

STARS

By Ryan J. Bruner

He vomited. He vomited so forcefully that his lungs tore from his chest and burned inside his throat. Gasping, he fell to the ground, clutching at the cramp in his side. John had never allowed himself to give in to the pain. But now he had to rest.

When he opened his eyes, a multitude of stars glistened in the night sky above. He only cared about one—which one, however, he didn't know. The sky was foreign to him from this planet, the constellations strange—bizarre creatures from a mythology he never knew. Some of the other prisoners had taught him the names, but the names did nothing to point him where he wanted to go. Home.

He picked himself up again. His lungs still burned, and his legs wobbled under his weight, but he could go on, at least. Another few kilometers.

The scab across his forearm caught on a bramble. It stung, and blood began to trickle again. He could hardly move his fingers as shards of pain ripped through his muscle. He would need to keep the wound hidden once he reached the city.

He came upon a village. The sun would be rising soon, and he needed to find clothes. The people from this planet were small and petite, and after his years of keeping himself virile and muscular—the only way to survive the prisons—he doubted he would find anything to fit him. What would they think, waking to find a naked man rummaging through their wardrobes? Each household slept peacefully behind unlocked doors, making John's ability to slip in and out easier than expected.

He found enough to cover himself. Pants were too short, sleeves barely long enough to reach his wrists, but it would do.

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"We found him," the officer announced.

The warden squinted at the blip on the display.

"You fool," he said tossing the tablet back at the man. "It isn't moving. It hasn't moved in hours."

The officer's mouth gaped a moment, then closed in realization—or acceptance—of his own stupidity.

The warden pulled a knife from his desk. "Give me your arm."

"Sir?"

But the officer obeyed, offering his forearm to the warden.

"You must realize the kind of determination this prisoner has. Determination that eludes even yourself." The warden placed the tip of the blade against the officer's skin. "Now take it."

The officer carefully eased the knife from the warden.

“A rabbit caught in a trap has been known to gnaw its own paw off. Can you imagine that? An animal instinct, really. To preserve oneself at any cost. Yet, it is a gift from God to be able to override instinct.”

The officer nodded.

“I want you to slice open your forearm, in the same way the prisoner did to free himself from the transmitter.”

The officer held the blade against his skin, his hand shaking. Sweat beaded on his forehead, and he silently pleaded with the warden. The warden, however, remained unmoved. The officer closed his eyes, tears forming in the corners. The knife fell from his fingers, clambering on the floor.

The warden smiled. “And that is what sets you and I apart from him. We are not animals. The transmitter is north of here. How far?”

The officer breathed deeply. "Half a kilometer at most."

“A trick. There is no point in going north, and he knows it. A port city, that’s where he’s headed. He won’t come south again. That would bring him right back here. He isn’t that bold. Have a company of men sent to the port cities in the east and in the west. Then wait for him.”

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The road into Grenetta Veil was nothing but a dirt path through grasslands, and by the time John reached the city, the stars had vanished behind a sky of blue.

Grenetta Veil had been built inside the ruins of some ancient civilization. The wall was stone, with only one way in and out. Beyond that, however, John knew little. A few of the prisoners had told him of the ports of Grenetta Veil. They were old men with minds that had

wasted away, memories corrupted by years of turmoil, so details were few, and likely no longer mattered.

Hunger scraped through his stomach as he passed into the city. The smell of meat and bread taunted him in the streets, but he was cautious to stay away from the market areas. Buildings were haphazardly placed, and no path headed in any given direction for more than a hundred meters. The roadways were narrow, and few people used any mechanical transportation. There was little technology at all, in fact, as though left behind in another time.

But this was a port city—at least according to the stories told in the dungeons, during the hours they were supposed to rest, building up their stamina for the next day's crop.

As John rounded a corner and climbed a flight of stairs, he spotted a local law man. The officer, in his brown and white uniform, nodded as some of the locals passed by, and John hid himself in an alley. He backtracked, only to face another officer guarding the way he had come. He slid with his back against the wall, waiting, hoping, to find a way out. When it began to rain, he cursed a god he didn't believe in.

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The warden wiped the moisture from his window overlooking the play yard. The pouring rain blurred the men as they splashed through the puddles and mud. They ran even when a storm pounded their bodies. Animals, thought the warden.

"We have him surrounded," the officer announced from behind.

"Surrounded? He's been surrounded for almost twenty years, yet he still managed to get away, didn't he? Surrounded isn't good enough. Surrounded only means we're a step away from losing him."

He drank from his mug, the taste stripping away the stickiness in his mouth. Prisoners had escaped before. This prisoner had escaped before, in fact. But now it had been over twenty-four hours. Any longer, and the prisoner might make it to a port. They would lose him for good, and he couldn't let that happen. He had worked too hard and long to ensure no one ever escaped. They were criminals. Freedom wasn't an option.

The officer cleared his throat. "We believe he's holed up in the home of a holy man, holding him hostage. The local government just informed us of the situation."

"Where? Where did he go?"

"Grenetta Veil."

The warden slammed his mug down, the coffee splattering. He seethed. Grenetta Veil. So he did go north. A double-bluff. The prisoner is smarter than I gave him credit for. Or perhaps just incredibly stupid. "Recall the men and send them to Grenetta Veil."

"Already done, sir."

* * *

"Eat, my child."

John stared at the bread and wine laid before him. His stomach ached, and his parched mouth forbade any attempt to refuse the charity. John neither knew this man, nor the god this man apparently served. It didn't matter to John. No god would have forced him to live over half of his life as a prisoner—an innocent man, innocence long forgotten. Who, after all, decides what is right or wrong?

"Eat," the man said, pushing the food closer. "It isn't much, but it is all I have to offer."

John bit off a chunk of bread, then sipped the wine. The sweetness exploded across his tongue—a taste long forgotten, and far more decadent than he ever remembered it could be. He closed his eyes, allowing the flavor to simmer on his taste buds before swallowing.

"Why are you helping me?"

The holy man shrugged, then smiled. "It isn't my place to question why I should help anyone. God brought you to my door. That is reason enough. Would he have preferred I turn you away, and tell you to go in peace? Where is the mercy in that?"

"It is a too late for mercy. I—"

He held up a hand. "I know who you are. Or, at least, how you came to be here. That is clear enough. I'm shocked you made it this far into the city with that wound across your forearm and those clothes. A peasant's clothes. Yet, you look like no peasant."

John finished the food, the holy man watching from across the table. "I came here because I thought this was a port city."

"This city is all but forgotten on this planet. Left alone, unburdened by technology. Life here is simple. If you wanted a port city, you should have gone east, to Falcor, or west, to Rinidia."

"So, the men lied to me...to themselves. They told of a port in Grenetta Veil. But it was simply the dream of men who had long ago given up hope."

The holy man shrunk back from the table and stood. "Hope often comes when we least expect it, my child. Now, then, it is time. They will be here soon."

"Who?"

"The men who want you. They know you are here, I'm sure of it. All they need is a warrant, and they will be pounding at the door."

The holy man opened the way into a room no larger than a closet. John stared. "I can't fit in there," he said.

With swift hands, the holy man yanked at a loose brick on the wall. The floor fell away, and a ladder appeared, descending into the darkness. "Here," he said, handing John a lantern. "You'll need this to find your way. But be silent, for sounds travel easily through the foundations."

"Thank you."

There was a pounding from the door.

"Do not thank me. I am merely a servant. Thank God, who brought you to me. Now go."

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The warden clenched his jaw. "What do you mean, 'He got away?'"

The officer shifted, uncomfortably, glancing to the floor, then erected himself again. "We did a thorough search of the holy man's home, but there was no sign of the prisoner."

The warden leaned forward, both hands planted on his desk. "He can no longer be called a prisoner, but a fugitive. May God curse his footsteps, wherever the fugitive's feet carry him."

He shoved his papers off the desk and grunted, the pages fluttering to the floor.

"We can still find him, sir," the officer said. "Grenetta Veil is not a large city. He couldn't have gone far. There is no place for him to go."

Water droplets clung to the window, distorting the now night sky. The storm had passed, and the stars were clearly visible. Which one, he wondered. Which star would the fugitive flee to? There were thousands. "Clearly you don't understand. He's found the port in Grenetta Veil by now. The port hidden beneath the city."

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The tunnel beneath the holy man's house ran for at least a kilometer, sometimes so low that John had to crawl on his hands and knees to make it through. He wore new clothes, now. Not peasant clothes, but the clothes of a rich man. The clothes of a man from another planet, a man who didn't appear to be on the run from the law—respectable, for perhaps the first time in his life. And this was only one of maybe a hundred outfits he had to choose from. The holy man must have hidden them there.

In the pocket there was a key, and a note with a series of numbers. John knew nothing about the key, but it must be of some importance, so he hid it away.

The end of the tunnel—and several other tunnels—emptied into a room. Dust and cobwebs covered what little furniture was along the walls. A filing cabinet, a table, and a chair. At the center, a terminal sat atop a dais.

"Please enter desired coordinates now." The voice came from a machine.

John spun around. The port. Long abandoned, it seemed. He twiddled with the piece of paper in his pocket. Where would it take him? Home, perhaps? He didn't know. Perhaps the holy man didn't know either. But this was a gift. A chance for freedom.

He punched the coordinates into the terminal. And as John looked up, a beam of light descended upon him and whisked him away.

THE END