

John Shumate

The Pygmy Kingfisher

The Pygmy Kingfisher's blue head sparkled under the intense observance of the afternoon sun. It waddled and chirped over the dust and pebbles that composed the dead soil, then heaved its yellow chest, expanded its tiny wings, and flittered into the air. Beneath the Kingfisher, the scrolling landscape was vast and silent, unconcerned with the lack of wind and rain. A natural, wordless unity permeated the trees and shrubs and insects and reptiles and even the Pygmy Kingfisher so high above. There was no confliction or worry in the eyes of the crocodile, as it searched endlessly for its next meal, or in the grunts of a dozing zebra, as it fought for maximum comfort beneath the shade of an ancient tree, or in the subtle fluttering of the tiny Kingfisher, as it carelessly flew to a shining tin compound a few hundred feet below.

It landed on the hot surface with a tiny squawk, and searched for the little invertebrate morsels that were destined to not appear. The Pygmy tapped about on the roof of the compound in playful delight. It took no notice of the tall, simian creatures that stalked about on the ground, with wooden clubs and clanking engines. It had no conception that beneath his tiny, vibrantly orange feet, a man, immersed in a sea of pain and darkness, listened to every chirp and every click the bird's feet made. It was a heavenly sound for the man. The prisoner. The slave. Locked in a cell only three feet in width and twelve feet in length. Locked in a cell without food for three days at a time. Yes, to that man,

J Shumato

the senseless action of that beautiful King of the Skies, scuttling about with so much energy above his head, was a holy chorus. A transcendental sonata, incomparable to all the chants and musings of his entire clan. There, on the roof, his only link with something sweeter, something purer than all the madness that surrounded him. His name was Jareth, and this was his last day on Earth.

If the thick black cloak that immersed Jareth's cell could be lifted for a single second, laying beneath would be a man of pallid complexion, depleted in muscle and constitution to the extent of complete morbidity. If Jareth could see himself, there would be no recognition, as changed as he was from his imprisonment. His hair was thin and frail, and fell in clumps about his calloused feet. Dried and cracked skin was the only protection his bones had—it wrapped loosely across his form like a cheap blanket. A cheap blanket. Such a commodity would be a dream come true for Jareth. The only company Jareth had was the dirt floor that scraped his naked body.

He would often spend the long, sleepless nights in a state of detached confusion, never sure if he truly existed, or if he had died long ago, his soul only waiting for the door to open for release. The door seldom opened, of course. A scrap of meat was occasionally thrown in, which he would eat ravenously. A small pile of bones sat in the back of the dark cell. Jareth often contemplated how alike in form and function he and the heap of bones were. Part of him envied those bones—he knew it was his

fate to become one with them, to bask in their dusty peace.

Jareth summoned enough saliva within his blistered mouth to wet his lips. He then whistled a desperate plea to the playful avian above his head. The tune was shaky and pitiful, a melody Jareth had once hummed during better times, with his children or on his way to the market. The Pygmy halted when the sound reached its ears, and as Jareth ended his melody, there was a tense moment of silence. Jareth waited breathlessly for the bird to heed his call, but no answer came. Instead, the Pygmy left when it was frightened from its perch. A rattling din shook Jareth's cell, and for the first time in four days, the door was opened.

As was his habit, Jareth immediately crouched into the furthest corner, near his collection of bones, and closed his eyes. Sunlight was torture for his mole-like eyes, and he avoided it at any cost. The battered tin door screeched open. A few thumps. A few coughs. A few grunts. The door closed. Jareth could hear heavy, panicked breathing that was not his own. His captors had given him a cellmate.

"Who? Is someone here?" A voice called out. "Please, let me know. Are you there? Anyone? Is somebody in here with me?" Jareth could hear the newcomer shuffling his feet across the earthen floor, and sliding his bare back against the hot walls. "Where? What is this place? Please, speak, whoever you are!"

Jareth cleared his parched throat. "I am here, my friend. What is your name?"

The stranger caught his breath. "You're fooling yourself," he began. "Names have no meaning here. But if you must know, I am called George. And you?"

"I am Jareth. I have been here for many months."

"Shut up!" George shouted. "I don't want to hear your sob stories! I don't care how long you have been here, I only want out! We all have tales, don't we? I'm sure mine is no different from yours. If only you could see through this darkness. My scars are many, old man. As are the scars on my daughter's face! I refuse to linger in the past. Now is the time to plan our escape. Have you not considered escape?"

Jareth did not know how to respond. George was so full of an energy that Jareth had long forgotten. The spirits of rebellion and Cause were alive and well within George, but Jareth was only a vague echo of the man he once was. Should Jareth speak of the endless nights he had spent, fantasizing about tackling his oppressors—



banging their heads against the cold cement and running off in search of their families, who he would torture as well? Should Jareth invoke the nobility and virtues of the Cause that had led him to that cell, to die as a worn and shriveled man? Should Jareth recall the last kiss he had given to his wife, before that fateful day? The pain and worry that saturated her tearful eyes? The final, disconsolate moan that escaped her lips as he turned to leave? But Jareth remained silent. He crouched down next to his bones, and chewed on his dried lip.

"Well, speak old man! You are an elder, are you not? I hear the sound of wisdom in that raspy voice of yours. Certainly you have something, anything to lend to this conversation. Something you know that may have use, to help our escape."

Jareth hacked and cleared his throat once again. "Occasionally, they will throw a bone or two in here. That is the only food we get—the leftovers that the dogs did not eat. Water is even less frequent than food, and you will learn quickly enough to save your energy. The more you perspire, the more you are likely to die. That is all I know, my friend. That is all there is to know."

"Nonsense," George hissed. "Have you lost all hope, old man?"

"It is not about hope, my friend. Hope. Hope I have plenty of, but I fear that my time here is almost through. I am a tired man."

"Heh. Tired, eh? And why? They never tire of beating us. Of raping our wives and stealing our daughters. They never tire of—"

"Please," Jareth moaned. "As I say, I am a tired man. I feel that your arrival here is more than coincidence. These cells have been known to house more than three people. Such a small space, but they manage to keep three. But I have been alone since my arrival. I once thought that as a sign of luck. And so now, in my last hours, they have brought you. I fear that you are a replacement. My post is nearly vacated, and you are here to take my place, friend."

J Shumate

George snickered and crouched onto the soil. As he played with the dirt and hair and pebbles, he thought of the tiny bird he had seen on the roof of the cell. "You were whistling," he said.

A few moments of silence passed, and then Jareth cleared his throat for the last time in his life. "Yes. There was a bird. He brought you to me. Thank you. Thank you for coming."

George sensed the finality of Jareth's statement, and he crawled near to the old man and took his hand in his. He wet his lips and whistled lively into Jareth's ear. If a knife could be used to slice away the immense darkness of the cell, Jareth would be seen smiling, as his breath slowly became labored.

Suddenly, the door slammed open, and an intense wave of dry sunlight drowned the prisoners. Two tall shadows stood at the opening, holding a thick fire hose. The valve was released, and the stinging force of a thousand gallons of propelled water surged into the small cell. George tried to block the barrage from Jareth, but his strength was not enough, and he was thrown against the back wall. He gargled out a few screams before he passed out from shock.

For the first time in months, Jareth opened his eyes to face the sun.

The Pygmy Kingfisher was weary from a long day of hunting and mating. It found much solace in the shade of the branch it rested upon. The cool early evening breeze sifted through its luminous feathers, and the Pygmy chirped out a song of relaxation.

Twenty feet below, a few simian creatures were finishing their toil for the day. They put down their shovels, and

patiently stacked six bodies into the mass grave they had created. It was ten feet deep, three feet wide, and twelve feet long.

Like dominoes, each body was placed on top of the other. The first body was a man named Homer, who was murdered the night before while on his way to his grandmother's hut for dinner. The second body was a man named Jason, the cousin of a renowned medicine man. The third body was a woman named Hope, who was eight months pregnant on the night she was raped for the last time. The fourth body was a child without a name. He was found dead in an alley, the product of the sick desires of a man with high official rank. The fifth body was a man named Hector, murdered in his sleep because of his political beliefs. And the sixth body was that of a man named Jareth, killed by an extended stay in a prison compound.

As the simian creatures heaved dirt into the grave, the Pygmy Kingfisher cocked its head. It heard a musical sound coming from a short distance away. It shook the sleepiness out of its tired wings, and took flight. As the sound grew stronger, the Pygmy Kingfisher became excited. Perhaps it was the calling of a mate? The sound was so familiar to the little bird. Finally, it centered in on the source of the whistling: it came from beneath the tin roof of a compound. The Kingfisher slowed its approach, and made a perfect landing onto the hot surface.