

The Final 48

or

The Five People I'm Going To Meet In Hell

It was cold and rainy the night before Johnny Villanova was released from prison. At least, he thought it was. He had no idea. He spent that night, like every one of the previous thirteen, locked in solitary confinement. He knew it wouldn't keep him from his parole, what he did he did in self-defense. The warden had seen the incident, and knew his side.

The solitary confinement wasn't for Nova's punishment. It was for his protection.

And now, putting his palms against the wall and feeling the rumble of distant thunder, now, the man they called Nova finally cried.

He was so close. He was two weeks away from getting out, two weeks away from regaining his freedom and going straight and reclaiming his life.

And he fucked it up.

He fucked it up in a way so badly that he knew that was it. As sure as if he had taken a gun to the temple and pulled the trigger, he had ended his own life. He had done something that someone would find unforgivable, and unnegotiable.

But Johnny Nova had something that no one else understood. He was a thinker. He was always a man with a brain, it wasn't until he stopped listening to his mind and started reacting with his physical nature that he got into trouble.

And now, he had been faced with a problem, a problem of certain death, his own. And just as sure as it was waiting on him when the prison doors opened, he had spent the last two weeks in solitary trying to figure out a way around it.

And so far, nothing.

But now, he was sure it was raining out there. And although he had to strain to pretend to hear it, he always did think better in the rain. It soothed him. He remembered how it felt on his shoulders, running in his hair, and those moments of crystal clear clarity that used to come so easy to him when he was younger. He needed another one of those now.

Tears ran down his face as he pressed his ear to the wall. To the imaginary sound of distant thunder, he ran down the details in his head one more time. Everything he had going for him, everything stacked against him, and everything he needed to do before he died.

He'd never seen the ocean. He'd never been on a roller coaster. He'd never had an Asian woman.

And he'd never met his son.

With eight hours until his release from prison and his almost certain death, he took a deep breath and went over it again. There had to be a loophole. If he accepted his fate, it was over. Therefore, he would not accept it. He approached it like a puzzle, adding together in his head dozens of factors and trying to reach the best conclusion. The problem was, so far every turn of this metaphorical Rubic's Cube ended up with him dead.

He wiped his eyes, and smiled a sweet, sly smile. He realized that his back was against the wall in a way he'd never known before.

And nobody, absolutely no one, was as good under the gun as Johnny Nova.

NEXT: Wake-Up Call

Wake-Up Call

The night was long for Nova. He fell asleep several times for short periods, but it was the kind of sleep that you don't even realize you're having. With no way of telling time in the square gray room, Nova felt like that night went on for days.

The door slid open, and his eyes flickered in the sudden light.

"Time to go." The voice was familiar, and Nova squinted to recognize the guard.

"Wish this wasn't necessary, Johnny," the guard said. Nova had made friends with several of the guards, which meant on occasion he made them laugh, and they didn't beat the shit out of him for no reason. Prison was a funny place like that.

"S'okay, Pinky," Nova replied. "I'd rather have you here while I get dressed than somewhere else while I get jumped."

Officer Pinkerton turned away as Nova changed clothes into the jeans and sweatshirt he was wearing the day he was sentenced. "Go comfortable," his lawyer had told him. "No point in looking nice for your first day in Hell."

He pulled on his sneakers and laced them up. He tightened his belt. He gave a small smile at finally getting those things back.

He was a free man now. If he killed himself, nobody would get in trouble.

He wiped his eyes and stood up, stretching himself. He bent over, straining the muscles in his legs and twisting his back. Then he slowly pulled himself up to his full height, and reached high in the air above him.

"What the Hell are you doing?" Pinkerton said.

"Hey, I'm not out of here yet."

Pinkerton smiled and gave a small laugh. Nova didn't.

They walked out into the hallway, and with every step Nova felt a crushing irony weighing down on him. He had waited for three years for this moment, and now it meant he was escaping from something bad, and walking into something worse.

If he could get that far, he thought.

The sun had cleared the skies overhead, and last night's rain was gone, leaving only puddles and a cool wind behind it. Nova was led from his solitary, darkened cell to an empty meeting area.

“You ready?” Pinkerton asked.

“Ready,” Nova said, taking a deep breath. “Where we going?”

Pinkerton pulled his hat off, and scratched his head. “You’re going up front, and you’re getting the Hell out of here. Unless you know something I don’t.”

“No, I mean, why are we down here? Isn’t there a better way to get up front?”

“Well, usually there’d be an easier way going through the medical ward, but there was a fire there last night. We’ll just take you up through Wing C.”

Nova felt every muscle in his stomach contract. “That’s...that’s a real bad sign, Pinky.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just keep your eyes open. Not to try and scare you, but I’m willing to bet that fire was set last night so I’d have to come out in the open before I left this prison.”

“I’m probably worth a lot more dead than alive right now, and if somebody gets me before I walk out the front door, they’re made for life.”

Pinkerton exhaled slowly. “What the Hell did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything they didn’t make me do, Pinky.”

“Let’s go, I’m ready. Let’s just make this as fast as possible, and watch your ass. They can’t get to me unless they go through you, so that’s the first thing they’ll do.”

It was a cool room, but Pinkerton was starting to sweat. He called for backup, but none was coming. It was time to make their exit.

NEXT: The Long Walk

The Long Walk

Officer Pinkerton unlocked the door, and Nova looked out at the ward. He counted a half-dozen men, all of whom probably were looking for a chance to kill him.

It was a security ward, a hallway with cells on each side, and down at the end an open section where his fellow prisoners were gathered around the mail cart. There were two other guards at the far end of the hall.

As he saw it, there was a ten foot area where there was no way to avoid the other prisoners, and somebody would be sure to try and make their mark by killing him.

He had seen it before, several times. When somebody was marked, it was amazing how fast they could get killed. A momentary distraction, a loud noise or fistfight in another direction, and a quick stab ended somebody's life before anybody saw it coming.

Nova followed Pinkerton through the hall, ignoring the insults thrown at him by the inhabitants of the cells. They spit on him, laughed at him, and told him he'd be dead soon. He tried not to react, and to just stay focused on the end of the hallway.

A hand reached out from a cell, and grabbed him by the shirt. Nova pulled away, and realized where the set up was coming from.

Pinkerton turned around when Nova pulled back, and something hit him in the back of the head. Nova saw him fall in the midst of a push in the hall ahead of him, and Pinky was gone into a crowd. One hand stuck out of a pile, but Nova knew in a moment that his guard was out of the picture. If he was lucky, he was just dragged down. Chances are, he wasn't lucky, and Nova wouldn't be either. Nova saw three men stomping Pinky, and he was out of the situation for good.

Another man came running down the hall at Nova. He took several steps back, but it was bars behind him. Nowhere to run, and a man six inches taller than him charging with a gleaming metal blade in his hand.

Looking at the size of the man, Nova saw him as a bull. He would fight like a bull, charge like a bull, and fall like one. He fainted right, then back left and the outstretched hand surged past him, lodging itself and its sharpened shiny payload through the bars into the cage. Nova spun, and kicked hard at the bull's arm, wedged into the cage bars.

The bull screamed, and dropped the knife into the cell. Nova reached for it, but the cell's occupant grabbed it first, and slid the knife across Nova's grasping arm. He pulled back, growling.

Even the caged animals wanted him dead.

A flesh wound, but now he had nothing to put his back against. Leaning back too far on either side, and he'd be grabbed and held down, or worse. He backed down the hall, keeping his eyes forward on the unrushing throng.

The guards were coming from the other end of the hall, but they'd have their hands full getting to him. Two more men were coming at him, both larger than him.

Nova was a big guy, big enough that people didn't usually fuck with him. He never looked for trouble, and it rarely found him on the outside. Inside the prison walls, he tried very hard to not get into bad situations.

Prison wasn't a place where brute force or physical toughness could keep you safe. It was like living in a jungle, and the only way to stay safe was to stay invisible. And sometimes, that wasn't even enough.

Now, Nova was fifty yards from freedom, but had two guys charging him intent on killing him before he could reach it.

Blood ran down his arm, dripping on to the floor and leaving a trail as he backed up. He saw the guards taking their sticks to the prisoners, but it would be a minute before they subdued them and got to him.

Nova saw both men with weapons, a glint of shiny metal in their hands. He turned and ran as they began to chase. Outstretched arms from the cells reached out, and Nova ducked under them, chest pounding from adrenaline.

At the end of the hall was a small chair and desk, used by the guards during shift change. Beyond that was a hard left turn, with a locked gate about five feet from the corner. He was trapped.

He was running headlong into a dead end.

NEXT: A Moment Of Zen

A Moment Of Zen

Nova had a special ability.

It was one he never talked about, because when he did, people just didn't seem to understand, so he kept it a secret. He didn't really know how to explain it anyway. It just happened to him, he never asked for it.

The more things got hectic, the calmer he got. The crazier the situation, the more he was able to focus through it. When he put his mind to it, things just sort of slowed down for him.

It was his gift, his little moment of Zen. One moment of clear, perfect focus in the middle of a maelstrom of chaos.

He rarely made rash decisions. It absolutely infuriated every woman he'd ever been with.

The last time he made a decision based on emotion, he wound up in prison for three years. He had a lot of time to think about the situation, and decided he wouldn't be flying off the handle again. 36 months in the hole had taught him that.

Now, running for his life down a dead end hallway, surrounded by people who wanted nothing more than to cut him open on the off chance that his murder would earn them a favored eye, he got that moment.

He couldn't hear the screams of the inmates, or the shouts of the guards anymore. He didn't feel the blood running from his arm. He simply saw a problem to be solved.

Whether he could actually solve it or not was another matter.

NEXT: Leap of Faith

Leap Of Faith

One step away from the wall, Nova made his move.

With two men chasing, he ran past the desk to the wall. Time this wrong, and he'd lay himself out like a Thanksgiving turkey. Of course, if he didn't stop and try something, he'd crash into the closed gate and be trapped anyway.

No time like the present to try something stupid, he thought.

He grabbed the wooden desk chair and sent it skidding behind him, slamming knee-high into one of the onrushing men. By the sound of his scream and continued moan, Nova guessed he had broken a knee or shin bone.

One down. No time to look back, though.

Nova counted on sheer adrenaline to pull this one off. As he approached the desk, he leapt up, his first foot hitting the desk, his second foot landing flat against the wall.

Without even looking behind him, he pushed off the wall and threw himself backwards through the air, pulling himself into a cannonball.

As he careened backwards, Nova wondered if this was what Jackie Chan felt like.

He wasn't quite high enough, and he felt a knife cut through his shirt. No pain for the moment.

He twisted in the air, landing on his feet and sliding down. The blade has missed him, but slit his shirt open, which meant it hadn't missed him by much. A crash behind him told him that his quick turnaround was too much to be followed, and the other con had crashed into the desk.

He pulled himself up, and looked back up the hallway. Pinky was down, and the other guards were finishing up restoring order. Nova started to walk slowly towards them, hands up to indicate this wasn't his fight.

Suddenly, his foot went sliding out from under him and his body slammed down into the hard floor. His ankle was wrapped in the grip of a very large, very angry man lying beneath a shattered wooden chair.

Nova tried to twist away, but the remnants of the chair came crashing down on top of him. The con had dropped the knife, and was trying to beat him to death with the only weapon available.

Holding him by the ankle with one giant paw, he was slamming the broken chair down on top of Nova with the other. Nova caught one in the side of the head, and pulled away one last time, reaching out for the bars of one of the cells to pull himself free.

With a flash of shiny metal, something came down beside Nova's hand. He looked up to see the hand of a convict sticking out of the cell bars, trying to pull his weapon loose from the floor and slashing at him again.

Nova pulled back quickly, and realized if he couldn't go forward, he'd have to go backwards.

Next: The Hard Turnaround

The Hard Turnaround

Pulling himself back from the slashing hand of the cellbound con, Nova turned around and pushed himself directly towards the man who still had him by the ankle. The combined push and pull brought Nova to him faster than the con was hoping for, and Nova was able to pull his other leg back and drive his foot sharply into the con's nose.

The tight grip around his ankle went slack, and Nova glanced back and the red smear where the center of the con's face was.

Yecch, he thought. That's not going to help that guy get conjugals.

He nearly threw himself up to a standing position, stumbling forward up the hallway avoiding the outstretched hands of other inmates in their cells. He was almost to the front of the hallway when he looked up at what he hoped to be freedom, and instead was just another cheap shot.

The first shot from the nightstick hit him on the side of the head, and Nova found the ground coming up to meet him again.

Another shot landed in his back, between his shoulder blades. Non-lethal, extremely painful force. Glad my tax dollars are being used well, he thought.

After another strike to one of his legs, his limp body was pulled up off of the floor. They had him by the arms, and were dragging him back in the other direction.

"Throw him back in the hole," he heard one of them say. Nova couldn't move, his body beaten and dragged back towards the cell he had live in for three weeks. Helpless, he was being pulled away from his only chance at survival, and back into a cell where his only activity would be waiting for someone to come and kill him.

NEXT: Frying Pan, Fire

Frying Pan, Fire

“Stop!”

Nova barely heard the word, but the other two guards stopped moving. He was vaguely aware of the pain in his body, and the blood running down his arm. He tried to shake off the sudden fog, but was still held fast.

“Get him out of here! To the front!”

Nova tried to pull himself to his feet, but the guards were dragging him anyway. He realized Pinkerton was giving the orders.

“He walks out the front door today, right now! It's too dangerous to leave him here.”

They brought him to Pinkerton, who put his hand on Nova's shoulder and took him from there. Both men were limping now, walking slowly through the doors of the hall. Another, longer hall was on the other side, and the two men leaned on each other for support to cross it. At the end, Nova reclaimed his personal possessions from three years ago and walked to the front gate.

“Sorry, Johnny. I was supposed to get you out of here without hurting you, but I guess the price on your head is too big.”

Nova took his last few breaths as a caged man, as afraid of the next step in his life as he'd ever been. “It's okay, Pinky. You did what you could.”

It was then that Nova clearly heard what Pinky said.

He stared at the older man as he opened the final gate.

“How much?”

“Ten grand,” Officer Pinkerton said. “Ten grand for getting you up front and to the door intact. I've got a granddaughter who's got leukemia. That'll help pay for her treatments, and all I had to do was take you where you were supposed to be going, anyway.”

“I always liked you, Johnny. You're not a bad guy like the rest of these bastards are. You had a bit of honor to you.”

“I'm sorry for what happens to you next, I want you to know that. But there's nothing I can do about it. You know what you did, and you knew it was just a matter of time. You were going to get caught by either the big fish, or some of these guppies.”

“At least this way, what happens to you will help out somebody. There's no way out of it. I hope you understand.”

Nova just stood blankly, and took his first step of freedom. One more step outside the gate, and he paused.

“Sure thing, Pinky. I understand. We all do what we have to. I'll keep your name on the list.”

“What list?”

“The list of things to do before I die. The list of unfinished business I have to resolve. You know what I did, and you know as sure as I'm standing here, I'm a dead man, and soon.”

“But before I go, I've got a secret of my own. And it's going to buy me a little bit of time, Pinky. Not enough to save me, but enough that I can finish up my life dead even.”

“I've had a lot of things done to me that I forgave, or ignored, or just couldn't figure out a way to even up. But I've had a while to think about it.”

“The funny thing is, you throwing me in the hole for those three weeks kept me alive so you could get paid. But it also gave me time to think.”

“And I don't think I'm going quietly.”

“Good-bye, Pinky. Have a nice life. I'll never see you again, but you'll remember me.”

“A lot of people will.”

Nova walked forward, towards a long black Lincoln car with tinted windows waiting on him. He had never seen that particular car before, but he knew it would be there. And he knew he had no choice but to get in.

NEXT: The Beginning of the End