

THE LIGHT OF MEN

BY

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DEDICATION

*For Mirjam
Without whose unwavering support
and encouragement this novel would
not have been possible.
All my love, Andrew.*



Airship 27 Presents
"The Light of Men"
by Andrew Salmon
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In him was life;
and the life was the light of men

~John 1:4

CHAPTER ONE

The train whistle shrieked across the deepening twilight. A lancing, yellow beam beneath a thick column of agitated smoke washed over the exhausted prisoners strewn about the platform, heralding the arrival of the transport. The emaciated prisoners rose slowly as though jerked by invisible strings. Another blast from the whistle urged them upright but they did not hurry, their work had long since become routine.

Forming strict ranks of three, they stood disinterested and downcast. Only the animal gleam of hunger in their eyes betrayed any emotion. The thundering locomotive loomed out of the black autumn night. Hissing and spitting like an enormous snake, it slowed, trailing its long body behind. Its single bright orb threw light on the armed SS men on either side of the track and turned the skeletal faces of the staring prisoners ghostly pale.

Staff cars rolled up to disgorge SS officers who took up vantage points above their men and the prisoners. Silver eagles clutching swastikas gleamed and winked from their caps as they looked down on the scene about to unfold.

At the arrival of the officers, the prisoners shrugged off their disinterest. The hiss of steam subsided only to be replaced by a new sound from the cars. Rumbling, chaotic murmurs and muffled cries seeped from between the slatted walls of the cattle cars.

“Water! Water!”

All along the sixty cars of the train the litany roared. Desperate faces pressed themselves between the slats, gulped air, then vanished and were replaced by others. The cars creaked and swayed with the shifting of the teeming, invisible mass they contained.

Barked orders. The SS men leapt to the doors. The shouts aroused the people in the cars and the volume of their pleas grew. The men drew the bolts which cracked like rifle shots.

Men, women and children were packed 150 to a car. When the doors rumbled open, the dead poured out like water from a pitcher. They toppled into the pools of sickly yellow haze cast by the light poles overhead.

“Everyone get out! Bring your hand baggage with you! Leave heavy baggage inside!”

Men jumped down, then turned with hands outstretched for the women, children and the elderly. The light baggage followed.

“Men to the left! Women to the right!” shouted a dozen SS noncoms who had come forward. With no trace of emotion in their voices and with an air of calm efficiency, they moved amongst the filthy, hungry arrivals, asking, “How old? Healthy?”

The prisoners marched forward. Their striped garb and hairless knobby heads gave them an eerie similarity. In rows of threes, they moved towards the train with an odd, embarrassed step with arms rigid at their sides, heads dangling in front.

In minutes, the cars were empty. Individual clouds of breath rose above the crowd, turning to a pinkish color as they rose to mingle with the smoke from the crematorium. The sickly sweet smell of burning flesh descended on the new arrivals, winding its way through the fetid odor from the cars and their contents.

A third of the way down the length of the train, a young man leapt gracefully down from a boxcar. He moved easily through the crowd. No wife clung to his threadbare, torn coat. No children hid themselves behind his soiled black trousers. He carried no backpack, no luggage of any kind.

He was tall, slim, well proportioned with an athletic build barely concealed by his loose work shirt and tattered trousers. The cold

October wind ran through his short, brown hair but did not furrow his high forehead. It did not pinch his long, thin nose or raise a blush on his high cheeks. The stench of human waste, in the car, on his clothes, all around him, sent no waves of nausea through him. He stood passive amidst the crowd, his dark eyes, set wide apart, gazed in the direction of distant thunder promising rain.

An SS man quickly made his way toward the young man. In his wake, columns of men and women formed. At the same time, a flushed, handsome peasant woman was struggling with an SS noncom behind the young man. The scuffle sent her thin, bony husband crashing into him. He turned.

“Women to the left!” the SS soldier spat. He held the woman by her scarf as she tried to tear away. The husband dug a claw-like hand into the guard’s shoulder as the woman fought to break free. Enraged, the guard released the woman, raised the butt of his rifle and struck the husband on the side of the head. The spindly man dropped senseless at the young man’s feet. The guard dragged the woman off. She could only stare open-mouthed, rigid with shock.

The young man went down on one knee to examine the fallen man. Blood poured from the side of the man’s head. His eyes held a vague, opaque stare.

“What are you doing here?” the husband asked the young man in his delirium.

The young man did not reply. The husband was a stranger who, in his semi-conscious state, mistook him for someone else.

“I lose nothing when I lose my life,” the dying man said. He clasped the young man’s hand.

A rifle butt hit the young man between the shoulder blades. “Up, you! Or do you want to join your friend in the great beyond?” There was ire in the guard’s laughter.

The young man rose, letting the frozen claw drop away. He moved quickly to the right and did not look back.

Sorting was easier now. Terror and hunger had overcome curiosity. In less than ten minutes the new arrivals were separated into two ragged columns. The column of women, children, the sick and aged were ordered forward first. Families called to each other across the



"I lose nothing when I lose my life."

widening gulf but their words were swallowed by the sickly sweet cloud overhead. Soon wives, children, grandparents dwindled to an obscure mass at the end of the platform -- a twisting stream winding its way to the large iron gates and the crematorium.

The striped prisoners marched into the cars to remove the dead and the heavy baggage left behind. Dead infants, old men, bodies trampled beyond recognition dropped from the cars like heavy, black sacks.

The order was given and the column of men moved forward as if linked by a giant rope tugged by invisible hands. Some of the prisoners marched alongside the column, shining their lights in each face, begging for bread or valuables. The men, eyes rigid on the gates, mouths dumb with something beyond their understanding, ignored their faceless tormentors.

Between the wrought iron letters atop the gate, the young man watched the last of the light kiss the snow-topped mountain peaks behind the spire of the crematorium. He read the words: Arbeit Macht Frei -- Work Will Free You -- then the light was gone. Only the glow of the crematorium remained.

The road the new arrivals were marched along was made up of the broken tombstones from the Jewish cemetery in the neighboring village of Jenseits. Births and deaths, old and young passed beneath the weary feet of the straggling column. The road stretched for three hundred meters. On either side ran high barbwire fences bearing signs that read: Danger High Tension. Beyond the wire, rows of barracks squatted in the deepening gloom. From high on the smooth walls pierced tiny windows through which pale, skeletal faces watched them with too-large eyes.

The new arrivals were ordered into long barracks. No heat emanated from the gurgling radiators. Terrified eyes glared at the dripping sink against the far wall. Thirst leapt into their throats despite the sign, which said, "Wassen Trinken Verboten."

An SS man entered.

"Form rows of five! Two yards between each man!"

His harsh voice echoed along the length of the barrack. The men instantly obeyed. Only the shuffling of feet accompanied this motion.

The men were still too numb to speak or question.

“Strip!” the man barked again when the rows had been formed to his liking. “You have ten minutes!”

Hand luggage boomed to the ground as the last syllable of the guard’s orders died away. Like pack animals the men shrugged out of their burdens.

“Woolen garments on one side, the rest on the other!”

Small mountains of garments rose up next to each of the shivering men. No one looked around. No one questioned. Each man stared at the bare back of the man in front. The front ranks stared at the sink into which dripped rhythmically the tainted water.

“Tie your shoes together,” cautioned the SS man. “You don’t want them stolen.”

In minutes the new arrivals were reduced to bare, clenched skin and blue lips below fixed stares. The SS man, satisfied at the speed of the new group, opened the door to leave. A blast of cold air rushed in, sending small convulsions over the men. The SS man deliberately closed the door then opened it again, smiling at the effect. The door closed behind him.

Four men with razors came in after him. With quick swipes and prodding, the new arrivals were shaved. The young man watched as great tufts of hair from the naked peasant in front of him collected like the hump of a camel poking out of the floor. All body hair was removed, carpeting the cold damp floor. The buzz of the razors fell silent. The new arrivals stood naked and alone.

Voices. The new arrivals began to speak for the first time since having left the train. A din of questions quickly silenced by the guards who had rattled in undetected.

“Outside! Outside! On the double!”

The exhausted men called up reserves forgotten in primordial memory and ran out the doors into the cold night. Kapos -- prisoners with white armbands embossed with a large black “K” -- beat them with axe handles. A youth, no more than fifteen was struck down. An older man, his father, seeing this, roared like a lion and charged the Kapo. In seconds the man was clubbed senseless while the naked youth sobbed in the mud.

The young man had to step around the fallen youth and received a solid blow to the kidneys for breaking ranks. He staggered but kept up with the rest. He heard the dull thumps of the axe handles as the fallen youth was bludgeoned behind him. This sound was quickly lost in the desperate breathing of the rest of the column, which had doubled its efforts to distance themselves from the slaughter at their backs.

A sign proclaimed 'Bathhouse' in a dozen languages. Outside the double doors of this barrack stood a barrel of petrol. Each prisoner was doused before entering the bathhouse. This was done to kill any vermin the men may have acquired during their time on the train.

Once inside, steaming hot water rained down on them. It pierced their frozen skin, providing the first comfort they had felt in a long time. They splashed about in the hot shower, some even spat jets of water out of their mouths. Smiles were born and died, a laugh echoed, strange and alien.

The comfort was short lived. After five minutes the water stopped. Naked and shivering the men stood about uncertain as to what would happen next. Some found their voices. Questions were asked, "Where are we?" "What will become of us?" But these newly shorn prisoners who had once been men had no answers.

Every mouth closed as the door banged open. Before them stood another of those comical fellows with the striped pajamas. However, by this time, he was not so comical because the new arrivals saw themselves reflected in his round head and pinched features. His sunken eyes held the promise of the same affliction being visited upon them. They were large, round, the whites yellowed and they seemed to look past the new arrivals at some nightmare they could only guess at.

"This is Kozenrationlager Gutundbose," his voice boomed over the heads of the naked men like a judgment. "We are five kilometers from the town of Jenseits, which rests 500 kilometers west of Frankfurt. You will be given shoes and clothes."

"Where are our wives?" a voice rang out.

"What have they done with the children?" asked another.

"You will work," the prisoner continued, ignoring their questions.

“On Sundays, there are concerts, football matches. Work well and you will receive coupons for water and tobacco. The water is no good, don’t drink it. Don’t worry, the soup is water enough.”

The young man was close to the speaker and took in every word while examining the inverted red triangle on the prisoner’s jacket. His speech completed, the prisoner turned and left, banging the door shut behind him.

Four Kapos entered and were on the new arrivals in a flash, herding them outside into the cold night.

The Clothing Room was some distance from the Bathhouse so the Kapos double-timed the new arrivals. A clinging, icy mist began to fall, chilling the prisoners. Panting and wheezing, they were queued up once more and led into a barracks. Inside were very long tables upon which were piled heaps of striped clothing. This line moved quickly as the prisoners behind the tables began throwing garments at the first in line. Each new arrival was issued, arbitrarily, a shirt, jacket, pants, underpants, a cap and, if fortunate, socks and shoes. The frozen men, ignoring the wretched odors of death, disease and human waste quickly donned these soiled, ragged garments.

The young man found himself in the possession of the top half of a priest’s cassock, the back of which contained three small holes rimmed with dark red circles. He slipped it on without comment, pulling the striped jacket over it. He had been issued shoes -- a wrecked pair of black work boots -- but no socks. The brim of his cap was hard with dried sweat and perched uncomfortably on his shaved skull.

The Kapos screamed at the new arrivals and led them back outside where their new garments were little protection from the elements. Shoed feet rumbled across the frozen mud, bare feet slapped in time as the great, faceless mass were driven the one hundred yards to the next hut.

Inside, they were ordered to line up alphabetically then were filed past a skilled official clutching a pointed tool with a short needle. They were all given numbers tattooed on the inside of their left forearms.

When it was the young man’s turn he watched the skilled man as

he worked the needle. Colored smoke rose up before his rapt eyes. The needle bit and stung the soft flesh of his arm. In blue characters an inch high his number -- 96432 -- was pressed into his skin.

With their freedom, clothes, hair and names taken from them, the new arrivals were marched outside. They ran with their thoughts dimly glowing behind their terrified eyes. SS men had taken over the herd. The Kapos joined the new arrivals but the SS did not cudgel them.

Some of the men tried rubbing their sides to produce heat as they ran but the sergeant ordered them to run with their hands above their heads. The young man ran easily, his breathing unlabored.

They were led up a road, which ran perpendicular to the one they'd come in on. To their surprise, they did not stop at the rows of barracks squatting in the light rain, but continued along the packed dirt road into the glare of the lights surrounding the roll call area. This was a dead open area extending from the front gate to the barracks.

The new arrivals ran across this area to the end at the right of the gate. Here they stood at attention for forty minutes in the freezing rain awaiting the return of the work parties to the camp.

Normally the SS men would have passed the time by tormenting the new arrivals but the rain had dampened their enthusiasm and they huddled in a small hut to watch the rain run down the scraped, smooth heads of the new prisoners.

As time crept by, the new arrivals moved only their eyes as they looked about like newborns at this strange world. The exertion required to keep their bodies absolutely rigid was too much for some and they fainted. This brought a curse from a guard who came out of the hut and mercilessly beat the prisoner until he got back in ranks or was dead.

The young man listened to the rain, watched it drip from the barbwire gate. Towers squatted like monsters every thirty feet along the wire, the SS men huddled in their great coats like turtles, blowing on their hands. All was quiet save the drumming of the rain and the odd cough from the guard's hut.

A group of prisoners emerged from one of the barracks just as

the rain began to taper off. Hastily, and silently, they set up their instruments, casting a quick glance at the arrivals.

From around the bend in the road beyond the gate, in columns of five, the prisoners came up the road, marching with that unnatural gait like crude, jointless puppets. The band took up the Emperor's Waltz and the men marched, downcast and ragged, in time to the music.

Another prisoner had appeared before the new arrivals. His uniform bore no dirt, contained no holes. The SS men acknowledged him as they emerged from the hut.

The prisoner's faces were exhausted, drawn, jaundiced. The weary stamp of their filthy shoes filled the roll call area, drowning out the gay music. The last column entered, staggering under their burden. On their backs they carried the dead or those too exhausted to march. This column took their place at the head of the ranks so that the dead too could be noted and recorded.

Rules dominated in death as they did in life. Corpses were laid with their heads square to the feet of the first rank, legs stretched out, hands folded on their belly cavity, Their heads precisely lined up with the muddy shoes of the first rank.

The prisoner with the clean uniform called the roll, taking a moment to record the numbers of the dead. Satisfied, he turned to the bored SS sergeant with the results.

"Abspene!" the prisoner barked after the SS men had marched off.

Stiff ranks broke up like wind tossed leaves. Amidst the confused, turbulent movement, a small detail was assembled to tote the dead and exhausted to the crematorium.

The new arrivals followed the prisoners now dragging themselves along to the barracks. A Blockaltester -- barrack commander -- waited outside each barrack for them. Without steel bowls attached to their belts, he picked out the new arrivals amongst the prisoners trudging aimlessly in stark contrast to the imposed rigidity of their earlier marching.

"Attention!" he shouted. "I'm only going to say this once. The Altesters are in charge. Disobey and you'll go up the chimney. Their

ranks are their armbands! 'LA' means Lageraltestor. As far as you lot are concerned, he is the boss in Gutundbose. 'Kapo' stands for Kameradpolizei. Do what they say when they say it and you'll live longer. You will work under a 'Vorarbeiter'. He's the foreman. If he knocks you down, well, get up and wait for more. Last, but not least, me. I am the Blockaltester for this barrack, Block 12. When I tell you to do something, do it. Or else. I'll show you what I mean."

His fleshy face flashed red. Eyes ablaze, he leapt into the crowd of new arrivals and seized a reed-thin man. With grunts of effort and pleasure, he swung his axe handle at the man who cried out once or twice before crumpling lifeless at the Blockaltester's feet.

No one moved a muscle. Silence reigned. The young man regarded their new lord and master with interest. Hands planted firmly on hips, the Blockaltester glared at the new arrivals, daring them to act. Seeing the defenseless man beaten to death in front of them would have outraged them outside but, here, they accepted in numb silence. Inside the camp was a different world.

"Now get inside you piles of shit before I finish off every last one of you!"

Once inside, the cold air was replaced by the fetid, close stench of too many prisoners in too confining an area. There was no talking in the Block. Prisoners regarded the new arrivals over the rims of their bowls. The last meal of the day had been doled out. There would be no food for the new men.

The new arrivals hesitantly eased their way down the tight walkway between the tiered, wooden bunks. Prisoners slurping soup on the floor did not make way for them. The look the veterans had for the new arrivals was a strange mixture of distrust, curiosity and envy. Into their midst had come strong, well-fed men. Their skin had not the yellowish gray of the veterans. Their bellies were not yet distended from starvation. Muscles still hid their bones from view. The old veterans knew that the arrival of new, strong prisoners only made them look even weaker, more jaundiced and brought them closer to the crematorium. When the next selection came, they would be taken. These new arrivals were their replacements. This pattern of logic made its way through the mind of each prisoner as

they gulped their soup and ate their bread over the bowl so as not to lose any crumbs. Their resentment urged them to lash out at the new arrivals.

One of the new prisoners found the courage to ask for a portion of a veteran's bread. The starved veteran bore the green triangle of the convict and slapped the hand of the new arrival away. He added a kick to the man's groin.

And so it began. The new arrivals huddled together as kicks and punches rained down on them. Veterans too weak to do physical harm spat on their victims. There was nowhere the new arrivals could turn. They could not ask to be fed. They had no bowls or spoons and the only way to get them was to steal or trade but they did not know this. Nor did they understand the hate the veterans had for them.

What passed for sanity here slowly took possession of the veterans. They returned to their places on the floor and bunks. The new arrivals remained huddled in a corner of the room.

The young man, a bruise on one cheek, a cut on his chin, took in his surroundings. The prisoners were packed into one-story wooden barracks. Tiers of wooden planks ran along the walls with a narrow walkway between them. There were three rows one on top of the other, the highest coming to just below the ceiling. Each tier held straw pallets. On the pallets, the prisoners were packed like sardines. There was no room to move. One had to lie perfectly straight on one's back or side. It was clear even to the untrained, frightened eyes of the new arrivals that the tiers were full. There was no bed for them this night.

The young man found it curious that after the harsh reception they had received, the veterans ignored them completely. A few large eyes glared at them from the dark recesses of the beds but most slept or conversed in low whispers.

Daring to stand, the young man challenged the veterans. He met every gaze that turned his way as he cautiously, then more quickly, examined the berths in search of a bed for the night. He noticed that the veterans supported their heads beneath a bundle made of the same striped material as their clothes. Few of the prisoners lying

abed were wearing trousers so he assumed these served as makeshift pillows.

He walked the length of the block. At the far wall he stopped. A prisoner was lying on a third level pallet but not like the others. His mouth hung slack and dry, his eyes were half-closed and upon further observation, the young man noticed that this prisoner's chest did not rise and fall. Two other prisoners had noticed their dead comrade and were easing claw-like hands beneath the lifeless head, making it move side-to-side as if trying to deny it was dead. The veterans weren't sure if he was dead, which explained their hesitation to rob the corpse.

The young man didn't hesitate. He crawled up onto the top tier. He shoved the skeletal, probing arms away while trying to place his body between the corpse and the robbers. Weak fingers sought his throat, frail kicks struck his knees and shins. The young man lashed out, quick chopping swings, hitting one veteran on the bridge of the nose, the other in the ribs. They left him alone.

He rolled the corpse over with one hand; the yellow exposed teeth clicked against the rough wall. With his other hand, he uncovered the bundle the corpse's head had been resting on. He found a bowl and spoon wrapped in the corpse's pants and a pair of shoes. A rock hard piece of bread was in one pocket, a shoelace in the other. He tossed the bread at the complaining veterans he had struck and kept the rest. The prisoners fought for the bread.

The young man guessed that the pants would not fit him since the corpse was no more than a skeleton. But they could be traded, as would the prisoner's ragged, worn out shoes under the bowl. The corpse clattered like a wooden puppet as the young man shoved it over the side of the bunk. The corpse fell amongst the new arrivals clustered on the floor, causing a great commotion.

The corpse seemed to dance as the new arrivals kicked and screamed in fright. This brought a holy babble of protests from the veterans. A dozen languages hurled curses and threats as the new prisoners tried to rid themselves of the thing. A few veterans, wearing the green triangle of convicts fell on them with punches and kicks. But they quieted down only after a veteran grabbed one of the

corpse's reed-thin arms and hauled it away.

The young man watched from above with great interest then settled back on the hard, fetid straw. Blood, urine and mud smells assailed him as he placed his head on the dead man's bundle.

So passed the first night