

Hostage Festival

by Tanya L. Schofield

Sean Rowan jerked awake to the unfamiliar sounds of cheering from the other prisoners. A smiling soldier unlocked the chain from around his ankle before moving on to the next man, who was celebrating along with the rest of them. Ronnie, Sean remembered. That was his name. Or was it Robbie?

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Hostage Festival," Ronnie or Robbie said, unzipping his coverall and picking up the pile of fresh clothes the soldier had set on the end of the bed. Sean frowned.

"Festival?" He picked up his own pile to find blue jeans and a tee shirt emblazoned with the letters "J.U." and a picture of a misshapen hat.

"Once a year deal. You'll love it, get dressed!" Sean changed his coverall for the achingly familiar denim and cotton, almost letting himself smile as he lined up with the rest of the contagiously cheerful men. He was the baby in the group. He'd only been here nine months - one guy had fifteen years under his belt. Almost all of them had family back home, including him. Lisa ... Sean lost the urge to smile.

"Same route," the Captain of the soldiers called out to them. "Rounds at Jester when it's over!" This announcement was met with deafening cheers, many of them referring to the excellence of Captain Hughes.

"What's Jester?" Sean asked Ronnie - yes, it was definitely Ronnie - as they were both pulled along by the mass of cheering prisoners bounding into the sunlight.

"Jester Unveiled," Ronnie yelled. Sean could still barely hear him over the crowd. "Best pub in the world. Get you a Bubbling No. 5, it's out of this world!"

"Foaming No. 3 is better," shouted another prisoner as he jogged by, waving to the civilians lined up along the road. The townspeople cheered back, waving and throwing confetti on the hostages as they

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passed. Sean frowned, but it was impossible not to get swept up in the excitement. He even caught some of the flowers the women were throwing down from their balconies. He laid them on the table when they arrived at the pub.

"Having fun?" The Captain brought Sean a long necked bottle and slid into the booth opposite him with a glass of something blue and foamy. Sean didn't drink.

"I don't understand this," he said. "What's the point?"

"The point," replied Hughes, pausing to drain his glass and wipe his lips, "is morale. I feel better. Don't you?"

"We're prisoners," Sean reminded the guard. "Prisoners of your military."

"You have never been treated as such." Captain Hughes looked around the bar. "This festival is a celebration of you, of all of you. We pride ourselves on our treatment of hostages. We have never lost a prisoner to injury or disease."

"We're still hostages," Sean insisted, his anger rising at the man's refusal to admit the obvious truth. The Captain smiled at him.

"You should enjoy it while you can," he said. "Your own country won't treat you this well when you get back."

Sean punched him. He uncoiled with years of boxing training behind the blow, smiling at the satisfying crunch of Hughes' nose under his knuckles. No one in the pub seemed to notice anything amiss. Captain Hughes sat silent and still while his shattered nose reformed itself.

Sean watched in disbelief, feeling his grip on reality start to slip. He screamed, long and loud, but not one of the others turned away from their drinks. He screamed again.

"We've given him a sedative," Captain Hughes' mouth said in a woman's crisp voice. Sean frowned. "It will calm him, but I'm afraid he shows no signs of waking up. We've tested his neurological functions extensively. There is nothing physically wrong with him. It's all up to him now."

