

WHAT HAPPENS IN FREESIDE STAYS

by
SUSANNE SAVILLE

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The liquor burned from the moment it touched his tongue. Vulpes grimaced and swallowed quickly but the whiskey continued to simmer all the way down. How did profligates drink this *merda*? And, for Mars' sake, why?

"Your scotch, Mr. Fox." The bartender deposited the glass with a flourish.

They certainly didn't give one much. Vulpes knocked back the amber liquid. And found someone had moved the wooden counter when he went to put the glass down.

He held still for a moment, eyes closed, waiting for the building to stop spinning.

"And your vodka martini, shaken." He heard the clink of glass as the bartender set this new drink in front of him.

He had ordered one of everything. It seemed the right thing do to. This was his first assignment on the Strip. Caesar had warned he would have to blend in with the profligates, and that his cover might involve partaking in their vices. But he was not to allow any of their decadence to stick to him.

Right now he craved a hot bath merely from entering Gomorrah.

"You sure you don't wanna have some fun with our girls?"

Vulpes opened his eyes and glanced at the Omerta thug making the offer. His business with them had concluded. He just wanted to do a bit of research before embarking on the long trek to Fortification Hill. He certainly didn't want to touch their diseased whores when there were perfectly Legion-virtuous slaves waiting at the Fort.

"I do not think your...girls would enjoy my kind of fun." Say things like that coldly enough, people tend to give you space. He'd pretty much perfected this art.

The man shrugged. "Being as you're a friend of the management, we don't mind if ya snuff 'em."

Vulpes narrowed his eyes. He knew profligates had no morals, but to feel no loyalty to your own--that was unforgivable. "You are saying you do not mind if I deplete your workforce?"

"Uh. Yeah."

"I see. And would the prostitute you are offering be armed?"

"What? No! Of course not."

"Then what fun is that?" Not that any of the drug-hooked slaves of Gomorrah would be his match. Not even this thug, with his reliance on that little gun at his hip, would cause him much effort. And his disloyal head would look much better detached and on the ground several feet to the left. Vulpes finished his martini. "I don't suppose you are any good with a machete?"

He watched as confusion, irritation, and then a sliver of fear crossed the thug's countenance. He liked the fear best.

"Uh. No, man. I think...I think I gotta be somewheres."

"You do that." Vulpes turned back to the bar. He decided to continue his sampling with something called a Freeside Flamethrower. One of these drinks must taste better than licking a centurion's balls. Once he found it, he'd know what to order on future trips to the Strip.

"You're pretty."

The man saying that was decidedly *not* pretty. His missing teeth and stubble-roughened cheeks were highlighted by Freeside's colorful electric display as he leered. Vulpes had seen that expression before. You didn't grow up in Caesar's Legion without seeing that expression. He resumed looking up at the twinkling lights. Nothing like them east of the Colorado. Nothing like them anywhere in the NCR either, or so he'd heard.

Caesar would rescue these people of Freeside and New Vegas. He would lift them up, raise them from their dissolution and bring them unity, a single purpose, and all such benefits of civilization. But Vulpes rather hoped Caesar would keep the sparkling lights.

Turning, he stumbled along the littered sidewalk, one arm periodically balancing himself against the row of abandoned brick buildings. Why had he come out here in the dark, anyway? Why wasn't he inside one of the Strip hotels, watching the lights from a window?

He couldn't remember precisely how he'd got here. He didn't even remember leaving Gomorrah. He did recall discovering that alcohol tasted best when heavily disguised with cactus fruit or Nuka-Cola, but that those drinks came bedecked with flowers or

strange paper parasols and certainly were not useful in avoiding attention. Or a general chorus of snickering.

"I said, you're pretty."

Him, again? The leer was persistent.

"I heard." Vulpes yawned, not bothering to look around. "Leave, or you'll lack the teeth to say so a third time." He was surprised by how much his words slurred together. That shouldn't have happened. They were clear inside his head.

A heavy hand clamped down on his shoulder. "That's not friendly," said a new male voice.

"I'd call it downright hostile," declared a third man from behind him.

It was like he'd wandered into a cazador nesting zone. More and more of the bastards kept popping up.

Vulpes knocked the hand from his shoulder. It took more effort that it should--mostly because he missed the first try. "Hostile's my middle name."

"Nah, It should be 'handsome'. You wanna play nice with my friends and me, right, Handsome?" That male voice made four.

If only these men knew of his Legion reputation for being a wicked fighter, possessed of an indomitable determination not to be on the receiving end of anything. It would save them grief. Legion predators had eventually left him alone in favor of easier prey. These four profligates would move along, too, once he taught them a lesson.

Slowly, so the street wouldn't move, he turned toward voice number four.

Vulpes hit the wall before he even realized they'd attacked. They were a swarm of fists and feet, flailing at him. He tried to block and retaliate, but his arms moved so slowly.

He fought in silence. Over the thump and crunch of battle he heard the leering man cry out, "Not in the face! I like his face."

Then they had him down on the ground.

The pavement was cold and hard and he couldn't think what to do except curl, protecting his head and stomach. Gleeefully they kicked him, like children around a dead radscorpion.

Vulpes felt dizzy and nauseous. His chest hurt like he'd been kicked by a brahmin. If he could just breathe, just get a good full breath once, everything would be better.

He heard the soft pop of buttons springing free from his shirt, but only when the cold desert air hit his bare chest did he understand they were undressing him. Grabby hands, vicious and chaotic, shucked cloth off him like a nightstalker stripping meat from a carcass.

What had they done with his suit jacket? He liked that one. It was...dapper.

Cutting his losses, he concentrated on retaining his trousers, but soon they were wrenched from him, pulled off and gone. He tried to track the direction in which they'd been thrown. He was going to need those back.

"Lookit those muscles!"

"Ooo, doggies, not nothing nicer 'n that anywhere on the Strip."

It was like his body was no longer his own. He couldn't coordinate his movements, his reaction time so far behind it was laughable, and now this gang of dissolutes were manhandling him into position like he was their plaything. Briefly he wondered if he could mount some sort of counter-attack using projectile vomiting. But no, apparently even his nausea was failing him at this point.

They had him on his knees. Two of them immobilized his arms. Then his face met the cement. That would bruise.

"Now that is one damn fine ass."

"You could bounce a cap off it."

One of the men slapped him right at the top of his thigh, a bright sting of pain accompanied by the bracing sound of flesh against flesh.

"I'm gonna enjoy you, handsome."

He could feel the roughened skin of his assailant's hands as he stroked his back, grabbed his ass, touched him, pinched him, pried him apart.

"He don't say much. See if you can make him sing, Caleb."

Vulpes locked his jaw, preferring to shatter his own teeth than release a sound. The first shock of invasion, when it came, hurt so terribly his sodden brain couldn't even process a response. The man withdrew and slammed into him again.

The muscles of his face twisted in agony. Stoic composure was out of the question. A silent scream echoed inside his head. But at least he remained quiet. At least he still had that.

Caesar had saved him from crucifixion, but this had to be what a nail through the wrist felt like. Repeatedly. And his involuntary resistance was just making it worse. But he couldn't stop his body from clamping down.

His assailant moaned, praising the tight squeeze, but--as he wasn't finished yet--that warm trickle slithering down his thigh was probably blood.

Gnashing his teeth, Vulpes forced himself to listen. Listen to their obscene gurgles of pleasure--for clues. Names. One was called Caleb. He already had that. Anything they said could be used against them.

He had to force his eyes open and, when he got the chance, observe. Observe their clothes. Any Mojave dust or just city dirt? How familiar with the location did they seem? Visitors or locals? Natives or squatters?

They didn't know it yet, but they were all dead men.

Get up.

Get dressed.

Vulpes stared up at the silver pre-dawn sky. He was conscious. He could feel the cold, abrasive pavement against his back. He could feel...he didn't want to go there. As far as that was concerned, he

never wanted to feel again.

He attempted to inhale the unsullied morning air but his chest hitched and reduced him to shallow panting. This was ridiculous. He didn't have time to lie here. He had to get up. Find his clothes. Get moving.

Get up!

Rolling onto his side drew a groan of pain through his cracked lips. No one was present so he didn't bother swallowing it. The pounding in his head sharpened. He lay still and gathered his strength for his next move.

None of this happened. He concluded Caesar's business with the Omertas. He left. He was currently en route to the Fort. Freeside never happened. If he could get under way, he could make this version of events so.

He managed to get himself into a crouching position before he had to pause and recuperate again. Every fiber of his body hurt. And his head.... He'd almost consider its amputation a blessed relief. Was this the alcohol or the beating? He supposed it didn't matter.

What next? He had to focus. Next steps. What next?

His trousers were around here somewhere.

He tried to remember where they'd been thrown. It took ages to locate the pile of fabric. And even longer to force them onto his body. Every movement hurt. His victories were measured in inches. But eventually he had his trousers on.

Good enough.

Well, not good enough to cross the Mojave. But good enough to find medical assistance. Much as he didn't want to admit it, he was in no shape for a journey.

He pictured his map of Freeside in his head. Old Mormon Fort. The Followers of the Apocalypse had taken over that place. They provided medical care.

Normally he'd never live down asking them for help. But he wouldn't make it back to Legion territory otherwise, not in this shape. And Caesar did say he might have to partake of...whatever. He couldn't remember anymore and he didn't really care. He was pretending to be a profligate and this is what a profligate would do.

Searing pain accompanied his every step. He only made it a few feet before the torment forced him to stop. He leaned his shoulder against the nearest wall. This might take a while.

"Well, someone's party train derailed, I see."

What with the weak lamplight and his awkward position on the ground, lying on his side upon a Followers' bedroll, Vulpes could discern only a few details of the doctor who towered over him. Glasses. Impressively blond hair. Tall. Carried a clipboard. No weapons.

Vulpes closed his eyes. Profligates didn't train in bare hand-to-hand combat like the Legion, so no weapons meant this one wasn't a fighter. Nevertheless, his every nerve twinged on edge as he listened to the snap of papers that meant the doctor was flipping through the contents of his clipboard.

"Assaulted by...four men, you said?"

There was a long pause during which the doctor seemed to be waiting for something. Vulpes opened one eye. The doctor was looking at him.

"Four men. Against just the single you?" the doctor prompted.
"And your face is only sporting one bruised cheekbone? Did they like your looks or is there someone else out there, in need of help, for whom we should be looking?"

"I had...no one else." He let his eyelid slide closed. He shouldn't have needed anyone else. One legionary was more than equal to four profligates. If he hadn't been impaired.... How was he going to explain this to Caesar?

He wouldn't explain it. That was it. No lying. Merely a little strategic omission.

He hadn't told the Followers aide at his admittance the extent of his injuries and she hadn't questioned his version of events. If he made good time back to the Fort, there'd be no questions. Caesar need never know of this unfortunate incident.

"Okay, arm above your head. I've got to see your side to compare it with the intake notes. Up...right. Okay. Possible broken ribs. Uh huh. Multiple bruises and lacerations. And them some. Oh, and a blood alcohol content with which we could sterilize our medical instruments. Really, you're quite lucky. You could be dead from alcohol poisoning."

In a swift and graceful movement, the doctor suddenly crouched at his side. Vulpes knew it was simply to get a better look at his injuries, but his nerves were all about self-defense right now and before he could stop himself, his arm shot out and seized the man's wrist, keeping him away. The pain from the motion caught up with

him a second later, but did not make him break his grip.

The doctor looked at him for a moment, then gently closed his free hand over Vulpes' fist. "Sorry. You're probably not feeling all that lucky."

Starting like he'd been burned, Vulpes released his grasp. He didn't want anyone's sympathy. And for this particular man, this callous profligate, to be offering sympathy, he must look as wild-eyed and lost as he felt. That was not him. He had to get himself back under control. He had to get this situation under control.

When in doubt, intimidate. That was Lucius' motto. The Praetorian wasn't subtle but he knew how to dominate a field of enemies so those remained words to live by.

"I take it your...bedside manner...encourages your patients...to heal rapidly..." Though struggling against his aching chest to draw a proper breath, Vulpes forced a veneer of calm over his features and hoped the dull exhaustion in his tone sounded reasonably close enough to bored detachment to fool the man crouched at his side. "...So they can kill you."

Instead of fear, or even betraying a vague sense of unease, the doctor chuckled. "Now you understand why I'm normally kept in the back doing research. Unfortunately, none of the other doctors are available, so I'm afraid you're stuck with me, Mr. Fox."

With practiced efficiency, the doctor cleaned the cuts on his chest and bound his ribs in long white bandages. "This will help with the pain until enough of the super stimpak kicks in. Remove the wrap as soon as you feel you can. You need to be able to breathe deeply, to keep your lungs clear."

The doctor reached into the bag beside him and pulled out a large

syringe mechanism attached to a wide leather cuff with a wicked set of buckles. It looked more like a torture device than a method of healing.

"You're going to lash that to me?"

The doctor looked momentarily confused, and Vulpes wished he'd kept his mouth shut. This apparatus was obviously something with which the average profligate would be familiar.

"It's called a super stimpak. I buckle this to your arm and it releases its medication over time. They're especially good for internal injuries, which you probably have." He held it out so Vulpes could see it better. "You'll just feel the initial jab of the needle. It'll keep you in bed for a bit, though." He waited for a moment before asking, "May I have your arm?"

Trying to disguise his reluctance, Vulpes held out his arm. The moment the buckles closed in place he felt a tiny stab. Nothing, really. In fact, it was less unpleasant than chewing healing powder. He almost told the doctor so, but when he glanced to the man kneeling on the ground beside him, that odd look was back in his eyes.

"Are those whip scars on your back?"

Vulpes had forgotten about those. They'd just be bitter pale ridges by now. His pre-crucifixion whipping for being an insubordinate Decanus. The punishment had ended early when Caesar's orders arrived. They were fairly average whip scars, nothing uncommon about them. He was surprised the doctor had even noticed them in the lamplight.

"Yes."

The doctor took off his glasses and pretended to be examining the lenses for dirt. "Were you a slave?"

Vulpes bit back the offended denial that jumped to his lips. What was wrong with him? Where had his dependable composure gone? He concentrated on keeping his face neutral. "Why do you ask?"

"Stimming would have prevented scars, so you didn't receive medical care for those injuries. You don't have to tell me. The past is a foreign country, right?"

On an instinctive level, Vulpes' ears pricked. There was something here. A stray note in his voice, the way his words fell. The doctor had something in his past. Perhaps this visit to the Followers didn't have to be a total loss.

"The past is strapped to our backs...." Vulpes murmured.

He was rewarded with a full body shudder from the doctor, who quickly put his glasses back on. "I never liked that quote. I'm siding with the great philosopher Scarlett O'Hara, when she said, tomorrow is another day."

The Legion didn't recognize female philosophers, so Vulpes didn't know her work. He couldn't admit that though, as it might be as great a mistake as his unfamiliarity with stimpaks.

"So you fill your tomorrows with good works to escape the shadows of the past?"

The doctor chuckled. "What, are you insinuating I'm mentally obfuscating my past connection with a fascist paramilitary organization? No, I assure you, I'm really quite boring. But I've never approved of slavers, and I would never turn in a runaway."

The doctor reached out toward his shoulder, like he was going to perform some sort of chummy gesture, but the movement halted halfway. Internally Vulpes groaned. Clearly, despite his best efforts, his dread of contact was still showing on his face.

Weakness. He was leaking weakness all over the place. If any of the Legion saw him like this....

The doctor turned his motion into an awkward stretch, acting like this had been his purpose all along. Vulpes felt a small surge of gratitude. As long as the man didn't acknowledge it, Vulpes could pretend to himself that he wasn't revealing his weakness to a profligate.

"Anyway. Don't worry about me. I know how it is." The doctor gave him a grin. "Humani nil a me alienum puto."

The words made Vulpes' heart freeze. It was too late. Mars curse him, he had blown his cover. The doctor knew he was Legion.

Were the words a signal? Vulpes didn't think they had anyone planted among the Followers, but Caesar had once been part of this organization, so it would not be inconceivable for him to have secretly renewed a relationship.

What did the man want from him? Perhaps he thought Vulpes should have committed suicide. Should he explain how it wasn't like that, that this attack had nothing to do with the NCR endeavoring to obtain information from him?

Would the doctor execute him now?

It wouldn't be an honorable death, with a machete. He'd probably

have to use poison in order to maintain his Followers cover. He could have already administered it via the syringe strapped to his arm. Why had he allowed..... Well, he was weak. That was the answer. He deserved to die.

That was the one abiding lesson the Legion taught to everyone it encountered. Be strong or die.

But poison. It was an ignominious death, at best.

He thrashed a little, making his body turn so he could get a full-on look at the blond doctor. How had he not seen it? The man was taller than most inhabitants of the Mojave, and well-built despite the disguise of the draping lab coat. A soldier's build, possibly even a centurion.

"I don't suppose I could request decapitation?" Vulpes muttered.

Two firm hands gripped his shoulders. The kneeling doctor stared directly into his eyes. "Yes, that's the language the Legion speaks. But I'm not Legion. Are you listening? I'm. Not. Legion." He spoke with a strange intensity, as if he couldn't think of anything worse than being associated with Caesar.

"You're not Legion," Vulpes repeated, because it seemed important to the doctor that he believe the words.

The doctor's grasp loosened, but his hands remained on Vulpes' shoulders. "Absolutely not. I'm sorry I scared you."

"I am not frightened," Vulpes growled, willing himself not to flinch under the man's continued touch.

"Well, of course not." The doctor answered in snippy tones. "You wander drunk and unarmed down dark Freeside alleys. Nothing

frightens you."

Vulpes snorted. The doctor was right, it was almost amusing. What had he been thinking? Alcohol was not his friend, that much was certain. "Clearly it seemed...a good idea at the time."

"Well, hopefully your next good idea isn't spawned from an overuse of alcohol. That was a very severe beating you took."

Vulpes made a disdainful sound. "I have had worse."

"I believe you."

More sympathy. Vulpes would have cuffed the hands from his shoulders except now the doctor was easing him back onto the bedroll.

"Okay, you relax, let the stimpak do its work. Oh, wait." The doctor's hands moved from his shoulders to the waistband of his trousers. "These are going to have to come off."

"No," he snapped, embarrassed to hear the panic in his voice.

The eyes behind the glasses narrowed. He'd responded too forcefully. Now the doctor was suspicious. Although his voice sounded cheery enough when he spoke. "Look, I know you didn't report any injuries below the waist, but I wouldn't be doing my duty if I didn't check your legs, right? You toddle out of here with a secretly infected calf wound and die in a ditch and the Followers' reputation will never recover. Strike that. I'll never forgive myself."

Vulpes folded his arms across his chest. "I already wear your splendid stimpak."

"Super stimpak. And if you have severe lacerations on your legs, you could need two."

Vulpes grit his teeth. He had come here to be healed. But did he really have to let go of the only bit of armor he had left?

The doctor crossed his arms as well. "I'll sit here as long as it takes. And I'll talk. A lot. About failed pre-war socioeconomic theories. You'll love it. And by 'love it' I mean you will want to disembowel yourself with your fingernails within the first thirty minutes."

Vulpes studied the doctor's set jaw. He wasn't joking. And he looked like he had the stamina to talk for hours.

Vulpes sighed. He supposed the doctor had a point. No sense in being only half-healed. After all, it was a long walk to Fortification Hill.

Well, if this was going to be done, he would be the one doing it. Take control of the situation. Be imperturbable.

"Allow me." Vulpes tugged on the button at his waist. The zipper was easier. He lifted his hips and tugged his trousers down. Such a small motion, and yet the exertion left him short of breath. And he didn't even have the fabric past the tops of his thighs.

He tried lifting his legs but the effort cost him a blinding spasm of pain. He curled on his side.

Hell with it. The doctor could do the rest. He had to know the truth already. Even in the brief glimpse he'd gotten of himself, he had seen a fair amount of blood.

A soft, drawn-out groan escaped the doctor's lips as he maneuvered the fabric free of his legs. Whispered swear words followed. When

the doctor finally spoke, his voice was thicker than normal, and lacked its usual bite. "You didn't say."

"What?" Vulpes mumbled into his arm.

"You didn't say, damn you. You didn't say you'd been raped. I can't believe you let me prattle on.... God, I suck at this."

Vulpes heard rattling and rummaging and a litany of whispered apologies. A second super stimpak was buckled around his ankle.

"Everything's going to be all right. Well...not...I mean, with stimpaks and some stitches.... Just hold on."

"I am fine."

"No. You're not. But you will be."

Even as he swum toward consciousness, Vulpes had the feeling he was being watched. His hand shifted under his pillow, fingers aiming with blind confidence for the grip of his machete...which wasn't there. He stilled. That was wrong.

His head felt wrong, too. Fuzzy. And these sheets felt soft against his skin, like they were woven pre-war. Slowly he opened his eyes.

The blond Followers doctor was sitting on the ground beside him.

Right. The Followers. Their super stimpaks made him groggy but their healing effects were amazing. The things the Legion could accomplish with...no, he mustn't think that.

"How are you feeling?" A small, hopeful smile quirked the corners

of the doctor's mouth while his earnest eyes gazed so intensely into Vulpes' that it made him wonder if the doctor could see the interior of his skull. "Do you need anything?"

Vulpes attempted to sit up but his head was too heavy. He left it on the pillow.

"You'll be a little woozy from the super stimaks still. They're great but they take a lot out of you. Want some water?"

The doctor was already moving, helping to hold up his head as he brought the bottle to his lips. It was good water, surprisingly cool. The Mormon Fort must have a cellar.

The doctor waited for him to swallow, and then offered the bottle again. He drank long and heartily.

"Since I'm holding your head, I suppose I should introduce myself. 'Manners are the happy ways of doing things,' as my mother used to say. I'm Arcade. You need anything, anything at all, you ask for me."

This Arcade would make a good frumentarius. He could simulate solicitude like nobody Vulpes had ever met. That gambit could definitely be useful in an interrogation setting.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand when Arcade moved the bottle away. "Emerson."

"Emerson Fox?"

"No. You quoted Emerson."

"Oh, right. Yes, I did. My mother loved Emerson. You like to read? Many in the Wastes don't understand the value of pre-war

books."

"I read considerable amounts. For...research." He thought for a moment. He'd never given his cover personality a first name. Mister Fox was really all he wanted the profligates to call him. Or sir. Preferably as in, 'excuse me, sir, but are my entrails dirtying your shoes?'

This doctor...Arcade may have saved his life, though. He occupied a rather unique niche. Vulpes had superiors and inferiors. He didn't have equals. And he certainly didn't have people to whom he owed anything. Other than Caesar.

"Just call me Fox." The words sounded strange, but he felt almost glad after saying them. It was...different.

Arcade nodded and gave him another drink before offering to feed him chunks of iguana from a stick. He was only gone a few moments before returning with a charred skewer of meat and vegetables. It wasn't half bad.

"I don't suppose you want to talk about--"

"No."

"If we had a description of the men, Julie could take it to the King. He might be able to get you some justice."

"I shall obtain my own justice."

"Okay, it's not that I'm dead set against vigilantism, but you're not from around here and it might take you a while to locate them."

"I think you'll find I am a relentless tracker."

"I just don't want this happening to anyone else."

"And I just do not want them breathing any longer. I believe our desires dovetail nicely."

"Has anyone ever told you you can sound really sinister when you want to?"

Vulpes chuckled. It felt refreshing. He hadn't laughed in a long time. "You flatter me."

"Not precisely the response I was expecting, but each to his own. Now, which for dessert - apples or snack cakes? If you pick apples, you won't have to lick any frosting off my fingers."

"I found you some wasteland doctor fatigues." Arcade entered the tent holding his prize aloft like a trophy.

"Found?" Vulpes maneuvered himself into a sitting position. The bedroll still felt too comfy to leave, but he was officially healed now and needed to be on his feet--if for no other reason than the Followers needed the bed for their next unlucky patient. Apparently Freeside provided them with no shortage of customers.

"All right, I deftly appropriated them from storage when the clerk wasn't looking. But it's not like anyone around here needs them. We all have official Followers gear. Y'know, we have a clubhouse, too. We should really have a theme song."

Vulpes stood and stretched. He felt good. No more stimpaks, no more bandages, just the warm air on his skin.

He strode over to accept the fatigues from Arcade and noticed the

doctor's cheeks had flushed a fetching pink.

"Are you feverish?"

"What? No. I.... No."

Vulpes raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. It couldn't be his nudity. The man was a doctor. Besides, weren't profligates supposed to be shameless?

He pulled on the fatigue trousers. Being shy or self-conscious made you a target in the Legion. But it could be something the profligates valued. They had a strange moral code, when they had morals at all.

He listened to Arcade humming while he dressed. "Is this your theme song?"

"Hmm? Uh. No. But I'll work on that."

"Good. You have a pleasant voice." He pulled the sleeveless shirt over his head. When he glanced at Arcade again, he noted the pink flush had spread to the doctor's ears.

"Thanks. I suppose I'm easier to listen to than the squeal of a crashing vertibird."

Vertibird. The back of Vulpes' neck tingled. There was a secret here. He itched to pry it out.

It wouldn't be difficult. The way Arcade dropped crumbs of information, it was as if he subconsciously hoped someone would follow the trail to his core. Vulpes sensed he had no friends in whom he could confide. Not that that was a failing--he was in the same situation himself. But he liked it that way, whereas Arcade

wanted someone to trust. That was the flaw that screamed out to him, begging to be utilized.

And he ignored it.

Despite the way his conscience berated him for abandoning his duty, he ignored it.

This action, or rather, this inaction was wrong. He knew that. He was probably going to remind himself of this for years, whenever he dwelt on past mistakes. But he was in debt to this man, under obligation to him, and there was no sin more despicable than violating fealty.

So he let the mysterious word pass, and simply said, "I believe I remember my mother singing to me."

Concern washed over the doctor's face. "I take it your mother died when you were young."

"Yes." That was true enough.

"Sometimes heritage is destiny. I'm sorry you don't remember her songs."

Vulpes shrugged. "They would have been uncivilized tribal nonsense. Better that I do not recall."

Arcade nodded slowly. His demeanor hadn't changed but his eyes were wary now.

Vulpes quickly ran through what he had just said. He'd referred to tribals as uncivilized. Didn't the NCR feel the same way? Or was Arcade's vulnerability catching? Was he, too, now uncontrollably dropping hints to his identity like water seeping from a cracked

bottle?

"At least, that is what I have been told," he added. Which was also true. His tribe had been unremarkable. Caesar said so.

But as part of the Legion, they were part of something great, something greater than the sum of its parts. The Legion would one day rule from here to where the sun meets the sea. Such greatness could not come without cost. And the weak paid the most. Which was as it should be. And if his mother had learned proper fighting techniques she mightn't have ended up at the feet of that legionary with her belly unzipped....

"Are you all right?" Concern had returned to Arcade's eyes.

"Yes. Of course. Why?"

"That muscle in your jaw twitched."

"What?"

"It's about the only emotion you ever show. Other than your eyes. Not that I've been looking into your eyes or anything. Except purely in the interest of medical research. They're blue, right? Do you find the sun bothers you? How often do you wear sunglasses?"

"Sunglasses."

"Yes. Oh, that's Julie calling my name. Thank God. I mean, I'll be right back."

Vulpes followed Arcade outside. The sunlight dazzled his eyes momentarily, and he wondered what the doctor would say if he saw him in his vexillarius helmet and sunglasses. Probably nothing complimentary. Which was a pity. It was a good look on him, or so

he'd heard.

The Fort courtyard was a busy place. Ghouls, gamblers, wastelanders. Mentally he sorted the injured from the medical personnel from the guards. Yes, the Followers were understaffed. And undersupplied by the look of it. They had enough guards to fend off random, amateur attacks, but an organized assault....

He didn't have orders to evaluate weaknesses in the Followers. He could let this go. Just let it go.

Although perhaps he could point out to Arcade that they really ought to assign snipers to the tops of the guardhouses. Why have high-ground advantage and not use it?

The thought made him want to hit himself. Was he seriously thinking of giving aid to the enemy? Although he did have plausible deniability. It was such an obvious omission that some Follower would surely see the advantage of sniper nests eventually. His advice would only get them built a little sooner.

He scanned the courtyard for Arcade and found him easily, taller than the rest, with his bright blond hair practically glowing in the sun. He stood beside a huge wooden box, having an animated conversation with a woman who somehow managed to carry off a Praetorian guard-like spiked hairstyle without looking the least bit intimidating.

Assuming she was the Julie of whom Arcade spoke, and seeing as he answered her call, she must be in charge. That was another strange aspect of profligate culture, putting women in charge of things. She finished their conversation and moved on to speak with another woman wearing a Followers lab coat.

Arcade was meanwhile struggling to pick up the crate. "This is

sexism!" he called after Julie.

Vulpes sauntered over.

Arcade saw him coming and grinned. "Grow to extraordinary heights and they think you're Superman. It's a cross to bear, I tell you."

Without a word, Vulpes crouched and helped him heft the crate from the ground.

"We're going to storage. You'd have never guessed, right? This way."

They lugged the crate to the eastern guardhouse, past the clerk and up the stairs. As they stacked their crate with the others, Vulpes outlined his plan for the sniper nests. Once they had everything in place, Arcade rested against the column of containers.

"Yeah, um, I'll pass that on to Julie, but she's more of a hugs girl than a bullets girl."

"That is an inadequate tactic for long-range kills. Hugs are only useful for stabbing your target in the back."

Arcade chuckled. "I'm going to pretend you mean that metaphorically, you scary, scary person."

Vulpes found himself returning the smile. Talking with this man was definitely...different.

"So." Arcade crossed his arms. "Now that you're released from care, where will you go? Do you live around here?"

"No."

"Do you have someplace you can stay?"

Vulpes considered. He couldn't go back to Gomorrah. They would wonder why he was still here, and it would hurt the battle reputation every legionary depended on if the reason were discovered. The men who attacked him had not known who he was, and he intended to keep it that way. Right up until he separated their heads from their shoulders.

Arcade jumped into the silence. "You could stay in my tent for the night. If you wanted. It's big. My tent, I mean. There's lots of room. In the tent. Obviously. Excuse me, I've just got to step outside and shoot myself in the head."

"Wait." Vulpes stepped sideways and blocked the exit. The doctor had to stop short to avoid colliding with him. He certainly was tall. Vulpes was unused to looking up to speak with anybody. His wounded instincts wanted him to step back, this other person was too close. Too close! But that would be retreating and the Legion did not retreat. Not even from large blond doctors. "If you shoot yourself, does that mean I get your bed?"

A thousand different thoughts seemed to flash behind Arcade's green eyes. But all he said was a partially croaked, "What?"

"Only I prefer the ground, you see. So your sacrifice would be for naught. The violent revelation of brain matter is also generally unappealing to females. Your Julie would not approve."

"'Generally unappealing to females'. Remind me to ask you what planet you're from? I do suppose my brains are more useful inside my skull than splattered on what passes for grass out there in the courtyard, though. ...Ummm.... You're touching my hair."

"It is...wavy." He ran his fingers through Arcade's undulating forelock, mussing his severely brushed back hair.

The doctor exhaled a shaky breath. "What, you don't know anyone with wavy hair?"

"No."

"Oh."

Vulpes abandoned his examination of the very un-Legion-like hair to let his fingertips drift down Arcade's forehead, skip his glasses to his cheek, and then trail along his jaw. He tried to remember when he had last touched someone he wasn't in the process of killing. Sorting through years took too long and he gave up.

"Okay, that's my face. You know people with faces." The doctor's protest was half-hearted at best. His eyes had closed and his lips had parted ever so slightly.

"True," Vulpes answered. He ran the pad of his thumb across those lips. Very warm. His hand slid lower, past the stubble on the doctor's chin to find the pulse at his throat.

No one just lets you touch their throat. He expected some sort of blocking move from the doctor, but none came. His fingers rested on Arcade's pulse, feeling it flutter like a cazador's wings. He found his own heartbeat inexplicably rising to mimic that pace.

"But I shall remember yours," he added before turning and descending the stairs.

Vulpes woke in a startled fit of thrashing. Sitting up on his bedroll,

he listened to the deafening beat of his own heart and tried to get his erratic breathing under control while his wide eyes searched the darkness. There was nothing here. He was in Arcade's tent. He was safe. It had just been a dream.

A nightmare.

He hadn't had nightmares since childhood. This was ridiculous. He caused other people's nightmares. He didn't have them himself. Closing his eyes, he pinched the bridge of his nose and took a deep breath, willing his body to relax.

"I'm awake. Just in case you were wondering. You didn't wake me, though. Do you need anything?"

Vulpes huffed a small laugh. What did he need? He needed to even the score with his attackers. He needed to eradicate the wickedness of profligates across the Mojave.

He looked toward the doctor's cot. A shape darker than the surrounding blackness was hunched on the edge. He could imagine Arcade's sympathetic eyes watching him. He needed to let this man know he wasn't a child to be cosseted.

"What I need, I take. Do not concern yourself."

After a while Arcade's voice floated out of the night. "You're not going back to sleep?" Apparently the doctor could see his silhouette, too.

"I shall be sitting up."

"I can sleep sitting up, too."

He watched the doctor's solid shadow rise from his cot. His bare

feet made little sound as he padded the few steps to Vulpes' bedroll. He hesitated, but as Vulpes made no protest, he lowered himself to the sheets. Then Vulpes felt the doctor's pajama-clad back press against his. The man radiated warmth even through the cloth.

"There. Now we've got eyes on the entire area. You're safe."

Vulpes swallowed his retort of being perfectly capable of looking after himself. Arcade's back was strong and supportive. After a bit he gave in and lounged against the doctor. "You have had practice at this?"

"It's rather a requirement when you're on the run. Did I say on the run? I meant--"

"I heard nothing."

"Thanks." The doctor sighed. "I know sometimes it sounds like I... I honestly am incredibly boring."

Vulpes chuckled. "So you continue to say. I do not believe you. If I made you break for me, I believe you would spill veritable gold."

With their bodies' close contact, he felt Arcade's shudder as if it were his own.

"You're pretty confident you could get me to talk."

Vulpes shrugged. "I have skills and an inventive imagination." He tilted his head, letting the back of his skull rest against Arcade's. "I could make you beg to shatter at my hand."

A quiet groan escaped the doctor. "Your voice...when you say these things.... I'm going to have sick fantasies now and it's all your

fault."

"You're welcome."

For a long time the quiet of the night was broken only by their breathing. Vulpes hadn't realized he'd drifted into a twilight world of pseudo-sleep until Arcade's voice snapped his senses back to attention.

"Is the man who whipped you still alive?"

The question surprised him, both in that it was unexpected and in that he had never considered the subject before. He had been so proud of his elevation to frumentarius that his incredibly uninspired former centurion ceased to exist. The man was still around though, as far as he knew. "Yes."

"Color me surprised."

Vulpes smiled. "While I appreciate your faith in my ability to exact vengeance, in that case my punishment was...deserved."

"No one deserves to be whipped."

"Sanctioned, then. Vengeance would have been inappropriate. Just as attempting to pry your secrets from you would be inappropriate."

A comfortable silence fell once again. A little later he felt Arcade shift a bit, then suddenly strong, warm fingers interlaced with his.

There was a sheepish snort before the doctor said, "I'm holding your hand."

"I know."

"Just...thought I'd mention it. In case you hadn't noticed. And wanted to move it."

"It is not objectionable."

"That's what they're going to write on my tombstone. 'Arcade Gannon. Not objectionable'."

"Arcade Gannon."

"What?"

"You are strangely named."

"Right. Fox. Nothing remotely strange about Fox as a name. Did you just elbow me?"

Vulpes had heard NCR soldiers on the Strip discussing their leave, usually in regard to how much longer they had before they must return to duty. The Legion did not have 'leave.' They knew nothing but duty, and with camp women and the arena for entertainment there was no reason to seek such pleasures elsewhere.

But, as he leaned over to correct Arcade's grip on the ripper, Vulpes imagined the siren call of following one's own pursuits, instead of the orders of another, must feel very much like this.

"A new-born puppy could hold a ripper with more finesse."

Arcade laughed. "I use it to collect plant samples, okay? They don't fight back. Generally speaking."

"This weapon strikes over thirty times per second and, if wielded correctly, is capable of dismembering three attackers before they can retaliate. It should be treated with respect."

"If cacti learn to attack, and I'm the first line of defense, Freeside is doomed."

"Stand up."

Arcade abandoned his research table and, still carrying the ripper, moved to stand in the middle of the tent. A smile flitted about the corners of his lips. Vulpes began to suspect he was being played, but no matter. This was worth doing. A few Legion moves might go a little way toward repaying Arcade for...everything.

"Arm out."

The doctor held the ripper out like it was iguana-on-a-stick.

With a derisive snort, Vulpes moved behind him. Gripping the doctor's hips, he gently kicked Arcade's feet farther apart, adjusting his stance. Arcade grunted softly.

Then he ran his hand up the doctor's side to his arm and tugged the limb lower. "Relax your elbow."

Arcade obeyed, but with his height and the breadth of his shoulders, Vulpes found it difficult to get his arm to swing correctly, from behind at least. He moved around to the front and, pressing his back to Arcade's chest, grasped the doctor's wrist.

"Like this." He moved the arm. There was some little resistance now, from muscles tightening. "Remain pliable."

"Oh god." The words were little more than a gasp that caressed

Vulpes' ear.

"Now...arc. Not that far. Good."

He stopped to let the doctor catch his breath. But apparently those shuddery, uneven breaths would not be caught. So he continued the lesson.

"This is a useful move when your enemy is attempting a retreat. Now...sweep. Step. Lunge. And back. Well done."

"It's like a dance. A gory dance. For the anti-social." Arcade chuckled, but if he were trying to disguise the taut note to his voice, he failed.

Vulpes was about to take him through the move again when the doctor's hand seized his shoulder, like he needed to steady himself, although the ground was not uneven. It was then he noticed the heat pouring from Arcade's body. They were so close. It was like being wrapped in a blanket. Enveloped.

Surrounded.

The thought made him squirm and he brutally berated himself for that sliver of fear that refused to be controlled. He would not let inconsequential emotion get the better of him. If his emotions said flee, then he would do the opposite. Vulpes pressed back against Arcade.

And then he knew.

Even if he had somehow failed to identify that extremely hard, and large, bulge prodding against his lower back, the accompanying quiet groan would have informed him of the doctor's simmering excitement.

The hand on his shoulder relaxed and then gripped him again, like it was refusing to obey its owner's attempt to let go. He felt Arcade's hot, ragged breath against his ear.

"Sorry. It's just.... Sorry."

Sparks zipped up his spine and into his scalp, not just at the feel of the words skating over his skin but at the needy sound of the voice behind the words. And with that he found himself confronted by, that rarity in his life, a dilemma.

Officially, Caesar was against same-sex "friendships." Unofficially, as long as one contributed to the economy through purchasing slaves and the Legion through producing sons, same-sex "friendships" were considered more equal than marriages. The subject had never particularly troubled Vulpes. He didn't wish to be close to anyone, and the slave girls provided satisfactory amusement when needed.

But this was different. This man was different. And he wasn't certain he should examine that feeling too closely. It would lead back to troublesome emotions. Emotions he did not wish to have.

He worshiped Caesar. He respected Lanius. He generally approved of Lucius. He didn't like anybody.

Except...maybe...Arcade.

Experimentally, he rocked back. The doctor moaned and returned the motion, forcefully. Vulpes tightened his grasp on Arcade's wrist, squeezing the bones together, and, while the pain did slow him a bit, that action received an appreciative moan as well.

"You are...very responsive."

"It's been a long time," Arcade answered, and somehow the yearning in his tone was contagious. Vulpes could feel an answering urge coil deep inside. "Keep talking," the doctor urged. "Please. Your voice is like dark honey."

So he talked. He spoke of what he would do to Arcade, if he had a few lengths of rope and a sturdy bedstead. How he would stimulate every nerve in his body, tease him to that knife's edge of craving and lust and keep him there until he begged for release. How good he would look with his bright, wavy hair disheveled. How good he would feel inside....

"Oh god, oh god...."

Those delicious whimpers the doctor was making as he rocked against him were causing his own erection to twitch and ache. So when Arcade nipped his ear and whispered, "Want...want to touch you," Vulpes did not say no.

The hand on his shoulder slid down his chest, down his abdomen, then delved lower, and suddenly was feeling and palming him through his trousers. His breath stopped at the intimacy. He had expected pleasure, but not so intense. Had it been that long, or was it different if you knew the person's name?

His heart pounded like it might punch through his chest and he bit his lip to keep his silence. But the Mojave sun was inside him, burning and pulsing and desirous of escape and he found his hips thrusting toward those talented fingers.

Then a female voice asked, "What are you doing?"

Julie Farkas stood in the entrance to the tent, an amused glint in her eye.

The pair separated, both answering at once.

"Dancing."

"Killing."

"It was a ripper lesson," Arcade added. "With the ripper. And...yeah. A learning moment. No, wait, a teaching moment, that's what it's called, right?"

Julie looked from one to the other, and raised an eyebrow. "Riiight. Just...keep it inside the tent. I can't have you two scaring the patients." She quickly picked up a tool from Arcade's research table and left.

Vulpes knew he should leave, too. Leave Freeside, that is. Caesar was awaiting his report. And he had four men to slaughter before he could actually get on the road.

"I should depart while it is still morning."

Arcade ran a hand through his hair. "Right. Of course." He pushed his glasses higher on his nose. "How far do you have to go?"

"Primm," Vulpes answered without hesitation. It was a good lie. He was unlikely to ever be near the spot, and thus would foil any attempts to delve into his identity. So why, then, did the disinformation leave a sour taste in his mouth?

Arcade frowned. "That's quite a dangerous trek. You're going to need something to defend yourself."

Vulpes nodded. Traveling to Cottonwood Cove while weaponless was a most unappealing scenario. "If you could manage to obtain

me a machete, I would be in your debt. Even more in your debt," he amended.

"All that way with just a machete? Are you sure you don't want a gun?"

"Just a machete."

"You could borrow my ripper."

"I would not leave you unarmed in this degenerate place." The words snapped out, and he realized he meant them every bit as strongly as he said them.

"The narrowed eyes say there's no reasoning with you. All right. Let me see what I can do." The doctor left.

Vulpes moved to the entrance and watched him stride toward storage. Long legs. He'd cover ground quickly on a march. Not that this man would ever be on a Legion march. Vulpes withdrew into the tent. It should be irrelevant to him whether the doctor joined the Legion. It wasn't like *frumentarii* worked in pairs.

When Arcade returned, he was grinning with pride in his accomplishment.

"Gannon Caravans is proud to present.... Machete. Belt. Rucksack." He laid each out on his bed as he named them. "You can take whatever food and drink you can find around here. Even my Sunset Sarsaparilla stash, which I normally defend with my life."

"With your life?"

"Well, I smack hands and make withering remarks. It's similar."

Arcade was called away to present his mesquite lab findings while Vulpes packed for the trail. Borrowed clothes. Borrowed weapon. Borrowed food and drink. Well, that wasn't exactly borrowed. He couldn't give that back. In fact, he wouldn't be giving any of it back. He wouldn't be seeing Arcade again.

He took one of the sarsaparillas as well. This might turn out to be his drink of choice on the Strip. Tucking the glass bottle carefully inside his rucksack, he hoped the liquid tasted as good as the doctor seemed to think. It would be nice to have something to remember him by. Not that he sat around remembering things. But if he did happen to be undercover, on the Strip, in a bar, he could order sarsaparilla and...recollect.

The barest draft of air caressed the back of his neck. He hadn't heard anyone approach - hadn't been listening - he'd let his guard down - and now someone was entering the tent. Panic rose in his chest at the thought of being trapped with an enemy behind him.

Snatching up his weapon, Vulpes whirled, arm outstretched at shoulder height, machete pointed, to meet the person who had pushed back the tent flap.

The blade stopped mere inches from Arcade's nose. He looked down the length of the weapon. Arcade held his gaze, surprisingly unperturbed by the formidable, sharp piece of metal right in front of his face.

"I assure you, you look extremely virile. Point it somewhere else now."

Vulpes allowed himself to flash a small grin. He flipped the

machete in a few flamboyant moves before returning it to the cot beside his rucksack. It truly was a pity Arcade wasn't Legion. A man with steel nerves and healing abilities would make a good companion in the desolate Mojave.

"You handle that well." Arcade nodded at the machete. He still hadn't moved from the entrance.

"It's a good blade. You have my gratitude for procuring me such a fine weapon."

With the suddenness of a storm out of the Divide, Arcade launched himself into pacing across the tent and back. Once. Twice. There was a belligerent set to his jaw when he stopped in front of Vulpes. Vulpes knew what was coming. He'd practically asked for it. So he waited, watching the doctor's eyes flash and burn.

"Who are you? I mean, who are you really? You're Legion. Aren't you? And not one of their slaves. Actual Legion." Arcade's mouth formed a grim line, like he knew the answer already.

There was no shame in the truth, yet somehow Vulpes felt...was that regret? Yes, he regretted having to answer. "Yes."

Arcade shook his head. There was a flush of red blooming beneath his pale skin. Anger. But he remained calm. Good self-control.

"Are you past Legion or active Legion? Is it too much to hope that you, maybe, deserted?"

"Do I seem like the sort of coward who would desert?"

"No." Arcade sighed, and it sounded like the air was being dragged up from the soles of his feet. "No, you're active Legion, aren't you? Please don't tell me you're one of the ones with a disgusting

nickname. Butcher of this. Slayer of that. Monster of whatever."

Vulpes laughed. "Just Vulpes Inculta. No nicknames. Yet."

"Vulpes. Fox. Got it." He shook his head. "So what are your intentions? Should I look forward to waking in the middle of the night with my throat cut? Because I've got to make plans. Wouldn't want to wear pajamas that clash with red."

"I have no orders to terrorize Freeside."

"That's it? That's all you're going to say to me?"

"Don't worry. I am not going to kill you."

"No, I mean...I don't know what I mean."

Vulpes watched the emotions warring on the other man's face. He had to admit he did not have a scheme in place for this. The doctor was not the sort to surrender his principles for a bribe or other silver-tongued solicitation. Which left violence as the best solution, should he attempt anything inconvenient like capture or harm. Vulpes' pulse picked up speed, nerves twitching, as his body readied for battle. Possibly the only battle he'd ever wished he could avoid.

Crossing his arms so Arcade could easily see his hands, he stepped away from the bed--not altering the distance between himself and the doctor, just making certain the machete was out of reach. If this did come to a fight, he aimed to incapacitate rather than injure, and he didn't want his instincts getting in the way of that.

Such a decision was in no way swayed by sentiment. He owed

Arcade and honoring debts was perfectly Legion. His faculties were not compromised by emotion. Absolutely not. Not at all.

Which was why he was unable to account for the cold, forsaken lurch in his entrails when Arcade turned and headed for the tent flap.

Stopping him was not a problem. The doctor was taller but Vulpes had the combat experience. With swift and savage precision, Vulpes took him to the ground. Arcade lay flat on his back with the wind knocked out of him as Vulpes straddled his stomach and pinned the doctor's wrists to either side of his head. He stared down into Arcade's green eyes, willing him to understand.

"You are the only profligate not allied with the Legion who knows my identity. Normally...normally you would die by my hand. If you wish to present yourself as a threat, I can be persuaded to treat you as one. But I would prefer to leave this Fort knowing you yet live."

The doctor scowled and struggled against Vulpes' weight pinning him down, but he said nothing. Vulpes took this as a good sign. He'd be trying to attract attention, yelling for help, if he truly desired his death.

"I congratulate you on your athleticism, but you're not getting up until I permit you."

"Oh? Here we go."

Arcade twisted and wriggled and Vulpes' breath caught in his throat. The warm body writhing beneath his quickened a desire he would have never recognized, much less welcomed, a scant few days ago. He fought to suppress it while concentrating on keeping Arcade on the floor.

Perhaps recognizing the futility of his actions, the doctor paused, chest heaving, and ground out through his clenched jaw, "Why? Why don't you kill me? Why do you care?"

Why, indeed? He wasn't sure he could satisfactorily explain the situation to himself, much less another. This might be a case where actions spoke louder than words.

Vulpes leaned forward, lowering his head. His nose touched the doctor's, and he noted blonde eyelashes on closed eyelids before he tilted his head. For a second he hesitated above Arcade's pale pink, chapped lips. Kissing was foreign territory to him. But it was like being in the middle of the Colorado now--too late to turn back. Carpe ausculum.

The press of lips started off quite chaste, the touch more gentle than Vulpes hitherto would have considered himself capable of being. He brushed his mouth over Arcade's again, familiarizing himself with the sensation of skin against skin, before expanding his explorations to the prickle of stubble from the doctor's upper lip and chin. Arcade's body shuddered between his thighs as his lips skimmed up the doctor's cheek to his ear. A surge of heat blazed straight to his groin in response.

Biting back a groan, he rested his cheek against Arcade's. Something must be wrong with him. He could feel the blood burning in his veins, feel each heavy, wet pulse of his heart. Nerves that never twinged at conflict jangled like a mad brahmin. His control was slipping away. Such a strange, unfamiliar feeling, and yet somehow so agreeable.

When his mouth returned to Arcade's, he wasn't entirely surprised that the doctor caught his bottom lip with his teeth. He fully expected to be bitten at some point. Risk always accompanied

good things.

He held still, eyes closed, awaiting the doctor to tear open his lip, awaiting the taste of his own blood. It never came. With a sudden lift of his head, Arcade mashed their mouths together. Vulpes froze in confusion as an insistent tongue flicked and prodded at his mouth. Then primitive instinct took over and his lips parted.

The doctor's talent blindsided him. Arcade's tongue penetrated his mouth, exploring, stroking, and kindling an ache both painful and wonderful deep in his vitals. He returned the kiss, sloppy in his enthusiasm, trying to reciprocate the thrilling sensations Arcade was giving him until the kiss became almost a battle for dominance.

When he broke the kiss, his lungs forcing him to remember how to breathe, he found himself mindlessly panting against Arcade's lips, "Join me. Join the Legion."

Arcade tore his mouth away, his head hitting the ground with a decided thump, and glared up at him. The doctor's lips were a vivid red, the surrounding skin looking almost bruised. When he spoke, the uttered sounds were more growl than words. "Go fornicate yourself."

Something inside his chest winced. He should have expected the doctor'd assume him to be using passion for manipulation. That wouldn't have been a bad ploy, had he thought of it.

Vulpes released the doctor's wrists and sat back on his haunches. "Hate is a valid response." He swiped his sleeve across his mouth and gave Arcade a mirthless grin before standing and stepping over him to grab his rucksack from the cot. As he slid the machete into his belt, he heard a soft, "Hey," behind him.

Vulpes turned. Arcade was still on the ground, though he had propped himself up on his elbows.

"I need to ask you something.... Caesar--"

"Kai-czar."

"...believes in total war. I don't suppose you could disabuse him of that notion? Suggest, oh, maybe not massacring civilian populations?"

"Would this include wicked civilian populations?"

"What?"

"Would you grant me that wicked places must be punished?"

"But it's not your place to decide...urgh...I can't debate morality with crazy people. If you can find a town without one redeeming human being...."

"Agreed."

"No, I wasn't.... Never mind. But you've got to give them a chance."

"Of course. I might even give them a lottery."

"Pardon?"

"Just an idea that occurred to me." His mind snapped through the possibilities. Inflicting such a lesson on a town would demonstrate the purity of Legion justice, while still allowing the town a way to save itself, if it possessed any integrity at all. The scheme involved more personal risk, in case the town did fight back, but he was

willing to accept that if it meant dodging Arcade's contempt. "I believe my lottery will satisfy the stringent metrics of your approval. And it would be...unique. Thank you. You have been very helpful."

"I don't want to be helpful."

Vulpes chuckled. "Never have I seen a fit of pique look so winsome."

Arcade ignored him. "And I'm sure I wouldn't approve of anything you'd think of. Ever."

He almost shrugged. "Perhaps one day I shall prove you incorrect." This was over. It was time to go. As he walked toward the tent flap, he heard Arcade call after him.

"You're too intelligent to follow that madman. Really."

He didn't turn around. "'That madman' is my lord." He heard a resigned sigh in response.

"I'm going to hate myself for saying this...but.... Come back when he's dead, then. Leave the Legion. Even the original Caesar didn't last. This one won't either."

Vulpes opened the tent flap, paused, and looked back. "For you, Arcade Gannon, I will consider it."

Then he was gone.

The following day Arcade Gannon found four severed heads neatly lined in a precise row to the left of the Old Mormon Fort's front

gate. He told Julie Farkas to let the King know not to bother. The rapist problem had been solved.

END