

Nublius: Prologue

by Elliot R Ronen

The sun was high in the sky over the Australian coast. A penal colony situated a few miles from the sea resonated heat, the air within baking amidst thick stone walls. Inside, nothing moved under the oppression of the heat; air sat stagnant, prisoners lay still. Heat melted through the rock but light did not: the only movement in the dark halls were shadows dancing from torches to metal bars to the floor.

She knew it was dreadfully hot for the others. Through the bars of her cell she saw prisoners sprawled out on the relatively cool floor, the shadows dancing playfully across their bodies. She sat on the stone bench in her cell, hands clasped together, head bowed as if deep in thought. Her body began to perspire underneath her light, cream colored robes.

A single drop of sweat dripped down her forehead and into her eye.

She lifted her head up and wiped her eyes. Her patience waned as she took a breath and pulled her dark hair back out of her face.

"He's late," she sang at a whisper.

The woman leaned as far back as she could on the narrow bench, pressing her back against the warm wall and gazed at the ceiling. Her right hand stretched up above her head and clenched the air with a tight fist. As she opened her hand, a small stream of water fell lightly from her palm to her tongue. With a mouth full of cool water, the woman glanced over at the man in the next cell. His white eyes, tinged with red, stared back from a dark, burned face. She choked back a laugh, swallowed and smiled at him.

"Hot?" she asked.

"'At's a stupid question, ain't it?" he replied in a thick British accent.

She paused and let her hair drop back around her face. "Why are you here?" she asked.

"Was gonna ask you the same thing. Never seen you around before, and didn't 'ear you come in," he said.

"I'm just visiting," she replied as coolly as possible, given the conditions.

"Just visitin'? Don't often get visitors who sit in locked cells by 'emselves, drinkin' water out of thin air. Did the guards send you here, to torture us and play tricks with us?" he asked.

She smiled. "Do I look like a torturer to you?" she asked. "And I didn't drink anything. I think the heat might be getting to you. Perhaps you need more water with your rations, you're starting to see it appear out of nowhere. Have you asked the guards for more water?"

If her tone was condescending, the man in the next cell didn't notice. He let out a cracked laugh. "Not exactly 'ere to serve me, they aren't."

"You may be a prisoner but you still deserve fair treatment. The next time I see... a..." the woman's words trailed off, her throat tightened by cascading waves of emotions, each distinct, separate and powerful. First her eyes were pulled wide as surprise made her breathing shallow. Next, sheer awe rushed over her like a gust of cool air, making her skin bristle against her soft clothes. Finally, disappointment set a weight down on her shoulders as if something slightly out

of her reach was pulled away. She folded her arms across her chest and rubbed her shoulders, her face awash with confusion.

"See what, a guard? Yeh, maybe you'll 'ave more luck than us."

Her words came slowly as she tried to sort out what just happened. "See... a... guard... give you people some more water... I'll... suggest it."

"Tch. Do what you want. Best of luck with 'at one, yeh," the prisoner said as the woman began to wring her hands nervously, her head still spinning from the sudden sensation.

The door to the cell block unlocked with a loud clank, creaked open and a man passed through. Unaffected by the weight of the heat, the man's flowing white robe fluttered around him as he passed smoothly through the dark hall. The prisoners rushed to the front bars of their cells, grabbing wildly for anything they could reach. Ignoring their flailing hands and pitiful whispers, the man strode down the hall with his hands held together in his lap.

He stopped at the woman's cell and removed an envelope from a pocket hidden deep in the folds of his robe. She remained on the bench motionless, staring aimlessly with glossed eyes. The man placed the envelope in between the bars of her cell, balancing it on a cross bar.

"See you soon," he said over the whispers of the prisoners.

Stirred by his voice, the woman blinked and shook her head. The man in the robe turned and walked back toward the door as the woman sluggishly got up from her bench and went to the bars.

Picking up the envelope, she called, "Say hello to your children for me." The man waved his hand without turning back, and slammed the door behind him, locking it.

The envelope was made of a thick, brown parchment and held closed with a large wax seal. Embossed in the seal were two sharp letters: BG. Lightly placing her fingers on the seal, she felt the warm wax give way under the punishment of the dry prison air. She held her hand over the seal and a soft white mist fell over the sides of the envelope.

I wonder how many I'm up to, she thought as she plucked the cool, solid wax seal off the envelope and slipped it into her robe pocket.

The woman flipped the envelope open. She removed its contents, placing the envelope beside the seal in her pocket. Printed on a neatly cut, pure white sheet of paper, the letter stood in stark contrast to the rough parchment envelope that carried it.

The letter was shorter than usual. Silently she mouthed the letter to herself with a frown. Her frown faded as she read the

letter a second time. She took in its message and replaced the letter in its envelope, tears emerging silently from her eyes. Soon her tears escalated to sobbing and crying, but ultimately gave way to laughter. Unaffected by the bewildered eyes from the cells, the woman took a deep breath to settle her nerves.

"You a'right?" her closest neighbor asked. The woman looked at him and smiled gently and genuinely, the streams of tears shining from the torchlight on her cheeks.

"I'm alright. I'm very good, in fact. It's very, very good news," she replied, her smile growing to a grin as she spoke.

"Good for us?" the prisoner asked, hope bubbling through his accent.

"Good for everyone."

The prisoner opened his mouth but made no reply. Locked with his, the woman's smiling eyes flashed and she vanished in a rush of cool, wet wind.

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Far away, a man quietly drifted along as warm ocean water lapped at the sides of his body. Miles above the calm ocean the stars fought to pierce through the fractured night sky. With a rising hum, a stream of bright white appeared across the solid

sky, as if lightning had fallen on its side and rolled from horizon to horizon, turning night into mid-day for a moment. The hum of the light rippled the water around his floating body, sending small splashes of water onto his face as it passed. A blue pendant shook lightly from the vibrations and slid side to side across his chest. Once the rolling light had passed, the darkness of the night sky settled back in.

The man floating in the ocean opened his eyes. He didn't want this comfortable dream of warm water and hot air to end, barely teetering on the realization that all of this was real. He shifted his eyes around, their yellow iris' flowing dreamily in all directions, taking in all above him. The dark sky looked menacingly back, its white eyes blinking at him through their crystal veil. He blinked back at them, clearing his head.

The man exhaled and flipped himself over, planting his face deep under water. He took the biggest breath of water he could muster.

He wildly burst out of the water, flailing his arms, hacking and coughing. Water poured from his nose and mouth as his comfortable dream dissolved, burning like the salt water in his lungs. He was truly awake now, his eyes darting all around in an effort to understand this strange reality. Minutes of rushing panic passed before he began to calm down.

"I... I need to see my wife." His voice reeked with panic. Frantically nodding in agreement with himself, he closed his eyes and tried to focus.

He opened his eyes, still wading in the ocean. He tried to remember what he'd been told. His hands fumbled to his neck and grasped the blue pendant tightly between his clenched hands. He concentrated all the Will he could muster on the pendant, his body shaking with effort. Soon an unfamiliar strain tugged at his eyes before blinding him with a burst of light.

The ocean around him barely noticed him vanish. Waves rushed quietly to fill the space where his shaking body floated a second before.