

SNOWFLAKES

By Jordan D. Dennis

The light hit him full in the face. He flinched away at first, but then turned his eyes to drink it in. The silhouette of a massive guard eclipsed the luminescence before he could fully adjust to the sudden change.

“Up, scum.”

The prisoner complied as quickly as his screaming nerves would allow him. The latest lash marks across his back and legs had just begun to heal. Standing up only caused the delicate new skin to tear. Waves of agony twisted through his body, but he managed to keep it off his face. He cleared his throat.

“Is it time for --”

“Did I say you could talk?” The guard snarled. He planted the butt of his spear in the prisoner’s stomach, knocking him back into the fetid straw. “Don’t remember saying that. Come t’ think of it, I didn’t tell you to grab a seat, neither. So, scum, up and out.”

I can’t take this much longer, thought the prisoner. But he did as told and shuffled out of the cell as fast as his ankle chains would allow.

“C’mon,” said the guard.

The guard followed him down the corridors of the dungeon, prodding if the pace was unsatisfactory. The prisoner could hear the shouts and screams of people being tortured behind different doors. The Usurper’s viciousness, well documented before the *coup de tat*, had only grown sharper as a response to power.

How many of these people are innocent? The thought made him wretch, and he collapsed against the slimy wall to dry heave.

The guard laughed. “Good thing you ain’t et anything recently, eh? That wall don’t need more decorating.” He gestured with his spear, but did not make to poke the obviously ill prisoner. “Enough dallying. Keep going.”

The tunnel began to slope upward toward a pinprick of sunlight that made the torchlight that had hurt the prisoner’s eyes before seem like the gloom of true night. A dull roar began to filter down. An officer in gleaming ceremonial armor met them.

“Here he is,” said the prisoner’s escort.

“Unmarked?” asked the officer, looking the prisoner over quickly.

“Well, not marked where you can see,” the escort chuckled cruelly. “Just like one of me own little ones, ya might say.”

The officer looked unimpressed. “I’ll take him from here. Back to your duties.” He spun on a heel and began to stalk off, military precision oozing out of his skin. The prison guard jabbed the prisoner once more and then ventured back into the dungeons.

The prisoner regained his balance and walked into the arena.

It was just as he remembered. The arena was the highest building here in Capital. It could hold all of the metropolis’s population, as well many from the surrounding hamlets.

Deafening waves of hisses and jeers swept down on him. He waded through them as best he could. *All for the bread and shows. Why do the people always sell themselves short?* The officer, not sensing his charge, turned and grabbed his arm.

“What are you doing?” the officer yelled. “Whatever clemency His Excellency might have felt

has evaporated by now.” He grabbed the prisoner’s arm and began dragging him toward the royal box.

They stopped several hundred feet away from where the Usurper would be. A squad of soldiers swept in to keep the prisoner from attempting to fulfill his once failed mission.

Emperor Gravinus the first stood to a thunderous cacophony of fanfare and cheering. He raised his hands up in appreciation. The crowd grew silent, waiting for words from the Slayer of Freedom.

“My people, we are here to celebrate that the most recent attack failed,” he said, his voice echoed through the stadium. Magic filled the ears of the audience, ensuring perfect sound to each attendee.

“Standing before me is the walking pustule who dared attempt to end my illustrious reign,” Gravinus roared. He pointed his finger straight at the prisoner. A red beam of light shot out and painted a dot on the prisoner’s forehead.

“And now, we shall see him admit his guilt!”

The prisoner tried to resist. He could not reveal what he knew. His co-conspirators must live to try again. She must live.

But his rebellion was too late. Waves of nausea washed over him as the red light left his forehead and shot up into the sky. It erupted into a huge ball, filled with images wrenched from his mind, proclaiming his guilt for the entire world to see.

#

“You understand how dangerous this mission is, don’t you?”

He looked into her eyes. The determination he saw through the flickering candlelight was fortifying. He could almost believe the plan would work.

He shrugged and quirked a sardonic half smile. “If I truly did, do you think I’d still be agreeing?”

“Now isn’t the time for sarcasm,” she said. “If you succeed, Gravinus will be dead. If not... well, we can’t help you.”

He sighed and looked around the dark tunnel. *You’ve no sense of humor, yet you want me to die.*

“I understand,” he said.

“Good.” She stood, abruptly. “It’s time to part.”

He caught her hand as she turned. “If you’re willing one last--”

“Stop,” she cut him off harshly. “You knew our relationship changed as soon as you walked through those doors for the first time.”

Then why did you ever bring me?

He sighed. “All right. You know I love you, though.”

She just stared for a moment. “Go to your assigned location and wait for the cue,” she said. Then she turned on her heel and stalked out.

And that was that.

#

Trumpets blared as he stood watching in the crowd. The royal procession was working its way through the Triumphal Arch. It was *the* day. Oddly enough, his nerves were calm. Maybe the anonymity of a crowd would provide enough of a cover for this to work. If so, he could go back to her. *Maybe then she’ll love me again.*

The royal hover floated closer to his position. A loud roar burst out. Just as it came to his

location, he pulled his blowgun out from under his jacket and slid the flechette into the barrel. *Here it comes...*

On the other side, of the road, a wizened hag stumbled from the crowd and fell to her knees in front of the Emperor's hover. The enemy was in plain view as the driver hastily stopped. He raised the tube to his lips, sighted, and blew a quick puff of air.

It was in vain. The cell's inside man had failed to deactivate the hover's shields. A shimmering wall of amber coalesced at the point where the flechette impacted. A soldier standing next to Gravinus jerked his head in that direction and saw him standing there, blowgun still in hand.

"You! Stop!"

He cursed and began to beat a path toward the back of the crowd. He fumbled, looking for the little pill in his pocket that would prevent his capture. Not looking, he tripped over a blind beggar's cane. Pain erupted through his head as it smacked into the stones.

The soldiers were on him in an instant, two sets of hands roughly dragging him up from the cobblestones. A hood went over his head obliterating the outside world.

"It seems we got us an insurgent."

"Figures. What's that he dropped?"

"Huh. One of those memory wiping pills. I wonder if these things work."

"Oh, I've seen 'em turn a man in his prime into a drooling idiot. They're real."

"Lovely. Now, you. Move your feet."

He was shoved up into something. A crowd-control hover, most likely. But it did not matter. His heart was already in chains.

#

"And so you see my people," roared the Slayer of Freedom. "This ignoble excuse for masculinity deigned to attempt our murder. As his peers, how do you find?"

If the jeers from before had been overwhelming, the cries that resounded through the coliseum were positively crushing.

"Guilty!"

The emperor turned and looked at the prisoner. He shrugged, smirking.

"Let us give the people what they desire."

With that the guards grabbed him under the armpits and dragged him up. He tried to struggle, the desire for life causing his stomach to convulse.

"Oh, gods, no! Please, I want to live. I'll tell you anything you want to know. Anything!"

One of the guards yelled over the screams of the audience. "You should have said that during interrogation, fool!"

With that, they were at the Pool of Desolation. The guards cut his bonds, and he tried to bolt. One of them smacked him hard with a cudgel, and he fell to the ground insensate.

They picked him up, hands and feet, and heaved him into the black abyss.

As he tumbled, he felt his body begin to chill. It was cold, falling, falling, falling through air. He felt his fingers disintegrating, then his feet, and then his arms.

As his body unraveled, his last thought was how nice it would be to feel warmth. Then he was nothing at all except little white flakes.

#

"Good morning, and thanks for listening to KFAK! It's seven thirty. Hey, did you see that blanket out there? All the kids are glad of it, that's for sure. Hey, in fact, I've got a list of snow closings coming up for you right after this --"

Bruce hit the snooze button and rolled back over. His wife groaned.

"Snow?"

"Yeah," he said. "Sounds like the king of blizzards."

"Maybe Cassie hasn't looked out the window yet," she said, muffled by the pillows."

A shriek of childish joy made both of them tense.

"Too late," said Bruce.

The door burst open and Cassie executed a perfect cannonball onto the bed.

"Daddy! It snowed," the excitement was practically oozing out of her voice. "Can we go out in it right now?"

Bruce sat up and stretched. "Not yet, honey. Breakfast first, and then play. What do we always have when it snows?"

"Pancakes!"

"That's right. So, go get your slippers on and get on down to the kitchen."

"Okay, Daddy," she said, climbing down. She turned around and looked at him solemnly. "Just as long as you promise we can make a snowman."

He pretended to think about it for several seconds before giving the ritualized answer. "Sure honey, why not?"

THE END