

DISOBEDIENCE

a novel

Daniel Sarah Karasik



D I S
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D I E N
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Daniel Sarah Karasik

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INSIDE

SAMPLE



OUTFOX THE JAILERS: GET TO COME. SUCH AS ON

this morning, when Shael learns—via the pale green letters of their bedroom wall’s infoscreen—that the motor assembly trainer is ill. The trainees will be left under the supervision of the surveillance unit, a black glass dome lodged discreetly in one corner of the ceiling. *We would like to remind you that attendance is mandatory and delinquency will be severely punished,* the infoscreen instructs. But Shael knows the surveillance footage won’t be reviewed until the evening, leaving time to alert and secure sign-off from Guard 937, with whom Coe has a delicate arrangement.

Shael passes their message to Coe through Guard 3476, with whom Shael has a similar arrangement, when 3476 arrives with rations. Just a single word: medic. Which will let Coe know to meet at their typical hour (they rendezvous every time this trainer is out—often enough) in the indefinitely under-renovation wing of Infirmary Seven. There might be another unlicensed couple there, or several: the place is known to those with need to know it. Some might be guards in disguise, or informants. A serious risk, and far from the only risk involved. Surveillance units aren’t activated in the abandoned infirmary wing, at least not noticeably, but they track the whole route there.

Potenza, Shael’s mother, calls them to eat. They sit with their younger siblings in the dwelling hub’s common room, boxy and beige and barely furnished.

“You’re eating quickly,” Potenza says.

“Running late,” Shael says, not lifting their eyes from their plate.

“He wants to see his girlfriend,” says Mertia, the smallest. Among Shael’s kin, only Potenza knows they’re not a he.

Mertia’s giggles infect Vinsan, her brother, two years older, who seldom smiles anymore. Potenza eats, impassive, reaches over to brush Shael’s long, wavy hair out of their eyes. “How can you see,” she murmurs.

In the shadows of their grey bedroom, a windowless concrete cave, Shael dresses for Coe. The black thong Coe likes; the white corset with delicate pink snaps. Lips stained just a shade or three redder than normal, no sure indication of Betweenness, plausibly deniable. A subtle effect also with the lash shade, though here discretion is harder to achieve, requiring a delicate touch with the application brush, lest clumping make it impossible to credibly feign innocence if scrutinized by guards, to bat dramatic lashes and say: What? They’re just like that. Standard masculine robe worn over their corset, gown hidden in their satchel. Risky...but what are they to do, not live? Accept the tedium of a life planned and controlled in every detail? Let the corporation cow them out of every delight besides the easy, deathly high of Sanem?

At hub unlock, Shael files out as usual. They follow the crowded route to training. Down the turquoise corridors of the hub block, painted generations ago like all the other blocks, supposedly to make confinement less oppressive, lower the suicide rate—then extraordinarily high, even by the camp’s standards. The effect has been to turn each journey into a fever dream. Shael never gets fully used to it, though they’ve never known anywhere else. Paint has peeled off all over the place, leaving even the brightest corridors grey-dappled. Silence rules here, broken only by the swish of regulation robes. There was once music in the corridors, a haunting of ancient song, but it filled participants with such melancholy—an affliction disastrous for productivity, the assessors noted—that it was removed.

Shael moves in step with the mass of other participants, along a narrow lane, its boundary marked on the floor in white. There’s no

explicit penalty for stepping over that white line, but so well-disciplined are most of Flint's participants, so thick the atmospheric threat of punishment at all times, that the lane holds its traffic as sternly as if its verge were made of steel. No participant meets eyes with any other. No one speaks. A spectacle of perfect obedience, in which Shael participates as seamlessly as possible—so as to more invisibly escape it. How many of the others walking alongside them feel and do the same? Maybe a greater number than their overseers would guess.

At the checkpoint between hub blocks, Shael flashes their identification papers: trainee, reporting to 9877C. The bored guard on duty sweeps them along, just one participant among the dull many. Through the orange corridors of the next block, past metal door after metal door, behind each of them a dwelling hub housing several families. In the early days, Flint experimented with different forms of generational housing, but the model placing children with at least one of their birth parents was found to have advantages for social control that just couldn't be matched. Parents and children would reliably impose a certain discipline on each other: the parents moderating their own risks for their children's sake, while pressuring their young to avoid attracting attention. Potenza, for instance, who's known about Shael's Betweenness for as long as Shael can remember, has always policed her child's gender with more worried vigilance than any official agency could do. Surveilling them, chastising them for transgressive play, urging them to conform: to keep them safe, ostensibly, but also doing the corporation's work of social pacification for it. As do the children who torment peers thought to be Betweens. And the withholding of intimate match licences from participants suspected of such deviance. And the hard correction centres.

The active entrance to Infirmary Seven is a reinforced glass door, located in the main passage of a hub block painted a soft purple, 9876C. Behind this door, Shael knows, lies a vast, gleaming clinic. All steel and glass, equipment of the latest design, medical minds of verified high competence—here the corporation spares no effort. Trin, a young participant frequently in fragile health, has told Shael all about it. Has described

how whenever Magent, the corporation that controls the continent's lands south of the Waste, sends diplomatic missions to Flint's camp, Flint executives make sure to work a tour of the medical facilities into the visit. Why go to such trouble? the Magent people ask. Why bother with this healing of bodies that are mostly interchangeable and anyway are reproducing above the population replacement rate? (Magent's camp is said to be unimaginably hellish.) According to Trin, who relates her insights dispassionately, the analysis of a person from whom pain has stripped illusions, Flint justifies its oases of bodily care in a couple of ways. First, simply, it's convenient to employ bodies that work in as optimized and normalized a state as possible. Second, and more important, a strategic investment in certain narrow forms of care makes it harder for agitators among participants to frame the corporation as unkind. Flint manages its camp by an old paternal logic: the corporation protects and provides, it does so effectively in a dangerous world where such protection and provision is needed, so its domination is legitimate and must be accepted by those it rules. That it also rules by force—of course nobody has a choice about their confinement—is beside the point.

Shael passes Infirmary Seven's active entrance without a glance. They continue down the hall till they reach a plain metal door, unnumbered but otherwise identical to those that lead to dwelling hubs. Without a break in their step, resisting the perverse urge to glance over their shoulder at the nearest surveillance unit, they open the door and slip through. As always, they marvel not only at finding the door unlocked, but also at how unremarkable it is to discover it that way, so abundant are the gaps in Flint's supposedly seamless matrix of control. How is it possible that the more rules, surveillance, and threats of correction proliferate, the more air pockets of freedom appear as well? The corporation, Shael thinks, delivers on some of its propaganda's promises despite itself. In films screened on the compulsory celebration days each month, a narrating voice claims that Flint's vast prison camp ("supported life/work zone") offers prisoners ("participants") maximal freedom by relieving them of the burden of constant decision making, while imposing on them a healthful discipline. The corpora-

tion's real designs, of course, can be read off the calluses of Potenza's fingers, sewing for most of the hours she's awake: the virtually limitless labour power of a captive workforce, sweating for the Mountainers' benefit. Yet carelessness, laziness, desire among the guards, who, prisoners themselves, are treated little better than the rest, supply liberties Flint never meant to offer. Sign-off on compromising surveillance footage. An unlocked door.

Unlike the officially occupied section of the infirmary, the abandoned wing is glassless. Steel surfaces, grey walls. Scaffolding lines the halls, illuminated with a faint blue glow. No one in sight. Not far from where Coe will be waiting, there's a small examination room without a door. Shael ducks into the room and squirms out of their loose robe, withdraws the form-fitting gown from their satchel. Before they can pull it on, there's a disturbance nearby. Voices, shuffling. Shael freezes, naked apart from underwear and corset. They flatten their back against the wall, watch the corridor. Two bodies drift into view. Muffled giggles, a kiss. Two feminine-appearing people, absorbed in each other. They're gone as soon as they appear. Shael exhales, dresses.

Coe is waiting in the examination room next door. Palpably impatient, hungry for Shael when they arrive. Yet also preoccupied, not fully present behind his eyes.

"What is it?" Shael asks.

"The group's dance," Coe replies.

"Is something wrong?"

"Just delays," Coe says. "The usual. Nothing worth talking about."

He slides off the examination table where he's been perched, squeezes Shael's waist with his long, slender hands. Coe has no need to specify that by the group he means the clandestine revolutionary organization called the Blood Moon, doesn't have to explain that dance refers to a planned attack on a correctors' station, because Shael knows Coe's codes. And Coe knows Shael. Knows, for instance, that if he slaps Shael's bum, hard, and maintains a stern demeanour—steely as a corrector—Shael will let out a short, sharp cry, which they'll promptly swallow, trying to regain their composure.