

## **Thankful**

By Jason Dean Sharpe

Tara stares nervously at the large wire fence. She drags her right foot back and forth steadily on the dirt ground while the others feast greedily at the droppings that had been strewn about just minutes before. She knows the little female being will be there any minute, but isn't exactly sure how she knows this. Something inside her screamed it out when she had seen the big blue transportation device rumble by the holding pen just before the masters brought their dinner.

This is the way it has been for a little while now, at least seven suns and moons. Whenever the big blue metal beast rumbled by, the little female with the bright colored coverings came running around their holding area, opened the fence and marched directly over to Tara.

Glancing over the mass of gluttonous slobs she stops to take a quick peek at Ted, pecking away at his meal as though he hadn't eaten in weeks. Luckily, what Ted lacks in manners he makes up for in kindness and honesty. She is glad he is one of the marked bunch.

Beside Ted as always is Tabitha, the constant belle of the ball. Tabitha is the biggest of the prisoners; in fact Tara is almost certain the masters are sending a little extra her way every now and then to make sure she is the biggest.

She had noticed recently how they were always pointing at Tabitha from outside the fence, smiling and whispering to each other as they did. Tara isn't sure if this is a good thing or not but Tabby ate it all up. Big ego aside, Tabby is Tara's best friend and they worry about each other constantly. Tara worries about why the big ones are trying to fatten Tabby up and Tabby worries about Tara with her crazy ideas for escape and freedom.

Of course Tara always tries to convince Tabby, and recently Ted, to go along with her but neither of them has the guts to go through with it. Or maybe they simply have the common sense not to even bother trying. Tara wonders if perhaps they are right.

A sloshing of pebbles snaps Tara out of her daze and her chest pumps loudly in her ears as a large glob of shiny golden hair goes whizzing by the compound. It is Daisy, one of the guards, no doubt just coming on duty and performing her rounds.

“Not a good time for a break is it?” It is Tabby. She has sprinted over from the rest of the pack when she noticed Tara hiding in her breakout spot. “Daisy’s out and about. Surely you aren’t going to try a break with her doing her rounds? That’s crazy.”

“Go back to your poor excuse for a meal Tabby. The little one will be along soon and I plan to take full advantage of it.” Tara fixes her eyes on the walkway. She feels bad for being curt with Tabby, but if she isn’t going to join the break out Tara doesn’t want her anywhere near to mess things up.

“What little one? The one with the flower coverings?” Tabby stands there blinking incessantly as she glances around the compound, waiting for this magical little being to appear.

“Yes. That’s the one I’m waiting on.” Tara rolls her eyes and snorts. While Tabby may be the belle, she definitely isn’t the brains. Not of the ball. Not of anything.

Both of them had lost their parents when they were very young, but Tara was lucky enough to have had hers instill all the knowledge they possibly could in the very short period of time that they had. This, of course, makes her stand out from the rest, apparently even to the big ones.

“Well when are you expecting this little one? I’m still hungry.” Tabby’s head continues moving as though she is scanning the pen but her eyes are fixed on the middle of the pack, where the grub is getting thin.

“She should have been here by now. Blue metal beast. Rumbling past quickly. High pitched screech. Little female. Flower coverings.” Tara emerges from the corner of the pen where she has been hiding out of sight from the gate. “It’s always the same, I just don’t understand it!”

Tabby glances around worried by the others who seemed as though they could go for a little after dining entertainment. She has seen Tara in this state before and knows it is awfully hard to bring her back to normal. “Careful now or you’ll get the others excited.”

“I’m tired of being careful! I’ve had enough!” Tara has had enough. She stumbles backwards into the middle of the pen as her cellmates finally begin to take notice of the strange goings on with the two younger prisoners. A woozy dizzy feeling sweeps through Tara. She stops center stage and slowly begins a counterclockwise spin that makes it look as though she will eventually burrow herself up to her ever pounding chest.

Images pour through her head in waves as her spin begins to pick up speed. The gate. The yard. The others huddling together yelping and confused. Tabby. The gate. The yard. The others. Tabby and Ted. The gate. A large group of big ones walking up the yard. The others scattering apart...

“STOP RIGHT NOW!!!” Ted. Looking even more shocked than Tara felt at the level to which he had managed to scream at her. “You’ve gone and started a bit of a hoopla and you know how easily those can turn into hullabaloes and I am not very fond of hullabaloes. So won’t you please calm down Tara? For my sake.”

Tara turns towards the others sheepishly. They have all conglomerated at the far side of the holding cell and every single eye is glued to the three marked prisoners standing in the spotlight.

Tara thinks it over in her head. She is rather fond of hooplas, mostly because she is usually a spectator chuckling from the sidelines at all the others but this time she is the main cause of it all and it embarrasses her.

She turns back towards Ted and stares at the ground in front of her. “I’m sorry Ted. You’re right, I’m being a fool. It’s just I was so sure that today would be the day. I’ve never felt so strongly about something before. It’s as though it’s circling all around me. My skin is bumpy.”

“Everyone seems a little out of sorts today. Isn’t that right Tabitha?” Ted glances at Tabby desperate that she will know exactly what to say to keep her best friend calm, but something in the distance seems to have caught her attention now.

“I agree wholeheartedly Ted. I could hardly even eat over half my dinner...” Tabby drifts in-between Ted and Tara in a hypnotized daze. “Who are all those big ones?”

She slowly prances her way over to the perimeter fence closest to the walkway in a trance. The others don’t take long to change their point of fixation and it doesn’t take any longer

for them to see what Tabby has noticed: a large group of big ones all arriving at once at the fence. Never so quickly has a hoopla turned into an all out hullabaloo.

Tara gulps deep and hard. She tries to think of the last time she has had some water. Judging by the desert forming in her throat, quite some time and she curses herself knowing full well that proper hydration is of great necessity here in the holding pen.

“This doesn’t seem right. Why are there so many of them?” Tara slowly starts her way back to the corner of the pen, eyeing Tabby who is in full hullabaloo form. “Ted, do you think you can snap her out of it?” Tara can’t tell, watching Tabby run amok from her secret corner prison break spot, but Ted has other plans.

When the main big one places his hand on the fence gate latch to open it he could never have expected the egregious attack about to befall him. He is communicating with the other big ones somewhat calmly as he pulls up the latch, yanking out the gate of the fence and this is when Ted makes his move.

Ted has never considered himself to be the brightest bulb in the bunch, but he is fairly certain that something big is about to happen and that if Tara is to have any chance of escape it will have to be now.

He stands directly in front of the gate to the cell watching with fervid intent as the big one opens it, not worrying about Ted in the least. “This will be a mistake you never make again in your big ugly life!”

Ted leaps through the air as high as he can with his weak, scrawny little legs. It is just the right height to strike where he is aiming for and draws just enough blood to send the big one flying back through the now fully opened gateway.

Out of the blue with an ardent warrior battle cry, Tabby lunges at the big one who is now on his behind and totally at striking level. Ted wonders if she is fully aware of her actions, but then he wondered this at least five times a day when it comes to Tabby.

Tara watches from the sidelines with awkward amazement. It has yet to dawn on her that Ted has purposefully given her a distraction to make her big break, however she is fairly certain that her best friend Tabby has finally lost her mind.

Tabby sees red. Everywhere the color red. She is frightened, frantic, tired and for some reason downright hungry. Every action feels controlled by some invisible puppet master laughing somewhere above her. Surely she would never lunge at a big ones seeing hole of her

own free will? Then, as suddenly as it had all began for Tabby, it all ended and red turned to black.

Ted stands stoic as the fallen big one launches his arm at Tabby defensively. He tries to command his feet to run to her aid to no avail so he does the next best thing he can before the big one gets up and really repays Tabby for the damage she has done. "FREEDOM!!"

Tara smiles lovingly at Ted. This is a word she has assaulted him with countless times in the past few suns and moons. While she had begun to think he would never fully understand the concept, there he stands bellowing it at the top of his lungs for the whole planet to hear with real feeling.

The stampede is like nothing she has ever witnessed before. The others are moshing in their usual fashion at the center of the cell, when Ted's cry for freedom heralds them towards the open gate like a beacon in the night. Before she knows it prisoners and big ones are flailing to and fro, shouting and poking at each other in what has escalated into something no creature present has ever witnessed before: a big fat hootenanny.

The massive hand gripping his neck was like nothing Ted had ever experienced before in his life. He struggles to pull in as much air as he can before his throat is totally and completely blocked off. He too wonders when the last time he has had some water was. Hydration is of major importance he remembers his mother telling him before she was taken many suns and moons ago. They never did know when they would have access to water and when they wouldn't.

He smiles as the blackness creeps in and his eyes settle on Tara, slowly creeping past the open gate and one step closer to her freedom.

This isn't the farthest Tara has ever been on the compound. They have routinely been brought outside to feed in the strong suns rays for a long period of time but that had all stopped with the sudden change in temperature.

She has situated herself behind a long green shrub at the side of the main holding area she has just fled and can see directly in front of her the area she wants to go to.

Many tall brown beings with orange and yellow head coverings have congregated, she supposes, to watch the hootenanny that she has gladly left behind her.

She wonders if these brown beings are friend or foe. Hard to tell considering the fact that they simply stand there staring and don't budge an inch to help her friends or the big ones. Their neutrality not being her main concern at the moment, Tara glances quickly towards the slowly dying melee at the holding pen. When she sees that all big ones are otherwise occupied she turns, darting towards her destination at the far end of the compound.

Upon arrival, Tara stops to catch her breath. She is pretty sure that life on the run is going to get her in better shape than she is now, but if it doesn't she promises herself she'll start a regular exercise routine. She tries to remember the last time she had some.

A green tubular device hangs coiled at the side of the compound. At the very end of it drips water. Not even remotely concerned it could be a trap, she springs towards it jubilated and re-invigorated with glee. Her throat can't swallow enough of the tantalizing clear nectar and she chokes on the cool refreshment coursing rapidly down into her stomach.

When she has had enough to drink she dips her head beneath the cooling stream for a moment and then shakes the nectar off joyfully. Her joy quickly turns to fear as she notices a strange sound coming from behind her.

A hulking shadow rises slowly up the compounds side, towering above her faster than she has time to blink. She recognizes the silhouette immediately and spins to face her would be captor, Daisy.

Tara had forgotten all about Daisy doing her rounds, but there she stood with a big toothy grin and drool running down her chin. This wasn't good at all.

The two of them stand, not more than a foot from each other, for what seems like an hour. Tara has no plan to give any quarter and she knows that Daisy will fulfill her obligations as the prisons main security guard to the best of her abilities. Daisy is above a bribe and even if Tara had something to offer they wouldn't understand each other anyhow. It is a good old fashioned Mexican stand off.

Daisy assumes her attack posture and almost looks as though she is about to break into a stretch of some kind. Pushing her head towards Tara and bearing her teeth threateningly she yells abruptly and growls for what feels like an eternity.

Tara, not sweating one little bit, backs towards the green tubular device at the wall and readies herself by crouching as close to the ground as she possibly can. Daisy springs forward

like a led ball from a canon and Tara is already on top of the tubular water delivery device when Daisy's golden haired head bashes into the wall with knock out force.

Tara hears a swarm of noises coming from behind her as she runs toward the big fence, but she doesn't plan to stop and see what they are all about. For all she knows the big brown ones have decided to join the fight for her side and are pummeling the big ones with their long thick arms.

She had seen the big fence once before and she knew that unlike the smaller ones she had been locked up behind, she could sneak under the openings in this one with great ease. Of course, that was her opinion from a much greater distance than what she was at now.

Lucky for her she tripped on a jutting gray piece of the ground some four feet before the fence, or she would have run herself directly into the thin metal mesh covering every part of the great big fence. She lay on the ground in awe of this magnificent entrapping mechanism basking in the glowing sunset and then, as with the other two delinquents, blackness came quickly.

Whenever Tara dreamt, it was often of her parents. Memories, more than dreams, of her father telling her everything he had stored away in his head from his father and grandfather before him. Tara's mother would always stand to the side staring at him with loving affection as he told the stories from a time long ago.

Most of the stories involved Tara's great grandfather, Tucker the Wild One, and his hair brained schemes to escape his captors at any cost and rejoin his family and friends living outside the compound, in freedom. This was how Tara had learned the word and its true meaning.

Tucker was not born inside. He was an outsider, a "caught one". She had always assumed that all of them were born inside. When she learned that she was a direct descendant of a "caught one", her future had been determined right there and then.

Legend had it, or Tara's father did anyway, that Tucker was caught by the masters and brought into the prison to mate with the captive females. The big ones wanted a new breed of specimens to maim and torture, but all attempts had failed horribly. Until Tucker. He was their stud on campus and took to the new task like flies took to shit, never forgetting his ultimate goal of escape.

Tara often wondered if this is what had made her a marked one. There really wasn't anything special about her except for her bloodline, that and the fact that she was always looking

for a way out. Was this why her friends had been marked? By association to her? There was a reason or two as to why Tabby might be of interest to the big ones, but why Ted? He was as skinny and plain old boring as they came.

Then something dawned on Tara as she tried to adjust her eyes to the total and complete darkness that surrounded her now: maybe she and Ted were chosen because of their friendship with The Belle? Tabby was the center of attention these days as far as the big ones were concerned, and the only big one who gave Tara any kind of attention was the little female with flowered coverings. Could she be the reason for their being marked?

Tara struggles to place exactly how long after the little one started visiting that she and the others were marked, but she isn't very good with things like time. She has always counted on Ted for things of that nature, but he isn't there to help her now and that makes her sad.

As she attempts to rise from her laying position, she is immediately thrown up in the air and lands hard on her bottom, wetting herself a little with surprise and fear.

"Am I alone? Is anyone there?" She listens for an answer and lays perfectly still. Wondering if she has broken anything in her bottom, she is thrown again sideways in a rolling wheelbarrow pirouette. Her head cracks against something hard and for the second time in one day, the darkness comes.

The smell is what wakes her up. It creeps up her nose and jiggles her eye coverings open ever so slightly. Where has she smelled this before? And then she remembers.

There hadn't been anything particularly special about the day, just that she hadn't eaten at first meal. She was too busy plotting from her secret breakout spot and so when second meal had come around her insides felt as though they were going to eat themselves right through to her outer coverings.

She had run to the center of the mob, shoving her head right into a big mound of feed and was so excited that she didn't notice there was a little extra this time around. The feeling on her mouth worm was not something she was expecting and she spit it right into Ted's face, immediately embarrassed. Ted however was oblivious to her faux pas and was studying the foreign matter with great interest.

It wasn't its round shape, or shiny golden brownness that interested Ted so much, it was the fact that there was a picture of a female big one on it that he found so enthralling. Tara on the

other hand just wanted that horrible taste out of her mouth. What she smelled now, reminded her of that taste.

Her sight coverings were able to open fully without pain now, and she immediately wishes they hadn't. Directly in front of her, hanging from a rope, is the source of the horrible smell. Tara tells herself not to scream as she struggles to draw wind down her arid breathing tube.

Her legs shake as they use every ounce of energy to push her tiny shaking body up off the dusty ground, taking in the horror that hung in front of her now.

The thick, colorless, soft tubing is attached to a piece of the new prison cells covering in the same looping manner it is wrapped around the strange body's foot. The other foot and leg stick out to the side stiffly and with a clenching fashion. Is this a strange body? Tara can't tell from her vantage point as she steps forward ever so carefully towards the new imprisoning wall.

The smell is stronger now and the dryness in her throat screams to be quenched. The size of the body at first has her thinking it could be Tabby, but it is actually much larger than her friend and the covers coloring isn't quite right. Tara sighs with relief.

She forces herself to look at the area that every fiber of her being tells her not to look at and she instantly regrets her forthcoming curiosity.

Blood drools slowly from the body's air breathing tube and it appears to float through the air in slow motion down to a large dull colored entrapment device. It reminds her of the outer water falling from the sky, except heavier. She turns away, unable to take in any more than she already has.

Breathing deeply, Tara slowly gets her wits about her and takes a good look around her new home. It really wasn't that different from her old cell. She wonders if she is still on the same compound. And why is she alone? She is filled with dread as to what fate might have touched her two dear friends when a familiar voice comes at her from behind.

The little female big one enters the room extremely excited and somewhat angry at the same time. She is babbling incessantly at another big one who has walked in behind her and Tara wishes that at some point she had found the time and ability to learn to communicate with at least this little big one.

For some reason Tara has a good feeling about her and is sure that if they could at least talk to each other in some way, the little one would have a good explanation as to why the big ones were doing what they had always done to Tara's kind.

Good feeling aside, Tara instinctively takes a few steps back as the little one approaches her. She stops after a few steps knowing there is nowhere she can go to save herself from whatever fate awaits her.

The little female big one stops directly in front of Tara putting both her large hands up in front of Tara's face in a way that makes Tara feel at ease. She hesitantly takes a step towards her and the little one reaches into her colorful covering with one hand pulling something out while gently stroking Tara's head with her free hand.

Tara feels something soft slip around her breathing tube and as the little female stands up she notices the same colorless tubing that is attached to the strange hanging body is what is now attached to hers.

Panic immediately sets in and Tara struggles in the opposite direction that the little female is trying to gently pull her in. Tara screams as though some magical being will come and save her from her fate. The little female immediately stops pulling and Tara hears a sound that makes her feel shocked, delighted and also a little bit confused. She thinks she hears Ted and Tabby yelling from another part of this new compound.

Tara treads softly behind the little female down a long dark walkway that has a strong odour of urine and fecal matter. On either side of her are massive beings that stand taller even than the big ones and are covered in dark short hair not unlike Daisy's. They stand on four legs and stare at her with great trepidation from behind their massive enclosures on either side of the walkway.

Tara is in awe and wonders if these are the true masters. Surely these great beings couldn't be prisoners of the big ones as Tara was? They seemed more than capable of doing massive amounts of damage to them in one swift movement, so how could they not be in control here?

The little female leads Tara past the last of the great beings and into a large open room not unlike the one where the strange body had hung. Relief grabs hold of her entire body as she gazes upon Ted and Tabby standing stoically in the center of their new holding cell.

The little female softly removes the limp colorless tube from around Tara's breathing tube and Tara rushes over to where her friends are waiting gleefully for her. "Tara!"

"Oh Tara, we're both so very glad you're here with us. We seem to be the only ones of our kind." Tara smiles blissfully at Ted, remembering what she thought at the time might be the last words she would hear him scream. "I did it Ted. I had a small taste of freedom. Thank you for that."

"He was very worried for you Tara. We both were. I almost couldn't finish my supper! There's some left if you're hungry." Tabby searches around the ground for what scraps of food there might be left for Tara and notices something on Tara's leg.

Ted notices at the exact same moment that Tabby does. "Hey! You're still marked! Ours were removed as soon as they brought us to this cell." Tara peers down at the orange colored object that has been wrapped permanently around her left leg for a very long while now. She looks at Ted and Tabby's legs noticing that their markings have indeed been removed. What did this mean? Was Tara the reason the other two had been marked? Why hasn't she been unmarked as the other two have been?

She hears the big ones behind her talking and she turns towards them, trying desperately to get some sense of what is going on. She stares at their moving face holes wondering what in the world they could possibly be saying to each other.

The male big one has his hand on the little female big ones head. She is staring at Tara with pity in her eyes. "How would you feel if you woke up in a strange room with one of your headless friends hanging from the rafters Daddy?" The male big one pats the little females head gently.

"There are only so many times I can apologize Gracie. Side's, she doesn't know the one that's hanging. We got him from another farm three years ago." The male big one kneels down beside the little female staring at Tara quizzically. "Aren't you gonna take her I.D. tag off like you did her friends?"

The little female one shakes her head forcefully and crosses her arms at her chest firmly. "I don't want there to be any mistake come Christmas dinner a month from now. Tara is the one with the tag still on. She's my pet and you promised I could keep her till the day she dies. Of natural causes."

The little female one uncrosses her arms, holding one hand out towards the male big one. He looks at her outstretched hand and smiles, shaking his head slowly as he rises from the ground. He looks over at Tara then back at the little female, taking her hand in his and shakes it up and down. “A deals a deal kiddo. Tara gets a free pass from the guillotine till the day she dies. But these three better not pull any kind of ruckus like they did over at Farmer Johnson’s when we picked them up this afternoon. Never have I seen such a fuss caused over one little turkey. Now get in the house and help your mother set the table for tomorrow night. A lot of people are gonna be here this year.”

“O.K. Daddy, let me just say goodbye to Tara.” The little female runs over and slides down in front of Tara who is still trying frantically to figure out just one word of what the two big ones were just saying to each other. She puts her arms around Tara, squeezing her gently. “Don’t worry Tara; you’ll be safe here for a very long time. I won’t let anything bad happen to you. I’ve been working hard and saving my money and you’re the pet I want to have. We’re going to have lots of fun teaching you new tricks, but we’re gonna have to start tomorrow cause I got to go help mama now. I hope you and your friends like it here.”

“Absolute Gibberish!” Tara exclaims as the little female one runs from the room, closing the large metal barrier behind her. “What kind of crazy babbledeegook was that?” Tara sighs, staring at the brand new enclosure that she is now going to have to figure out how to escape, with less distractions and more watchful eyes than her previous prison had.

“You mean you were actually trying to figure that muckaluck out?” Tabby is over at the wall dipping her head into a large shiny gray container. She pulls her head out and water drips from her mouth. Tara remembers that she is in desperate need of water and rushes over to dip her head in too.

Ted walks over to a gray container not too far from where the girls stand. “They even put our feed in these large containers here. Isn’t that wonderful? I hope it doesn’t get too crowded in here, or there’ll be a real fight over these things come supper time. I don’t know about you two but I’ve had enough of the hullabaloo for a while. You should eat something Tara. You must be hungry after all that’s happened.”

“Actually I’m hungrier than I can ever remember being Ted.” Tara strolls up to the container with the feed in it and peeks inside. She thinks about how peaceful it is here and wonders if it will always stay that way. She sinks her head into the feed almost choking on the

deep, fresh helping of corn. She would definitely have a lot to get used to here, but she likes the fact that it is just her and her two friends.

She plucks her head out and takes a real good look around the room. A nagging feeling of dread crawls into the back of her head as she remembers the strange body hanging in the other room. She can't help but wonder if the same fate might be in store for any of the three of them in the near future.

Gulping down her food, she settles her sights on Ted and Tabby. How did the three of them manage to end up in the same place together, when so many others simply disappear by themselves in the night? She figures it has something to do with the kind little female big one, but it didn't really matter to Tara in the end. This place was nicer and quieter than the last one and most of all, she was thankful to be with her two best friends.

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