



The
Arroyo

M. Caspian

THE ARROYO

Isaac is tired to the bones. He keeps his head down and looks after his family, but every two years the sick fear comes around again as the Feds arrive for a new harvest of kids.

It's Trace's last sweep; he's about to serve out his term of slavery. One last run and then... what? A life alone, with his books and music? He's seen far too much of the dark side of human nature to think that's a possibility.

Trace and Isaac both know happy ever after doesn't grow in the parched desert. Maybe together they can change that.

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

THE ARROYO

By M. Caspian

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

A dark-haired, young man crouches naked in the corner of a bathtub, beneath a spray of water. White tiles and chrome fittings surround him. A heavy chain with a sturdy padlock is draped over his right shoulder, above a large tribal tattoo on his bicep. The man protects his head and chest with his arms, cowering, as he apprehensively meets the gaze of the viewer staring down at him.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I always knew it was a possibility. Have known since childhood that they could take me someday. The slave traders have been sweeping the area for weeks now but I didn't think they'd want me. They usually take girls and if they take boys they're younger, blonder... prettier. There's not usually a demand for someone who looks like me and has reached the ripe, old age of twenty-four. But I was wrong. Someone did want me. I'm so fucked.

One last sweep of this dirt water town and I can get back to my life. My books, my music, my art and my life that doesn't revolve around grabbing kids to sell to the highest bidder. I hate this shit. One last run. My debt will be paid and I'll be free from that son of a bitch who grabbed ME as a kid. Maybe then I can finally stop thinking and dreaming. Turn off those dark desires that swirl in my head and wake me up at night in a cold sweat. I'm not HIM. I will never be HIM. My last fucking run and it all goes to shit when some guy, trying to be the hero, gets in my face. He's too old, too dark, too inked... but God help me I want him.

I don't know what I was thinking when I stood up to him. I just wanted the kid to have half a chance at getting away. He's so angry. I screwed up his quota and now I'm going to pay for that. He told me to get clean. EVERYWHERE. Then he gave me a thick chain with a padlock on it and told me to chain myself to the table when I was done. Something about "inspecting the merchandise". I'm so fucked.

I'd like a story that caters to my medical kink. Examinations, medical instruments, non-con that turns consensual, never penetrated straight virgin,

training, etc... Prefer some angst with a lot of internal struggle for both characters. Straight guy should struggle against getting aroused by his captor. No Stockholm syndrome and a HEA.

Thanks!

Sincerely,

Moderatrix Lori

Story Info

Genre: dystopia, speculative fiction

Tags: dark, slavefic, medical personnel, medical kink, body modification, abuse, humiliation, first time, age gap, interracial

Content Warnings: graphic violence, sexual violence (rape, sexual assault), medical procedures

Word Count: 34,858

Acknowledgements

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THE ARROYO

By M. Caspian

“That’s the fucking spot.”

The truck shuddered as it descended the arroyo. Trace kept working Pete’s fat prick with his mouth, sucking firmly and tonguing the slit just the way Pete liked it. Pete’s free hand carded through his hair, massaging his scalp. The touch calmed him, made him feel less alone.

“Shit, you’re so good at that, Trace.”

A snap reverberated through the bench seat, followed by a terrible grinding crunch. The truck tilted sharply and jerked to a halt, leaning over at an unsteady angle in the sand. Pete’s weight crushed him against the door of the truck. Twenty years of training stopped Trace closing his jaw, but his teeth still grated against Pete’s sensitive head, and he stopped petting Pete’s warm balls.

Trace pulled off, a long string of saliva connecting them like some thread woven by Fate’s daughters.

“Fuck! Can’t they even keep the fucking roads maintained in this hellhole?”

Trace let the roar of Pete’s voice roll over him. It was never personal. Pete was only hot and bored, and the man liked bitching to pass the time. Instead, Trace tipped his head side to side, cracking his neck, rolling his shoulders where they had stiffened. Damn small cab.

Just for a second, Trace closed his eyes. He was grateful to Pete, not least for letting him ride up front of the catering unit. He never expected payment for favors; just one reason why Trace liked making him feel good. They were all bone-tired. He hated this part of the trip. Hated thinking about the cargo riding in the buses ahead. And the Colonel was always tense in this part of the Valley.

He wished he could have stayed in his tiny, sterile domain at the back of the convoy. But the regular road washouts throughout the Protectorate—and the occasional crack from earthquake damage—made the big medlab sway until he felt sick. Seeing the view helped a lot.

Pete radioed ahead to let the Colonel know they were going nowhere, fast. Dark, narrowed eyes watched them from the scattered handful of buildings at

the sides of the road on each side of the wash. Trace looked past them to the endless horizon, a lone elephant tree standing silent sentry.

Vehicles passed them on either side, as the command unit ahead paused with the deep hiss of hydraulics. The Colonel jumped down, the morning shine on his boots quickly enveloped with chalk-colored dust. Trace swung open the heavy passenger door, struggling against the lean of the catering unit. He clambered out, landing awkwardly in the base of the arroyo that had carved its way through the Fed-laid asphalt, and ran forward.

“What’s the take gonna be here?” the Colonel asked.

Trace wiped the dust off the tablet screen with the lower edge of his gray T-shirt. “We’ve got seven fifteen-year-olds, five of them girls.”

He shook his head. “That’s not gonna be enough, is it? What are our numbers so far?”

“Four hundred and twenty-nine. We’ve still got a lot of the Valley to go, Brawley, Calexico, then Digby—”

“Yeah, yeah, give me totals, not the names of these piece-of-shit towns. Fuck, I can’t wait to be back to civilization.”

“Another forty, more or less. Probably less.”

“Fuck. We need five hundred to meet the orders from Purity Houses alone. That doesn’t include private commissions. And I’ve got another one from Senator Fields that’ll pay big bucks. A boy.”

Trace stiffened.

The Colonel grinned. “See, you’ve been lucky with me. Fields likes to take them apart piece by piece. The world never knows the inverts and the sadists from the outside. Only you and me, boy. We know, don’t we.”

“Yes, sir.”

The Colonel nodded. “Piece by fucking piece.”

Isaac was changing a keg when his brother’s lanky body came bursting through the swinging inner door, carrying Lila in his arms. A sliver of harsh daylight and a billowing cloud of dust testified that the kid hadn’t waited for the outer door to close.

“Shit, Miles. You know better than that. There’s a pressure door there for a reason, goddammit.” The kid’s face fell, and Isaac cursed himself.

“The Feds are here.”

Fuck. He’d hoped for an hour of sleep before the bar opened at five. Through the thick double-glazing, and over the hum of the aircon, came the engine roar of the convoy. He pulled his work shirt over his head and threw it onto the bar with his canvas apron. Lila handed him up an old T-shirt, ingrained with dirt and sweat so that it never looked clean.

“Thanks, princess.”

Isaac glanced through the wide glass window by the front door, keeping out of sight. The forward carriers of the convoy had passed already, winding off toward town. He stuffed his feet into unlaced steel-capped safety boots, traded for with one of the refinery workers. Good quality. Citizen-made.

“You gonna put a closed sign up or something?” asked Miles.

Isaac shook his head. “Nah. No one will expect us to be open tonight, not with this lot outside.”

He guided them out the back door, heading around the side of the building and crouching down behind the dumpster in the alley. They crowded together to peer at the large buses now passing, detouring around the steep side of the arroyo. Last year’s solitary rainstorm had worn through the asphalt surface fifty yards up the road from the bar. For two days, purple desert blooms washed across the sea of shiny, black asphalt and white dust.

Tiny faces pressed against the bus windows, looking resolutely outward. Lila tugged at his shirt. “Isaac, what’s a princess?”

“I don’t know, Lila. It’s just something you say, I guess.”

At the back of his mind he’d known they were due, but it was still a surprise: like finding out a toothache was an abscess deep in the root.

An armored platoon vehicle roared past, its track making easy work of the sides of the dry wash. The star-and-rays flag painted on the driver’s door made Isaac’s gut clench. Lila ran out from the shadow of the dumpster, toward the line of vehicles, “Traders!” she cried, clapping her palms together at the duo of fluttering flags attached to the roof of a supply truck.

Isaac swooped her up and ducked back into the shadows. He caught her hands, silencing her. “No,” he said. “No, not traders. Feds. Federation of American States.”

The mistake was hardly surprising. Traders visited two, sometimes three times a year, bringing luxuries like Coca-Cola and chocolate. Not that they had much to trade for them. But the Feds hadn't been through since their last scheduled vaccination pass, last winter. The flag flew down at the refinery and over at the solar plant, of course, but they kept the kids away from there.

Miles reached over to take Lila from Isaac, hefting her onto his knee. Isaac gripped his shoulder with what he hoped was a reassuring clasp. Miles was only fourteen. No matter what the next day brought, at least his brother would be okay. Lila started to whimper. Would she remember this day in twelve years' time?

They were up to the tail end of the convoy—the catering trucks and big medical units—when there came a teeth-aching grind. Isaac peered over the garbage bags. The truck maneuvering its way down the shallow sides of the arroyo came to a halt, tipping half over on its side. The convoy slowed, then stopped.

Isaac tensed. It was the command unit that had halted at the entrance to the alley. A white-haired colonel jumped out, bellowing, "Trace!" Isaac's breath caught in his lungs. He tried to still his pounding heart, too scared to crouch out of sight and draw attention through his movement.

A big guy in the gray drill pants and T-shirt of a slave hopped out of the truck sitting askew in the bottom of the arroyo. He easily topped out over six foot, muscled and fit. He glanced into the alley as he ran to the command unit, meeting Isaac's surreptitious gaze. Sun-wrinkled, copper skin surrounded his cool gray-blue eyes.

The second the two men turned away Isaac ducked his head behind the dumpster and flattened his solid frame against the rough boards of the bar. His heart was in his throat. He told himself it was okay. *He* couldn't know. There was no danger, but fading into the background was a hard habit to break.

The klaxon rang out. So, old Barney hadn't been asleep atop his tower for once. Isaac swallowed and forced himself to speak. "Hear that?" Isaac said. "Census. Tomorrow, I guess. You best get home to your mom. Stay off the roads. Tell her I'll come by first thing in the morning." He smiled down at Lila, trying to hide the tension in his body.

Lila started to cry anyway. Isaac didn't bother to shush her. Better she got it out of her system now. She definitely didn't want to cry during Census. No one needed that kind of attention drawn to themselves, no matter their age.

The cool air in the command unit was a relief after twenty minutes in the outside world. When a knock came at the outside door, Trace stayed kneeling next to the Colonel, seated at his desk.

“Enter.”

It was Pete, wiping his oily hands on a rag. “It’s completely fubar, sir. But there’s the refinery we passed back up the road away. They can lend us the equipment we need to fix it. I’ve ordered a new axle from Yuma. It’ll only take three days, maybe four.”

Pete’s eyes flickered down to Trace, taking in his position on the floor.

“Where are my manners, Barnes,” said the Colonel. “You wanna use him? Be my guest.” A conspiratorial smile danced across his face, and he reached down, caressing Trace’s face gently. “He likes it when you hurt him, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir. Please.” Trace turned his head into the Colonel’s hand, kissing it softly.

Pete coughed. “No, sir, thank you for the offer though. Maybe later.”

“Oh, I don’t think I have your restraint.” He laughed, leaning back in his chair. “It’s been a long day. Not over yet, either. Suck me, boy.”

Trace raised himself up on his knees. The long muscle in his left thigh gave a deep twinge. He’d been worried about it for a while, ever since that session on the Morgan’s Mule last year in San Luis. He could have cursed out the Colonel’s brother for having the bright idea to run a copper rod across the top and electrify it. Getting up again from this position wasn’t going to be easy for much longer. The Colonel brushed his hand across Trace’s short hair, pulling at the salt and pepper strands at his temples.

“You’re getting old, boy. How long have you been with me?”

“Nineteen years, sir.”

“Shit. When are you up?”

“May fifteenth.”

“Only two months left, huh? Let’s make them memorable, shall we?”

Trace worked the stiff leather from the elaborate belt buckle the Colonel wore, the twelve bright stars of the Federation standing proud of the surface. He unfastened the khaki trousers, and drew out the Colonel’s flaccid cock,

surrounded by wiry gray hairs. It pulsed as Trace sucked it into his mouth, lapping and slurping at the loose foreskin. Revulsion coiled in his belly.

“Wait a minute. Off, boy. Eyes open.”

Trace pulled off the Colonel's cock, kneeling straight, hands tucked behind his back. The Colonel turned the ring on his right hand around, bringing the ruby Citizen's Cross palm-side. He caught Trace's bristled chin in his left hand, striking out with the right. The raised cross caught Trace on the cheekbone, knocking his head to the side. Pete's face was blurry and distorted through the moisture the blow brought to his eyes. He swallowed a hiss of pain as he turned his head to face the Colonel again.

He drew his hand back a second time, then struck again, landing unerringly in the same place.

Warmth trickled down his cheek, and Trace held himself still as the Colonel leaned in. His whispered words landed in hot breaths against the side of Trace's face. “Only two months. We will have to make the most of those.” His gnarled hand snaked down Trace's body to grasp his balls firmly through his soft pants, tugging them downward. The sensation of his cock trying to fill punched into him. Even all these years later, Trace fought back the bitter revulsion of wanting to get hard. That had been a tough lesson, and he was a slow learner. From the corner of his eye, he saw the Colonel's pink, wet tongue snake out, quivering.

Wet saliva daubed his face, and the Colonel's caresses turned to crushing pain in his sack. Tears left hot trails down his face.

“Good. Back on, now. And get me good and wet, boy.”

Trace slurped on the Colonel's prick, burrowing his tongue under the hood, as the length stiffened and engorged.

The Colonel shrugged. “Well, Barnes, that's damned annoying. So, you two had better stay here. Trace can process the local cohort in the small medunit while you do the repairs. Use the comms truck with the bunks in it. And if you keep that small transport you could send the girls on as soon as they're ready, save a bus staying behind. There's only five. No—wait. Pick a boy up here, too. Saves me looking for one. He can come back with you. I'll push on and finish up the Valley, meet y'all in Yuma.”

Abruptly he stood, placing his booted foot in the center of Trace's chest, pushing him to the floor and leaving an imprint on Trace's shirt. The Colonel

worked his cock, rubbing it slickly between his fingers, before throwing his head back, groaning as white fluid jetted from the tip. The wetness was cold against Trace's face in the chilled air. The come soaked through his T-shirt, sticking the fabric to his body.

He smiled at Pete. "Sure you don't want to join me?"

"No, thank you, sir."

"Well, you'll have him for the rest of the week. Don't hesitate to make use of him. Make sure he keeps himself ready for you. Unless you like it dry and tight, of course. That's fun, too."

The Colonel kept jerking himself, as a few last drops fell. Trace knew better than to move. He refastened his button fly, the shiny buckle catching the bright ceiling lights. "Who else d'ya want on your team, Barnes?"

"Rodriguez, if that's okay, and Clarke to drive."

"Sure, no problem. Is that enough? Just the two of you for the mechanical work?" He nudged Trace with his boot. "All right, kneel up, boy. So, that's the plan. We'll push on today. You wait here till it's all fixed. Call me when you're done and heading to Yuma. Anything else, Barnes?"

"Not for me, sir, but young Miller would appreciate a word."

The Colonel looked taken aback for a second. "Sure, send him in."

Miller entered bashfully, twisting his forage cap in his hands. The gesture was curiously incongruous in a guy as big as Miller was: six three and muscles all over. His first trip out of the Fed, and he looked perpetually overwhelmed. The red cotton Cross hand-stitched to his pale sand-colored fatigues hadn't even had a chance to get sun-faded yet.

"Sir, I'm... ah... I'm sorry to bother you. Do you have a minute?"

"Sure, son, come on in. Have a seat. What's up?"

"I have a... concern. About my soul."

"That's a mighty big concern, Miller. You'd better tell me about it."

"I know we do God's work. But God said we weren't to lie with other men. It's a sin, sir."

"It is indeed, son. But you're not lying with men, are you?"

"No... but... your slave. When I see him, I have... unnatural urges."

A grin slit the Colonel's face, and he leaned forward, patting Miller's knee. "I see where the confusion lies, son. You're thinking this slave here is a man."

"Well... yes, sir."

"Rest easy, son." His eyes flicked toward Trace. "You're not a man, are you boy?"

"No, sir." Trace used every ounce of control to keep his voice level.

"That's exactly right. Good boy." He half-frowned, then turned his attention back to Miller. "It's fine, son. You know your twenty commandments, right? God's law is clear. A Citizen must never lie with another Citizen as he would with a woman. Slaves come from the Protectorate of Southern California. They don't count. You have a... what's that word, boy?"

"A dispensation, sir."

"Right on the button. You have a dispensation, son. You could use him to your heart's content, and God would be fine with that. I'm not actually sure if he has a soul. What do you think, boy?"

Trace gritted his teeth, swallowing the bile that rose in his throat. "Evidence suggests not, sir."

"Show him your hole."

The greedy craving in Miller's eyes made Trace's throat catch in apprehension. He turned, then unfastened his gray cotton pants, letting them drop to his feet in a puddle of fabric. He bent over, resting his elbows on his knees.

"You lack enthusiasm, boy. Spread your cheeks a little wider, there."

He closed his eyes, gripping his ass with his hands and pulling his cheeks apart. He was glad neither of them could see his face.

"Now just you take a look, Miller. That hole there does not belong to a man. You can do anything you want to it. You wanna fuck it, that's fine. But you wanna work your shock stick in there and just enjoy the squeals he makes, well, that's fine, too. God has a purpose for each of us, son. He made us born in the upstanding, God-fearingly glorious Federation of American States because he wanted us to be Citizens. Now, His ineffable will placed this boy here in the Protectorate of Southern California. Ours is not to second-guess His reasons, son. We are His tools. There's a natural order to things. We obey our God. Our wives and daughters obey us. Our slaves obey everyone.

“I’m glad you came to me with your concerns. I’m proud of you, son, for thinking about what God wants, and how we can honor Him. If you work hard in God’s cause, you can own your own slave one day. Now, was there anything else?”

“No. That’s all. Thank you, sir.”

“Fine, fine. Any more questions, you come see me. I’ll tell you what; you stay here with Barnes. Give him a hand instead of Rodriguez. Spend a bit more time with the new harvest, up close. Get to see for yourself they’re not like the rest of us. I’m glad we had this little talk.”

Trace imagined the look on Miller’s face as his heavy footfalls left the command unit. He heard the creak as the Colonel swung around in his swivel chair, and took the nudge to the back of his knee as permission to straighten. He pulled his pants up as he turned around. The Colonel’s voice radiated satisfaction, even if he was never sated for long. “Keep one of the girls back for me to play with, okay? A nice used one. Existing scars would be good. Don’t want to lose value. And wipe my jizz off your face before you see them. No need to spook the livestock. Not until I can enjoy it, anyway.” He pursed his lips. “I never had a slave who served their time out before. You planning to go back home?”

“No, sir.”

“Good boy. You always did know how to properly show your gratitude.”

Trace watched the convoy move off, the white dust swirling behind the last trucks, until he tasted dirt on his tongue. He pulled his filthy T-shirt off and wiped the come from his face and neck, balling the fabric in his hands and hurling it away. He took a breath, trying to calm himself. He had three, maybe four days. Alone. He definitely had tonight. A whole night by himself in the medunit, and the Colonel would be clicks away. He sat on the aluminum steps, and with shaking hands drew a bootleg pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. He heard the scuff of boots on sand, and tensed. Pete walked around the corner of the medunit, producing a lighter from his chest pocket and throwing it at him. Trace caught it neatly, then pulled two cigarettes out of the packet and lit them both, cupping his hand against the wind. Pete lowered himself to the ground beside him.

He passed a cigarette over. “Smoke, sir?”

“Cut that ‘sir’ crap out.” Pete took his cigarette, their fingers touching. Pete’s skin was hot. “It’s all set up for tomorrow. Met the headman and everything. It’s a head *woman*. Can you believe that?”

Trace shrugged. There’d been a woman in charge in El Centro, too, from what he could remember. Hadn’t seemed to make any difference.

Pete took a deep draw and blew out a smoke ring. “What’s the updated population for the county?” he asked.

“Thousand and six. Up from last trip.”

“I’m surprised the land supports that many,” Pete said.

“It’s the solar plant.” Trace jerked his head south. “And the refinery. Brings Fed money in.”

Pete nodded. They sat close together, breathing the thin smoke into their lungs and expelling it into the short, dry dusk, each breath a quiet addendum to the day.

“Pete, you ever met an ex-slave?”

Pete shook his head. “I don’t think there’s any such thing.”

“They tell us twenty years.”

“You sure you remember the talk right?”

“I *give* it.”

Pete snorted. “Sure, then. Hell, I bet there’s a farm in Great Carolina where the ex-slaves all go. Green fields. Trees and shit.”

A tiny butterfly landed next to their shoes, deep mustard-yellow against the bone-white earth. Trace put his hand down in front of the butterfly and waited for it to crawl over his finger so he could lift it up. Wingspots of gray made it seem flecked with ashes. He raised it high and let out a soft breath under its wings, watching as it fluttered toward a stand of tall green torch trees.

“You got nowhere else to go, you’re welcome to come home with me.” Pete didn’t look at him, but his arm tensed at Trace’s side.

“Yeah.” He forced a smile out. “You know I appreciate it.”

“It’s not charity, man. You’re a medic, my family would love to have you on the spread.”

He didn’t reply. It was a nice fantasy.

He tracked the butterfly's path, until its wings were lost in the livid yellow starting to streak the sky.

Pete stood, throwing the last inch of his cigarette down to the dry sand and grinding it out with his boot. He nodded out at the huge horizon, the ground paved in cracked salt tiles. "What's that called?"

Trace swallowed, trying to moisten his dry throat. "The Salton Sea."

"Sea? There's no fucking water."

"There was once, I guess. There used to be a canal that irrigated the whole Valley. Till Secession. Now Colorado sends its water to the rest of the Federation."

"How the fuck do you know that? No, wait, don't answer that. It's those damn dead trees you collect, isn't it? You're the font of all bloody knowledge." He chuckled. "Grub's up soon. You coming over to eat?"

At a table across from Miller's God-fearing eyes? He'd rather be tucked up in his bunk with music on and a nineteenth-century French novel in his hand. Or the emergency MREs he had stashed in the medunit. He shook his head. "Naw, I'm fine. Not hungry. I'm gonna turn in early. I'll see you tomorrow, okay?"

Pete's back tensed, but he only nodded.

Trace watched until Pete was out of sight, then leaned back against the steps, thinking about the delicious rasp of yellowed paper under his fingers, the story yet to be unraveled, and smiled.

Trace scuffed his feet on the steps to remove the worst of the dust, before climbing into the medunit. He locked the outer door and slipped his shoes off, stowing them in a locker by the door. He padded across to the living quarters at the rear, the metal floor cool on his bare feet. He closed the door and leaned back against it, breathing deeply and relaxing at the scent of chlorhexidine hanging in the cool air. Just him. Only him.

The bunk was narrow, the shelf above it stacked with books. He ran his fingers along them, the dust jackets crisp and new. He took out the one carrying the title *The Life of St Thomas Aquinas*, and pulled the camouflaging cover off to save it from wear. The pages inside were the color of turned cream, the paper soft and pliable under his fingers. The type pressed deep into the paper. He

could *feel* the town of Yonville-l'Abbaye as he ran his fingertips over the pages. He left the novel on his bunk so he could look at it as he showered. The water washed away the day while his mind went out to the agricultural show, and Rodolphe clasping Emma's hand.

He dressed in a clean T-shirt and sweats, reveling in the luxury of being able to sleep in clothes. He pulled up his favorite playlist on his tablet, letting the soft strains of Bach cello suite whisper to him.

He'd barely read a paragraph when a demanding rap came outside the main unit door. He froze. It wasn't Pete, he'd never come to him at night. Would Clarke need something?

The knock came again, but he couldn't make himself answer. Physically couldn't. He was asleep. He never heard. He'd shucked off all his defenses; he couldn't make himself put his slave face on again. There would be a penalty tomorrow, but he couldn't bring himself to care. He plugged his earbuds into the tablet jack and tucked them into his ears. The cello sang, just to him, as he rode through the ferns with Emma and Rodolphe.

They started early, the sun a dull orange segment on the horizon.

Pete stood beside Trace, projecting his voice out to the crowd, while his lapel mic sent his words to the portable speakers set around the outside of the square. "You all know how this works, so let's get this over and done with before the sun gets too much higher in the sky. Then you can all go home with your families."

Well, not *all* your families. Trace hated this part. He shoved his sour emotions beneath his medical training. Miller caught his eye with a smirk, standing on the edge of the crowd, hand fondling the hilt of his shock stick. He'd shown his enjoyment of the last few weeks all too much.

"I want all the babies born in the last two years, front and center," Pete called.

A small trickle of women holding babies and toddlers came up to the table, laid out with Trace's equipment. The process wasn't demanding. A quick DNA sample, a jab for the MMRHIV vaccine, sending high-pitched squalls slicing into the air, and a scanned copy of the flimsy plastic birth certificate.

One mother handed him a blanket-wrapped bundle, the apprehension clear on her face. Trace pulled the blanket back from the tiny face. A split smile

greeted him, her philtrum cleft down the center, like a hare. She was born in an odd year, anyway, so she wouldn't be harvested, but he noted in the file that she should be sterilized when she reached puberty. Regulations were to pull the weed out at the root rather than let it spread. He smiled at the mother when he passed the infant back, but she didn't meet his eyes.

The toddler in the next woman's arms had a livid, puckered burn scar across her face. He flipped the blanket back and followed where it dripped down her body. An even. His eyes went straight to the mother, her gleam of triumph shining through her mask of fear and hesitation. He tapped Pete on the shoulder, drawing his gaze from the crowd. Pete always expected trouble, although there hadn't been any for years.

Pete took the bundle gently from him, eyes roaming the tiny, naked body, sadness and compassion warring for supremacy. He steeled his face, and walked away, holding the child up, arms stretched over his head, swiveling for the whole crowd to see. His voice was steadier than Trace's own would have been. "This is a crime against the Federation. I want everyone here to know that this child will be taken when it's her harvest. She's an even, and she belongs to Citizens. Hurting your own children won't change that. You want to make things better for them? Teach them to be obedient, loyal, docile. Teach them that they don't belong to you, they belong to the Federation."

Pete thrust the toddler into Trace's arms and walked away. The tension in his shoulders told Trace he was hurting, too.

Trace filled in the details on his tablet and handed her back to her mother, forcing down his disgust. Trace was glad he wouldn't be here when this kid's harvest came. She was too damaged to appeal to wealthy Citizens. By scarring her, the mother was inviting clients to add to the collection. He shook his head. People never thought their actions through.

There were only nine under-twos: five odds, four evens, and only two of those girls. Not good. The population wasn't replenishing itself. Not only here: all over the Protectorate. The Colonel wouldn't be happy. Especially here. When he wasn't happy, no one was happy.

The atmosphere grew cold, taut. People murmured as Pete tried to speak. He raised his voice over the crowd. Uneasiness settled on Trace's skin with the ever-present dust.

"Come on, let's get this finished. All the fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds up to the front. Odds on the right, evens on the left."

Trace looked them over, Pete beside him. The five girls were passable, and Clarke herded them over to the transport, as choked sobs filled the air. The single boy was a disappointment. Wiry enough, from good strong stock, but ugly as Satan, and decidedly lacking in supple, ivory skin that might tempt a man to sodomy, even one with a distinct taste for it already.

“Where’s the other boy?” he asked.

Two parents stepped forward, tremulously holding out a folded rectangle of thin plastic to Pete. Pete grabbed it with irritation, passing it over. Trace unfolded a death certificate, dated three months earlier. Snake bite. He nodded and passed it back to the parents. Fortunate kid. Fifteen minutes of excruciating agony, and then peace.

Weariness filled his bones, soaked his marrow. There was bound to be another snake out there, wasn’t there? He could take a nice long walk. Write his own final chapter.

The fourteen-year-olds were a better batch. One of the boys was tall, willowy. Olive skin, with a golden sun-kissed glow that Trace was willing to bet went all the way under his clothes. Blond curls with a hint of chestnut, falling adorably over his fine-boned face. God, they’d be fighting over his contract. He shook his head. He needed this to be over. It was getting too fucking hot. He looked at Pete and pointed his thumb at the tall kid. “He’ll do.”

The kid stumbled a step backwards, his mouth opening and closing like he was drowning. Trace had seen that enough times to recognize it. Felt it, too.

He wished they wouldn’t run. It only made the process more painful. It happened sometimes, with the odds. They weren’t prepared, the way the evens were. They thought it was a sure thing: they were off the hook. They should have learned earlier that life just wasn’t fair.

Trace turned his back on the kid. He couldn’t watch another takedown. Clarke was already jogging back, pulling cable ties out of his pocket, while Miller smiled and advanced, shock stick drawn.

Isaac’s heart pounded as Miles sought him, his frightened gaze scanning over hundreds of heads to try and find where Isaac had hid himself in the crowd. Feds marched toward the boy. Isaac saw terror and horror in his gaze, felt its echo in his own chest.

Not Miles. No. *He* wouldn't have Miles. Isaac didn't look back to Rachel and Lila behind him somewhere in the crowd. He threaded his way to the front of the throng, lunging forward to trip the young Fed as he passed. He snagged the thin, reedy man by the shoulder, grabbing hold of his greige uniform with both hands and using his greater weight to force him off his feet.

“Miles, run!”

The boy fled, his long legs carrying him swiftly, reflexes honed from twelve years of digging out kangaroo rats to supplement a meager meal. Isaac felt a sense of satisfaction at the dust cloud that dissipated into the desert air, as his brother ran to safety.

The older Fed, the one who'd stood back and watched everything, turned an exasperated expression on him. He was on top of Isaac before he could land a second blow. The ground rushed up to meet him and the stench of urine filled his nostrils. Dust plugged his nose and he tasted chalk and creosote, gritty against his teeth and tongue as he tried to suck air into his lungs. His ear scraped the ground, catching against a sharp rock. He tried to lift his head, but the message wasn't getting through to his muscles.

“You want me to go after the kid, Sarge?” The Fed he'd tripped pinned him to the dirt, rocking from side to side, the knee in Isaac's back grinding across his spine.

“Nah. It's too fucking hot, Miller.”

“Where do you want the new meat?”

The medic loomed over him, blocking the sun like a monument. A sheaf of emotions warred on his face: compassion, annoyance, and something else, dark and hungry. The man's voice sounded far away. “Stick an ankle cuff on him and dump him in the shower in the medunit.”

The words stole any trickle of hope Isaac had left. Something hard and metallic shoved his head forward and down. He didn't even have time to groan before the world darkened to nothingness.

Tiles pressed against Isaac's skin, slippery and cold. He squinted his eyes against the brightness of the room. White surrounded him, reflections bouncing off slick ceramic and chrome. Cold water beat down on him from a showerhead a million miles above.

Isaac shivered and retched, his stomach trying to empty itself. Guys at the bar got shocked sometimes, when they overstayed their work leave and talked back to the MPs. Isaac's head pounded. Did this feel better or worse if you were also drunk?

A shadow fell on him, blocking the blue-white light. Isaac blinked the stream of water out of his eyelashes.

“Welcome back, kid. That was incredibly stupid, you know.”

He was forty, maybe, gray hairs adding texture to his short buzz cut. An angry scab marred his sharp cheekbone. His upper body was thick with muscles, the skin lined and weather-beaten. Isaac shivered as his eyes cut right through him: the gray of nighttime clouds in the rainy season. Thick forearms and wrists ended in huge gnarled hands. This was the medic. The slave. *His* slave.

“You're the property of the Federation, now. Bet that wasn't what you were expecting when you pulled that stunt, huh? I've gotta go process this new batch of girls. Get clean. Everywhere. Here.”

He held his hand out, and Isaac instinctively reached up to take the offering. The weight was unexpected, the large gauge chain thick and clumsy in his hands. The padlock clunked against the side of the tub.

“When you're done, lock yourself to the table. I'll be back to inspect the merchandise.”

Despite the shower, Isaac's mouth was suddenly dry. He narrowed his eyes in puzzlement. He was too old: he was twenty-four, for God's sake. This was a mistake. He couldn't be here.

The man—Trace, they'd called him—nodded as if reading his mind. “The Federation only takes the kids born in even years to make sure there's enough girls left for breeding. To renew your population. Make sure there's always another harvest. There's nothing in the Law says they can't take whoever they want. As you have just discovered. Accept it. Now get yourself ready. There's soap, shampoo, de-lice solution, and an anal bulb in that basket at the other end of the tub. Use them all.”

“Please. Did Miles get away? My brother?”

Trace turned back, gazing blankly at Isaac for a moment before he gave a curt nod. The metal door closed hollowly behind him, and after a few minutes

fragments of words filtered through the wall, as the man raised his voice in the well-measured cadences of a rehearsed presentation.

Isaac checked the metal walls of the room. There was no back door, no window, no vents overhead. Fuck. He couldn't stay here. He crouched in the bottom of the shower, trying to think through the terror and anxiety that were all he could register.

Patience: that was the only card he had to play. He needed to be compliant. Wait. Watch. His eyes rested on the basket of cleansing products at the other end of the tub. They were at least familiar. Maybe shampoo would be the best start. The thought of the anal bulb filled him with apprehension and confusion and... something else, something that stroked the edges of his consciousness with featherlight touches that made him shiver. He picked up the bottle and poured a soapy handful.

His fingers twitched against his gray pants, betraying his desire to reach out and touch skin as he surveyed the new cohort. But not this skin. Fuck, the kid in the room next door would do that to anyone. Had he looked like that himself, once? Pale skin like smooth vellum, eyes full of fear. And that innocence... now that was delicious. Trace wanted to lick it off his skin. Not pretty, no, not like that kid who got away. Nose a fraction too long, and the wrong shape, eyebrows too bold, face too independent. And that tattoo. That would have to go. *He's too old, too dark, too inked... but God help me, I want him. I want to be inside him.* He laughed at himself. *Well, that's one thing that will never happen. Is this what the Colonel feels when he looks at me?*

The girls were cowering around the edges of the main exam room. It took all his strength to find his voice, to stop it from shaking the way his hands were, to try to inject the reassurance he had honed over the years.

“Don't be scared. Nothing bad is going to happen to you. I'm a medic. I'm going to check out each one of you. You can see this is exactly like the medunit that comes by every year to give you your vaccinations, just bigger, that's all. There are no surprises in here. Nothing I do to you will hurt more than a needle prick.

“After I check you out, assuming you're good to go, you'll be transported over the border to the Federation. You'll attend training school. You'll be taught to read. You'll learn some basic skills.”

One girl, with pretty red hair, raised her hand, and he acknowledged her with a nod. "Can we learn to be a medic, like you, sir?"

"Don't sir me. I'm not a Citizen, no more than you. But, no, you won't," he said. "You're too valuable for stuff like this." That was one way to put it.

"What happens after we finish training?"

"You'll be taken to a Purity House. How long you serve there depends. It's different for everyone."

"Depends on what?"

"It's hard to say. It varies from person to person." *And depends on how fast your youthful looks fade.* He didn't say that, though. He wasn't a fucking idiot. No need for them to be difficult to handle on the journey. There was plenty of time for them to work out the lifespan for soft skin and guileless eyes when you were being fucked by upstanding men of the community eighteen hours a day. The Purity Code mandated ten years hard labor for Citizens who debauched another Citizen's daughter with sexual congress outside of marriage. But those uncontrollable male urges needed satiating. It was lucky women didn't feel sexual desire at all, or he supposed they'd be taking all the boys from each community as well.

"When you've done your time in the House you'll be assigned other duties. Housekeeping, cleaning, child care. Food service, sometimes." And sometimes not. Best to hope you're not too pretty, that you don't end up catching the eye of someone who wants to pay the premium so you end up in a private stable. Anything could happen behind domestic walls. And often did.

"Once you serve your term, twenty years, you're free to go."

"We can come home, then?"

He smiled at her. "Sure, kid." How many ex-slaves had she seen come home? "If you've got more questions, remember them for the training center in Flagstaff. Today, when we're done, there's a cold Coca-Cola waiting in the fridge for each of you. Now, who wants to go first, get the formalities over and done with?"

A blond girl, big-boned and sturdy, spoke up. "Here? In front of everyone?"

"There's no need for you to be shy. You're all in this together." And this would be the least of the things that would happen in front of whoever cared to

watch. He patted the exam chair, the disposable paper cover crackling under his hand. "How about you then? Hop on up."

No cigarette had ever felt so good as the one he smoked on the medunit steps when he'd finished. Astounding. This had to be a record: five virgins. The Colonel wouldn't be happy, though. Virgins fetched such a high price; he wouldn't pass up profit to slake his own thirst. These girls wouldn't be headed for a House, but straight into private collections. The Colonel had connections. He always knew where the top bidders were to be found. Even for that plain one. Maybe not for long, with her, though.

The girls clambered into the air-conditioned transport with Clarke, clasping their precious carbonated prizes to their chests. A few tremulously waved to him, but he didn't wave back. This time he had a treat waiting for him as well. And for once it wasn't a book. He sucked the sweet smoke into his lungs, hoping to still his tremors. He wanted a steady hand when he touched the kid.

Iridescent blue wasps scampered in and out of pinhole burrows in the chalky dirt, dazzling where they caught the light. Sandaled feet stepped into his sight line. He brought his gaze up slowly. Baggy shorts bared lean, golden legs. A white singlet exposed flawless skin and a hint of a nipple where it slipped to one side. Long, sun-bleached strands fell to the boy's shoulders and strayed over a perfect oval face.

"I'm sorry."

"Say what now, kid?"

"I'm sorry I ran. I didn't mean to. I was just... I'm sorry."

Trace shrugged, taking another draw of tobacco smoke. The kid moved his feet restlessly on the sand. The merest hint of soft hairs on his legs caught the sun.

"Please, can you take me instead?"

He cocked his head to one side. "You're offering yourself up?"

"Yes. Please? My brother... he supports us all. They need him. No one needs me. Please. Just let me take his place. The way you wanted."

He closed his eyes and let another mouthful of smoke fill his lungs. "But I want *him*."

Walking back inside the medunit was like entering a cave. Cool light reflected off the shiny white tiles, letting Trace's eyes widen in relief after the blinding sun outside. Cold air kissed his skin, making him shiver. Just the cold. Sure. He circuited the room, wiping dust from shiny chrome surfaces. Damn stuff snuck in everywhere.

He spread a clean cloth on the instrument trolley and laid out the tools of his trade in meticulous rows. One drawer was ajar, and he nudged it closed, rubbing his fingerprints away. He'd already cleaned the examination chair, but he took a moment to grab a paper towel, squirt disinfectant, and wipe the white vinyl surface down again, before spreading a new disposable cover over it. He'd have the kid on it in a minute, laid out, helpless...

Jittery with anticipation, he moved to the door. The handle was cold to the touch. Strange that he'd put the kid in there. He could have left him with Clarke and Pete. So why had he done it? He closed his eyes as the answer came to him: he wanted the kid untouched, left just for him. His to touch, his to explore, his to keep. Which was hilarious, seeing as he had nothing. Not even himself. Only a bootleg collection of tattered words.

He entered the room. Good. The kid had obeyed orders. The chain clanked against the leg of the dining table that was bolted to the floor. Trace squatted down beside him. The kid was cold and shivering, the moisture of the shower still damp on his skin. Trace was appalled.

"Hey, I left a towel for you, you know." He gestured with a tip of his head to the white folds of cotton on the floor beside the tub.

The kid's eyes only flicked toward it for a second, then sought his face again. Reaching out, Trace snagged the towel. "Stand up."

The kid dragged himself to his feet. Trace shook the towel, the worn terrycloth scratchy against his hands. He reached out and touched the kid, pulling him close and holding his breath as he felt the firm body through the thin layer of fabric.

"What's your name?"

The kid was trying to grit his teeth, but he couldn't stop them from chattering. Trace rubbed him down, trying to warm him with friction. *Shit.* He'd left him in here alone way too long, while he lost himself in pointless reverie. He was a fucking idiot. And now the kid was scared, and with his body this cold Trace would have a hell of a time finding a vein for the draw.

He knelt, unlocking the padlock with fingers suddenly clumsy. He forced himself to keep the light, professional tone in his voice. It was hard-won. It had taken years to be able to show up and do his job with his own wounds slathered in burn cream, bandages, antiseptics. And other wounds that nothing could touch. "Come on, kid."

"It's not kid." His voice was low, but strong.

"What's that?"

"My name's not kid. It's Isaac."

Tentatively, Isaac followed the medic out into the main room of the medunit. The smell of the place drew echoes from his childhood: the bitter tang of disinfectant mixed with fear. Light glinted on metal surfaces.

Isaac turned his head, checking out the room. Again, no windows, and a single door, with a snib lock on the inside. Trace shook his head. "They're right outside kid. You'll end up back in here, and in worse shape than you are now. Don't do it, for both our sakes, okay?"

"I wasn't... I won't."

Trace pointed toward the corner where a scale unit stood against one wall. "You know the drill. Hop up."

It was easier facing the wall than exposing himself to the medic. He let out a long breath and straightened up on the scale.

"You're only five nine, kid, but a good solid build for all that. I'd have said you were supposed to be a little taller, but you look like you eat okay. You had some nutrition issues when you were younger?"

Trace's voice was soft, and there was a moment where Isaac thought about opening his big mouth, then he thought better of it. How could he explain?

"All right, we're done here. Jump up on the chair."

Trace nodded to the large exam chair in the center of the room. The white paper cover looked sterile and cold.

Isaac sidled over to the chair, holding his hands cupped in front of his cock and balls, which hung limp and shriveled by the cold. Trace gestured to his groin. "Don't even bother. I'm going to see a lot more than that by the time we're through."

More than that? Isaac swallowed and slid himself sideways onto the chair. The paper cover was Tyvek, like the building paper they used to line shacks, when they could get it. Softer than Isaac expected.

“That’s it,” said Trace. “Just there, for now.”

Isaac glanced at the instrument trolley. He remembered the big six-pronged vaccination gun from his childhood. Glass tubes and a white plastic syringe rattled in a kidney-shaped dish.

Trace draped a shiny white plastic apron over his gray scrubs, then slipped a smooth blood pressure cuff around Isaac’s right arm. The slave’s face was so close, he could see the puckering in the skin around the scab, and older scars, faint under his tan. Isaac realized the slave was watching him in return, and the scrutiny brought a flush to Isaac’s cheeks. He turned his head, concentrated on the soft rubbery sounds the apron made as Trace shifted position, and when that wasn’t enough, on the quiet beep of a tablet powering up and the soft taps of a stylus on glass.

The quiet hum as the cuff filled vibrated through his body. Trace’s hands warmed Isaac’s cold skin where they glanced across him. An ice-cold stethoscope bell landed on his chest. He inhaled sharply, then let out a harsh cough.

“It’s all right. Just breathe in and out.” Trace’s voice was graveled, deep, and reassuring.

“Lean forward.”

Isaac rested his weight against Trace’s solid body. Trace placed the stethoscope against his back.

“That’s it, good boy. In and out. That’s all you have to do.”

Exhaustion closed Isaac’s eyes. It was more than the shock stick and being harvested, after all his efforts to avoid the census over the years. He was hollowed out from Miles’s close call. He’d have given almost anything to save his brother, but he wished the price hadn’t been quite this high. He rested his forehead against Trace’s chest, and matched the man’s breathing, calm and unhurried. He drew in a deeper breath and coughed again.

“That’s good,” said Trace. His hand stroked Isaac’s shoulder blade. The touch was strange. Gentle. Caressing. No one had touched him like that before. He’d always hoped a girl would, one day, but there were so few, and he had

nothing to offer but a share of his burdens. Isaac forced himself to remember this was the man who'd had him brought in here. He wore the gray of a slave, but they'd followed his orders.

Trace put a hand to his shoulder and lightly pushed him upright. He read the cuff monitor then detached it.

“What's your name?”

“I told you. Isaac.”

“Full name.”

“Poole. Isaac Daniel Poole.”

“Okay, Isaac, let's have a look at your records, shall we? What did you catch as a youngster, huh?” The man's voice was gentle, too, an incongruous match to his big build.

Trace worked at the tablet for long minutes, and Isaac felt his muscles stiffen up in the cool air.

“How old are you, Isaac?”

“Twenty-four.” He didn't see any point in lying.

“You look younger. It's that pale skin that does it. You sure that boy was your brother? You're not much alike.” His words made Isaac shiver.

Trace put the tablet down and dragged a stool over, sitting in front of Isaac and staring into his eyes. “So, kid, you wanna explain to me why there's no Isaac Poole in our records, but Miles Poole is?”

Isaac didn't know what to say, so he said nothing.

“You move here from outside the Protectorate?”

Isaac shook his head. He tried to speak, but his throat was dry, and only a croak emerged. He snapped his mouth closed, ashamed. “It's okay, kid. I'll get you a drink.” Trace walked over to the big double sink, pulled a plastic cup from a dispenser fastened to the wall and filled it. He looked solid and dependable, all muscle under his soft scrubs. He was different from the Feds. Different, too, from the men in town who worked at the refinery or the plant until they shrank and faded. Or the women who incessantly toiled and cooked and swept the ever-present dust. Isaac had never imagined how his life might fit around getting older, about not being a boy any more. He never dared assume there would be a time when Rachel and Lila and Miles and anyone else might not need him.

He studied Trace, the contours of his face and thickness of his arms. Maybe it would be all right to become a grown man in the Fed, if it was this kind of man. Wouldn't it?

Trace held out the plastic cup. Isaac took it with a shaking hand, the water in it shivering in tiny ripples.

"You'll still be feeling the after effects of the shock sticks. I can give you an analgesic, if you want?"

Isaac shook his head. The cold water bit his gums and left a sour aftertaste on the back of his tongue. Trace threw the empty cup into the wastebasket with unerring aim.

A wet sensation brushed over his upper arm, and Isaac hissed. Trace wiped his bicep with a white wet square of cloth. His face was so close again, and this time, Isaac didn't look away. When Trace looked up, their eyes met, and Isaac's breath hitched. A zigzag line cut the warm brown of Trace's iris where it met the hazel-green ring around the outside. He knew those eyes.

"Just a disinfectant wipe," said Trace. "Your tracker goes in here." He held a tiny plastic syringe in his gloved hand, and Isaac turned his head away. He didn't see the large gauge needle slide into his skin, but he grimaced as Trace's fingers depressed the plunger, sending the chip into his body. The empty syringe landed on the trolley with a dull clunk.

Trace tightened a green webbing tourniquet on his upper arm. His fingers were tender and nimble as he stroked the inside of Isaac's elbow, touching the site of the deep blue vein. Isaac started shivering.

"Hey, don't tense up, okay?" Trace's hand was on his face, stroking his skin. "When you're tense your veins are hard to find. Shit, you're way too cold." Trace pulled off the tourniquet. His footsteps echoed. A squeak filled the space, then the closing of a cupboard, and a peculiar and unfamiliar crackling. A warm, soft weight descended on Isaac. Heat radiated out from a blanket covering him.

"Just swivel yourself around, get comfortable." Trace stroked Isaac's back with one hand as he helped him turn. He grasped Isaac's shoulder, pressing and urging him back, until he was lying in the chair. The large flat lights in the ceiling shone blue-white, the glow diffused by textured plastic panels.

"You weren't supposed to get this cold. That's why the water was warm. It was hours you let yourself get cold in there. That / let you get cold in there. I'm sorry. Instant heat blanket. Pretty good, huh?"

He was sorry? He'd never heard that from a Fed before. Isaac couldn't respond. He closed his eyes and listened to Trace moving around the room, making small noises of tidiness and organization. His muscles started to loosen...

Trace's big hand settled on top of his head, stroking his hair softly. His voice sounded distant. "You get warm. I'll be back soon."

His tablet chimed softly. Trace knew it would be the Colonel: there was no one else to call him.

"How's it going, boy?"

"Fine, sir. The five girls are all on their way to the center now. They're all good, healthy. They'll do well. Sorry, but I couldn't hold one back for you."

"You've got a boy, though, yeah?"

"Yes, sir. It's strange, though. He's not in the database. I've got his DNA running now."

"That's fine. Doesn't matter who he is. Don't loosen him up too much for me, you hear?"

"Of course not, sir." His gut clenched at the thought of what Isaac was going to go through. Those early years hadn't been easy. Yeah, like *now* was easy.

"And Barnes says the repairs are going well, so you should be out of there in forty-eight hours. I'm looking forward to it, boy. Be good now."

Trace nodded, then realized the Colonel couldn't see him. "Yes, sir." The sense of hopelessness overwhelmed him.

The Colonel disconnected without a good-bye. Isaac lay sleeping on the chair. He looked impossibly young. Brave, though. Ready to take a risk for someone else. How long would that last?

A screech of metal on metal made Isaac's eyes flick open. Disoriented, he looked around. Had he dozed off?

"Feeling better now, kid? We have to continue." Trace pulled off his latex gloves and threw them into the rubbish bin.

“I told you; it’s Isaac. Not kid. I haven’t been a kid for years.”

“To an old man like me, you’re a kid.” Trace pulled the blanket off Isaac, folding it and putting it on the bottom shelf of the instrument trolley. Trace’s hands were dusty from the gloves, and where he skimmed Isaac’s body he left behind a delicate trail of white powder.

Isaac cringed as his body was bared again. His balls had dropped a little, not pulled up to his body with cold and stress. Well, there was still the stress. Trace pulled a new pair of gloves from the box, and put them on, then refastened the tourniquet. “Let’s have a look at those veins again, yeah?”

Trace’s fingers were delicate against his skin as he stroked the inside of Isaac’s elbow, skittering across the deep blue vein. The cold swipe of a sterilizing pad followed.

Isaac stared at the bite of the needle as it slid into his vein. He watched the thick red liquid fill up the vial in great slow goutts.

“Oh, you’re going to watch this time?”

There was something peaceful about everything now. Simple. Yesterday he’d worked eighteen hours and worried how he was going to get shoes for Lila. Tomorrow he’d look for his chance to run, and if there wasn’t one, then the next day and the next and the next. He’d done it once before, after all. But right now, all he had to do was lie here and do what the medic told him. There wasn’t any other option. Trace tugged his arm as he unsnapped one vial and deftly inserted a second. He laid the blood-filled tube on the green cloth covering the trolley. Why did they always take blood? What did they do with it?

He closed his eyes again while Trace walked around the lab, footsteps followed by stickers peeling off backing paper and the beep of a bar code reader. A piece of gauze pressed against his tiny wound, held there with a piece of tape.

Trace took Isaac’s arm, holding it out straight. He ran his hands down the limb from armpit to hand, manipulating each finger, and kneading the palm between his thumbs. His touch was caressing, possessive. It wasn’t the impartial and peremptory touch of the medics of his childhood. He skimmed his fingers along Isaac’s clavicle. “You got an old break here, kid. And there’s a mole on your forearm I think we’d better excise and send for testing. It might be nothing, but if it’s not, it’s a nasty melanoma. You ever notice how raised it is?” Trace made another note on his tablet.

“How the hell do I have a melanoma? I’m never outside!”

Trace palpated his armpits. “It’s the kind least associated with sun exposure. Don’t worry about it. It might be nothing, but either way, I’ll take care of it.” Trace’s hand carded through Isaac’s hair, feeling the skull structure underneath. His fingertips worked their way down the bone, marking eye sockets, cheekbones, pressing behind his ears. He dug into the hinge of Isaac’s jaw, and delicately into the soft flesh of his neck. Isaac’s skin pebbled at his touch.

Trace’s fingers lingered before sliding downward, caressing his pecs, stroking down to his belly. “You’ve still got your appendix.”

Isaac’s stomach muscles clenched involuntarily under Trace’s touch. The medic’s fingers skimmed his abs, digging into the tender crease where thigh met groin. Unaccountably, Isaac’s cock stirred, flexed, and halfheartedly tried to fill. Shame and horror flooded his veins, and Isaac willed himself to stillness, breathing out as Trace hummed and released him, then made a notation on his tablet.

Trace grabbed an instrument off the small table. Isaac dredged up the name from his memory; an otoscope. He saw the glimpse of light in his peripheral vision, then shivered as the beaked appliance delved deep into his ear. Trace was muttering to himself, dropping his hand to Isaac’s shoulder and stroking a patch of skin. The back of Isaac’s elbow brushed against Trace’s crotch. Isaac jerked his arm away in reflex. His face burned.

Trace pulled the otoscope out and reached to the trolley again. The sound of the vaccination gun raised a familiar dread; that dry click as each vial snapped into place.

Trace placed the gun against Isaac’s upper arm and pulled the trigger. Yep, it still stung like a bastard.

“Well, you’ve had your major vaccinations, anyway,” said Trace. “So you were under some kind of medical care before.”

Isaac glanced at the new mark next to the old welt. His Genoese pox vac site had become inflamed and tender. He’d complained, so his father had taken him to an internment camp, back before they spent money on medical care in the Protectorate. He’d forced Isaac to watch through sturdy plate glass as unvaccinated slaves oozed and died on canvas cots. Isaac still had the scar tissue. Trace stuck an adhesive bandage over the top, so Isaac at least didn’t have to keep looking at the circular mark.

“One more,” said Trace, picking up a disposable syringe.

“What’s that one for?”

“Antidepressant implant with a vitamin supplement. It’ll last your first six months. You might need something stronger before then, but at least this will help you deal with transition.” The injection was swift and painless. “And I probably shouldn’t have told you that,” said Trace. “At least you don’t need a contraceptive implant.”

“Contraceptives? I thought they were against God’s will.”

“Sure they are, kid.”

“Isaac,” he whispered.

“Swing your leg over.” Trace helped him lift his left leg over the metal stirrups, protruding from the extension at one end of the chair.

“There’s more?”

Isaac squirmed in the chair like he had a stomach full of green berries, shivering as his shackle clanked against a stirrup. Trace’s hand rested softly on his shoulder, then stroked up his neck and caressed his cheek. The repetitive motion settled him. “It’s okay. You don’t need to worry yet. We’re going to start easy. Just relax.”

Isaac wrapped his arms around himself. A slight vibration shot through him as Trace raised the height of the chair with a hydraulic base.

“You going to be good for me?”

Isaac didn’t trust his voice. He nodded and kept his eyes closed.

“Anything bothering you at the moment, physically? Any aches and pains?”

Isaac’s cough took that exact moment to burst forth. He sat up and bent over, cradling his chest to try to ease that tight feeling in his lungs.

“Well, that answers that question.” Trace sounded almost satisfied. “We’d better have a look at that. But let’s get a DNA sample first.”

A burst of adrenaline renewed Isaac. “No. Please. Honest, I’m fine. I’m not sick. It’s just a cough.”

Trace stroked Isaac’s forehead.

“Hey, boy, it’s okay. Where did you ever get the idea illness is a personal failing, huh? You’ve done nothing wrong. Let’s just take a look at you.”

Trace's hand lingered on Isaac's hair. The unfamiliar touch pressed reality back into the room. What the hell was he doing lying here? None of this was possible. He couldn't go back to the Fed, he had responsibilities here. He struggled to rise again.

"Look, I've got money saved, some. I can get you more. Please, just let me out. It's a mistake."

Trace swiveled on his stool and looked Isaac square in the face. "It's not up to me, you know that, right? You belong to the Federation, just as much as I do. There's not going to be anyone letting anyone else go. There's no way out. You've got a tracker in you now. If you tried to run they'd do everything they could to get you back. They can't afford to let people think that running is an option. They'll kill you first."

He wanted to stop struggling, he did, but fear threaded through him. Trace grasped his left forearm in his huge hands and brought it down to the side of the chair as Isaac fought. He knew it was pointless. There were Feds outside the door, and even if he got free, where would he go? They'd come for him, and his family would pay. But a DNA test would ruin everything.

Trace fastened his left hand to the chair with the worn leather cuffs dangling limply from the armrests. Planting his big palm in the center of Isaac's chest, Trace held him down as he lowered the chair again. He leaned over Isaac's body and single-handedly fastened Isaac's right hand into the other strap. He placed both hands on Isaac's shoulders, looking into his eyes. "I don't want this to be difficult for you. Do you need more?"

Isaac couldn't ask, couldn't say it. Trace seemed to understand anyway, and he stooped to pull up a long leather strap that held Isaac around the waist, pinning him to the chair. He grasped one of Isaac's legs around the ankle. Isaac thrashed and shouted, but it was too late. Trace lifted the leg, nudging the strut of the stirrup into place with his hip, then lowered Isaac's foot into the cradling metal. He strapped it in with a soft leather piece that caressed his ankle and instep. Isaac flailed like a toad after the rains, tipped onto its back by delighted kids. The waist strap stopped him getting leverage, and Trace implacably positioned his second leg in the other stirrup.

Cool air stirred on his thighs, his ass, his hole. Salt stung his eyes at the humiliation. He'd always struggled to be strong, dependable. And now to be vulnerable like this, ass and cock exposed, unable to move... He wasn't Isaac any more. A sob burst from him, abrading his throat and pulling the anguish out of his heart. Tears followed.

Trace ignored his weakness, stroking the skin of his calves, running his big hands from knee to foot in long, careful movements. He murmured inarticulate sounds, as if gentling a stray. Isaac dropped his head back on the headrest. Trace's hands were on his thigh now, his fingers kneading Isaac's solid muscle, hard from years of lifting and stacking. When the big hands reached his cock, Isaac closed his eyes, hot tears leaking out from under his closed lids. Trace's hands caressed his balls, then stroked up the length of his shaft, pulling at his soft foreskin. He worked the hood back and forth, drawing it back from the head. Isaac felt tender touches on his slit, a soft caress back down his length, then Trace released him and slid his hands up Isaac's torso.

Isaac tensed at the loss of Trace's fingers, even as he emptied his lungs in relief. Trace's touch confused him. He knew it was all kinds of wrong to touch another guy's junk, even if Isaac had heard whispers otherwise. *Seen otherwise. Not that. Please, not that.*

Trace picked the translucent plastic tube off the table and unscrewed it, pulling out a swab. "Open up. It won't hurt. And it'll tell us if there's anything you're carrying, any reason you shouldn't be bred from. If you're likely to develop anything genetic in the next couple of decades. Heart disease, MS. It's no big deal. Just open up."

Isaac flexed against his bonds, knowing it wouldn't do any good. The leather was supple, well oiled. And it was the real thing too, not synth or vinyl. He just had to lie here and take it. He was so stupid. He should have known this was coming: he'd seen it often enough.

Isaac closed his eyes and opened his mouth. Trace scraped the inside of his cheek, as his breath brushed his face. He smelt like tobacco; like the guys at the bar who sat outside and smoked cigars, trading tall stories in sparse words. The worn leather of their boots spoke of confidence and certainty. He'd always doubted that future would be in his stars.

Trace walked over to a shiny processor on a bench, and snipped the tip off the swab, dropping it into a vial he inserted into the machine.

"How long will it take?" asked Isaac.

"What?"

"The DNA profile."

"Forty-eight hours. Why? Is there anything you should tell me?"

Isaac shook his head. Two days. He had two days to work out how to get out of here. "Are we done?" Isaac asked. "Please?"

"Not even close."

Isaac turned his head away, then gasped as Trace's hands caressed the skin between his legs, pulling his balls gently, coaxing them away from his body. It felt good, but men with men... it was wrong. He tensed, waiting for the touch to be removed.

"Gotta check you for testicular cancer. You're young, but it's never too early." Trace's gloved hands caressed Isaac's eggs inside their soft skin pouch. The latex was familiar, impersonal, but Trace's touch, and the way his eyes lingered on Isaac's face and neck... that didn't feel impersonal at all.

Trace at last brought his hand out from between Isaac's legs, and Isaac relaxed, exhausted already.

Trace took a tube off his instrument trolley and squeezed a thick stripe of gel out onto the tip of his long latex-covered middle finger. His hand darted back under Isaac's balls, and a cold wet touch met Isaac's hole. Trace's fingers massaged his testicles, and his hand started working Isaac's cock, lifting it until it stood straight out from Isaac's body, gently tugging and caressing, as the other hand worked his ball sack, delicately kneading and softly pulling. Fingers stroked his perineum, brushing across his anus, and drew circles on the soft skin around his hole, sliding and tickling slickly. Trace pressed a little harder, and Isaac moaned despite himself. The slippery caresses turned his cock into the center of earth and sky.

"Take a deep breath."

Isaac's mind tried to swim toward awareness, lost in Trace's liquid touch. "Wait, what?"

Trace's hand kept stroking and pulling his cock. Isaac could feel his pulse thrumming in his ears.

"Now bear down. Like you would going to the bathroom."

Anything, anything Trace wanted, as long as he didn't stop those circling, rotating movements on his cock. And then Trace's fingers were pushing against his anus, pushing inside. "No. Fuck, no. Stop it." He lunged against the straps holding him fast.

Trace's eyes were sympathetic, but his finger sank farther into Isaac's hole. The movement was constant, one hand pressing and twisting deep inside Isaac,

as his other hand caressed and pumped his now flaccid cock. Isaac was broken into pieces, could feel the blood rushing to his face. He snapped at Trace with his teeth, half-growling, half-crying in his rage.

“Shhh. This is going to happen. It hurts more when you fight it. You’ll thank me for it soon. Trust me.”

Trace’s finger was insistent, gentle, but inexorable. The flat pad of his finger swiped across something inside Isaac’s body, and he gasped. Trace released Isaac’s cock and placed one hand flat against him, not pressing down, just holding him in place while his finger stroked and pressed, circling around the spot then rubbing it lightly. Trace’s finger connected directly to Isaac’s dick, and Isaac grunted, trying to jerk his hips forward. His knees tried to fold in against his body, his feet straining against the leather that held them tight. Isaac didn’t know if he wanted to protect himself or give Trace better access.

“That’s your prostate. Good, huh?”

“No,” whispered Isaac. And he almost believed his words. Then Trace’s fingers drew the warmth of pleasure from deep beneath the root of his cock, spreading through his groin and ass and leaking like sunlight into his body.

Isaac turned his head to the side, resting his cheek against the chair, his breath coming in short rasps. Trace’s finger left his hole. Isaac’s heart stuttered. God, was that it? Did he listen? Why had he ever wished for Trace to stop? Then Trace picked up the tube again and spread another line of gel on his finger, then added a generous dollop to Isaac’s cock. The cold touch made his semi-soft cock jerk. Trace’s finger stroked along his crack and circled his hole, until it inexorably found its target, delving deep into his anus. Trace pulled out again, and ran his finger around Isaac’s crack and balls, scooping along the skin then pushing back inside Isaac’s ass, this time feeling wider, bigger. His fingers went unerringly to *that spot*, lightly stroking, circling, rubbing across it.

Trace’s hand started a rhythmic stroking and Isaac unaccountably felt moisture bloom in his eyes. No one else’s hand had ever touched him there, for all the nights he had woken in his own sticky emissions after dreaming about the girl from the bakery down the road. He didn’t want it to be like this. All at once, the day’s events caught up with him. If he didn’t get out of here there never would be a bakery girl. This would be his life now: touched by whoever wanted to touch him, however they pleased. The tears flowed freely as Trace jacked his prick, his fingers plunging deeper and deeper into Isaac’s hole. There was pain, then discomfort, and all the while the slow easy friction of Trace’s

hand on his dick. He felt his cock swell and grow against his will. Isaac made himself fall still, passive. He had nothing now, no control, but they couldn't make him respond to this, they couldn't make him like it.

"That's it." Trace's words were breathless. Isaac watched with blurry eyes at the pleasure in Trace's eyes, as Isaac grew to full erection. He felt rigid, as if the blood vessels were trying to burst out from under his skin.

Isaac threw his head back in the chair, tugging his arms against the straps. He wanted to move his legs, stretch them out, then bring them back, change the angle of his pelvis, but he was held fast, like a butterfly on a collection board.

"Good boy."

Isaac felt a spurt of pleasure at Trace's words. He looked down and saw one drop of milky white fluid, then another, fall from the tip of his dick, landing on his smooth belly. He glanced at Trace and his heart caught at the expression on the medic's face: possessive, hungry, utterly in control. Isaac's cock was flexing, jerking up and down with each push and prod of Trace's fingertips as they swirled over that spot inside Isaac's ass.

"I've got a finger on each side of your gland," said Trace. "It feels healthy. If I kept going I could milk you of your prostatic fluid, Isaac. You wouldn't have an orgasm, but you'd give me your fluid."

He sounded so matter-of-fact. The words forced a groan from Isaac as he closed his eyes. Trace's fingers crept downward again, squeezing his balls and rolling them within their sack, while Isaac's cock kept its regular jerking in time with the tender rhythm of Trace's right hand inside him.

Isaac could feel more drops of his liquid on his skin, then Trace's hand was back on his cock, working him quicker now, twisting his grip then flicking the palm of his hand over the glistening red head. Too much sensation. Too much to feel. His muscles contracted in spasm as Trace ripped his orgasm from him. White lights flashed in the red behind his closed eyelids, and his balls shot their load, his come barreling up his urethra.

The sensation was the strongest he'd ever experienced. His own hand, in the furtive darkness on his floor pallet in the store's back room, had never been like this. It took long moments for his brain to circle back to earth. The first thing he was aware of was Trace screwing a lid on a small white plastic jar.

"Nicely done. More than enough. They'll take a look at your boys, back in Yuma, see how motile they are. If you do well in training, and your sperm looks healthy, you'll be milked regularly."

Isaac couldn't even spare the energy to ask why.

Trace dropped the jar into a tiny cryo-unit, then rinsed a soft cloth under the sink tap. He wiped Isaac's stomach, ass, and now-soft prick, the water warm against his skin. He patted him dry with a soft towel, cleaning off his own hand at the same time.

Isaac lay exhausted, panting. He was confused. Used up. And he yearned for Trace to do it again.

"That's all for today, kid. I wanna take a look at that cough tomorrow. It's too late to start anything major now."

Trace unstrapped Isaac's arms, waist, then legs, caressing his feet as he handled each one.

Isaac's limbs were weird, light, unanchored. On the chair he'd had no choices: everything was up to Trace. Now he had to decide for himself what to do. Deciding where to place his arms, his hands, had never felt so awkward before.

Trace handed him a green bottle from the small fridge. "Here. It's got electrolytes in it. It'll help you feel better." He led Isaac back into the living quarters and pulled out a rollaway bed from under a bunk. He retrieved Isaac's chain from the table and clamped his shackle to a loop at the foot of the bed, then tucked a soft blanket around him.

"I'll be back with some food. Try to finish your drink."

Trace pressed against the bent, twisted trunk of the elephant tree. The bronze bark exposed the wood in patches, a silvery sun-dried heart. He plucked at the cracks in the wood. The tiny leaves were already more brown than green. Would it even make it through the spring?

He turned his back to the medunit and the smudge of mountains, and sank to the ground. Heat haze shimmered in his vision. A strong leg bumped his shoulder, then a cool metal flask nudged the side of his neck. He raised his hand, twined his fingers around the flask, then took a swallow of water. He leaned against Pete's leg, warm and comforting, as it had always been.

"The axle arrives tomorrow. We should be done the day after, maybe the next."

Trace nodded and passed the flask back up, swapping it for a lit cigarette.

"I've got your back, man," said Pete. "But what the fuck are you doing? You can't train anyone this old. Even if he were slave material."

He knew that already. Isaac was too hard, too strong. He'd fight. The way he struggled against his bonds in there.

God, the look in his face when he came... he wanted to do *everything* to him. He wanted to be in there now, holding him, telling him how brave he was. How full of all the promise of the world, not yet dried up and desiccated.

I'm losing my mind.

He nodded at Pete, then got to his feet and walked out into the desert, his cotton T-shirt damp despite the cool in his trailer. He hated that feeling. He'd seen this cotton growing, wide fields of it. The Colonel lent him out sometimes to a plantation owner. The Citizen liked to fuck him outside on the pale, sandy Arkansas soil, kneeling on his back as dry twigs scratched his face. He'd stake him out, after, luring tiny biting bugs to be crushed against his skin as he struggled, come dribbling down his ass. An audience of righteous men watching as swarming things claimed him until he screamed.

Trace brushed his free hand over the patch of cigar burns on his left hipbone, the pockmarked skin a miniature crater field. He needed to process this kid and get the fuck away from him. He had to stop this now. He drew his hand back, and flicked his lit butt into the air, watching the glowing red light arc before falling into the dry desert sand to be extinguished.

He knew it was already too late.

He followed Pete back to the catering unit, where four covered dishes were lined up on the bench. "You won't believe it," Pete said. "Miller made potatoes dauphinoise. Even though he's pissed off Clarke 'forgot' to get his duffel bag off the transport. He doesn't even have a toothbrush. Such a terrible oversight."

Trace grinned, and grabbed two trays from the big pile by the sink. This was a break for all of them. Usually Miller would be helping cook for sixty crew plus harvest.

Miller stuck his head into the catering truck. "Hey Sarge, there's a crying mom out here with the head cunt. Want me to tell her to fuck off?"

Pete rolled his eyes. "I'll handle it. And don't speak about residents of the Protectorate that way."

Miller pressed himself to the frame of the doorway to let Pete out. Pete's voice carried in on the night breeze, starting his well-practiced "regrettable but necessary" speech. Miller swung the door shut on the cool air.

"Well now, isn't this cozy? You've been holed up in that medunit all day. A less compassionate man might think you were trying to avoid me."

Trace kept dishing up meals on the trays. *Don't look. Don't react. Don't respond.*

"Listen, I've been thinking a lot about what the Colonel said. And I'm ready to give it a try, okay?" He stepped in behind Trace, pressing him against the big metal prep table. The semi-hard bulge of his cock thrust against Trace's ass. Miller reached up and ran a fingertip down Trace's neck. "You can suck me, all right?"

Trace shivered, and lowered his arms, appetite gone. Miller spoke like he was offering a treat. *Keep calm. Stick to the truth.*

"I'm still on duty, Private Miller."

Miller stepped back, laid a big hand on Trace's shoulder, and forced him to turn around. "That's all right. I can wait. I'll meet you outside in an hour."

Trace and Miller were eye to eye, and Miller tilted his head forward, eyes glowing with excitement as he raised a thick finger and pried Trace's lips apart. Fuck. Trace knew how this went. He was supposed to part his teeth, suck Miller down, make a promise with his mouth that he'd deliver later on Miller's dick. But he couldn't. He fucking hated being caught on the knife's edge like this; part whore, part medic, all slave. Twenty years of making decisions about others while being allowed none for himself. He gritted his teeth until Miller removed his hand, clenching into a fist as he lowered it, face tight and eyes narrowed.

"I'm sorry, Private. I'll be tied up all night."

Miller cocked his head to the side. "*Excuse me?* Are you refusing a Citizen?"

"I've got to get dinner back to the ne—"

Miller swept the trays off the table with a clatter, his hand flying up and grabbing Trace around the throat. He turned Trace's head from side to side, peering at the scab on his cheek, his tongue darting out to moisten his lips. Trace shut his eyes, and braced himself, but Miller released him, shoving him backward against the table.

“You are *not* better than me, bitch.”

Trace didn't move, fighting to keep his arms loose and passive at his side. Miller crowded against him, then bent down to pull up the leg of his fatigues. Trace caught his breath as Miller unsheathed a large hunting knife with an elaborate carved handle. Grabbing the neck of Trace's T-shirt, Miller sliced through the thin cotton, dragging the blade downwards. The fabric ripped in quick jerks. He traced the point of the knife back up Trace's chest, leaving a white scratched trail in the skin. His fingers sought out Trace's nipple, and he dug his short blunt nails into the flesh, pulling and twisting. Trace clenched his teeth. He wouldn't cry out, he wouldn't give this asshole kid the satisfaction.

“This isn't your choice to make, understand?”

Miller thrust his groin forward, and Trace felt Miller swelling within his fatigues, growing hard and fully erect. Miller bent, and bit the firm skin over Trace's pecs, worrying it with his teeth until the blood roaring in his head deafened Trace and he feared his flesh would rend. Trace thrashed in place, biting his lip against the agony, until a whine leaked out from his unwilling lips. Miller stood and slammed a hand over his mouth. “Shush, bitch,” Miller hissed into Trace's ear. Spit landed on his cheek. “I sure like your titties.”

“What the fuck are you doing?” shouted Pete. Trace hadn't even heard the door open over the pulse in his ears. “Have you lost your mind? That is the Colonel's personal property.”

Trace shivered.

Pete yanked Miller away from Trace, flinging him across the kitchen. “You're dismissed, Private.”

They both watched until the door closed behind Miller.

“Fuck, Trace, are you okay?”

“Yeah, the Colonel's property is fine, thank you, Sergeant.”

“Shit, don't take it that way.”

Trace turned away and picked up the trays on the floor, placing them in the big dishwasher, and grabbing a cloth to wipe up the spilled food.

“I'll get you dinner.” Pete dished up two trays and covered them with wrap, while Trace cleaned up and collected two sets of cutlery. When he took the trays from Pete, he could see he wanted to speak, but Trace had no more words in him.

“Thank you, Sergeant. I’ll see you in the morning.” He left without looking back, T-shirt fluttering behind him like a pair of broken wings.

Isaac heard Trace in the exam room next door for ten minutes before he came through with dinner. When he appeared he was shirtless, with a white bandage taped over his right pectoral muscle. Head down, he’d placed the trays on the table without noticing that Isaac was reading one of the books from the shelf above the bed. Isaac had only just been able to reach it, grateful as hell for a distraction, and to touch a book again after so long.

“Hey, why do you have a book about a boy at magic school under a dust jacket for *Obligations and Duties of the Obedient Slave*?”

Isaac was utterly unprepared for Trace’s roar of anger, or the vicious lunge with which he ripped the book from Isaac’s hand. “Don’t touch my fucking stuff!”

Trace raised the book as if to strike him. Isaac didn’t even lift his hands to defend himself, only gazed in bewilderment at the rage and pain on the medic’s face.

Trace froze, arm high, then sagged, throwing the book onto the bunk, before turning and leaving the room.

Isaac curled up on his cot as best he could, hunger gnawing in his belly. He hadn’t eaten yesterday, but emptiness was an old familiar friend. He didn’t reach for the book again.

It was half an hour before Trace returned. His face was blotchy and red. He unwrapped a tray and passed it to Isaac. Isaac took it carefully, keeping his gaze lowered and his body angled away from Trace. The food was cold, but delicious. He hadn’t eaten like this in... well, a very long time.

Trace didn’t bother with his own meal, just climbed into his bunk, avoiding Isaac in his cot on the floor. When Isaac finished his meal he lowered the empty tray to the ground. “Lights off,” called Trace. They lay close together in the darkness, a thousand miles apart.

“I’m sorry,” whispered Isaac. “I just wanted to know what could happen to me; what to expect.”

“It’s okay,” said Trace. The despair in his voice made Isaac’s heart lurch, as if it were Miles lying there. “I shouldn’t have made such a big deal out of it. It hardly matters now, anyway.”

Isaac rolled over, so he could just make out the shape of Trace's solid shoulders and back under his blanket, like the range of dark mountains to the northeast. He watched for a long time, seeing the rise and fall with each breath, too fast to show a body at sleep.

When they came, Trace's words were nearly inaudible in the quiet room.

"It's just, they're all I have, my books."

Isaac felt an unaccountable desire to reach his hand out and touch Trace's back, to offer foolish comfort.

"Why books?"

Trace took a long time to answer. "Because they're reliable. They don't change from moment to moment. They can't deny what they said the next day. And they can take you anywhere. They can even take me away from this goddamn hellhole."

"But they're not true. Unless they're on the List, they're full of lies, sent to deceive us. I love reading, but books aren't real."

"Maybe. Maybe they're lies. How would we know? I have this book on the history of language, right? It's on the List, it's legal. But at the back there's a list of other books by the same writer, about other countries, and hiking, and his childhood. They're all on the List. But there's one title I've never heard of. It's not on the List. Why? Did he suddenly start lying?"

"I just wanted something to read, honestly. I won't say anything."

"It never crossed my mind you *could* read. That one you saw... it's pretty obvious it's not on the Whitelist. Magic definitely *is* a lie. If you say anything, it's grounds for—well, something bad."

"What happens to you if they find your stash?" asked Isaac.

"For Citizens, the first offense is public discipline. Second is incarceration. Third is a death sentence. I don't think they expect a slave would ever own anything, let alone items not on the Whitelist. I'm fairly valuable to the Colonel. There's a chance he might not kill me. But, probably, it's just death."

"Why take the risk that they'll find them, then?"

"I think I'm hoping they will."

Isaac woke to the sound of quiet, ordered movement through the wall. Today had to be the day. When they went outside, he'd wait for his moment, then run. He lay under the crisp sheets, trying to shake his apprehension about whatever Trace had in store for him. Just as Trace had said, there was nothing he could do about that. Getting worked up would only hinder him. He had to be calm, patient, and alert for opportunity.

When Trace eventually came into the living quarters he was dressed, and filled with a familiar sense of purpose. Trace knelt and unlocked his leg chain from the end of the bed.

He walked him to the toilet closet. "Piss and take a crap."

"What if I don't need to?"

"It's better you learn to go when you can. If you need to later, when you're in the chair, I won't unlock you for it."

Isaac obeyed, grateful that Trace at least gave him some privacy for it.

"Now go shower and brush your teeth. Clean out your ass, too. Make sure you use warm water and towel yourself dry. No repeats of yesterday, okay?"

Trace set his unlocked chain on the table.

"You don't need that. I won't run."

"You might if you knew what was coming. Wash up, kid."

Trace left a clean white towel and a new toothbrush, and disappeared into the exam room again.

Trace reappeared so quickly after he finished toweling off and brushing his teeth, that Isaac wondered if there was a camera in the living quarters. Isaac wrapped the towel around himself, and Trace held his hand out, gazing at him.

"Trace, please—?"

Only because Isaac was looking directly at Trace did he catch his momentary wince. He held his tongue and handed Trace the towel without argument, then followed him out to the exam room.

Trace nodded at the chair, and Isaac hopped up. Trace strapped his arms and waist down, testing the binding with a sharp tug.

"Doesn't a condemned man get a last breakfast or something?"

"I'll feed you after this. You don't want food to interfere with any anaesthetic we might need. Trust me on this."

Isaac nodded and leaned back in the chair, letting his head fall onto the headrest. This already felt familiar. Trace picked up each leg and strapped it into the stirrup, fastening each foot cuff tightly.

“Today we’re going to take a look at that cough,” said Trace. “I’ve already got an idea what we might be dealing with, but we have to check.”

He held up a small white spray bottle with a long thin nozzle. “I’m going to anesthetize your larynx.”

“My what?”

“Your vocal chords.”

“What the hell? I won’t be able to talk? No way.” Isaac thrashed against the straps, feeling the leather dig into his wrists, until exhaustion quieted him. Trace stroked the hair back from his forehead. Isaac could feel it stick to his skin where he’d raised a sweat even in the cool air of the unit.

“Shhh. It’s only temporary. I can’t have you shifting around like this. I’m going to fasten your head in place. It’s for your own good.”

Trace’s firm hand held Isaac’s head still. All he could hear was fumbling above him, at the back of the headrest, and then something flexible cradled his forehead and neck. Isaac heard a faint clank of metal on metal, and Trace’s hands released him. He followed him with his eyes, but he wasn’t able to move his head.

“Please. Please don’t.”

Trace just stroked his cheek.

Trace had a large wooden tongue depressor, but Isaac kept his mouth firmly closed, teeth gritted. Trace sighed and placed the spray bottle down. It seemed he had been ready for this. There was the rustle of plastic and paper, then a soft scrape. He felt Trace’s big fingers poking into the jaw joints on each side of his face. He couldn’t seem to keep his teeth clenched, and Trace slipped something between them. The tang of metal was against his tongue, and something bulky touched the left corner of his mouth. Isaac heard the unmistakable *clank* of a ratchet, and his jaw opened wider, then wider, until he was open and exposed to Trace.

“Please, don’t,” he tried to say, but all he heard was an inarticulate garble. His throat gave a spasm in fear.

Trace leaned forward, and Isaac felt something hard pushing against the back of his tongue, down his throat, then the sound of liquid spraying. It didn't feel cold or hot, it didn't feel anything but... weird. Where the spray must have touched became... other. Alien. The tip of the spray bottle kept bumping against his airway, touching the inside of his throat, but the touch was becoming muted, dull. Isaac whined and clenched his hands into fists, pressing his jaw down against the appliance. But it refused to move.

Trace stroked Isaac's face, then leaned forward. "It'll be all right," he whispered. "We have to wait a while for the anaesthetic to fully take effect."

The chair lowered and Trace straddled him, and ran his hands down Isaac's face, stroking his cheeks, then caressing the inside of his mouth. Isaac tensed in his chair, muscles seizing up. Trace leaned forward, so close Isaac could see the pores of his skin, and fine crows' feet around his eyes. Trace's fingers delved inside his mouth, stroking his tongue.

"You're so open to me," breathed Trace. "So exposed... Look how beautiful you are." Trace's fingers caressed the inside of Isaac's mouth. Isaac tried to speak.

"You'll only hurt your throat if you try to talk. Just take it. I'm inside you, and you can't stop me."

Isaac closed his eyes, and felt Trace's fingers outline his lips, stroke across the pliable surface of his tongue.

Trace's body was big, but he could feel that Trace was resting much of his weight on his own feet, only pressing lightly onto Isaac. Isaac almost wished he could feel the man's whole weight on top of him, pushing him down. He could feel Trace's balls against his groin, through the thin fabric of his pants. He wondered if Trace was hard; what his cock might look like.

His own cock stirred in interest. No, this was crazy. It was a girl he wanted pressed over him, pushing him down, touching him and giving him no choices...

Trace leaned forward, resting his left arm on the headrest right beside Isaac's ear. Trace held his index and middle fingers up in front of Isaac's face.

"How far down your throat do you think I can get these?"

The pressure against the back of his tongue came immediately.

"Usually you've got a gag reflex here, but the local took care of that."

The fingers were pushing deeper. The sensation of something foreign in his throat made Isaac try to struggle but his body was held fast. It was delicious and terrifying in equal measure.

“Shhh,” said Trace. He wrapped his other hand around Isaac’s throat, squeezing. “I won’t damage you.”

Isaac wanted to cough, but could only sit, yielding to the invasion. His cock thickened, swelled, as he gave himself to Trace’s touch. Trace started working his fingers in and out of Isaac’s throat, fucking him with his hand. He pulled out for a second and adjusted the ratchets, and Isaac felt his jaws forced even wider with the single click. He let out a groan, but all that emerged was a quiet wet gagging sound.

“I know what this feels like, believe me. When you get into the Fed, they’ll use this to train your gag reflex away. You’ll be so used to it, soon it will hardly bother you. But I’m the first person to put anything in your throat. I wish I could feed you my whole hand. But you’ll take my fingers.”

Trace pressed his fingers against the inside of Isaac’s throat, and Isaac wished he felt like he wanted to throw up. There wasn’t supposed to be anything inside him there. It was wrong.

“Oh, I think we’re at maximum effect now.” Trace slithered his fingers out of Isaac’s throat. Trails of saliva dripped down his chin, and Trace wiped them away with a cool, dry cloth.

“I’m going to cover your eyes, Isaac. You’ll find it easier that way.”

What was Trace going to do? Pinned, and voiceless, and now sightless, too? Terror nudged its way into his body, but Trace had never harmed him; surely he wouldn’t start now? Isaac couldn’t move his head, but he caught glimpses of Trace folding bandages around soft pads, before he lowered them over Isaac’s eyes. Isaac tried to shake his head, but the appliance fastened around his head held him still.

Trace wound medical tape around and around Isaac’s head, pinning the soft bandages down, pressing them over Isaac’s eyeballs. Light leaked in around the edges, but he could see nothing. Isaac felt himself floating, all connection with the environment cut off. Except for those hands. Trace’s hands, skimming along the side of his face and down his neck, then trailing down his pecs and stroking across his nipples, until Isaac was writhing in the chair.

“Okay now, sit still for me. I’m going to use something called a bronchoscope to look into your lungs. I can sedate you if you think you need it. It won’t hurt; it will just feel like... a lot. I’d rather not use the midazolam if I can help it.”

Isaac whimpered as the motor kicked in and the chair reclined, until he was lying flat on his back. Isaac heard Trace adjust and arrange things on the trolley, the sounds of metal and soft rubber unnerving him. Trace’s palms felt hot against his cheeks as he held and settled him.

There was a *clink* against the gag, and then something was inside Isaac’s mouth. His breaths became shallow and rapid.

“It won’t hurt.”

There was something big, thrusting down inside his throat, Trace’s hands brushed against Isaac’s lips, his chin. A metal and rubber mass pressed against the gag. Something *pushed*. Every inch of Isaac fought to get away, yet there was nowhere to go. His jaw pressed against the gag, but it didn’t give. And always this foreign *thing* kept coming, until his chest heaved in panic, and he felt as if something had nested within it.

“Good boy,” Trace murmured.

Isaac. *His name was Isaac.*

Soft mechanical sounds reverberated inside his skin. When Trace shifted Isaac felt like a puppet on his hand, his weight moving back and forward in the chair in response. The procedure seemed to go on for days. Isaac wished he’d insisted on the sedation, whatever the side effects would have been. There was no pain, only an ever-present sense of wrongness that made him want to retch and yank the bronchoscope out and hurl it across the room.

Isaac’s body grew exhausted, his muscles no longer capable of resisting. Sometimes Trace made small noises in the back of his throat, half-formed words murmured, and then, when he was not expecting it, the discomfort grew, and with a great dragging slide, Trace tugged the bronchoscope out of his body. It was as if it drew his lungs out with it. Wetness and metal and rubber touched his face. Isaac wanted to cough but he couldn’t: he screamed, but nothing emerged.

And then Trace was there, of course. He pressed on Isaac’s shoulder, stilling him, calming him, as the chair rose until he was sitting upright once again. Trace whispered nothings into his ear and his breath caressed his cheek. He

held a plastic cup to Isaac's lips and helped him drink, then wiped his mouth and face with a cool, damp cloth.

"That's all. There's no more of that. It had to be done. You were so brave."

While Isaac lay limply after Trace's ministrations, he felt a tourniquet fastened around his upper arm, the light stroke of Trace's fingers from the crook of his left elbow, down to his wrist, the fleabite of a needle pricking his skin. "I thought you took blood already," Isaac tried to say, but only a soft, rasping breath emerged. Trace whisked the tourniquet away and spread a bandage upon his skin like a kiss.

Isaac wished he could hold on to Trace, feel him, but all he could do was lie there and wait for whatever came next. Trace wiped Isaac's skin with a soft cloth, his touch deliberate, careful. Isaac didn't flinch this time when Trace's hand caressed his groin and wiped over his hole. Nor when Trace returned his fingers there, lubing him up with cool, wet gel. There was a rattling sound as Trace picked an object off the instrument trolley. Then he gasped as something slick and narrow and cold slid inside his ass. The intrusion felt vast, and Isaac felt part sick, part excited, that there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Trace's hands vanished, and then Isaac couldn't help but jerk as the medic's touch returned, unexpectedly, to his soft cock where it lay quiescent, nestled in the join between leg and torso. Trace slipped something rigid and unyielding over the head of his cock, and Isaac felt it settle at rest beneath the helmet, encircling him, holding him, not tightly, not hurting, but disconcerting in its very presence.

"Why?" Isaac mouthed, but no sound came out. He'd been good. Wasn't he good?

"This isn't a punishment, Isaac. It's a pleasure. It's a gift for you."

Trace's strong fingers moved purposefully. Thin wires draped across his skin.

"You ready?"

Isaac tried to shake his head, but the restraints held him fast. He heard a soft click as Trace flicked a switch, and an exquisite hum-tingle-throbbing filled his whole body. Isaac's cock was being tickled with summer lightning, crawling and creeping and touching inside him, pulling his balls up into his body and tightening each breath within his chest. His hole convulsed, pushing against resistance then pulling something deep inside him. Isaac tried to speak, to make

his mouth form words, but only a silent gasp came out, language deserting him. He was all body, all cock, all ass, and he was grateful for the straps holding him down, afraid he would fly away with every pulse that shot through his brain-skin-tongue-sack-dick. He wanted more, more, and he wanted it to stop. He was on a cresting wave that never seemed to break. He clenched and unclenched his hands, and Trace was there, touching him, grounding him, smoothing across the landscape of his body and giving him something to cling on to that wasn't this growing urge to come and come and shout and flail. His belly fluttered, and his stomach muscles convulsed in time with the incessant there-ness of the current inside him. He wanted to tell Trace, to ask him if he'd ever had this done to him, but when he opened his lips he could only mouth a silent howl, as tears fell from his eyes, soaking into the cotton pads. The sensation went on and on and he couldn't seem to control his body and it was in him, in his dick and around him and every bit of him and he was losing his mind...

Trace's voice brought him back, whispering against his ear. "That's my good boy. You're all right. My wonderful boy."

He needed Trace now, needed him to fasten him to the earth. He tried to say, "Please? Please don't leave me?" But not even a whisper emerged. The humming of the machine in his ass filled the room. Trace unstrapped his left arm and grasped Isaac's hand. "I'm here. I've got you. You'll be able to speak soon."

Isaac's orgasm swelled within him, growing exponentially, but he was unprepared for the moment when it rolled over in a breaking crest. It was, again, Trace's hands that held him, rocked him through it, as he writhed and gasped through his pleasure. He dimly felt Trace pulling the long tube from out of his hole, freeing his prick, unfastening the rest of his bonds, turning him in the chair. And then Trace was unwinding the tape holding the bandages over Isaac's eyes, until the bright blue-white dazzled him once more. Trace stood there for a long while, letting Isaac rest against him. Eventually he nudged Isaac to his feet.

"Come on." He led Isaac through to the living quarters, and steered him toward his own bunk. Trace spread a smooth clean sheet over Isaac, then cracked open a heat blanket, shaking it to let the chemicals mix, before draping it over Isaac's body. Isaac curled up, half hurt, half ecstatic, all exhausted.

"I'm going to get you some food. You sleep, if you want."

Isaac caught Trace's sleeve, croaking out his words as if he'd never spoken before. "Why didn't you want to use the midazwhatever—the sedative stuff?"

Trace said nothing for a long time, and Isaac thought that he wasn't going to speak at all.

"Because you would have forgotten. You would have forgotten the whole thing. And I wanted you to remember." Trace leaned down and pressed his lips against Isaac's hair, rocked and held him. "I wanted you to remember me."

When Trace stepped down from the medlab, Pete was sitting on the ground in the dappled shade of the elephant tree.

Trace walked over and joined him. Pete passed him a protein bar and a lukewarm cup of coffee.

"Sorry it's not hot. I didn't think you would take so long."

He didn't say anything, just took them and swallowed down the tepid liquid in giant gulps, like he was trying to swallow his desire. He tipped the dregs out, and set his mug on the ground. A red-brown hawk circled overhead, playing in the thermals, zeroing in on prey far below.

"Got a cigarette, Pete? I'm all out."

Pete passed him his own, lit but not yet burned down. He took a deep draw.

"This kid?"

He nodded.

"You're taking a long time processing him. What's the deal?"

He breathed in a lung full of smoke. "Coccidioides immitis."

"What the hell is that?"

"A spore that causes a nasty little fungal infestation. He's got coccidioidomycosis. Basically the kid's got mold growing in his lungs. I'll have to send the sample to the lab to confirm it, but I'm damn certain."

"Fuck! Can we catch it? Will you catch it?"

Trace shook his head. "No. We're breathing it in right now."

Pete pulled his undershirt up over his nose and mouth.

"Don't worry. We've been breathing it for years. Every time we come out here. Back in Yuma, for that matter. It's everywhere. Invisible. Surrounding us all the time. We don't even think about it." He shrugged. "For some reason, in some people, it digs in, takes hold. Takes over."

“Is it bad?”

“Right now he thinks he just has a cough. The flu, maybe. But the fungus in his lungs is sending spores throughout his bloodstream. They’re probably in all his organs, in his skin, maybe even in the soft tissue lining of his brain. I’ve started him on amphotericin.”

“You what? That sells for, what, two thousand a dose on the black market? Are you out of your mind?”

“And he’ll need monitoring and ongoing treatment for six months, at least, maybe a year. Without treatment he’ll be developing the first bout of chronic pneumonia any day now. Next month he’ll be coughing up blood. Give him a year, a bronchopleural fistula—a hole in the lungs that leads into the chest cavity. With treatment...” Trace shrugged. “He’ll probably be fine.”

“It sounds fucking terrifying. Why are you looking after him like this?”

“He’s not cut out to be a slave. He won’t last three months. We’re going to have to throw him back.”

Pete nudged him with his elbow. “I miss you,” he said. “It’s more than the processing, isn’t it?”

Trace nodded, dropping the roach end into the sand and grinding it with the heel of his soft shoe. A black ant ran across his instep, investigating.

“He’s me, Pete. He’s me who didn’t get picked. I’ve spent twenty years wondering what would have happened if I’d stayed free. He’s what happened. If he hadn’t stuck up for that stupid kid, hadn’t been harvested... I dream about the life I could have had, but would I have had all that much?”

“You’d have had something.”

Trace’s shoulders shook as something tried to well up from his heart, and he wondered if he was going to laugh or cry.

“Here. Before I forget.” Pete pulled a slim volume out of his thigh pocket and handed it across. “I was just glad the locals had something I could bargain for. Never saw a town so in need of hard currency.”

Trace reached for the book, eagerness twitching in his fingers. His red eyes met Pete’s in gratitude.

Pete huffed out a breath and broke their gaze. “Miller cooked a hot lunch. It’s not half bad. Come on over and grab a couple of trays to take back. I’ll make sure nothing happens.”

Pete turned his back on him, strolling over to the catering unit, as Trace flipped through the book. The lower half of the cover was unevenly torn away, leaving no author's surname, only three initials. The remaining cover was battered, but beneath the dust and scratches, a red sun hovered over gray mountains with curious white peaks. Three strange almost-birds flew in the sky. Letter shapes he'd never seen before marched in a border along the top edge, and he flicked open the book in concern, but the text was in American, thank God. He'd have to stash it out of sight until he could get a dust jacket made up. He was grateful no one else cared enough to ever open the books on his shelf. Apart from Isaac, of course. The only other person he'd ever met who liked reading, and it was a fucking Protectorate kid. He tucked the book into his own thigh pocket, and marched resolutely toward the catering truck.

Isaac woke from his doze as Trace threw a set of slave grays onto the end of his cot.

“Congratulations. You earned clothes.”

He watched, perplexed, as Trace flipped his bunk mattress over. Trace's fingers burrowed along the seam, before delving into a hidden pocket. He tucked a paperback out of sight.

His throat was tender from the bronchoscopy. Every time he swallowed, he remembered Trace's fingers in his throat, his weight upon his body. He glanced up at Trace, and wondered if he was feeling the same thing, too. “New reading material?”

Trace grinned. “Yep. Definitely not Whitelist.”

“Can I have a look?”

“Not yet. I'll have to make a dust jacket for it, disguise it, once I get back home and get some unsupervised time on the printer. If it looks like a Whitelist book, no one ever checks to see what's under the cover. Only you. How did you learn to read, anyway?”

“Just lucky. Couldn't check deliveries or send in orders without my letters. I'm an even, but I was skipped over at harvest. Too scrawny, I guess.” Isaac was glad Trace wasn't looking at him; he would have seen the lie in his face. “We didn't get a whole lot of regular meals.”

“We?”

“Miles, Rachel, and me. She’s three years younger than me, Miles just turned fourteen.”

“Where are your parents?”

Isaac looked down at his knees. “Rachel and I always looked after each other. Anyway, after I found work things got easier. And three years ago Rachel had Lila.”

“Who’s Lila’s dad?”

“Fucked if I know. Rachel’s her own woman. I never ask her where the Fed currency she brings in comes from. And I wouldn’t dream of telling her what to do.”

“What a devoted brother.”

Isaac didn’t know if Trace was being sarcastic.

“Where do you work?” asked Trace.

What was the point in lying? Anyone in town could answer the question. “At the store. And the bar, nights.”

“They’re locally owned, aren’t they?”

Isaac nodded.

Trace rearranged his bed, tucking the sheets and blanket back in. “So they pay you in trade goods,” he said. “The real question is, why aren’t you working at the refinery? They’re crying out for strapping young men. They just can’t get the labor out here in the desert. And they pay hard currency. You’d earn ten times what you do in two jobs now.”

How could he possibly answer without it sounding like the hollow excuse it would be? “I get to sleep out the back of the store. And they’re good about looking the other way when the occasional can of food goes missing.” What would make Trace drop the subject? “Where do you get all the books from?”

Trace looked at him while he worked, as if trying to judge how much to say, then shrugged. “Different places. Different people. My first was from the Colonel’s son. That’s why the Colonel hates it here so much, actually. Why he took the rest of the convoy and left us behind.”

“What’s wrong with here?”

“The Colonel lost his son here. Fourteen, maybe fifteen years ago. He should never have brought him on a trip, and he knew it. Wanted to toughen

him up, I guess. Didn't like the way he was turning out. Thought a little trip out would show him why slavery works. Why the Protectorate needs the Fed."

"You were here then." It wasn't a question. "So what happened?"

"Kid saw something that upset him. Wasn't ready for the realities of the harvest. We had taken a new boy, and—shit, the kid was only ten. Took off into the desert. Left his copy of *Tom Sawyer* on my bunk and headed out, right when a dust storm blew in from the border. You should have seen it. Easily a mile high, like a red fucking tsunami. You couldn't see six inches in front of you. No point in chasing after him: he could have been at our feet and we wouldn't have known. The Colonel was so pissed."

"You looked for him though, right?"

Trace snorted. "Yeah, no. The Colonel was kind of mad. No kid of his would be so squeamish about a little blood, he said, especially when it wasn't even Citizen blood. We stayed a day. Sent out some guys on ATVs to scout. There wasn't really any point, though, no tracks because of the dust cover. And then we moved on. Since then, he tries to get through here as fast as possible."

"And so, what? He... died?"

"There's no way anyone survives out here alone. He was a great kid. I missed him. So, anyway, that was my first book." Trace stood, plumping the pillows and throwing them to the head of the bunk. "I've got another about a man who turns into a giant bug. The owner caught me reading it when we were visiting, said he'd offer me a deal. Forty-eight pages: I'd get one for each strike of the cane I could take. I could say 'stop' any time I wanted. But what I wanted was the story. You should read it. You'd like it, I think."

Isaac swallowed, appalled and sickened. Trace grinned wryly at him. "Not a real rattan cane, of course. I wouldn't be alive to tell the tale."

"Not Whitelist?"

"What do you think?"

"Then how could he have it?"

"I know you're not that naïve. The people who make the rules don't have to follow the rules. That's the one thing that stays the same no matter where you go."

All the lessons of twenty years were in Trace's words.

“Here.”

Isaac looked up. Trace was holding a book out to him. “What’s this?”

“*Obligations and Duties of the Obedient Slave*. Enjoy.”

Isaac took it in pure reflex, watching dazedly as Trace went through to the lab. He spent the rest of the afternoon curled up on his cot, caught up in classes and spells and friendship, as Trace tidied and cleaned and ran instruments through the autoclave. No girl had ever given Isaac a world like this.

They ate dinner together in the living quarters, the Sergeant passing two trays in through the main door. Afterwards, Trace didn’t shower, just climbed straight into his bunk. Isaac lay in his cot for a while, looking from each page up to the broad back so close to him. When, oh, too soon, he finished the book, he shut it with a snap. He’d never felt so alone, or felt such a kinship with a character. He was grateful when Trace called for the lights to shut off. The dark hid Isaac’s tears.

Trace was a man, but he was a good man. Strong, yet gentle. Thoughtful. He was with the Feds, but he wasn’t a Fed. And it would be one night. Isaac didn’t ask, merely climbed up to the bunk and lay beside Trace, wrapping one arm around him and pressing against his warm body. “Thank you.” He found Trace’s hand up by his pillow and grasped it in his. “I wish it was all real.”

“You know what I wish?” said Trace. “I wish I could have seen the ocean. Savannah looks out over the sea. I’ve always wanted to go there.”

“Is that the only ocean?”

“I don’t know.”

They huddled close together on the single bunk, their chests rising and falling in unison. Trace released his hand and rolled over so they were face to face, pressing his body against Isaac’s. Isaac grasped for Trace with his lips and tongue. He nuzzled against Trace’s cheeks, his chin, the curve of his neck. They lay entwined in each other’s arms, keeping the dark at bay.

“Know what else I wish?” said Isaac.

“Mmm?” Trace was half asleep, dozing, and Isaac knew there was no better time to ask.

“I wish I knew why you haven’t tried to fuck me.”

Trace didn’t reply for a long time. “Is that something you want?”

“No. But I know you want to.”

Trace rested his head against Isaac's chest, and Isaac tried to calm the frantic beating of his heart.

“I do want you,” said Trace. “But I won't fuck you. You can fuck me. If *you* want to.” Isaac's skin muffled Trace's words.

“Are you sure? Doesn't it hurt?”

Trace shook his head. “I want it. But it has to be my way.”

“Whatever you want. Anything. Everything.”

Trace eased himself out of bed, and Isaac bit back a protest at the loss, as his silhouette padded across the clean metal floor to the exam room door. He returned carrying supplies. He knelt above Isaac on the bed, leaning over him.

“Reach up and grab the bed frame.”

Isaac obeyed, stretching his body out against the cool sheets. Trace snapped a restraint on him, securing one of Isaac's hands over his head, then the second. His chest was so close to Isaac's face he could see bruises on Trace's chest in the shape of teeth marks. Isaac strained his head up and lapped gently, delicately, at Trace's coppery nipple, pressing the lightest of kisses against his skin. He needed to take all the pain away: Trace deserved none of it.

When he had bound Isaac Trace held up a roll of medical tape and cotton bandages. “I'm going to blindfold you.”

Isaac could hear it wasn't a request.

Trace folded the cotton into a pad, then leaned forward and placed a delicate kiss on each of Isaac's eyelids. Isaac closed his eyes, and then the red light filtering through his eyelids darkened as Trace placed the cloth over his eyes. One hand cradled the back of Isaac's head as he wrapped the soft bandage over and around, covering his ears as well as his eyes.

Trace untied Isaac's loose pants, and cold air swamped his cock and balls as Trace pulled the fabric down over his hips. Isaac pulled his feet in toward his body so he could lift his hips up higher, and Trace worked the pants down to Isaac's knees, then lifted each foot in turn to pull the clothing off, left foot last. He stroked Isaac's arch with his strong, thick fingers, until Isaac jerked and quivered.

Isaac turned his head, trying to catch a sliver of sound. Was that the snick of a cap opening? He felt Trace straddle him, his balls brushing against the inside

of Isaac's leg. Isaac shivered and tried to pull his legs together, to feel more than that ghostly trace of the man. And then, abruptly, Trace's hands were upon him, cold and wet, and Isaac arched his back at the unexpected bite of Trace's gel-covered fingers. Unseen hands grasped his shaft, working him together, each palm grasping the bottom of his cock and slithering upwards to the soft loose skin at the tip. Isaac snapped his teeth closed to hold back the moan that welled up from his belly.

The bandages muffled Trace's voice. "No, let it out. I want to hear you. I want to hear you want this."

One of Trace's hands dropped to Isaac's sack, working his balls inside the soft pouch, pulling, stroking, tugging his balls gently away from his body. Trace's other hand ran up his shaft, twisting his palm against Isaac's stiffness, then rubbing his thumb over the sensitive head. With a last caress Trace removed his hands, and Isaac felt him lean forward, covering his body, resting his broad chest against Isaac's. Trace was shifting, wriggling, and Isaac could hear a soft slide of flesh on flesh that made his cock weep precome. Then Trace was moving his weight backwards over Isaac's groin, rising up with one hand grasping Isaac's shaft. His cockhead pressed against an expanse of warm skin, and there was pressure, and Isaac's groan reverberated in his throat as a soft channel encompassed him, squeezing and caressing him.

Trace's rhythm was slow and steady as he rocked himself on Isaac's cock. With each descent Isaac was worked a little farther inside Trace. He didn't want to take control, didn't want to be in the driver's seat, but he couldn't stop his hips from bucking up underneath Trace, trying to thrust up into the big man. Trace's hands were on his chest, pressing him backwards into the thin mattress until he felt the firm solid surface of the bunk base press into his shoulder blades. Trace raised his weight farther off Isaac, and he felt his cock withdraw, until Trace's hole held only the tip. Isaac whimpered, rattling the leather restraints against the metal railing of the cot. Fuck, he wanted to hold Trace, wanted to grasp his hips in his hands and drive into him, to see him throw his head back in pleasure. And yet the security of his bonds was reassuring. He couldn't screw this up. Couldn't hurt Trace and not realize. Couldn't time it wrong. Couldn't go too fast and too deep. A week ago he'd never dreamed he could have this, any of this, with a man, and now he could only lie there, and take what Trace gave him, trust Trace to make this good for both of them. The sense of freedom swept over him, and he laughed, as Trace sank down upon him once again, and Isaac felt his whole being in his inches of rigid flesh, in the stroking and clenching of Trace's ass.

The muscles in Trace's legs shook in strain and his breathing grew labored. Trace paused, pulled off, and Isaac whimpered at the loss. Trace was kneeling over him unfastening his hands, then coaxing him to turn to the side. Trace's hands fumbled with the bandage holding Isaac's sight, lifting it away from Isaac's head, until Trace's lips brushed over the shell of his ear as he breathed words into him. "Don't try and touch me, understand? Leave your hands where I put them."

Isaac nodded.

"Keep your right hand on the bed head."

Isaac was lying on his right side now, and Trace captured his left hand, pulling it to wrap around his own body. Isaac's heart swelled at the feeling of Trace's skin under his fingers, his warm broad back against Isaac's chest. Trace fumbled in the narrow space between them as he reached for Isaac's cock. Isaac's fingers twitched as he ached to reach down, position his cock and push it deep inside. His fingers brushed softly against Trace's nipple. He spread his hand wide, making sure to leave his palm where Trace had positioned it, his index finger barely stroking against the raised nub. Isaac put all his emotions into that touch as Trace grasped Isaac's cock, edged his hips around, then drove himself onto Isaac once again. Isaac's prick delved right in this time, fluidly, freely, and he pressed his head forward until his forehead nestled in the space between Trace's shoulders, feeling the muscles rippling as Trace grabbed Isaac's hand, entwining their fingers and undulating his body. Oh, this was better; he could move now, mumbling incoherent words against Trace's back as he pumped his hips and wished his skin could speak his feelings.

Trace grasped Isaac's hand, lifted it and carried it down his body, nestled it in the thatch of hair between his legs, Trace's own hand covering his cock.

"Can you—"

"Anything," said Isaac. He could feel the hesitation in Trace's whole body, tight and controlled.

Isaac moved his fingers, petting and stroking the delicate skin that held Trace's pretty eggs. He wished he could see them, mouth them, lick and suck them inside him. "May I? May I stroke these?" He felt Trace nod and part his legs to give Isaac's hand more room to move, to love.

"Can you tug them a little? Gently." Isaac was grateful the cloth was working its way off his face now. Trace's voice was so quiet he might have

missed it. He cradled Trace's balls carefully, palming them and wrapping his fingers around them softly, then pulled downward tenderly, squeezing just a little more firmly, the way he liked to do to himself when he was lying in bed, exhausted, wanking in an attempt to quiet his mind and let him catch three hours sleep before he got up to do another day over again.

Isaac heard Trace's breath catch. He pressed his lips against Trace's ear. "Like that?"

It took concentration, meeting Trace's movements as he worked himself on Isaac, caressing and tugging his sack at the same time. He leaned in and brushed his lips over the skin of Trace's neck, gently nibbling him with his lips.

"Oh!" Trace's voice was low, abrupt, as if Isaac had forced the syllable out of him, unplanned. Isaac could feel the tremors in Trace's groin, the tight pressure of Trace's ass against his cock. He reveled in Trace's rhythmic grunts, the sudden release of all tension in his body as his thrusts against Isaac slowed to a slight rolling motion. Isaac loosened his control, pressing kisses to the nape of Trace's neck as he shot his load deep into Trace's body.

Regret filled Isaac as Trace pulled his hand away from his crotch, lifting it back up to his chest and wrapping it tight against him. Isaac didn't pull out, and Trace didn't pull away from him. They lay, enfolded together, and Isaac turned his head to the side and let his cheek rest against the back of Trace's stubbled head, wishing he could see his beautiful, strong, lined face.

Eventually Trace's body twisted and Isaac heard him pull tissues from a box, then felt him reach down and wipe his groin. Isaac let go of the metal bed frame carefully, gently, not wanting to remind Trace of his commands. It was awkward, and he didn't have anywhere to put his other arm. He wanted to wrap it around Trace's solid, warm body from underneath.

"Can I... hold you?"

Trace stiffened in his arms for a second, then slid out of the cot, letting Isaac's prick slip out from inside him, leaving it lonely and cold, now, against the warm bed linen. Isaac silently cursed himself for a fool.

He heard the soft sounds of fabric, then Trace's weight was on the bed again, nestling in against Isaac, who held his breath as Trace pulled the warm blankets up over the two of them. Trace's big hands were on his face, cupping his cheeks, then sliding upwards and dragging off his makeshift blindfold, and Trace was kissing him, his tongue pushing for entrance. Isaac let him in,

reveling in the press of skin against skin, Trace's solid biceps coming down and encompassing Isaac's body. Isaac barely registered that Trace had put his sleep pants on. Isaac slipped his hand underneath Trace's body. He'd regret it, no doubt, in an hour, when his forearm was asleep, but for now, if there wasn't any way to meld them both together, to slip into Trace's skin, then Isaac would take as close as he could get.

The room was as bright as a quarter moon in the desert, the blue light from Trace's recharging tablet filling up the space around them. The expression etched in Trace's skin was almost one of pain, and Isaac leaned forward and kissed the corner of his mouth, flicking his tongue against the turned down lines. He wanted to lick the anguish out of him, to consume it until it was thoroughly vanquished. He wanted to take Trace to the arroyo and show him where the anemones would bloom next rain, each white petal faintly edged with palest purple, to borrow the headwoman's glossy bay mares and ride out to the foothills at the full moon, and gift him with the only silver he had. Trace clutched his arms. He grasped Trace tightly back, and closed his eyes against the knowledge that this metal box was sitting in a space between, that this moment was their treasure. It was all they had, and it wouldn't last.

In the morning, they'd thrown the sheets half off, their two bodies generating heat even against the cold of the air-conditioning. Trace was still tired, woken all night by dreams of Isaac's skin, his touch, dreams that swirled in his head and left him in a cold sweat. Trace winced at the slight burn in his ass. That had been foolish. More foolish than even he usually was. And yet he couldn't hold it against Isaac. Not even against himself. He'd wanted it. Nothing had ever been better, not with Isaac's sweet face, still holding hints of the boy he'd been. He'd blindfolded him as much so he didn't have to look at those eyes as so Isaac couldn't see him unmanned.

He slipped out of the cot before Isaac could stir and look at him with questions. It wasn't that he wasn't well-versed in awkward mornings-after, just that he'd never been the one in charge before.

The shower was warm and comforting against his skin. He'd never had hot showers before he was a slave. Sometimes, when he was trying to contort himself into a position where he could sleep, he would make a list of all the things he was grateful for, and hot showers were right at the top. And those nights never ended with tears. Almost never. Well, sometimes they didn't.

He soaped himself quickly, facing the wall, just in case, wanting to be done before Isaac woke up. Isaac would probably climb in with him, given half the chance. The way he'd clasped against him last night, like he couldn't be close enough. Hell, he'd done the same. No fool like an old fool.

He rinsed off, grabbing a towel and wrapping it around him as he heard Isaac's first stirring over in the bunk.

The kid looked amazing as he walked over, with those eyes that could hold the whole world. Isaac's soft cock and sack nestled against his thighs, his balls loose and relaxed in their skin from body heat, his dick beginning to fill and swell. The kid's dark tattoo stood out against his pale skin, and he realized that arm had pillowed him, all night.

He nodded at Isaac's right shoulder. "We still have to take care of that."

"My tattoo?" Isaac looked down at it, wrapping his hand around his left arm.

"Can't have you up for auction all mar—"

Trace stopped. *Isaac wasn't going up for auction.*

In his desire for the man, he'd actually forgotten. Isaac would never make his full term of service; the mycosis had damaged his lungs too much. He'd be fine with a quiet life, but the Fed offered anything but a quiet life. He didn't know another slave who'd lasted out his twenty. Fuck. He had to tell him. And he had to find a replacement. Not Miles, though; not his brother. Aside from anything else, he'd look at him and remember Isaac the whole trip home. Nah, he'd keep an eye out for one, someone he didn't know, in the towns on the road southeast.

Trace shook his head. "Sorry, no, I meant *that*." He nodded at Isaac's forearm. "We have to take care of that growth." How he wished their last contact wasn't going to be spilling Isaac's blood. At least it was for a good reason. "Not this morning, though. I've got plans."

He threw a dry towel at Isaac, brusque now, in his loss. "Get washed and dressed."

"Wait, Trace. I have to know... they're going to fuck me, aren't they? Like I fucked you last night?"

How could he possibly answer that?

"Can you... get me ready? Make it easier?"

Oh, fuck. He was asking? To be stretched and trained and have his flesh made yielding and ready? That was too much for any man to bear, even one who wasn't a man at all. He had to get Isaac away before that happened.

"No. I'm sorry. I can't do that."

He couldn't dress in front of him. Regret stalked Trace as he carried his change of clothes into the exam room.

Trace brought back coffee and breakfast. They sat together at the table, and Isaac spooned cold cereal and reconstituted milk into his mouth while Trace swiped the display from his tablet onto the big table. It was a map, and it took Isaac only seconds to recognize the Valley.

"You know where Slab City is?"

Isaac nodded.

"Point it out for me? I've always wanted to see it."

Oh, this was it. This was his moment. He hadn't left the unit for two days, and this was his chance. He shook his head.

"What do you mean, no? You said you knew where it was."

"Yeah, sure, but I'm not used to this... stuff." He waved his spoon at the map.

Trace looked nonplussed. "Well, can you tell me how to get there?"

"It's all about which angle the sun needs to be at. How far up that arroyo we need to go. How many hours to walk. It'll be fine. I'll get us there."

"You're not *coming*." Trace sounded genuinely shocked.

"Why not?"

"Don't be stupid. We're not even allowed to ride an ATV without a Citizen. If anyone asks, Pete will cover for me, but there's no possible way he can explain why two slaves decided to take a fucking day trip. I'm taking the risk because Miller's buggered off somewhere, but I won't risk it for you, too."

If they stayed here, would it mean more time in the chair? He didn't know if he wanted the answer to be yes or no. "You could hobble me. Like the slaves who work at the refinery. Then I won't be able to run, even if I try."

"Oh fuck no."

Isaac took another spoonful of cereal. What would it take to get Trace to take Isaac with him? It had to be something important to Trace: something he wanted. "I bet there are books there. Unread. Waiting." He took another mouthful, chewing slowly to give his words time to sink in. "You could bind my wrists, too," he said. "I'll be putty in your hands."

Trace glared at him, and Isaac looked down into his cereal bowl and smiled.

Sweat rolled down Isaac's back, tickling and itching. It was only March, and in a few months only fools would venture out here during the day. His ass was sore from the long ride out on the ATV, sitting sideways because of the hobbles. His hands were tight and aching from grasping onto Trace's shoulders. It seemed Slab City wasn't what Trace had expected, from the desultory way he surveyed the cracked, half-buried tires, crumbling cement slabs, and rusted metal hulks.

Trace strode over to a car body half engulfed by a silver-gray turpentine broom shrub. A single door hung like a broken limb. Trace yanked it open wider with a rusty shriek.

"Hey, watch out for—" Isaac tried to bite the words back. Goddamn Feds always thought they knew better. A dozen things could kill you in the Valley. But then, Trace wasn't a Fed, was he? Still, without him, no one even knew Isaac was out here.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Rattlers, sidewinders, brown spiders, scorpions..." He slammed the door again, and a dusting of rust shivered off the chassis. "I just thought there'd be... something. Anything."

"Like what?"

Trace stalked over to one of the abandoned concrete pads, scuffing it with his shoe. Isaac shuffled after him, the hobbles on his ankles keeping him from taking proper steps. Trace's eyes wandered over the expanse of creosote bushes dotted throughout the ruins, dismay on his face.

"Basements. Houses. It used to be an air force base, back in the mid-twentieth century. Then it was a sort of... nomad camp, I guess. My grandparents talked about it. They called it the Last Free Place. I thought it would be... just... more."

The concrete had been boxed and poured straight on top of the ground, and winter rains had eroded the dirt beneath, leaving the slabs floating adrift on a

sand sea. Kangaroo rat burrows disappeared under the edges of slabs, leaving them loose and cracked. Spiny, brown lizards ran between the fractured sections. Drifts of spindly aluminum frames lay in a heap by a pile of rubble.

Trace's foot hit something with a clang. He knelt, and sifted through the drifts of white sand, unearthing the corner of an old square tin, buried in hard-packed dirt.

Trace jogged back to the ATV and unhitched a long bulky cylinder from the pack frame, unfolding it as he walked over.

"One end, a shovel," Trace said, holding it up. "The other, an ice pick, rock axe, or grubber." Trace unfolded the sharp pointed pickax end, chipping away the solid earth around the box. Isaac shuffled over to the ATV to retrieve one of the water bottles for Trace. Sweating like this would kill a man. Trace drained the final mouthful then handed it back to him.

"Here, hold this, too." Trace shoved the pickax at Isaac, and knelt to unearth the last half of the box from its tomb. Trace's neck bowed before him, fingers scrabbling in the dirt.

"Trace?"

"Yep."

"Why didn't you ever try running?"

"Where would I go?"

"Where were you from?"

"Pretty close to here. Place called El Centro."

"I've never heard of it. You sure it's near here?"

Trace glanced up, twisting his mouth into something that almost passed for a smile. "Yeah, it's gone now. Local county seat. Got shelled out."

"Shit. Resisters?"

"I assume so. It was eighteen years ago. I didn't even find out for two years afterward. I was only a dumb kid when I got harvested. I knew nothing." Trace nearly had the box unearthed now, working it back and forth to worry the last corner out from under a subterranean slab of concrete. "So, no. There won't be any running for me."

The pick weighed heavy in Isaac's hand. The skin on the back of Trace's neck was paler than his face, and rivulets of sweat rolled out of his hairline. He

had an ATV. The pickax would make short work of the hobble. One blow. That's all it would take. On that spot where Isaac's lips had touched him in the darkness.

And then the moment was gone as Trace stood, grasping the tin. It was the kind they still sold in the store every Christ's Day, holding fancy cookies, not that Isaac ever had the cash for luxuries. Any decoration on the outside to hint at what it had originally held was long faded away. The lid had rusted tight against the base.

Trace balanced the box upside down on a flat fragment of concrete block, hammering at the lid with a fist-sized rock until it gave way, spilling its contents across the sands. Trace snorted. "Kids' treasures."

He handed Isaac a green plastic whistle on a brightly colored string, the pea still rattling inside it, then held a pretty glass marble up to the sky, blue and green entwined within. Isaac reached over Trace's shoulder and unfurled a folded piece of nylon from the bottom of the tin. A tiny printed flag hung limply, stapled to a wooden stick, still clinging to flakes of bright red paint.

"Weird," he said. "Look at all the stars."

Trace frowned. "It's not Federation, despite the stripes. Way too many, and they're not in a circle." He shrugged and threw the box to one side. Isaac tucked the flag into the hip pocket of his pants.

"There's nothing here. Let's go back."

"Free my hands? Please? My ass itches, and I know you don't want to do that for me. I've been good, right?"

Trace gestured for Isaac to give him his hands as he pulled the cuff key out of his pocket. "But don't say one word about the hobbles, okay?"

Isaac sketched him a sloppy salute. As they walked back to the ATV, he pulled up short.

"Trace, you hear that?"

Trace halted, head cocked to listen, then shook his head. "Your ears are younger though."

Isaac pointed to where dust the color of skin spiraled into the desert air, riding the updrafts. A few minutes later, the rough rattle of a four-stroke in need of tuning broke the meditative silence of the desert. Trace stiffened at the very moment Isaac recognized the build of the driver.

“Fancy finding you out here,” said Miller, dismounting. “I wondered where you might have headed off to, and now I’m glad I bothered to find out.” He smirked. “Isn’t this just perfect. We have unfinished business, don’t we, boy?” He walked toward Trace, hands working to unbuckle his belt. He stopped eight feet away, letting his pants drop. The fabric puddled at his feet, and he bent and freed his knife from the sheath on his calf. “Now crawl over here and suck me.”

Myriad expressions swept across Trace’s face, before a perfect blankness entered his eyes. Trace turned, and with growing horror, Isaac watched him lower himself to the dusty ground, and slink toward Miller on his hands and knees. When he reached him, he knelt up and placed his palms on Miller’s hips, opening his mouth wide.

“Get your hands off me, boy. I’m a Citizen. Keep them behind your back.” Miller’s cock was purple-red, veiny and rigid. Clear liquid drooled from the tip. He smeared his precome over Trace’s face, slapping his dick against the stubbled cheeks. Miller tapped the hilt of the knife against Trace’s teeth. “I’ll admit, I’m a little worried about these. I wonder how much force it would take to spill them down your throat.” He flipped the knife and trailed the point down Trace’s cheek until the cold blade rested in the hollow of his throat. He held it there as he pushed his dick into the waiting cavern of Trace’s mouth. “Don’t try anything.”

Miller pushed his hips forward in a slow rhythm as he slid his jacket off and threw it to one side, then slowly unfastened his shirt, wiping his sweaty chest before discarding it.

Miller grinned across at Isaac as he thrust into Trace’s mouth. “You broken in yet, boy? You be good and patient, and when I’m done, I’ll look after you too, don’t you worry.” Isaac couldn’t look away. He wasn’t even real to Miller: just a piece of equipment waiting for its turn.

Miller turned his attention back to Trace, kneeling in front of him. “All right, Trace, that’s enough. You got me good and hard now. You know the drill: turn around.”

Trace shuffled on his knees until his back was facing Isaac, hands unfastening the fly on his pants. He exposed his ass, bending over and stretching his hands over his head. His fingers grasped tracks in the white dust. A host of parallel scars bisected Trace’s buttocks, silver-white in the bright sunlight.

Miller took his shock stick out of its holster where it lay on the ground, and hit the inside of Trace's thighs, until he widened his stance. Trace's balls dangled between his legs. Miller reached through, hefting the weight of Trace's sack with his stick, the soft red skin and sparse hair vivid against the black metal.

"These are wasted on you, Trace." Miller spat, then, the moisture glistening on the pale skin of Trace's buttocks, running down his crack to his hole. The slimy trail it left behind evaporated off Trace's skin almost instantly.

"Oops, too bad for you, boy. It's going to be mighty hard to keep you lubed up for this. But, you know, ever since the Colonel made that suggestion, there's been something I've been dying to try. Just hold still."

Miller held the end of his shock stick to Trace's hole, twisting and working his hand as he tried to screw the shaft into Trace's anus.

"Scuttlebutt on the airwaves, bitch, is that you'll be a free agent in eight weeks. Is the Colonel gonna resell you on the Tampa black market? I know I'm not the ideal owner. I'm away a lot for my job, obviously, but I've got an auto feeder in the kennel, and there's a tree for shade. And I can always ask my cousin to come by, check up on you. Give you a workout."

Miller repositioned the stick in his sweaty hand, shoving it in another inch. Trace groaned in anguish.

"Hey, what the fuck are you doing!" Isaac yelled.

Miller barely spared him a glance. Isaac shuffled forward. If only his legs weren't bound. "Trace. Trace! You're the same size as him: you can take him. Get up."

Miller turned, exasperation in his eyes. "What part of the situation do you not get, fuckwit? You are both slaves. This is what you're for. To fuck, to ream, it doesn't matter. How many men do you think will have you? Maybe more than even Trace here has serviced. How many is that, hey?" He pushed the shock stick farther into Trace's ass, pulling the dry skin taut. "He's kind of legendary. The Colonel's a very generous man."

Miller placed one hand on Trace's hip, trying to get more leverage. Trace gave another shriek.

"Shut the fuck up!" cried Isaac, stumbling closer. "Stop."

Miller's fingers tightened on the stick grip, his thumb inching toward the trigger-switch. "Fuck, I would have brought lube if I knew you were this tight.

You better get it wet, or I'm never going to tickle your colon." Miller pulled the shock stick out, and wrapped his hand in Trace's T-shirt, dragging him to kneel upright.

"Suck it." Miller wrapped one muscled forearm around Trace's neck, pulling him back against his solid body and presenting the end of the shock stick to his mouth. Trace parted his lips...

The metal shaft of the pick slipped against the skin on Isaac's palms as he swung it into Miller's back. The tip sank between his ribs like a shovel through soft sand. Miller rocked to the side, falling to the dust, dropping shock stick and knife to the bleached hard pack. The pick handle wrenched itself from Isaac's hands.

Suddenly Trace could breathe again, and a dull thud shivered its way up through the bones in his legs. Why had Miller stopped? He turned his head cautiously. If a blade was coming he'd rather face it. See it.

Miller lay twisting in the dirt, the handle of the pickax protruding from his back. Isaac stood over him, chest heaving and hands clenching. Trace yanked his pants up, and felt hysterical laughter bubble up. They'd just killed a Fed, and yet the one thing Trace wanted was for Isaac not to see him.

He stood, using his T-shirt to wipe his face, snot-smear and wet with tears. Miller clawed at the ground, trying to push himself upright. Isaac put his hand on Trace's shoulder, as if to comfort him. Shouldn't he be the one doing that?

With calm precision Trace pressed his foot against Miller's side, nudging the big man onto his front. Trace placed one shoe on Miller's back for leverage, then worked the pickax back and forth until it pulled, at last, out of Miller's flesh. He stood quietly for a second, then swung the pickax overhand, landing a second blow. The metal sliced into Miller's backbone, six inches above the first wound. Miller screamed. Droplets of blood, bright red against the dry dust, splattered across the sand, and his legs flopped limply to one side. Trace tugged the pick free as Miller's fingers flexed in the dirt, scrabbling to catch the trailing branch of a creosote bush. He twisted his body until he was lying on his back, then reached for Trace's legs.

Trace's second blow pierced Miller's belly. A rivulet of red blood spouted briefly from the hole, trickling down Miller's abdomen. Trace slid the axe back

out of the gash, and a length of wrinkled organ burrowed out from the skin in its wake, roiling and unfurling at the surface. The delicate pink was shocking against Miller's light tan belly skin. The section of bowel looped and turned back against itself, lumpy and creased, shiny-wet. Miller's mouth made silent movements, like a fish pulled out of a tank. He wasn't making any noise, now, but where was all the racket coming from? Trace's throat caught, the sound stuttering, and he realized the screaming was his own. He raised the pickax over his head again.

"No, stop," said Isaac. "No more. He's done." He gripped Trace's shoulder, pulling him away from the carnage with his warm grasp. Trace struggled against him and then was still, letting the pick drop to the earth. He looked down at Miller's limp form. The desert shimmered and swam around him as his chest heaved, and he retched, losing the contents of his stomach into the dry sand. He gulped oxygen into his raw, scratchy throat.

It took long minutes before he could find the will to speak. "He had his dick in my mouth."

"I know. I'm sorry."

Trace swiveled to meet Isaac's eyes, surprise coloring his tone. "No. I mean my DNA's all over him. Now, unless I go back to camp and bring a gallon of bleach out here I don't think there's anything we can do about that. At least this won't come back to you."

"What are you talking about? I'm the one who hit him first."

"It doesn't matter. My service is nearly up anyway. If I'd just assaulted him they'd shoot me. Killing a Citizen? They'll make sure I suffer, first." Trace dug the keys to Isaac's hobbles out of his pocket with shaking hands, then unlocked him. "They'll need a body before they know he's dead. Don't get any blood on you. I'll handle this."

Trace stumbled over to the ATV. *Please let there be one.* He didn't want to have to run his hands all over Miller's body. He rummaged through the saddlebags, unearthing a tiny tracker, the size of a thumb.

Miller's eyes were open wide. He had one hand pressed to the wound in his belly, candy-pink tissue bulging between his fingers, and blood seeping down his side. His breathing was thin and reedy. He tried to speak, but only a harsh panting came out. Trace knelt beside him, picking the big knife up from its resting place in the dirt. He flipped the tracker on and ran it over Miller's body.

It emitted a rapid clicking, rising to a high-pitched whine as it settled over Miller's left bicep.

Isaac squatted on the other side of Miller, close to his face. Spit dribbled from Miller's lips and chin.

Trace rolled Miller toward him, bringing his left arm high. He pulled the wrist forward and knelt on Miller's hand, running his fingers across his bicep, locating the rice-grain-sized chip. He flipped the knife around in his hand, holding the blade tenderly while he made the first incision into the skin. He dug inside the wound with his fingers. Miller groaned, and Trace pulled out a tiny chip. He smashed it between two rocks until only powder remained.

Trace ran his eyes over the landscape. The car wreck. Just the thing. Trace grabbed Miller's hands and dragged him across the ground toward the car wreck, a sluggish blood trail oozing out behind them. He rolled Miller into the backseat space of the chassis. This felt good. It was the first time in his life he was making *all* the decisions. He rolled up Miller's trouser leg, unstrapping the knife sheath. "You won't be needing this anymore."

He retrieved the pickax and unfolded the shovel end, scooping up the dirt from the blood trail and tossing it over Miller's body. He threw the jacket and shirt over Miller's torso and face, then closed the car door with a protesting metallic screech. By the time he joined Isaac, by the ATVs, Miller's rattling, hollow breaths and rasped curses had faded into the sounds of the desert.

"If they find out he's dead, I forced you, okay?" said Trace. "Promise me you'll tell them it was my fault." He cut a branch from a creosote bush and started sweeping away their footsteps and drag marks. Tiny red ants were swarming over the already-drying pool of his vomit, drawn by the moisture and protein.

"The wind's picking up," said Isaac. "With any luck it will fill in the ATV tracks. But what do we do with this?" He held up the pickax. "Both our fingerprints are all ov—"

"What are you doing?"

Trace froze, his eyes pinned to Isaac's. The voice was young, barely broken, and he'd heard it before.

"Miles!" shouted Isaac. He ran toward the kid, now crawling out from under blue-gray mesquite cover. "Shit, I'm so happy to see you. What are you doing here?"

“We’re bugging out, Isaac. You gotta come with us.”

“Are Lila and Rachel here?”

“Sure!”

Two hundred yards away an eddy of dust rose from the hard pack. Slowly, a figure emerged from the haze: a tall young woman, dark haired and muscular, carrying a toddler in a packframe on her back.

Isaac whooped and ran toward her.

Trace shifted his weight from foot to foot. Should he go over as well? He was the man who had taken their brother away. It didn’t seem likely they would welcome him with open arms. He brushed the rest of the drag marks away, searching the dirt until he found Miller’s shock stick, and stowing it in the ATV saddlebag next to the second water flask. He rinsed out his mouth and spat, then spilled water on his hands, rubbing them together to rinse off the worst of the sticky red droplets. Footsteps came toward him, and he looked up.

“Trace, this is Rachel.”

There was no welcome for him in her face. Of course not. Slave or not, he was a Fed.

“Were you following me, Rach?” asked Isaac.

“No. We’re leaving. We never expected to see you out this way. The Feds won’t leave Miles alone now, and no one will hire him in the future, knowing he’s a target. We won’t make it without your income. There’s nothing left for any of us now. Leaving was the only choice. I don’t even know if there’s anywhere to leave for.”

“I couldn’t just let them *take him*.”

Rachel only looked at him with hard eyes.

Trace turned away. “You should go with them, Isaac,” he said. “Take the rest of the water.” Guilt swamped him for the mouthfuls he had just wasted on his hands. How pointless that had been. “And take Miller’s ATV. It won’t carry all of you, but it will lighten the load at least.”

Isaac gripped his wrist. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

This was the best idea he’d had in his life. “Where are you going to go?”

Rachel eyed him with open distrust and Trace held his hands up. “No, that’s okay, don’t tell me. But I gotta get that tracker out of you first.” There was a

bottle of disinfectant in the sparse ATV medkit. Trace didn't bother with a wipe, just squirted chlorhexidine over Miller's knife and Isaac's arm. The blade nicked the skin above the tracker on Isaac's bicep effortlessly. Trace scratched it out with his blunt fingernail, like a thorn. Lucky it was so shallow; he could extract it and leave no more than a graze. He replaced the disinfectant in the kit and passed the box to Rachel. She took it warily.

"Isaac, this is important... you're sick. Seriously sick. You need treatment. Wherever you go, promise me you'll try to get it. If you came back with me to camp I'd give you the drugs, but it's probably better you just seize the moment and go now."

It was a perfect day. The sky was insanely blue, the haze of the morning completely burnt off now. "You know, in one of my books it says the Inuit have fifty words for snow," said Trace.

"Who are the Inuit?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. And I doubt very much it's true anyway. But it makes me think we need more than one word for blue. Look at that sky. I've never seen anything like it. There should be a word for just this shade of blue."

Isaac's hand crept into his, squeezing good-bye. Rachel and Lila mounted the ATV while Trace gave her a rundown on the controls. Rachel's eyes overflowed with misgivings. He didn't blame her. And then they were ready. How did this come to good-bye so fast? Rachel accelerated slowly away, Miles and Isaac loping along beside the vehicle in an easy run. They could probably keep that pace up for clicks. It had been a long time since Trace had had that kind of stamina.

Trace raised his hand in farewell, and Isaac grinned at him, boyish in his happiness. It was the best thing he had ever seen.

Trace sat in the scant shade of a spindly brown ocotillo and watched until the dust trail of the small family faded into the atmosphere. He forced his lungs to work slower, calming his racing heart until everything was still. Whatever would come after, this had been worth it. A perfect blue sky, and Isaac would go on, beneath it.

They headed toward the foothills, distant ranges endlessly growing in size but never coming nearer. Maybe the desert really did go on forever.

"You should have killed him," said Rachel.

“What? No!”

“He’s a Fed. He could send them after you.”

Isaac shook his head. “He’s a slave, not a Fed. And you don’t know him.”

“It’s been two days, Isaac! You don’t know him either.”

“He’s the most gentle man I’ve ever met.”

“So, what, he’s going to go back and tell them he *left you* in the desert?”

“Oh, fuck!” Isaac stopped, appalled. What *was* Trace going to say?

Rachel took her hand off the throttle and brought the ATV to a slow halt, and Miles, jogging up ahead, stopped and looked back at them. “You care about him, don’t you?”

Isaac shook his head. Of course not. Trace was a man. A Fed.

“Holy mother of God, *you do!* Fourteen years, it’s been, since I dug you out of that sand drift in the side of the dry wash, and for at least five of them I’ve wondered why you were happy to pretend that you were my brother. I even— oh, never mind. Just go.”

“Rach, don’t. You know I care about you. You’re my family. All of you.” That last bit was true though. He loved her like a sister. He’d never wanted to make it more than that, and now it finally made sense.

“Go. Go get him. If he’s your man then you’d better make him part of our family. But we’re not going to wait for you. We’re heading to wherever the arroyo flows from. Catch up to us, if you can.”

For a second he was frozen in place, torn between two desires. He couldn’t deny the truth: he wanted Trace to be his family, too. He pressed a kiss to Lila’s sleeping head, lolling to one side under her threadbare gingham sunhat, and then he was walking back along the ATV tracks without a glance back at his heart’s blood.

Rachel’s voice carried to him on the warm tendrils of breeze. “Isaac. You’d better hurry.”

Why would he need to hurry?

Oh, shit.

Isaac started to run.

Firm pressure gripped his arm,

“Okay, *now* who is the incredibly stupid one?”

Trace opened his eyes, blinking sand from his lashes. The medkit from the ATV lay spilled open in front of him. The desert dirt cradled his head. A familiar figure knelt beside him, carefully binding his wrists with soft bandages.

“All you’ve done is mangle your wrists all to hell.” Why was Isaac’s voice shaking? “You’ve lost a little blood, not enough to kill you. But if you lay out here in the sun for a couple of days, you wouldn’t have needed the knife. And we have no water, and we won’t catch up to Rachel and Miles in time. Goddammit!”

Hands heaved Trace to his feet, settling him on the ATV in front of Isaac’s warm body.

“You asshole. Don’t you ever try this again.”

Those whispered words in his ear must have been the wind. No universe would be this kind.

By the time they reached the outskirts of the township, it was as if Trace was shutting down, curling in on himself. The strength of the big medic had bled into the desert along with his and Miller’s fluids.

Isaac parked the ATV next to the medunit and hustled Trace inside in his blood-spattered clothes before the Sergeant could see them. He pressed a bottle of electrolyte drink into Trace’s hands and watched to make sure he drank it, leaving a second bottle on the table. He turned the shower on, as cold as he could get it, and pulled Trace’s T-shirt over his head. He itched to run his fingers over the solid chest, heaving now, in shallow breaths. He risked pressing a kiss to the shoulder in front of him, and Trace jerked away. Isaac clenched his fists, then reached down to unfasten Trace’s pants. Trace slapped his hands away. “No!”

Isaac took a step back, hands raised. “Okay, no problem. You do that, Trace, okay.”

“Don’t call me Trace.” His voice was anguished.

“I’m sorry. I’m going to tell Sergeant Barnes we’re back. Maybe find some grub. You shower.”

Barnes was cleaning up the catering truck, three covered trays sitting on the shiny metal bench.

“Um, hey,” said Isaac.

Barnes glared at him, then pointed towards their lunch trays. “You’re back late. Where’s Trace?”

“Getting clean. It’s dusty out there.”

“So you’re looking after *him*, now?”

Isaac shrugged. “Whatever he needs, I guess.” He picked up two of the trays.

“Miller’s late getting back as well. You didn’t see him out there did you?”

Isaac forced a tone of nonchalance into his voice. “He’s AWOL? Maybe he defected.”

Barnes snorted. “Not him. All full of the glory of serving as a Citizen, clasp his rights to him like armor.”

“Did you check his tracker?”

“If I run the search through the system, it’ll log it with HQ,” said Barnes. “If he’s just lingering over a good fuck I don’t want to get him in that kind of trouble. But I finished the repairs, no thanks to him. We’re pulling out in three hours, Miller or no Miller. Tell Trace.”

Isaac knew a dismissal when he heard one.

It was tricky, managing the two trays and opening the medlab doors. Trace was already in dry clothes, throwing his blood-spattered set into a medical waste bag. Isaac unwound his wet bandages, and patted the wounds dry, then redressed them under Trace’s instructions. He wished he could wipe the day out of Trace’s eyes.

Isaac made Trace sit and spooned food into him, trading bites off both their trays. “The sergeant says we’re out of here in three hours. He also mentioned Miller’s missing.”

Trace was functioning again, although he looked frayed and beaten. “Listen, I’ve got to take that growth off your arm, and then I’m going to pack you some amphotericin and IVs. Do you think you can find someone to inject you? It’s important.”

“*You* can inject me.”

“You need this every other day. I won’t be on the convoy the next time it comes through, and you’ll be gone after Rachel and your family.”

“Come with me.”

Trace shook his head. “No way. You’ll have no chance with me slowing you down. Holding you back.”

Silence filled the room, and Isaac thought about never seeing those eyes again.

“I want you to put me in the chair.” Isaac grasped Trace’s hand. “One more time.” Just once more. He *needed* it. He didn’t know if he said it out loud or managed to keep the words tucked deep inside. This was foolish, but he wanted to be helpless and laid out, wanted Trace’s hands on him. The desire had grown in him like yellow primrose after rain.

Trace paused, wiping his hands on his trousers and Isaac knew he’d won.

“Okay. One more session. Then you have to get out of here.”

They walked through to the exam room.

“Jump up,” said Trace, gesturing to the exam chair. “You can leave the T-shirt on.”

Isaac grasped his arm before Trace could move away. That wasn’t what he wanted. He shed his grays, slowly, lingeringly, willing Trace to watch him. He folded the soft fabrics and placed them on a shelf until he stood naked before Trace. Did he feel the same want? Did he like what he saw?

“Into the chair.” Trace’s voice shook, and pleasure stroked Isaac. He’d done that.

Isaac wouldn’t let his eyes leave Trace’s as he lowered himself into the chair’s embrace, then swung around until he was reclining against the back. The cover made crisp sounds as it stuck to his skin. Isaac lifted his ankles into the stirrups.

“You don’t need the straps today,” said Trace.

“But I want them.”

Desire flooded him as Trace fastened the leather around his feet. Trace lavished attention on Isaac’s skin, stroking and caressing, running his hands across Isaac’s chest. Isaac shivered and pushed into his touch.

Trace's voice was teasing now, playful. "Well now, what shall I do with you? I could catheterize you. Insert a Foley into your urethra, until you won't even be able to decide if you want to take a piss or not."

Isaac blanched. Something—anything—going inside his slit... he quivered in the chair. Trace could take all his decisions away. A tight knot formed in his belly.

"No need to be concerned, Isaac. I've done it before. Admittedly, only the once. And the feedback I got last time wasn't entirely encouraging. So I could use the practice, right? But what we're actually going to do is take that mole off your arm, okay?"

Isaac glanced down at the mottled bump on his left arm. It itched, sometimes, and hadn't been there long.

"I have midazolam if you want it."

Isaac shook his head. "I want to keep every second of you."

Trace held up a hypodermic. "This is just local anaesthetic. I won't cause you pain."

Isaac looked up at him. "I know."

Trace squirted clear liquid on a cotton pad and rubbed it in a spiral motion on Isaac's arm, working gently outward. The needle was tiny. Isaac watched as Trace punctured the skin just outside the blemish on his forearm. Trace was a big man, but he moved swiftly and surely in his element. Watching him was like listening to music. Isaac thought Trace was going to pull the needle out, but instead, just before he withdrew it completely, he swiveled the needle around, pushing it back into his flesh at right angles. A tiny drop of blood wept to the surface when he pulled the needle out, then reinserted it on the other side of the mole, and then again, making a triangle around it. The skin around the mole was strangely white now, and when Trace pushed at it with a pair of tweezers Isaac felt nothing but a dull pressure.

"I'll give it just another minute. While we wait, let's take care of something else."

Trace swabbed the inside of his right arm, and injected a clear liquid into his vein with a small, narrow syringe.

"What's that for?"

“That’s the amphotericin.”

Trace stroked Isaac’s body, running his fingers down Isaac’s abs, and petting Isaac’s soft cock where it lay on his thigh. It pulsed and grew under Trace’s touch, and Trace caressed the swollen flesh, toying with the foreskin. He let it fall back to Isaac’s groin with reluctant hands.

Trace picked up a glinting scalpel. “If your mole was smaller, we could do a punch biopsy, but I wanna get the whole thing. You might not get the chance for follow-up treatment.”

Trace wiped the whole site with a fresh disinfectant pad again, and the tang of alcohol filled Isaac’s nostrils. The first cut was fast. The blade didn’t hurt as it entered his arm, slicing through the skin as if it were no more substantial than the rind of a soft fruit. Trace repositioned the blade at the top of the cut, moving downward again in an elliptical arc, encompassing the irregular mole and a wide margin of skin around it. Blood welled up, and Trace wiped it away with a folded gauze square. He placed the scalpel back on the trolley, and picked up forceps and a pair of surgical scissors. Trace grasped the stump of loose flesh, demarcated by the scalpel cuts, and pulled it up until it stood above Isaac’s arm. He inserted the surgical scissors into the wound, the tip disappearing in a shallow pool of blood lying within the wound. Isaac felt only tugging and pulling, no pain.

Trace clipped the flesh. It took several snips with the scissors to cut through the lump. Trace lifted it with the forceps and placed it in a small translucent plastic jar.

The distinct layers of his flesh made Isaac flinch: skin, then fine, white fat—almost undetectable—and red flesh below. So he was only meat, after all. Blood welled up, and Trace covered the wound with gauze cloth, pressing down.

“You’re so strong,” said Trace. “You can do anything. Be anyone.”

Isaac leaned forward in the chair and brushed their lips together. His tongue darted out, touching Trace’s lower lip, requesting entry. Trace made a sound deep in his throat, then pressed Isaac back, his mouth hovering breathlessly over Isaac’s. Trace’s hands found their way to Isaac’s shoulders and Isaac tasted Trace’s mouth, biting gently at his lips. They kissed for long minutes.

At length, Trace pulled away and cleared his throat. “I’ve got to stitch that up.”

Isaac didn't watch his wound this time; he watched the medic's face, as he wielded the forceps and curved needle like a conjurer sketching runes in the air. After each stitch, Trace met his eyes.

Finally, Trace laid down his tools and stepped back from the chair. "So I guess this is the end."

Isaac opened his mouth to reply, and then, almost imperceptibly, the unit shook with the tread of feet mounting the steps outside. Trace's eyes flicked to the medlab door, horror carved into his face.

The Colonel yanked the door open, and climbed the steps, white dust falling off his boots onto the clean medlab floor. He took in the vignette in front of him, then clapped his hands, rubbing his palms together.

"Excellent. You got the new kid all ready for me." A grin spread over his face. Trace stood, dumbstruck. The Colonel snapped his fingers. Why was he doing that? The expression on the Colonel's face shifted to outrage. Trace shook himself from his daze. He was waiting for *him*. For his slave's welcome. Trace lowered himself slowly to his hands and knees. *Everything was different now; how could this still be the same?* The textured metal flooring dug into his knees as he crawled across to the Colonel. *How did it go again?* He lapped at the heavy boots until shiny leather emerged from the encasing dirt. From the corner of his eye he saw Isaac crane his neck forward as the Colonel swung his jacket off and nudged Trace to one side with his knee. He walked over to Isaac's chair, catching his chin between his fingers and turning Isaac's head from side to side. So that's where Miller had got the gesture from: his idol. He'd wanted to be like the Colonel in every way. Isaac struggled against his cuffs, trying to wrench his face away from the implacable grip.

"He's a bit big. And old. This isn't your best work. What were you thinking? You get his DNA results through yet?"

He nodded, then coughed and cleared his throat. "Yes, sir. They finished cycling this morning, but I haven't looked at them yet." It hadn't seemed important any more. Trace could only kneel, swallowing down the bitter bile that filled his throat. *Stupid. Stupid.* He'd known this was coming. He just thought they'd have... more. More time. More of each other. More than this to look forward to. Fuck. If only he hadn't kissed Isaac, if he'd let him go right away this morning, if Isaac had never turned back—for him... if—

Fucking if.

“Let’s just take a look at who you are.” The Colonel walked over to the DNA processing unit, and used his elbow to activate the readout. When he turned, his face was unreadable.

“I guess it’s hello again, Father,” said Isaac.

Trace gazed at Isaac in dismay. *Holy shit.* Well, no wonder he knew how to read. And couldn’t work except under the table. Trace lowered his eyes to the floor before the Colonel noticed he’d been looking. “I’m so sorry, sir. I screwed up. I never would have taken him if I’d known. And sir, he’s got valley fever.”

“Well, that sucks. He’s got, what, a couple of months of useful life?”

“I’ve already given him two doses of intravenous antifungals, sir.”

“Well, shit, what’s wrong with you, boy? Why’d you waste that much on him? It’s fine. We’ll harvest a second, sell this one to Fields anyway, then fill the reorder on the back swing. That’s not a drawback, kid, that’s planned goddamn obsolescence. It’s a win-win.” He stroked Isaac’s skin, trailing his hand down to Isaac’s groin and flipping Isaac’s cock back and forth, examining it dispassionately.

“Or maybe I can salvage something from him, after all this disappointment. I’ll need a replacement for you. What are we up to now, *siete*? No, *ocho*, yeah? I forgot about that cute blond kid. I expected him to last longer than three weeks, you know? Untreated wounds are a fucking killer in high summer. Well, get *ocho* ready for docking while I wash up.”

He couldn’t. He couldn’t make himself move; could only meet Isaac’s eyes, where he lay in the chair, struggling against the straps. He never even saw the Colonel’s fist coming before it knocked him to the ground. “Three days I’ve been gone, that’s all. And yet somehow you have grown entirely too big for your boots. It’s just as well I won’t have to put up with your weaknesses for much longer.”

Isaac called to him from the chair. “What does he mean, docking? Trace? Trace? Who’s *Ocho*?”

He was numb as he heaved himself to his feet. “You’re *ocho*.” He was working on automatic as he grabbed a new tray, laid out a sterile cloth and a selection of retractors, clamps, and forceps. And scalpels, of course. He could hear Isaac’s fevered attempts to break free, wriggling in the strong, lined wristbands, his ankle cuff clanking against the metal stirrup in a frantic beat.

He could hear the Colonel at the sink, the thrum of the water against the metal tub, the soft plastic sound of the pump as the Colonel squirted soap into his palms, the squelching as he lathered up his hands and arms—the same sound that made the pit of his own stomach fall away in despair.

“What’s docking? Trace?”

“Don’t call me that,” he whispered.

“That’s adorable. The kid thinks that’s a name?” The Colonel walked up to the chair, drying his hands, before draping the towel over his shoulder. “That’s not a name, you dumb fuck. It’s a number. *Uno, dos, tres.*”

Isaac’s face shone red with exertion and rage.

Trace hated the number. Hated the way the Colonel used it to turn him into a thing. Trace was barely tolerable when Pete said it, but only because he pronounced it longer, sweeter, purposefully turning the number into a name. Making him back into a person.

“It sounds like *ocho* here wants to know what docking is, *tres*. Think we should show him what we’re about to do? Or would you rather it was a delightful surprise, just like it was for you?”

Trace tucked his thumbs into the soft waistband of his pants and dragged them downward. The Colonel leaned over and pulled up the gray T-shirt, letting Isaac get a good look at the ragged stump of a cock that jutted out above stretched, low-hanging balls. Livid red and brown scars marred Trace’s groin and cock stump, as if someone had held the edge of a hot iron there long enough to start flesh melting.

“It’s just a precaution, *ocho*. We can’t have you around all the pretty girls with a prick on you, can we now? This means you won’t ever have to worry about those nasty urges. We want to keep you fertile though. Why, *tres* here must have twenty, thirty kids back in the Fed. Big beasts, like him, good for farm work. I’ve got a couple on my own spread. It’s like fucking a silent *tres*: my favorite kind. We sever the vocal cords on bred slaves, of course. You’re lucky that way; you’ll have to keep your voice to give the happy little ‘Welcome to the Fed’ speech to all the young ’uns.”

The Colonel stepped forward to the instrument trolley and selected a scalpel, raising it to the light. He shook his head as Trace picked up a hypodermic syringe. “I don’t think we need to bother with anaesthetic or sedation, *tres*. I want him to remember this forever.”

Trace recoiled. "Sir, you can't—"

"Oh, I can. No son of mine would have been such a pussy about the fate of a few slaves. Or run. That's what happens when you mix Citizen blood with that of a mongrel. His mother was entirely unworthy. Lucky she died so soon after whelping him. Putting her down would have been messy."

"You fuck," Isaac screamed at him. "You fucking fuck, I will end you."

The Colonel grinned. "Well, you've still got a temper. I don't know, maybe we should take those balls, too. After all, I've got plenty of tiny copies of *tres* on ice." He stepped toward Isaac, helpless in the chair.

The seconds hung like dust in the air as Trace met Isaac's eyes. How had he missed the resemblance? How had he overlooked this boy, who had given him the most precious gift of all? And now his father would take away *everything*. He let his arm move without second-guessing himself. Trace thrust the needle into the Colonel's neck and depressed the plunger as soon as he felt the syringe break the skin, hitting the vein as much through luck as twenty years of practice. He used all his strength to wrap the Colonel's arms to his side, to stop him from reaching up to pull out the needle.

"My name's not fucking *tres*! It's Alejandro! I'm Alejandro. I have a name, goddamn you, you bastard. You took everything, even my name, and I want it back!" He was screaming, his throat raw, the tang of blood on his lips. "I'm Alejandro."

Tears wet his face, and he couldn't wipe them away with arms heavy with the growing weight of the Colonel's body. Even through the blood roaring in his ears, Alejandro heard the Colonel's shout turn into a gurgle, as the fast-acting sedative hit his system. He held on to him until the struggling stopped, then let the limp body fall to the floor. Alejandro stared at his own hands and dropped the syringe onto the floor.

"Trace—"

"Don't call me that." Was that him speaking? How were words still coming out of his mouth when the world had ended?

"I'm sorry. Alejandro. Please will you let me out?"

Isaac was still strapped in the chair. He unfastened his arms with trembling hands. Isaac leaned forward and freed his legs, then clambered over the stirrups, out of the chair. Isaac pulled Alejandro to him, pressing his hands against his broad muscular back.

He rested against him for a minute then pushed him away. He had to get Isaac away for good.

“Isaac, pull his uniform off. We’ve got twenty minutes. Maybe. We’ve got no civilian clothes here. If you’re wearing the gray, you’ll get stopped by everyone who wonders what an unaccompanied slave is doing out in the Protectorate. You’re about the same size.” He forced out a laugh. “Of course you are. Anyway, you’ll get a lot farther if people think you’re a Citizen.”

He grabbed a field bag, yanked open the cupboard and threw in all the amphotericin B and packaged hypodermics they had, and all the fluconazole tabs. There weren’t enough—not even close. He topped the bag off with every broad-spectrum antibiotic he could find. Isaac would be able to trade those anywhere. He dashed into the living quarters and picked a book at random, ripping out the flyleaf and grabbing one out of his precious hoard of pencils. He scribbled down dosage instructions. Thank God Isaac could read.

Isaac was dressing in the Colonel’s uniform, strapping his sidearm holster to his body.

“Do you know how to use that?” Alejandro asked.

Isaac nodded, settling the pistol in its harness. “He bought me my first rifle when I was four. Weapon skills were almost the only thing he had the inclination to teach me that I was actually good at.”

He pushed the field bag at Isaac. “There aren’t enough hypodermics. You’ll have to sterilize these to reuse if you can’t find some more. Don’t waste them on anyone else. The dosage and instructions are on the note in the outside pocket. When the liquid stuff runs out, start on the pills. Don’t stop. It’ll take more than a year. Seriously.” He pulled Isaac’s face toward him, looked into his eyes. “Use them until they’re all gone. Don’t sell these on the black market, just the antibiotics. Take them all. You hear me?” If he followed instructions he’d be fine. Live a long and happy life. It might be too late for him, but it wouldn’t be too late for Isaac.

He leaned forward and pressed a hungry kiss to Isaac’s mouth. It was too urgent to be pretty, all teeth and spit and desperation.

Isaac clutched at his arms, shaking him. “Alejandro. I’m not going without you.”

“I’m his, Isaac, and he’s used me up.” He’d forgotten Alejandro was long gone. A slave was all he was. Isaac’s youth had enchanted him. As soon as Isaac had gone, he’d take that walk.

"I need you, Alejandro."

"I can't leave my stuff. My books. Twenty years it's taken me to find them."

"You'll find more books. You'll find a life."

"Did you somehow fail to notice I'm not even a fucking man?" He gestured down at himself, choking out a laugh. "*Literally* not a fucking man."

Isaac crushed Alejandro against him, whispering into his ear. "You're still a man. I want you to be *my* man."

"You're speaking like I'm going to step out of this medunit and all my life will come rushing back, flowing to fill the gaps and cracks of my life." He could barely choke the words out for the anguish that overflowed him. "I don't know how *not* to be a slave, Isaac. I'm as barren as this fucking desert. I have *nothing* inside me left for you."

He sagged against Isaac. Isaac held him, kissing his hair, his ear, his cheek, seeking out Alejandro's lips, sucking Alejandro's tongue into his own mouth, kneading his flesh with his demanding hands.

"You're so full of shit," said Isaac. "Trace can stay here, but Alejandro's coming with me. I did it once, and I was alone then." Isaac nodded at the Colonel's limp form on the floor of the lab. "Now tell me how to take care of your tracker."

"The battery only lasts five years, give or take. I've never had a new one since the day I was taken. Never gave them a reason to bother. They knew I had nothing to leave for." No *one*. That Isaac—this kid who had once smiled at him from across the lab as he watched his father at work—that he wanted *him*... it was impossible.

"Then let's go. Wait... do we kill him?" Isaac nodded at the Colonel's limp form on the floor.

Alejandro shook his head, stepping away from Isaac. "No. If we do, they'll hunt us down for sure. They'll never stop. Maybe if we just go—*maybe*—there's a chance we can get away." They needed longer though; twenty minutes wouldn't give them enough time. He threw bandages and medical tape onto the floor as he rummaged desperately for the cable ties stocked for the times the harvest was restless, then held up a handful with a cry of glee. Isaac kissed the back of his neck as Alejandro looped one around each of the Colonel's wrists, threading another through to hold his arms behind his back.

“Give me a hand,” said Isaac, and they half lifted, half pulled the Colonel through to the living quarters. His body was hard to move, limp, and Alejandro grunted as he tipped the body into the bathtub, leaving him on his side.

“Part of me wants to hurt him,” said Alejandro.

“Hell, I want to cut off his equipment and shove it in his mouth.”

“That’s not us, though, right? I wish it was.”

Isaac didn’t reply. He wasn’t going to lie.

Isaac slung the field bag over his shoulder, and caught Alejandro’s hand, leading him back out into the lab. Before they could take a step toward the main door, heavy footsteps bounded up the outside steps, and the door swung open.

“We’re all set, Colonel. Ready to go when you say the word.” Pete’s jaw dropped open as he took in Isaac in the Colonel’s uniform, Alejandro’s hand in his. They faced each other for long seconds.

Pete backed out of the medunit, slamming the door in his wake. Isaac wrenched it open and they tumbled out after him. Pete staggered away from the unit, then turned and walked until he reached the tree.

His shaken voice drifted back to them. “Fuck. I seriously need a cigarette.”

Alejandro pushed Isaac toward the ATV. “I’ll be right there.” He pulled two cigarettes out of the packet in his pocket and walked over to stand beside Pete.

“Got a light?”

Pete pulled his lighter out, and took the cigarettes from Alejandro’s hand. He lit them both in his mouth, then passed one to Alejandro, their fingers touching for the last time. They both took a deep inhalation then stood, shoulder to shoulder, watching the sun arc downward.

“Why the hell do you smoke, man?” said Alejandro, finally. “You know this shit’ll fuck you up.”

Pete breathed out a cloud of white vapor. “Why do you?”

“I smoke because I hoped cigarettes would kill me before now. I knew I’d never find the courage for a more direct solution.”

Pete took a last drag. “I smoke because I like the company.” He threw the tiny stub to the ground and crushed it under his boot heel. “I’ll have to quit the damn things now.” Pete turned away from Alejandro and pulled a foil-wrapped bar from his chest pocket.

“I guess I’ll just enjoy a little snack on some chocolate I traded with one of these local kids. Black-market Mexicano chocolate. Organic and artisan-made. Illicit goods, so of course I’m making sure to eat it out here away from the Colonel. In about forty more minutes, I’m going to finish up and go check if he wants me to do anything else before we bug outta here. Hell, it might even be forty-five. I sure will enjoy this chocolate, even though it’s melted all to hell. I’ll have to lick my fingers pretty thoroughly when I’m done. Usually I would have saved some for my best friend, but I guess he won’t need any this time. No, siree, not this time.”

Alejandro rested one hand on Pete’s shoulder. He searched for the right words, but Pete took another step out toward the desert, and Alejandro’s hand dropped back to his side. What could he possibly say? He would never have made it this far without the man, would have taken that long one-way stroll years before. But there could have been a life down the other fork of the road. He turned and walked toward the ATV, where Isaac was throwing catering-coded supplies into the saddlebags.

“I took care of the comms truck, and a few other things. They’ll be out of touch till they can drive to the refinery. Rachel and the others have gone toward the mountains. We can follow, catch up to them. They’re only hours ahead of us, and Miles is on foot.”

“No.”

“They’re my family. I have to find them. Help them.”

“Not now. Not with only a couple of hours lead before the Feds will be on our tails. The best way you can help them is by going where they are not.”

“Shit! How can I leave them? I promised I’d never abandon them.” Isaac clutched at him, like Alejandro could somehow stanch the pain flowing out of him. Maybe he could. He’d give his life to try.

Isaac cleared his throat and scrubbed at his face with his hands. “We both need uniforms. Which is a problem, because you’ll never fit into the Colonel’s. Or Pete’s. We could steal the truck?”

“Too slow, and too easy to track.”

Isaac cocked his head to one side. “Wait. I know where there’s another uniform. Just about your size.”

Isaac's limbs jittered the whole way back out to the Slabs. Tiny finches stalked them, taking advantage of the disturbance they made in the scattered creosote bushes to snap dinner from clouds of midges. It took them too long to locate the right car wreck. Wind-blown sand had filled in the old ATV tracks and they had to navigate by half-buried patches of black asphalt.

Isaac opened the door. Miller's jacket and shirt were lying on top of him where Alejandro had thrown them, and Isaac snagged the shirt, throwing it over to Alejandro.

He lifted the jacket off Miller's face, then yelped as a hand brushed his ankle. The shape of Miller's head flowed with movement in the shadowed dust, like wet ink on parchment. The light glinted off his right eye, glaring at Isaac from a hollow in his drawn, sunken face that crawled with a multitude of tiny red ants. Miller's left eye was gone, only an ever-moving mass of red-brown carapaces protruding from the socket. More swarmed from the wound that opened his belly to the world, a red infestation staining the crinkled pink folds that now lay in ruin. Trickle of dried blood ran from Miller's mouth down to the sand beneath his head. He strained his neck to raise his head from the dust and insects that enveloped him. His swollen tongue emerged from the gash that was his mouth, touching his cracked lips. He hissed dryly at Isaac in words that would be forever unheard.

"You'd better shake that shirt out really well, Alejandro," said Isaac. "There might be some ants in it."

"Got you."

"But this jacket is a no-go." He glanced down at the bloodstained fabric, damp with fluids.

"Can you pass his pants over, too?" said Alejandro. Of course... Alejandro hadn't seen what remained of Miller; couldn't see his face from that angle. Well, Isaac wasn't going to give him this memory to carry. He shook Miller's grip from his leg and reached down to unlace his boots and yank them off. He unwrapped Miller's fatigues from around his ankles and wrestled them off his limbs, along with his socks. The realization that Isaac and Alejandro would leave him here flowed into Miller's remaining eye like cold honey. He struggled feebly to grasp Isaac's trousers. Isaac passed the clothes to Alejandro. "You're going to have to freeball it, man: I am *not* touching his underwear."

Isaac turned to leave, then swung back and knelt down, his face so close to Miller he could see each individual set of shiny, red mandibles gape in

chitinous warning. He leaned in to whisper Miller's afterword. "If you'd raped *me*, I would have given you mercy right about now: a quick knife thrust to the jugular. But you hurt my Alejandro. I hope they keep you alive for days." He turned to make sure Alejandro wasn't watching, then reached into his pocket. "Here. You admired the man so much, you can hold onto his dick for him." Isaac tossed the flaccid length of pale flesh on top of Miller's chest. He drew back and pushed the car door closed for the final time.

Alejandro fastened the last boot, straightened his shirt, and nodded at Isaac. "Let's go."

They headed across the dry lakebed, driving toward the scarlet sunset. White crystalline encrustations climbed the lower shores, and an abandoned cabin lay on its side on the distant salt-covered sand. Innumerable bones were just under the crisp salted surface, tiny and fragile, crackling under the ATV tires. At the other side, they angled northwest, toward a range of hills. To whatever might be there. They paused just before dawn to eat a single MRE, split between them. Isaac brushed his fingertips over the stitches in his forearm, playing with the spiky sensation against his skin, wondering if Miller in the desert was feeling the same thing.

Alejandro slapped his hand. "Stop picking at them!"

He was attempting to be casual, but his voice was pitched too high and his eyes held pain.

"You okay?" asked Isaac.

"I've got no cigarettes. I've been smoking for twenty years. How am I gonna give up now?"

Isaac drew Alejandro against him, embracing him from behind. There was a glow on the horizon peeking over the tips of distant eastern peaks. His family was out there somewhere. One day—when he'd slipped the Feds, when he had something to offer them—he'd find them. He and Alejandro would find them together.

"I've known you two days, and I know that's not it."

"All my books," said Alejandro. "And now I'll never find out how my story ends."

"There are books where we're going." Isaac drew the flag out of his pocket, unfolding it in front of them. "Pretend that each star stands for a state like they

do on the Fed flag. I counted: there's fifty. What if somewhere out there are places where they don't do things the way they do in the Fed? And they all have books."

"It won't be the same. It won't be this book. I was only halfway through."

"Where did you get up to?" asked Isaac.

"Emma's lover Rodolphe left her. She was depressed for a long time, living with her husband in a country village. But now she's visiting a small town, and she's just met up again with the young man who had a crush on her. Leon just confessed he used to write her love letters and tear them up."

Isaac wrapped his arms around Alejandro, cradling the strong body. He tucked the flag into Alejandro's jacket pocket. Isaac bent his head, whispered into his ear, licking and nuzzling the soft skin. "They fall in love. They run away to the city, find a small room where they can make a home together. They promise to never leave each other."

Alejandro tilted his head back, and Isaac kissed him with a soft brush of their lips, speaking the final words into his mouth.

"And their love lasts forever."

Fin

Author Bio

M. Caspian dreams of quitting full-time work to write, but knows this would quickly devolve into full-time reading. And naps. And Xbox. So, probably better the way things are, huh?

Contact & Media Info

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