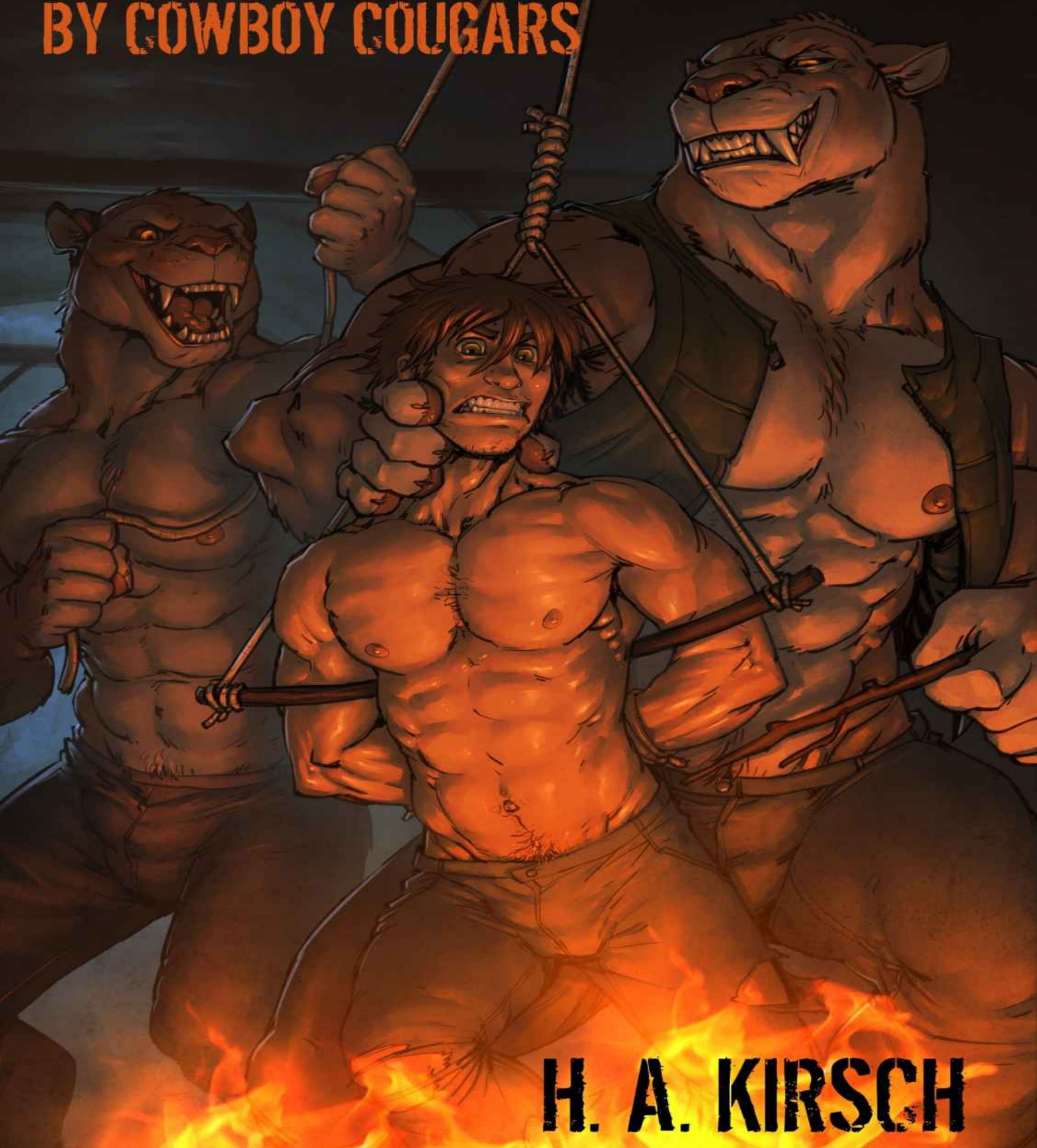


# CAPTURED...

BY COWBOY COUGARS



H. A. KIRSCH

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# CAPTURED BY COWBOY COUGARS

H. A. Kirsch

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Thanks to my beta readers who told me that this story was, “hot”.

Thanks to Forge for the cover artwork. You can find more of his artwork here: <http://forge.sofurry.com>

Thanks to my husband for listening to me talk about this project for months.

“OOH, LOOKIT THAT go. That is one damn fancy car. Bookin’ it real hard, like someone’s chasin’ after him. Lemme tell you somethin’, Dwayne-”

Dwayne grunted in response and did not look at what was requested. He just sprawled back on the mostly horizontal sandstone boulder and kept his hat over his eyes while he sunned himself.

His counterpart continued clutching his binoculars to his face. “There sure as hell ain’t no one chasin’ that sorry shit through this sorry desert. He oughta drive slower. He’s gonna-boom! There he goes! Right off a roadside cliff. Cooked that corner like it was a fine steak an’ slid right off. Whew, rolled a few times, too. That’s a damn mess. What a shame. Could probably sell that thing for scrap if I got to shoot his tire out an’ he just stopped first.”

*If you keep talking, Zeke, I’m gonna break your tail in half,* Dwayne thought, for the thousandth time.

“Oh! Oh! He ain’t dead, Dwayne, he ain’t dead! Lookit that, goddamnit Dwayne are you gonna look?” Zeke slid down the boulder enough where he could bang Dwayne on the head with his boot toe. In response, Dwayne grabbed his leg and pulled him all the way down; Zeke hit the ground in a role and stood up, then immediately dusted his chaps off. “Get your ass up there an’ look, that dumb-ass skinbag’s crawlin’ outta his car.”

*If it’s gonna shut you up, fine.* Dwayne grabbed the binoculars and peeked around the sandstone they were using as a vantage point. “Fancy car. Guess the airbags work. Car’s on fire now. Guy can walk. Kinda. Knee’s out, though.”

“Oh goody, he ain’t gonna put up a fight then,” Zeke said, then put his hat back on and grabbed his crossbow. “You gonna come along or do I gotta do this myself?”

Dwayne came along.

There was no way to sneak up on the crash victim as their current cover was hundreds of yards away, and despite Zeke’s best intentions with a surplus sniper scope, the crossbow was not a long-range weapon. Especially not with tranquilizer darts. The two cats got down on the desert floor and just started walking. Their target was in no danger of escaping.

The young man seemed unsure of where he was going, limping slowly on a diagonal. He finally stopped and sat down on the ground, clutching at his head. He was leaving a slight trail of blood spatters in the sand; Zeke and Dwayne both sniffed at the air. *Blood, sweat, fear.*

Zeke lifted the crossbow up. The young man stared, then turned and moved to stand up to escape. His bad knee gave way and he crumpled back down, reared up and looked over his shoulder, then

started trying to get to his feet. Zeke sighted him on the back and pulled the trigger. Despite a sudden gust of the hot breeze, the hypodermic dart hit the stranger right next to his spine and he fell forward.

By the time the pair reached him, he was glassy-eyed and drooling into the sand.

*I CAN'T BELIEVE I pulled it off.*

Jacob roared through the desert in a car that was pretty impractical for an escape. It was fast, but a fast German sports car that was conspicuously loud and instantly recognizable, performance tuning ill-suited for a drive through a desert wasteland of unknown quality.

Nevertheless, Jacob had stolen it from the thugs he barely ran with while they were busy disposing of their latest victim.

That victim was his own brother, but his stupid, careless, and greedy family was far less important than his own careless and greedy dramatic escape to the vaunted west coast. Jacob liked to think of himself as a fuckboy with a secret. He was slender but attractively masculine, with moppish brown hair and a carved look that went perfect with a cock in each end and whatever drugs people wanted to give him while screwing him to a dirty bed, and he never fought back.

He always took advantage, though. While the thugs were busy giving his brother more holes than needed for a dog-pile end of life gangbang, Jacob hurtled towards and then past their hideout on the edge of modern civilization and onto an on-ramp theoretically blocked with bollards. They didn't stop him, only slowing him to allow border patrol police to start their approach.

After a few disabling shots that missed their mark, the police fell back. Vindicated, Jacob drove on, pushing the car's limits not because he had to, but because he could and there was no one to stop him. There was no one at all. The only indication that anyone had been anywhere for a hundred miles were the increasingly dire and hand-created signs urging drivers to turn back and beg for forgiveness. One final sign said it all:

### *NO RETURN*

Jacob responded verbally to no one in particular: "I'm not planning on it." After another fifty miles of weed-sprouting road, though, he started to worry. He drove through what had once been a suburb, but now had literally been abandoned, homes burnt out and dilapidated, husks of vehicles left to rot in the sun. The landscape paled in comparison with the former inhabitants: a handful of skeletons with weathered tatters of clothes that simply lay in the center of the roadway with no one to come by and scatter them.

That ghost town ended abruptly into real, actual desert highway, winding along a plateau at the edge of a shallow river canyon. He pressed on, reckless and hard, satisfying his fear and anxiety with the howl of a real six-cylinder turbocharged gas engine and squall of performance tires on aged but driveable pavement. He picked up on how to slide the car a little through a turn, but on his fifth attempt, the slide started and didn't stop.

He watched helpless as the roadway slid off to the right, then everything tilted sideways. The car

smashed onto the steep wall of the canyon and the airbags exploded around him with a bang, saving him from being shredded by broken glass. The car rolled six more times, six more ways for him to be bashed around the interior before it finally came to a halt. Dazed, he struggled to open one of the doors and fell out onto hot sandy dirt. Everything hurt, but his right knee hurt the most and barely worked. A piece of metal sprouted from it along with a slather of blood.

Dazed, he looked up to see two figures approaching, sun to their backs, a dual silhouette of cowboy grifters come to-

*They have a gun!*

He turned to try and bolt, but the pain froze him, then something hit him in the back. *A fucking gun!* A hot, gray euphoria washed over him, and then time passed. He came to in what at first looked like a swirl of fire. After he came out further from under the heavy sedative, he realized it was a cave. Red, sandstone, lit by dancing fire.

Whatever had knocked him out wasn't a painkiller, and pain tore through him the second he moved. Most of it was a heavy, bruised ache, but as his right leg twitched, a searing hot poker went through his knee from the side. He whimpered and lay still. The pain wouldn't go away, because despite the unseen fire, he was freezing cold and he couldn't help but shiver.

Dusty, spur-rattled unseen boot steps came up behind him, then their owner crouched down next to his head. He turned and looked. Brown leather, a heavy duty but still rakish cowboy boot, battered old spurs, brown leather chaps. A long, tawny cat tail, with a black tip. He looked up along the tail, where it connected to the firm butt of an anthropomorphic cougar.

“What the fuck, what the hell, who the fuck are you, what are you, what the fuck are you a cat?” Jacob spoke, until he coughed himself silent from the jaggging pain that got him across the ribs. *I fucking saw this shit my whole life and thought it was bullshit, I thought we were butthurt over losing the fucking southwest, but holy fuck they're CATS!*

The man - the creature - the *cat* did not speak. He turned and leaned over Jacob's face, then sniffed at him. He leaned over his leg and sniffed at the wound Jacob couldn't quite see but could definitely feel. “You quit bleedin', that's good,” the cat said. While intelligible, his words had slobbery intonation and a strange inhuman grind to the tone. “Lucked out. Thing was just stuck in the muscle. You hurtin' bad?”

“I was... in a car crash...”

“Yep. You don't seem to have trouble movin' anything else. You know your own name?”

“Jacob... Tucker.” Jacob didn’t have trouble remembering that, but he had trouble speaking without coughing from the sore ribs. It immediately gave him the rigors. “I’m so cold. I’m so f-f-f-f-fucking cold I’m gonna die, am I gonna die?”

The cat grabbed him by the face with a surprisingly leather-gloved hand, considering he was a *fucking cat* and had clawnails that came out of each of his five, furry fingers. They also poked out of grommet holes in the cat’s gloves. He forced Jacob to stare him in the eye, unflinching. While not slitted like a house-cat, they were golden and definitely inhuman, as was the entire rest of his feline face. What was clothed was covered in leather riding chaps and jeans, and what wasn’t had tawny fur. *He’s a mountain lion. A whole fucking mountain lion that walks around and talks.* Jacob stared on while the cat slowly turned his head back and forth. Jacob looked around. Cave. Cat. Fire. The desert. The accident. The car. The chase. The chance to get to the west. The failure.

“Eyes are workin’ fine, too. I asked you, you hurt bad?”

“I feel... like shit,” Jacob groaned as the cat let his head back down. “Cold. So fucking cold.” *He has fur, he probably can’t tell how cold it is-*

The cat stood up and walked away. Seconds passed, then minutes, maybe hours, forever, *I’m going to die. They’re gonna eat me. I’m gonna be cat food,* Jacob thought. It was actually only a couple of minutes before the cat returned with a heavy olive-drab surplus military blanket. It felt awful and scratchy, but also warm.

“Got it,” the cat said, then stabbed something into Jacob’s thigh at a steep angle. “Got it, found that vein first try. Better be glad I used to be a medic,” the cat said, and depressed the plunger on the needle. “Not like Zeke over there. All he knows how to do is run skinbags for money and piss me off.”

Another wave of hot grey washed over Jacob, but this time, it wiped the pain right out and left him awake but uncaring, watching the flame light and projected shadows lick the cave walls. Smoke swirled up and out into a black expanse of sky, dotted with stars. *I can see the stars. This fucking desert is for real.* The cat walked back and forth, turning into a jumble of cowboy leathers, cat tail, fur, muzzle, whiskers. Not a cat. *Two cats.* Two male cougars, each half in cowboy leathers and half naked, stomping around with their tails rowdy like posturing housecats as Jacob faded into painkiller nothingness.

THERE WERE DEFINITELY two cats. One of them had gone to sleep in a tent inside the cave, while the other one was stringing Jacob up next to a campfire.

Jacob couldn't fight back. If he tried to move his knee, so much pain shot through him that he redded out and lost track of what was happening. One minute, he'd been asleep under a warm, if sweaty blanket. The next, on his feet. The next, getting his arms roped behind his back. The next, dangling in the air, dangling from a mountaineering hook jutting out from between two rocks above the cave entrance. The next, one leg folded up and tied, then pulled so his body angled towards the fire. Then, pain, pain, pain, from the knee, un-bent but lashed to the rope. The other end of the rope was clutched by the other cougar, who didn't seem too pleased with his job.

“What are you gonna do, what are you gonna do, why are you tying me up, why, please?” Jacob pleaded through the fog of pain and dizzying haze of painkillers. His mouth was dry but he was pouring with sweat.

“Well now, let's see. First I jus' wanted to get some information outta you, find out why you were drivin' such a fancy car 'cross this god-forsaken wasteland. I heard it's full of mutant lizards an' cat people,” the cat said, but it was a different cat than the one who had apparently dosed him and gone to sleep. This one's voice was brash and brassy and mountain-man crazy. “And ain't no one ever gonna come after you. But you weren't talkin' right, all you've been goin' on about is how you were so goddamn cold an' wanted to know where you were. You even had that blanket on you, but no, so damn cold! So then I thought well I made this here cozy fire for us all tonight, me an' Dwayne, and I wanted it to warm you good so I had to hang you up here... ahh hell, I'm jus' kiddin'. You smell like meat an' I'm awful hungry.”

“Zeke, shaddup,” came the other cat's voice, unseen from the tent.

“I wanna know what the hell you're doin' out here, skinbag. You wanna tell me that? It's a real simple question.” Zeke, who was dressed up slightly more than the other cat had been, with the addition of a leather vest, started to lower the end of the rope he was holding.

Jacob was no longer cold, although his back quivered from the cool night breeze. As he inched down to the fire, he warmed up to the perfect temperature. Then hot. Then *hot*. “I s-s-s-stole a car, a fast car, in case I had to drive hard, stole some gas, I'm trying to just go west, you know, to the coast, across the desert.” Jacob stuttered for real, but the simpering tone in his voice was a put-on. The situation was extreme, but every time fear backed off, he continued mentally plotting his eventual escape.

“Boy, there is a reason this is called a *wasteland*, it's *wasted*, it's done for, there ain't nothin' good out here except monsters an' a whole lotta sand. Two things you do not want in your squirmin' little ass pussy. Or do you? Saw you tentin' that blanket back there an' eye-ballin' our boots stompin' back and forth. You one of those cow-boy fanciers, you like rough-ridin' in a leather saddle? Jacob Tucker,

that what Dwayne said your name was? Jacob “Boot-Licker” Tucker.” Inch by inch, Zeke let the rope out. “You got a big sausage on you, Boot-Licker. Gonna cook that up real good first.”

Jacob was unable to respond, terrorized into silence, stabbed with pain, and slowly overheating. The fire felt like it was roasting him, but the night breeze blew at his sweat in fits and starts and gave him the tiniest reprieve.

A hot growl came out of the tent.

“Oh quit havin’ a cat-fit over there,” Zeke said, but paused the rope. A tail flopped out of the opening to the tent, then snaked inside. The other cougar bolted out and leaped the fifteen or so feet from tent to fire and smashed Zeke off his boots. Zeke rolled off to the side and snarled, yowled, and his tail bristled up. Meanwhile, Dwayne stayed put exactly. Jacob fell atop him and the cougar just rolled and caught him.

*Not in the fire. Not in the fire.*

Neither were in the fire. Neither was on fire. “Gonna keep him ‘way from you tonight, Zeke. Let you cool down.” Dwayne was naked, completely naked, clad only in his fur. Only a little bigger than Jacob, but massively strong, able to carry the human by holding him around his chest over to the tent. The nude cougar crouched and undid the rope holding Jacob’s leg folded. Jacob started to stand, then a bolt of pain hit him and he continued to hunker. Dwayne helped him into the tent.

An old surplus military pup tent, olive drab with drapes at one end and a panel at the other. A bedroll, a blanket. Dwayne ducked out of the tent and came back with another blanket, this one dotted with sweat. He tossed it down next to where Jacob squirmed on his side, arms still pulled behind his back in a V.

Dwayne dropped down and tucked under his own blanket, then pulled the sweatier one up over Jacob. He then fell still, the only indication of wakefulness coming from the tip of his tail as it rhythmically tapped up and down against the human’s ankle.

*This is a nightmare. There are no cat people. I am not in a cave. I’m dead by the road. I died in the crash. This is hell. I’m at home, I didn’t go anywhere, I didn’t escape. I’m still there with those mobsters. They’re gonna fuck me again.*

The tapping slowed down moment by moment. In the other tent, unseen Zeke was outright snoring already despite having just been in a cat fight. Jacob’s shoulder started to hurt, strain from him having to lie on it and whatever minor injuries it had sustained in the accident. Finally, Jacob couldn’t stand it and whispered.

“Can you untie me?”

Dwayne immediately clutched up against his back and wrapped a furry hand around his mouth. Jacob tingled and froze up, nearly fainting from the paralyzing terror. “Don’t talk or that damn cat’ll wake up, come fuck with you again.” Dwayne whispered in his ear.

Jacob slowly unfroze and squirmed his hands around under the rope. He reached out with his fingers to grab Dwayne, perhaps to make him realize that the question wasn’t rhetorical, *that his fucking arm was going numb*. His fingers brushed fur, but grasped around warm, sweaty flesh. Jacob didn’t care and squeezed, tugged a bit. *I don’t care what it is, untie me, untie me, untie me!*

Dwayne huffed and uttered a low mrowl, then let his hand slip from Jacob’s mouth. His tail curled and thumped at the bedroll, then the tent wall. Despite what he’d just said, and despite the noise he was making, Zeke continued to huff and snore a few feet away.

Dwayne rubbed at Jacob’s chest and started to growl. To rumble. To *purr*. He did not otherwise move. Jacob squirmed and his heart started to pound. He kept playing with the now-stiff cock in his fingers, tugging the foreskin back and forth. Every movement made him hurt in some way, but Dwayne wasn’t doing anything to untie him and obviously choosing to enjoy pleasure instead. The feeling was slightly mutual, as Jacob found himself unavoidably turned on by a thick, heart-pulsing cock sliding through his fingers, even considering the surreal situation he was in. He grew erect as well, and had nothing but a blanket to try to stimulate him. *I’m naked. In a tent. With a were-cougar.*

*And he has a great dick.*

Dwayne suddenly squirmed out of Jacob’s grip and reached down to grab at the ropes binding his wrists, then undid them. The rest remained on his arms and shoulders but slacked enough that Jacob could move freely. The cougar backed up and Jacob rolled onto his back and sighed a big huff of relief.

The cougar looked between Jacob’s half-mast and the human’s sweaty face. Without speaking, he moved and straddled onto Jacob’s chest, then leaned over onto all fours. His turgid cock smacked forward against Jacob’s chin.

Dumbfounded, Jacob twisted his head back and forth, but that only got dick sweat and the start of some arousal slobber smeared on his lips and cheek. Dwayne’s cock smelled awful, but also awfully good. Impossibly male, sweaty, well past the sour of a few hours but not at all towards the horrible cheese of someone who never ever washed. Salty, and musky, and the flavor was much the same. He kissed, then sucked on the head. In the dark, he could imagine the cock belonging to anyone. He imagined it belonging to one of the men he’d played fuckboy to for months, years, their flashy outfits, leather and rubber and business suits and costumes, ropes and handcuffs, gags and hoods-

Then Dwayne moved and fur brushed against Jacob's body, just after his cock-head slid fully into the human's mouth. Jacob tongued and swallowed, mouth filling with slobber from a wave of nausea, then going sticky with fear. It all began to fade away as Dwayne started purring again, the sound vibrating down through his cock as it slid back and forth through the human's trembling lips.

Jacob cautiously reached up, arms aching, shoulders burning, but he managed to get his hands on the cougar's thighs. His *furry* thighs. He reached further, stomach and ribs aching from bruises, and felt around Dwayne's rump. The cougar uttered a rowl and chuffed, and his cock spat precum all over Jacob's tongue. Jacob cautiously touched at the cougar's tail-base and Dwayne pulled back and smacked him across the jaw. The human froze; after a few tense seconds, Dwayne relaxed and sank down again, cock pushing back into Jacob's mouth.

The second time around, Jacob didn't try to touch Dwayne's tail, and the cougar rewarded him by continuing to purr like an idling truck and rocking back and forth into his mouth. It didn't take long before Dwayne's tail smacked at the sides of the tent and his cock exploded into Jacob's mouth. His spunk tasted like regular male semen, albeit the awful bitter chlorine of a weightlifter's protein-bro diet. Jacob swallowed it.

Dwayne pulled back and his cock drooled the last of its load on Jacob's face, then rolled off to the side, over to face the other way, and seemed to curl up. Jacob squirmed, dumbfounded again, mouth coated on the inside with cougar semen. As he listened, Dwayne's purring rattled, amidst the sounds of wet licking. Then, the cougar relaxed and stretched out, still facing away, still purring. His purr slowly wound down, eventually dying off into sleepy huffs. Unlike Zeke, he didn't snore.

Jacob didn't dare touch himself.

MORNING CAME, AND Jacob hadn't. He had, however, managed to sleep. He woke up, still in the tent, huddled under the army blanket, and aching all over still. His knee only burned with a low fire, and the pain was now localized to his thigh muscle just above it, and moving his leg didn't produce that much more discomfort.

The cougar had rolled over in his sleep and was now clutching onto him, still soundly huffing away.

Jacob's mind had cleared. In a tent, in a cave, next to a *monster*. He tried to play things over in his head to make sure he knew what happened. Escape. Chase. Driving. Desert. Accident. Something something something, an empty space in his memory. Lying in the cave, horrible pain, a shot, less pain, the fire and a second cat, then-

He ran his tongue around his mouth and swallowed. Dick. *Cougar Dick*. As much as he tried to be disgusted, he got an erection instead.

Zeke chose that moment to flip the tent open. "Gittup, you two faggots! Gotta long way to go today! Have ourselves a nice ol' sausage snack, haw, an' then we gotta move!"

Jacob was already awake and stared terrified at the wild-eyed cougar-man that hunched in the tent opening. Dwayne jolted awake and grabbed onto Jacob, then dug his clawnails in, then scratched. "Oww oww oww oww leggo FUCK!"

The cougar hissed in his face and, when realizing what he was doing, shrank away and looked disgusted. Zeke merely laughed and stormed away. Dwayne climbed up and got out of the tent, then ducked back in. "Get up, he ain't kidding about moving on."

The human could still barely stand; he could use one leg, but just staying upright made enough places hurt that he felt ready to crumple at any moment. Zeke paced around the inside of the rock formation, dressing with each pass, eating an actual dried sausage, drinking what looked and smelled like coffee, all the while mumbling and gesturing to himself. Meanwhile, Jacob stood naked. Zeke finally stopped. "The hell you standin' there for, you got clothes, all mucked up with dirt an' some blood but whatever, and shit you look bad, you look like you got all banged up good, oh that's 'cuz you did." He snarled out the last part of the statement right into Jacob's face, then backed off, cackling.

Dwayne snuck up behind the other cougar, reached around, and whacked him across the face. Zeke threw his coffee in an arc towards the wall, tin cup following and clattering around as the two immediately tussled.

"Give him some water, dumbass. And some food. And one of the sheets off your bed roll, because

he can't ride a horse in the hot sun without burning up to a cinder, he's not a goddamn *cat*."

Zeke stood up and rubbed at his face. He was back to wearing riding gloves, leather vest, chaps, and boots. No jeans this time. His cock swung free out in the open, bronzed and nakedly human, with a chrome decorative cockring tucked around the base behind his balls.

"And put your goddamn pants on under that shit."

"I can do whatever the hell I want," Zeke spat.

Jacob stared at the quarreling felines. He then looked around the cave, and spotted a big waterskin. He hobbled over, crouched down, picked it up, and guzzled from it. Both cats looked, but then immediately went back to fussing at each other. *Thank god they're fucking insane.*

"You wanna chafe your ass-hole, go ahead," Dwayne sniffed, then put his own jeans on before the rest of his gear.

Zeke responded by spur-stomping over to their food sack, grabbing a grizzled summer sausage, and wagging it at Jacob. "Here you go, you wanna suck on some more meat? Heard kitty-kitty here humpin' your face last night." Then he tossed it over and Jacob caught it, almost dropped it. The meat was waxy and greasy and smelled spicy. Almost italian.

Jacob hadn't even eaten the previous day, and even with the pain and whatever drugs he'd been shot up with, the mere thought of food had him tearing into the end of the dried sausage.

"Naw, I ain't heard shit at night, I sleep like a sack of rocks. I *smelled* it on you, standin' there scared-eyed an' huffin' cum breath on me while I was pullin' my boots on. You got a big ol' smear of it all over your chin. You tickle his nuts while he was on you? Kitty-kitty loves that real good, makes him-GHAH!" Dwayne didn't sneak up this time; he walked right up in front of Zeke clutching one of his boots and clocked the cat in the muzzle with his boot heel, then dropped it down and pulled it on like nothing had happened.

The water perked up Jacob even more. "I'm not going anywhere until you tell me where I am."

"You. are. in. the. desert, what the hell don't you understand when I say that?" Zeke said and stomped up, then rocked on his heels, flexing his gloved hands like he was milking a cow on each side.

"So what are you doing with me? Where are we going? Why'd you save my life? You two... seem to be doing f-fine," Jacob sputtered, and his mouth ran dry again. He grabbed for the water and slugged some more down, then looked over at Dwayne.

“Finish it, just less weight,” Dwayne grumbled as he struck the tents and packed everything else up into big saddlebags.

“Obviously this here skinbag has no damn clue what the hell goes on out in these parts huh? You think you can jus’ drive on some highway ‘cross to the coast an’ be done with it? Ain’t no traffic allowed in here, this ain’t a country no more, this is nothin’. This is our place now. No one’s on that road so it goes to shit, gets all these holes an’ washes out an’ gets gravelly. Bet that’s what happened to you, threw your PORSH into a corner an’ just went ass over head. Bet you’re real good at that, you lil’ cocksucker you.” Zeke grabbed at Jacob’s chin and managed to wiggle it before the bewildered human bucked away. “Well you ain’t goin’ to the coast, skinbag. You’re goin’ to Red Rock City an’ we’re gonna sell you off. Get us some hot dollars, maybe get me a nice long coat, too, been wantin’ somethin’ pretty to wear for when it gets cool out.”

Jacob kept watching between the two cats; Zeke raved as he strutted back and forth, tail alert out behind him, while Dwayne finished packing things up. Finally, the working cougar hefted a bag and shoved it at Zeke, then took a white bedroll sheet and tossed it at Jacob.

“Huddle under this up on the horse, you won’t get so sunburnt. Dumb cat tried doin’ this once by himself, let the guy bake ‘till he had heatstroke and dropped dead.”

“Long pig bacon gives me the god-damn shits,” Zeke interjected.

Jacob almost fainted at the thought, but recovered and clutched at the fabric. He barely managed to get dressed, and Dwayne had to help him limp out to where the horses were hobbled nearby.

“You... you tie your horses up?” *Somehow that’s not surprising*, Jacob thought, as Dwayne and Zeke removed hobbles from each of two bay horses.

“Bet Boot-Licker here ain’t ever even seen a hoss. Ooh wait, maybe he’s some rich boy who’s got a hoss but his slave takes care of it, maybe that’s what it is. You want your hoss to stay put overnight, you hobble it or tie it up. Less you got a real nice hoss, like if you’re on real good terms maybe he’s gonna stick around on his own, like if he knows he’s gettin’ a handjob outta you or somethin’, but then you still hobble him up so he ain’t gonna kick you while you’re workin’.” Zeke climbed up onto one of the horses. “Nah, I’d rather give a handjob to someone who’ll nuzzle me back.”

Dwayne sidled up to Jacob. “You’re gonna sit in front of me. Hold onto the saddle horn an’ don’t let go,” Dwayne said, then helped Jacob up onto the other horse. Jacob screamed in pain as he dealt with his leg, and ended up hunkered forward, hands turning white as they squeezed at the saddle horn. Dwayne hopped up behind him, and tossed the sheet over him, then looped his lariat around it.

“Alright! Buck an’ Chuck, move out!” Then, because horses need more concrete direction than from a crazy man’s mouth, Zeke spurred his mount on and trotted off, with Dwayne following.

They were serious about going somewhere, and rode nearly constantly throughout the day. Jacob was no longer cold like the night before, sweating under the hot sun, but also not getting too much of a sunburn. The blanket was indeed a good idea, a makeshift poncho. He had plenty of time to think.

Dwayne let Zeke get alarmingly far ahead with seemingly no concern. After a couple of hours, Jacob crossed a pain management threshold from perpetual discomfort into nihilistic alertness. “Are you guys really cats? Like, I’m not seeing things or fucked up from the crash?”

“Yep.”

“Are you really slavers? Like, there are slavers, and you’re them, and you’re gonna sell me?”

“Yep.”

“And this doesn’t bother you a little bit? Enslaving people? That’s... against the law for a reason.”

Dwayne stopped the horse. *Shit shit shit shit*. “Out here, you’d probably end up dead all by yourself. You’d run outta food and starve. Maybe somethin’ would come by an’ eat you. Maybe someone’d come by an’ shoot you, assumin’ you were gonna shoot them first, an’ then they’d eat you. Gettin’ sold off to someone means you’re gonna eat an’ have somewhere to sleep an’ hopefully you won’t be breakin’ rocks by hand. Sure, it ain’t good, but it ain’t the worst.” Then, the cougar climbed off, stepped a few paces away, and scuffed at the dirt with his boot. Jacob squeezed onto the saddle horn so hard that his hand cramped and he couldn’t let go without twisting his arms, and that made his leg hurt as he had to squeeze the horse to stay mounted.

Jacob’s moment of panic faded as Dwayne just started to piss into the fresh dirt. It came back when he saw Zeke up ahead stop, then turn around, then come to a full gallop towards them. He rode right up and stopped in a show of snorting and whinnying from Buck that horse spit ended up on Jacob’s sun shawl.

“Goddamnit, we don’t gotta stop, how many times I tell you, jus’ whip it out an’ off to the side, piss while you’re ridin’. You got a big dick, kitty-kitty, jus’ have Boot-Licker there strangle it so it don’t spray up Chuck’s mane.”

“Why the hell are you callin’ him that, he ain’t licked anyone’s boots yet.”

Jacob vaguely had to pee, but decided not to let either of the cats know that. Dwayne finished up,

shook off, then scuffed dirt back over the wet patch on the ground and mounted up. One riding, Dwayne again let Zeke go far ahead. For the rest of the day, neither human nor cat said anything to each other.

TRAVELING BY HORSEBACK was not what Jacob had expected he'd be doing, especially not riding behind a slave-running cougar. He'd never even been on a horse before, and spending all day on one had him exhausted, both from staying upright and not falling off, and because he was perpetually scared that either he'd get thrown off or one of the cougars would decide to torment and/or kill him.

Camp for the evening was near a spring, and all five creatures spent a good few minutes drinking. Both cats and both horses went down right next to the glistening, bubbling stream; Dwayne fetched a filter straw out of his saddle bag for Jacob.

“Alright, Boot-Licker, time to come clean with your life story. If you're some kinda criminal or junkie, I wanna know so we can make sure you get priced out right. If you turn out to have some kinda bad habit or some nasty disease, well, that's gonna come back on us. Slave runners ain't *all* morally bankrupt,” Zeke said, as he put together another fire. This time, they were out in the open, albeit there were numerous boulders and even a few trees near the water, not to mention plenty of bush growth.

“Why do you keep callin' him that?” Dwayne grouched, then sat down in front of the tent he'd just constructed and leaned forward to hug around his chaps.

“Well! Ain't everyone so goddamn nosy today!” Zeke hollered, slapped his hips, and walked right up to Jacob. The human was huddled up against a rock so he could lean on something to ease up his battered muscles. Zeke picked up his boot and stomped it down on top of the rock with a squeak of leather and a clatter of spur rowel. “While you're tellin' the story, how 'bout you live up to that name of yours. Figure there's some mighty fine leather underneath all the dust an' hoss-sweat. Buck's always a wet sonovabitch. I don't buy fancy-ass boots for nothin'.”

Jacob stared at the snip-toe boot aimed at him on top of his leaning rock. “What?” He feigned mystery; unlike the panic he'd been feeling over his own impending mortality, sexual power-play was old hat.

“You deaf an' dumb, or jus' one or th' other? Who the fuckin' fuck are you, an' lick my boot while you're talkin' bout it. Jus' pretend it's kitty-kitty's squirtin' dick, you'll warm up good to it.”

Jacob looked over to Dwayne for some sort of protection. That cougar was now lying down, boots crossed and propped up on a rock, leather hat over his face. *I did this before, and I got a Porsche out of it.* He leaned down and kissed the toe of Zeke's boot. “I'm just some idiot who worked for his brother's shipping company.”

“Oh, do go on!” The cougar smirked, and then gestured blindly at Dwayne. “An' you, don't you jus' fall asleep, go hunt somethin'. Gotta be some kinda bucks prancin' around out here, you love those things.”

“Fine,” Dwayne hissed, then got up and took his clothes off completely. He swiped up Zeke’s crossbow and stalked off, now completely silent as he moved.

“You ain’t done, you jus’ gave it a lil’ peck! C’mon. Have at it. You wanna brush it off first, fine, what the hell ever,” Zeke huffed, and his tail lashed around hard enough that it curled entirely around Jacob and smacked his lower back.

Jacob held up the hem of his shirt - as dirty as it was - and buffed most of the obvious dust from Zeke’s booted foot, then leaned in again and licked up the instep. His face turned red and he hoped it looked embarrassing, but really came from a jolt of arousal. “That’s it, I mean, mostly. Well, he was, you know, diverting stuff and whatnot, for the extra money. And he ended up owing more than he made. The guys he was working with came around and, uh, shit went down hard. So I got the hell out of there.”

“Uh-huh,” the cougar said, then pulled his boot away and sat down on the rock, then picked his foot up and stepped on Jacob’s chest. “Kinda funny you got the hell out of anywhere, considerin’ I’m steppin’ on you like you’re a rug an’ you’re jus’ sweatin’ and blushin’ like some lil’ girl.”

“Well, I was uh, trying to get the guys to lay off my brother, even though he’s... was... a total asshole. But anyway, I stole the thugs’ car while they were busy finishing him off and beat it. I mean, suddenly, the opportunity to get out of that shitty place? To make it to the west? The west is always better.” Jacob caressed over the leather as Zeke trod on his chest, fingering along the sturdy leather curves, around the underslung heel, and even jangled the spur rowel. The gangster perverts he’d buddied up with had been bedroom cowboys; Zeke and Dwayne were the real thing.

“Damn, you really *are* an idiot.” Zeke shoved the sole of his boot toe at Jacob’s face. “If you ain’t gonna lick it, maybe feel ‘round it a bit. You like this kinda thing, I know it. I seen you starin’ and starin’ and starin’ at my boots, an’ Dwayne’s too. You might be some dumb idiot skinbag lil’ shit but you aren’t so self-hatin’ that you’re *just* lookin’ at the ground.”

“Cowboys are really hot.” Jacob slid his hands around the top of Zeke’s boot, cradled under the under-raked heel, then tried to sit up and kissed the side of the ankle. “If I could strut around in spurs and chaps, I would.”

Zeke laughed, and then chirped like a bird. “So you ain’t about escapin’ your shit-ass life playin’ lackey for some two-bit criminal. You wandered out here hopin’ you’d get to be some kinda grifter, walkin’ around with a big-brim hat an’ a big gun an’ a nasty look on his face.”

“Not really, I actually... wanted to...” Jacob couldn’t finish his thought, both from his feigned embarrassment, and because he suddenly wasn’t sure what he actually wanted to do. The West was now on the other side of a real wasteland.

“Well! I think this is enough yappin’. I see you either are so damn afraid of cats you’ll do whatever they say, or-” Zeke took his boot back and crouched forward, then slapped a gloved hand square on Jacob’s cock through his jeans. The human yelped and wheezed. “Yep, you’re damn hard. Bet you’re thinkin’ about Dwayne cummin’ down your throat-hole. While he’s off findin’ dinner for us, I’m gonna help you concoct your origin story.”

“My what?”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty. I’m not a kid. Why aren’t you wearing any pants?”

“Why am I wearin’ any clothes at all, I’m a goddamn mountain lion!” Zeke yowled. “Jus’ like you, I enjoy cowboys. I enjoy lookin’ at ‘em, smellin’ em, stickin’ my dick up in ‘em, knockin’ spurs with ‘em, an’ bein’ one. I like waggling my hard dick all over the place, rubbin’ it on a horse’s saddle all day while ridin’, sniffin’ Dwayne’s boots while he’s asleep an’ I’m cummin’ on myself, I am a bona-fide *PERVERT*.” Zeke started pacing again. “Instead of playin’ cattle ranger or rustlin’ someone else’s cattle, we ride ‘round an’ rustle up dumb-fuck humans who wander out into this shit-hole of a desert. An’ you need an origin story for when we go sellin’ you off. See, you look like shit right now. Don’t get me wrong, you’re pretty hot. You got that kinda hot pout goin’ on and you ain’t fat at all, kinda strong really, must be all that shippin’ you were doin’ for your brother or what-ever. Get on up an’ strip down.”

Jacob got up and almost fell over, but braved the pain and steeled up, then slowly took his clothes off.

“Now I said you look like shit, an’ I don’t mean you look unattractive, you’re damn hot, I’d fuck you no matter what. I like skinbags. You can suck dick, you want me to suck your dick with this?” Zeke pointed to his mouth and bared his teeth. “Nuh-uh, no you don’t. I got a tongue that can sand coal into a diamond. I mean, you look like you got all beat the hell up.”

“I was just in a car accident...”

“You, skin-bag, were not in a car accident. You, were caught up in some mutiny with your fellow work slaves. You didn’t wanna go ‘long with them, because you’re broken in real good an’ know what’s right for you. So you got beat up by them an’ your owner. Real sad story. Even got an arrow in the knee.” Zeke walked around Jacob, scuffing at the dirt, dragging his spur, and then smacked Jacob right where he’d been impaled by some unknown car part in the crash. Jacob screamed and the cougar grabbed him from behind, covered his mouth. “Hush, you ain’t doin’ so bad, I saw Dwayne workin’ on you. You probably don’t remember, he shot you up with some real good stuff, but he was rootin’ around in there an’ everythin’. By the time we get to Red Rock City, you’re jus’ gonna limp. Now there’s one problem, an’ that’s... you ain’t got ‘nuff lash marks for a work slave. Only got a few back

here. Now why the hell's some city kid like you been gettin' whipped on?"

Delirious with the post-pain endorphin rush, Jacob mouthed at the gloved hand covering his, then licked his lips when Zeke let him speak. His leg quivered and he broke out in a fresh sweat. "I let those guys fuck me, they were real weird and... kinky... and I liked it... well, they made me like it, but I liked it..." *Holy shit, he's eating it up*, Jacob thought, in between zaps of pain from his bad knee.

"Ain't that jus' great, you're gonna love gettin' some nice new scars then!" Zeke slapped him on the shoulder. "Now since kitty-kitty likes huntin' naked, go put on his stuff. Bet you're bout the same size."

"Do you... do you have anything for... my leg really hurts," Jacob said, and started aimlessly turning back and forth, as if he couldn't decide whether to approach Zeke or walk to Dwayne's pile of riding leathers. Acting like something hurt, when it did very much cause him pain, made Jacob sweat even more than the hot climate and his injury did.

Zeke rolled his eyes and growled, then stalked over to one of the tents and ducked inside. His boots stayed outside, and Jacob stared at them until his eyes hurt. The cougar jolted back out and came back over. "You tell him I gave you this an' he'll get so god-damn mad, madder than he usually is an' that's pretty mad." The cougar then stuffed something into Jacob's hand. "Jus' chew on it an' swallow your spit. Don't swallow the stuff, it'll make you hurl."

Jacob stuck what looked like a sticky purple bundle of leaves into his mouth and chewed. "Gah, it tastes like really strong licorice." It made his mouth water, and he swallowed a few times. He finally took it out. "Is that enough?"

The cougar busied himself gathering up Dwayne's things, then walked over and shoved them into Jacob's arms. "Does it feel like you jus' stuffed one of those deodorant sticks you skinbags use, up in your mouth?"

"Ungh," Jacob said, but his mouth also felt a bit numb now. The cold shivering sweats of pain were gone and he felt a bit warm, even on the side not facing the campfire."Yeah, I guess. Oh. Oh..". Numbness was the least of the effects; Jacob had previously been playing the clueless game but now he was stoned beyond belief. Stoned and frighteningly horny.

Zeke shot him a winning grin, snatched the bundle of herbal leaves, and popped them into his own mouth. "Good boy. Now get all gussied up an' come see me over by that lil' tree oasis what-the-fuck-ever," the cougar then stalked off towards the other edge of the spring.

Jacob contemplated just walking off, but that wouldn't have been *fun*, and suddenly all he wanted was *fun*. Sexy fun, but most importantly, *fun fun fun*. The woozy, numbing euphoria was without any

other awful symptoms, although it didn't help him move his knee any better. *I shouldn't put a boot on like that, it's gonna hurt to take it off*, he thought, but then he looked down at his already booted left foot. The sight of knee-high brown leather snaking up his leg made his cock feel better than it had ever felt before, and he wasn't even touching it. On went the second boot. He didn't feel much pain, but he did feel a lot of strange sensations in his right knee.

"I can't... put on the chaps," he babbled, walking in a lazy zig-zag towards Zeke. He'd managed the gloves and leather cowboy hat just fine.

"Now don't you go fallin' over like a drunk guy, you get used to walkin' on prak after you do it a few times," Zeke said, and helpfully took hold of Jacob's arms. Instead of steadying him, the cougar helped him lean forward against the large boulder. Jacob splayed against it and grumbled to himself. "Well if it's sandy 'gainst your dick, quit fuckin' your dick 'gainst it! Now gimme your hands." Zeke clambered up the rock and reached out.

Jacob reached up, and expected Zeke to pull him up. Instead, the cougar roped around his wrists not once, not just in a strong hogtie brace, but from his gloved wrists midway up the bell cuffs of Dwayne's riding gloves. "Hey, what're you doing?" He drooled, then squirmed against the rock. It was indeed uncomfortable, but watching rope wind around glove leather gave him a flashback to one of the sessions with The Men back in what seemed like a life he had years ago. That flashback made him grind harder against the rock.

"Were you even listenin'? You're gonna be real trouble, you know that? If you fuck 'round as a slave an' give us a bad name, well shit, you know cats stalk their prey..." Zeke said, then climbed right up the scraggly tree that was growing on the other side of the rock. He wound the rope around the branch, pulling it tight until Jacob was as outstretched as he could get before leaving the ground. Then he hopped back down and pulled something off his chaps belt. "Now, you ever seen one of these, or did those mafia thugs you were talkin' bout use paddles or jus' spank you or whatever?" He unfurled his bullwhip against the boulder and Jacob groaned.

"One of them dressed up like a c-c-cowboy," Jacob slurred and stuttered, then scooted a few inches away from the braided leather whip. While stupefied, he at least had the wits to keep up his meek act. 'Dressed up like a cowboy' was just the beginning of what he'd done to cement his position as pack bitch for some gangsters.

"Bet you liked that. He look like me?" Zeke wagged the whip like a snake and Jacob mewled and tucked his face against the rock. That made his - Dwayne's - hat tip backwards. Zeke reached over and affixed the chin strap.

"No... hewasntacat..."

"Well that's jus' too bad for him!" Zeke sprang backwards and as soon as he landed with a clatter

of spurs, CRACK! He lashed Jacob across the middle of the spine. The human's reaction was a startled grunt, and then a hard wince. He tried to draw his arms up in front of his face, but since they were roped together in front of him and pulled up to the overhanging tree, all he could do is put his face down between them.

“Owww, fuck, I thought you were just gonna spank me,” Jacob said, turning over his shoulder and staring worried-eyed at Zeke. That moment of clarity left him, and the hot, numb euphoria of the unknown herbal drug washed back over.

“Why th’hell would I *spank* you, I ain’t your daddy, you ain’t some disobedient lil’ boy. You’re a *slave*, you’ve done *wrong* an’ you’ve been *punished* so you ain’t gonna do wrong *again*.” CRACK!

This time, Jacob screamed as the pain from a lash that went from shoulder across down to his bare rump was just too much.

“Oh fuckin’ hell, you’re gonna scare off whatever th’hell Dwayne’s huntin’ an’ then he’s gonna come back here an’ hiss in my face an’ we’re gonna eat snakes again for dinner.” Zeke then wandered back to the campsite and returned with a pair of red paisley bandanas. He wrapped one around his own muzzle. “Lookit me, I’m some badass grifter, I’m gonna steal your cattle an’ your wife an’ shoot up your goddamn *train*.” If he was getting any effect from the ‘prak’ he was chewing, it wasn’t the stupefied sexual delirium Jacob received.

Despite the pain, Jacob was still hard, still drooling precum against the rock, and still buzzing with the glorious pang of fantastic realization. The whip pain wasn’t like his bruises or his lame knee; the sharp sting and then burn faded away to a spreading heat. The prak just amplified it.

Zeke took the other hanky and balled it up in his gloved hand. “Whew, you sure are some city kid, you ain’t sun-ripened like some of the skinbag drifters we run into now and then. You’re gonna scar up *nice*,” he said, as he wiped at Jacob’s back with the bandana. He then leaned down and licked along one of the lash marks. Jacob howled and coughed, laughed, then perhaps sobbed. “Oh goddamn hush *up* already,” Zeke said, then took the balled up bandana and stuffed it into Jacob’s mouth. “Don’t you spit that out. You keep it in there an’ think about what you’ve done. Runnin’ out into the wasteland an’ wagglin’ your butt around for us faggot cats to come runnin’ after...”

CRACK!

Jacob screamed into the gag, then slumped forward against his arms. Spit soaked the bandana, spit and salt. Salt and *metal*. *I’m bleeding. I’m fucking bleeding. He’s fucking tearing me up and I love it. I’m so fucked. I asked for this and I’m getting it and god damnit if he hits me again I’m gonna cum.*

“Nice ol’ X marks the spot there an’ a few slashes-” CRACK! CRACK! “For good ol’ measure.”

Jacob sobbed against his bare arm, then groaned into the gag, and then laughed. Whatever infernal drug ‘prak’ was, he wished he’d had it back home. It made him feel every emotion at once except for crushing fear. It was the best of poppers and none of the headache, the whining euphoria of nitrous without burning feet, the dull glow of painkillers without accidental death.

Zeke wound the bullwhip back up and snapped it into a leather loop on his chaps. “Now then, as you might imagine,” he said, enunciating clearly for once, “I’m awful wound up from all that. Lookit this,” he said, and wagged his cock. Fully hard, glinting in the dusk light from sweat, bronze and purple-headed. “You jus’ cool off a bit, I gotta slick up,” and the cougar wandered back to the campsite.

Jacob didn’t cool off. He kept sweating, despite the dropping temperature, cock grating against the hard boulder, back stinging and burning as sweat ran down the lashmarks, endorphin glow having faded and leaving him with the unpleasant sensation of open, swollen abrasions. The only thing bearable about it was the delirium induced by the prak.

“I keep tellin’ kitty-kitty that if he keeps this shit ‘round it’ll attract some kinda animal but I guess I see why he’s got it,” Zeke said, returning with his gloved hand milking and squeezing over his cock. Something greasy and white squelched between flesh and leather. “Mink oil’s nice an’ greasy. Keeps your leathers all nice an’ supple.” He offered no foreplay, or even a warning about what was going to happen. Zeke just leaned forward against Jacob and hot-dogged his rump, then reached down and pushed so his cockhead ground against the pucker. He pushed harder and it popped in.

“Unnrnrrrhhhh! Oh!”

“Ain’t that good? Lemme tell you, I can’t get fucked without a wad of that stuff in my cheek,” Zeke said, then slid his gloved hands up Jacob’s sides, underneath the front of his chest, and up to hold beneath his upstretched biceps. “You weren’t kiddin’ about all that nasty stuff you said, satisfyin’ some scary mafia men or what-the-fuck-ever, you got a nice hole. Slid right in.”

What pain resulted only made Jacob feel more used, and more turned on, as another endorphin rush came gushing over him. He almost ejaculated on the second thrust, and once past that bridge, let his face slap against the sandy boulder. *Just like before, I’m gonna screw these guys good. I’m gonna screw them like this cat’s screwing me.* The thought was deliriously erotic, a fantasy of sexual vengeance at odds with being tied up and fucked against a boulder with cat fur brushing his torn-up back.

For all of Zeke’s bluster, the cougar didn’t thrust particularly hard, but he did dig deep like he had to use the entire length. He also started to purr heavily, which vibrated down his cock and gave Jacob an intermittent thrill against his prostate.

“You ain’t complainin’. You really like gettin’ fucked. What kinda luck is that, findin’ some escaped human sex slave from the old world, mmmhh!” Zeke licked his chops, adjusted his hat, and gave Jacob a slap to the flank.

Jacob could barely pay attention to anything. Not only had he retreated into the headspace he’d used when allowing sadists to satisfy their urges, not only had he started plotting how he was going to get out of this particular situation, but the hallucinogenic chew left him feeling like he was in a moving pornographic slide show. Another wave of almost-cum washed over him, then piqued as Zeke abruptly pulled out. Jacob looked up: first there was one cat behind him, then there were two.

“You fucking crank, I almost lost this deer,” Dwayne hissed, as he kicked at a lifeless animal that resembled a buck. He then continued dragging it around to the other side of the boulder, near the stream. “Get your furry ass over here an’ help me clean it.”

There were two cats, and then there were none. Jacob whimpered and pulled at his bonds, but they were already untied. He backed up, staggered, and backpedaled all the way into the campsite. He dodged the heat of the fire and collapsed onto the ground, back itching. Every few moments, a residual pang of sexual excitement tingled through him and reminded him that he still had definitely not orgasmed yet, but sleepy delirium eventually knocked him out.

JACOB WOKE UP hungry, and as usual for the last two days, in pain. At first, he thought he'd dreamed that he'd been tied up and flogged, but his back reminded him that had actually happened as soon as he'd moved. Then he remembered he was wearing Dwayne's boots and tried to take them off, but was thwarted by his right knee and the tall leather. There just didn't seem to be a way he could get it off his leg without causing massive pain.

Both Dwayne and Zeke were in one tent, cuddled against each other, fast asleep. Zeke looked like he'd fallen asleep in his gear; Dwayne was naked. The fire had died down low and there were scraps of meat on a makeshift spit above it. Somewhere nearby, something smelled gross but Jacob couldn't figure out what it was.

*That's it. I'm done with this crazy shit. This place can't be that much of a wasteland. There's gotta be a road or something. These two freaks ran into me within half an hour of me getting through the barricades.*

Jacob got up and found that, while his knee hurt a lot to do anything advanced, he could walk with just a pained limp. He quickly got out of the oasis and started following the stream. He checked behind and neither cougar was following him, so he kept limping along, hoping the babbling of the spring would cover up whatever noises he would make.

After perhaps a quarter of a mile, he leaned over and pondered drinking the water. His back crackled with pain, and then he remembered that it was a bad idea to drink city water when traveling. If water from a faucet was bad, water from the ground in the middle of a terrifying wasteland would probably dissolve his flesh or turn him into a monster.

Then something moved. Unseen, because it was night and Jacob could barely see anything, but a definite noise that he didn't make. After standing still for several minutes, he kept moving. Again, the sound, something rustling, scraping, crunching gravel-

Jacob saw a glint and turned, and a shape blotted out the moon. Hot breath blew on his face, and then *THWACK!* The dark shape made a squalling sound and fell to the ground. Now lying down, it was some sort of large animal, perhaps a lizard, only it was bigger than any lizard Jacob had ever seen back home in the city. It was also seemingly dead, a crossbow bolt buried two-thirds into its head through the eye socket.

He spun around and there was Dwayne, naked, armed with Zeke's sniper crossbow. He pulled out a strange-looking bolt and loaded it in with a clack, then aimed it square at Jacob's chest. The human immediately put his hands up. "Look, uh, I'm not any good if you kill me, right? Like that's not gonna get you any money?"

Dwayne sniffed, then uttered a completely inhuman noise, a soft chirp like a small bird. He lowered the crossbow, but only slightly. "This is a tranq dart, like we shot you with after th'crash. I

shoot you anywhere with it, you're slobbering and snoring in under a minute. I shoot you in the heart, that's the end of you. But you're also right, if I kill your ass, that kinda makes all this effort for nothing. And I'm not lettin' Zeke work me that hard just so he can stick his dick in some long pig whippin' post."

"I can't do this, I just can't," Jacob finally had a true crack in his attitude and felt his eyes burn with impending tears. The lizard creature had actually brushed against him..

"You sure as hell can," Dwayne said, then stepped up and grabbed him by the arm. "You don't wanna get eaten by one of those reps, you don't wanna sunburn to death, you don't wanna dry up like a corn husk, you don't want any of that. I don't really know what you do want, but you don't wanna go badly. You gotta come on back, alright?" He started urging Jacob along.

Jacob went along with him, feeling increasingly dazed. He wondered if he had been sleepwalking, and was now being led confused back to the camp. He remembered everything, though. Spilling the beans on his story; Zeke drugging him with that wonderful, weird herb; being tied to the tree against a rock; being flogged; being *fucked*. "Oh man, I can't believe this is really happening, like I thought I'd just gotten into something crazy back home, letting those guys fuck me and tie me up and... and other stuff, but no, this is what I'm gonna do forever, huh? You're gonna sell me as a sex slave to some big lion or whatever, right?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. Zeke's definitely got walk behind his talk, but he's also crazy," Dwayne said, helping Jacob limp along. "It's kinda hot seeing some guy strut around in my boots."

"It hurts, I can't take them off, I mean not the right one," Jacob wheezed.

"Soon as we're back at the fire, I'll fix that up for you," the cougar said, in a harsh whisper. He was serious, as well. Back at the campsite, Zeke was still passed out in his tent, snoring lightly, and purring intermittently loud enough to be heard from ten feet away. Dwayne had Jacob lie down and got out a rag and a canteen, then rinsed his back off. Next, he got out some sort of salve that smelled astringent and burned horribly as the cat smeared it around against the whiplashes.

"You really were a medic or whatever?" Jacob finally whispered. "You said that the other day."

"Mmm-hmm," Dwayne murmured, then wiped up the excess ointment. The burn quickly turned into a wave of endorphin euphoria and Jacob sighed. "Zeke told me all about what he did to you while I was off huntin' that sand buck. Said you were beside yourself while he was dickin' you. That true?"

"I love getting fucked," Jacob sighed, "And used, I guess. Guess I'll be a good slave."

"I said we'll see about that," the cougar hissed, then rummaged around. He took something out and

then held it up to Jacob's mouth. Sticky but not damp, leafy, and with a strong and strange smell that was somehow just 'green'. "Go on. Since you decided to run away, I'm gonna punish you my way. I'm gonna drug you and fuck you an' then let you curl up with me an' sleep. I ain't crazy like that other shit-head."

Jacob took the 'prak' into his mouth and chewed on it until his tongue went numb. Then he stuffed it into his cheek. "That's not punishment," he said, and waited. His heart started to quicken slightly, and the horrible burn on his back faded completely away with the rush of pleasure. He sighed and squirmed. "I really liked sucking your dick."

"You're really somethin'," Dwayne chuffed, then straddled onto Jacob, rump perched on the backs of his knees. He clung on and nosed down around Jacob's sweaty neck, then licked, then opened his jaws and gnawed down.

"Holy shit, oww, don't, don't!" Jacob hissed and squirmed hard.

Dwayne groaned and huffed and let go, then turned Jacob's head by grabbing him through the hair. "Spit it into my mouth," he said. "Come on, just do it," he hissed again.

Jacob winced and wrinkled his nose up, but finally opened his mouth and pushed the ball of leaves out to the front. Dwayne lunged and snapped, grabbing it out of his teeth and terrifying him to squirm around beneath the muscular cat. Once Dwayne had the sachet of herbs, he chewed on it and started purring, then tucked it into his own cheek. After a long few moments, he spat it out into the sand.

"You're really somethin'," Dwayne repeated, and hunkered back down against Jacob's back. "You smell good. I like how you look at us, like you're kinda, in awe, like you wanna... fuck." Dwayne's purring started to overtake his ability to speak, and he bit down on Jacob's neck again.

This time, Jacob was completely shell-shocked and just sighed heavily, body shivering as the eroticism was amplified so greatly by the delirious drug. Dwayne was nude and aroused already, and Jacob tried to squeeze at his cock with his cheeks. The cougar grunted in response and fumbled around between bodies, finally resorting to lifting off a few inches so he could aim his cockhead at Jacob's hole. In the space of just a few seconds, he spurted three messy bolts of spunk against it. "Are, are you cumming already?" Jacob whispered.

"It's this damn prak, took too much once an' just lay back squirtin' on myself, then passed right out like Zeke," Dwayne huffed, then started pushing in. "Oh, you're still wet from him cummin' in you. An' I'm still hard after doin' it all over your hole just now."

Jacob was both loosened up and still sore from earlier, and tried to bury his face against his arms. Even with the salve, any time Dwayne's fur touched his back, it prickled and stung. Dwayne was covered with fur, so he always prickled and stung. The cougar atop him stopped talking and started

thrusting, much less aggressively than Zeke had earlier. Jacob didn't need to will himself into a different headspace; Dwayne was almost romantic about it.

After a few very long - or very drugged - minutes, the big cat ground to a halt and nuzzled down against Jacob's ear. "You like it when he fucked you?" he whispered roughly. Aside from the words, and Zeke's sound near-snoring, it was painfully quiet.

"It was okay," Jacob said, and started trying to make up for Dwayne's short break. He thrust his hips forward against the blanket, then rocked back. Somewhere off in another dimension, his right knee welled up with pain, but it was nothing compared to the pure quivering ecstasy that he got from squeezing his prostate against Dwayne's throbbing cock. "You do it better. And you purr. I didn't cum. He's kinda crazy. Can he hear me?"

"I could go punch 'im right now an' he'd just snort and drool on himself. You didn't cum? You gonna cum with me in you?" Dwayne kept his voice at a whisper but started adding some growl to it, body instinctively struggling against Jacob's rhythmic undulation.

Jacob's head swam and he didn't answer. Not just the strange drug, but the ever-present sensation against his over-full prostate kept him quiet and desperate. If he moved just right, the sensation started to peak, like he was going to shudder from a chill or sneeze, the beginning of an orgasm, but then it ebbed back only to ramp up again. The insides of his body were replaced by pure sex, leaving him a shell of sweaty skin inside someone else's cowboy boots. Dwayne must have sensed the reaction because he kept at it, grinding more than thrusting, pushing just at the right spot.

The cougar abruptly covered Jacob's mouth and that pushed him over the edge, huffing out into leathery skin and rough fur as his asshole bore down on Dwayne's cock over and over and his own pumped seed onto the rough desert blanket. He collapsed down after the rush of climax even though it meant rolling in his own spunk.

Dwayne wasn't silent about his second orgasm. He purred so hard that he made a trilling sound, then yowled, then buried in as deep as he could and stayed still while his shaft bucked and twitched. Then he pulled back and his cock slid out with a wet plop, leaving Jacob to convulse for a moment as the still-thick head slid through his ring and left it spasming.

Every ounce of tension that had filled Jacob since he'd turned on his brother, since he'd climbed in a stolen sports car and hurtled it past the cops and onto an access road that was full of weedy cracks, past official signs and a not-very-useful set of blocking pylons, past hand-written signs imploring "THERE BE ONLY MONSTERS", since he had bolted for hundreds of miles across the desert until nerves and cockiness sent him careening off a shallow roadside cliff, every ounce of that struggle evaporated. Post orgasm, Jacob could truly think for himself for the first time in days. He started to think about how he was going to get what he really wanted, which was to get to the west coast. He just had to get himself indentured to someone who was going to trade something - anything - with that

side of the country. He would just go along with the cats' plan, and play as good as he could-

Dwayne huffed and sank against his back, holding him and purring for a few long minutes, then got up and off. "Gonna get my boots back," he said, then turned around and sat on Jacob's ass facing his boots. He pulled Jacob's left boot off without much of a fuss, but as soon as he grabbed the right leg, Jacob made a choking sound. "Keep quiet. You wake him up, he's gonna do crazy shit, all drugged out like that," the cougar hissed, then worked the other boot off. He then took both of them in hand and left Jacob alone to sweat and nearly cry from the bolt of pain in his knee.

JACOB BOLTED AWAKE, wracked with anxiety, sweating already as the sun hit the rough tent he was sleeping in. Dwayne was gone. He stuck his head out, heart pounding, and saw that Zeke was gone as well. The camp was still there, as were the cougars' belongings, so they hadn't abandoned him, but they were nowhere to be found.

He put on his filthy tee-shirt and ruined jeans, then got up and started wandering around the campsite. He quickly found that whatever was going on, the cougars had left their clothing and leathers, and Zeke had even left his crossbow. Jacob swiped it up and then checked around for a few bolts, then cautiously tried loading it with one. Still woozy from sleep and whatever painkillers and other drugs had been pumped into him, he could just barely pull the bo. He got it cranked, aimed it at the ground and fired. The bolt stung into the ground with a loud thwap. He loaded another.

Crossbow in hand, Jacob rounded past the boulders that Zeke had propped him against the previous afternoon, and almost smashed into Dwayne. "Shit fuck shit fuck shit fuck what the fuck are you doing c'mon what the fuck!" he hissed, tail lashing around. Instead of grabbing Jacob and rushing back to whatever he was doing, the cougar paced in a series of oblivious figure-eights, like he was so freaked out that he couldn't go in a straight line.

Perhaps ten yards away, there was another smaller crop of boulders and someone's body lay strewn across the ground next to it in a pool of bloody mud. It was neither a cougar, nor human. Canine, too light and dusty to be a wolf. A coyote, the same kind of crossover with man like the cougar, slumped lifeless against on the rocks. The amount of blood was intense, and his chest had a gory hole straight through it.

Meanwhile, Zeke was wrestling with an absolute monster. The creature looked vaguely like a bidedal lizard, although its tail was overly prehensile and it had an alarming horn jutting up from its leather-scaled snout. It looked very familiar.

"Look at that, he's only got one eye, he's that fucker I shot last night who was comin' up on you!" Dwayne screeched, voice escalated to a shrieking timbre that Jacob had never heard from a human. "He ain't dead!"

"No.. shit..." Zeke croaked, as the creature managed to get him into a chokehold. The cat's hat was trampled on the ground nearby; his gloved hands desperately pried at the arm bent up around under his chin.

Jacob stared, more amused than terrified. The rough fistfight looked like something from a pulpy action movie, and the current chokehold was perfect comeuppance for the sadistic cougar in Jacob's mind. "What is that thing?" He asked, trying to stare dumbly and not with rapt attention.

Dwayne started trying to get in on the action, hands up like he was going to scratch, pacing back and forth with his bare feet kicking up dust. He didn't answer Jacob's question.

Zeke didn't respond either, but he didn't stay quiet. "That's it.. You ain't gonna horn... me... like this... gotta work me hard..." For a moment, it looked like he was about to escape.

The lizard monster's tail had heavy horn-like spikes near the end. It lashed them at Dwayne, who leaped about hissing and spitting like a fighting tabby tomcat, unable to actually get close.

In the struggle, the creature sunk down behind Zeke for a moment, arms clutching around the cougar's midsection. Jacob swung the crossbow up and sighted right down between the creature's eyes. Zeke's head popped up in the way, but that didn't stop Jacob. He pulled the trigger with scarcely a second thought and the bolt went out with a heavy ka-thunk. Zeke's head jerked back and bashed into the reptilian's face, then went slack and twitching. The creature sank down with him, one head pinned to the other by the crossbow bolt.

Dwayne rushed up and kicked at the creature several times, and got no response. He wound up into a blind panic, hissing and uttering strange chirping sounds. The cougar kicked at Zeke as well, and got no more response. He then sighted Jacob, crouched down, and sprang. Jacob swung the the crossbow to aim at him, but then tossed it as the cougar actually left the ground and came hurtling through the air after him.

The cougar crashed into Jacob and knocked him completely off his feet, then pinned him down and sat on his stomach. "YOU FUCKIN' SHOT ZEKE! YOU FUCKIN' KILLED HIM! YOU FUCKIN' SHIT-HEAD!" His eyes were wide, ears pinned, fur ruffled, as much terrified as seeing red.

Jacob was not nearly as upset as Dwayne, and actually a little proud. He was knocked full out of breath, though, and gasped his response. "Well, if I didn't shoot him, that thing, finished him off, come for us--"

Dwayne grabbed him by the neck and heaved him off the ground, then bashed him back into it. "YOU FUCKIN' KILLED HIM!" Then he sprang up and off and paced in a hard, tight circle. "I don't believe it. I don't goddamn believe it." He then broke down onto his knees and started sobbing into his hands.

Jacob lay crumpled on the ground, bodily pains stabbing in and out of existence, head swimming from the impact. Dwayne continued his grieving fit, finally rolling onto the ground before he stood up, huffed to himself, then stalked up and yanked the crossbow bolt out of Zeke's eye-socket. Neither body stirred on the ground except to slide slightly apart, no longer joined at the head. The cougar then hurled the bloody bolt aside, then swiped up the crossbow. He cocked it with a pull from his big hands, then sighted Jacob with it. "You," he snarled. "You go back to camp, start that fire goin' again. You do it or I'm gonna rip your neck off your spine," he hissed, so roughly that he spit as he said the word 'spine', and pointed back towards the campsite.

Jacob went and lit the fire.

DWAYNE, IN THE middle of the day and scarcely a couple of hours after the horrible fight, set fire to his former partner.

“I don’t know why I ain’t more upset,” the cougar sighed, watching the flames consume Zeke’s clothing. He’d soaked it with campfire wax and wrapped it around both Zeke and the now-really-dead lizard creature, then set it ablaze. “He was... he was the best thing that ever happened to me. But also a god-damn asshole. And if I’m right, then he’s a real serious god-damn asshole. An unforgivable, god-damn asshole.” The cougar crouched near the fire, a large stick clasped in his work-gloved hand, spurs almost jabbing him in the backside. “I guess he ain’t the best thing, then. But god damn fuck, you killed him. You fuckin’ psycho skinbag.”

Jacob stared at the fire as it started to lick around the two lifeless bodies. The weight of the situation sat on him, but he felt like he could still get out from beneath it. *This is the next step of getting out of here.* It helped that Dwayne was suddenly more forlorn than the vicious, shrieking anger he’d experienced for the past couple of hours. “I had to do it. I had to take that shot.” He couldn’t get out of his actual situation, a set of hobbling shackles leaving him hunching forward with his knees up. Dwayne had tackled and restrained him as soon as he’d gotten near the fire, then lit it himself. “I... I really got that lizard thing this time.”

The pair settled back into silence. Jacob was starting to fall asleep, hungry enough to be weak, no longer on edge and exhausted from the restraint of keeping himself calm. Many minutes passed as the fire hissed and crackled. Occasionally, the breeze came back the wrong way and Jacob got a whiff of what was alarmingly close to summer barbecue. Slowly, he nodded forward, until he fell asleep.

And jolted back awake, convulsing against his metal wrist shackles and ankle chains. Dwayne had hobbled him and while he could make a pass at sitting comfortably, was left hugging his knees.

“So how much of that story’s true, ‘bout you and your brother an’ all that sex-kitten bull-shit?” Dwayne looked back over his shoulder, then turned back away as he poked around at the fire. He spoke up after a long pause. “If you ‘had to take that shot’.”

“The whole thing,” Jacob replied. “Well, I guess maybe I sicced the thugs on my brother like attack dogs. I needed a really good diversion to get away, and he was really embroiled in something he should have left alone.”

“And betrayin’ your brother doesn’t make you feel a lil’ bit bad?” The cougar growled.

“Doesn’t burning Zeke up to a cinder when you’ve been... when you’ve been-”

Dwayne stomped away and towards the fire, then kicked hard into it. Wood and meaty parts exploded off into the dust. He lept into the fray and swiped something up, then bounced it between his

hands for a few moments with a yelp. It must have been very hot even through his gloves, a metal cylinder with a hanger hole at one end, smeared with black char. “Son of a fuckin’ bitch! I knew it!”

“Knew what?”

“Asshole’s been holdin’ out on somethin’ big.”

FOR THE REST of the day, Jacob rode alone behind Zeke's riderless horse. Jacob was tied into the his own saddle in such a way that he wasn't in much danger of falling off, but yet unable to even kick the horse to spur him to go anywhere else. Despite the air of doom that had surrounded them as soon as Jacob had pulled the trigger on that crossbow shot, straddling a horse with his wrists cuffed together and to the saddle horn gave him a visceral thrill.

Dwayne largely ignored him. Several times, Jacob shifted into panic and then delirium out of dehydration, only to stop as he was wavering on his horse and have Dwayne squirt water into his mouth past the impromptu bit gag made with rope. Other times, they'd stop for no reason, Dwayne wandering about or even getting off his horse to hunker down in the dirt, but then they picked up traveling with no acknowledgement that the gruff cougar had been sobbing.

Evening approached, and they kept moving, not setting up camp anywhere. During a watering stop as the sun started to set, Jacob finally tried to speak up.

“Whah arenh weh campung?”

“Pushing on ‘till the city. Should just be another hour.”

“Whahz dat?” He jerked his head towards the odd knurled metal cylinder that had come from somewhere inside of Zeke and was now on a rawhide necklace. He'd tried asking about it before he'd been tied up, but Dwayne had ignored him.

“Ain't no reason to tell you, but I guess you gotta find out anyway. Best keep you close in Red Rock City..”

Dwayne was right, first about how long it was until they reached their destination. There was no sign of any city, until they descended into a sandstone valley and rounded a corner along a small spring stream. Down on a plateau in the expansive valley lay a 'city', although hardly like the one Jacob had come from. There were no skyscrapers, no airplanes, no pedestrians staring into their smartphones, no augmented reality visors, no self-driving cars, and very few humans. There were buildings, many made of wood or something that might have been 'adobe'; there were a few internal-combustion trucks, but also plenty of horses; there seemed to be a few paved roads in the thick of the sprawl but mostly dirt; and there didn't see to be any indication of wealth that Jacob could recognize. The non-mud houses were barely one step above shanties.

No one in the city seemed to think it was strange that a cougar on a horse was leading a riderless horse and one with a bound and gagged human mount through town. Plenty of people looked at Jacob, but only with a sense of acknowledgement. As they wound from one side of the city to the next, past cooking stands and all manner of rough-hewn huts and buildings, vendors and buyers, Jacob saw several other humans in similar states being moved around bound on horseback. They were all scarred or branded, and just as resigned to their fate.

Dwayne stopped them in front of one of the nicest buildings, something that would pass for a dingy concrete strip mall back home in the suburbs. The building had a sign that read, CORDERO FINANCIAL SERVICES, and each door had some division above it: BOND ENFORCEMENT, SAVINGS, CREDIT, COLLECTIONS. It stood deserted at the moment, as the sun fell behind other buildings and cast the street in darkness. A wolf-man came out of the SAVINGS door and set about lighting kerosene lanterns on each of the support posts over the awning. Jacob gawked at him; it was like seeing the cougars for the first time, a shock of disbelief that there actually could be a wolf that walked around on human feet, used human hands, yet was as furry and vicious-looking as any wild animal.

“How come you got two hosses there an’ just one stick of beef jerky, cat?” The wolf said, barely giving Dwayne more than a glance.

Dwayne hopped down and hooked his horse to a hitching post, then hooked up Jacob’s, then the one that had belonged to Zeke. “Shit went bad.”

The wolf just nodded. “Comin’ to tide yourself over ‘till you move him off?” He gestured at Jacob with a mottled gray furred hand. He wore boots and jeans, a shirt that had been torn into a vest, and a battered trucker cap. He also carried an alarming gun and knife on his belt, and had a nametag that read, “DAVID”. “Where’s that other puss you keep ‘round?”

The cougar hooked Jacob’s shackles to chains at his hitching post, so even if he managed to get off the horse, he wouldn’t be able to escape. Dwayne then displayed the strange cylinder he was wearing as a necklace, and the wolf looked like he’d pulled out a brick of pure gold. “I said, shit went bad. You talk to him ‘bout it, I’m gonna go see what Zeke had this shoved up his butt for.” He then opened the door and went inside the savings bank with a wooden look on his face.

David walked over to Jacob and climbed up behind him on the horse, which stood and snorted with only a little indignity. “I like talkin’,” the wolf said, and then worked the rope-gag out of Jacob’s mouth. The human drooled down onto the saddle horn, then wrinkled his face a few times. “What happened to lil’ ol’ Zeke? He get himself bit by a snakey or somethin’ stupid like that? He always liked playin’ with snakes. Got real good at wrasslin’ them.” He didn’t get off the horse, and his closeness made Jacob flinch up. It was just like when Dwayne had accosted him before their furtive trysts, except David didn’t purr and now had a knife in his hand. “I know he’s dead or else your lil’ kitty friend there wouldn’t have that vault key.”

“I shot him.”

The wolf climbed right off the horse. “Now don’t you tell me bull-shit, or I’m gonna tell Dwayne an’ he’s gonna make sure you get sold off to someone real good.” The way he growled ‘real good’ did not bode well for that option.

The daytime burn of the sun had fully given way to evening chill, and Jacob was nearly naked between his loose white riding poncho. Regardless, he broke into a sweat. "I mean it, this lizard thing came up on us, and it got Zeke, and it was gonna kill him and then come after us. So I shot it, with their own crossbow, and Zeke was in the way.," he gestured over to Dwayne's horse where the bow was hooked to a rack on the saddle. "I'm... I'm kind of a crack shot."

"Uh-huh," the wolf said, and kept standing by, knife in hand but otherwise just idly waving his tail. While he stood guard, an actual car drove up - a battered and motley Jeep - and to Jacob's horror another one of the 'lizard things' climbed out. He was dressed like an all-leather version of the wolf and covered in strange bold-line tattoos over his leather-scale hide. He strode into the BOND ENFORCEMENT office and shut the door with a careless slam.

"That... that... that's one of them, the lizard things!" Jacob said.

"You shot th'hell out of Zeke with a crossbow, but you're all scared now? You ain't from around here."

"Where do you think I'm from? Down the street? Look at me! I'm not some fucking animal like you!"

"Right, you ain't already scarred up, not like a slave, none of them marks or real punishment, looks like you got lashed good. Bet that was Zeke huh? I taught him how to bullwhip."

"Well, he's DEAD!" Jacob shouted, then immediately regretted it as the lizard burst his door open a foot and stuck his beastly head out.

"Serves him right, always had somethin' wrong with him," the wolf said, and pocketed his knife, then unholstered his gun. "Hey Clate, lookit how good this cleaned up," he said, then turned the firearm over a few times in the air like he was showing it off towards the lizard. From twelve feet away.

Meanwhile, the lizard looked ready to attack, and uttered an awful gurgling hiss. "Ssshutupyaguntotin' faggot," he said, barely more than syllables in a row that sounded like English. "He ain't yours," he said a bit more clearly, but then shut the door.

"Dumb-fuck never gives a shit about guns," David huffed, then just kept it trained on Jacob. "Where you come from? You a city boy? That why you're so clean? You're gonna get your ass-hole fucked inside out. You better hope it gets wrecked so you can get a real contract doin' something worthwhile, not just cumming on command. I smell fuck on you and you know how much you skinbags are in demand 'round here. I felt your butt clench up with me up there behind ya," he said.

“I’m not a fucktoy anymore! I flew that coop. I’m going to the fuckin’ west and ran into, into these crazy cats! It doesn’t matter what anyone’s gonna do,” Jacob said, voice high, stuttering with real frustrated terror.

Dwayne stalked out of the SAVINGS door, and uttered an inappropriately cute PRRT! sound, while his tail lashed about behind him and hit the wall with a repeated soft thud. “Knew it! That asshole cat’d been holding out for years! I knew it, I fuckin’ knew it, I didn’t have any proof but I knew it, he was a fucking salesman, he’d sell a rock to a mountain, I shoulda known he was swindlin’ everyone. I thought he just got cut up in bar fights, oh no, it was him gettin’ this goddamn vault key taken out an’ stuck back in. No wonder he was on all that prak shit all day, probably felt like his guts were gonna fall out through the hole. Fuck!” Dwayne hissed so hard that he coughed and spit on the ground. “Put that thing away, Dave, I want *this guy* alive. Sure, he fuckin’ betrayed us. He was gonna get me before I got him. I jumped him like a rat. Psycho faggot’s a crack shot. Bet he’s really some bounty hunter or somethin’, got sent out here to collect tail-bones for fancy jewelry. And if he does anythin’ useful for real, then he’s at least worth real money.”

David let Dwayne vent. “Told me he killed Zeke.”

Dwayne yowled and punched the beam whose shackles stretched over to Jacob. The impact shook dust from the wood and rattled the lantern. “Damn right he fucking killed Zeke! I don’t, I don’t, that cat was fucking me over but he, he, he - I dunno why the hell I’m so mad! I didn’t love him, I just, I just don’t know what the hell I’m gonna do! I hate this shit, this fuckin’ skin trade shit. I’m gonna sell him to the right kinda bidder and then get done with this shit for good.”

“So-”

“You keep your mouth shut,” Dwayne hissed, and then jumped up on the horse behind Jacob just like the wolf had. He was much more violent about it and the horse reared and tried to buck. Dwayne grabbed its mane and made a series of bird chirps. “That’s right, that’s right, you settle down,” he said, and the horse sputtered and clomped his front hooves down.

Jacob swooned as his last vestiges of adrenaline finally gave way to pain and dehydration and exhaustion. He dumbly sat astride the horse as Dwayne fixed the gag in place.

Dwayne got down and climbed up on his own horse. “You want a horse? You got a horse, I don’t need Zeke’s,” he said, as David helpfully disconnected Jacob and mount from their shackles. Dwayne started off and Jacob’s horse followed with no command needed.

Moving through town after sundown felt even worse. Various torches or trash fires provided random heat and flickering light, but only a scant few buildings seemed to have any kind of electricity. The ones that did were always the fanciest. The night was cold and Jacob quickly started to shudder,

body wearing down from his healing injuries and the complete turmoil he'd been through. He cooked up rebellious ideas that then crumbled before he could even finish them out. The spark that had ignited when the lizard creature had showed up was now fully smothered.

"I'm not gonna just sell you off like Zeke was gonna. Now that I've got his vault key, well, I've got everything he's owed me for years. I'm gonna do what I wanna do with my life. I'm gonna set up some shop, settle down, hunt on the weekends. I'm gonna be some fat cat, and you know what he is? He's dead," Dwayne said, turning his head to the side to talk back at Jacob. Anyone who saw them merely looked back to their own business after a few seconds. Most of them were various animals; a few were humans, all with metal collars. "You wanna know what I'm gonna do with you? You ain't gonna have all that fun, like those skinbags," he gestured with a leathered hand, while his tail curled and the tip twitched. Dwayne seemed to be doing his best impression of the late Zeke, but his irate gruffness never quite made it into brassy redneck madman.

"Whaah?"

Dwayne didn't answer, and instead led them into a part of the city that was even more decrepit than the street filth they'd already seen. They approached a drab concrete and metal structure and Dwayne again hitched their horses. This time, he got Jacob down, the human stiff and groaning as he tried to assist with his arms still shackled together. The cougar wrestled Jacob and banged on a corrugated metal door with his boot. Seconds later, someone slid a little lookout window open, then clacked it shut. Dwayne pulled Jacob back and three people swarmed out of the door, then got behind both of them and hurried them inside.

"What, do you think you're doing, coming to my front door like that," a massive voice filled the cramped and stifling foyer. Inside, it was rough, unfinished and stank of bodily smells. The three people were all cats, although not cougars. They appeared to be bobcats, with the telltale tufts rising up from their ears. The massive voice came from a tiger who couldn't stand up straight in the available space. "With skin, no less."

"Quit being smug like that," Dwayne said, only to be roughed up by one of the bobcats. The two hissed and jostled for a moment before Dwayne snapped at him and chirped. The other cat backed off. "I'm not here to sell him. I'm here to get rid of him. But, if you would like to pay me, that'd be nice."

"Not looking for a fair price?" The tiger said, sounding surprised. The bobcats looked like they were doing someone's mercenary dirty work, with tactical vests and leather combat boots. The tiger wore only a big apron. "I am in the middle of something. And that something is going to forget how to breathe if I don't return to it."

"Well, now you have another something," Dwayne said, then stopped holding onto Jacob's restrained wrists. He turned to walk out.

The bobcats growled at him, but let him go. The cougar disappeared out the door, and then hoof clops announced his departure outside.

“Waaaih, waaih, wheruh heh ga-” and then Jacob coughed into the rope gag.

The tiger stepped up and pulled it out of Jacob’s mouth with two meaty fingers, strangling him slightly and then let it go down at his chin. “Obviously, you aren’t fit for the trade, in his opinion. I trust Dwayne quite well.”

“What the hell is going on? Seriously, what’s going on? I... I... I’m sorry I killed the other one! That’s right, I killed Zeke, that’s his name? The other cougar guy? I killed him.” The threat would have gotten a wide berth around Jacob back home; it got him not even a whisker flick here.

“I don’t care who you killed,” the tiger said, and shooed the bobcats away. They stomped away, hissing and swatting at each other as they pushed away into the back of the building. The massive feline stepped behind him and pushed him forward, still shackled. “You soon won’t, either.”

“I seriously don’t know what’s going on. I’m from, I’m from the real city! I’m just trying to get to the west coast! They kidnapped me, I crashed my car and they kidnapped me, they FUCKED me!”

“Obviously,” the tiger droned, and pushed Jacob through the swing-doors into the rest of the space. The floor sloped down like a ramp; the building was only a surface entrance. They descended into a dim basement rimmed with rough metal cages. One of the was occupied, and the person inside of it looked like they were on their way to becoming a monster. Vaguely human, they were covered in open scabs and bandaged, face especially gory as it was a human’s that had been stretched into the form of a canine snout. The tiger spoke up again. “I am a breaker, and you are about to be broken.”

“But I didn’t do anything!”

“Except kill Dwayne’s partner, although I do not doubt he had it coming. How did you do it?”

“Crossbow,” Jacob said. “Zeke’s own.”

“Are you proud of your accomplishment?” The tiger kept pushing, and Jacob struggled to move forward. His hips were sore from riding a horse and staying upright with his arms bound; not to mention his lame right knee. He looked around the dim space and tried to pretend it was some kind of haunted attraction. Then the creature in the cage looked his way and his eyes said, *kill me*.

“Well, I’m not dead, and neither is Dwayne.”

“You know what you’re here for?”

On the other side of the dingy room, one of the bobcats went into the dog creature's cage with something clutched in his hand. Now out of sight behind a body, he whimpered and groaned. The bobcat turned and pulled a curtain across, and then the whimpering escalated to a yelp and a growl, then a wet gagging sound. "Wait, what's going on?" Jacob spoke up, and tried to look at what was happening. "What're they doing to that.. That guy? Are they hurting him? What the fuck is going on here? What the fuck are you gonna do to me?!"

"I'm going to turn you into something beautiful, and you won't remember a thing about it." The tiger aimed him at one of the cages, where the remaining bobcats had assembled. One of them opened the door; the other flanked tiger and human, taking over and crowding Jacob into the space.

Back across the room, the third feline pushed the curtain aside and stepped out of the cage cell, then closed and locked the door. He clutched something in his hand that looked like a positively massive syringe, but instead of a needle, a tube ran from the end and dribbled something onto the floor. The bobcat was also wincing and glaring at his hand which was wet.

The tiger looked over, still unconcerned, and spoke out to the bobcat. "I told you, his jaw is probably unlocked now. Give him real food next time. Let him chew and tear at it, it'll center his thoughts. Clean the bite off and get the gear for this one."

The first two spotted cats quickly strapped Jacob down to the cot in his cell and hooked up some battered piece of military-issue monitoring equipment with electrodes on his chest and a band around his head. The situation terrified Jacob so much that he started to dissociate away from it. Everything was happening to him, terrifying animals strapping him down and wiring him up, but he felt like he was watching from a window in the other room. *Let's be honest*, he thought, *You knew you weren't gonna make it to the coast. The mythical coast.*

"Do you understand, now? That unpleasantly gory coyote over there used to be like you. We are going to turn you into one of us. A cat, in particular. I think your cougar friend would approve." The tiger spoke as deadpan as possible, face a slack feline glare. "Purification by transformation."

*Dwayne isn't my friend. Dwayne fucked me twice. Dwayne and Zeke kidnapped me. But I killed Zeke because he was a bad seed. Now it's my turn, 'cuz I'm a bad seed. I led them on like I always do, and this time, I can't run away because I'm strapped to a motherfucking cot-*

The third of the bobcats took out a big syringe from a medical bag, and this one was no feeding tube. He attached a vial to it, and before Jacob could even scream in terror, jammed it right into his heart. Jacob jumped back from dissociating to the massive pain, more than the worst of the crash, more than the flogging, more than anything he'd ever experienced. Every single heartbeat felt like someone was stabbing him, and despite the lancing pain, his heart raced faster and faster. "You fucking asshole! You fucking asshole! You're just gonna kill me!" he croaked, increasingly blinded by the pain and panic as whatever substance started coursing through his body.

This was not the west coast he'd imagined at all.

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