

The Political Prisoner by Charles Coleman Finlay

Although Charlie Finlay's story "The Political Officer" ran in our April 2002 issue, your editor has an indelible memory of reading it on 9/15/01, when the drama of workers enduring radiation burns took on extra poignancy in the aftermath of the collapse of the World Trade Towers. (If you want to read the story again to see that scene for yourself, you can find the story reprinted on our Website this month.)

No such cataclysmic event occurred during the week when your editor read this new story, but we think what befalls Max Nikomedes in this tale will also leave a lasting impression.

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For everyone's convenience, the execution grounds on Jesusalem stood next to the cemetery. The cemetery was the biggest public garden on the terraformed planet: families sacrificed part of their soil ration to plant perennials and blossoming evergreens, bits of garnish like little sprigs of parsley on a vast platter of rocks. The sight of the garden usually made Maxim Nikomedes feel welcome when he returned to the planet, even if he only glimpsed the flowers for a moment from the window of his limousine.

This return was different. An Adarean was scheduled for execution, and the mob that gathered to watch it blocked Max's view. And for this visit, Max was riding in an armored car for prisoners, not a limousine.

Max peered out the tinted window, but was met with his own reflection: he was a small man in his forties, with an acne-scarred face pale from years in the space service as a political officer. There were loose threads on his uniform where the rank had been torn off. He raised his hands to scratch his nose—the window flashed with the silver gleam of the handcuffs.

He looked past himself.

The crowd, dressed in their drab Sabbath clothes, shoved and shouted, surging toward the execution altar. They were pushed back by the soldiers from Justice, spilling into the road and blocking the car. Atop the altar, the Minister of Executions poured baptismal water over the Adarean's bald green head. The crowd shook and roared in frenzy.

"You want to stay and watch them stretch the pig-man's neck?" the

guard asked Max.

Max had been ignoring the guard seated opposite him. But now the seasoned political officer turned his head with a cold calm and lifted his handcuffed wrists, as if to say he had bigger worries. Soon enough, he might make an official visit to the execution altar. He would, at least, have a good view of the flowers in the graveyard.

Looking back out the window, he said, “What does it matter to me if an Adarean lives or dies?”

The guard craned his head around to talk to the driver.

“See, that’s what I don’t understand,” he said, pointing the barrel of his gun out the window. “They’re like aliens. Adareans gave up their souls when they quit being human, so what’s the point in baptizing this pig-man?”

Max frowned while the guard and driver argued the merits of pre-execution conversion. *Pig-man*. It was odd how a man’s work took on a life of its own. Max remembered creating that propaganda term years ago, during the war with Adares. The people on his planet thought they were God’s Select, emigrating to a purer place where they could live a holy life. They fell into conflict with the emigrants to Adares, a population that claimed to be the next step, deliberate and scientific, in human evolution. To stir people up to fight a technologically superior foe, Max created the slogan *There is no evolution, only abomination*. Then he dug up some old Earth-history on using pig-valves in heart transplants—the first step toward godlessness, changing man into something other than God’s own image. Max connected *that* to the genetically modified Adareans, who stole genes promiscuously from any species, and called them pig-men. It was adolescent name-calling, improvised in the service of a war long since over. Who cared if the Adareans’ chlorophyll-laden skin and hair indicated more plant genes than pig? The religious population of Jerusalem, thinking swine unclean, embraced the insult.

That was many years, and a different identity, ago. Max was vain enough to feel proud—and old enough to be ashamed. He loved his home, and had always served it any way he could.

Outside, the hangman fixed the steel cable around the Adarean’s neck. Tradition called for hemp rope, but there was so little natural fiber on the planet, despite decades of terraforming, that everything but their clothes was made from metal or rock. The minister began preaching the repentance sermon while the powerfully built hangman forced the Adarean

to kneel and bend his head. The crowd settled down to listen, and the driver nudged the car forward again.

Max continued to stare out the window. They hovered through dusty, unpaved streets, leaving a cloud of grit behind them, until they arrived at a big, concrete, open-ended U. The Department of Political Education building.

The guard hopped out, weapon at his side, and held open the door. “It must feel good to be back, huh?”

Max looked up to see if the guard really was that stupid. His simple, frank face bespoke genuine belief. Max scooted across the seat and lifted his handcuffed wrists for an answer.

The guard waved his hand vaguely. “Nobody believes that charge of treason!”

Max winced at the word. In the old days, even a suspicion of treason meant immediate death. He walked quickly as if to escape the charge, crossing the courtyard to the entrance. More guards, these blissfully silent in their charcoal-colored uniforms, opened the door. The lobby inside was an oasis of tan benches planted around a small blue pool of carpet.

A pale green Adarean leapt up from one of the seats and blocked Max’s way. “Please,” he said. “I must see Director Mallove while there’s still time to stop the execution.”

Depending on the length of the sermon—they could run for a few minutes or a few hours—it might already be too late. “Can’t really help you,” Max said, lifting his handcuffs in answer for a third time.

The guard steered Max around the Adarean. When the door to the stairwell creaked shut behind them, the guard grumbled, “Weedheads.”

“I’ll never get used to grass hair,” Max said. He doubted the Adareans converted much solar energy from their hair, despite all their talk of developing “multiple calorie streams.”

His legs ached in the full gravity as he climbed the stairs. He’d visited planets with elevators before: the older he got, the more he believed in the possible holiness of technology. When he went to Earth, he visited a museum about the Amish, a group of people who stubbornly lived in the past while technology swept others past them. The tour guide thought he’d

find the religious similarities interesting. Max had begun to have sympathy for the galactics who looked at his planet as an oddity just like the Amish.

Too bad his people had never been pacifists.

On the top floor, the guard ushered Max past the admin—owl-eyed Anatoly, whose expressionless gaze followed Max across the room—to the office of the Director of Political Education, Willem Mallove. Max's boss.

One of Max's bosses. But that was complicated, and involved his old identity. Max filed that away in "things too dangerous to think about right now."

Mallove sat posed, hand on chin, staring out the window. He had an actor's face, handsome and charismatic with just the right hint of imperfection—a small scar that forced his upper lip into a minor sneer. His face had gotten him into vids when he studied off-planet on Adares, years ago, before the revolution. Rumor had it that his insincerity—the Adareans were enormously sensitive to nuances of emotion—had driven him out of acting. The spacious office was decorated with fabric wall-coverings, some rare wooden chairs, and the famous stained-glass desk with its images of the Blessed Martyrs—a ministry heirloom from before the revolution.

"You may leave us, Vasily," Mallove told the earnest-but-stupid guard. His hand stayed posed on his chin.

"But, sir—"

"That will be all."

Great—whatever happened next, Mallove didn't want witnesses. The door clicked shut behind Max. He had an impulse to stand at parade rest, hands behind him—like all of the government bureaucracy, Education was part of the military—but the cuffs made that impossible.

"Sir, may I have these off?" Max lifted his bound wrists.

Mallove's chair creaked as he spun around. Instead of answering the question, he pulled open a drawer, removed a gun, and aimed it at Max's head.

"Someone in my Department is disloyal," Mallove said. "What I need to know, Max, is it you?"

Max stared past the barrel into Mallove's eyes. "Sir, if you want me to be disloyal, I will be."

If it was going to be theatrics, Max could play his role.

They stared at each other until Mallove, with exaggerated casualness, placed the gun, still charged, still aimed at Max, on the desk and leaned back in his chair. "A big change is coming, Max. Before it arrives, I have to root out every traitor—"

Cold fear prickled the back of Max's neck. "Is Drozhin dead?"

Mallove paused, frowning in irritation at the interruption. "I know we all think of General Drozhin as the man who eats knives just so he can shit on people to kill them. But even he is just another mortal man."

"That's why I asked. Is he dead?"

Mallove folded his hands together and looked away. "Not yet, not quite."

Max held his breath. Dmitri Drozhin was Max's other boss. Drozhin, the last great patriarch of the revolution, Director of the Department of Intelligence, in charge of the spies, the secret police, and the assassins. Max had been all three for Drozhin, including his deep undercover spy on Mallove. Max's last mission in space, aboard the spy ship *Gethsemane*, had gone badly when his orders from Drozhin conflicted with his orders from Mallove.

And now here he was a prisoner. Very likely, he had finally been caught as a double agent. Maybe Meredith, his wife, from long ago and that other identity, would use their soil ration to plant flowers for him in the cemetery.

"Too bad," he said to the news about Drozhin.

Mallove leaned forward, resting his hand on the gun. "What happened aboard the *Gethsemane*? To Lukinov, I mean."

The implication was that he knew something. *Answer right, or I'll still shoot you.* For once, Max didn't think Mallove was acting. What could he say safely? What did Mallove know and what did he only guess? Max jerked his hands apart—the metal cuffs dug into his wrists as the chain snapped

taut. He was thinking about this wrong: if he wanted to survive, the question was not what did Mallove know, but what did he want to hear?

“It would seem,” Max said, reciting the official version, “that Lukinov tried to sabotage the ship’s nuclear reactor, that he ended up killing himself when he botched it.”

Mallove sketched a whirligig in the air with his free hand, signifying his opinion of the official version. “Yes, but what *really* happened?”

What really happened was that Max caught Lukinov spying for Mallove. Max garrotted him and sabotaged the ship so he could return home to report to his secret boss. He paused for a second, trying to guess Mallove’s fear. “I don’t think Lukinov was selling us out to the Adareans, no matter what Intelligence says,” he said. “More likely it had something to do with his gambling habit.”

Mallove’s scarred lip twitched—a tell.

The gambling habit. That was probably how Mallove blackmailed Lukinov into spying for him. Now Mallove was afraid of being caught.

Max decided to push his luck. “I witnessed Lukinov gambling with the captain,” he said. “The sabotage was intended to cover up some secret, only it went wrong. I’m sure I was arrested on trumped-up charges in order to keep me from investigating the captain. If we find out who Lukinov had been gambling with at home before—”

Mallove interrupted. “That doesn’t matter. So his body’s still floating out there in space?”

“Yes. He was ejected during a hull breach in the radiation clean-up.”

“Well, you can rest easy. I’ve insisted that we recover Lukinov’s body. If anything’s been hidden, we’ll find it.”

Like the ligature marks Max left on Lukinov’s neck? That would wreck his story. “Excellent news,” he said.

Metal runners squeaked as Mallove pulled open another stained glass drawer and retrieved a crystal bottle of vodka with two tumblers. He filled one and took a sip. “How long have you been with Political Education, Max?”

Longer than you, Max thought. He'd been there at Drozhin's side when the old man decided to form Political Education. Together, they created a new identity for Max when he joined it as a mole. "Since the beginning. It was my first posting when I joined the service."

"Mine too." Mallove tapped his fingers on the glass. "The treason charges against you are laughable, Max. I'm sure Drozhin locked you up because he knows you're one of the key men in my Department."

Yes, why had Drozhin's department locked him up as soon as the ship landed? Disregarding the captain's official charges against him—Max was still trying to figure that one out. He'd gone from being the prisoner of one boss to the prisoner of another. What did the Bible say about serving two masters?

He rattled the links on his cuffs. "If the charges are so laughable, maybe we could take these off."

Again, Mallove ignored his request. "Let's speak frankly. Drozhin's old, he's sick, he's going to die soon. Maybe within days. Without him, Intelligence will be in complete disarray."

And the people he's protected, like me, Max thought, *we're all compost.*

Mallove picked up the gun. Max tensed, ready to take the bolt.

But Mallove didn't notice him flinch; he was too intent on swiveling his chair to point the gun out the window. "The fact is, Intelligence is done for once the old man dies. Drozhin never promoted anyone smart enough to replace him. So when he dies, there will be a battle for power."

There was more than some truth in that. "You think it'll be a physical battle?"

Mallove pretended to shoot people out the window, as if he wanted a physical battle. "There won't be soldiers in the streets," he said. "Those days are long behind us. Yes, men will be discredited, forced to leave their positions, and senior officers will go to prison. But if I surround myself with enough loyal men, all that power will be mine."

Which would be a disaster for the planet, and all their attempts to change it for the better. "You think there's a traitor within Education?"

“I’m sure of it, at least two.” Mallove spun around, pointing the gun directly at Max.

This time Max didn’t jump. Mallove paused a moment, then set the gun down. The metal clicked hard on a slab of colored glass depicting the assassination of Brother Porluck.

Mallove chuckled to himself. “I’ll be disloyal if you order me to, sir.’ Now there’s loyalty for you. Drozhin doesn’t have anyone like that.” He tapped the intercom. “Anatoly, bring in the key.”

Max released a sigh of relief. For the first time, he thought he might survive this interview.

The door swung open quietly. The admin entered and unlocked Max’s cuffs. Anatoly was a competent, scholarly officer, the kind who plotted out military campaigns on spreadsheets instead of maps. His gaze lingered on the desk, on the gun backlit by bulbs behind the stained glass image of the fall of the Temple, and on Mallove’s hand, which rested with deliberate casualness by the pistol’s trigger.

Max rubbed his sore wrists, and wondered what part of this tableau was for him and what part was for Anatoly. With Mallove, there were always wheels inside of wheels.

“Anything else, sir?” Anatoly asked.

“There are some things still up in the air—kinda like clay pigeons.” Mallove barked out a laugh at his own joke and pretended to shoot one. “Get reservations for three down at Pillars of Salt. The booth across from the door.”

Anatoly said, “Yes, sir,” and reached in his pocket for a phone.

Max’s mouth watered at the prospect of dinner from Pillars of Salt. He had lamb medallions on a bed of saffron couscous the last time he was there, a few years ago, and hadn’t eaten that well since. That had been with Meredith, to celebrate their wedding anniversary—

He shut down that line of thinking. He kept his life strictly compartmentalized, different parts of it sealed behind bulkheads. This was no time to weaken the seals.

Mallove capped the vodka and put it in a drawer, along with the

weapon. Scene over, time to put the props away. The second glass, intended for Max, had been forgotten.

“I want you to help me find the traitor, Max,” Mallove said. “Let’s root out Drozhin’s spies.”

“I’m the man to do it,” Max said, without a hint of irony. Maybe he could cast suspicion on Mallove’s best men, and weaken Education in the process.

“Anatoly has already compiled a short list of suspects. The two of you together will find Drozhin’s moles.”

Max carefully avoided meeting the admin’s gaze. “Are you sure Anatoly has time for this, with all his other duties?”

“He’ll make time,” Mallove said. “This is the most important job I have and you’re the two best men I’ve got.”

That’s what Max feared. Anatoly was smart, and Max didn’t want to risk being caught by him. The admin stared at Max over the rim of his glasses, as if he were already trying to peer through his facade. He maintained eye contact the whole time he tapped out reservations and made a call to Mallove’s driver to bring around a car. He looked like he wanted to say something; Max wondered what it was.

Anatoly’s gaze flicked to Mallove. “They have the booth ready, sir.” Then he held out his hand to Max. “It’s good to have you back, Nick.”

Max forced a grin. Nick was short for Nikomedes—Anatoly had always called him Old Nick, said he was as ugly as Satan and twice as mean. He clasped Anatoly’s hand, hard. “It’s damn good to be back, Annie.”

He knew the admin hated the girly contraction of his name, but he grinned back. Max’s first order of business would be getting Anatoly off this assignment.

They left the office together, boot soles echoing on concrete as they stomped down the main stairwell, which was plain and unpainted. The architecture was plain for a moral as well as a practical purpose. The settlers of Jerusalem had called themselves Plain Christians, twenty-first-century religious fundamentalists who feared the advances of science and considered all genetic engineering abominations. After all, if man was made in the form of God, any changes in that form amounted to a

renunciation of the divine. They'd started in the old United States, in North America, but had found many of their converts later in Europe, especially the former Soviet republics.

Ironically, it was the technology the Plain Christians feared that allowed the survival of their religion. When biocomputers created the singular new intelligence that made space travel possible, they sank all their resources into a mass migration out to the first marginally habitable planet no one else wanted, a primitive place with surface water and just enough ocean-algae-cognate to produce breathable levels of oxygen. Everything beyond that was rock and sand and struggle, a desert for the devout. Publicly they claimed to keep their buildings austere and luxuryless as penance; the truth was that terraforming went slowly and poorly, and plain was all they could manage.

When they exited the stairwell and crossed the main lobby, the Adarean rose from his bench and came toward them.

Max looked at him more closely this time. The Adarean was too tall, with joints and proportions that were off, inhuman even before you noticed the green color.

"Willem," the Adarean called out to Mallove, coming forward. Like they were old friends. Adareans hated hierarchies. "I've been waiting days to see you."

"Ah," Mallove said, his face momentarily blank as he thought about which script he was performing. Then he smiled, cold, frosty, as blinding as the sun on a comet. "How good to see you again, comrade Patience."

For a second, Max wondered if the *Patience* were a joke; the Adareans who came to Jerusalem sometimes named themselves for traits they admired, but *Patience*?

Mallove didn't offer his hand.

"I'm here to protest recent acts of violence against innocent Adareans and ask for a halt to today's execution, late though it may be," Patience told Mallove. He seemed very agitated, looking up as if he expected to hear other voices.

Mallove took the stern role now. "But you chose to come to Jerusalem, knowing the history between our planets and accepting the personal risks."

“Between our planets?” The Adarean’s voice rose into that unsettling mid-range that could be either male or female. “What does that mean? Planets don’t interact—individual people do. You know that we have nothing to do with the Adareans who came here before us. They were different people.”

A group of Adareans had come before the revolution to join the Plain Christian church. When the old patriarchs were losing the war in the cities, a few radical Adareans showed them how to fashion nuclear weapons from the fissionable undecayed uranium-235 sometimes found in the young planet’s surface. They’d nuked the revolutionary stronghold of New Nazareth, almost reversing the war.

The surviving leaders declared war on Adares, although they were in no position to prosecute it at the time. And the people, even those not originally for the revolution, had rallied in their hatred of the impure, genetically altered Adareans. The pig-men. The abomination. The Beast. It gave all the people of the planet a common enemy to hate besides each other. A rallying cry that saved the planet.

“Look,” Max said. “What happened to your friend, it’s nothing personal. It’s just politics.”

Mallove opened his hand with a dramatic flourish. “Exactly. It’s politics. Perhaps you should go protest at the Department of Intelligence.”

“I did!” Patience said. His hair bristled, moving like grass in the wind. “They said they couldn’t do anything to stop the execution and told me that I needed Education.”

“Well, there you have it,” Mallove quipped. “Consider today’s execution educational.”

Mallove walked toward the door, Anatoly in his wake; guards blocked the Adarean to prevent him from following. Max sniffed something sour in the air—the briefing was that Adareans communicated with scent, but no one had any proof.

“I’ve been looking over your files while we were fighting to get you out of that prison cell,” Mallove was saying as Max caught up.

“Trying to decide if I was worth the effort?” Max asked.

Mallove grinned. “You must be. Drozhin did everything in his power to keep us from knowing that he held you prisoner. Fortunately I have my own sources. Of all the senior officers I have, Max, you’ve spent the least amount of time at headquarters.”

“Yes, sir,” Max said. The guard opened the door. Hot air from the plaza washed over them.

“For over twenty years, you’ve gone from one field posting to the next,” Mallove said. “Never a desk rotation. That’s not typical at all.”

He was asking for an explanation.

“It’s been easier to keep fighting the revolution that way,” Max said, knowing it was the right thing to say, but more than half-believing it. “To change the planet, we have to change one mind at a time, until everyone’s transformed.”

The cost of terraforming a primitive planet was too high; it required too much sacrifice. People had to be true believers in *something* to do it.

“That’s been good so far, Max,” Mallove said with an almost avuncular tolerance. “But we’re moving the battlefield to another level now and we need a bigger vision.”

Max made a mental note: Mallove repeated his earlier war metaphor—he wanted to be seen by history as a great general, even though he came to the revolution late, after the fighting was over.

Max scanned the courtyard and reminded himself that the fighting was over. The Department of Political Education sat on a peaceful street. Headquarters was, in fact, an old school building: the ostensible symbol was that Education was part of the people, right out in the neighborhood, not set off behind barricades like the secret police in Intelligence. Older, smaller buildings bunched up around it, with windowbox gardens and colorful banners hanging from the rooftops.

Their limousine pulled up to the curb.

Mallove’s personal bodyguard opened the door. Mallove paused, lifted his head to the sky, and said, with a grin like a vid general’s, “Into the battle!”

Which is when Max noticed the armed gunmen—soldiers for certain,

special forces, but in street clothes, nondescript browns and grays—step out from the alleys and doorways. Education's goons always made extravagant gestures, eager to be seen and feared. These moved smoothly, almost gliding, with a distinct lack of threat that made Max's skin prickle.

He grabbed Anatoly's shoulder, out of reflex, one comrade to another, and hissed "Run!"

The first of the soldiers lifted his gun and shot Mallove's driver in the back of the head with a sound no louder than a muffled pop.

Max raised his hands above his head, turned away, dropped his chin toward his chest. *Look, I'm no danger, I don't see a thing.* He walked toward the nearest corner.

Another muffled pop, and a shout to "Get down! Get the hell down!" and Anatoly's voice, or maybe Mallove's, shouted his name. One of the gray men stepped out from the corner, gun aimed pointblank at his eye.

Guards burst out of Education's lobby at the same moment, firing wildly. Automatic gunfire, old-fashioned ballistics, blasted from the windows directly overhead.

The gray man lifted his eyes for a split second as the shots sounded above him. Max attacked, closing his hand over the barrel of the gun and turning it back into the man's chest, squeezing the trigger with his finger over the other man's. Volts shot through the body, dropped him twitching to the ground. Max's arm went numb to his elbow.

For the next few seconds everything dissolved in the chaos of crossfire and men diving for cover. With the gun still in his hand, Max emptied the man's pockets into his—a little cash, nothing more. He rounded the corner, ran to the next one, turned. Shopkeepers and residents were coming out into the street at the sounds of fighting.

So Mallove had been wrong. Intelligence did mean to have a battle in the streets. And Max had let himself get trapped on the wrong side of the front lines. He would have been safer in his original prison cell.

He dodged down another alley, buttons flying as he ripped off his telltale charcoal-colored uniform shirt. His plain T-shirt would draw less attention from snipers looking for the other color. Jamming the gun into his pants, he shoved his way into a group of old women with shopping bags full

of bread and produce. He slouched, keeping his head down as he crossed the street in their midst.

“What—you didn’t have time to get dressed when her husband came in?” one of the old ladies sneered.

I’m not happy to see you, Max wanted to say. And that really is a gun in my pocket. He broke away from them at the far curb.

An unmarked government car—but black, with tinted windows, same as being marked—blew down the street toward Education. Max flattened into a doorway to let it pass.

A block away, on the edge of a rougher neighborhood, he slipped into a small shop and bought a phonecard, probably an illegal phonecard since the clerk accepted cash. Max stood in a corner by the window and watched the street. As he punched in the private number to Drozhin’s gatekeeper, the one he’d memorized and never used, he noticed scratch marks on his hand. He must’ve gotten them from the guard, when they struggled for the gun—

“What is it?” the voice on the other end said before the phone even rang.

“I need to speak to Uncle Wiggly,” Max said. “Peter Rabbit’s in trouble—”

“Sorry, you have a wrong number.”

He was disconnected.

Just like he had been in Drozhin’s prison.

A thought hit Max with all the power of a sniper’s shot: what if Drozhin had *already* died? The mean old son of a bitch had to go sometime and, like everything else he did, he would probably do it in secret.

Max was screwed if that was the case. Who would take over Intelligence? Hubert was the nominal second in command, but he had no real power. Kostigan was the one to watch out for, but Drozhin probably had standing orders to have him assassinated on his own death. He wouldn’t trust that one without a thumb on him. The only one who knew Max personally was Obermeyer. He’d been Max’s case officer for years and reported directly to Drozhin. He was also certainly the one assigned to

assassinate Kostigan, and it was unlikely he would live out the day after that.

So if Drozhin was dead, and Mallove had just been assassinated, which seemed to be the case, Max was unlikely to live out the day either. Anyone who didn't kill him on purpose would do it by accident.

The clerk stared at him, at the bloody back of his hand, the half-uniform. Pictures of the coup were being broadcast on the screen. If the media was involved already, then the whole thing had been staged. So, yeah, he was screwed.

Max yanked a phonecard from the rack, shoved it at the clerk, tossed money at the counter. "Activate it."

The clerk shook his head, pushed the money back.

The gun came out of Max's pocket and the barrel came to rest on the clerk's temple: Max nodded at the wedding ring on the man's hand. "I'm going to use this to call my wife, tell her she's in trouble. You let me do that, and then I'm gone."

Keeping one eye on Max, the clerk rang up the sale and activated the phone.

It rang and rang until her voicemail clicked on. "This is the house of," she used Max's other name, his original one. Her voice was a bit rough—she joked it was from yelling at their children, but it was too many years spent outside in the planet's harsh landscape, breathing grit. "He's unable to speak to you right now, but leave a message and we'll call back."

He hesitated. "Honey, it's me. I'm in the capital, but may be traveling soon. Don't know when I'll be back—"

Footsoldiers, dressed in the tan uniforms of Intelligence infantry, ran by the window. Max faded back behind the rack of apple chips.

"—I, I," he couldn't bring himself to say *love*, so he switched to their private code, "wish I was with you at the beach. Take care of yourself."

He clicked off and looked up to see the clerk pointing the barrel of a shockprod at him.

Max let the phonecard slip from his hand. It clattered on the floor. For the second time in less than a half hour, he put his hands up in visible

surrender, backing quickly toward the door.

He shoved the gun in his pocket and hit the street running blind. The street was oddly quiet now except for shouts from one alley. Max turned the opposite way, sprinted down a residential street and over a wall into somebody's garden, running through backyards and past astonished faces until he came to a corner lot occupied by one of the old Plain Churches, a long, low building that could have been a bunker if you bricked in the windows.

The revolutionaries had not eliminated the churches when they took over the government. Pastors who supported the new regime prospered; some churches, like this one, the Falter Sanctuary, found other uses as dropboxes where Drozhin's spies passed information to Intelligence.

Max entered, circling the pews to reach the Holy Spirit Stations in the side chapel. Whispering a prayer, he opened the thumb-worn, ancient Bible at random, more for the sake of ritual than insight.

He closed his eyes, stabbed his finger at a page, and opened them again. Deuteronomy 14.2: You are a people holy to the LORD your God, and he has chosen you out of all peoples on Earth to be his special possession.

And what exactly did that mean when they were no longer on Earth? Theology had never been Max's strong point, so he didn't worry about it. He snatched up a slip of prayer paper and a pencil stub, then walked to the kneeling wall. He chose the spot farthest from the two women, probably mother and daughter, heads covered in similar red scarves, who were earnestly and quietly scratching out their prayer requests. The television screen in the corner cycled through the old videos of Renee Golden, the Golden Prophet, founder of the Plain Christians.

"God's plan for us can be seen in the tests he sends us," the Golden Prophet said.

Max recognized the sermon, the one she made on the banks of the river in Rostov-on-Don, in southern Russia. Golden was American, but she proselytized heavily during two long missions to the old Soviet republics, returning through Bulgaria, Serbia, and Greece. Hundreds of thousands followed her call to go into space. When she died before making the journey herself, it only made her more like Moses, destined never to reach the Holy Land. Her followers formed a polyglot community that never came together except by force—the force of her personality in the beginning, the

force of hardship during the settlement of Jerusalem, and then, finally, under the Patriarchs and the revolution, the force of force.

Max hadn't used this church dropbox in over a decade. He folded his hands and said an earnest prayer to the god of spies and all men caught behind enemy lines that there was still someone out there to receive it.

Picking up his pencil, he began to write. He hoped that whoever saw the old code recognized it.

“—Those of you who are listening to me now by way of satellite, I want you to join hands with us. Reach out and put your hand on the television screen—”

He wrote slowly. The old code was all language for family. Aunt meant one thing, uncle meant another, with trigger words that keyed off the meanings.

“—God has given us the design for a ship the same way He gave Noah the blueprints for the ark. Only now we are invited to ascend directly into heaven. Bring your prayers with you, into heaven, and hand-deliver them to God—”

Max folded the paper and dropped it in the slot.

“May I help you?”

A young pastor stood there in his ceremonial suit and tie. One of the angry young pastors, bent on reclaiming the church's glory in the face of the secular regime, if Max guessed correctly.

“—God tells us not to mix with sinners, but this fallen world is full of sinners. Our only choice is to leave this world behind, to ascend—”

“Just making a prayer request,” Max replied softly. He dropped the pencil stub into the little cup.

“I don't recognize you as a regular communicant.”

“The church is a sanctuary for all,” Max said.

The pastor glanced at Max's state of half undress, his sweat, his bloody hand. “It's funny how those who persecute the church run to it when

it suits their needs.”

“—Are you ready for the test? You have a choice to make: you can die with the sinners or turn your face toward heaven and join the angels —”

The old woman at the other end of the pew grunted as she rose to her feet with the help of her daughter. “Anyone can change,” she chided the pastor. “Sometimes crisis is God’s way of showing us the need to repent.”

“Yes, Mrs. Yevenko,” the pastor said.

Max slipped away when the pastor spoke to her. There was nothing else to do here except hope that Obermeyer, or whoever, got his message and understood it. He pushed open the side door; the sun over the metal rooftops glared blindingly, and he blinked.

The hard muzzle of a gun pressed against his neck. “I’ll be happy to kill you,” a voice said. “Just give me an excuse.”

Max raised his hands in the air, for the third time today, this time in true surrender. “No need for that.”

The muzzle shoved hard against his head, knocking him off-balance. “I’ll decide what is and isn’t needed.” He reached into Max’s pocket and retrieved the gun. “Now walk toward Calvary Park.”

“Yes, sir,” Max said. These men were on his side, he had to remember that: they all served Intelligence, they all served Jerusalem. He’d tell them who he was right now, except for the possibility that Kostigan was in charge.

He walked at a non-provocative pace, neither too slow nor too fast. Close to the square, he saw other men being rounded up. No, not just men: there was a woman carrying a baby, tugging a cap down over its head. A little boy clutched the hem of her skirt, running to keep up. This district housed the employees and families of those who worked for the Department of Education. So they were all being rounded up, even the civilians. A clean sweep.

Two other men marched along under the gun of another soldier. One of them was in a T-shirt, like Max, with a cross on the same chain as his dogtags. The other was a major from Education.

“Can you take this one for me?” shouted Max’s keeper.

The other soldier nodded yes, used his weapon to wave all three men up against a flat concrete wall. “Go stand over there—now!”

Perfect wall for an execution, Max thought as he stood against it. Lots of room for burn marks and bloodstains to impress and cow the public for years to come. Jerusalem was full of walls like that, but most of them were old.

While the soldier talked into his link, the other two prisoners whispered. The one with the cross said, “Hey, it’s me. Hey.”

The voice startled Max. The stupid-but-earnest guard—what was his name? “Vasily?”

“Yeah, what a mess. What’s going on?”

The major had different plans. “If we run three different directions, he can’t get us all.”

Vasily brushed his thumb nervously against his cross. “Yeah, but what about the one he does get?”

“Look,” Max whispered, covering his mouth with his hand like he was scratching his nose. “The guard’s just pretending to talk. He’s watching, waiting for us to run.”

Probably hoping for them to run. That way he could just shoot them and walk away. He might do it anyway, Max thought, even without provocation.

“I’ll go left first, draw his attention,” the major whispered. “You two take off the other way.”

It didn’t matter to Max if the guy got himself killed, but he didn’t want to get caught in the crossfire. When the major leaned, ready to spring away, Max slammed him into the wall. “Don’t do it!”

“Your mother’s a pig!”

“Move again and I’ll shoot all of you!” the guard yelled, running over with his weapon up.

Max looked him in the eye, held up his hands in what was turning into a habitual gesture. “Hey, I’m on your side—”

“Shut up!”

The guard hesitated. He wasn’t used to killing yet, wasn’t even used to hurting people. Maybe Drozhin recognized that problem with this generation of troops and was trying to blood them. That was possible too, if Drozhin was still alive. That was something Drozhin would do. Any explanation was possible at this point: it was making Max crazy. All he needed to do was hold on until he could make his contact and get away.

The guard listened to something in his ear bud, gestured with the gun. “That way. The transports are lined up in Calvary Park.”

“Transports?” the major asked. “Where are we—”

The butt of the rifle interrupted his sentence, scattering his words, along with his blood, over the road ahead of him as he sprawled.

“Did I give you permission to talk?” The guard, pulse jumping in his neck, hopped out of arm’s reach and jabbed his gun at them again. “Get up.”

Max tensed. The guard was working himself up to kill. It was clear three prisoners made him nervous. He felt outnumbered, unsure.

The major tried to push himself up, but his elbow buckled and he fell again. The guard jabbed his gun, pointing it at all of them in turn, “I said, get up.”

Vasily shouted, “Get up!”

Max hooked his hand under the major’s elbow and yanked him to his feet, grunting with the effort. He was thinking he could throw the major into the guard and then run—

Wheels squealed around the corner and a military recruit van commandeered for tonight’s mission braked to a stop just feet away from Max. Two soldiers hopped out and the moment to run had passed. The major tore his arm away from Max, staggered to his feet. He’d never been blooded either, which is why he thought he could run.

“What the *fuck* is going on?” one of the new soldiers said. They all

looked like children to Max, although they were older than he'd been during the revolution.

"I'm just following orders," Max's guard answered.

"Well the whole thing is *fucked*," the newcomer said. "What the *fuck* do we do with these *fuckers*?"

"Take them down to Calvary Park with the others."

"God *fucking* damn it all. Jesus Golden."

Guns jammed in their backs, the three men climbed into the back of the van. The new soldier grabbed the major. "I just fucking cleaned this, so don't bleed all over the seat."

"I am still your superior officer—"

His protest was cut short by the goose-pimpling electricity, the smell of ozone and singed flesh. The major clapped a hand to his burned shoulder but he didn't cry out.

"Any other questions, traitor?" the new soldier asked. "No? Good." He shoved the major in, slammed the door shut.

Well, they were all being blooded.

The only other occupant in the van wore civilian clothes. He was leaning forward, saying, "Was that a gun? What just happened?"

Vasily swallowed hard, lifted the cross to his lips, kissed it, and the major stared straight ahead, his wide mouth tight, grim. Max didn't say anything either as the van rumbled away. They all leaned as the van sped around a corner. Max's stomach, still empty, lurched with it.

"Why is this happening?" Vasily asked. "We're all on the same side. I don't understand."

"I heard they assassinated Mallove," the major said, quietly. "Shot to the head."

Max wondered if the comment was an observation or if it was bait. He glanced at the floor, glanced out the window. "No, they didn't. I was there when it happened."

All their attention focused on him now, including the soldier on the other side of the cage up front.

“Mallove and his assistant, Anatoly,” Max said, “and some other senior officer were on their way out. There were shots fired by the soldiers, but only after all three were shoved into a car and taken away.”

The major stared at Max; so did the guard up front.

“What do you think it means?” the civilian asked.

“It means Drozhin’s probably dead,” the major said. “It means Kostigan has taken over Intelligence finally. And if they shoved all three guys in a car, it means they’re dead as soon as the interrogations are done.”

The civilian laughed nervously. “Drozhin’s not dead. He’s got more lives than Lazarus. I don’t think he’s ever going to die.”

“All of you, just shut up,” the soldier said as the van pulled to a stop. He and the driver got out.

“They’ll be satisfied with killing all the generals and half the majors,” the major said, with a rueful glance at his own insignia. “Most of the rest of you can expect some interrogation, some time in a cell, then reassignment. It won’t be too bad.”

When the civilian, probably a contractor of some sort caught in the Education buildings, spoke, his voice rose sharply. “They’re taking us down to the cells? They told me it was an emergency evacuation.”

“Don’t worry, they don’t have enough cells for all of us,” Max said. The major stared at him hard, again, as if trying to figure out who he was.

“See, that’s what I don’t understand,” Vasily asked. “Why are we doing this to each other? We’ve got a planet to finish terraforming. Hell, there’s a whole galaxy to explore.”

That was the real question, wasn’t it? After three generations of terraforming, the planet was still hardscrabble at best. Like people, it was deeply resistant to change.

The civilian jabbed a finger at him. “How can you talk about

terraforming—”

A fist hammered on the side of the van. “Shut the *fuck* up in there.”

They fell quiet. Max folded his hands on his lap, leaned back, savoring the smell of antiseptic cleaners mixed with sweat. These other guys were on their own. All he had to do was avoid anything stupid now, get into the system and stay alive until some of the Intelligence people noticed him and pulled him out. He had to believe that would happen.

The major hooked his tongue into his cheek, then spat blood on the floor.

“Hey,” Vasily hissed. “Don’t do that. The guard said not to do that.”

The major scuffed at the blood with the sole of his shoe, smearing the red stain everywhere. He was swirling his tongue for another spit when the back door swung open.

“Get out,” the guard said, using his gun to herd them into a large crowd of men milling around in a hastily erected enclosure in Calvary Park. The gate clicked shut behind them. Nervous guards from Intelligence and the regular services patrolled around the outside of the chainlink fence.

Max circled the perimeter once, estimated about a hundred and thirty prisoners, most of them low-level Education bureaucrats or headquarters staff like Vasily. All men, which meant the families were being taken somewhere else. He tried to count the guards, but the numbers kept changing as men came and went. No familiar faces either, but then only Drozhin and Obermeyer would know him. He asked questions, trying to find out what people knew, but all he learned was that you could ask a question at one end of the crowd and hear it repeated as a statement of fact at the other end a few minutes later.

On the second pass around, someone clutched his arm.

“You!” The civilian from the van, still smelling like cologne and breath mints. “You’re the one who saw Mallove get away free. Do you think he’s negotiating for our release? What’s going on?”

Max stared at him until he let go. “I think Mallove is doing everything in his power right now.”

Let him interpret that as he might. Max walked away, the civilian trailing

after, toward a noise at the gate.

A bald colonel in the sand-colored uniform of the regular services, backed by a small knot of similarly dressed soldiers and a flock of medtechs in green scrub coats, appeared at the fence. He kicked the chainlink at the main gate until the crowd all looked that way. He lifted a bullhorn to his mouth. “We know some of you were injured during today’s unfortunate safety evacuation—”

“It’s unfortunate more of you weren’t hurt,” someone shouted. Max moved away from the voice. All he wanted to do was stay clear of trouble; screw everyone else.

“—so you’re all going to get a quick medical inspection for your own records, to make sure everything’s fine, before we process you out of here. Be quick about it, cooperate fully, and everything will be fine. Line up, single file, at the gate. Stee-rip!”

The command echoed those the younger soldiers would have heard recently at basic training camp, and it settled down those men, including Vasily, who pushed his way to the front of the line, eager to comply. Max fell into line a little back of the middle, giving him time to hide how much he was unnerved. There was no reason to strip for a medical inspection, but getting men to obey seemingly reasonable authority was the first step to making them obey wrongful authority. If anyone knew that, a political officer did.

While the men ahead of him joked with the guards and fished for information about their release, Max removed his clothes and folded them, shoes on top.

A scuffle sounded at the very front of the line. “Hey, I don’t have any injuries in there!”

“Get used to it,” cracked a voice behind him. “You know Intelligence has always been a pain in our ass.”

Laughter rippled through the line as they shuffled forward one spot. Max stilled his face to boredom. If Education’s best men joked like sheep under these circumstances, either they didn’t know their history or they were idiots. Or both.

When his turn in line came, he handed over his articles and was directed behind a small temporary screen. One guard held a gun on him, another held a bigger weapon on the line behind him, and a third man

scanned his clothes then tore off all the pockets and ripped open the seams and hems looking for hidden pockets. He had none in this pair, which he'd been issued in prison. A fourth man in medtech green ran a quick scan over his skin for subdermal implants and weapons.

"Bend over," the medtech said. "Nothing personal, just doing my job."

Max grunted. For a quick body cavity search, it was done as professionally and efficiently as a prostate exam.

"Next," the medtech said.

Max's clothes were handed back, more rags than not. The guard dropped the pockets and belt loops on a folding table with other confiscated items. Dressing again was a challenge, as thin as Max was—the drawstring had been torn off his underwear, so his briefs drooped, and without a belt, his pants sagged around his hips.

An explosive battering jerked Max's head around. In the garden by the playground, across from the enclosure, a jackhammer-truck dug a trench. While Max tried to figure out what it was doing, a shoving match erupted by the medtechs.

"Bend over!"

"Bend over yourself!"

The remaining guards rushed over, slammed the protesting man to the ground, and punched or threatened anyone else in line who looked likely to argue. Max held his pants up at the waist and went to the table with the confiscated items. He skipped over a pocketknife and a razor-cutter to grab two frutein bars, the only food he saw. He ripped one open and smashed it into his mouth, then rolled the other into the fold of his pants where he was holding them up.

"You! Move on!" Max stopped chewing, nodded his compliance to the guard, and walked past the objector, now pinned to the ground by three men. Without shoelaces, Max's shoes kept slipping off.

The inspected prisoners mobbed together near the fence, most of them, like Max, holding up their pants. They were subdued, angry, frightened: their attention was focused on the excavation machine beside the garden, where it jackhammered a large pit in the bedrock beneath the thin layer of soil. The grass had been carefully cut back in strips and moved

to the side first, so it could be replaced.

“Would make a nice grave,” someone said.

“Not so nice,” said someone else, but Vasily was there, shaking his head, saying, “It’s probably for latrines.”

“Moron,” someone else shouted. “Why not truck in compost booths?”

“Maybe they don’t have enough,” Vasily said.

His innocence and capacity for rationalization was almost charming. Max avoided him. The officer with the bullhorn outside the fence waved the workmen to stop and climbed down into the hole. His bald head and shoulders stuck out of the top. He shouted orders, indicated a certain depth, climbed back out.

Most of the men began to say that it was a grave, but the hole wasn’t big enough for dozens of men. Max jostled his way into the middle of the mob for camouflage.

“Ow, watch my foot,” someone next to him said.

“Sorry.”

“You’re lucky all they took were your shoelaces,” the man said. “They took my boots. It’s like we’re all on suicide watch.”

“Worst case of suicide I ever saw,” Max said. “A hundred men shot themselves in the back, then filled in their own grave.”

A few men chuckled. Outside the fence, a van pulled up—Max thought it might have been the same one they’d been transported in, with the bloody floor in back. It drove slowly over the mounds of colored stone until it reached the pit, where it unloaded a half dozen Adareans. One of them was Patience, who’d been waiting outside Mallove’s office earlier in the day. Seemed like years ago.

The jackhammer continued its work, sending up spectral clouds of dust in the twilight. A backhoe crowded up against the other side of the pit, scooping out buckets of broken rock whenever the jackhammer paused. While the Adareans milled around, their greenish skin looking sickly and pale, the last of Max’s fellow prisoners finished his “health” inspection and crowded up against the fence. Cold, clammy skin pressed against Max as

they tried to see what was happening outside.

“Weedheads!” one of the prisoners yelled.

“Go home, pig-men!” another shouted.

“Abomination!”

Within seconds, all their anger and fear and venom was directed at the Adareans. The chainlink rattled in rising pitch with their voices.

Outside, the Adareans clustered together. Even this far away, Max thought he could smell something sour waft from them. If the soldiers opened the gates and shoved the six into the compound right now, there’d be a massacre.

Instead the officer with the bullhorn stomped over to the Adareans, barking sharp orders, telling them to stand in the pit. When they hesitated, he waved his hands and guards rushed forward, shoving them down.

Tall as they were, the Adareans’ heads showed above the rim of the pit. “It’s not deep enough!” shouted one of the hecklers.

“Shoot them and they’ll fit,” shouted another and laughter rippled through the crowd. Max remained an island of silence.

Soldiers with shovels appeared around the hole and began spading the jackhammer gravel into it as quickly as they could. The Adareans shouted and struggled, but other guards kept them in place. Soon the weight of the stone pinned them where they were, until all that stuck above the surface was their bleeding, dusty heads.

The island of silence spread on Max’s side of the fence, broken only by someone’s half-suppressed laughter.

“They going to leave them there?” someone whispered.

No, Max thought, no, they weren’t.

The scene was another tableau, like the one in Mallove’s office. It reminded him of what they’d done, as guerrillas, with the Adareans they caught during the revolution. But he wasn’t sure whether this was a sign that Drozhin was still alive and reviving old tactics, or that Kostigan had taken over and was reinventing them.

The men with shovels tamped the lumpy gravel down smooth around their Adareans. The long grassy hair on their skulls was coated with a layer of dust. One of the Adareans alternated between weeping and panting. A couple others lolled unconscious.

“Are they trying to plant them to see if they’ll grow?” one of the young men asked.

“What the hell are they doing?”

Teaching us a lesson, Max thought. Education.

The work crew stepped out of the way while someone went to the equipment shed and liberated the mower.

Max turned away and left the crowd. He leaned on the far fence, head sagging, as the mower made its charge across the small park. As the first shrill scream sounded, he squeezed his eyes shut, and he kept them shut as the grinding sound of the blades whirred down to bare gravel.

A few prisoners cheered the executions; others laughed nervously, trying to get the rest of the crowd to join them. One man retched. Most fell silent, and several drifted back toward Max.

The colonel with the bullhorn walked back over to the enclosure. “Listen up,” he shouted. “You’re all enemies of Jerusalem. You know in your heart what your crimes are, so we don’t need to tell you.”

He would have been a good political officer, Max thought.

“Unlike these off-worlder animals,” the voice from the bullhorn continued, “we believe that you can repent of your evil choices”—interesting, Max thought, that their secular government used the same language as the religious one that preceded it—“and return to being productive citizens. We know that you were all misled by the criminal Mallove. Reject him and you’ll be accepted back into society.”

A surge toward the fence came from men ready to admit to, confess to, anything, for immediate release.

“I’m innocent,” the civilian contractor was yelling as he shoved his way to the gate. “I don’t even know Mallove.”

Bullhorn gave an order. Guards cracked the gate while the sizzle of shock rifles kept the prisoners at bay; one guard yanked the civilian out of the compound before locking the gate again. The whole mob protested and yelled that they too were innocent. Bullhorn pulled out a handgun, placed it against the citizen's forehead, and shot him. His body collapsed to the ground. A shiver went through the mob around Max.

"We know all of you are guilty," Bullhorn shouted, "You will now have to redeem yourself through penance."

Yes, Max thought, a terrific political officer.

A large articulated bus, hastily armored with bars outside the windows, rumbled up to the gate.

"This is your ride," Bullhorn said. "Next stop, fabulous seaside beach resorts. Bring your swimsuits, towels, and tiny shovels. All aboard!"

The guards with shockguns opened the gate and herded the prisoners into the bus. They shuffled past the civilian's body, sprawled facedown on the rock. Professionally, Max admired that detail—it worked on so many levels: it showed the men that if civilians weren't safe, neither were they. And if Adareans could be killed, and if civilians could be killed, it made the prisoners identify more with the men with guns.

He stepped onto the bus, noting that it was one of the charter buses that mothers used to visit their children who'd moved to the new cities close to the coast. Another nice detail. Very reassuring.

Max shouldered his way back to the other door, then to the sliding door that connected the front compartment to the back, and found both locked. Not so reassuring.

The bus had three sections—a separate cab where the driver was safe from the passengers, important for this ride, followed by two individual sections, each with forty-eight seats. They'd be shoving sixty to seventy men in each.

Someone bumped into him, then someone else bumped them both. Bodies pressed close, the cumulative odor of sweat and bad breath and stale lunch was almost overwhelming. Guards yelled, "Get in, get back from the door!" as they physically packed the last few men on board. It felt like a grotesque game of musical chairs, with cursing for music and metal benches for chairs. The door snapped shut, stayed shut even as men

pushed back. Through the window, Max saw guards herd more men into the second compartment.

A hand snaked through the bodies and grabbed hold of Max. Max twisted, tried to tug free, but it only had the effect of reeling the man to him.

“Hey, it’s me, Vasily.”

“I don’t really need a guard anymore,” Max said.

“The front doors are locked.”

“And the back doors and the compartment door.”

“What are we going to do?” Vasily said. “You’re a senior political officer—”

“Sh, sh, sh,” Max said, squeezing a hand up in Vasily’s face to make him shut up.

“Nikomedes—that’s it!” a voice said from the bench beside them. The major from the van. His cheek was bruised, his lip swollen, where he’d been hit in the face. “I knew I knew you.”

“I’m sorry,” Max said.

“Major Benjamin Georgiev,” the man said, squeezing over on the bench, making room for Max. “I served aboard the *Jericho* with you, years ago.”

“You were the radio tech,” Max said, sitting, recalling the name once it was matched to the ship. Another chance to keep a low profile, remain invisible, slipped away. The bus lurched into motion, throwing everyone off-balance, raising a chorus of curses. “I thought you were regular service.”

“Transferred. Got inspired by the spirit of the revolution to join Education.” Georgiev’s eyes surveyed the bus. “Seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“You two,” Vasily interrupted. “You know how to get out of this, right?”

Georgiev ignored Vasily. “Killing those Adareans, that was a mistake,” he said to Max. “That’ll bring down the power of Adares, first with political

pressure, then with force.”

“Maybe,” Max answered. “But Intelligence can get away with killing Adareans during the first throes of the purge. They’ll blame it on runaway elements, punish some token low-level grunts, execute someone prominent, then appease the Adareans later.”

“I doubt it’ll stop there—it never does. Did you ever hear the one about the secret police?” Georgiev asked.

“Probably,” Max said.

Vasily asked, “Which one?”

Georgiev lifted his head toward Vasily. “The secret police came for the Adareans and no one tried to stop them, so they took the Adareans away.”

Max recognized the old chestnut; Vasily said, “Yeah?”

“Then the secret police came for the unchristians and no one tried to stop them, so all the uns were taken away. Then the secret police came for the sinners—the fornicators, the secret body polluters, the users of forbidden technology—and no one tried to stop them.”

“So they took the sinners away,” Vasily finished.

“Right,” Georgiev said. “Finally the secret police came for honest men like you and me.”

Max finished the joke. “And there was no one left to stop them.”

“No,” Georgiev said. “When they came for me, I said, ‘Welcome, brother. Isn’t it good to be the secret police?’”

After a pause, Vasily chuckled. The bus braked hard, throwing them back in their seats, then sped up again.

A young man with a soft chin leaned in from the bench beside them. “I heard you guys talking. You know, that guy they shot at the gate—”

“The accountant?” Georgiev asked. “He told me he was an accountant.”

“No he wasn’t, that’s what I’m saying.” He jerked his thumb down the aisle. “Guy back there says he recognized him as an actor. It was all staged. Guy got up and walked away while we were getting on the bus.”

“Not walked,” interrupted another kid hanging from an overhead rack. “There were two guys, one on either side of him, helping him, made it look like they were dragging him, but you could tell he was faking it.”

“See, they’re just trying to scare us,” the first kid said. He laughed, like he wasn’t fooled.

“Well, it’s working,” Vasily said, rubbing his throat, where his cross would’ve been. “I’m scared.”

“The Adareans, that was fake too,” Max said. “Really great bunch of actors.”

The kid sitting down, the one with the soft chin, looked away and didn’t say anything. But the one hanging from the strap said, “Yeah, the whole thing is a big scam. I hear Mallove and Drozhin worked it out together, plan to combine the two departments. Mallove’s going to take over as soon as Drozhin’s dead.”

The pitch of conversation rose around them, a dozen variations of the same stories being told, repeated, and invented. Their small group sat quietly for a second.

Max coughed. “Did you ever hear the one that goes, how can you tell when a rumor about Drozhin is true?”

Major Georgiev stared at Max, his face carefully blank. The two kids waited for the answer. Finally, Vasily said, “How?”

Max aimed his finger like a gun at the other man’s head. ““What did you just say?””

Georgiev smirked and the kids chuckled nervously. Max leaned back, closed his eyes, ignored the press of bodies. His day had started as a prisoner, waiting to hear from his contact in Intelligence. His day ended as a prisoner, waiting to hear from his contacts in Intelligence. Nothing had changed. But then he thought about the distance from the Adarean baptism at the execution that morning to the brutal murder of the Adareans in the park, and it felt as if everything had changed.

As he listened to the sound of the wheels, all he could think of was the roar of the mower blades as the tractor rolled toward the Adareans trapped in the pit.

* * * *

“Wake up, Nikomedes.” A hand shook him.

Before he was completely awake, Max deflected the hand and turned the wrist. He snapped alert quick enough to stop before he broke it. Major Georgiev bent over him. “What?”

“We’re passing through the outskirts of Lost Angeles—it’s night, the city’s big enough to hide most of us.”

“What’s the plan? There are bars welded on the windows, and the doors are locked.” He’d watched younger men waste themselves for hours trying to find a way out, everything from tearing through the panels to breaking windows. One of them had been cut badly on broken glass. Wind whistled through the broken windows; combined with the night temperatures, it would have chilled the ride to the point of hypothermia if not for the warmth of the bodies jammed together.

“We’re going to rock the bus, tip it over,” Georgiev said. “I could use your help organizing these kids.”

Max straightened in his seat. “Tipping the bus—that will get us out how?”

“They’ll have to empty the bus then. We’ll overpower them, make a break for it.”

“You’re on your own.” He leaned back again.

“To think that I was ever inspired by you,” Georgiev sneered. “You’re a coward.”

And you’re a fool, Max wanted to respond. He had nothing against escape, but suicide? “Don’t play into their hands.”

“This morning,” Georgiev said, looking around, “we were all part of an organization, each of us knowing our role and function. Tonight we are starving, thirsty outcasts, deprived of basic necessities. But we’re still men, we have to do something.”

There were murmurs of “amen” and “witness” from the men around them.

“Don’t you think Intelligence’s purpose is to reduce and dispirit us?” Max asked.

“Yes, but—”

“So what do you think they’ll do to anyone who goes against their intentions early on?” Max asked. “What would your response be? To anyone who tries to lead?”

Georgiev said nothing.

“You would destroy the ring leaders as an example,” Max said, answering his own question. “And first you would create a situation where you expect people to step up, just so you can make examples of them. It’s what I would do.”

“I’m not you,” Georgiev said. “And I believe this is all a mistake. Those are our fellow soldiers out there, our brothers and cousins. If we force them to pay attention to us, they’ll listen. And if they don’t, we’ll overwhelm them.”

Murmurs of “yeah” and “they have to listen.”

“You’ve been hit in the face and burned and you still say that?” Max said, leaning back in his seat. “We save ourselves. No purge lasts forever.”

“You’re pathetic,” Georgiev said and turned away.

Vasily, hand at the invisible cross at his throat, stared at Max, shook his head, and followed Georgiev.

Georgiev had no trouble organizing the men: he was the senior officer on board and soldiers were trained to love a hierarchy, taught to do something instead of nothing. After explaining his plan to tip the bus, he said, “All right, on the count of three, we all throw ourselves to starboard. Is that clear? One! Two!”

“Wait, wait, wait,” cried one voice, and then others said, “Stop,” and Georgiev yelled, “Wait, stop!”

The compartment was dark, but lights outside rolled front to back, front to back, illuminating puzzled faces. Finally, someone said, “Which side’s starboard?”

Max smirked. Most of the men had only served groundside.

Georgiev rattled the locked door. “The doors are port, the other side is starboard. We want to tip over to starboard, so we can climb out the doors on top.”

Murmurs of “got it” and “all right” were followed by Georgiev resuming the count. Max braced his feet on the floor and grabbed hold of the bench.

On *three* the mob of men surged toward the starboard side. The bus rocked—about as much as it did when it hit a bad pothole.

“That was pretty effective,” Max said, but Georgiev was shouting out encouragement and instructions: “All right, that was a good first try. Let’s all squeeze over to port, to the door side, and do it again.”

Men crushed Max against the side. He smelled urine mixed in with all the other locker-room odors.

“Three!”

This time the men yelled as they surged to the other side.

This time there was a noticeable rock.

“Good work, men,” Georgiev shouted. “Now we’re going to rock it back and forth. As soon as we hit port side, the door side over here”—he leaned over and banged the door—“I want you all to run back to starboard, over here. Got it?”

Mumbles of “got it” and “yes, sir.”

“What? I can’t hear you!”

“YES, SIR!”

On three, they all shouted and threw themselves at the port side. Max brought up his arm to cover his head. This time the bus rocked again, though no more than it would be by the wind coming off the escarpment this time of year.

“Starboard!” Georgiev ordered, and with a roar, they immediately threw themselves at the other side. Several men tumbled to the floor in the dark, but despite the blindness and swearing, the rock on the other side was bigger.

Georgiev got them cheering and clapping for themselves, then set up a rhythm, charging one side then the other. As Max persisted in staying in his seat, knees and elbows hit him with every rush, even though he pulled his legs up on the seat. He deflected some blows, braced and took the others.

“Come on,” Vasily shouted, all excited.

Pounding from the compartment behind them led to a shouted exchange of plans. On the first combined rush, the two compartments ran toward different sides, canceling each other’s efforts. One of the young men leaned up against the back wall and yelled, “Starboard, you morons, starboard!”

“Hurry,” Georgiev shouted. “We’re almost through Lost Angeles!”

Renewed effort in both cars quickly led to rocking until the bus tipped up, wheels off the ground. As it swerved suddenly on the road, bouncing down again, the men fell silent, all but two or three forgetting to finish the charge back to the other side.

“That’s it, we can do it!” Georgiev shouted. “Come on, get up, let’s start over!”

The men were so absorbed in rocking the bus that only Max noticed it slowing or saw the headlights of the dustskimmers outside. The bus braked to a stop as a row of floodlights cut through the barred windows, freezing the unshaven, sunken-eyed faces of Max’s fellow prisoners in a harsh light.

Guards ran over, the locks clattered to the pavement, and the door flew open. “Congratulations, that’s an impressive effort, good work, men,” the guard said. “Who’s the senior officer here?”

Georgiev squinted as he squeezed forward through the men. “Major Benjamin Georgiev, enlisted regular service in six-four. What we’d like—”

The guard shot him, discharging enough bolt to knock down two men beside him and pimple the hairs on Max’s arms a couple seat rows back.

One of the kids shouted, tried to rush the guard, but the blue crackle from the gun just missed his head as the men near him dragged him to the floor.

Angry shouts from the second compartment were silenced by the sound of broken windows and a barrage of fire.

“Do we have another senior officer in here?” the guard asked. Vasily and a couple others looked toward Max, but he shook his head.

“Do we have someone else in charge?” the guard asked. When no one spoke, he said, “Good, because I’m a big believer in individual responsibility, and if anything else happens, I will hold each and every one of you individually responsible. Do I make myself clear?”

He grabbed Georgiev by the back of his shirt and dragged his body, face first, down the steps and outside. Other guards, nervous, guns up, shut and locked the doors again.

Vasily slumped down in the seat beside Max, his face a pale mask of disbelief and despair.

“Don’t worry,” Max said. “Georgiev is probably just faking it.”

The bus started rolling again, this time the skimmers flanking it in clear view. The city shrank behind them, and in moments, dust and grit came through the window, getting in Max’s eyes and under his tongue. Elsewhere in the darkened bus, someone coughed. A couple others whispered that they should have prepared weapons from the broken glass and jumped the guard. Retrospect always gave you a better plan.

Out of the corner of his eye, Max saw one of the kids stand up toward the side of the bus and unzip his pants to relieve himself.

“You might want to save that for drinking later,” Max shouted. Some of the men around them laughed; some didn’t.

“I got nothing to save it in,” the kid shouted back, which was true. “You want to come over, use it like a drinking fountain?”

Max smiled, and his lips cracked. “Nah, don’t think I want to touch that handle.”

Beside him, Vasily rubbed his throat. “I would do anything right now for a bathroom,” he whispered. “Hell, I’d personally murder Mallove for

something to eat or some water to drink.”

Max’s own throat was parched and his stomach had been growling for hours. With a glance around, he unrolled the stolen fruitain bar from the waist of his pants. He tried to tear it open with his hands, couldn’t, ripped it open with his teeth. After breaking the bar in half, he said, “Sh,” and pressed half into Vasily’s palm.

“What? What’s—”

“Sh!” Then softly, Max added, “Eat it slow.”

He saw the blue shadow of Vasily’s hand shove the whole thing into his mouth. He tried to chew it slowly, but swallowed before Max ate his first small piece.

“Is there more?” Vasily whispered.

“No, that’s all.”

Later, while Max finished the last piece of the bar, Vasily asked, “Why did you share it?”

“Because where we’re going, I’ll need friends more than I need food right now. Can we look out for each other?”

“Yeah, of course,” Vasily whispered. “Whatever you need, whatever I can do, I’m the man.”

Max nodded, as if a contract had been signed, and Vasily dipped his head in return. Such a slight gesture in the dark. Vasily’s stomach rumbled and he crossed his hands over it. As the bus rolled on through the dark, Max searched his lap for crumbs, licking them off his finger, one by one. Wind coursed over the flatlands and through the broken windows, carrying a hint of salt and moisture.

All that was missing was the smell of compost and blood to complete the reclamation camp stink. As a political officer, he’d visited them more than once.

Men around him shifted, tried to sleep, but Max stared straight ahead into the rushing night.

* * * *

Sunrise, harsh and unrelenting, cast brightness on their squalor even through the unbroken, tinted windows. The bus smelled of urine, shit, and sweat. Get used to it, Max told himself. His back ached and his legs were stiff from too many hours in the unyielding seat. In one corner, someone sobbed.

“That’s Machete Ridge,” Max said, pointing to a sharp line on the horizon. Vasily leaned across Max to look. “Do you see that bump, up there beside the road?” Max asked.

“That’s the reclamation camp,” Vasily said.

“That’s Faraway Farms. It used to be a reclamation camp.” Twenty years ago, Faraway Farms was the end of the line. Now it was just one more extension settlement on the coast, a few thousand people occupying rows of low brown buildings built around a series of narrow field-ponds.

“Maybe we’ll stop here,” Vasily suggested.

“Be wary of hope,” Max warned quietly. “It’d be too hard to guard everyone here. Too many other people, too much access to boats and skimmers.”

Still, an hour later, when the bus pulled over to the fresh water cisterns outside of Faraway, even Max had to fight against hope.

When he saw the guards hooking up a fire hose, he gave up hope and clawed his way over the benches to reach one of the open windows first. For a few blissful seconds, Max’s face was drenched as he opened his throat to gulp down the blast of water. Then he was fighting the weight of men on his back, crushing him for a drink. He was saved when the hose moved along to another window and the mass of bodies tumbled over the seatbacks after it. Everyone got at least a trickle of water, all except for two men too sick, or weak, to move, who lay moaning at the front end of the car. Max thought they were the ones caught by the shot that killed Georgiev. Men stretched their arms through the bars, begging for more, as the guards moved to the next car.

Max returned to his bench—he thought of it as his bench now, every man had marked out his two square feet of bus—and grunted as he sat. His whole body ached, needing exercise, a chance to stretch. Normally, he’d walk, if only to pace the aisle of the bus, but the aisle was filled too. A few men had stretched across the bench backs, feet on one seat, hands on

another, to do pushups, and others did chin-ups on the hanging straps. Max would do that soon, if he had to, to keep his strength. Of course, that was a hard choice too: spend his energy, not knowing when he'd eat or drink next, or save it in reserve.

Vasily plopped down, hair plastered to his head. He was scraping drops of water off his face, pushing them into his mouth. "I wouldn't treat animals this way," he told Max.

"That's rather the point," Max said, imitating him, feeling the scratch of his unshaven skin under the droplets.

"Your face is cut up pretty bad."

"Is it?" He tasted the sharpness of blood on his fingertips, saw the bright red. "Must have been some glass shards in the window, got blown out by the blast of water."

"When will we stop?"

"We've been on the road maybe twelve, fourteen hours. I forget where all the camps are now, but we're not even halfway there."

"Oh, Jesus," Vasily said.

In the old days, during the schism, the men sent off to the reclamation camps for their religious beliefs—or disbeliefs—would pray to God. Max prayed to Drozhin. During the purge, Intelligence would be desperate for information. Obermeyer would check the dropboxes, realize Max was out there, and start looking for him. Survive long enough to give them time to find him: that was Max's sole faith.

"I can't believe they're sending me to the reclamation camps," Vasily said. "I didn't do anything to deserve being treated like a murderer or a rapist."

"So don't let them turn you into one," Max said. "Besides, the worst crime is still having the wrong beliefs."

"But I did everything I was supposed to do, I enlisted in the government after my mandatory service, I—"

"Get over it. Keep your head low, do what you need to do to survive."

“Do what I have to do to survive,” Vasily said, letting out a deep breath. He seemed like a decent guy, Max thought, not used to thinking, but thinking hard now. “Why did we have a revolution?” he asked. “I thought it was supposed to put a stop to this.”

Max remembered those days. The church schismed, and different groups insisted that they had the only true beliefs. With life depending on limited resources, each side wanted everything for the true believers. Even after the terraforming increased their yields, the two sides had been willing to kill each other to prove who had the direct word from God. “The revolution bought us twenty years.”

“What?”

“It’s been twenty years since we had this kind of purge,” Max said. Sure, there were individual murders here and there, usually arranged to look like accidents or poor health. But that was politics as usual anywhere. “We bought twenty years of peace where we hadn’t had it more than three years in a row for two generations. You grew up in peace, didn’t you?”

“Well, yeah.”

“The revolution bought you that. So it was worth it. And if this purge buys us another twenty years, maybe it’ll be worth it too.”

Vasily shook his head. “I don’t know if I can think that way. I don’t know if I can ever think that way.”

“Maybe you won’t have to,” Max said, but doubtfully.

The bus continued all day, stopping only to relieve the drivers and escorts. Sometime that night, while they shivered to keep warm, one of the sick men died. The man next to him must’ve noticed he was cold, called his name, saying, “Pete, Piotr, aw, man, Pete, wake up, man, aw, I can’t believe this, aw, Pete, aw, man.”

The body had a noticeable reek, even above the stench of piss and shit and sweat that permeated the bus. By the time the sun came up again, all the men were collapsed in a mixture of exhaustion and depression. There were no more pushups or chin-ups. The wind blew sand in through the broken windows, turning everyone a dusty brown. Max had grit in his eyes, his hair, in every wrinkle in his clothes and body.

With the hot sun baking down through the windows as they drove

north toward the equator, Max leaned against the wall, listless, conserving his energy. An impromptu morgue was formed under the seats at the front of the bus, the corpse shrouded with what was left of his clothes, pulled up to cover his face. The next row back remained empty, even though there weren't enough places to sit.

Max was light-headed, weak from lack of food and lack of water. They'd gone so far. But then the reclamation camps had to be isolated. Only after the new one was turned into a settlement, like Faraway, would they fill in the space between with cistern stations and rest spots.

Terrafarms. That's what the first colonists had called them. Until the prisoners changed the name to terrorfarms. He closed his eyes.

"Are you all right?" Vasily shook his arm.

"Fine," Max said.

"No, I mean, just now, I thought you were a corpse."

"Funny," Max rasped. "Back in the space fleet my nickname was the Corpse, because I always look this way."

"Look, I'm counting on you," Vasily said, leaning over earnestly, speaking low. "I don't want to end up dead."

Max felt sorry for him. Trying to swallow the dust in his throat, he said, "Here's the thing you need to know to survive—"

He started coughing then, the grit in his dry throat damming the words, and he couldn't stop. He needed something to drink, just a sip, and it would be fine, but there was nothing. Not even sucking on his shirt, which had been soaked, gave him any moisture, just more dust, the taste of salt, and more reason to cough.

Up front, one of the men screamed, roared in senseless rage. Within seconds the gangly redhead flung himself at the walls of the bus, one side then the other, then kicked and stomped and slapped the men scattered on the benches and the floors, demanding that they do something, ordering them to get up and do something. The dustskimmers zipped in close, flanking the sides of the bus.

"Make him shut up," Max yelled hoarsely between hacks. "Hold him down." Others said the same thing from the safety of a similar distance.

At first, the men close by just tried to get out of the beserker's way, but he grabbed one and began beating his face. Others tried to pull him away, but he lashed out at them, demanding water, demanding to be let off, demanding justice—things none of them had to give him. The more they held him, the harder he thrashed, until finally one of them lost it and punched him, telling him to "Shut up, just shut up," and then they all started hitting him until they tumbled in a crushing pile to the floor.

One of the older men, a paunchy bureaucrat in his thirties, began pulling men off, ordering them to stop the beating. When they did, the beserker lay still in the aisle. Men went back to their seats, ignoring him; after a while, some came and checked on him, and later two of them dragged him up to the morgue at the front of the bus.

Vasily held his stomach. "How long is it before someone suggests we start eating the corpses?"

"Won't happen," Max said, hoping it was true.

He was thinking that another reason for having the reclamation camps out so far was that bodies could be dumped into the compost pits, and then the prisoners reported escaped and missing instead of being sent back for burial. The families got a letter saying their loved one had escaped, please report to the authorities if he shows up: it gave them hope and the dead man some dignity. But prisoners marked as escaped were always dead.

"It'll be worse when we get to the camps," he said.

The camps were still a couple hundred kilometers away. Sometime during the night, Max reached that stage of hunger and sleeplessness where he drifted in and out of consciousness, caught in the no-man's land between the minefield of his hallucinations and the barbed-wire of reality. With his face against the cool glass, eyes half-lidded, and a heavy weight pressing on him, he first mistook the smell of rotting algae for a dream. Then he snapped awake.

At the sudden movement, Vasily's head fell off Max's shoulder and he sagged into Max's lap. Max shook him. "Come on," he whispered. "We have to get off here."

"Huh," Vasily said, drowsily. "What?"

"Sh," Max said. "We won't live to the next camp." He shoved Vasily

aside and stepped over the bodies and around the seats to the doorwell. He grabbed the man propped upright on the steps. “Hey, there’s a bench open, back there—I need to stand a while.”

The man, sunken-eyed, peered over the seats, full of desire and mistrust.

“You won’t get a second chance,” Max said. “Promise I won’t want it back.”

The man rose awkwardly, crabbed his way past Vasily to the empty bench. Vasily squeezed into the doorwell next to Max. Every time he tried to ask a question, Max held up his hand for silence in case others listened.

Dawn rose like a wail of despair, thin and piercing. No man wanted to face another day of sun and heat. The bus rattled and shook, kicking up dust over the unfinished, unpaved road, so that only Max, who was looking for it as they came over each rise, saw the bunkers floating in a little pond of green surrounded by the ocean of sand and rock.

When the other men finally saw it, some declared it a mirage while others raised a feeble cheer, thinking it their destination. Max knew Intelligence would never leave them all at one camp—it would be some here, some at the next one, divided among camps, spread among strangers.

The mirage came steadily closer, resolving in dreary detail—the rounded corrugated roofs of the half-buried huts, scoured by the wind and sand to the same dull tones as the landscape; the surrounding fence, topped by razor wire, its sharp points cutting the sky so that it bled light; the little bowl of brown and green mud visible beyond the camp.

Bodies pressed behind Max as the bus rolled slowly to a stop and the cloud of dust settled. Past the last bunkers, Max saw the camp population standing in lines for the morning roll. The sign above the gate read:

RECLAMATION CAMP 42

“THEY WERE JUDGED EVERY MAN
ACCORDING TO THEIR WORKS.”

The guards jumped off their skimmers. Most of them stood, jawing, while one went to the gate to meet the camp staff.

Max beat on the door. “Pray,” he grunted to Vasily.

“For what?”

“That they come to this car, not the second one.” That Drozhin got my message and has someone waiting for us, he would have added. His fist grew numb, so he banged his forearm on the door. Other men, not sure what was up, followed his lead, beating the walls and window frames.

The camp minister limped to the gate with his assistant and several guards. Dusty gray clothes, indistinguishable of rank, hung loose on their lean forms. Camp supervisors were still called ministers, instead of directors, despite the changes following the revolution, because the camps were nominally for rehabilitation. *Drozhin, come get me*, Max heresied to himself, *and I promise to be a better man*.

The minister argued with the guards, pointing at the front half of the bus: he wanted men still alive and with some fight in them—he could get more work from them before they broke. The guard listened indifferently, yelled something to the other guards, who came to Max’s door aiming weapons.

Sixty bodies pressed against Max, trying to elbow their way in front of him. Max elbowed back, hooking his arm around Vasily to keep him close.

“Ten,” shouted the main guard, spreading his fingers. “Just ten of you!”

The bodies slammed forward again, banging Max’s head into the doorframe. Hands tried to claw him back. The guard removed the locks and the doors opened halfway, stopped by the press of men. Max yanked his head free from a fist in his hair, bit a finger that clutched at his face, and gripped the door so that no one could push past him. A grunt, as punches landed in his kidneys, then he ducked as the gun’s electric sizzle flew over their heads, setting their hair on end. One guard was yelling “Back, back!” and another grabbed a fistful of Max’s shirt since he was in front, and pulled him through the door, calling, “One.”

Max still had an elbow hooked around Vasily’s arm, who tumbled after him. They both sprawled in the dirt.

“Make that two.”

Max stood up quickly before anyone could jerk him to his feet, smoothing his clothes, tugging up his pants, as the guard counted, "Nine, Ten, and that's it. Get the hell back!" A roar of protest was followed by the sizzle of the guns, cries of pain, and the doors snapping shut.

"They're all yours," the guard told the minister. Turning to his second, he said, "Call Forty-three, tell them they need to be ready to take fifty, water a hundred, and they have to put us up for the night." To the rest of the guards he shouted, "Wheel up, wheel up, we're moving out!"

Guards closed and locked the camp gate. The minister walked up and down the short line of prisoners, sucking on his teeth, as mean-looking as a starved pitbull. He wore goggles to keep the sand out of his eyes, which kept Max from reading his expressions. Finally, with the bus already a plume of dust over the hill, he turned and walked back toward the roll call. The guards shoved Max and the other prisoners after him, back toward the compound's waste pits. Max tried not to choke on the stench; he made careful note of the dead bodies laid out at pit's edge. Escapees. Nine of them, in various states of decomposition.

Vasily nudged his shoulder, whispered. "At least we're not starting off on the lowest rung in the camp."

He glanced the other direction. In front of the razor-wire fence, apart from the other rows of men, stood a clump of sunburned, emaciated Adareans. Max had noticed them, but he found it more interesting that Vasily seemed determined to ignore the dead bodies.

"Take your clothes off," one of the guards ordered. He offered no reason for them to strip, no pretense of inspection or health check, but he seemed so bored by the command, so ready to use his gun, that they did what he said immediately. The earlier conditioning was already paying off.

As soon as they were naked, a guard gathered up their clothes.

The minister grinned at them. "Welcome to Camp Revelations."

* * * *

Of course, thought Max. The camp would be named for the Bible book its verse came from. He looked again at the dead bodies and wondered if the sea or hell had delivered them up.

"Many of you noticed the verse inscribed above the entrance of our

humble enterprise,” the minister said. “I promise each of you that during your time here you will be judged according to your deeds.”

He pulled a handkerchief from his shirt pocket, shook the dust from it, and wiped his goggles clean. Then he walked down the line, looking each one of them over.

“My name is Minister Pappas, but you may call me sir. If you ever address me at all, which is not something I encourage you to do. You are penitents and you are here to do penance for your crimes. There are guards and deacons in this camp, and you will respect them just as if they were me.”

The guards were regular service, but Max knew if they posted out here they either weren't very bright or had some kind of pathology. Deacons were prisoners trusted to act like guards, except they weren't trusted enough to have their fingerprints keyed to the guns.

“Your work here will be to turn this valley from desert to oasis,” the minister said. Behind him, a few hundred prisoners stood in ranks, like cans on a store shelf or pieces off an assembly line. Beyond them, beyond the razor-wire fence, the low green slopes reached up to the raw, wind-scarred hilltops and the sere blue sky.

“Three kilometers over that hill lies the sea. All of you remember the stories about the first settlers—that's what you do now. You carry the rocks to the sea, bring back the algae, and we seed it with enzymes and bacteria and earthworms to create topsoil for farming. In a decade, these hills will be covered with plants and trees.”

Max didn't plan on being here in a decade to see it, though he knew some of these men would.

“At this moment,” the minister said, tucking the handkerchief back in his pocket, “I would draw your attention to the corpses you see in front of you. Those are your camp uniforms. You are expected to dress appropriately at all times.”

Max was old enough to remember the shortages of food and basic supplies the winter after the nuclear bombing of New Nazareth. Without the meanest rags to wear, even the strongest died. So he broke the line and ran to the corpses, hurrying to the end where they looked only a day or two dead instead of weeks. There was a cleaner uniform on one of the bigger Adareans, but he grabbed the ankle of the one closest to his own size—the

body weighed no more than a stick—and yanked off the soiled, foul-smelling overalls. He felt the arms crack as he tugged the top off the dead man's back.

This was meant to shame him, classic psychological manipulation, but he would not be shamed by survival. He thrust his legs into the pants one at a time. The orange uniform, dulled by sun and sand, fit him no worse than his other clothes and had the advantage of needing no belt. The sandals were no worse than his shoes. He took the straw hat off the dead man's face and put it on his head, returning to his place in line while the others pulled on their uniforms.

Only Vasily remained, wandering naked from corpse to corpse. "What? What am I supposed to wear?"

"That's your problem, not mine," one of the guards said, backing him up with the gun.

The other men fell back into line with Max, who began to size them up as possible partners.

Vasily hopped frantically between the corpses while the guards chuckled at him. "I need a uniform. You have to—"

"No," the minister said, who had probably chosen the number of prisoners with this amusement in mind. "We don't have to do anything."

"Wait," Vasily shouted. He walked over toward the clump of Adareans and pointed to the one in front. "Give me that pig-man's uniform. I deserve it more than him."

Nothing might have happened then—Vasily was a newbie, lower than the lowest, and not worthy of tolerance—except that the Adarean balled his hand into a fist.

That slight gesture, Max realized, tipped the scales. The deacons wouldn't tolerate even a small show of defiance from a fellow prisoner, especially a pig-man. One ran over and cuffed the Adarean on the back of the head; a second arrived an instant later, and cracked his knees with a pipe, knocked him to the ground. Guards shifted position, using their guns to keep the other Adareans at bay. The man in the tower rang a bell and brought up his sniper rifle.

While all this happened, Vasily hovered around the guards,

desperate, shouting, “Don’t stop there, I’m one of you, I’m a human being!”

The deacons looked at the minister, who paused to regard Vasily. The Adarean pushed himself up from the dirt, and one of the deacons kicked him—the Adarean caught his foot and shoved it away.

Without waiting for the minister’s approval, the deacons fell on the Adarean, striking and kicking him with a fury they had saved up from a thousand other unanswered frustrations, fears, and slights.

Vasily shouldered his way between them. “Don’t mess up my uniform!” He put his arm around the Adarean’s neck and, while the deacons pinned him, choked until he was still.

Moments later the deacons dragged another body over to the compost pits. They tossed it directly into the waste, and added the other naked corpses after it.

The minister walked down the line, pausing when he reached Vasily. The handkerchief in his pocket was the color of Vasily’s faded orange uniform. “What did you think you were doing?”

“What I needed to do, sir.”

“You won’t do it again without my permission first. You clear about that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You’ll do just fine then,” the minister said. He turned to his camp clerk, a prisoner carrying an antique keypad, and said, “Enter ten new penitents on the rolls, record nine runaways, and mark one piece of trash disposed.”

He moved along the line, stopping to inspect each man for a few seconds as if he were looking for something. He found it when he reached Max, because he stood there, staring, then slipped his hands into his pockets.

“You,” he drawled, “already look like a corpse.”

“That was my nickname in the space fleet, sir,” Max replied, staring straight ahead, past the goggled face. “It’s just what I look like, sir.”

After a long pause, the minister sucked on his teeth, turned to the deacon with the keypad, and said, "Help me remember something here. Did I ask him a question?"

"No, sir, you didn't."

"And did he speak to me anyway?"

"Yes, sir, I believe he did."

Max cursed himself silently. It was all about demonstrating power. He'd guessed right on the uniforms, but made a mistake here. The only thing he could do was keep his head down, take his punishment, and survive it.

The minister sucked his teeth again, leaned over and got right in Max's face. His breath smelled like onions and tooth decay. "That group over there," he said, with a nod toward the Adareans, "they're one short. You go take that spot."

Max hesitated. Being with the Adareans was a death sentence, but a slow one. He had the feeling that defying the camp minister, here, at this moment, would mean his immediate death.

Spinning on his heel, he turned and walked crisply over to the small group of Adareans: the guards and deacons laughed behind him, while the minister assigned the other nine men to work groups in the main camp.

Max studied the Adareans. They were all taller than he, a half a meter or more, bred for a planet with lower gravity. Their skin color ranged from grass green to sandy brown; their hair ranged from thick sawgrass to normal human, gray. Their features were soft, halfway between male and female, but the expressions on their faces were uniformly hostile. No one met his gaze.

"Hi, I'm Max," he said. There was no response. He wanted to ask where the food and water were, but decided not to waste his energy.

"All right, time to go to work," the minister shouted. "It's going to be another scorcher and I don't want no more of you dying from heat stroke. So it's light work today in the gardens and turning the fields. You can get your assignments from Smith. Prayer Block 13 has sea duty."

"Let me guess, we're Prayer Block 13," Max said.

After a moment of silence, during which the Adareans exchanged glances with one another, the gray-haired one said, "Yes."

"Ah." Sea duty no doubt entailed carrying rocks to the sea. Max tilted his head, looked right into the gray-haired Adarean's eyes. "Where's the water?"

When no one answered him, he began to think that this was an immediate death sentence as well. He shut down his senses and turned his back on the Adareans. The less he had to do with them, the more likely he was to survive.

* * * *

A guard with a machine gun directed them toward the camp's back gate. He was flanked by two deacons wearing orange jumpsuits that didn't stink like death. Max went obediently.

At the gate, another deacon said, "Take a basket."

Outside the gate stood a pile of wire baskets, each a half meter in diameter and not quite as tall. He grabbed one by the rim as he passed by, then saw that it had a twisted-wire strap so he could drag it by his wrist or carry it slung over his shoulder. The Adareans were slinging their baskets over their shoulders, so he did too.

In a single file, with the guard riding flank on a four-wheeled rockjumper, they climbed uphill to the meadows. Max smelled the meadows before they crossed the lip of the hill and he saw them spread out below, a shallow field of green-brown sludge in a sheltered bowl of dust and sandstone. A dirty stream flowed through the middle of the field.

"Load up!" shouted the deacon.

Max followed the Adareans to the edge of the sludge-field and loaded his basket with rocks, just like they did. Dust caked his fingers, stone chipped his nails. Sparing an eye for the Adareans working around him, he filled his basket no more than they did, then waited until they led the way, dragging their baskets single file, over the hill to the ocean. There were grooves in the exposed bedrock on either side of the path made by the weight of the baskets.

Half the Adareans were in front of Max, half behind. A tall one, with

cheekbones like knife cuts and dark green veins in his light green skin, called out, "Swimmer or drowner?"

The answers came back down the line. "Drowner." "Drowner." "Drowner."

One of the deacons walking along the path said, "I'm in. Cup of soup says he's a drowner within a month."

The other deacon and the guard laughed.

"Two cups of soup says he's a swimmer." The old man, the one with the gray hair.

"You say that about everyone," Cheekbones ribbed him.

Max didn't understand what was going on. He had grown up almost living in the water. "I can swim."

Cheekbones chuckled, then all the Adareans chuckled, and the deacons and the guard laughed out loud again.

"*Definitely* a drowner," Cheekbones said.

"You're going to owe me two cups of soup," the deacon told the old man.

More puzzled than before, Max held his tongue.

The old man looked over his shoulder, saw Max's expression. "Everyone in camp is either a swimmer or a drowner."

"You mean everyone's a drowner," the guard shouted from the back of the four-wheeler. He wore goggles like the camp minister, carried his gun across his lap. "All of you drown eventually, once you get tired of swimming. And some of you come through the gates already tired."

Cheekbones lowered his head. "And some come in here ready to build a raft out of other people's bodies just to stay afloat."

Max's basket caught on a bump in the groove, yanking him off balance. He righted himself quickly, but his stumble was noticed.

"That's your swimmer?" the deacon asked the old Adarean, who just

shrugged. The deacon laughed and rubbed his belly. "I'm looking forward to that soup—two cups, mmm-mmm!"

The next time Max's basket caught on a hump, he let the wire cut his wrist rather than pull him off balance. He paused, tugged it over the hump, and kept on walking. He had survived worse.

Joy is infinite in its varieties but all misery is the same. In that way, every day in the camp was much like another. Max only had to learn the routine and survive the misery. He could do that.

At sunup, the blare of a siren roused them from their narrow metal bunks. Max, as the new man, had the bunk next to the door, right beside the siren's speaker. On the first morning, it nearly gave him a heart attack. By the third day, it was barely enough to startle him awake.

Every morning, on the way out the door, the old Adarean would stop Max and say, "How are you today?"

Every morning, Max answered, "Still swimming."

For breakfast the camp kitchen served out a small ball of rice, plain, unseasoned, which they ate with their fingers. Every day, after breakfast, the Adareans were sent to sea duty. Sometimes the other work details joined them too, but now, at the height of summer, the minister had them seeding, weeding, and tending fields.

The stench of decomposition in the meadows choked Max on the first day; after that, it was just a constant plateau of the unbearable which must be born. Not nearly as bad as the waste pits at the edge of the camp. By watching the Adareans, he learned the trick to loading his basket with rocks. If it was too full, you drained your energy too fast, but if it was too empty the deacons would beat you. The trick was to stack the rocks so that there were hollow spaces between them, making the basket look fuller than it was.

The dismal kilometers to the ocean ended in a long stone jetty that jutted out into the bay. They dragged their baskets to the end and dumped them. The rocks sank out of sight in the deep water and the jetty slowly grew.

A short pontoon dock tethered to the end of the jetty rolled with the slight motion of the water. Its rhythm was matched by the undulations of the purple-brown algae that covered the bay from one side to the other. The deacons sat in a boat, using skimmers to push the algae into mounds

around the end of the dock. Once you dumped the rocks, you had to fill your basket with the weed.

This was the most disheartening part of the work. There was no way to cheat on the load and the journey back to the meadows was all uphill. If you dragged the baskets, the algae would snag on every sharp rock, leak with every bump, so you had to sling them over your back and carry them or the guards would beat you. The water running down your back felt cool at first, until it chafed your skin raw. The moment you were done dumping your basket, you had to start gathering rocks again. Or the guards would beat you.

At midday, there was a break for a cup of tuber soup and a cup of water. Some days the soup was so thin and the water so cloudy it was hard to tell the difference between the two. Afterward, it was back to rocks and weeds, rocks and weeds, until sunset. Back at camp, they received another cup of water and half a ball of rice, some days with vegetables from the terraced gardens close to camp. Luckily, Max was small and had been malnourished as a child, so he needed fewer calories than most men. Hunger was, if not a friend, something like an irascible but familiar uncle.

There was variation in this routine, but it was not the stuff of joy, and so was all the same in its difference.

During his first days in camp, the sun burned his pale skin, turning his neck and forearms and ankles pink, then red. At night he peeled away the dead layers of skin, folding it into his mouth, chewing it slowly.

One day, a rock he was lifting into his basket slipped from his hands and gashed his shin, tearing his pants and banging his leg badly enough that he limped for a week.

But he survived that too.

Even slight blessings came with a bitter edge. When rain fell, as it did several times, sudden cloudbursts that scoured the rocks and then evaporated like water on a frying pan, everyone in camp, guard and deacon and penitent, ran outside to wash themselves and their clothes, to open their mouths to the sky and drink clean water that didn't taste like sand or iron, to fill whatever cup or bowl they had for later, an extra portion that only left them longing for more.

Comparisons to others were just as bitter; for example the realization one day, as he was pretending to drop his hat accidentally in the water so

that it would cool his head as he worked, that the Adareans worked without hats, with their overalls opened, because they took energy from the sun, however slight, even while it beat Max down and drained him.

Max survived that too, and survived the days when the two types of bitterness combined. He was filling his basket at the dock one day when he spotted tiny silver flashes in the green mess of algae. Minnows. Careful not to let the guard or deacons see him, he found and swallowed seven of them on the walk back to the meadow. Every load after that, he looked for them again, finding a few every fourth or fifth day.

“You spread that weed awfully carefully,” he heard a voice say one day while he was bent over the edge of the meadow.

He squinted, the glare of the sun knifing under the brim of his hat. A deacon, dressed in boots off some new prisoner, a canteen hanging from his waist, smacked a length of metal pipe against his open palm.

“Vasily,” Max said.

Vasily looked both ways to make sure no one was near. “Don’t go greenmouth on me, Max. That stuff’s poison. I already seen a guy crap himself to death.”

“Yeah, I know better.” Max finished spreading the weed, grabbed a stone, rolled it into his basket.

“That’s the way,” Vasily said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, yellow onion, and bit into it like an apple. Still crunching, he walked behind some Adareans and poked them between the shoulder blades with the pipe.

Max turned away, forgetting he was there.

His plan for survival had depended on getting help from a partner within the camp until someone outside found his messages and came for him. The first part had failed and the second had come to nothing, but he would do what he had to do to survive. He would be patient, conserve his energy, and when his chance came, he would take it.

One night, after dark when they were all lying in their bunks, the old Adarean came up and sat across from him, and asked, “How do you do it?”

Max pushed up on his elbows. “Do what?”

“How do you keep yourself apart from us, apart from everyone?”

Max lay back down, closed his eyes. “It’s easy.”

“It’s been weeks and still you stay alone.”

“A man is born alone and he dies alone,” Max said.

“Shit on that.” The other Adareans came down to his end of the bunker, quietly taking up seats on the beds and floor around him in the dark, like a convocation of ghosts. Snickering ghosts. Max, feeling threatened, snapped up.

“You have your beliefs, I have mine,” he said.

“No one is alone,” the Adarean said. “Our first experience is being connected. We spend nine months in the womb connected to our mother. You say we’re born alone, but childbirth is always an experience shared by mother *and* child. In even the most barbaric and backward places—”

“Like this planet,” someone said, to more snickers.

“—a third person is there to catch us when we leave the womb and lift us to our mother’s breast. The whole experience of birth is one of connection, an affirmation of it, in spite of the pain.”

“That’s just one moment,” Max said.

“Are you serious?” the Adarean begged. “We spend the first years of our life completely dependent on others, connected to them to meet our every need. They take care of us and we return love. When we reach puberty and are driven by hormones away from our first caregivers, we are moved toward other people—mentors, friends, sexual partners.”

One of the Adareans nudged another, who grunted. Max didn’t look to see who it was, but the old man’s head turned.

“See,” the Adarean said. “When we’re wounded or hurt, our natural reflex, our inborn trait, is to make noise. We cry out, knowing that others will respond. Our natural reaction is to turn toward those who cry out in pain. The lack of empathy is a defect, a loss of the most fundamental human trait.”

“You say that, even after the way the guards treat you?”

“What? You don’t see it as a defect in *their* character?”

“That’s not what I’m saying.”

“What are you saying?” the old Adarean asked patiently.

Max swung his legs over the edge of his bunk and sat up straight. “What are you doing here on our planet?” He pointed his finger at all of them. “Why are you here?”

The Adareans exchanged glances. As always, they seemed to be thinking it over together before any of them spoke. Max thought he detected a scent in the air, something sharp.

“We come here to trade,” one of them offered, a sandy-faced man with burr-like hair. “This is the only place in the galaxy that you can find machine-made goods. Everywhere else, things are either fabrikated, the exact same every time, or handmade, individual and different. But your factories make these odd items that are at once identical and yet each of which shows some individual variation from a human hand.”

Max dismissed that with a wave of his hand. He worked in political education and knew spin when he heard it. “You could trade for that from space. I mean the real reason.”

The odor in the air turned bittersweet, then faded. “Do you have any idea how extraordinary the people of your planet are?” the old man said finally. “The settlers here spoke a dozen languages, came from countries that had been enemies with one another, and yet they united in a single purpose, to transform this desert of a world that no one else saw value in.”

“Too bad they left us to finish the work,” Max said.

The green-skinned Adarean murmured, “Amen.”

“We’re here by force,” the old Adarean said, “but those first settlers came of their own free will, with hardly any real chance of survival, and they not only survived, but thrived. What amazing faith that took. They formed human chains, every man, woman, and child, dredging life from the sea—”

“I know my own history,” Max said. “You can skip the kindergarten lesson. Unless you want to make a faith brigade and pass buckets around

the room.”

The Adarean shifted, turned his head toward the others, who leaned together, without speaking. A moment later, he said, “We want to honor the spirit of the twentieth century.”

That made less sense to Max than anything. Yes, his people wanted to hold time back to the twentieth century, but the Adareans had advanced far beyond that. “What? You mean like the discovery of the double helix, the first genome projects?”

“More than that,” the Adarean said. “It’s the great century of political change, of people like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. For the first time in history, people could peacefully oppose their governments; for the first time, without the use of violence, they could force their governments to change. It is the century where technology made real democracy possible, immediate, functional, on a large scale, for the first time ever.”

“Huh,” Max said, looking at their tiny bunker, their too small beds, their emaciated bodies. “And here I always thought of it as the century of poison gas and nuclear bombs, the century of concentration camps and gulags, the century of murder, mass produced.”

“It is that too,” the old Adarean said after a pause. “But we have a choice.”

“Doesn’t feel like a choice to me,” Max said. “So you’re saying you’re here, basically, because we’re a big historical amusement park?”

The tall, green-veined Adarean grunted.

“That’s not—” the old man said.

“Him,” Max interrupted, pointing to the tall one. “Isn’t he the one who said we all drown eventually? That’s not by choice and it’s not amusing.”

“I didn’t say that,” the green Adarean said coldly.

The old Adarean reached out, squeezed the other man’s leg. “We take turns holding each other up so that we don’t drown too soon.”

“If you say so,” Max said.

The old man shifted, picked up something beside him in the dark.

“Here,” he said, offering it to Max. “You’ve been swimming for a month. I won my bet. I figure you deserve one of the two cups of soup.”

Max took it in both hands, held it up to his face. It smelled like onion, potato, and dill.

The old Adarean reached out, touched the back of Max’s hand, then went back to his own bunk. One by one, the Adareans stood up, each one touching him, a squeeze on the shoulder, a light clap on the back, before returning to their own space. The green-skinned Adarean was the last to rise, and the only one not to touch Max.

“What I said was, *you’re* a drowner,” he said. “I still think you’re a drowner.”

When he turned away, Max said, “What’s your name?”

He stopped, his body angled half toward Max, half away. “We don’t have individual names anymore. We’re trash, pig-men, monsters. Don’t you listen?”

“Did you ever hear the saying that those who don’t study history are doomed to repeat it?”

The Adarean stopped. “Yes.”

“Those who do study history are doomed to see the repetition coming.”

The Adarean smirked, then walked back to his bed. Max leaned his mouth over the rim of the cup, resting it there for a long time, savoring the smell, without taking a sip. Outside, the wind kicked up. Sand skittered like thousands of tiny feet over the metal roof of their hut.

Nothing had changed, Max told himself. He needed to be patient, conserve his energy, wait for a chance to improve his situation, then take it. When the chance came, he could do what Vasily did, do what he had to do, and he would have water, extra food, a pair of boots.

He sipped the soup slowly, so that it seemed to last all night, and when it was done, for the first time in a month, his belly felt almost full.

* * * *

The weeks passed until Turning Day. In the meadow, the hundreds of acres of sludge on the hillsides became dirt faster when it was turned and mixed with sand. The weeds, the volunteer plants, were uprooted and mixed with the compost.

Every part of the camp smelled like decay. From the fecal stench of the waste pits on the edge of the camps, to the rotting vegetable stench of the meadow, to the smell of rust in their beds and bunkers and bowls, to the slow decay of their own bodies. But Turning Day was the worst; on Turning Day the men became one with the decay. The camp's full count of penitents waded out into the morass, a single long line of misery, churning the decomposing soup with their bare hands. The minister sat beneath an umbrella, occasionally pausing to wipe his goggles, as he described his plans for terraced gardens and a vast expanse of fields.

"What we are going to do here," the minister shouted, "is cover a square kilometer with topsoil, to a depth of a meter. It'll be amazing, the biggest, most beautiful city on the planet, right here, right on this spot. General Kostigan has told me personally what great work we're accomplishing here."

He went on and on that way, until it was four square kilometers and a new Garden of Eden. But all Max heard was the name of Kostigan, who would be happy to kill him if he ever got the chance. He kept his head down, as if it would avert Kostigan's gaze, and turned over armful after armful of wet, stinking sludge, until he was caked with it and the stench soaked into his skin and became part of him.

In books and vids, terraforming was always portrayed as some heroic effort, the conclusion foregone. But this is how it was really done, with sludge and sweat and aching backs. Meanwhile, it was hard not to be aware that planets, like men, were incredibly resistant to change. All the colonists of Jerusalem could die tomorrow, and the planet would hardly notice. Year by year it would erase their effort and crawl back toward the course it had previously chosen.

"Look," whispered a voice next to Max, pulling him from his reverie. He kept his head ducked, plunging his hand back into the muck.

"Look," the voice repeated. It was the big, green-skinned Adarean.

Max glanced at the camp guards first. The minister, taking a break from his sermon, stood and fanned himself with his hat. The guards were clustered around a keg of water. He turned his head the other way to glance

at the Adarean.

The tall man pushed his arms down into the muck, turning over a mixture of greens and weeds. When his hand came out it held a small, yellow potato. He ripped the greens off and tucked the potato inside his shirt, showing Max how to do the same. "We planted them," he whispered, with a nod of his head toward an outcrop of boulders on the hillside. "Between here and those rocks."

Max realized that he may have already felt a couple of the potatoes, but dumped them, thinking they were stones. He returned to the sludge with interest. The first potato he found sat in his hand like a lump of gold. With furtive glances to either side, he pretended to wipe his nose, and slipped it into his mouth. When he bit into it one of his teeth came loose, so he chewed slowly, carefully, until every bit was gone. It tasted like the mud, and the raw starch filmed his mouth. But it was glorious. Meredith used to cook potatoes in olive oil with a pinch of salt and some parsley; when he tried to remember what their kitchen looked like, it was just a blur.

A rock bounced off his shoulder. A guard standing clear of the muck shouted at him. "Back to work!"

He bent over at once and began turning the sludge. "I'm swimming," he mumbled as he dog-paddled the knee-deep sludge. "I'm still swimming."

Although he wasn't sure where he was swimming to anymore. That's when he knew he might be sinking.

They woke up to winds so strong that sand whistled through every crack in their bunker, forming tiny dunes in the corners and around the legs of their cots.

On the way to roll call, beneath the black roil of sky, Max saw three escapees laid out by the waste pits, one of them new since the day before, and all of them from prayer blocks with easier work than his. He wondered how long it would be until he ended up there too. He'd lost two teeth and a third was loose; what little body fat he had before was gone, and his knee buckled every time he put weight on it wrong; the sores on his back wept constantly.

They had to hold their hats on their heads while they stood in line, and the gusts were so powerful that they picked men up off their feet and tumbled them into the fence. Max was lucky he had the bigger Adareans for

a windbreak. The camp second shouted something about an off-season hurricane, too far north, gave them all a second serving of breakfast and told them to save it, then dismissed them back to their prayer blocks for the duration.

By the time the rain pelted the roof like an avalanche of gravel, they were sitting around the small room in the dark, filling their cups from drips in the roof. It was enough not to be working for a day.

Max looked at the tall green Adarean and said, "It feels like Christmas, only we need something to celebrate with."

"I see sand and water," he said. "If we mix them together we could have mud."

"No, outside," Max said. "While the storm's at its worst, before anyone else thinks of it."

They squeezed out the door, the wind banging it shut behind them, and, with Max clinging to the bigger man, made their way over to the camp kitchen. No could see them in the deluge—they could barely see a few feet in front of their own faces.

Max wiped the water from his eyes and peered into the darkened room. "Be quick," he shouted above the roar of the storm. "Grab anything you can carry."

While the Adarean gathered up loaves of pumpkin bread and raw vegetables, Max used a can to smash the lock off a side closet. "Bullseye."

"What is it?" the Adarean asked.

"I never yet knew a military officer who, given access to potatoes and time, would not construct a still." The door banged behind them and they jumped, but it was only a trick of the wind. Max tucked bottles in his shirt until it was full, took another in his hand. "Let's go. By lunch time, the minister will think to place a guard here."

When they shoved their way back into the bunker, soaked like a pair of muddy sponges, they were greeted with concern, then celebration. While the Adareans passed around the first loaf of bread, Max opened a bottle and swallowed what was simultaneously the worst and sweetest alcohol he'd ever tasted.

After that, Max listened to hours of conversation, long talks about people and places back home. The tall green Adarean was a historian, the gray-haired old man some kind of freelance diplomat, the brown-skinned one a collectibles trader. Everyone had a job and a family they were concerned about. That discussion turned to plans for escape, ultimately declared impractical because there were too many men to kill—never mind the moral objections to killing, and no offense intended, Max—or too far to go once they escaped, or no one to help them once they got where they were going.

“We could always just build his garden for him,” the collectibles trader said of the minister, and that led to calculations—four square kilometers to a depth of a meter was how many cubic meters, with half a cubic meter of weed per basket load.

“How many men in camp?” the diplomat asked.

“Total or just prisoners?” the trader wanted to know.

“Penitents,” the diplomat said.

And while several offered a number, Max said, “You mean penitents and pig-men.” Which was greeted with silence, then a burst of laughter, and a discussion of whether Max counted as a penitent or pig-man, until the old man picked up the math again by asking, “What’s the most loads you’ve ever carried in a day?”

“Seventeen,” said the green Adarean, the historian, and several others thought that was too many, although one other remembered that day, and then, after an argument on maximum loads versus average, they were dividing the total number of cubic yards by the number of trips per man to get a minimum number of days, no, years counted in decades, to reach the goal.

“It’s too many,” the historian said to the final number. “I’ve been here almost a year and it would be too many if it were one day more.”

The diplomat said something encouraging but the comment had turned the mood dark for a minute and everyone fell silent. They all sat on their beds because the floor of the bunker was flooded. Outside the wind was so strong that rain sprayed through every crack and seam, and for a moment it felt that everywhere was water and the room would fill up to the ceiling with it. Max poured the dregs of a bottle down his throat.

“You remind me of Drozhin,” he said, because the silence was unbearable and it was the only thing he could think to say. That provoked outrage and questions and laughter and disbelief, and, dizzy with drink, dizzy because the aches in his body were momentarily numbed to the point he could bear them, Max heard himself saying, “No, no, I know him personally, he’s just like that.”

The diplomat took the bottle from Max, found it empty, and opened another. “But I thought you were a political officer. You worked in Education for Mallove, right?”

“This is way before that,” Max said, leaning forward, resting on his knees. “This is back when the revolution was still a civil war. Drozhin had been Minister of Police before this purge, and when they tried to kill him, he went underground and started organizing the army that overthrew the government.” It was more complicated than that, Drozhin let other people be the leaders for one thing, but those details were beside the point. “I was a teenager, but looked much younger, so I ended up being one of the first men on his staff right after the purge. He used me as a spy, since I could get in and out of the cities easily.”

“Why’d you hook up with Drozhin?” the collectibles dealer interrupted.

Max shrugged. “It was a civil war. We all had to pick sides. Being on Drozhin’s side probably saved my life.” He took a loaf of bread that was passed to him, broke off a bite, and handed it on. “Anyway, Drozhin was just like you. He was always doing what he called victory math. How many recruits to overrun a certain post, how much fabric to make coats for all his men, how many generations until we could get back to the stars. He had his hand in everything, always adding and readding to get the result he wanted. He even....”

“Even what?”

A lump of bread stuck in his throat. Max swallowed. It was no secret, the things Drozhin had done. “He even calculated the number of Adareans he needed to kill to unite the people against a common enemy instead of fighting each other. He had a theory of proportions, that the more gruesome the murders, the fewer he would need to tip the scales.”

This produced the same silence as before. The Adareans stared at him in the dark. They had human shapes but their faces were genderless silhouettes and their limbs, in shadow, looked like weapons. Finally, the historian said, “Drozhin wanted to go back to space? After all your people

did, to preserve their technologically primitive way of life here?"

"The first space flights were in the twentieth century. Drozhin always said we had betrayed the stars by staying here." The roar of the storm, loud enough to smash all the buildings and compartments into one, suddenly disturbed Max, so he kept talking. "Anyway, and this is no shit, I won my wife from Drozhin in a card game."

There were sounds of disbelief, a bit muted, and a curious tang to the room's stale air. "Her name's Meredith," Max said. "Means guardian of the sea. I loved her smile, the way it made her cheeks dimple. Still love that. Her father had been one of Drozhin's officers in the ministry—he was killed at New Hope during the purge, so Drozhin promised to be like a father to her. We wanted to marry but Drozhin didn't approve, since I wasn't an officer and wasn't good enough for her. This went on for a while; it doesn't seem like long now, but back then we expected to be dead any day, and a month felt like forever." He reached for the bottle, took another drink.

"We were playing poker one night—there'd been a setback, and for a couple weeks the whole revolution amounted to six of us stuck in a basement at a farmhouse on the escarpment—so we were playing poker one night, during a storm like this one, when we couldn't do anything else, and I was beating Drozhin badly, beating everyone, but he was the one that mattered. Drozhin hated to lose, *hated* it more than anything, but he was out of money. He didn't have anything else I wanted, so I asked him for a commission, which meant I could marry Meredith, against everything I had, all in. He couldn't resist because he never gave up. I won with a straight."

The old man chuckled. "So you got your commission."

"Sort of," Max said, wiggling the loose tooth with his tongue. "Drozhin said I could have the commission, like he had promised me, but I had to pay for it. 'To support the revolution.'" He paused for effect. "He charged me the exact amount I'd won."

There was enough laughter at that to break the mood of despair and jumpstart discussion among the other Adareans. Max left out the part that he was unwilling to pay that price, but Meredith hounded him until he finally gave in.

The big green Adarean, the historian, said, "You still know Drozhin?"

"No," Max said. "No, he was an old man even then. He's dead now, just like Mallove. That's why all of us are here."

“Too bad.” He reached out and squeezed Max’s shoulder.

Outside, the noise stopped abruptly as the eye of the storm passed overhead. The camp was so small that any loud sound in one of the blocks carried to another, so suddenly distant conversations came through cracks widened by the wind. One of the Adareans started to sing a silly verse about a talking toaster and its pet dog, and others took up the song. Other bunkers began to sing back, trying to drown out the Adarean melody with religious hymns and patriotic songs.

Max was no singer, and neither was the historian. Both sat there, somber if not sober. “It’d be good if you still had some friends from the revolution who could help us if we broke out of here,” the Adarean said.

“Yeah, it would be,” Max admitted. He tilted his head up at the roof, the room. “Do you know why they call these prayer blocks?”

“No. Why?”

“Because when you’re here, all your prayers to God are blocked.”

* * * *

After the last of the storm passed, they emerged from their blocks to find the tower down and sections of fence ripped away. The waste pits had flooded and overflowed, scattering bones and pieces of bodies with the outhouse products across the roll call ground. One of guards ran the camp’s sole bulldozer, pushing waste back into the pits while the minister marched the rest of them up to the meadow.

All the compost had been washed from the hillsides, mixing with sand and stone until it choked the stream where it flowed between the hills. If they didn’t clear it out, the stream would back up until the bowl filled with water and the camp was threatened.

Under the guns of the guards, they waded waist-deep in the sludge, using their bodies as dredges, pushing the tangled mats back up the slopes. They scooped the sand-sludge mix with their bare arms until Max’s skin was rubbed rash-raw. And then, when the other men were given a break, the Adareans were told to load up their baskets with rocks pulled from the blocked culvert and carry them down to the jetty.

“No need to do the same work twice,” the minister explained,

seemingly oblivious to the irony.

They loaded their baskets under the eyes of deacons who were antsy because the minister kept threatening to put them to work. Max groaned when he lifted his basket, even stacked as empty as possible. Too many more days of this would kill him. Today might kill him.

The historian passed him, taking a rock from the top of his basket and dropping it in his own. Several times, when they came to a hilltop, or a turn in the trail, he passed Max, or let Max pass him, taking a stone from Max's basket. On the last rise before the long road down to the ocean, he started to sing.

"A brave little toaster took a rocketship to space

Where he tried to find a planet that would save the human race.

But, O, O, O, he found a dog."

"You're terrible," Max said. "Didn't they genetically engineer perfect pitch on Adares?"

"Come on, Max, sing with me."

He started over again, and all the Adareans took up the song, which cycled right back to the beginning as soon as the toaster and his dog finished their adventure. It was a quick walk to the ocean. Vasily, the deacon in charge, followed the Adareans, tapping the end of his pipe against the boulders in time with the song. Their guard rode on the rock-jumper, rifle across his lap, parallel to their path until they came to the jetty. Two more guards were out in the boat. They'd found the pontoon dock, towed it back, tied it up again, and were now scouting the coast around the edge of the point.

Max and the others walked out to the end of the jetty and dumped their baskets. The rocks made a hollow splash, then slowly sank from view. Max stepped aside so the other men could dump their loads. As he stood there, wire grooved in his wrist, staring at the sun sparkling on the bay, water weed-cleared by the storm, he thought it almost a beautiful spot. He wondered if Meredith made it to their safe house. He'd been gone so much, for so many years, for all of their marriage really, that he wondered if she missed him, even if she was there.

The historian's hand touched his shoulder, and he stepped past Max

onto the dock, shifting his balance as it bobbed unanchored under his weight. He was still humming that ridiculous song about the toaster, basket slung over his shoulder. Max, smiling, opened his mouth to say there was no weed to carry back, as if it were good news, just discovered.

Then he saw that the basket was still full of rocks, his own load, and half Max's.

The historian dropped it off his shoulder, and swung it once, twice, out over the water.

"Hey," Max said.

On the third swing he let go, and the basket arced into the air and dropped into the water with a cavernous splash. The loop was still fastened around the Adarean's wrist, pulling him after it.

Vasily was the first one out to the end of the pier, cursing and spinning, half-panicked. When the old man, the diplomat, ran out beside him, dropping his basket, prepared to dive in, Vasily smashed him down with his club. He kicked the old man in the stomach, drove him back along the jetty to the shore.

"We're in charge here!" he shouted. "You don't get to choose when you die, we choose! Now go, go back to the meadow!"

He ran up and down the line, beating the exhausted Adareans on their arms and shoulders if they didn't move fast enough. The guard came in close, rifle ready, looking eager to shoot. Max cowered, covering his head with hands, stumbling all the way back to the camp.

* * * *

All that night in the camp, the wail of the Adareans rose over and over again, as sure as the dawn. Because of their grief, Max thought he finally understood them.

It had always seemed to him as if he only saw half their conversations. They communicated, deliberately, through pheromones and with heightened sensitivity to very slight non-verbal cues. Even in a dark room, without words, they were never alone. In that way, they were alien.

Max sat on his bunk with his back to the wall, as far from them as possible. Yet he could smell their grief, a scent he had no words for, though

it reminded him of saltwater and juniper.

At first he didn't understand why they wept and tore at their chests: hadn't he seen another Adarean die his first day in the camp? The one choked to death by Vasily? There had been no dirge then.

But he came to realize, from the way they tried to comfort one another that it was not the death they grieved—death was inevitable—but the suicide. The historian's choice to be alone, to cut himself apart.

Max blocked his ears, but he still heard the dirging. He pulled a blanket over his head, but that didn't help.

Late into the night, the other bunks shouted at them to stop, their voices sometimes rising above the dirge, sometimes falling into the cracks of silence.

Near morning, exhausted, depleted, Max heard a rattling at the door and then it came open.

Vasily stood there.

"Shut up!" he yelled. "Shut the hell up so we can sleep!"

He seemed fearful to come inside alone. When the Adareans ignored him, he turned to Max, whose bunk was beside the door. "You've got to help me out here. The other penitents, they blame *me* for this. I told them there was no way to stop the pig-man from drowning, but they don't care. We're all exhausted, nobody's slept, and we have to work all day tomorrow. And now the lights just came on in the minister's cabin. The other deacons, they say I got to fix this, or I'm going to lose *my* spot."

"What do you want me to do about it?"

Vasily licked his lips, checked to see who was outside. "Look, I don't want to come in there, all right. But you, you make them shut up, you make them be quiet, and I promise we get you out. You don't belong in here with these animals. You make them shut up, you get moved to a regular bunker."

Max turned his head away.

"Right now, I'll take you with me right now, over to our block. Just do what you need to do, make them shut up."

Max held his head in his hands, squeezed it to make the pounding stop. So, Vasily came through for him after all; one of the seeds Max had planted was finally ready for harvest. If he got into a better block, if he worked less, if he got more food, he could survive. Eventually, the purge would end.

“Look, you’ve got to decide fast,” Vasily said. “There’s something going on in the minister’s office, so we got to fix this now or I get blamed for everything.”

It would be easy, Max thought. If he killed the diplomat, maybe broke his neck, it would break the rhythm of their lament and change their mood completely. He might not even have to kill him, just hurt him, maybe leave him unconscious. All he would need was six, seven seconds. No more than he needed to murder that double agent Lukinov during his last mission. During the brief moment of confusion that followed, he could get out the door with Vasily.

“There are guards coming,” Vasily said, “so it’s now or never. If the guards come, I can’t be responsible for what they do. They might just compost everyone in the bunker, including you. You have to choose now—are you in or out?”

Max swung his legs off the bunk, walked over to the old man, who was seated on the floor, and knelt behind him. He slid his hands up the old man’s shoulders, leaned forward, and whispered in his ear.

“Still swimming,” Max said. “Remember that we’re still swimming.”

The diplomat turned his head and the dirge faltered.

“Hey, Vasily,” Max said. “You can go choke yourself.”

When Vasily didn’t respond, he looked up. The deacon was flanked by two guards, guns drawn, standing to either side of him in the doorway. So, Max thought, he might not swim that much longer after all.

“Are you Colonel Maxim Nikomedes?” the first guard asked.

Max said, “Huh?”

“Are you Colonel Nikomedes?” he snapped.

“Yes, I am.”

“You have to come with us right away.” The guard gave him a hurry-along gesture with the gun.

Max went at his own pace, neither hurrying nor dragging his feet. As he passed through the door, they left it open, pointing him toward the main gate. He heard the crunch of footsteps in gravel behind him, and he drew in his breath, waiting for the gunshot in the back of his head, wondering how much he would feel before he died. The gate still lay in ruins, smashed by the fall of the tower in the hurricane, open to the desert.

“Go on,” the guard said. Still standing well back. His voice shook, as if he were frightened.

“Go where?” Max asked.

“To them,” the guard said.

Dawn spied over the horizon; its pale smear of light glinted on two government cars. Half a dozen elite troops in body armor, with heavy weapons, stared down the guards. The dark blots of troop carriers hovered overhead. A thin, scholarly man stepped out of the first ground car, stood there, hands behind his back. He had a gun in the holster at his waist.

“It’s good to see you again, Nick,” he said.

Nick? Who called him Nick? “Anatoly?”

He walked toward Max, stopped abruptly when he saw Max’s face. “Yes, it’s me.”

So there had been another mole in Mallove’s office after all.

One of the soldiers held open a door in the second car for a very old man who had wisps of white hair at his temples and a beard like a biblical patriarch. He stepped out too quickly and lost his balance, though he reached out and grabbed the door handle to steady himself before he fell. His military uniform was insignia-less. On his feet he wore fuzzy, pink bunny slippers.

He stared at Max with almost vacant eyes, then scratched his cheek with the backs of his fingernails. “Hi, Max.” His voice was faint, as if barely any air remained in his lungs.

“What’s going on here?” the minister shouted. The first light of the day reflected off his goggles. He stomped out of the gate, flanked by his guards. The bunkers were emptying, the whole camp coming to witness this new tableau. “If there’s a problem here, I assure you I can deal with it.”

He spoke over the tan-uniformed soldiers, who blocked his way, and tried to address the men in the cars.

The camp guards and the deacons mobbed together behind him, guns in some hands, pipes in others. The ragged penitents, in their filthy orange uniforms, spread out to see what was happening, which made the guards and deacons nervous. The minister shouted at the soldiers, and the soldiers shouted at him to back off. Any second, a lot of people could die.

Max turned to Anatoly. “May I have your gun?”

Anatoly looked to the old man, who nodded approval, then drew it, flicked off the safety, and offered it to Max butt-first. Max sighed when he felt it in his hand. As he walked toward the gate, the minister was saying, “Look, if you want revenge on those pig-men, for the way they treated you—”

“Shut up,” Max ordered in the tone of a man used to being obeyed.

The minister’s mouth clamped shut. His eyes revealed nothing behind the dusty goggles, but he tried to look past Max to the cars for an answer.

The guards and deacons began to back away, feet scuffling over the sand and stone.

“Stop!” Max ordered.

They stopped. A breeze passed through the camp, carrying the scent of the dead along with the smell of the sea and the promise of another hell-hot day. It rattled the Bible verse sign that had greeted Max on his arrival to the camp.

“Max, we’re friends, right? I tried to help you, right?”

Vasily stepped forward from the mob, one hand up in surrender, the other still clutching the metal club.

“Get me out with you, Max,” he said. “I did my best to help you. I was just doing what I had to do—”

“Shut up, Vasily.”

“I don’t have anything to do with politics—”

Max pointed the gun at Vasily’s face. “Shut up! We’re all prisoners to our politics. We make our choices, and we have to accept the direction those choices take us.”

Vasily covered his face and shut his eyes.

“I don’t know who you are, I couldn’t know,” the minister said. “But I’ll make it right. If you want to kill that deacon, go ahead. He’s a worthless—”

Max moved his arm sideways until the barrel tapped the minister’s goggles.

He pulled the trigger.

The minister’s head snapped backward, body flung to the ground. The tan-uniformed soldiers lunged forward with their weapons, shouting at the camp guards to stand down. A metal pipe thudded into the ground, followed by the clatter of the others. A second later, the guards’ guns rattled on the stony soil as they too were dropped.

Max went back to the cars. “Thank you, general,” he said. “Nice slippers.”

“They’re a gift from Isabelle, my granddaughter, Anna’s girl.” His voice was raspy, his words punctuated with long pauses. “Max, my feet, they’re always cold these days. These slippers don’t keep them that much warmer, but maybe a little bit. A little girl’s love, that’s what it is. She’s a good girl, likes chocolate too much, but I still give her chocolate.” He paused for a second, looked off as if he was trying to remember something. “Meredith is worried sick about you, Max. Some kind of phone call you left her? She wouldn’t leave me alone, kept after me and after me, over a month, until I promised to come find you.”

A knot formed in Max’s throat. “That sounds like her.”

Drozhin turned his body half away from Max, scowled, scratching at his beard. “See, I didn’t understand. I kept telling her you were safe. I’d thought I’d set it up that you were away in deep space. Safe, far away, during the purge. Keeping an eye on that bastard Lukinov for me.”

“The mission got canceled,” Max said. “Lukinov was killed.”

The eyes fired, suddenly present. “You killed Lukinov?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Good!” He paused. “No, wait, we were using him to feed false information to—no, wait, Mallove’s dead now too.”

“Right.”

“Good.” Drozhin lifted one bunny slipper to rub the back of his ankle and lost his balance again. Max reached out to catch him, and special forces men suddenly appeared in front of him. He realized he was still holding the gun.

Drozhin steadied himself by holding onto the door. “I want to go home. Is there anything else to do here, Max? There are flyers in the air. We can burn the place to the ground, erase it, kill everyone. Just say the word.”

“Thank you, General. I know what I want to do.”

He turned to the guards and deacons, aimed the gun at them, then pointed it south.

“Faraway is, well, it’s very far away,” he shouted. “But Camp Forty-three is only fifty kilometers north. You’ve got an hour’s headstart before we come for you. That’s the best you’re going to get from me.”

Vasily sprinted away instantly; the others followed a second later. Soon, only the penitents were left standing there, confused, their lines broken.

Drozhin sat down on the edge of his seat. “Max, just tell Anatoly who should die. We’ll kill them all. Come see me next week. I’ll have Anna make peanut butter cookies.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.” As the door closed, Max walked over to the second car and handed the gun back to Anatoly. “I owe you a bullet.”

“Consider it a gift,” he said, holding the door open for Max. “Can you sit and talk for a minute?”

“Yes.” They climbed into the car and sat across from each other. Max said, “So Drozhin still hates to fly.”

“Still hates it. He was going to visit every camp personally until he found you.”

“I’m glad I got off at the first stop.”

Anatoly pulled the door shut. “You know you nearly got me killed outside Mallove’s office?”

Max stared through the tinted window at the camp. “What?”

“Mallove’s car was sent by Intelligence. It was a setup. We were supposed to climb in back and be whisked away to safety while Mallove was killed.”

“Ah. That would have been much simpler. I’m sorry.”

“No, you had no way of knowing. Frankly, I was amazed by your recognition and action. I just wanted to tell you, so you wouldn’t think you’d been forgotten. You moved so quickly, it was damn hard to find you once we started looking. When Obermeyer checked some old dropboxes and found your note, that finally narrowed our search in the right direction.”

“Ah.”

Anatoly covered his nose and mouth, sighing, as if he was embarrassed by what he had to say. “Can I ask you a favor?”

“I stink, don’t I?”

“Like a corpse. That was your nickname, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.” Max hit the button to roll down the window. The world outside went from a smoky blur to a landscape awash with clarity and light. The Adareans at the gate gathered the dropped weapons while the other prisoners hung back, afraid. The sky spread out behind them, blue-green like the sea.

“Is there anything I can do?”

“You must set the Adareans free. You must send them back to their

families.”

Anatoly’s face went blank and he didn’t answer.

“Drozhin said anything I wanted—that’s what I want.”

Anatoly took off his glasses and polished them with a fold of his shirt. “We can do that. We’ll blame their imprisonment on Mallove. And Education. Say that’s how we knew he was out of control and had to be stopped.”

Max nodded.

After a moment’s pause, Anatoly cleared his throat. “Do you really want to go after the guards?”

“No,” Max said. He rapped a knuckle on the window and gestured for the driver to follow Drozhin’s car. Kilometers of empty land stretched out ahead of them: for a moment, Max imagined it a garden, like the cemetery in the capitol, filled with flowers remembering all those who died to terraform the planet. “There’s been enough killing.”