hydrogen fuel cells are honeycombed into the rock around this room. The equipment here is also centuries old but still works.

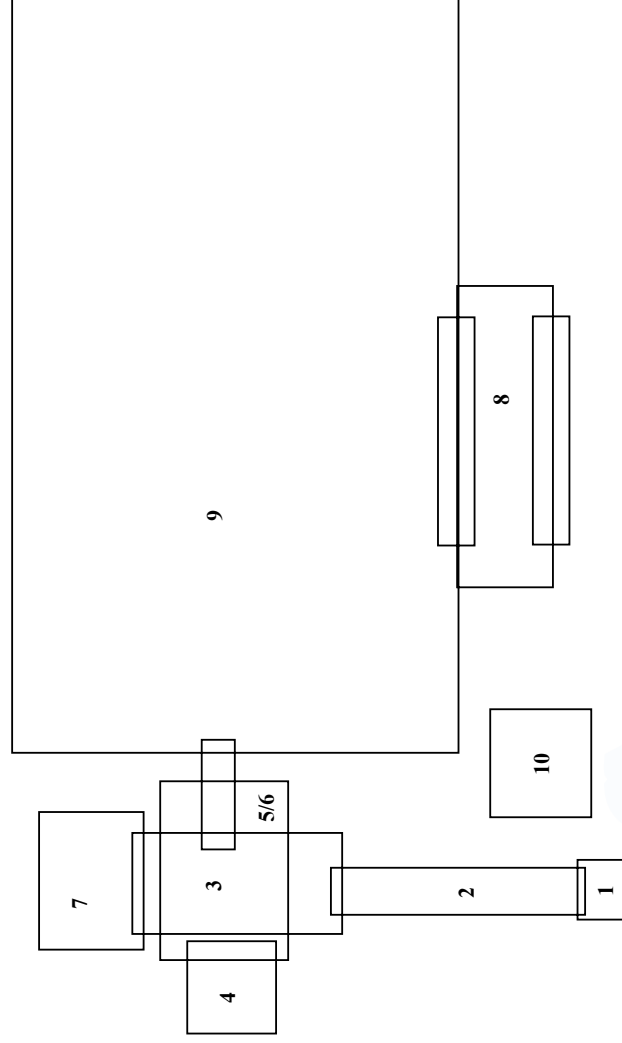
7. **Computer Control:** The computer system in this chamber logs visits to the depot. A quick check shows that after the depot was constructed 310 years ago, there was approximately one visit per decade – up until two years ago. Since then, robot tugs have been showing up every few months and depositing cargo. There are also records of the main airlock being used, usually a week after the tug's visit. No ship is logged as having arrived at

those times. (The smugglers have not bothered to log their illegal visits to the depot.)

8. **Large Airlock:** There are two automated cargo-handling robots waiting in this airlock. If commanded, they will move cargo containers from the bay to a docked ship.

9. **Cargo Bay:** This cavernous zero-g cargo bay is filled with one-dton cargo containers. There are obviously two groups of containers. One set of containers are stacked at the edges of the bay and have not been touched in centuries. The second set of a dozen containers is in the middle of the bay and is much newer. This second set of containers holds the stolen naval components.

10. **Fuel Umbilical:** This tube can be connected to a ship to tap the asteroid's hydrogen reserves. The asteroid has 50 tons of fuel available.



...and Jump Out

Soon after the characters arrive at M129-AP-299 (ideally, while the characters are loading cargo), the smuggler ship arrives. The smuggler vessel is a Far Trader that just made a Jump-1 in from Kinorb. Their plan is to pick up the cargo and jump out again, as their ship still has the fuel to make a Jump-1 back.

Far Trader

Hull 4, Structure 4

Double Turret: Two Beam Lasers (2d6 each)

Double Turret: One Beam Laser (2d6), Sandcaster

Pirate Crew

STR6 DEX8 END7 INT6 EDU7 SOC7

Skills: Pilot (spacecraft) 1, Gunnery (turret) 1, Gun Combat (rifle) 1, Engineering 0, Mechanic 1, Recon 1

Vacc Suit (Armour 6), **Accelerator Rifle** (3d6)

This plan does not include another ship sitting right on top of the asteroid. The smugglers' reaction depends on that of the players. They will ignore any attempts at negotiation and instead attempt to threaten them using the turret-mounted laser cannons. However, the last thing the smugglers want is a firefight right on the doorstep of their secret drop-off point. Therefore, after a few rounds of combat, the smugglers will jump away unless the Player Characters surrender.

If there are characters on M129-AP-299 when the smuggler vessel arrives, they may have to fight off boarders.

Searching the Cargo

Containers

Inquisitive Player Characters will doubtless search the cargo containers. According to the electronic manifest on each container, they all contain 'scrap and salvage' recovered from decommissioned naval vessels. If the crates are opened, they are found to contain naval weapons components. There are no complete weapons here but there are parts for meson guns and other alarming weapons (these count as Illegal Weapons for the purposes of trade).

Return to Villin

Assuming the characters recovered any cargo from the asteroid, their next step should be to return to the *Lunion Queen* and collect their payment from Sadder Villin.

Unfortunately for the characters, Hoster the corrupt intelligence agent is no fool. He suspected someone in his organisation was onto him and made a list of likely pawns who might be used to sabotage his smuggling ring. Sadder Villin was one of the top names on that list. A military vessel, the *Kestrel*, has been dispatched from Macene to the *Lunion Queen*, with orders to capture Villin and the characters. (The ship dispatched should be big enough to overpower the Player Characters' vessel – a *Gazelle* class escort should be more than enough in most cases).

Dead or Alive, You're

Coming With Us

The *Gazelle* may be waiting for the characters, lurking in a powered-down state in orbit or it could jump in as the characters are meeting

with Villin on board the *Lunion Queen*. The characters are hailed: 'LUNION QUEEN, [PLAYER CHARACTER VESSEL], THIS IS THE IMPERIAL SHIP KESTREL. IN THE NAME OF THE EMPEROR YOU ARE ORDERED TO SHUT DOWN ALL DRIVES AND WEAPONS AND PREPARE TO BE BOARDED. ANY RESISTANCE OR SUBTERFUGE WILL BE MET WITH LETHAL FORCE!' The *Kestrel* closes in and launches a squad of Imperial marines in gray-assisted battle dress armed with gauss rifles.

Villin signals his surrender – he's got friends in Naval Security or so he thinks. He's gotten out of scrapes before thanks to his naval allies. The Player Characters can fight back if they want but their chances of survival in a stand-up fight should be slim. If they flee, they become wanted criminals.

Part 2: Tarkwall

After their capture, the characters are transferred – without trial – to a prison transport. Their ship and any weapons, armour or other notable equipment is impounded at Macene. The characters spot Villin in another cell on board the transport but are unable to speak to him. After several weeks of confinement aboard the prison transport, the characters find themselves in the Keanou system.

The transport lands at Keanou spaceport, where the prison shuttle waits to bring them to Tarkwall Prison. Protestations that they have not had a trial are ignored – Hoster has enough sway with the Ministry of Justice to have the characters and Villin quietly buried at Tarkwall Prison. Hoster wants to find out who hired Villin to hire the Player Characters and Tarkwall is the best place to do so.

The First Weeks

The first weeks in Tarkwall should unfold as normal. Prison hits Villin hard – he is not used to either high gravity or open spaces. His new cellmate is 1119 Morian Gosh, a violent thug who is spending 20 years in Tarkwall for murder. Gosh is trying to curry favour with 7057 Big Rolf.

Villin initially assigned to light work in the Upper Mining Level but then 9047 Rand Gurish recognises Villin; he claims that Villin ratted him out five years ago to the authorities and attacks Villin with a mining pick.

If the characters do not intervene, then Gurish beats Villin hard enough to send the old spacer to the infirmary for a month. If they do save Villin, then he is reassigned to the machine shop as it is clear that he is in no condition to survive the mines (and he has yet to incur the dislike of a prison official who would send him back to the mines regardless of his survival chances).

Gurish spreads the rumour that Villin is a snitch and untrustworthy bastard; several other prisoners, including 1215 Ward Stamboul, 1217 Talbot Vinge, 1935 Felip Karageorge, 8046 Satoshi Honig and 3064 Berndt Khanugir listen to this rumour and also take a dislike to Villin.

If the characters ask Villin about his connection to 9047 Rand Gurish, he admits that he did know Gurish out in the real world; Gurish was part of a pirate crew who raided shipping on the fringes of Lunion subsector. Gurish approached Villin, looking for a fence to shift some stolen cargo but Villin reported Gurish to the authorities. The rest of the pirate gang escaped but he was pleased to see Gurish put away for thirty years. Villin's obvious distaste for piracy may be surprising to the Player Characters, given the job he hired them to do.

In the machine shop, Villin tries to befriend 3006 Azax Hamid, believing that the clerk can get a message out to Rahm. Unfortunately, Hamid charges Cr. 500 to even attempt sending a message and Villin has no cash. He asks the characters to help him gather the money but refuses to tell them what he wants it for (to preserve Rahm's secrecy). In fact, Azax is scamming Villin – he is pocketing the cash and telling Villin that his contact in Circle City will relay the messages 'any day now'.

Villin also befriends 6724 Jaime Giligis, who comes from an asteroid colony and shares Villin's problems with high-gravity. Giligis has a stash of bone-density drugs which he shares with Villin. Characters who investigate may come to the conclusion that Villin has become addicted to drugs supplied by Giligis.

A Visitor

The next incident occurs several weeks later, when Hoster visits the prison. This is an unofficial visit – Hoster is not here in his capacity as director of security for Macene, he is simply popping in to have a little chat with the prison warden. Warden Grice is quite star-struck by his visitor and is so awed that he will do anything for Hoster's approval.

The characters may glimpse Hoster as he lands in a private shuttle. He is a fat man with a florid, multi-coloured moustache and cybernetic eyes. He is well dressed and pops vitamin tablets constantly. He speaks very quietly, in a voice just above a whisper.

Hoster interviews Villin privately but Villin refuses to tell him who ordered the break-in.

Characters with connections among the guards will learn that a secret interview took place and that no-one in the prison knows what the strange visitor wanted.

Breaking Villin

Having failed to extract the information he needed from Villin, Hoster departs, leaving instructions with Assistant Warden Voller to break Villin's will. The old spacer is reassigned to the Danger Zone and the word goes forth that it is open season on Sadder Villin. Those who make Villin's life hell – without killing him – will be rewarded. If anyone does kill him, though, then they will answer to Assistant Warden Voller. All the major gangs start hunting Villin. If the spacer is caught, they beat him, he is carted off to the Infirmary and goes from there to the Hole.

Once he is out of the Hole, it starts again. The guards only intervene to keep Villin alive. His every waking moment – and those of the Player Characters, if they help him – is a nightmare. His food in the canteen is unimaginable slop. His cell is sabotaged, spilling the contents of the chemical toilet everywhere. In the repair shop, his equipment is smashed, every day's work ruined. Anyone who publicly associates with Villin suffers the same fate.

The one advantage of all this is that Rand Gurish can no longer threaten Villin. The ex-pirate complains about the warden's 'favouritism' of Villin to anyone who listens, insists that Villin is actually a snitch and claims that the attacks on Villin are all faked to give him some credibility among the prison population.

Villin holds out for a few weeks. By the end, his nerves are frayed to the verge of insanity and he is

skeletally thin. Death hangs on him like a shroud – but he has not given in.

Villain's Plea

Sadder Villin knows that he can't endure much longer – either he will be killed by the torments of the other prisoners or he will crack and give in, revealing Ishta Rahm's identity to Hoster. He still believes that if he can only get word to Ishta Rahm, she will be able to rescue him from prison. He sends word to the characters by bribing G10 Semyon Wainrite, telling them that he wants to meet them in Area I of the Danger Zone tomorrow. It is vitally important that they meet him, if any of them are to escape Tarkwall.

The Murder

When the characters make it down to the Danger Zone, they find Villin's body lying in the dirt. He's been brutally beaten, his head smashed against the wall over and over until his skull fractured. It's a horrible, bloody way to die and whoever did it must have been remarkably quick and strong. A quick Investigate check shows that Villin's body was searched after he died – his pockets were inside out and his boots were stolen.

If the characters linger here too long, they will be discovered by the guards and possibly blamed for the murder.

What Really Happened: Gurish could not attack Villin directly, because of the Assistant Warden's proclamation that anyone who killed Villin would be punished. Therefore, Gurish approached the insane 1470 Jack Shansir and told Jack that Villin was actually a Zhodani spy who was broadcasting thoughts into Shansir's head. The crazed Shansir tried to break into Villin's cell that night but

couldn't get through the bars and was beaten back by 1119 Morian Gosh.

Shansir tracked Villin down the next day in the Danger Zone and murdered him, smashing him against the walls until the older man went limp. Shansir then wandered off into the caves, talking to himself. He claimed, when asked by the guards, to have cut his hands on sharp rocks and bled all over his clothes. A few minutes later, 8144 Eneri Shadashi found the body and he looted everything he could find.

The characters will presumably investigate Villin's death – during this investigation, Hoster will show up again, in *You're Next!*

Investigating the Death

There are several routes that the characters can take when investigating the death. Warden Voller is also investigating the death and will dispatch G4 Cesmo Wallenstein and G3 Gorod to find the killer. Cesmo begins by bringing the body to the infirmary and having the doctors perform a full autopsy. Gorod just beats people up.

Within a week, Cesmo will identify 1470 Jack Shansir as the killer and the psychopath will be thrown in the hole to rot.

Witnesses: No-one is willing to admit they saw anything initially. A few bribes, threats or rumour gathering gets the following information:

- There was a furious racket outside Villin's cell last night (caused by Shansir's attack on the cell)
- Villin obtained pen and paper from 3006 Azax Hamid during the week and the two had a fierce argument (Villin wanted the paper to write a note, explaining the situation to the

characters; he took the opportunity to berate the clerk about his failure to pass messages onto Rahm)

- Rand Gurish has been spreading rumours about Villin
- 8144 Eneri Shadashi has been lurking around the mining level lately; he is probably trying to steal gemstones
- One of the guards visited Villin's cell yesterday.

Villin's Autopsy: If the characters obtain a copy of Villin's autopsy, they learn that the body was disturbed at least once after the death. Furthermore, there were traces of a second blood type on the body, suggesting that the killer was injured in the struggle.

Villin's Cell: His cellmate reports that Jack Shansir tried to break into their cell the night before the murder. Shansir was raving that Villin was 'in his damn head'.

Villin's Boots: Eneri sells Villin's heavy magnetic boots to 6724 Jaime Giligis; the boots have good ankle support, necessary for those who have bone density problems. Characters who know Giligis or are searching for Villin's boots will discover this and Giligis will inform them where he got the boots.

The Note: Eneri Shadashi has the note he stole from Villin's corpse. He will give up this note with a bribe of a few hundred credits or the threat of violence. The note reads, simply 'ISHTA RAHM, MACENE TRANSIT – CONTACT HER.'

You're Next!

As soon as news of Villin's death reaches Hoster, he returns to Tarkwall. He is furious – few visitors

have both the authority and the courage to berate both Warden Brice *and* Assistant Warden Voller. After castigating the prison authorities for losing an important prisoner, Hoster calls any Player Characters who is a known associate of Sadler Villin for an interview.

If the characters played through the first part of this adventure, then Hoster demands they reveal who hired them to steal from asteroid M129-AP-299. If they have not, then Hoster asks if Villin told them anything about M129-AP-299. If the characters refuse to answer or lie (and as the characters have no idea who hired Villin, those are the only two options), then Hoster sighs and releases them.

If the characters have found Villin's note, they can give Hoster Rahm's name. If they do this, then Hoster leaves Tarkwall forever; Rahm is spaced in a convenient accident and the smuggling ring continues.

Otherwise, after failing to get an answer from the characters, Hoster departs. He orders Assistant Warden Voller to do to the characters what he did to Villin – make their lives hell until one of them cracks and talks. Hoster makes it clear that a few casualties are permitted this time, as long as one of the characters survives long enough to breathe the name of Villin's contact within Hoster's organisation.

Contacting Rahm

At this point in the scenario, the characters are in big trouble in Tarkwall. Any attacks on them have Voller's blessing, so they will be assaulted, stolen from, insulted and threatened by every other prisoner. Anyone who injures them will be rewarded by the prison authorities. Every minor

infraction on their part, by contrast, will result in vicious beatings by the guards, a spell in the Hole or both.

Hoster will return to the prison after six months. If the characters have survived to this point, then he will question the characters again and if they still do not know who hired Villin, he will finally believe them and give up on this route of investigation.

If the characters can get word out of the prison through a more reliable channel than 3006 Azax Hamid, then Rahm will visit the prison after a few weeks. She will pose as Sister Mari, a nun from a charitable organisation that sponsors promising inmates for eventual release and redemption. She seeks out the characters and has a private interview with them; during this interview, Rahm reveals who she is and asks the characters about Villin's death.

If the characters have made contact with Rahm, then she will aid in getting them released (if they were illegally incarcerated because of Hoster) or in aiding them otherwise (if they were in prison for other reasons). Once the characters are eventually released, Rahm may even employ them in other schemes to bring down Hoster.