

A Mighty Fortress

The light hits your eye, and the image is refracted by the lens onto your retina, and the data is carried by the optic nerve. But the actual seeing takes place in your brain. So and no otherwise is it, with prisons.

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His cell was exactly ten paces in each direction. If you could call it a cell: the force-field walls were clear, nearly invisible except when the distant primary Caruso heaved above the horizon to gild the curve above his head. At this latitude Friday, the lesser sun, never rose into view. He might be utterly at liberty, lord of illimitable space, standing on the high place and surveying Ugolino, his planet and kingdom. But then he returned to his pacing again.

He lacked only some way of keeping count of his pacing. With subtlest cruelty his captors had denied him writing implements. A Catholic would use a rosary. He had seen a rosary once, clenched in an old woman's hand. The woman must have been old – he remembered the dirt engraved in the wrinkles of the knuckles, and the black crescents under the broken nails – but her face had been invisible, hidden under the other corpses.

Again he took control of his straying thoughts. He stepped out with resolution, raising his voice in song: “For all the saints, who from their labors rest! Who thee, by faith, before the world confessed ...” The old hymns of his boyhood, verse after ingrained verse in eight- or ten- or thirteen-beat lines, were as good as any abacus. The futile prowlings of a caged beast were transmuted to worship in the eyes of his viewers. Besides, he knew he had a tin ear. Being forced to listen to him sing the same antique songs, day after day after tuneless day, must be torture for his captors.

It was one of the first rules of generalship: always keep the troops busy. Now, with the body safely occupied with pacing, and the resonant songs to distract the spies, his mind could work. At every tenth step he could look down over the edge, a thousand meters to where the atmosphere thickened into breathable pinkish soup. Still poisonous of course, at 20% methane.

That was the cunning of his prison. If by strength or wit he should breach the energy wall, he'd suffocate in the gossamer atmosphere, that is as he plunged down the vertical cliff to his death. Should he survive the climb down to the surface, he could breathe methane. And if by chance the supply buggy was nearby on its automated round, it was no refuge. He had observed the buggy closely over the past months. What else was there to watch? He had noted its route as it slowly trundled along, foreshortening and then too close to see as it came up to the base of his mesa and then slowly retreating on its fixed course. The vehicle was nothing but wheels and the hoist machinery. The cargoes on the open bed were sorted onto individual pallets and sealed against the ammonia sleet. For a long time there had been ten pallets, then eight, and six, and now only three. Somewhere on this hellish planet there were others like himself.

They must be weak, and the difficulties were insuperable to the weak. But he was strong. Not only in himself, but in friends. Supporters and partisans had died defending him; after his capture petitions and hunger strikes had been organized to force his release. At last it had come, as it always must, to force. The army would liberate him: soon, soon. Unless he could escape first. That would be politically preferable – to lead his troops in triumph through the defeated capital, rather than to be passively rescued like Sleeping Beauty from her tower.

But Wors was reliable. Closer than any brother – certainly of better faith than that snake Lidi. Wors had laid contingency plans, spider-webs of fine complexity. But he knew his part well, because Wors had repeated it often. "They will not, they cannot deny a prisoner the consolations of religion," Wors had insisted. "When you receive something, my general, with the Easter lily on it – a medal, a card, a tract – then be ready. Watch for rescue!"

"I shall rise again, and they shall not know me," he had replied, deadpan. The entire meeting – it had been the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as hard a crew as any Supreme Leader could wish for – they had laughed and laughed, clapping each other on the back and slapping their knees in mirth. God, those had been good times. Nobody had believed then that things could come to this.

For a moment he was in the here and now again, pacing his eyrie prison. But he focused, lifting his voice in song again: "O Zion haste, thy mission high fulfilling ..." Then he turned his thoughts to how rescue must come.

All he needed was a pressure suit. In the suit he could brave the hydromethane atmosphere. He could descend to ground level by clinging to the hoist cable. It ran over a simple pulley recessed into the cliff top. It might even be that his weight alone would suffice to lower him down. If not he could descend hand over hand. He'd have to time this break carefully. Just as the supply buggy neared the base of the mesa: that was the moment. The spy cameras and sound pick-ups were high above his reach beyond the struts that supported the field generator. But the signal took ten minutes to get to enemy headquarters. Ten more minutes for a signal to come back, and perhaps five good minutes in between of the inevitable hysteria and indecision that was typical of the enemy's lower echelons. He'd have twenty-five minutes to swarm down the cable and over-ride the buggy's programming. He would drive west to the prison base, the only settlement on Ugolino, gambling on reaching it before the air reservoirs in his suit ran out. And there he would commandeer a ship, and return to Prospero in triumph.

Wors would know this. Everyone would. His captivity was being broadcast. He knew it. Thousands, perhaps millions were watching to see how the Supreme Leader, their master, bore adversity. They should see no crack in his armor. And Wors, intelligent fellow, would somehow smuggle a pressure suit onto his pallet. Disguised as clothing, perhaps. It would arrive today!

And today, therefore, called for his most iron control of self and countenance. When the pallet was extruded through the energy wall he must unpack it just as usual. He must not betray by so much as the twitch of an eyelid that the suit had arrived. He must cling to the routine, pacing, singing, until the next

supply buggy was close enough.

When he thought about it like that it seemed an impossible task. Those 48 hours would seem as long – longer! – than his entire imprisonment. Not that the Supreme Leader could be jailed for long ...

Even over his untuneful song he could hear it, the whiz and hum of the hoist. In his reverie he must have failed to spot the supply buggy's approach. Careful, very careful he was not to speed up his pace or skip a word. "O day of God draw nigh in beauty and in power ..." The watchers should not see the Supreme Leader betray himself. The pallet inched up over the stony edge. With a final whine it flipped downwards and scooted forward through the energy wall. Even then he didn't react. He finished the last verse of the hymn first. Then he turned, majestically, and knelt to rip the plastic sheathing away.

He fanned away the lingering stench of ammonia. Where would the pressure suit be? Laid flat under the water jugs? Rolled small and crammed in beside the food concentrates? Slowly he unpacked the pallet, missing nothing. This would not surprise his captors. A prisoner learned to savor every tiny new thing. The arrival of supplies was always the highlight of each 48-hour period.

His hands quivered in spite of himself as he lifted out the last packet of crackers. Nothing. Nothing! What could be wrong? Could it be that Wors had failed him? Impossible! Methodically he repacked the pallet again, loading all the supplies back so as to unpack them once more with even greater attention. He could not miss a pressure suit. It would not be possible to compress it small enough, say, to be disguised as crackers. Perhaps in a bread bag, or between the shirts –

With a terrible shock he realized that he had packed and unpacked his provisions a dozen times or more. The packet of crackers sagged from over-handling, nothing but a bag of crumbs in his shaking hands. He threw it down with an oath and stamped on it.

It was a brief and familiar comfort to feel it explode under his heel. It came to him that he had smashed other cracker bags like this before, other items even. "My God, how long?" he groaned aloud. How long had he been going mad here in solitary confinement?

It had been months! For a while he had kept tally of the 48-hour supply cycles – he could see the hatch marks he had pressed with his thumbnail into the plastic of his basin. But it was entirely possible his captors had tricked him, confusing him by changing the interval between supply deliveries. And then the obsessive packing and repacking had further confused his count. "Wors, you traitor," he muttered. "You swine ..."

But wait. Wors was dead. He remembered clearly now, the tingling buzz of the gun in his hand as he had emptied the charge into Wors's body. And yes! The delicious thrill up his leg from his booted foot, as he had stamped on Wors's head and crushed the skull in!

All this time he had been singing, singing. Now he heard the grand words rolling out of his mouth: "Awake O sleeper, rise from death!" He had to laugh. It was guff, the most blatant nonsense, all this watery spirituality. A ruler could have no truck with such stuff. Or could the very hymns be a trap as well? Endlessly repeating praise and worship, was he being subverted by their message? Those holy-boleys -- from his childhood had yearned to get their hooks into the Supreme Leader of Prospero! How they would blush when they learned the hymns were only a signal to Wors, the signal that he was prepared for the rescue attempt. Except that Wors was dead.

It was all illusion – but an illusion with a purpose. Anything to keep his mental resources hoarded together, until rescue came. The army was conquering Prospero again, grinding these insects of rebels into paste. He had to endure only a little longer!

But was Wors dead? If he was, could it be that his victorious troops were also lost? Perhaps there was nobody coming to his rescue. Prospero could be enslaved at this moment, groaning under the tyranny of his enemies. Perhaps he would die here, chained to this rock.

A day would come when no buggy would arrive. When he was forgotten – was he? Was anyone really watching, or was he alone, forgotten? If his people had despaired and gone over to some other leader, they would need him no longer. He could starve. Or the power cells could fail. No maintenance crew, no visitor at all, had ever come here since he was immured. Without power he would freeze and suffocate in the dark.

He had condemned political prisoners here himself in his day, to that very fate. That bastard Senti, for one. The traitor. He hoped Senti had died whimpering, gnawing on the rocks. Or ... singing, perhaps? “Glorious things of thee are spoken ...” New pitfalls seemed to open at his feet, as if he was not safe on a pinnacle but balanced precariously on a verge. The distant doctrines hammered into him in boyhood, boiled together with all these hymns, suddenly chilled him with superstitious dread. He was going to die here. Salvation or damnation opened before him, and he had to choose. He was in Hell, but the path to Heaven lay open to his feet.

God, that train of thought led to madness for certain! Was he flinging himself back into delusion, or was he cunningly marshalling his resources? Time would tell. The truth would out.

No, he knew the truth. Some day he would be gloriously justified. The hymns were in some sense about himself. “All praise to thee for thou, O king divine ...” Wors must be dead. He had not failed in a killing for many years now. The old woman clutching the rosary – he remembered clearly now giving the order to the Special Guard. “Truncheons, my lads,” he had said. “No use wasting charges on oldsters and trash.” They had grinned back at him with simple boyish pleasure and turned avidly to the work. No, Wors was dead. But there was Toda, and Noben, and Monton, and so many other loyalists and supporters, an invincible host. Why, he was the lord of all he surveyed from this high place. Eternity could overtake him and he would be standing here, unchangeable as trolls are said to be when the sunrise overtakes them.

Enough of this moperly! He rose to his feet. Ten paces each way, and no way to keep count. But his resources were infinite. He raised his voice in song: “A mighty fortress is our God ...”