

Freedom's End

SE Estes

Freedom is never dear at any price; it is the breath of life.

What would a man not pay for living?

— Mahatma Gandhi

Painter's Journal

~ Note ~

We go out tomorrow...

If we don't stop the cannons long enough to repair the east shields of the city's second wall, we're sure to lose the war for Zarral, humanity's capital world. If Zarral falls, it won't be long before the rest of the universe follows. All thinking beings will be enslaved to the creatures that control the mind-slaves massed to take the city.

It's going to be a tough fight. We're heavily outnumbered and the thralls will fight without regard to losses. I don't know if we'll make it, so I'm entrusting this journal to Stalking Cougar, one of the leaders of this war who always manages to survive, no matter the odds. If I fall, he'll get it to Kadiza, my granddaughter, who runs my gallery on Trader's Hand.

Tonight is for Mae and me... tomorrow, we live or die.

Freedom

I remember my mother's face the day she died under the whip of a slave handler. Before her body grew cold, they took me into the mines to work... her eyes went with me.

Time in the mines blurred into an endless cycle... waking to the whip's crack, toiling relentlessly, dodging beatings, and subsisting on meager rations that never satisfied our hunger. People dropped from exhaustion, many never got up again. Every day we watched the dead thrown into piles for the reclamators. The living became dull... hopeless... mindless.

One sleep, when I was still very young, pictures awoke in my mind, and every sleep after. I wanted them to live as long as possible, so I taught my hands to make them flow from my bleeding fingers into the dirt. When my eyes could no longer focus, I slept on top of my dreams. They'd be swept away by morning. I didn't want the handlers to see that I was different; standing out brought beatings.

A series of events kept me from dying another beaten man who'd lost his dreams.

I became captivated by a woman in my sector. Cruel labor couldn't quench an inner beauty that shone through her eyes. She shared her food with those in need, tended the sick and injured and sat with the dying. I didn't know why she did it, sharing and kindness were foreign to me. She was the only example of selflessness I saw since my mother died. Her eyes reminded me of my mother, too. I never spoke to her because it would be an invitation for even crueler treatment if the handlers saw us together, but I hoped that one day I could choose her.

"Excuse me." I'd made sure I was working close enough to bump into her. It was the first time I ever spoke to her. She gave me a quick stare with her crystal blue eyes. "Yes." Her whisper was barely heard but it stirred unexplained longings in me... to see beyond the rock that drew in closer each passing day, to breathe something besides dust.

Sweat was running into my eyes, and I paused from chiseling out a chip of ore to wipe my face. I was being watched. I turned to glare at the intruder and saw a flash of bright blue quickly covered by black lashes. The woman... watching me.

I tossed on my mat that night; my thoughts tossed, my feelings. I was exhausted, but there was no sleep. Only the vision of melancholy blue eyes gave me a measure of sad rest. I wanted her, wanted to hear more than just a word. I wanted her eyes to rest on me, to say she was mine.

One night, when I was almost asleep, she came to the mat next to mine to care for an injured girl. She spent precious sleep time cleaning the emaciated girl's wounds and speaking soothing words to ease her fear. Her kindness moved me to reach out and touch her hand; she looked at me. "Yes?" "I've never seen anyone like you. What makes you help others when you suffer along with the rest of us?" "This dark place needs caring," she answered in a soft, sad whisper. "One day I will choose you," I promised.

We worked twenty hours a day, and on the tenth day we rested. The Tenth was the Time of Proving, when the strongest in every sector fought for the privilege to take part in The Day of Choosing. On that day, the sectors' champions were awarded the right to pick breeding mates.

I worked hard, determined to win the right to pick the woman on The Day, but my new-found work ethic angered Vardoc; he preferred me to work only after he beat me into it. He looked for opportunities to punish me, and whether he had a reason to or not, he brutalized me at least once a day. The worse Vardoc hurt me, the harder I worked and the madder he got.

"Why throw down?" I glared at him. "It slipped." "You throw," Vardoc growled. The particularly cruel handler had picked me out as his special pet; I was the first to try out his newest ideas of pain. This time was no different.

Vicious glee lit up his eyes as he pointed at me. Two guards dragged me to the punishment area and chained me to the wall. We'd been locked in a contest for years; he kept trying to break me and I wouldn't give him the satisfaction. I wasn't going to give him any that time, either. I loosened my muscles, tightened my will, and waited for whatever savagery he had a whim to throw at me.

A staff to the face; I felt my nose break. When my head snapped back into the rock wall, there were gasps and laughs from the crowd.

I was left to hang half unconscious from my chains while Vardoc, eyes bulging, ranted, "Who laugh? Who laugh!? WHO LAUGH?!!" After a time of fruitless screaming, he raged into his room and left me on the wall, unforgotten, all night.

When the woman finished tending the child and moved away, I felt like I was being watched, so I looked behind me. Larvik, named after sneaking creatures that hid in the shadows and fed on the dead, was another of Vardoc's pets. He won himself into the big handler's favor by selling the lives of the other slaves; he reported even our slightest acts of disobedience to Vardoc. He skulked around, watching and listening, like his namesake stealing bits of flesh from

the dead. Larvik would betray anyone for a piece of bread; he was the only fat person I'd ever seen. When Larvik saw me looking at him, he gave me a gloating smile and walked away; I knew that smile meant trouble.

"Fight!" A daily occurrence, even more so the closer it got to The Day of Choosing. I pressed in to watch with the rest of the crowd; it relieved the boredom. I'd seen the two fighting before; they were rivals for the same woman. The crowd was shouting, the guards were taking bets, bones were breaking when I spotted Larvik go into Vardoc's office. After the look he gave me the night before, I had a sinking feeling. I tried to act like I was watching the fight, but I kept an eye on Vardoc's door the whole time.

Vardoc came out with Larvik and looked at me, then he smiled at the woman. My blood ran cold. When he started toward her, a murderous rage welled up in me and I pushed through the crowd to reach him; he was going to die before he could lay a filthy hand on her. I was an arm's reach from him when he stopped, grabbed the closest woman to him and dragged her into his room. I didn't care about her screams and struggles to get away from the brute, or that she was going to suffer; I only cared that the woman I wanted was safe... for the time.

An intense burning kept me awake nights thinking murderous thoughts, most centered on bashing Vardoc's head in with the first big rock at hand. Had the chance arisen, I would have done it, and I would have been killed. My gnawing hunger to kill Vardoc seemed impossible to satisfy. Two guards with blasters always stayed with him, even outside his door while he slept. I saw that they were less vigilant when Vardoc was in his room with the lights out, so I looked for an opportunity.

The guards had been lax all one sleep; I waited in the darkness with a rock in my hands. It was time for Vardoc to die. "It'll work, then what?" I stared hard at the only old person I'd ever seen. The first time I saw him, I had to ask someone nearby, "Why does he look like that? Isn't he human?" The Asing stopped working, looked at me, and said, "Human. Old." I shook my head, uncomprehending. "Old? What is old?" "We die. Not he, long time... long time," the big man grunted and went back to chiseling at the rock. Sometimes the old man would show up and help the woman tend to the sick and injured, then he'd disappear.

"That's my business," I said, glaring at him with an intensity that should have made him back off. But he either didn't get the hint or didn't care. "What will you do after he's dead?" His

gaze stayed locked on mine, unwavering. "Why do you care what I do?" I demanded, confusion and suspicion coloring my voice.

He sighed, a sound heavy with a weariness that went beyond our prison's physical weight. "When he dies, you and the girl will soon follow." "Not without a fight," I shot back, my resolve hardening. He sighed again, a deeper weariness evident. "Alone against so many?"

I glanced around at the sleeping people surrounding us. "Do you see any fighters here? I see slaves and bullies. The bullies fight, but they only prey on the weak and run from resistance."

His distinctive blue eyes seemed to pierce into my very soul, scrutinizing my intentions, my dreams. I felt a momentary stab of powerlessness.

"Look for the ones with eyes like ours; they'll fight. Galach are born to fight."

"I've never heard of Galach," I replied, wondering. "What does it mean?" The old man gave a cryptic smile. "Another time," he said, and then called for a guard to escort him out of the sector.

I watched him walk away, my mind buzzing with questions. Who was he really, and what secrets did he hold?

The old man's words stayed my hand that sleep. Since The Day of Choosing was more than twenty sleeps away, I had time to consider options.

In the mines, looks seldom crossed; such fleeting connections could spell death. The quest to find Galach warriors amid the downtrodden seemed a fool's errand. Despair clawed at me, threatening to extinguish the embers of hope that were my mother's legacy... her eyes, my beacon. As I made my way through the tunnels of an alien sector, a conflicting scene captured me. A handler was beating a young man—this was the mine's brutal ballet. Yet, the dance was off. The young man's eyes bore no trace of fear, no shadow of submission; his stance was a silent rebellion. The handler's eyes, typically scornful triumph, played a mix of emotions—rage, hate, and a palpable fear. In the young man's untamed, blue Galach eyes I found an unspoken defiance, a declaration that his spirit remained unbroken despite the handler's blows. Those eyes, a mirror of Vardoc's own when he beat me, ignited a spark within me.

Amid the clatter of chains and the crack of whips, my search for the Galach led to a young man's unyielding gaze. Fierce, blue eyes met mine with a silent challenge. In that moment, a bond was forged, an unspoken pact between warriors ready to claim their freedom.

In the hush of the mine at sleep, I traced the contours of a stone, its weight a promise of vengeance. Vardoc's days were numbered, and with each passing sleep, the whispers of revolt grew louder. "We are Galach." There was power in those words. "You Galach are born to fight," the old man's words echoed, a mantra for the uprising to come.

Eyes met, blue flames in the gloom. Words were unnecessary; the shared gaze spoke volumes. They were Galach, and the blood of warriors ran through their veins.

We were ready; warrior blue eyes searched for the opportunity that would herald our fight for a freedom we barely understood.

My breath came in labored gasps and sweat trickled down the back of my neck. I was on the verge of risking a break when a faint breeze brushed my cheek. I leaned in closer, savoring the cool air, and resumed my work with renewed vigor. Even after freeing the body, I kept pulling out rocks, driven by the mystery of the breeze, until I uncovered a large airshaft.

I hesitated, considering whether to tell a handler, but then decided to keep it to myself. An idea was forming in my mind.

Above, the handler's attention was fixed on a new batch of slaves, his back turned to the secrets that unfolded in the depths. It was a moment seized by the Galach, a precious moment of time where plans could be whispered.

Beneath the earth, where the shadows clung to the walls, three figures emerged from the darkness. Our steps were silent, our presence known only to each other. We gathered in a hollow, away from prying eyes, where the only light was the faint glow of luminescent moss creeping along the rock.

We stood together, a small band of rebels. Our resolve was as unbreakable as the stone that surrounded us. This was the spark that would ignite the flames of freedom. And it all began with a meeting, hidden away from the world, where the Galach dared to dream of victory.

"The next time Vardoc goes at me." Whispered ayes and we disappeared into the shadows to go our separate ways.

A shard of rock struck my brow, and as I paused to wipe the blood from my eye, I sensed the inevitable. A grin spread across my face as Vardoc's whip bit into my chest. Enraged, he signaled the guards to bring me closer. Work in the sector stopped; everyone, including the guards and handlers, turned their attention to the spectacle.

Vardoc shed his tunic, revealing his massive flexing muscles as a guard wheeled in his rack of weapons. He savored the moment, taking his time to select the first tool, though he always picked the same one. Holding a staff, he stepped in front of me, glanced at his audience, and sneered, "I start with staff, it..." "...makes muscle soft. Aye, so you always say," I interrupted with a mocking grin.

The savagery of his blow caught me off guard. I crumpled to the ground, and Vardoc beat me into unconsciousness. In the agonizing darkness, a dream stirred awake.

My tired young hands drop a stone. The first barb pins my ear to a beam; the rest tear into my chest. I stand on my toes to keep from ripping my lobe off. Vardoc shuffles around and laughs. "Look like puppet! Dance puppet!"

I stare my defiance. He pulls back on his whip. The barbs sink deeper into my muscles. He roars out his laughter and shouts, "Stone puppet! Stone!" Everyone throws rocks at me. Vardoc jerks on his whip and chants, "Dance puppet, dance!" I don't let them see my pain.

"Stop throw!" he shouts to the crowd, and I think he's done with me. He smiles; I don't see the malice behind it. "Take down." Two guards pull me free of the whip and I drop to the ground. "Beat." I glare my refusal to cry out from the agony of their kicks and blows. Vardoc motions to the guards to stop. "My turn." He stomps my chest. I hear a loud crack and blinding pain paralyzes me. I struggle for every breath then darkness overtakes me.

Falling... The sound of water...

I wake up on my blanket. Everyone is asleep. I see a chip of illium and begin painfully scratching with it in the dirt. When the pain is too much to continue, I stick the ore in my torn earlobe and silently vow, 'I will never forget this night.' I drop down on my bloody drawing of Vardoc's whip in his severed hand. Sleep overtakes me.

The dream faded, and I awoke in a pool of blood trickling from my ear. Struggling halfway to my feet, the barbs tore into me again. Vardoc snapped the whip, yanking me off my feet. I hit the ground hard, his whip lashing into me over and over.

Summoning my strength, I staggered to my feet. The whip's tails sang through the air; I grabbed them, the sharp barbs slicing into my palm. "Say goodbye to hands!" Vardoc bellows as he jerks back on his whip. The crowd held its breath as I lunged forward, smashing my head into Vardoc's face. Blood sprayed from his nose, his eyes wide with shock. Seizing a sword from his

rack, I swung it in a wide arc. The jarring impact of metal on bone ran up my arm, giving me strength.

Vardoc gasped for breath as I severed his whip hand, the weapon still clutched in his grip. I tied my trophies to my waist, the crowd around us frozen in silent awe.

After Vardoc died, so did most of the guards and handlers in the sector; the waiting Galach were fearless, merciless. We ran to the recent rockfall in the back of the cave and checked out the weapons we captured; we had three blasters and five swords. Twenty-seven of us went up the hidden airshaft behind the fall. As we climbed, we kept the guards below us pinned down by blaster fire, then we came to a set of bars blocking any further progress up. There was talk of giving up then someone said, “S’only rock,” and pulled a hand sledge and chisel from his belt.

Our hands, slick with blood from the climb, made it difficult to hold onto our tools, so we bound them with strips of cloth. It didn’t take us long to cut through the bars. We hurled some of the debris down on the guards below and used the rest to build a blockade. Piling up the loose rock into a makeshift wall was slow, but if it kept them occupied, it would be worth it. Most of us focused on the blockade while others fired down the shaft to keep the guards at bay.

Once the wall was up, we rewrapped our hands for the climb. I moved over to the woman to help her with her bindings. Her hands trembled with pain, but she didn’t utter a sound. When I was done, I wrapped my arms around her. “We’ll make it,” I promised. She buried her face in my neck and let out a long sigh. “We have to go,” I told the group after finishing my bindings, and we continued upward.

She was right behind me when I heard her slip. A gasp escaped her lips, and I reached out, but it was too late. Her eyes never left mine as she plummeted. I stared into the abyss that swallowed her, my chest tight, breath shallow. She was gone. She was my reason for fighting, for running, for the long bloody climb, and now she was gone.

I stood frozen, memories of my mother’s death crashing into me, blending with the fresh agony of this loss. The only two people I had ever cared for were gone. My hands trembled. I couldn’t save her. Her death was a weight on my soul, but I had to turn my grief into strength. For her. For my mother. For everyone still shackled in darkness.

A shot from below jolted me back to reality. I continued upward with newfound determination. I was going to be free for her and my mother; their deaths would not be in vain.

Near the top of the shaft, we came to a long dark tunnel with a faint glow of light at the end. As we reached the light, we saw, for most of us, our first glimpse of the outside world. The way was blocked by another set of bars. A moan of despair echoed through the group, some cried.

“No,” someone groaned, the weight of the journey bearing down on them.

“We can do it,” a woman declared with fierce determination.

“Can't stop now,” I grunt as I work at the bars. “Almost there. Look, light and fresh air. Just one more obstacle. Why did we fight? Why are we climbing?”

“No more whips!” the first Galach I found shouted, tackling the bars with renewed vigor.

“No more beatings!” another Galach echoed, joining him.

Soon, everyone was working as if they had just had a long rest and a satisfying meal.

We attacked the rock frenziedly, trying to break the bars free, but our hands were too torn up to hold onto our tools. The sound of approaching guards grew louder, adding to the panic. People cried and clawed at the rock with their bloody fingers, casting fearful glances over their shoulders.

By the time we pulled three bars out, exhaustion set in. The fight, the climb—it was all too much.

“We can't do it,” someone cried, collapsing in defeat. Others followed, sinking to the ground in despair.

“One more bar and we can squeeze through!” I shouted. “We're almost there!” I refused to give up. Turning back to the rock, four people joined me. The bar was loose, freedom within our grasp, when I heard a hiss. Red vapor filled the tunnel, and darkness overtook me.