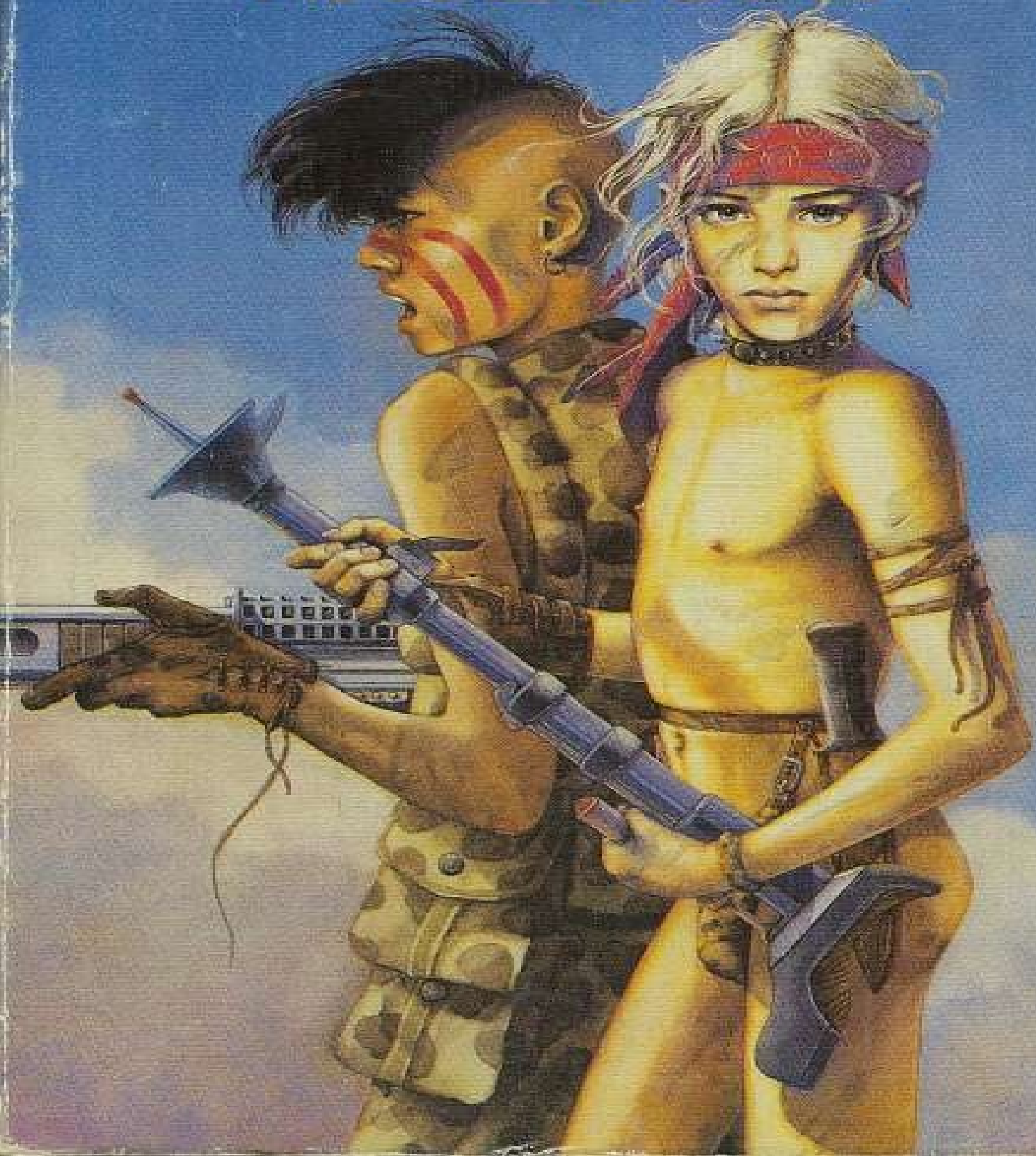


Kevin Esser

DANCE OF THE WARRIORS



Dance of the Warriors

by Kevin Esser



Kevin Esser's *Dance of the Warriors* is totally hot, it *kicks ass*, and should be treasured as one of the very few members of that gorgeous hybrid set of radical porno queer SF novels, an exclusive genre presided over by Uncle Bill Burroughs & including Sam Delaney & myself... and that's about it. *All right!* VAG POWER!

- Hakim Bey, author of *Crowstone*

I suspect this book will become *the* man - boy love statement and a sort of rallying cry to the masses. I've certainly been feeling the urge to scrawl 'VAG POWER!' on every wall I see.

- Camilla

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First Edition published in March, 1988 in The Netherlands

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The Acolyte Press

P. O. Box I273I

1100 AS Amsterdam - ZO

The Netherlands

CIP - GEGEVENS KONINKLUKE BIBLIOTHEEK,
DEN HAAG

Esser, Kevin

Dance of the Warriors / Kevin Esser. -

Amsterdam: Acolyte Press

ISBN 90 - 6971 - 010 - 2

UDC 82 - 31

Trefw.: romans; oorspronkelijk - Engels.

DANCE OF THE WARRIORS

by Kevin Esser

ebook by the Ghost

Book One

One

Summer was dying. A few leaves were falling from the oak trees in the front yard, fluttering dry and brown to the grass. Teddy sat watching them from the porch, his chin resting on both fists. It was hot for September, sunny and humid. A weak breeze ruffled Teddy's hair. He wrinkled his nose at the sharp stench blowing from the nearby fields. Two weeks of heavy rain had turned them into swampland. Lettuce and cabbage and cauliflower lay rotting and stinking in the mud, impossible to harvest. All

spring and summer, the Mexican migrant workers had labored in the fields, tending the crops - but now those crops were a foul mess, cooking in the sun.

"They smell wormy," Teddy whispered to himself.

He glanced up as a door banged from across the gravel road. It was the new man, the stranger who had recently moved into the rundown old house that everyone called "the shack" because of its cracked shingles and broken shutters and sagging, lopsided porch. Teddy had noticed him once or twice, but there was nothing special about him. Not tall, not fat, not ugly. Just average. His brown hair and beard were streaked with gray. He wore a pair of wire - rimmed glasses that flashed sunlight now as he lifted his head. Teddy looked away quickly, somehow embarrassed, not sure why.

The man stared across the road for another moment, then checked his empty mailbox and walked back into the house.

Another leaf wafted to the ground. In a few weeks, it would be - time to rake them up. Teddy smiled at the thought. The work was a pain, but it brought him good money around the neighborhood. Sometimes, though, even making and saving money seemed pointless. The new war made everything seem pale and unimportant. The whole world was going to be blown apart. His teachers insisted that photon and plasma weapons would never be used, but Teddy didn't believe them.

The smell of death was everywhere.

He wandered around to the back of the house and went inside, his canvas bookbag dangling from his right hand, bumping across the floor. Old food was on the kitchen table - scraps of cheese and lunchmeat, an open jar of instant coffee, half-eaten sandwiches, an empty can of Chef Boyardee spaghetti. The sink was piled with greasy dishes, cups, crusty silverware, pans, pots, cracked Tupperware, all soaking in cold, dirty water. Teddy surveyed the mess. Same as ever. He went into the living room. His mother was on the couch, a glass of vodka in her hand. She glanced at Teddy as he walked past, on his way to the bedroom. "How was school?" She sounded almost interested.

"Oh, fine," he said, smiling briefly, pausing outside the door to his room. "Nothing special, really. It was fine."

"Good," she nodded, her eyes drifting back to the vid screen. Another group of fag-criminals had been rounded up and were being shipped to the Correctional Camps in Utah. They shuffled to the prison van in their gray robes, their foreheads branded with the mark of the serpent. Teddy watched them until a commercial for dog food flashed onto the screen, then turned away slowly and went into his room.

From his window he could see across the back yard to Sandburg Creek, and across that to the muddy patchwork of fields simmering beneath the evening sun. Away in the distance, near the railroad tracks that bordered the far edge of the fields, he could just see the trailers of the migrant workers, a shabby jungle of wood and tin. He knew one of the boys from over there, a fifteen-year-old kid named Cisco Zepeda who sometimes sat in the vegetable stand up the road. They had gotten to know each other during the summer. They weren't exactly friends, but they liked each other well enough to hang out together and talk about the war. The prospect of joining the military excited Cisco. "I wanna be a Red Beret," he always said. "Or maybe a Christian Guard. They're chill, man, absolutely the *best*." Teddy wanted no part of it. He was only thirteen, still five years away from being drafted, but the war was closing in, getting nearer. All the boys over eighteen had already disappeared from the neighborhood. Now there was talk of lowering the draft age to sixteen. And it would happen soon enough, Teddy was sure of that.

He turned away from the window and kicked off his shoes. They were black and tight and uncomfortable. Teddy hated them. He hated his whole school uniform. Blue and white. "The colors of our Blessed Virgin," the teachers often reminded the class. "Chastity, purity, sinless perfection." Baby-blue shirt, baby-blue pants, blue-and-white clip-on tie: the uniform of St. Mary's Academy for Boys. It

was a sweet relief to take it off every evening. Teddy draped the shirt and pants and tie across the back of a chair. He glanced at himself in the big mirror above the dresser, a slender boy wearing white underpants and black socks. His blond hair was brushed back long and curly behind his ears. He ran one finger back and forth between his nipples, wishing that he had some hair on his chest. He flexed his biceps, grimaced at his reflection, did a flurry of rapid karate punches.

Cisco also liked karate. Teddy wandered to the window and gazed across the flooded fields toward the distant cluster of trailers. The boys had agreed, weeks before, to practice together, to help each other with their karate moves. Teddy had forgotten about it until now. He decided to visit Cisco in the morning. Saturday. No school. Nothing else to do anyway.

His mother called him for supper. Teddy mumbled, "Yeah, OK, I'm coming," and headed for the kitchen. There was a pan of soup on the table. Most of the other debris had been cleared away. His mother glanced at him as he pulled out a chair and sat down. "You shouldn't run around without any clothes," she said. "It's not very nice."

"I've got clothes," Teddy said. He snapped the elastic waistband on his briefs. "It's too hot for other stuff, anyway."

"You're too old. It's sort of... it's not nice," his mother said again. She sat across the table and watched as Teddy poured the soup into his bowl. Chicken broth and noodles splashed steaming from the pan. "How was school today?"

Teddy looked up. "Fine," he said. His mother's eyes were bloodshot and droopy. He was no longer surprised by her memory lapses or her constantly repeated questions. "School was fine, Mom."

She nodded, smoothed back her hair with a heavy, awkward hand. "I can make you a sandwich," she said quietly, almost to herself. "A sandwich might be nice."

"No, Mom, that's OK."

"A sandwich..." Her voice faded into silence. She stood up and walked toward the living room. "I'll just watch the vid," she said. "Just watch a little vid for a while."

"You're not going to eat anything?"

"Had some already, hon."

She was lying, of course. Teddy knew she was going into the living room for another drink. She didn't like to drink in front of him. Doing it in private made it seem less serious, less of a problem. Discretion. Propriety. Something like that.

Teddy finished his soup. He pushed back his chair, scraping it noisily across the linoleum, and crossed to the back door. The swampy fields were glowing rose and orange in the twilight. They looked almost pretty now. Six geese flew slowly above, black against the sun. Teddy could hear their honking, lonesome in the distance. He leaned his cheek against the cool screen. The mesh smelled dusty and metallic. He hoped that Cisco would be home tomorrow. His eagerness surprised him. Seeing Cisco suddenly seemed important. Special.

Maybe even exciting.

Two

Richard checked his mailbox, glanced once more across the road, then went back into the house. He lit a Camel. His hand was trembling. The sight of the boy had been like a kick in the stomach. Richard

had glimpsed him before - maybe three or four times - since moving into the neighborhood. But this time their eyes had met; this time they had seen each other and paused; this had been a fleeting encounter, almost an introduction. Richard smiled, took a drag on his cigarette. He was being foolish. Overly romantic, as usual. He was old enough to know better. Even eye contact could be dangerous.

He decided to take a walk. Activity was the best antidote for treacherous daydreams. There was a tiny food mart up the road, maybe half a mile away. Richard lit another cigarette and left the house. The air reeked with the odor of rotten vegetables, an odor like dead fish and sewer gas. There was no relief from the stench until Richard was past the fields and the trailers and over the railroad tracks, nearly to the store. He stepped to the side of the road as a car raced past. The weeds brushed wet against his pants. His eyes froze on the license plate. It was a special vice patrol.

He threw aside his cigarette, turned quickly toward home, then stopped. He could hear the car turning around behind him, crunching through the gravel. The siren emitted one brief warning shriek. Richard waited on the side of the road, sweat pouring out cold on his face, one hand clenching and unclenching and clenching again.

The patrol car glided to a stop beside him. Two agents were in the front seat, both wearing regulation black uniforms and caps. The driver climbed out slowly, casually, moving with the jaded deliberation of an expert bored by trivialities. He nodded a curt greeting. "What's your name, friend?"

Richard was already pulling out his ID card. "Wilson," he said, handing over the card. "Richard Wilson."

"Live around here, Richard?"

"Up the road."

The agent studied the card, turned it over briefly, handed it back. "Where do you work, Richard?"

"I used to be a teacher... several years ago."

The agent nodded, squinting slightly. The word "teacher" had obviously caught his attention.

"But I don't have a job right now," Richard went on. "My father left me some money when he died. Enough to live on."

"Lucky you." The agent pulled a stick of gum from the pocket of his black jacket. He unwrapped it slowly, crumpled the paper and foil into a tiny ball and deposited it back neatly in his pocket. His eyes stayed on Richard as he pushed the gum into his mouth and started chewing. "So... you live alone?"

"Yes, sir."

The agent nodded again. "That's what I figured." He leaned one hand against the top of the car, still nodding slightly, still chewing. "Are you a homosexual, Richard?"

"No, sir."

The agent laughed. "Come on," he said, sounding very bored, "save us all a lot of trouble."

"I'm not a homosexual," Richard repeated as calmly as possible. He could feel his legs shaking. "I'm telling you the truth."

"OK," the agent shrugged, "we'll play it your way." He opened the rear door of the car. "Get in, we'll give you a lift home."

"You don't have..."

"Get in," the agent said again, grinning like an affable limo driver. "We'll just have a little look around your house."

Five minutes later, Richard was slouched at the kitchen table, watching as the two agents roamed nonchalantly from room to room, opening drawers and cupboards and closets, poking beneath cushions, leafing through books and magazines. The senior agent checked a final drawer, glanced in the refrigerator, then stepped in front of Richard. "Where do you keep your porn?" He took the gum from his

mouth, flicked it into the wastebasket. “Where is it, Richard?”

“I don't have anything like that.”

“You don't have anything like that,” the agent repeated softly, obviously amused. “Where did you hide it? With a friend?”

“I don't have...”

“You think you're clever, Richard?”

“No, sir, I don't.”

“You think you're smart?”

“No, sir, not at all.”

The refrigerator switched on with a loud hum. The agent glanced at it over his shoulder, then grinned slightly and stepped closer to the table. “What's your boyfriend's name, Richard?”

“My boyfriend?” For a moment, Richard felt a rush of panic that left him dizzy and out of breath. Old names and faces flashed through his mind, each as lethal as a bullet. Then the panic subsided. He realized that the agent was bluffing. Again. “I don't have a boyfriend. I'm not a homosexual.”

“Sure,” the agent muttered. His partner entered from the living room, shook his head, said, “It's clean, let's go.”

“Yeah, we're finished.”

They walked to the door. The senior agent turned with his hand already on the knob. “Get yourself a nice little wife, Richard. If you're not a fag-crim, then get married, have some kids. Do your duty. Right?”

“Yeah, right,” Richard said, his breath coming easier now, his muscles unknotting. “You're absolutely right.”

The agent took a last glance around the kitchen, then followed his partner out the door.

Richard didn't move. He sat staring at the noisy refrigerator, letting the fear drain from his bones. The room was nearly dark. A dog barked outside. Somewhere in the distance, music was playing. Electric moog harps, guitars, synth-drums and vibrapipes. Richard stood up and walked to the door. The music was coming from the house across the road. The boy must have been playing his CD box. Richard smiled. The song reminded him of Morocco, of Berber drums and pipes, of frenzied pagan melodies performed beneath a desert moon. Twenty years ago. Maybe twenty-five. Hard to remember.

He leaned against the door and listened. The breeze cooled him through the screen, drying the sweat on his face. He felt shaky inside, raw and frightened. But at least he was free. That was something. He was still free. And he had his memories. They were safe from the vice agents, hidden away, private, untouchable.

Three

Saturday was hot, gray, muggy. The fields were steamy and stagnant, as putrid as an open sewer. Teddy held one hand over his nose as he turned off the road and headed for Cisco's trailer. The ground was littered with cans and bottles and piles of dog crap seething with flies. Before he reached the trailer, Teddy spotted Cisco near the railroad tracks, using a tree stump as a target for his pocketknife. He jogged to the older boy's side. “Hey, Cisco, what's up?”

“Not much, man.”

“Is that your knife?”

“Yeah, it's mine.” Cisco wiped the blade on his green camouflage pants. His dark brown hair was long and uncombed, hanging in sweaty tangles over his ears.

“You wanna try it?”

“Sure, yeah.”

They took turns throwing the knife into the old stump. Teddy had trouble getting it to stick, but Cisco was deadly, flicking the blade home with fearsome precision. He had a talent for weapons, combat, stealth. “Wish I could be a ninja,” he remarked wistfully, glancing at the knife before flinging it once more into the wood. “Or at least a Guard.”

“We should practice our karate,” Teddy said. He didn't want to discuss the war. “Remember we talked about it before?”

“No shit, man, you're right.” Cisco wandered to the stump. The knife was still quivering when he grabbed it and pulled it out. “Where should we do it?”

“We could use my basement.”

“That's chill.” He folded the knife and slipped it into his pocket. “What about your mom and dad?”

“My mom won't care,” Teddy said. “And my dad was killed when I was little, so...” He shrugged, not sure what else to say.

Cisco glanced at him. “In the Old War?”

“Yeah.” They were at the road now, walking side by side, taking their time. “He was a sergeant.”

“Mine's still alive,” Cisco said, sounding almost disappointed. “He had a bad back, he couldn't fight.”

Teddy grabbed a handful of gravel, started pitching pebbles into the weeds beside the road as they walked along. “We talked about the Mexican Territories in school,” he remarked idly, remembering a recent history class. “They used to be a real country before the Old War... before the Federation.”

“Yeah,” Cisco said, “we learned about that last year. That's why I asked about your mom and dad... 'cause some guys they still don't like Mexicans so good.”

“That's stupid.”

“Maybe - but it's true, man.”

“We're all part of the Federation now,” Teddy shrugged. “It seems like we should be friends.”

“And kill the fuckin' Empire pricks,” Cisco said with a mock snarl. Laughing, he punched the other boy lightly in the ribs. “No shit, man, I wanna do some *real* fightin'. It would be utterly kick-ass, absolute.”

“I'm not in any hurry.”

“All I need is an ID card.”

“You're only fifteen, you can't get...”

“It don't matter,” Cisco said. He kicked at a crumpled Coke can. His hightop gym shoes were tattered, unlaced, floppy. His ankles were bare and dirty. “I know a guy at school, he can get me a card.”

“A fake?”

“Fuckin' right, man. I'm gonna get it in a few weeks.”

“What about your parents?”

“I do what I want,” Cisco said. “Ain't nobody tells me what to do.”

Teddy's mother was in the kitchen when the boys arrived.

She looked around with a towel in one hand, a dripping plate in the other. She was working her way gamely through a week's worth of dirty dishes. She smiled at Teddy, then at Cisco, waiting for some sort

of introduction.

“This is Cisco, Mom. He's my friend.”

She nodded, still smiling slightly. “From school?”

“Not really.” Teddy nudged the other boy toward the basement door. “We're going to practice karate... downstairs.”

“That's a nice idea.” She turned back toward the sink. Her voice was a little too loud, too tense. She needed a drink, Teddy could tell. “You boys go ahead, have a good time.”

In the basement, Cisco aimed a quick punch at the heavy bag in the middle of the room. “She's nice,” he said, positioning himself for a roundhouse kick.

“My mom?”

“Yeah.” His foot slammed against the gray canvas. “She's a nice lady.”

Teddy nodded, said, “She's nice, yeah, we get along real good.” He was watching Cisco. His stomach felt suddenly tight, shivery. He recognized the feeling; he knew what it was. Being alone with Cisco excited him. He felt vaguely surprised, but not guilty, not frightened. Just... weird.

He took off his shoes and started doing some exercises to stretch his shoulders, his back, his legs. “You ready to spar?”

Cisco landed another kick against the bag, then turned around and nodded. He was already beginning to sweat. His dirty white T-shirt was hanging out loose from the back of his pants. He kicked off his floppy gym shoes and started shaking his legs and arms, loosening up. His feet were filthy, the toenails black with grime. “I'm gonna whip your ass,” he smiled.

Teddy smiled back. “No way, man. I'm too *excellent!*”

They spent the next thirty minutes sparring and grappling and laughing at each other's insults. By the end of the bout, they were both shirtless, both glistening with sweat - Teddy in his blue jeans, Cisco in his camouflage pants - breathless, exhilarated. Neither could claim victory. Cisco was bigger and stronger than Teddy, but both boys were quick and clever and ended up fighting each other to a draw.

“You're pretty decent,” Cisco said, picking up his shirt.

He wiped the sweat from his chest and arms. “Not bad for a punk.”

“That was fierce,” Teddy nodded. “We should do it all the time.”

“No shit, absolute.”

They clasped hands and laughed, giddy from heat and adrenaline and the new bond of friendship between them.

Later that day, after eating lunch with Cisco and beating him in a long game of Holographic Chess, Teddy returned alone to the basement. It was dim and cool and smelled of mildew and boy-sweat. He jabbed his workout bag with a series of lazy punches, left right left, brushing his knuckles across the rough canvas. Moving faster, he danced back two steps and aimed a hard side kick at the bag. A muscle in his left thigh went into a sudden cramp. He winced, sucked in air between his teeth, sat down hastily on an old sleeping mat against the wall.

“Never do kicks without warming up,” he muttered to himself. “Moron.”

He unfastened his jeans and pushed them down to his knees. The knot of pain in his thigh was already easing. Nothing serious, just a spasm. He rubbed it with his fingers, massaging and loosening the clenched muscle. The only sound in the basement was the rhythmic squeak of the punching bag, still swinging slowly on its steel chain. It was safe here, quiet, peaceful. His mother was upstairs in the living room, asleep on the couch. Teddy understood - sort of - why she was so unhappy, why she always drank so much. It was like a disease, a sickness in her heart, and no one could make it go away, no one could help her because the whole world was empty and frightened and sick. The whole world was dying.

Teddy closed his eyes, trying to shut out the fear. He let himself drift. Safe, quiet, peaceful. Thinking about Cisco. Remembering the smell of him. It was a good smell, an exciting smell. Teddy knew it was wrong to think about other boys; he knew all about fag-crims and the Camps in Utah. But the images were too vivid to brush aside.

He touched the hardness in his underpants - still thinking about the good smell, the brown skin, the glisten of sweat. He opened his eyes, making sure that the basement door was safely shut, then pulled down his underpants and started stroking himself slowly. He took his time, letting the images play in his head.

The bag squeaked softly on its chain.

Four

The next week was worse than usual. Teddy thought it would never end. He sat through lessons that sounded like gibberish. The harder he tried to concentrate, the less he understood. History, geography, math, English - none of them mattered, none of them could snag his attention. Christian Morality class was the worst. Teddy already knew the lessons by heart; he'd been hearing them since first grade. The familiar words lulled him deeper and deeper into comfortable daydreams. He was thinking about Cisco, making plans for the upcoming weekend, when he noticed the silence around him. He glanced at the other boys. They were staring at him. Suddenly alarmed, he looked to the front. Brother Graham was watching him with an expression of weary frustration. "Are we disturbing your nap, Disciple Cameron?"

Teddy shook his head. "No, sir, I was just..."

"I'm not really interested," Brother Graham said. He was tapping a wooden pointer against the palm of his left hand. "Perhaps you'd like to answer my earlier question?"

"I didn't hear..."

"No, of course you didn't." He aimed the pointer at a boy near Teddy. "Disciple Ericson, why don't you tell Disciple Cameron how a proper Christian youth dresses in public."

The boy stood up quickly. "Soberly and discreetly, with no unseemly display of bare limbs." He glanced at Teddy with a smug grin, then resumed his seat.

"Is that correct, Disciple Cameron?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now, my boy, tell the class why the Federation has dress codes for its young citizens."

Teddy stood up and cleared his throat. "The dress codes are for our own good, to protect innocent children, to instill proper Christian values, and to guard against wicked thoughts." He recited the words sluggishly, with none of the appropriate fervor and conviction. Brother Graham watched him for a moment longer, appraising him silently, then turned away and sighed. "Stop by my office after school, Disciple Cameron."

Teddy nodded, cursing himself inside for being such a jerk. But he couldn't help it. The dress code and the other rules were stupid, and he couldn't pretend that they weren't.

At three o'clock, he marched obediently into Brother Graham's office. The Brother was behind his desk, preoccupied by a pile of term papers. He glanced up at the boy standing near the door. "Ah... it's Disciple Cameron." He beckoned gently. "Advance to your doom, my boy."

Teddy stepped forward, his bookbag dangling against the floor. He noticed, with some relief, that the

Brother was grinning slightly. Not such a bad guy. Better than most.

“So, what do you have to say about your recent behavior?”

“I'm not sure.”

“Not sure?”

“I guess I... it just seems that I can't concentrate very good.”

“That's obvious,” the Brother commented softly. “And how exactly do you account for this unfortunate daydreaming of yours?”

Teddy shrugged. “I don't know, it's just... “ He struggled again, lowered his eyes. “I'll try harder, I promise.”

Brother Graham walked around to the front of his desk and sat against the edge. “You're a thirteen-year-old boy, Disciple Cameron. You're at a precarious age. The mind becomes filled with dangerous thoughts.” He paused, waiting for his words to take effect. “Is that your problem, Disciple? Is your mind troubled by unclean thoughts?”

Teddy didn't answer.

“No need to be shy, my boy. It's perfectly normal. The adolescent mind is a... is a battlefield, you might say, between the clean and the unclean.” He touched his own jacket. “Remember the colors of our uniform, Blue and white. Purity, chastity. Pray to the Blessed Virgin for strength.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now... there's the unpleasant matter of your punishment.” He crossed to the door and shut it quietly. A wooden paddle was hanging on the back. He took it in his hand and turned towards Teddy. “I think you know the procedure, Disciple.”

The boy nodded, staring at the paddle. He set his bookbag on the floor, then lowered his trousers and his shorts and bent over the front of the desk. He heard Brother Graham step behind him, heard him murmur, “Accept your penance bravely, Disciple,” then felt the paddle whack sharply against his bottom. Once, twice, again. He pressed his forehead against his arm and forced himself not to cry. Eight, nine, ten stinging smacks, and then it was over. Brother Graham stepped back. “That's all, my boy. I think we're finished for now.”

Teddy pulled up his pants, tucked in his shirt, fastened his belt. He grabbed his bookbag and moved towards the door. “I'm going to miss my bus if...”

“Next week,” Brother Graham interrupted, “I trust we'll see an improvement in your attitude.”

“I'll try real hard.”

He touched the boy's shoulder. “There are special homes for bad children, you know.”

“Yes, sir.”

“We wouldn't want you to end up in one of those homes, would we, Disciple Cameron?”

“No, sir.”

“Off you go, then. Don't miss your bus.”

Teddy ran off down the hallway, the canvas bookbag bumping against his leg as he headed for freedom.

At home, he found his mother stirring a pot of stew. The kitchen smelled of carrots and onion and beef. She looked over her shoulder and smiled. “They had meat at the store today.”

“That's great, Mom.”

She banged the wooden spoon against the edge of the pot, replaced the cover. “Good day at school?”

“Yeah, it was fine.” Teddy kissed her on the cheek as he passed. “That stew smells great.”

“It's ready, soon as you're hungry.”

“In a little while.”

He went quickly to his room. The scene in Brother Graham's office came rushing back. He felt a tightness in his throat, a hot rush of blood to his face. But crying was for babies. Teddy forced back his tears and threw his bookbag across the room. He wanted to hit something, wanted to slam his fist through the wall. "I hate you," he said to no one, to everyone. "I hate you!"

He tore off his uniform and left it lying crumpled on the floor. His bottom was still sore from the paddling. They had no right to hit him. It wasn't fair.

Someday, he thought... someday I'll hit them back, I'll hurt them all.

Something tapped suddenly at the window. Teddy yanked up the venetian blinds and discovered Cisco smiling on the other side, still carrying his school books and wearing his green high school uniform.

Teddy pushed up the window. "What's going on?"

"I walked home from school, man. Just stopped by, no fuckin' reason." He looked more carefully at Teddy's face. "You pissed off about somethin'?"

"Not really. I got whipped at school, that's all."

"On the ass?"

"Yeah," Teddy laughed, "I got whipped for daydreaming and stuff like that."

"Shit, man, that's utterly hairball, absolute."

Teddy was kneeling in front of the window, resting his arms against the sill. "The whole school is absolute hairball," he said. His anger was gone now. The world seemed less frightening. "You wanna do our karate stuff tomorrow?"

"Fuckin' right, man. I been practicin' my kicks all week."

"You still won't be any good."

"Cocksucker!"

"You wish."

"You're gonna get your skinny ass kicked."

"Like hell," Teddy said, feeling actually happy now.

"*You're* the one who's going to get his ass kicked!"

They laughed together for a few more seconds, out of insults. Then Cisco stepped back. "Well, man, I gotta slide."

"Yeah, I'll see you tomorrow."

"In the morning."

"Come early."

"Fuckin' right."

Teddy watched him lope away, heading for the bridge across Sandburg Creek. The breeze coming through the window was still foul, still contaminated by the rotten vegetables. But October was only a few days away; the weather would soon become cooler, drying the muddy fields and cleansing the air.

The boy closed the window and stood up. Supper was waiting. He rubbed his sore behind. For a moment, the anger returned. But then he thought of Cisco and relaxed.

On his way out, he folded his school uniform neatly over the back of the chair.

Five

On Saturday, the wind finally shifted, bringing cool air and clean blue skies. The trees started

shedding their leaves more quickly now, dropping soft showers of red and gold and orange. Richard watched them from his front door, wondering if he should buy a rake or borrow one from the boy's mother. He knew, by now, that the boy had no father, no sisters, no brothers. He saw him leave for school every morning and return every afternoon, dressed in the blue-and-white uniform of St. Mary's Academy. Watching him, wondering about him, had become a daily custom, a pastime that brought more pain than pleasure. Richard guessed often at his name: Bobby seemed right. Or Todd. Or maybe David. He thought, early on, that he might hear the boy's name shouted by his mother, but it never happened. She rarely ventured from the house, never called to him for lunch or dinner or curfew. So Richard continued to watch, and to wonder.

That afternoon, he walked up the road to the store for some cigarettes, coffee, bread, rice, cheese. He never made the trip without an anxious flutter in his stomach, cringing each time a car drove past.

On his way back, he paused near the migrant trailers to light a Camel. There was a lingering odor here of rancid cabbage, but nothing to compare to the stench of recent weeks. Tossing away the match, Richard glanced left and discovered the boy walking towards him. He felt sudden panic, embarrassment, confusion. He wanted to run, to avoid any public encounter between them. The boy, too, appeared flustered, uneasy with encountering an adult outside Academy walls. They stood staring at each other for a moment. Then the boy moved forward.

Richard smiled nervously. "I think we're neighbors," he said. "I'm Richard Wilson."

"I've seen you a few times," the boy nodded. "You live in the... in the house across the road." His eyes were green, bright, alert.

"Yep, that's me."

They walked together in silence, squinting into the late afternoon sun. After three or four uncomfortable minutes, the boy cleared his throat and glanced at Richard. "My name's Teddy."

"Is that short for Edward?"

"Yes, sir."

From up the road, a car came driving towards them, bouncing through the chuckholes, churning up a whirlpool of dust. Richard's heart started racing. He watched the car approach, held his breath as it passed by, then laughed weakly. The boy looked at him. "Are you OK?"

"I think so." He took a drag on his cigarette, laughed again.

"I'm just a little nervous."

"About the police?"

Richard nodded. "Maybe you should run on ahead."

"Talking together is only a misdemeanor."

"How in the world do you know *that*?"

"From school. I know all the rules."

"Apparently."

"Anyway, we're almost home." Teddy waved his hand toward the Sandburg Creek bridge just ahead. "It'll be OK."

"Let's pick up the pace... just in case."

At the bridge, Richard leaned against the iron railing and lit another cigarette. "You go ahead," he told the boy, "I'll wait here for a few minutes."

The boy hesitated, then nodded and started off. He took only a few steps before Richard called him back. "I wanted to ask you a question."

Teddy waited, one hand on the railing.

"It's none of my business," Richard smiled, "but I was wondering... I was wondering why you were at

the trailer camp today.”

“I have a friend there,” Teddy said, “and we were practicing karate and stuff this morning, and then we went back there to fool around.”

“It's none of my business,” Richard said again. The boy's voice was adolescent and husky, just beginning to change. “I'm nosy, I guess.”

Teddy laughed softly. “That's OK.”

“Well... you'd better go.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Teddy waved, already backing away, then turned towards home. He walked on his toes with a brisk, nimble stride. Slender, coltish, dressed in sneakers, jeans, a gray sweatshirt. Blond hair brushed behind his ears, long and curly in back. Dangerously beautiful.

Richard finished his cigarette and tossed the butt into the creek. He shook his head. Something risky and frightening was happening. He should never have spoken to the boy. Then again, verbal contact between an unmarried man and a minor was only a class C misdemeanor, as Teddy had observed. A modest fine, maybe - nothing more.

Back home, Richard pulled down the shades and locked the doors. Only a misdemeanor, sure - but he still felt jumpy and vulnerable. Dealing with the vice patrol was always a nightmare, regardless of circumstances. He didn't want any trouble. Being alone - and being lonely - was bad, but going to the Camps was worse. Going to the Camps was death.

Teddy tugged off his sweatshirt and draped it across the kitchen chair. He could hear the vid playing in the living room. His mother appeared suddenly in the doorway. “I was just going to clean up,” she said, pointing vaguely toward the messy sink, table, counters. She was still wearing her bathrobe and slippers. Her hair was unbrushed. “I was just...”

“Don't worry about it, Mom,” Teddy said. “I'll do it.”

“But I...”

“It's OK, really. You go rest, I'll clean up.”

She turned to go, then looked back. “Maybe I should get something for dinner. It's getting late. I should get something.”

“I'll make some spaghetti or something.”

“I should get it.”

“No, I'll do it, you go rest.”

Teddy waited till she was gone, then looked around the kitchen, trying to decide where to start. Make some dinner first (canned spaghetti, canned corn, bread), clean up afterwards - that seemed the best strategy. He glanced at the clock. Almost six o'clock. No time to waste.

By eight o'clock, his stomach was full and the kitchen was clean. He kissed his mother good-night on his way through the living room. She was curled on one end of the couch, already asleep. Teddy covered her with an afghan, turned off the vid, then went to his room.

The window blinds were open. Teddy looked outside as he took off his jeans and T-shirt. The trailer camp was a cluster of lights in the distance, sparkling especially bright in the crisp, dry air. In his underpants, Teddy grabbed his math workbook and crawled into bed. He had ten problems to solve by Monday, but his mind refused to focus. He thought back to his morning workout with Cisco, to their afternoon spent lounging in the autumn sun, talking, laughing, watching the ducks and geese fly south.

And then he thought about the man on the road.

Richard.

He seemed like a good guy. Nice, friendly. Teddy smiled, imagining Brother Graham's reaction to his

rendezvous with a strange man. That would have been worth at least a paddling, maybe something worse - like being sent to one of the juvenile homes. But he didn't care. The rules were for hairball morons.

In the margin of his workbook, Teddy drew a tiny sketch of the man. Straight hair combed back with no part, a full beard, glasses. And a funny little smile. Teddy stared at the drawing, trying to remember the real face more clearly. "Richard," he said to himself, just to hear the name, to test its sound. "Richard Wilson." He made the beard a little longer, reconsidered his handiwork, then set the book aside and shut his eyes. The math problems could wait until tomorrow.

Dreams came quickly - hazy and disjointed at first, then bright, vivid. He was alone, pitching pebbles into Sandburg Creek. A school of carp, each as big as a shark, rooted lazily in the mud near shore. Teddy was suddenly afraid. The carp were huge, dangerous. They were waiting for him to fall in. Waiting for food. Watching him. Teddy tried to back away, but the ground was slippery beneath his feet. He slid closer to the water.

"You shouldn't come here alone," someone said from behind him. It was Cisco's voice. "You have to stay with a friend, all the time - especially here." He grabbed Teddy by the arm and led him to the grassy slope beside the railroad tracks. They rested together on the warm ground, side by side. Noisy flocks of birds flew above them, some heading north, some south, hundreds of birds, thousands. Teddy took Cisco's hand, said, "I wish they'd leave us alone."

"They're friendly, I think."

"It's hard to tell."

"Just stay with me."

"I'm getting cold," Teddy said, realizing suddenly that he and Cisco were wearing nothing but underpants. "It's freezing here." They huddled together in each other's arms. It was dark, silent. Showers of leaves drifted against them, scratchy and dry. Teddy was shivering, clutching Cisco, afraid to let go. "You smell good," he whispered, "better than anybody."

"It's time," Cisco whispered back. The leaves swirled over them, dead and dusty. "No one can see us."

"Brother Graham might..."

"It's too dark."

"But I don't know what to do."

"I think it's easy."

Something was wrong. The darkness was alive, watching, hungry. Teddy wanted to jump up and run, but he couldn't show Cisco that he was afraid. He had to stay; he had to do something important; time was running out. "If we could only take our pants off," he said, almost crying now, "everything would be OK."

"It's easy, just do it."

"They're watching, everywhere, I'm sure."

"We have to finish before the bus comes."

Teddy could see the headlights over Cisco's shoulder. It was hard to breathe. He felt sick and sweaty with fear. And then Cisco was gone, leaving him alone in front of the school, somehow naked now, on his back, unable to move, everyone watching him, all the kids, all the teachers, all staring at him from the side of the road as the bus approached, its headlights glaring across him, blinding him, so close that he could feel its rumbling in his back and legs.

And as the bus rolled over him in an eruption of light and fumes and noise, Teddy jerked awake. Another nightmare. The lamp beside the bed was still on. Teddy reached to turn it off, then changed his mind. He didn't want to be alone in the dark. Not now.

Six

Piles of leaves were burning everywhere through the neighborhood, crackling and smoking, filling the air with sharp-smelling haze. Richard sat on the steps of his front porch, a cigarette in his hand, staring at his messy, unraked yard. A squirrel was scampering nearby, busily hiding acorns beneath the leaves. It stopped now and then to peer at Richard and listen for sounds of danger, its tail twitching. "You shouldn't stare at strangers," Richard said. He flicked his cigarette to the ground. It smouldered against the dried brown edge of a leaf.

He glanced up the road. Teddy was coming. He was with his friend, both of them trudging like soldiers returning from battle, their rakes over their shoulders. Richard had seen them leave earlier in the day, off to clean yards and make money. Now they were back, looking rumpled and tired in their dirty jeans and sweatshirts. The Mexican boy was wearing a red bandana around his scraggly brown hair.

Teddy waved when he saw Richard. He said something to his friend and pointed, then came jogging into the yard, hot on the scent of new business. "Do you want us to rake your leaves?"

Richard pulled the pack of Camels from his shirt pocket. "You guys look a little worn out."

"Naw, we're OK."

"Anyway, we shouldn't even be talking together, remember?"

Teddy looked from side to side, looked behind him, then shrugged. "There's nobody around."

"That's what Custer said."

The boys looked at each other and laughed. Richard lit his cigarette, blew smoke from the side of his mouth. "I don't even know your friend's name."

"Oh... this is Cisco."

"Cisco and Teddy, huh?" He took another drag, pausing to calm his nerves. Being alone with two boys, talking and laughing with them in public, was terrifying, reckless, wonderful. "Well... how much do you charge?"

"Ten dollars each."

"That's pretty cheap."

"And we'll do a kick-ass job," Cisco said. "Me and Ted is good workers, man."

"I'm sure you are."

"So can we do it?"

"Go ahead," Richard nodded. "I'll just sit here and rest my lazy bones."

He watched them for the next hour. They raked the leaves into four large piles beside the road, setting fire to each one before starting on the next. Cisco was taller and heavier than Teddy, obviously older. He talked constantly, sang bits of pop songs, told jokes, whistled, shouted goofy obscenities at passing cars. Teddy listened to him and laughed. Sometimes he looked at Richard and shook his head, as if to say, "I know Cisco is nuts, but you've got to love him, right?"

After setting fire to the last pile, the boys strolled back to the porch for their money. Cisco pointed to the cigarettes in Richard's pocket. "Can I have one of those, man?"

"Help yourself," Richard said. He handed a cigarette to Cisco, glanced at Teddy. "How about you?"

"No way, those things are poison."

"Absolutely right," he laughed. "An infallible suicide technique. Stay away from them."

Cisco used one of his own matches to light up, then hoisted the rake over his shoulder and sidled toward the road. "I'm goin' home, Ted."

"Yeah, me too... in a minute."

"I'll see you tomorrow."

"Come for lunch."

"Fuckin' OK."

Teddy turned back towards the porch. "He's a nice kid," Richard said.

"We're best friends."

"You're lucky."

The boy leaned forward against his rake, a weary young warrior resting on his spear. "I should go," he said. "It's suppertime."

"You did a good job, Teddy."

"Thanks. If you need help for any other jobs... "

"I'll let you know."

"I sort of need the money."

Richard stood up, stretched his stiff back. "Does your mother work?"

"No, but she... she gets my dad's army pension."

"That's something, at least."

"I guess."

The breeze blew smoke into Teddy's face. He coughed, fanned it away with his hand. "Well... 'bye. I gotta go."

"So long."

Richard waited, watching him, then went quickly inside.

His heart was thumping. He grabbed a pen and a piece of paper and sat at the kitchen table. The feelings inside him had to come out. Writing about them would help. He had to diffuse his agitation with the cool logic of words. Black ciphers on a white page. An act of verbal sorcery.

He started writing:

I don't know which is stronger right now - my fear or my joy. When I first saw the boy several weeks ago, I never imagined that we would eventually speak to each other. He was another of the Untouchables, someone to be worshiped from a distance, without an identity or a name. But now we're almost friends. Not quite, of course. There hasn't been time for that. We've only spoken twice. But I think he actually likes me. The situation is impossibly dangerous, absolutely mad. I should move away at once before this game of Russian Roulette gets out of hand. But I won't; I can't.

Needless to say, the boy is beautiful. He's very slim, very supple, with no trace of adolescent awkwardness. I suppose that will come later, in a year or two. He wears the uniform of St. Mary's Academy, so he can't be more than thirteen. He has a lovely way of walking, sort of a dainty tiptoed strut, graceful as a dancer. His eyes are emerald and wide-set and slightly myopic - soft, moist - with delicate smudges of green and violet beneath, an odd, natural bruising finer than any cosmetic. His hair is loosely curled, the color of summer sun on wheat. He wears it long, down over his collar, brushed back casually.

His friend is called Cisco. (Francisco, no doubt.) He's older than Teddy, maybe fifteen or sixteen, a sturdy, good-looking boy with strong hips and shoulders. He looks very Mex-

Indian: brown skin, high cheekbones, slanted eyes. He and Teddy obviously love each other, united by that brand of high-spirited raucous affection so common among young boys. They use jokes and insults to bind themselves closer. It goes deeper with Teddy, though. He watches Cisco constantly. He can't hide his hunger for the older boy. He's hopelessly in love. Perhaps Cisco fully understands the actual situation, but I doubt it. He doesn't seem to realize that his friend wants to be his lover. But, really, it's perfectly obvious.

I'm not sure what to do next. Avoiding Teddy would be the sanest and safest strategy. Any friendship between us would involve a thousand deadly traps. The dangers would multiply every day. Yet, I can't imagine going on without him. I think about him every moment. It's asinine, of course. And self-indulgent. And melodramatic. But I know, without question, that I'll continue seeing him and talking to him whenever I can, regardless of risk. Having come this far, I can't imagine never holding him, never petting him, never kissing him. A week ago, I could have stopped. But not now, not after today. Being with him is terrifying; being without him is unthinkable.

Richard put down his pen. Carefully, slowly, he re-read the words. They were like a pact, a declaration. He felt stronger now. The situation seemed no less dangerous, but at least he was more confident of his own feelings.

He folded the paper, kissed it, then carried it outside. The sun was just setting, flaring pink and orange against the low - hanging clouds. Richard crossed the yard to the four heaps of sparking, smoldering ashes. He tossed the paper onto one of the piles. It smoked and blackened around the edges, then caught fire and curled in a hissing wisp of flame. Dying, flickering, gone.

He stared at the ashes until a coil of smoke blew hot and acrid into his eyes. Stepping away, ready to go inside, he looked across the road and found Teddy looking back through the screen of his front door. He was still wearing his dirty clothes - silent, expressionless. And then he smiled, as if roused from a dream. He lifted one hand in a brief wave. Richard waved back through the drifting veil of smoke, then turned away.

He paused to light a cigarette before going inside.

Seven

Next morning, Teddy's mother backed their old Chevy carefully from the garage. They had enough gas coupons for three trips into the city every week: one trip for buying meat (and alcohol), a second for visiting the pension office, a third for Sunday Mass.

Teddy hated going to church. Everything about it was hairball, generic, a total pain. Wearing his uniform, listening to the boring sermons, putting up with the nauseating reek of incense - he hated it all. But his mother actually seemed to enjoy it. Even if church attendance hadn't been mandatory, she would have gone. It was the one time each week when she dressed up, brushed her hair, came to life. For that, Teddy was grateful. He was willing to ignore his own boredom and discomfort to see his mother looking happy and alert, even for just one morning.

Today the sermon was about dedication to the state. Render unto Caesar, and all that. Father Valenti was in the pulpit, his gray hair greased back and shiny beneath the overhead spot - lights. Teddy tried to

shut out the annoying drone. He gazed past Father Valenti, past the altar and the two flanking statues of genuflecting angels, past the stained-glass window gleaming with sunlight, up to the huge Judgment Day mural covering the apse. It was the one thing about the church that Teddy liked. He knew every inch of it; he could have closed his eyes and still seen it perfectly: bodies rising from the ground, ascending toward heaven; ribbons of flame swirling in a purplish sky; angels with festooned trumpets; a massive, muscular God riding a throne of gold. But Teddy's favorites were the cherubs. They were naked, grinning, coyly hidden behind flowing strips of white cloth. One of them looked older than the others, more of a boy-angel than a true cherub, with golden ringlets, rosy skin, blue eyes. He was twisted away from the congregation, looking back over his shoulder with a cunning grin, a long white ribbon twining under one arm, down his back, between his legs. His bare buttocks were plump, smooth, satiny pink. Teddy stared at him as Father Valenti finished his sermon, praising the Federation as God's truest earthly champion, the last hope of humanity against the satanic Empire.

Slightly startled, Teddy realized that it was time to rise for a prayer. He lowered his eyes from the nude boy-angel and stood up, his trousers uncomfortably tight in front. Hoping no one would notice, he leaned forward against the pew in front of him and pressed his crotch against the smooth wood.

Father Valenti headed to the altar, up three red - carpeted steps, through a delicate rainbow filtering in from the stained glass above. Teddy lifted his eyes to the Judgment Day mural, to the pink, pretty boy-angel smiling down at him.

He pressed his crotch more tightly against the wood.

Back home, Teddy changed quickly into his jeans and sweatshirt. He helped his mother wash the breakfast dishes, then put a pot of leftover chili on the stove to heat. "I asked Cisco to come over for lunch," he said.

"Oh?"

"Yeah." He took a box of crackers from the cupboard by the refrigerator. "Is that OK?"

"He's spending a lot of time here, that's all."

"Don't you like him?"

"He seems like a nice boy," she said, carrying her shoes and purse to the living room. She stopped in the doorway. "Sometimes he's just a little... a little crude."

"Crude how?"

"His clothes, and the way he talks..."

"Aw, Mom, that's stupid."

"Don't get smart, young man!"

"I'm sorry, but..."

"Anyway," she said, "I talked to Brother Graham after Mass today."

"I know, I saw him."

"And he's not very pleased with you, Teddy."

"I know."

She stared at him, then smoothed back her hair and sighed. "Will you *please* try harder, sweetie? It breaks my heart when..."

"I will, Mom, I promise."

"Ever since you met that Cisco boy..."

"It's not his fault, Mom. He's real nice."

She glanced at the clock. "You're old enough to choose your own friends, I guess. Well, listen, I'm going to sneak a quick nap."

“Do you want me to save you some chili?”

“Thanks, hon, but you go ahead, eat it up.” She took one step, then looked back. “Make sure you remember what we talked about.”

“I will, Mom, I’ll be real good at school. And don’t worry, about Cisco.”

“Have fun,” she said, on her way to the bedroom. She had a bottle of vodka in there, of course. When she came out later that afternoon, all the good intentions of Sunday morning would be gone. Her hair would be mussed, her eyes blood-shot. She wouldn’t remember anything about Brother Graham.

Cisco arrived on schedule, happy and hungry, wearing his green camouflage pants and white T-shirt. His arms were bare - in violation of the public dress codes.

“You’re such a *crude* guy,” Teddy smiled, poking his friend’s arm. “Aren’t you afraid of the vice patrols?”

“Shit, man, I just duck in the weeds, no problem.”

“You should wear a jacket, just in case.”

Cisco shrugged, already spooning chili into his bowl. “Ain’t no big deal, man.” He tapped the side of his head with the spoon handle. “You just gotta be *smooth*, that’s all. Anyway, it’s too warm for a jacket today.”

After lunch, they went to the basement for an hour of sparring and working out on the bag. As always, they ended up bare-chested and sweaty. Cisco picked up his shirt and dried his face. “I think I need a shower,” he laughed. “I smell like a fuckin’ pig, man.”

Teddy picked up his sweatshirt, his sneakers. “We have a shower upstairs.”

“I was just kidding around.”

“No joke, man, you can really use it.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“We ain’t got no shower at home,” Cisco said quietly, still trying to decide. He followed Teddy up the stairs into the kitchen. “Where’s your mom?”

“I’ll check.”

They hurried through the house to her bedroom. Teddy pressed his ear to the door, listened for several seconds, then headed quickly to his own room. “She’s asleep,” he said, “so it’ll be OK.”

“A shower would be extreme,” Cisco admitted. “Where’s the bathroom?”

“At the end of the hall.” Teddy switched on his CD box, sat on the edge of the bed. “You can use that towel there,” he said, pointing to the dresser. “I used it yesterday.”

Cisco looked at the towel and nodded, already unzipping his pants. He pushed them down and stepped out. “I won’t take too long.” His underpants were orange with white elastic. He peeled them off, dropped them to the floor, grabbed the towel. His body was brown, hard, solidly muscled. “Be right back, man.”

“OK,” Teddy murmured, watching Cisco open the door and step into the hall. “I’ll just... I’ll be here.” He dropped onto his back and stared at the ceiling. His belly felt sore and tight. He lay without moving for several minutes, listening to the new disc by Ozzie Egypt and his vibrapipe band - listening also to the sound of water splashing in the bathroom. Then, suddenly alert, he hopped up and went over to Cisco’s clothes. He picked up the orange-and-white underpants, turned them slowly in his hands, felt them, lifted them to his nose, sniffed the damp, smelly crotch. Three curlicued brown hairs were stuck to the cloth. Teddy picked one off and rolled it between his fingers.

The water stopped. Teddy dropped the underpants. He crossed the room quickly and turned up the

Ozzie Egypt disc. With his back to the door, he heard Cisco come padding bare-foot into the room. “That shower is supreme kick-ass, man.”

Teddy turned around. “Yeah, supreme.” Cisco was still naked; his hair was drenched dark and stringy, dripping onto his shoulders. He stood drying himself in the middle of the room, his body striped with sunlight from the venetian blinds. Teddy watched him silently. He had never seen a wiener like the one Cisco had. His own thing was pink and circumcised and sort of small, but Cisco's was long and pale brown and had skin over the end like a fleshy nipple. His pubic hair (the only hair on his body) was a heavy bush of dark frizz. His balls were big and saggy. He rubbed the towel over his rear end, then down his legs. “You takin' one, Ted?”

“Huh?”

“A shower, man. You takin' one?”

“Later.”

Cisco dropped the towel, grabbed his briefs, pulled them on. “Now you can't see my royal bod no more.”

“I wasn't looking at...”

“I was just kiddin',” Cisco laughed, putting on his pants. “Don't get all jacked up, asshole.”

“Eat me raw, jerk.”

“You'd love that, I know.”

“Not quite.”

“Yeah, you'd love it absolute.” Cisco laughed again, picked up the towel and fired it at Teddy's head. “And you'd love to suck on my dick even better.”

Both boys were suddenly silent. Cisco's last joke was a little too direct, somehow embarrassing, dangerous. He leaned down and grabbed his T-shirt. “You got any soda, man?”

Teddy nodded. “Yeah, we got some.” He put on his sweat-shirt. “Come on.”

They fetched two cans of Coke from the refrigerator, took them to the front porch. A group of girls were on their way past the house. They glanced at the two boys and giggled. Since the war, all the draftable males had disappeared from the neighborhood, leaving a population of old men, young boys, women, and girls. Lots of girls. They seemed to spend all their time strolling from house to house, killing time, gossiping, looking bored and restless.

“Those chicks are extreme,” Cisco said, watching them pass by.

“Yeah,” Teddy said softly, “they're royal.”

One of the girls looked back and shouted, “Rebecca loves Cisco!” Another girl, apparently Rebecca, slapped her friend's arm and shrieked. The whole group laughed.

“I ain't interested,” Cisco yelled back.

“That's not what I hear,” came the response. Again the girls giggled. They turned suddenly off the road, into someone's yard, out of sight.

Cisco nudged Teddy's arm. “I screwed her before.”

“Who?”

“That Rebecca chick. Me and her go to the same high school.”

“She lives around the corner,” Teddy commented vaguely.

“No shit, Einstein.”

They sipped their sodas, staring silently up the road.

“It must be great,” Teddy finally murmured.

“What?”

“Messing around and stuff like that.”

“Ain't you never screwed a chick?”

Teddy shook his head. “It's all guys at school, and I don't really know anybody...” He shrugged, feeling suddenly selfconscious.

“It's supreme kick-ass, man. You gotta try it.”

“How many times did you...?”

“Lotsa times.”

“With just her?”

“Mostly her, and with my sister's friend too, and a couple others.”

“Man,” Teddy marveled, shaking his head slowly, “that's fierce.”

Cisco finished his soda and stood up. “I gotta go.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“School tomorrow,” he remarked, his voice sharp with disgust.

“I know, it's generic.”

“Later, man.”

Teddy sat quietly as Cisco walked away. Then he jumped to his feet, roused by a sudden exhilarating idea. “Hey... do you wanna stay overnight next week?”

Cisco stopped by the edge of the road and looked back. “Here?”

“Yeah.”

“Your mom probably wouldn't let me.”

“Don't worry about that.” Teddy stepped forward onto the grass. “So you wanna?”

“Sure, man, yeah.”

“Friday night.”

“Chill.”

Teddy returned slowly to the porch and sat down. He glanced at the house across the road. Richard's house. There was a movement at the kitchen window. A brief flicker of light, probably a match. Then nothing.

Eight

During the week, when all the children were at school, the neighborhood became a place of dry, spiritless silence. To escape, Richard started making daily trips into the city, gladly paying the bus fare that bought him a few hours of noisy life and energy. At first, he spent most of his time simply roaming the streets, dropping in at various shops and cafes, occasionally stopping at a bench to rest and watch the passersby. But then the cover of a magazine changed his routine. He saw it at a newsstand. It showed a group of young men and boys silhouetted against a dark cityscape. The headline read, “Urban Vags: A Federation Blight.” Richard bought the magazine, read the article with growing fascination, then hurried to the library to track down more information.

Of course, Richard was already familiar with the vags (short for either “vagabonds” or “vagrants,” no one seemed certain). They were known by various names: urban vags, city vags, ghetto vags, slum vags. Their numbers, according to the stories that Richard was able to find at the library, had been growing in recent years, swelled by deserters, draftdodgers, fag-criminals, escapees from juvenile homes - all types of criminals and traitors. “They wander the deepest urban ghettos like jungle predators,” reported one

editorial. “Even the elite Christian Guards seem reluctant to move against them. On their own turf, they roam unchallenged. They defy the laws of the Federation. This is a disgrace, a scandal. We call on our leaders to meet this challenge and to cleanse our cities.”

Other editorials and articles were much the same. The vags routinely inspired disgust, outrage, contempt; and yet, little was done about them. No one seemed capable of dealing with the problem.

Richard concluded, after studying dozens of sources, that official policy and actual behavior were suspiciously out of sync. Everyone ranted about the vags, but no one acted against them. It seemed possible, in fact, that the Federation was willingly abandoning the inner cities to them; the last thing it wanted was a domestic insurrection; it needed all of its men and resources for the war against the Empire.

Surrendering the inner cities to the vags was the surest way of isolating and controlling them.

Next day, Richard returned to the library. He wanted to learn more about the vags. They were mysterious, exotic, strangely romantic. He managed to track down one especially detailed article about them in *Urban Studies Review*. It pointed out, as part of its sociological profile, that vag bands were almost exclusively male, akin to high-seas pirate crews or Old West outlaw gangs. Politically, they were described as “anarchotribal,” with loosely organized groups consisting of “warriors” and “sorcerer-chieftains.” They rejected Christianity “with pathological intensity,” practicing instead a murky blend of paganism and occultism mingling homoerotic sex, astral worship, witchcraft, and psychotropic drugs.

“They pose a grave threat to the order and stability of the Federation,” the study concluded, “opposing healthy respect for the state with dangerously primitive credos of individualism, hedonism, and perverted sexual indulgence.”

Four of the pages were devoted to rare photographs of vags in their own domain. The urban settings were familiar, but the subjects looked as bizarrely foreign as Stone Age tribesmen. All were male - old men, young men, boys - a mongrel collection of blacks, whites, Latinos, American Indians, yellow Asians, Filipinos, Arabs. Richard studied the photos carefully, greedily, as if seeing images from another planet.

Every vag was armed with at least one weapon - machine pistols and mini-bazookas, crises and scimitars, plasma darts, nunchuks, sonic grenades, bullwhips, laser swords. They posed for the camera (some close-ups, some group shots) in a startling assortment of costumes. The older men seemed to favor trappings of rank and distinction - feathered ceremonial headdresses, turbans, spiked leather helmets, kilts, robes, jeweled rings and pendants. The younger men wore the altered remains of their former uniforms - military, penal, institutional, religious - cut here, ripped there, embellished with studs, tassels, medals, ribbons, chains, belts, bandoliers.

And then there were the boys. They looked wilder than the older vags, more gleefully barbaric, like Paleolithic cave-children transported to an urban ghetto. The youngest subject appeared to be ten or eleven, still clearly prepubertal. He stood naked and scowling next to a middle-aged warrior, his arm around the man's waist. Most of the boys in the other photos wore some sort of clothing, but very little.

Their stylized nudity was obviously a matter of taste, not necessity. They posed defiantly in loin-cloths, shredded underpants, short fish-net tunics, crotchless gym shorts. Their bodies were smeared with dyes and paints, emblazoned with rainbow tattoos. Their hair was long, woven with beads and feathers, worn in ponytails or dreadlocks or spread over their shoulders in full, tangled manes. One of the boys, photographed alone in medium close-up, held Richard mesmerized, breathless. The caption identified him simply as “Chucho, I3.” He was squatted on the hood of a rusty, gutted automobile, holding a curved dagger in his right hand, wearing nothing but a jockstrap painted with tiny zodiacal symbols. He had the lean brown body of a desert warrior. His face was dark, thin, fierce. His black hair was shoulder-length and braided with silver trinkets, dog fangs, miniature polished skulls of bats, birds, snakes. Looking at him, Richard finally appreciated the full power of the vags. He began to understand the Federation's

unwillingness to move against them. The young face in that photograph was savage, fearless, dangerous beyond imagining.

Later that evening, Richard returned to his house with a carton of cigarettes, a box of kitchen matches, and a page torn furtively from *Urban Studies Review*. It was the page with Chucho's photo. Richard unfolded it carefully, took several minutes to smooth away the creases, then taped it to the door of his refrigerator. On the kitchen table, next to an overflowing ashtray, was the magazine that had originally perked his curiosity, plus a pile of photocopied articles from the library. He knew that he should throw them all away, along with the picture of Chucho. If the vice squads were determined enough, they could use them as evidence of subversive tendencies, intent to disturb the peace, even conspiracy to commit treason. The photo of Chucho was the most dangerous item, of course. It was stolen property, for one thing. For another, it was clearly an object of lascivious contemplation. Richard knew he was being foolhardy to keep it. But he had to have it. He needed it.

He sat in the kitchen for over an hour, smoking cigarettes and gazing at the picture. He realized, after a while, that his new found obsession with the vags had something to do with Teddy. He wanted the boy to find out about them, to discover that the Federation was fallible and that life offered some opportunity for freedom, pleasure, joy. For Richard, actually joining the vags was no more than a daydream, a titillating fantasy, as unrealistic as manning a space station or climbing Mount Everest. But Teddy was young, bright, tough. He could do anything. The picture of Chucho was a symbol of that hope. Richard smiled to himself. "You're an idealistic fool," he muttered.

Someone shouted suddenly from across the road. Richard went to the door. It was the Mexican boy, Cisco. He was in front of Teddy's house, carrying a knapsack. He shouted once more. Teddy appeared at the door and yelled, "It's OK, my mom says you can stay!" The Mexican boy ran up the steps and disappeared into the house.

"He must be staying overnight," Richard said. He looked at the picture of Chucho across the kitchen. "Well, kid, it's just you and me."

The room became darker as he pulled the shades.

Nine

Cisco dropped his knapsack onto the kitchen table. "You sure it's OK with your mom?"

"Yeah," Teddy said. "I asked her just a few minutes ago."

He didn't tell Cisco that his mother was already drunk, slumped nearly comatose in front of the vid, too intoxicated to care about anything but her next drink. He pointed at the knapsack. "You brought a lot of stuff."

Cisco nodded, smiling slyly. "Enough," he said. "Come on, man, let's do somethin'."

"OK, let's go downstairs."

"Chill."

They jogged together into the basement for a fast workout. Neither was in the mood for anything too strenuous. It was Friday night, a time for goofing around and having fun, not exercising. Back upstairs after only twenty minutes, Cisco fished a red paisley bandana from his knapsack and tied it around his head. "I'm goin' out for a while."

"Huh?"

He glanced at his reflection in the window and adjusted the bandana. "I wanna see Rebecca one more time."

"One more time?"

"Before I leave."

"But you'll see her on..."

"No I won't." Cisco broke into a grin, ready now to reveal his secret. "That's why I brought my sack, man."

"I don't get it."

He reached into the bag once more, pulled out a shiny plastic card. "I got it today."

Teddy touched it with his finger - gingerly, reverently. "It's an ID card."

"Fuckin' right, genius."

"I can't believe you really..."

"I got it today," Cisco said, still grinning. "I used the money we made last weekend."

"Jesus."

"It's royal, ain't it?"

"Absolute."

He put the card back into the bag, then headed for the door. "So I'm leavin' tomorrow."

"For where?"

"The city, man. I got enough money for the bus, and then I won't need no more after that 'cause I'll be in the Guards."

Teddy shook his head, too dumbfounded to speak. He had never imagined that Cisco would actually carry out his plan. Kids talked about doing things like that all the time; but the talk had never turned into action. Until now. "But... you can't leave tomorrow."

They were on the porch now. "The fuck I can't! First thing tomorrow, I'm outta here."

There was nothing more to say about the subject. Continuing to argue about it would have been stupid and pussy. Teddy wanted to shout, "No, you can't go, you can't leave me," but that would have ruined everything. He had to shut up and let Cisco go. End of discussion.

"Anyway," he smiled, "you'll probably get arrested tonight for breaking curfew."

Cisco skipped down the steps onto the sidewalk. "No way, asshole."

"Jag-off."

Cisco laughed softly. "Go play with yourself, punk."

"Serious, man... don't get into trouble."

"I'll be back, don't worry."

"Knock on the bedroom window."

"Later, man."

"Yeah."

Teddy listened from the porch, waiting until he could no longer hear Cisco's gym shoes against the pavement. He turned to go inside, then stopped as his eyes caught the glow of a cigarette from across the road. Richard's voice came suddenly through the darkness. "Hello, Teddy."

The boy moved forward. "I didn't know you were out here."

"I told you I was nosy."

"That's right," Teddy laughed. He walked into Richard's yard. "Cisco left for a little while."

"I heard."

"He went to see some girl"

“Quite a Casanova,” Richard chuckled. He took a drag on his cigarette. “Do you want to sit down?”

“Sure, I guess.” The boy sat next to Richard on the steps. He could feel the cement cool and hard against his bottom. “He's staying overnight.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“I just hope he doesn't get into trouble.”

“Probably not,” Richard said. “If he's careful, he'll be OK.” Teddy nodded. He could smell the man beside him: cigarettes, musty clothing, coffee, some sort of peppermint soap. It was a pleasant, comfortable smell. He felt himself relaxing. The night was clear, still, peaceful. No birds, no crickets, no frogs. Nothing but the occasional faraway barking of a dog, the soft intake and outtake of breath as Richard puffed his cigarette. Surprising himself; Teddy suddenly said, “I think you smoke too much.”

“I think you're right.”

“Aren't you afraid of cancer and stuff?”

“A little bit, I suppose. But I can think of worse things to be afraid of.”

Teddy thought of school, of Cisco leaving, of the war. “Yeah, I know.” He shivered slightly, rubbed his bare arms. “It's cold. I forgot my sweatshirt.”

“Naughty boy.”

“The dress codes are stupid, anyway.”

“No question of that,” Richard smiled. “You're an unusual kid, Teddy.”

“I just don't like all the rules, that's all.”

“Amen, brother.”

The boy laughed. “You talk sort of funny sometimes.”

“Thanks, I think.”

“No, I mean I like it, really.”

“Thanks for sure, then.” Richard reached out and gave the boy's neck a gentle squeeze, vaguely startled by his own boldness. He pulled his hand away.

Teddy stood up, still rubbing his arms. “I'm getting too cold.”

“You'd better go inside.”

“Yeah.” He headed for the road. “Maybe I'll see you tomorrow.”

“Maybe.”

“Bye, Richard.”

“So long, Teddy.”

The boy jogged across the road, up his steps, into the house. The feel of Richard's hand was still warm on his neck.

In the living room, he found his mother fumbling with the remote control for the vid. “You should go to bed, Mom.”

She looked at him slowly, trying to focus. “I'm just going to watch... watch this...”

“Come on, Mom, it's getting late.” He took the remote control from her hand and helped her off the couch. “Time for bed.”

“I should fix the... fix something for... for you to eat.”

“I ate already, a long time ago.”

She stopped at her bedroom door, holding Teddy's shoulder for balance. “I'm such a terrible old nuisance,” she said, tears shining in her eyes.

“No you're not.”

“Such a terrible old...”

“Just get some sleep, that's all.”

She kissed his cheek, then turned away, still mumbling, “Terrible old nuisance,” as she shuffled unsteadily across the room. Teddy shut the door behind her. He stood there for several minutes, listening for her to get safely into bed. Finally satisfied, he crossed to his own room to wait for Cisco.

About an hour later, Cisco rapped loudly at the window. Teddy directed him around to the back door. He waited until they were in the living room before asking any questions. “So... did you see her?”

Cisco flopped down on the couch. “I seen her, yeah. Man, she digs me absolute.”

“Did you, like, *do* anything with her?”

“Shit, man, I wish.” Cisco switched from channel to channel with the remote control. “We had to talk through the fuckin' window, though.”

Teddy laughed. “Just through the window? That's all?”

Cisco poked him in the shoulder. "It ain't funny, asshole! I was lookin' forward to some pussy."

"Poor baby."

"You're too generic for words, man. You don't know what it's like."

"Bullshit. "

"You ain't never screwed a chick."

"I know," Teddy shrugged, "but..."

"Trust me, man, I got total blue balls."

Teddy scrambled hastily to change the subject. "You wanna play Holographic Chess or something?"

Cisco spotted the bottle of vodka beside the couch, grabbed it, said, "I'd rather drink some of this."

"That's my mom's."

"So?"

"So don't drink too much, that's all."

"I won't, I won't." Cisco took a gulp, gasped softly, gulped again. "Supreme, man."

They sat together on the couch until almost midnight, watching the vid, cracking jokes, eating potato chips and peanut-butter sandwiches. Cisco, with half-a-dozen ounces of vodka in his belly, was getting hyper, feisty, silly. At first, Teddy was worried about his mother, afraid of her reaction when she discovered the missing alcohol; but it occurred to him, after a while, that she'd never even notice. Worrying about it was crazy.

After the vid show ended, Cisco decided to reveal his second secret of the night. He fetched his knapsack from the kitchen and took it into the bedroom, where he produced two large, hand-rolled cigarettes. "Grass," he said quietly. "I got 'em today, from the guy with the IDs. You ever smoked before?"

Teddy shook his head. "No, I never even saw any before." He shut the door. His stomach was tingling. Something risky and exciting was about to happen. Cisco was sitting on the floor with his back against the bed. He pulled off his gym shoes, his T-shirt, making himself more comfortable before lighting the first joint. "Open the window, man."

"What for?"

"To let the smoke out, fuzz-brain."

"Oh, yeah, right."

Teddy pushed up the window. A cool puff of breeze brushed his arms. He sat on the bed, next to Cisco's left shoulder. He stared at the knotted red tail of his friend's bandana, at the soft brown hair against his neck, at the smooth, muscled curve of his left arm. Cisco held a match to the joint and sucked in a long hiss of breath, glanced briefly at the tip, reapplied the flame, inhaled more smoke. Teddy watched him - a student eagerly observing his teacher - then took the joint as Cisco passed it over his shoulder. He put the end between his lips and inhaled cautiously. The smoke rushed hot and acrid down his throat, burning him, choking him. He coughed it back out, his eyes brimming with tears.

"You gotta hold it in," Cisco laughed.

Teddy started to answer, coughed again, finally croaked, "*I tried* to hold it in, you fucker!"

"Just take a little bit next time."

Teddy nodded, tried again. The smoke was still bitter and hot, but he managed to keep it down a few seconds without choking. He handed the joint back to Cisco. "I don't feel anything."

"It takes a few minutes, man."

They passed the joint between them, handing it carefully back and forth, filling the room with the musty sweet fragrance of burnt hemp. After the final toke, Cisco swallowed the charred roach, picked up the other joint and nudged Teddy's leg with his elbow. "Ready for more, asshole?"

Teddy laughed, not sure why. "Sure, jag-off, light it up!" He went across the room to turn on his CD box. An old disc by the Ferris Flambee Chamber Rock Quartet was in the machine. The music sounded loud, crisp, incredibly sharp and clear. Teddy stood with his hand on the box, enthralled by the vibrations moving up his arm, into his skull. He fell deeper and deeper into the music, feeling it, seeing it, forgetting about everything else... until a flying gym shoe smacked against his leg. "Come on," Cisco snarled, "get over here!"

Suddenly remembering the joint, Teddy shambled back across the room and knelt beside Cisco. He took a long hit, then yanked off his T-shirt and tossed it at his friend's head. Cisco swatted it away. "Asshole!"

"You're too generic for words," Teddy replied, mimicking his friend's earlier insult. Again he laughed for no reason. Cisco started, too, unable to control himself, inhaling smoke and giggling at the same time. His eyes were red and watery. "Here," he mumbled, "smoke some more shit, fuzz-brain," passing the joint.

"OK, shit - face."

The joint went back and forth between them - three times, four, five, getting smaller, harder to pass, burning down finally to a tiny blackened roach that Cisco held out to Teddy. "You eat this one, man."

"Fuckin' right," Teddy said, "stick it in." He opened his mouth and waited. Laughing, Cisco put the roach on Teddy's tongue. "Take your medicine, little boy."

"Thank you, asshole daddy."

"Bitch."

"Eat me, punk."

"You always want me to do that."

Laughing harder, they grabbed each other and fell rolling on the floor in a furious wrestling match. It didn't take long for Cisco to pin the smaller, lighter boy beneath him, his knees on Teddy's shoulders. "There, bitch, now you're my prisoner," he growled, playing a lazy game of patty-cake with Teddy's face, slapping lightly at each cheek, left right left, slap slap slap, grinning and chuckling. Teddy struggled beneath him - sweaty, red-faced, giggling as if being tickled. "You cocksucker!"

"Wrong again," Cisco said, his voice groggy and hoarse from too much booze, too much dope. "I ain't the cocksucker here."

"Cocksucker," Teddy repeated, still laughing out of control, taunting the other boy. His mouth was dry; his heart was racing; his head felt swollen with light and noise. "Fuzz-brain," he giggled, crazily delighted by the image. "I got fuzz in my brain."

"Extreme fuzz."

"Fuzz-brained cocksucker!"

"You're gonna eat it in a minute."

"Fuzzy, fuzzy, fuzzy!"

"For real, punk."

"Fuzzy punky cocky-sucker!"

Shaking his head with a low demonic chuckle, Cisco unzipped his camouflage pants and opened the fly, giving Teddy a close-up view of his orange-and-white undershorts. They smelled sour, gamey, like stale pee and sweat. "Here's what you want, little faggoty punk."

"You wish."

"Come on, admit it."

"Turd-head! "

"Faggoty baby wants his candy," Cisco laughed, stretching the waistband down a couple of inches,

just far enough to expose a curly fringe of hair. "Admit it, admit it."

Teddy said, "Suck on it yourself," and thrashed harder. Too doozy and drunk to keep fighting, Cisco rolled off him and sprawled in the middle of the room, staring at the ceiling and giggling softly. "No more, man. I'm dead."

"Chicken-shit!"

"Truce, man, for real." After pausing another moment to catch his breath, Cisco pulled off his pants and put them under his head like a green camouflage pillow. "I'm dead," he mumbled again, already half-asleep, stretched out on the floor in his underpants and bandana. He threw one arm across his eyes to block out the light. His armpit was matted with a swirl of damp brown hair.

"Come on, jag-off," Teddy ordered, "get up, get up!" No response. He - tickled beneath Cisco's upraised arm, poked him in the ribs. Still nothing. Buzzing with energy, he said, "Fuck you then," and jumped up. The Ferris Flambee Quartet was still on the box, recycling itself automatically, playing "Barbary Sunrise" for the second time. Teddy started doing karate moves to the music, then interrupted himself to take off his jeans. More comfortable now in just his briefs, he continued his wild karate dance, side-kicking and lunge-punching around the room, spinning, leaping, shadow-boxing until he was too sweaty and worn out to keep going. He dropped to his knees beside Cisco. "Fuzz-brain," he laughed, flinging out the insult in a last vain effort to rouse the other boy from his drugged coma. He knew, though, that his friend was out cold until morning. He had seen his mother in the same condition dozens of times. Nothing would wake him now.

Teddy stayed there on his knees, staring, not sure what to do next, feeling suddenly woozy and raw. More than anything, he wanted to touch Cisco. The desire inside him was like a sharp hunger, an actual pain, a clenched shortness of breath. "You should get up," he whispered, using the words as an excuse to poke Cisco's belly. The muscles were washboard hard from years of sit-ups. Teddy poked again, still whispering, "get up, get up," over and over, like a soft nursery-rhyme refrain. Cisco let out a long, raspy breath and scratched his forehead, pushing his bandana crooked with a sleep-numbed hand. Feeling another itch lower down, he raised one knee and scratched between his legs. Teddy watched him and waited. Cisco scratched slowly for a few seconds longer, then threw his arm back over his eyes. His left knee was still raised, angled slightly to the side. Timidly, cautiously, Teddy reached down and pressed at his friend's crotch, murmuring, "get up, get up" - an incantation, a sorcerer's spell. The Ferris Flambee Quartet segued from "Sunday Slaughter" into "Savages in Wonderland," electric sitars wailing, reverb-guitars echoing. He could see and feel the tubular bulge of Cisco's dick inside - maybe five limp inches, maybe even six - firm as a slender sausage above the soft, rounded swell of his balls. Teddy squeezed gently at that hidden sausage, massaged it through the warm fabric, trying to make it hard, trying to make it bigger. Cisco flexed his hips, grunted softly. The lump between Teddy's fingers started growing, stiffening. Cisco grunted again, then dream-mumbled and rolled onto his stomach.

Teddy's excitement curdled suddenly into anger, then just as suddenly into a faint shiver of fear and shame. His head was beginning to hurt, a throb of dull pain behind his eyes. His earlier euphoria was gone. He stood up, grabbed one of the covers from the bed and spread it carefully over Cisco's body. Standing there, he realized that his own underpants were sticking out in front. His crotch was achy and tight. He wanted to jerk off, but he couldn't do it with Cisco in the same room, asleep or not. He'd have to do it in the bathroom.

Then again... there was no reason to hide. Not really. Doing it in the same room would be kick-ass. Supreme kick-ass. His energy came rushing back. Watching Cisco (wishing, in a way, that he would open his eyes and see what was happening), Teddy slipped out of his briefs and sat on the floor. His crotch was directly in front of Cisco's face, no more than two feet away. He scooted closer, moving

carefully, inching forward until he could feel the other boy's breath against his testicles. He sat there for several minutes, not moving, hardly blinking, terrified and exhilarated at the same time. "Look at me," he said softly. "Look at my thing." The danger was making him dizzy with excitement. He nudged Cisco's backside with his left foot and said, "Look at me, man," in full voice now, "look at the hard wiener I've got," turning himself on with his own nasty talk. He nudged Cisco again. "Watch this," he grinned, "I'm jerking off now, look at me," and he started doing it, unable to wait any longer, eager to finish. He cupped his free hand in front, ready to catch the stuff about to squirt out.

On the CD box, "Barbary Sunrise" started playing for the third time.

The room was beginning to fill with dawn light when Teddy woke up. He was in bed, facing the wall, curled beneath the covers. At first, the sounds coming from behind him seemed to be part of a dream, unreal and faraway: someone dressing, someone going to the bathroom to urinate and get a glass of water, someone returning to the bedroom, zipping his knapsack, coughing. It was Cisco, of course. Teddy was fully awake now. He remembered with a terrible ache that his friend was leaving. Forever. Soldiers never came back.

There was a sudden silence. Teddy could tell that Cisco was standing beside the bed, trying to decide whether or not he should wake his friend to say goodbye. Teddy didn't move; he couldn't face the farewell pain. Cisco stood there for a moment longer, then turned away and left the room. A few seconds later, the back door opened and closed. He was gone.

Teddy sat up and looked around the empty room. The digital clock on his CD box said 6:25. Licking his dry lips, he climbed out of bed and pulled on his underpants. He shuffled groggily to the bathroom, did his business, shuffled back. The floor was cold beneath his feet. He picked up his pants and shirt, started to put them on, then spotted the red paisley bandana on his dresser. It was Cisco's, placed there neatly and carefully, left behind as a parting gift.

That's when Teddy started to cry.

Ten

The bell rang to begin Christian Morality class. Brother Graham looked up from his desk as if vaguely irritated. The boys watched him silently, their hands folded, backs straight. Teddy stared at the Christian Federation flag above the door. He was already bored. Mentally, he recited the flag's familiar history and significance: designed after the Old War, when Canada and the Latin American nations finally joined the Federation; red, white, and blue like the old flag, with a pair of crossed sabers in the corner surrounded by a dozen stars, representing the two American continents and the twelve Territories, (Mexican, Greater and Lesser Brazilian, Patagonian, Canadian, Polynesian, and so on). Teddy tried to remember the names of the twelve Territorial regents, then stood up quickly as he heard his name being called. "Yes, sir."

"Tell us, Disciple Cameron, about the Correctional Camps in Utah."

"The Correctional Camps were created to rid the Federation of fag-crims and subversives and other sinners against God and State."

"And?"

Teddy squinted down at his desk, trying to concentrate.

“And... and they help us to... to better remember our duty as Christian patriots.”

“And?”

Teddy stared harder at his desk. Nothing would come. The words fluttered away, hiding from him, taunting him. Finally giving up, he shook his head and murmured, “I can't remember, sir.”

“That doesn't surprise me.”

The other boys laughed nervously. Brother Graham paced in front of them, tapping his pointer against his left hand like an impatient conductor. From down the hall, echoing softly, came the voices of St. Mary's choir, twenty boys in all, practicing a special hymn for Sunday Mass. As if listening to the music, Brother Graham stopped near the door and cocked his head. Quietly, he said, “Certain boys are Satan's playthings.”

Teddy nodded in timorous agreement.

“We have to be compassionate,” the Brother continued. He turned, strolled back across the room. “The Lord teaches compassion, He teaches patience, but there's a limit to our... to our understanding. Certain boys refuse our assistance, our encouragement. Satan has them *tight* in his grasp,” and he clenched his fist with a sudden force that made the boys flinch.

Teddy remained standing at his desk. Brother Graham turned and looked at him. “I want to see you in my office after class,” he said, then added, “as usual,” in a quietly acidic tone.

The boy nodded, resumed his seat. Brother Graham stared silently - as if, again, listening to the music - then continued his lesson on the Correctional Camps.

Before going to the office after class, Teddy stopped at his locker to get his jacket and bookbag. He had already resigned himself to another paddling. His second of the week. Now that Cisco was gone, Teddy found it more difficult than ever to focus his energy and attention on schoolwork, and his lack of interest clearly showed. But he didn't care. There was an emptiness inside him that grew darker and colder every day.

Brother Graham was rummaging through his file cabinet when Teddy knocked at his half-open office door. The Brother stood up with a folder full of material, then waved the boy forward and sat behind his desk. “Disciple Cameron, we meet again.”

“Yes, sir.”

“This is becoming very tiresome.”

“Yes, sir.”

He pointed to a chair beside the desk. “Sit down, my boy.” Teddy obeyed quickly, not sure what Brother Graham had in mind. This wasn't the usual routine. He didn't know whether to be frightened or relieved. The Brother scanned the contents of the folder in front of him, then looked up and sighed. “I think you're basically a good child.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“But I also think you've fallen victim to certain... temptations.” He paused to adjust his pencils and papers. “I've just finished speaking with your mother on the phone, Disciple.”

Teddy said nothing.

“Does that surprise you, lad?”

“Yes, sir, I guess it does.”

“We discussed your poor attitude of the past several weeks. She's very upset, you know. I asked her if there were any problems at home. Do you know what she told me?”

“No, sir.”

“She told me you've been seeing a boy named... “ The Brother glanced down at a note by the phone. “A boy named Cisco.”

Teddy stiffened in his chair. Brother Graham waited for some reply, then said, “A Mexican, obviously.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do you see him often?”

“He's gone.”

“Explain that, Disciple.”

“He went away last week, that's 'all.”

“Away to where?”

“I don't know,” Teddy shrugged, “He just sort of disappeared. I haven't seen him since last week.”

“Your mother didn't seem to know about this... development.”

“She didn't, I never mentioned it.”

The Brother considered this new information, tapping one finger slowly against the folder. “You admit, though, that you knew this youngster?”

“Yes, sir, I guess so.”

“The Latin temperament is extremely unstable, my boy, extremely primitive. The young males, especially, are unruly and irresponsible.”

Teddy listened carefully, puzzled by Brother Graham's comments.

“Friendships between boys are always perilous,” the Brother went on, “complicated by immature emotions. When one of those boys is, let's say, a Mexican, well... the situation can become very dangerous indeed. Do you understand what I'm saying, Disciple?”

“No, sir, not really.”

“I think you do.”

“No, sir, I really don't know what...”

Brother Graham silenced the boy with an upraised hand. “I think you became involved in unclean behavior with this Mexican youngster,” he said. “You're ashamed to admit it, of course, but I think this boy led you into sinful and destructive activities. He tainted your spirit, my boy, and we now see daily evidence of that damage.”

Teddy shook his head slowly, too flustered to speak.

“Come now,” the Brother smiled, “confess your corruption.”

“I... we never did anything, he never...”

“I expected this,” the Brother sighed, opening the folder.

He removed a stack of large, glossy photographs, some black-and-white, some color. “I want you to see these pictures, Disciple - these illustrations of fag-crim behavior.” He pushed the photos across the desk. “They're difficult to look at, I know, but necessary. Your soul is at stake here, after all.”

Vaguely curious at first, then with growing revulsion, Teddy examined the photographs. They showed a series of horribly mutilated boys and young men. “The victims of fag-crim perversion,” Brother Graham explained. He pointed to the photo in Teddy's hand. “That one is only twelve, I believe.” It was a boy with his own bloody, severed genitals stuffed into his mouth. Teddy dropped the photo and shoved it away with all the others. “I don't want to see any more,” he mumbled, feeling sick to his stomach. “I can't.”

But the Brother wouldn't let him stop. He pushed another photo into the boy's hand. The victim's head had been chopped off and put between his legs. Another showed a group of young men spread-eagled, manacled, and slit open from throat to crotch. Teddy turned away gagging. He forced himself not to vomit. Brother Graham finally relented. “Perhaps you've seen enough,” he said gently, replacing the photographs in their folder. “I hope your eyes have been opened.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Remember those pictures from now on. Perhaps they'll give you a better understanding of fag-crim savagery. No more daydreaming after this, Disciple. No more unhealthy associations with dirty boys. No more wicked games and wicked thoughts.”

Teddy opened his mouth to protest, then realized his mistake and stayed silent. Brother Graham took the folder across the room and put it back into the file cabinet. “There's nothing more dangerous than sexual passion,” he said, his back turned. “Perverved forms of that passion are an abomination, boy. Never forget that. Never allow yourself to stray.”

“I won't.”

“Good lad.” He walked to the door and took down the paddle. “Now for our unpleasant duty.”

Teddy stood up. His legs were trembling. Mechanically, trying not to think:, he unfastened his trousers.

Teddy's mother was at the kitchen table when he got home. An empty glass was in front of her. She seemed fidgety, nervous. “You're late,” she said.

“I missed the bus, so I walked.”

“I could have picked you up.”

“I felt like walking,” Teddy mumbled. He hadn't realized the strength of his anger until now. Seeing his mother made it sizzle hotter.

“So,” she said, “were you talking with Brother Graham?”

“Yeah, you should know.”

“There's no need for that tone, Edward Cameron.” She picked up her glass, remembered it was empty, put it down. “Whatever I said was for your own good.”

“You didn't have to tell him about Cisco!”

“He's a bad influence, he's always ... “

“He's gone,” Teddy interrupted, “so you can forget about him.”

“I didn't know about that.”

“You don't know a lot of things,” he said under his breath.

“He was so crude, such a bad influence, he was...” Her voice tapered off. She stared at the empty glass, her energy gone. Teddy watched her, waiting for her to continue, then shook his head. “You shouldn't have told him about Cisco, Mom.”

“You don't know how hard it is,” she said softly.

“He was my friend.”

“I do all I can to be a good mother.”

“It wasn't right, that's all.”

“You have no idea what I go through.”

“Forget it,” Teddy shrugged. He knew she wasn't listening. She was waiting for him to leave so she could have another drink. The conversation was over.

By next morning, she seemed to have forgotten their argument. Teddy found her in the kitchen, preparing a Saturday breakfast of eggs, hash browns, and toast. “No bacon this week,” she said over her shoulder. “We ran out of coupons.”

“That's OK.”

“I hope you're hungry.”

“I am, yeah.” Teddy poured himself a glass of milk. His anger was gone now. The night before, while sulking in his room, he had spent several hours reliving the experience in Brother Graham's office,

probing and analyzing it over and over until he could judge it calmly, rationally. He still felt queasy when he thought about the photographs, but they no longer seemed threatening. He understood Brother Graham's purpose in showing them; he understood all the lessons about Correctional Camps and sexual perversion and wicked thoughts. Some of the lessons made sense; some didn't. But fag-crims and mutilated boys had nothing to do with Teddy's feelings for Cisco. No one could make him believe that those good feelings had been sick or sinful. There were bad people in the world, no doubt; someone had butchered those kids in the photos; but it obviously had been someone who *hated* boys, not loved them. Brother Graham didn't seem to understand that; and if he did, then he was a liar and a hairball, as bad as the sinners he always talked about.

And there was something else: the more Teddy thought about fag-crims, the more he wondered about Richard. Why did he live alone? Why wasn't he married? And why was he always so worried about the vice patrols? He was different from the other men Teddy knew. He was more like a big kid, sort of funny and sarcastic, always cheating on the rules. Besides that, he looked at Teddy in a strange way, with an odd, nervous intensity that made the boy feel almost selfconscious. There was nothing scary or dangerous about the look. Just the opposite, really. Teddy felt certain that Richard liked him, maybe even in a fag-crim way. But he knew, just as certainly, that Richard would never hurt him. So how could all fag-crims be bad? Maybe some of them were nice; maybe some of them were just regular guys. Why were they all sent to the Camps for doing exactly what Teddy himself wanted to do with Cisco? Nothing could explain that - not the sermons Teddy heard at church, not the lessons at school, not Brother Graham's horrible photos. They all dealt with cruelty, violence, hatred. No one ever talked about love.

Those were the thoughts that had swirled through Teddy's mind as he fell asleep; those were the thoughts that had greeted him when he woke up. His anger had been replaced by a quiet, unsettling confusion. A creeping anxiety. The emptiness was growing colder, darker. Cisco was gone. There was no one else to talk to, no one to laugh with, no one to take the fear away. His mother tried, but she had her own demons to battle. Teddy watched her scooping hash browns onto a platter with six fried eggs and a pile of buttered toast. She tried, yeah - but she couldn't help, she couldn't understand. No one could.

Except, maybe, for Richard.

Eleven

Saturday afternoon was overcast, drizzly. Richard's glasses were speckled with water when he got back from the store, a new carton of cigarettes and a rolled-up copy of *Metro* magazine beneath his arm. He wiped the lenses of his glasses with a handkerchief, then lit a Camel and glanced out the window above the sink, hoping to catch a glimpse of the boy. But, as usual, the yard was empty. "Still no Teddy or Cisco," he said quietly, glancing at the picture of Chucho on the refrigerator. "I hope they're all right."

He spent the next hour reading the issue of *Metro* magazine. A cover story about the vags had caught his eye at the store. They seemed to be getting more and more attention recently. The news media had adopted them as their latest freak show, good for a few months of novelty value before giving way to black-market coupon forgers or some lunatic social movement like the CCSDC (Christian Crusaders for Stricter Dress Control). For now, though, the ghetto vags were trendy, hot, good copy.

There was nothing in the article that Richard didn't already know. It was the same old litany of facts and statistics leading up to the same old outraged demands for "decisive action to rid cities of these

satanic vermin.” One grainy black-and-white photo showed a young warrior with crossed bandoliers and a loaded machine pistol. “Go get 'em,” Richard said softly. “Shoot one of the bastards for me, too.”

He was still leafing through the magazine when someone knocked at the door. His stomach went cold and fluttery with fear. He jumped up, started to reach for the picture of Chucho, then decided it was too late and turned frantically toward the door. And then his fear dissolved in a rush of laughter as he spotted Teddy on the porch, just visible through the little window.

The boy smiled when Richard opened the door. “I thought maybe you were gone,” he said, drumming one hand nervously against the side of his leg.

“Nope,” Richard said, “I'm right here.”

“I was just sort of wondering if you had... if you needed any help.”

“With what?”

“With anything - like jobs and stuff.”

Still holding open the door, Richard poked his head outside and glanced up and down the empty road. “You'd better come inside for a minute.”

Teddy stepped quickly into the kitchen. “There's nobody around, I made sure.”

“You're a clever spy, Mr. Bond.”

“Mr. Bond,” Teddy repeated, shaking his head and laughing.

“It makes me nervous just the same.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Anyway,” Richard said, “I don't think I have any work for you to do.”

“Maybe I could clean your basement or something.”

“This little shack doesn't even *have* a basement. Sorry.”

Teddy looked around slowly. “It's backwards, too.”

“How do you figure that?”

“The kitchen is in the front here, instead of the back.”

“I guess you're right,” Richard laughed. “I never thought about it before.”

The boy wandered to the refrigerator. He was wearing a hooded gray sweatshirt and bright yellow sweatpants. A red bandana was tied around his long blond hair. He pointed to the picture of Chucho.

“That's weird.”

“It's a vag.”

“Sincere?”

“Absolutely.”

“Do you know him?”

“Unfortunately not.”

“It's a royal picture,” Teddy said, leaning closer for a better look. “It says he's thirteen, just like me.”

“Yep.”

“He looks... tough.”

“It's a beautiful picture,” Richard agreed, standing next to the boy. “The vags are fascinating guys.”

“I've heard about them on the vid,” Teddy said, “but I never saw anything like *this*.” He couldn't take his eyes from the picture. “It's extreme, really.”

“I have a whole pile of stuff about the vags, over there.”

“More pictures?”

“A few.”

“I'd like to see them, maybe later.”

Richard lit another cigarette. “Do you have to go already?”

“I just wanted to see if you had any jobs,” Teddy nodded. “I wasn't planning on... on coming in and staying and stuff like that.”

“Maybe tomorrow you could run to the store for me.”

The boy perked up suddenly. “Yeah, I could do that, no problem!”

“I think I'll need some bread and milk. Maybe you could buy yourself something while you're there - a candy bar or a comic book or something.”

“Great.”

“I can't pay you much,” Richard said. “Just a few bucks.”

“I don't care.”

He put his hand on the boy's shoulder. “Are you sure it's not too risky for you?”

“Naw, it's OK,” Teddy said. “My mom takes a lot of naps, so she won't know, and I'll be real careful when I come over here.”

“Let's use the side door, just in case.”

They went through the living room to a small vestibule on the west side of the house. Richard moved three empty boxes out of the way and unlocked the door. “I've never used this entrance before,” he said. “It'll be safer, I think. There's a tree that sort of hides it from the road.”

Teddy smiled. “This is a good idea.” “Our secret passage.”

“Yeah, it's kick-ass.”

“I'll leave it unlocked during the day,” Richard said. “Just let yourself in from now on - if you ever want to come over, I mean.” He touched the boy's shoulder one more time. “But be careful, please.”

Teddy stepped outside. “Don't worry, I'm a supreme spy.”

“I'm sure of that.”

“I'll be back tomorrow, absolute.”

Richard nodded as the boy walked off, then called out, “I like your headband, by the way!”

“Thanks.”

“It looks like Cisco's.”

“It is.” Teddy stopped, looked back. “He had to go away, so he gave it to me.”

“He's gone?”

“Yeah, he left. Last week.”

“Too bad. He was your best friend, I know.”

Teddy shrugged. “Yeah, he was, but...” There was nothing more to be said. Not really. Cisco was gone. That was all.

“Tomorrow,” Richard said, sensing the boy's reticence.

“Yeah,” Teddy smiled, “I'll be here.”

He walked off with his usual jaunty strut, up on the toes of his sneakers. Richard watched him until he rounded the corner of the house, out of sight. Their pact of friendship had been sealed now. No question of that. Richard could take the alliance as far as he wanted. The boy would follow happily, eagerly. The only limit was fear - Richard's fear. Being with Teddy was wonderful, but it was also insanely reckless, virtually suicidal. Sooner or later - somehow, someday - the fatal blow would fall. The vice patrol would come knocking at the door. It had to happen. But “someday” was a threat too distant and faint to kill Richard's desire for the boy. Only tomorrow was real - tomorrow, when Teddy was due to return. Nothing else mattered.

Teddy showed up early in the afternoon, still wearing his sweat-clothes and his red bandana. He knocked at the side door as he let himself in, not quite bold enough to enter unannounced. Richard hurried in from the kitchen. “My errand boy has arrived.”

“Yep, I'm here.”

“Any problems?”

“I told my mom that I was going for a walk, so it's OK.”

“Terrific.”

Richard gave him twenty dollars and sent him back out. About forty minutes later, the boy returned with a bag of bread, milk, root beer, and ice cream. He dumped it on the kitchen table with an exhausted grunt. “I thought my arms were going to break.”

“I can imagine.”

“Did I get too much?”

“No, not at all.”

“Root - beer floats are my all-time favorite.”

“They're great,” Richard agreed. “I haven't had one in years”

“Can I make one now?”

“Sure, go ahead.” He took two glasses from the cupboard.

“Make one for me, too.”

Teddy, as skillful as a soda jerk, put the floats together quickly. He brought them into the living room and handed one to Richard. They drank them together on the couch, watching Richard's antique portable TV. Teddy had never seen one like it before. “Where did you get that thing?”

“At a little second-hand store in New York.”

“It's a *weird* vid, man.”

“It works on transistors instead of a laser disc,” Richard explained. “Actually, it's a television, not a vid. It's probably about thirty years old.”

Teddy tipped up his glass to get the last dribble of creamy root beer. It left a foamy amber mustache on his upper lip. “You lived in New York?”

“A few years ago.”

“What happened?”

For a moment, Richard pondered his response. He considered lying outright, then decided on a cautious, sanitized version of the truth. “I had to leave... because of a boy like you.”

Teddy mulled that over for a few seconds. He wiped the foam from his mouth. “Because of... because you got in trouble?”

“Just *before* I got in trouble, actually. We were friends, somebody found out and told his parents, and I left town... with the hounds nipping at my heels.”

“That's generic, absolute.”

“It was scary, that's for sure.”

The boy stared down at his empty glass, muttered, “I hate them.”

“Who?”

“The vice patrols, the Brothers... everybody.”

“It's dangerous to say that,” Richard said. He looked at Teddy sitting beside him, his profile silhouetted against the bright backdrop of the living room window: delicate chin, slightly upturned nose, long eyelashes. “Aren't you afraid I might turn you in?”

“No,” Teddy laughed, “that's stupid.”

“Maybe I'm an undercover agent.”

Teddy laughed harder. “Yeah, I'm sure.”

“Now I'm insulted,” Richard said, also laughing. He grabbed the boy's shoulder and gave it a playful shake. “I always thought of myself as a pretty intimidating guy.”

“Not quite.”

“Don't make me mad, kid!”

“Real tough,” Teddy said. “I'm shakin' all over.”

They looked at each other and laughed again. Richard kept his hand on the boy's shoulder, massaging it gently. “It is dangerous for us to be friends, Teddy. We have to remember that.”

“Talking together is just a misdemeanor.”

“I know, but your being here in the house makes it a lot more serious.”

“We'll be careful,” Teddy shrugged. “They can't tell us what to do.”

“I suppose not.”

The boy looked at the little table clock next to the TV.

“Aw, man, it's getting late!” He stood up quickly and rushed to the kitchen. “I've gotta get home.”

“We lost track of the time, I guess.”

Teddy put his glass in the sink, then raced back through the living room to the side door. “I'll come back when I can. Maybe tomorrow. But I don't know.”

“Just let yourself in.”

“I will.”

“Your ice cream and root beer will be waiting patiently for your return.”

“OK,” Teddy laughed. “I'll see ya.”

Richard watched him go, then wandered back to the couch and sat down. He touched the cushion beside him. It was still warm from Teddy's butt. “I must be crazy,” he whispered, smiling slightly, shaking his head. “Totally crazy.”

Twelve

After school on Friday, Teddy spent an hour punching and kicking at the bag in the basement, working off a week's worth of frustration and resentment. He hated his classes more than ever. Every lesson was long, tedious, pointless. Pummeling the bag was his only release, his only way of striking back at the lies, the meanness, the stupid fucking rules.

Finally exhausted, he went upstairs and heated himself a can of vegetable soup. His mother had forgotten to fix supper. She was in the living room, already asleep. Teddy ate alone, listening to the vid through the kitchen door. There was a report on the evening news about the war. Fighting had intensified on the North African front. Federation troops were advancing on Cairo. Teddy thought about Cisco, out there somewhere fighting against the Empire, finally getting his chance to do some heavy-duty killing. Maybe in Africa, maybe in Central Europe or Greater Palestine. For Cisco, it wouldn't have mattered.

Teddy washed the sink full of dirty dishes after he finished eating. Done with that, he looked into the living room. His mother was still asleep. Wasting no time, he slipped out of the house and hurried over to Richard's. The side door was unlocked. He knocked two times and went in. Richard appeared from the kitchen, cigarette in hand. “Welcome back, old pal! I haven't seen you all week.”

“I know, I couldn't sneak out.”

“Well... come on in, sit down.”

The boy stepped toward the kitchen. “Can I make myself a float?”

“Definitely.”

“You want one, too?”

“No,” Richard said, “not this time. But you go ahead.” Teddy joined him on the porch after a few minutes. “We should buy some straws.”

“Remember that for tomorrow.”

“Do you need anything else?”

“Some bread, I suppose, and some lunchmeat, that's about all.” Richard held up a thin sheaf of papers for the boy to see. “I have some vag pictures for you.” They were the photocopied portraits from *Urban Studies Review*. Teddy took them in his free hand and started studying them, making soft sounds of astonishment as he went along. “These guys are supremely chill, man.”

“Yeah, they're wonderful.”

“Where do they live?”

“In the big cities - New York, Chicago, Toronto. They're allover, I guess.”

Teddy was staring at a pair of boys, one of them in a loincloth, the other in tattered undershorts that left his genitals exposed. “How can they get away with showing... you know, with going around like this?”

“They're outside the Federation, they make their own rules.”

“That's hard to believe.”

“Want me to read you some stuff about them?”

“Yeah, for sure!”

Richard fetched a handful of material from the bookcase across the room. “I haven't read to anybody since I was a teacher, long time ago.”

Teddy stared at the boys for a few more seconds, then took a gulp of root beer float and scooted next to Richard. “Go ahead, I'm listening.”

“I'll just read a few excerpts.”

“Some good stuff.”

“Like what?”

“Like their weapons and their rules and stuff like that.”

“OK,” Richard said, “here's something good.” He put his arm around the boy and started reading. Teddy leaned closer. The passage was about vag warriors and sorcerer-chieftains. It was difficult to concentrate on the words. Teddy tried to listen, but all he could think about was Richard's arm around him, Richard's hand massaging his shoulder, Richard's warmth against him. No man had ever held him before, not like this. He wanted to stay there forever, safe in Richard's embrace, lost, invisible.

Richard, too, had trouble focusing on the words. He found himself abruptly at the end of the passage. The room seemed suddenly, uncannily silent. He glanced down into Teddy's face. “Are you still awake?”

“Yeah.”

“You're so quiet.”

“I'm just listening, that's all.”

“Should I read some more?”

Teddy forced himself to sit forward, away from the warmth, the safety. “Maybe later,” he said. “But I should go home now, before my mom... before she starts looking for me.”

“Yeah, we have to be careful.”

“I'll come back tomorrow.”

“I'm counting on it.”

Teddy hurried to the door and let himself out. He turned after a few steps and called back, “Early

tomorrow, in the morning!”

“I’ll be here.”

A brief wave, and then Teddy jogged across the road, into the house. His mother was waiting for him in the kitchen. She slammed her half-filled glass against the table, sloshing vodka over the rim. “Where have you *been*?”

“Sorry, Mom, I was down by the creek, just goofing around.”

“It’s after dark,” she yelled. “There’s a curfew, young man!”

“I’m sorry.”

“You *want* to upset me, don’t you! You always... you always do things to make... to get me upset!”

“I don’t try to.”

“Brother Graham warned me, he did, he warned me.” She took a drink, no longer caring about her privacy. “And I almost... almost called him just now, too! Don’t think I didn’t. He would know how to handle such a... such a brat!”

“I said I’m sorry.”

“Such a thoughtless brat,” she mumbled, almost crying now. “You want to upset me, you do, you always do.” She headed for the living room, banging her shoulder against the doorway as she stumbled through. Teddy didn’t answer. He knew she’d forget the whole episode by morning. And, anyway, he was already thinking about his next meeting with Richard. His mother’s drunken outburst couldn’t spoil that. Nothing could.

True to his word, Teddy arrived early in the morning, dressed in blue jeans and his familiar gray sweatshirt. Richard was waiting for him in the living room. “Here’s my boy,” he said, rubbing out his cigarette in the ashtray.

Teddy smiled. “Should I go to the store now?”

“Sure, any time.”

“I’ll need some money.”

“No problem.” Richard gave him twenty dollars. “Some bread, mustard, lunch meat, a box of matches...”

“I can’t buy matches, I’m too young.”

“Forget the matches, then. Just get the other stuff, and get something for yourself.”

“Anything?”

“Whatever you want.”

“Thanks, Richard.”

Teddy put the money into his pocket and took off. He half-walked, half-ran to the store (slowing once as a vice patrol drove past), bought the groceries quickly, then rushed back. In the kitchen, he pulled a comic book from the bag for Richard to see. “It’s the newest *Doctor Dread*.”

“Looks good.”

“It’s the best there is, no doubt.”

Richard put the package of lunch meat into the refrigerator. When he turned around, Teddy was smiling at him and holding out the comic. “Would you read it to me?”

“Yeah, I’d love to. Come on.”

They went into the living room, back to the couch. Teddy pressed himself against Richard as he listened to the story. Doctor Dread was doing battle with an alien telepath for possession of the all-powerful Jasmine Stone. Richard changed voices as he went along, doing his best to make the story

exciting, pausing now and then to glance at the boy huddled against his side, warm beneath his arm. At the end, after Doctor Dread's inevitable victory, he looked down at Teddy and hugged him tighter. "Well?"

"That was great."

"You were right; it's an excellent comic."

"You read it real good."

"What a shrewd judge of talent you are."

Teddy sat forward, his hand on Richard's knee. "I guess I should go."

"Already?"

"I really should."

"Yeah, I suppose you're right."

"After lunch," Teddy proposed timidly, "if you want to... I mean, we don't have to, but maybe we could meet down by the creek."

"That sounds good... but sort of dangerous."

"Me and Cisco did it a couple of times. Under the bridge. Nobody ever goes there."

"OK, then, I'll meet you there."

"After lunch."

"About one o'clock?"

"Yeah," Teddy nodded. "I'll bring my fishing pole." He jumped up and started for the door, then ran back and wrapped his arms around Richard. "Thanks for reading the story."

"Any time," Richard said. He laughed softly, surprised and delighted by this unexpected hug. He held the boy gently, rubbed his back through the sweatshirt, kissed the top of his head. Teddy squeezed him harder, then let go and dashed out the door. He didn't stop running until he was in his own kitchen.

He guzzled a glass of water. There was an odd sort of panic inside him, a panic that was somehow exciting, invigorating. He knew now that Richard really liked him; and he knew what that meant. Anything might happen between them. All those dark, mysterious sins that Brother Graham warned against - they were all possible now. Richard, if he was brave enough, could show Teddy everything, all the forbidden secrets. But that was the problem. Teddy had to wait silently, patiently for Richard's advances. He could never tell Richard what he wanted, never ask to be touched. That would have been pussy and stupid, an impossible breach of the rules, like farting in church or swearing at Brother Graham. Some things just couldn't be done.

Teddy took another drink, then went into the living room. His mother was gazing out the front door. She turned quickly as Teddy crossed the room behind her. "I didn't hear you come in," she said. "You startled me."

"I just got here."

"Did you have lunch yet?"

"I'll get a sandwich in a minute." He headed for his bedroom. "I'm gonna go fishing after."

"By yourself?"

He stopped abruptly. "Yeah, by myself. Why?"

"I just wish you had some friends, that's all. It's not good to be alone all the time."

"Don't worry about it, Mom." "I *do* worry, I can't help it."

"I'll be OK," Teddy said, going into his room. He shut the door. His fishing pole was in the closet, untouched since August. He took it out, checked the line, the hook, the sinker. All he needed now was bait. Worms would be good. He could get some later, after lunch, down by the creek.

He glanced at the digital CD clock. It was only eleven-thirty, still an hour and a half before he could

see Richard again. Seemed like a million years. He glanced at himself in the mirror. Cisco's bandana was on the dresser. Teddy picked it up and tied it around his head. It looked good on him, and he knew that Richard liked it. Again he studied his reflection. Then he smiled, thinking of something else that Richard would like. He took off his jeans and undershorts, grabbed his yellow sweatpants from the floor and put them on. The soft, fleecy fabric felt great against his bare skin. He pulled the drawstring good and tight, then checked himself out in the mirror one more time, turning himself slowly, flirting with his own reflection. It was easy to see - front and back - that he had nothing on underneath. He pulled the string a little tighter, just to make sure.

Leaving his pole on the bed, he went back to the kitchen for lunch.

At twelve-thirty, unable to wait any longer, Teddy grabbed his pole and an empty soup can and jogged down to the creek. Using a stick to dig with, he managed to find about a dozen small worms, enough for two or three hours of fishing. He put them in the soup can with a couple of scoops of dirt and took them beneath the bridge.

It was dim and cool there, rank with moss and mud and fishy creek smells. Sunlight from the water swam in dappled reflections against the concrete slabs overhead. Teddy put a worm on his hook and tossed it in. The tiny splash sent out a rippling pattern of concentric circles through the shallow brown water. Near the far bank, beneath an overhang of yellow-green shrubs, Teddy could see the dorsal fin of a carp. Its tail flicked above the surface now and then as it rooted lazily in the muddy bottom.

A few minutes later, Richard arrived. He sidled carefully down the embankment, ducked beneath the bridge and sat next to Teddy on the gritty concrete. "Well," he smiled, "fancy meeting you here."

Teddy smiled back. "Yeah, it's a miracle for sure."

"Any trouble getting out?"

"Nope."

Richard looked around slowly at their shadowy under-bridge hideout. The concrete above and below them was scrawled with years of graffiti - slogans and emblems in every color - skulls and crossbones, lightning bolts, crescents and crosses and pentagrams - cryptic combinations of numbers - splashes of obscenity ("Luther sucks cock," "Rickie fucked Tina," "J. H. Loves P. L. W.") - all shivering with reflected sunlight. One slogan caught Richard's attention. It said, in faded black letters, "VAG POWER." He pointed to it. "Did you ever see that before?"

The boy looked up, read it, shook his head. "No, I never noticed it. I wonder who wrote it."

"Some aspiring young vag, I guess."

"Like me," Teddy chuckled. "That would be fierce."

"Being a vag?"

"Yeah - just imagine how chill that would be, making your own rules and stuff like that."

"And not having any dress codes."

"Yeah, *especially* that!"

"When I was a kid," Richard said, "we used to wear shorts all the time. In public. And T-shirts, too. Or no shirt at all."

"No shirt?"

"It was different then," he said softly. "It's hard to remember. People were freer, they were happier, and then they gave it all away. Like collective suicide. Very sad."

Teddy reeled in his line, checked his worm, tossed it back. "In school, they say that the country was dying and that the Christian revolution saved it, and that now we're safe because God loves us again."

A car drove by overhead, sending a shower of dust drifting like smoke toward the water. Richard leaned back against one elbow, facing Teddy. "Do you believe that?"

“Not really, but that's what they say.”

“The vags know better.”

“Yeah, I guess they do.”

The fishing pole jerked suddenly in Teddy's hand. He yanked it back and jumped to his feet, already reeling in, edging down the slanted concrete slab toward the water. “It feels like a big one,” he yelled. “Probably a carp.”

Richard watched him from behind. He noticed - vaguely at first - that the boy had changed his clothes. He was wearing his yellow sweatpants now. They were grimy in back from sitting on the dirty concrete, stuck tight between his buttocks - so tight, in fact, that there couldn't possibly have been anything on beneath them. It was illegal, of course, to go out in public without underclothes, but Teddy had never pretended to like the dress codes. If any boy were to venture outside without his skivvies, it would have been him. When he turned back around, holding up a small carp for Richard to see, his brazen disregard for the rules became even more prominent.

Smiling, he scrambled up the steep concrete slab with his fish. “I thought it would be bigger,” he said. “It fought like crazy.”

Richard looked away quickly from his crotch. “Carp are strong, even the little ones.”

“I guess I'll throw him back.”

“Sounds fair. Are there any bullhead in here?”

“Yeah! Some big ones.” Teddy twisted the hook from the carp's mouth. “They're good to eat, too.” He tossed the carp back into the creek. It hit the water with a loud smack. He picked another worm from the soup can, threaded it on the hook and cast his line back in, next to a tiny patch of shriveled yellow lily pads. “The fish like it over there,” he said, sitting down beside Richard. He was out far enough to be in the sun. It was warm for the first weekend in November, a last breath of Indian summer before winter came blasting down from the Canadian Territories. Richard took off his brown Goodwill suit coat and put it under his elbow as a cushion against the hard concrete. “It feels like a summer day,” he said. “Nice and warm.”

“Feels great,” Teddy nodded. He laid down his pole and stretched out on his back, both hands behind his head, right knee bent. “I like it here, I really do.”

Richard was staring at the naughty little bulge in the boy's tight sweatpants. He wanted to touch it. And he knew the boy wanted him to touch it, too. But he couldn't do it. Not here, not where any passerby could sneak up and surprise them. Impossible. Another car raced by overhead, convincing him of the danger. Then, too, there was always the possibility that maybe, just maybe, he was wrong about the boy's intentions. That doubt was always there - with every boy, every time. Saying the wrong thing, making the wrong move could have been disastrous. He had to be careful. Always.

Teddy rolled onto his side, facing Richard. “The fish must be taking a nap.”

“Or maybe they've already had their lunch.”

“Yeah,” Teddy laughed, “maybe that's it.” He closed his eyes, yawned, murmured, “The sun makes me sleepy.”

“You look like a little cat,” Richard said, putting his hand on the boy's head. “A little golden cat.” He scratched him behind the ear, then slowly, cautiously started rubbing his lean, warm neck. But even that was too risky. Reluctantly, he pulled his hand away. Teddy opened his eyes. “What's wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Oh... I thought maybe somebody was coming.”

“No,” Richard said, “don't worry.”

The boy sat up and checked his line. Still no luck. “The fish just aren't hungry.”

"I guess not."

"I'll try for a few more minutes."

"It's nice being here anyway," Richard said. "Fish or no fish, it doesn't matter."

Teddy looked at him with a strangely urgent expression. "You really think so? I mean, you're not bored or anything?"

"No, of course not!"

"I was afraid maybe you were bored with me."

"No way! I love being with you."

"I like being with you, too."

They were silent after that, both staring at the catgut line hanging slack in the water, both busy with their own thoughts. Five minutes passed. Ten. Fifteen. Finally giving up, Teddy reeled in his line and dumped the extra worms, dirt and all, onto the ground. "No fishies today," he said in a silly falsetto.

Richard laughed. "I'm glad you're taking it so well."

"I should probably go home, anyway. My mom gets kinda scared when I stay out too long."

"We don't want that to happen."

"So," Teddy said, brushing off his backside as he stood up, "I guess I'll see you later."

"The sooner the better."

He stepped toward Richard with a timid smile. "I can't leave yet, though."

Richard got up and put on his coat. "And why is that?"

"I didn't get my hug yet."

"Hey, that's right!" Richard put his arms around the boy and held him there beneath the bridge, petting his hair, rocking him slowly from side to side. "My little cat," he said softly. "Pretty little cat."

"I wish you were my real dad," Teddy mumbled, his face against Richard's chest.

"I love you anyway."

"You really do?"

"Yeah, very much."

"I love you too."

They hugged each other tighter, alone in the quiet shadows. And then the boy stepped back, forcing himself to go. "My mom gets worried," he said. "She'll be looking for me."

"I know, it's OK."

"But I'll see you later."

"Definitely."

Teddy grabbed his fishing pole and ran home. His mother barely glanced up as he rushed through the living room. She was getting an early start on her drinking. The bottle beside her was nearly empty.

In his bedroom, Teddy paused to catch his breath. He knew now, for sure, that all the things he wanted to do with Richard were going to happen. All those things he had dreamed about with Cisco were finally going to come true. Maybe not today, or tomorrow, or even next week - but soon, very soon, he was going to know everything, he was going to do it all.

Still breathing hard - more from excitement than exertion - he stepped in front of the mirror and appraised himself with new interest. Richard had called him pretty. Actually pretty. Teddy touched his face as if it belonged to a stranger. "Little cat," he whispered to his reflection. "Pretty little cat."

In church next morning, Father Valenti droned his way through a sermon on the Prodigal Son, ungrateful children, long-suffering parents, the need for strict discipline - and a great deal more. Teddy sat next to a man with bad breath and waited impatiently for his freedom, trying to kill the endless slow-motion minutes by staring at the beautiful boy-angel on the ceiling. And by thinking about Richard.

After Mass, Teddy and his mother were met at the door by Brother Graham, dressed impeccably in his sky-blue uniform. He patted the boy's shoulder. "Did you enjoy today's sermon, Disciple Cameron?"

"Yes, sir."

"Some good lessons for a young boy to remember. I'm sure you'd agree, Mrs. Cameron?"

"Oh yes, Brother, I certainly would. I'm sure Edward learned a lot this morning."

"Has he been behaving himself at home?"

"Some days are good, some bad," she shrugged. "You know how children are. They never appreciate anything you do for them."

"How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is," the Brother agreed sadly. "We've had a great deal of trouble with young Edward, as you well know."

"I'm keeping my eye on him, Brother, don't worry."

"Never hesitate to call me, Mrs. Cameron. If you have any problems with the boy, I'd like to know - at once."

She nodded, desperately agreeable. "You'll be the first to know, I promise you that. He won't get away with anything."

Brother Graham smiled his appreciation, gave Teddy a final pat on the shoulder, then strolled away. Teddy's mother looked at the boy and shook her head. "You're bound and determined to humiliate me, aren't you?"

"He's a jerk, he's always..."

She grabbed his arm and pushed him toward the sidewalk. "That's *enough*, young man! Get in the car and be quiet."

"But, Mom, it's not..."

"That's *enough*! Go to your room when we get home and don't come out. You're grounded till tomorrow."

Teddy kept his mouth shut after that. At home, he went straight to his room and slammed the door. He took off his hated uniform and crawled into bed beneath the covers. He stayed there all afternoon, ignoring his mother's two-o'clock offer of lunch. That was the last he heard from her. But he knew she was out there - on the couch, watching the vid, drinking.

Late in the afternoon, as the bedroom darkened around him, Teddy felt himself sinking into the fuzzy warmth of dreams. He knew he was already asleep; he could see himself in bed - and yet, the room looked somehow different, bigger, with strange pictures on the walls. He stood up and took a closer look. The pictures were of vags, dozens of them. Hundreds. Cisco was in one of them, smiling at the camera and wearing a dirty white loincloth. Then he started moving. He stepped out of the picture and poked Teddy's shoulder. "I decided to come back, man."

"I thought you were gone forever."

"I missed you too much." He walked up to Teddy and pinched him on the cheek. "You're so pretty."

"Not really."

"Yeah, man, you're the prettiest. Like a little cat."

Their voices echoed in the room. It was some sort of chapel, Teddy realized suddenly. His bed was

actually a long pew, cushioned with plush red velvet. The marble floor was smooth and cold beneath his bare feet. He pointed at Cisco's loincloth. "But you're a vag now."

"Fuckin' right, man."

"It must be great. You're lucky."

"Come back with me."

"I can't, I have to stay here."

"I'll teach you everything. Look at this," and Cisco lifted the loincloth to show Teddy his genitals, "You can do it now, whatever you want, go ahead."

"Richard is going to help me."

Cisco was turning himself slowly, still holding up the cloth. "Look at me, look at me, look at me."

"I have to wait for Richard." Teddy ran to the door. It was high, incredibly high, a giant oaken panel bolted with iron. He couldn't move it, not an inch, no matter how hard he shoved and banged against it. Almost crying, he wheeled frantically and discovered Richard standing behind him, wearing the blue uniform of the Brothers. "You're an impossible nuisance, little boy!"

"I'm being good."

Richard stalked toward him, the wooden paddle in his hand. The chapel was as dark and dank as a dungeon. Teddy backed cringing into a corner. The walls were cold and slimy. Richard's footsteps seemed to echo forever in the stony vastness. "You know the procedure, Disciple."

"But you're not a Brother!"

"You know the procedure."

"What have you done with Cisco?"

"You know the procedure."

The audience of boys behind Richard began cheering and applauding. But it wasn't Richard any more. The Brother was just a grinning skull - deadly, greedy, evil. Teddy jumped up and aimed a powerful roundhouse kick at its head. He advanced, spinning and kicking again and again and again, battering the creature into a pile of dusty rags. The boys cheered louder. Teddy bent his knees and sprang upward, rising higher, higher, flying with his arms outspread and the air rushing cool against his face. He circled the domed ceiling of the chapel, soaring with effortless grace, so happy and free that he laughed aloud. Everything was good now; everything was alive and exciting and glowing with energy. He was flying miles and miles above the floor, skimming the ceiling with his fingers, close enough to see every tiny crack in the plaster, every blister in the paint, every chaotic brush stroke, floating alone in the high, vaulted chambers where angels and cherubs dwelled. He could feel the spirits around him, the spooky ghost-tingle of hovering souls. And then he saw the boy-angel - in front of him now, palpable, alive, smiling over his shoulder. Teddy flew to him and touched his hair with reverent fingers. "I love you," he whispered. The boy-angel trembled. Teddy hugged him from behind, pressing against him. They were both nude, both shivering with pleasure. The angel smelled of sunlight, flowers, April dew. Teddy reached down the front of him, feeling for those precious hidden parts he had always yearned to see. A sound like dove-song came from the angel's throat, a soft, lustful cooing that rippled through him like laughter. Teddy found the hardness between the angel's legs and gripped it tenderly, both of them floating together in a warm rainbow glow, like swimmers making love in a tropic pool, rolling and twisting lazily in mid-air, quivering closer and closer to satisfaction.

Then, in a burst of light, the dream ended. Teddy sat up with a panicky gasp. The room was silent, dark. Through the window beside his bed he could see a sliver of moon shining cold and sharp in the black November sky. He could still feel the warmth of the angel against him, so vivid and real that it made him tremble in the darkness. Feeling strangely frightened, he threw back the covers and put on his

jeans and hurried out to the living room. His mother was asleep. He took the empty glass from her hand and set it on the table beside the couch.

The wall clock said six thirty-five. Teddy could feel himself relaxing now. The dream already seemed pallid and distant, banished by the bright lights of the living room and the familiar jabber of the vid. He noticed suddenly that his mother had forgotten to close the inner front door. He crossed the room and glanced outside. There, across the road, was the tiny orange firefly-glow of a cigarette. It was Richard's, of course. Teddy opened the screen door and ran out. Sharp pieces of gravel poked against his stockinged feet as he scampered across the road. "I can't stay," he called out. "I'm supposed to be grounded."

"I was afraid of that," Richard said. "I missed you today." Teddy stepped closer and smiled. "I just wanted to say good night."

"Do I get a hug?"

Nodding, the boy moved up onto the first step and put his arms around Richard. "And a kiss, too," he said, pressing his lips quickly against Richard's cheek. "I'll see you tomorrow." He broke away and headed for the road.

"I'll be waiting," Richard yelled after him.

"I love you!"

"I love you too!"

Teddy raced into the house and shut the door. His mother was still asleep. He stood watching her, waiting for some sort of movement, then smiled and went back to his room.

Every day after school, Teddy stopped at Richard's house for a few minutes of talking and cuddling on the couch. At first, his mother didn't seem to notice his tardiness; she was rarely sober enough to keep track of the time. But on Friday she was waiting for him at the kitchen table with a platter of pork chops and a bowl of boiled potatoes and carrots. "You're late," she said. "The food is getting cold."

"Sorry, Mom."

"Well?"

Teddy put his jacket and bookbag in the corner. "Well what?"

"Where were you?"

"Nowhere," he shrugged. "I was just messing around by the bridge."

She put a pork chop on his plate, some potatoes, some carrots. "I don't want you lying to me, Edward Cameron."

"I'm *not* lying!"

"You know what Brother Graham said last Sunday. I won't put up with any more nonsense from you, that's a promise."

"I know, I know."

"You make sure you're home on time from now on," she said, fixing a plate for herself. "No nonsense, young man."

"OK," he mumbled, "I hear you."

They ate the rest of their dinner in silence.

Next day, Teddy put on his sweats and his bandana and snuck across to Richard's house. The old TV was on in the living room. Teddy looked in the kitchen. Empty. He went back through the house to the bedroom. Richard was there, sitting on the far edge of the bed and staring at something in his hand. He looked over his shoulder as the boy entered the room. "Oh... you're already here."

"Are you busy?"

“No, no, it's OK.” He swung his legs up onto the mattress and sat against the headboard. “I'm glad you're here.”

Teddy sat next to him on the bed. “What were you looking at?”

“Something dangerous and subversive,” Richard said with a smile. “My friend from New York.” He handed an old photograph to Teddy. It showed a young boy in blue gym shorts flexing his muscles for the camera. “His name was Kim.”

“Where did he get those shorts?”

“We bought them at a little shop in New York - sort of a black-market outlet.”

“They're extreme. I wish *I* had some.”

“You don't need any,” Richard said. “You're beautiful enough already.” He kissed the boy's cheek, then took back the photo and slid it into a loose seam of the mattress. “We can't leave this lying around for our vice buddies to see.”

“Those fuckers!”

“My feelings exactly.”

Teddy looked slowly around the room. “I've never been in here before.”

Richard laughed, said, “Welcome to my parlor,” in a ghoulish Bela Lugosi voice. “Make yourself comfortable.”

“OK, I'll take a nap,” Teddy grinned. He yanked off his shoes and socks, then flopped onto his belly.

“That's a little *too* comfortable.”

“Wake me up for lunch.”

“What a smart - ass you are.”

“Yep, that's me.”

They both laughed, not sure what to do next, listening to the soft drone of the television from the other room. Richard reached down and touched the boy's head. “How long can you stay?”

“For a while,” Teddy murmured, “maybe an hour.” Richard pulled off the boy's red bandana, started petting his hair. “You're so pretty,” he said, letting his fingers comb slowly through the feathery blond curls. “So pretty.”

Teddy settled himself more comfortably against the mattress. “Do you know how to give back rubs?”

That was the signal, the go-ahead, the timid invitation.

“Yeah, of course,” Richard said. He'd heard the same question before, dozens of times. He knew what it meant. “With your shirt on?”

“Should I take it off?”

“If you want to, yeah.”

The boy sat up quickly and pulled the gray sweatshirt over his head. He was wearing an undershirt beneath. He peeled that off too, then dropped back onto his belly. “It feels weird,” he chuckled nervously. No grown man had ever seen him before without a shirt. He shivered slightly as Richard's hand touched his back. It was going to happen now. All of it.

“Just relax,” Richard said quietly. The boy's skin was palest ivory, made velvety around the dimpled base of the spine by a golden whorl of pubescent fuzz. Richard pressed his thumb against the bumpy vertebrae, massaging up, down, up again, around the neck and shoulders, using his whole hand now, working back down slowly to the waist, then cautiously onto the seat of Teddy's pants. The soft yellow fleece slid easily around the bare skin beneath. “You're not wearing any underwear - as usual.”

“I forgot.”

“Oh, of course,” Richard laughed, “you're pretty forgetful lately.” He continued sliding his hand in slow circles, buffing the boy's bottom with the fleecy fabric. “Should I do your legs, too? A full body

massage?"

"Yeah, great."

"Pants on or off?"

"Maybe you should take them off, I guess."

"That would be nice," Richard said. "Just lift up your hips a little." He tugged the sweatpants down. They came off easily, quickly, with a soft shush of fleece against skin, leaving Teddy naked on the bed. His eyes were shut, his head resting on his folded arms. Richard sat beside him, just staring at him, afraid to move, afraid to break the spell. Teddy waited. His legs were trembling. He could hear Richard's slow, even breath; he could hear the TV's muffled chatter through the open doorway. "It's sort of cold," he mumbled finally, desperate for something to happen.

Richard gave his hands a vigorous rub to get them warm, then ran them lightly up Teddy's body - over the slim calves sprinkled with short blond hairs, over the thighs, up onto the lean white ass. "Incredible," he whispered, his hands skimming back down, then up once again, more slowly this time. Gently, he urged Teddy's legs apart, brushing the smooth inner thighs with his fingertips, coaxing them wider. He ran one finger up between the buttocks. The crack was warm, moist with sweat. Teddy let out a long, shaky breath. Richard leaned down and kissed his neck. "Turn over," he said tensely, "turn over now."

The boy rolled quickly onto his back, both knees raised and spread, his hands clenched into loose fists beside his head. He was hard and ready. Richard pawed at his cornsilk blond pubic hair, then just as gently, just as slowly began fondling his swollen red balls - still staring at him as if entranced, trying to stop time, trying to freeze the images forever in his mind. Teddy's penis was thin, curved stiffly to the left. Richard started petting it. The boy inhaled sharply; he couldn't believe this was really happening. Like the supremest wet dream ever. Richard was actually touching him, actually jerking him off now, stroking him rapidly. Teddy pressed his fists against his eyes and arched his back, opening his legs as wide as he could, his toes digging against the mattress, every muscle tight and shaky. It wouldn't take much longer now. Just a few more strokes. He started pumping his hips, getting ready, getting closer, almost there, almost - and then he was squeezing it out, every drop he had, still pumping rapidly, letting himself slide warm and slippery in Richard's fist. Empty. Finished.

They were silent for several minutes. Teddy stayed on his back - exhausted, raw, motionless - gazing at the ceiling, only vaguely aware of Richard's hand still caressing him. Finally regaining his strength, he sat up slowly with a bashful, self-conscious grin. "Thanks for the massage," he said. "It was great."

"You liked it?"

"Yeah, a lot." His sweatpants were lying crumpled beside him. He picked them up, wiped between his legs, pulled them on. "Best massage I ever had."

"Any time you want another one, just let me know."

"Great." Teddy stood up and put on the rest of his clothes.

"Maybe I can come back tomorrow."

"Not this afternoon?"

"I don't think so." He went into the living room, straight to the side door. "My Mom is kinda hyper right now. She doesn't like me to be gone all the time."

"OK then, Super Spy, don't take any chances."

Teddy turned in the doorway and lifted his face. "Kiss me, kiss me," he said in a breathlessly theatrical voice, laughing at his own silliness.

"Gladly, gladly," Richard answered. "Pucker those sweet little lips." He leaned forward and gave the boy a wet kiss on the mouth, lingering for two warm breaths before backing away. "Love you."

Teddy hopped down the steps. "Love you too," he called back, already sprinting toward the road. He

felt like whooping - a long, loud victory shout - but of course he couldn't. His joy had to remain hidden from the world. He was a fag-crim now, a sharer in the dark secrets, an outsider - and he liked it. He liked being a rebel. The cold emptiness inside him had been filled by the warmth and excitement of Richard's touch. He belonged to Richard now; they were joined in a deliciously sinful alliance against all the vice patrols, all the Brothers, all the hairball grown-ups who wanted to boss them around and run their lives. They had fooled everybody, they had done something that made them different, special - something wicked and unforgivable and totally wonderful.

Still smiling, Teddy dashed into the kitchen for lunch. His mother was talking on the phone when he came in. She mumbled a final hurried comment into the receiver, then hung up and froze him with an angry stare. "Where were you this time?"

"Nowhere special."

"I want to know," she said. Her voice was tight, cold, frightening. "I want you to tell me right now!"

Teddy backed against the sink. "Just around... down by the bridge."

"You're lying."

"No, really, I..."

"You're lying," she said again, louder this time, almost yelling. "I *know* where you were!"

"I was down by..."

"You were in that *house*!"

"No I wasn't, I wasn't there."

She crossed her arms in front of her, trying to keep her hands from shaking. "I saw you go in, I watched you - sneaking around like a little thief!"

"I wasn't there," Teddy murmured, but he knew it was hopeless now. His stomach felt sick and sore.

"I didn't do anything wrong."

His mother stepped to the table, picked up a spoon, threw it back down. "Don't say another word. I've had *enough*!"

"I didn't do anything."

"I said to be quiet!" She was crying now, staring at the floor, shaking her head. "I warned you over and over, so many times. I kept telling you to be good."

Teddy waited, not moving, weak with fear.

"I warned you," his mother said once more, "but you were always too stubborn to listen." Her face was red, streaked with tears. "I watched you go out before, I saw you go to that house, I saw you sneak over there. I *had* to call the Brother, I didn't have any other choice."

"You called Brother Graham?"

"For your own good!" She was yelling again, holding her head with one hand, crying harder. "I warned you, but..."

Teddy wasn't listening any more. He rushed past her into the living room, on his way to the door. He had to do something; he had to warn Richard. Maybe it wasn't too late. But then he saw the squad cars outside, and his fear turned to terror. A trickle of urine ran down his leg before he could control himself. What happened after that seemed blurry and unreal, like the horribly chaotic images of a nightmare. Three black cars stopped in front of the house. Vice agents climbed from inside, looking strangely bored, sunglasses hiding their eyes. Two headed for Richard's door; four more strolled through Teddy's yard and up onto the porch. The boy backed away. His mother came in from the kitchen. "You see," she said, "you see what's happening now!"

"I'm sorry," Teddy whispered from the corner, pressing himself against the wall as the door opened and four black-uniformed agents filed in. One of them was wearing a golden cross on his cap. He looked

at the boy. "Is that him?"

Teddy's mother nodded. "That's my son." She glanced out the door, at the empty porch. "Where's the Brother?"

"What Brother is that, lady?"

"Brother Graham!" She suddenly seemed frightened, almost panicky. "He should be here!"

"We just get our orders and do our jobs."

"But this isn't right!"

The senior officer ignored her. "Take them both out," he said, already poking around the room for evidence. "Use separate cars."

"I have to talk to Brother Graham," she screamed. "You can't arrest me and my son! You're supposed to get the man next door, not *us*!"

"Just doing our jobs, lady."

She struggled against the agent leading her out. "But it's not supposed to happen this way! He's just a little boy, you can't hurt him, you can't take him!"

Teddy didn't even resist as he was ushered roughly out to the squad car. This was just another dream - an especially terrible one, but certainly not real. He saw his mother being shoved into one of the other cars; across the road, he saw Richard being frisked and handcuffed and pushed forward violently onto his knees in the grass. His glasses were gone; his left cheek was purplish red and puffy. He looked up briefly toward the boy, but his eyes were dead, glassy. One of the agents grabbed his hair to hold him steady; the other held up a shiny black instrument and pressed it against his forehead. Richard howled in pain as the electric prongs burned into his skin, branding him with the mark of the serpent. Teddy collapsed into the squad car. This was just a dream, he kept telling himself, just a bad dream.

The car started moving.

Just a dream.

Book Two

One

It was already dark when Teddy arrived at the Falwell Home for Wayward Christian Boys. He shuffled into the reception area with a dozen other youngsters. The room was big and stark, with bare white cinderblock walls, yellow linoleum on the floor, ceiling lights glaring harshly overhead. It smelled like a doctor's office, antiseptic and medicinal. On his way in, Teddy had taken a good look at the entire complex. He knew that he was in the main section now, an enormous three-story brick building that housed the reception area and the dispensary, the staff offices, and the dining hall. Two long wings extended east and west from this central section, single-story dormitories with a hundred beds each.

A guard shoved him toward the main desk. A little bald man in a brown uniform was seated on the other side. His name plate said Deacon Thatcher. He glanced at Teddy's file. "Edward Michael Cameron, thirteen years old last August, guilty of willful association with an adult fag-crim. Is that accurate, Disciple?"

The boy stared silently.

"No matter," the Deacon said. "I have your detainment papers right here, signed by a Brother Graham of St. Mary's Academy, all in good order." He looked at the boy, appraising him with a long, careful gaze. "You have a record of undisciplined behavior, young man."

Teddy still didn't respond. The Deacon's words were distant and tinny, miles and miles away, just another part of the bad dream - meaningless, unimportant.

"You'd do well to change your attitude here, my friend... or we'll change it for you, I guarantee." Another silence. Deacon Thatcher gestured to the guard. "Move them along, we're finished for now."

The guard took Teddy and the other boys to an adjoining room and ordered them to strip. Their clothes were dumped into a gray laundry cart. "This too," the guard muttered, yanking the bandana from Teddy's head. He tossed it onto the pile, then herded the group into the showers. A few minutes later, still wet and shivering, they were lined up for their new uniforms: underwear, white socks, long-sleeved khaki shirts, khaki trousers, white canvas sneakers. Then, as the final step in the induction process, their heads were given a rapid boot-camp shave. All that remained of Teddy's long hair was a scalp full of blond stubble. He ran one hand across it, fascinated by his own baldness.

The boys were marched to the dormitories after that - one group of older teenagers to the east wing, the younger group (including Teddy) to the west. Fifty beds were lined against each wall, a narrow aisle between. This building, too, was nothing but cinder blocks and linoleum and bare overhead lightbulbs - all cold, sterile. The bathroom and showers were at the entrance. There was one small window at the other end, far above eye-level and covered with wire mesh. Teddy was assigned to the first bed near the entrance, so close to the bathroom that he could smell the flowery reek of deodorizer and hear the hollow plink - plink - plink of leaky shower nozzles. He dropped onto the mattress and stared at the high white ceiling. The pillow was as hard as a bag of sand beneath his head.

It was several seconds before he realized that someone was talking to him. The voice was young and chirpy. Teddy rolled his head to the left and saw a boy sitting on the edge of the next bed, asking him

questions. "When did you get here? Did they bring you in the bus or the van?"

"The van," Teddy said weakly, surprised to hear his own voice.

"What did they get you for?"

Teddy looked away without answering. This other kid couldn't possibly have been real. Soon he would go away, he would vanish with everything else, leaving Teddy safe and snug in his own house, in his own bedroom.

"They caught *me* dipping someone's pocket," the voice continued. "Do you think that's so bad? It didn't seem so bad to me. But I guess it was. They say it was, so I guess it was."

The chatter continued for a few more minutes, then went silent. Sometime later - it might have been an hour, it might have been two - the guard reappeared and flashed the lights. Familiar with this signal, the boys stood up and marched sluggishly into the bathroom. There were a dozen urinals and six toilets, all in open view against the same wall. The queue moved slowly through the one door and out another, each boy taking his turn at the facilities before heading back to the dorm and getting undressed. As soon as the last boy had stripped to his underwear and crawled into bed, the guard switched off the lights. Teddy pulled the rough woolen blanket up to his chin. It was scratchy against his bare arms and legs. He closed his eyes, only dimly aware of the voice drifting to him quietly from the next bed. "This place isn't so bad," it was saying, "you get everything here you need. It's not so bad. You'll like it here after a while, I bet you will, honest."

There was silence after that - except for the sounds of a hundred boys settling into their beds - turning, coughing, rustling their covers - a fidgety bedtime noise that gave way gradually to soft snoring and sighing. There was another sound, too, hardly noticeable at first, coming from everywhere in the darkness - a rhythmic squeak of bed springs, slow and steady, going on and on for ten minutes, fifteen, twenty, eventually diminishing, getting quieter. Finally there was only one bed still creaking, far off somewhere across the dorm - and then it too fell silent.

Teddy clutched his blanket tighter. Now that he was alone, totally isolated in the deep blackness, something strange and terrifying was stirring within him. He was starting to believe, for the first time, that the dorm and the Deacon and the other boys were real; he was starting to believe that his mother and Richard were actually gone, taken away by the vice squad, ripped suddenly from his life. His long, horrible dream had been no dream at all.

It was real. All of it was real.

Teddy rolled quickly onto his stomach and pressed his face against the pillow, trying to muffle his sobs.

At dawn, the boys were roused from their beds by a shrill electric buzzer. They undressed silently and shuffled naked into the bathroom, stopping to use the toilets and urinals before passing through the showers. One of the guards handed out towels at the far end. Back in the dorm, hastily drying himself and putting on his clothes, Teddy finally noticed the boy from the next bed. He was a thin little red-head with freckled milk-white skin and hyper-focused blue eyes. His name was Kelly Dillon. He looked at Teddy with a friendly grin. "It's sort of cold in here," he said. "Some mornings are OK, but the heat doesn't always work so good." He pulled on his khaki trousers. "You feel better today, I bet. Don't you feel better?"

"Yeah," Teddy said, "I guess I feel OK."

"I knew you'd feel better. It's not bad here, really. Are you hungry?"

"A little bit."

"We'll be eating pretty soon. I'm hungry too. We'll be eating pretty soon, don't worry."

A few minutes later they were in the huge dining hall, seated in groups of ten around long metal tables. Teddy sat next to Kelly on the hard bench. They ate their breakfast of oatmeal, dry toast, and powdered orange juice in silence, listening to one of the sub-deacons read selections from the Bible. Conversation was prohibited during meals. Lunch and supper were no different. Each time, the boys were marched to their assigned tables for thirty minutes of eating and Bible-reading. The food was always cheap and simple: soy-burgers, macaroni, beans, broth, vegetable stew, canned fruit, bread, powdered milk. But Teddy didn't mind. Getting three meals every day was a luxury he had never enjoyed before. After his first few days at the Home, he began to understand Kelly's attitude of game resignation. He had a bed here, a shower, plenty of food. He didn't like all the rules, or the lack of privacy, or the constant praying and Bible-reading, but those were just minor annoyances, nothing serious. The daily routine was monotonous, but easy: a morning shower, breakfast, Christian Morality class, two hours of chores (helping in the kitchen, mopping floors, cleaning bathrooms), lunch, Bible class, two hours of outside recreation, more chores, supper, an hour of chapel, then a final "contemplation hour" before lights-out. Only Sundays were different, when outside recreation was replaced by an extra two-hour dose of chapel.

It was at night, when Teddy was alone in the darkness, that his fear and his loneliness returned. He never stopped wondering and worrying about his mother and Richard. They were in the Camps - he was convinced of that - somewhere in Utah, over a thousand miles away. He also knew that he might never see them again. Every night he dreamed about them and saw them being dragged away by the vice agents; every night he heard Richard's final howl of pain, like the desperate cry of an animal. He thought constantly about escaping and going to Utah, about rescuing them, about starting over and being free. He studied the outer grounds every day for possible escape routes; the Home was surrounded by several acres of lawns and woodland, all enclosed by thousands of feet of chain-link fence, patrolled 'round-the-clock by a squad of black-uniformed guards. Getting out wouldn't be easy. It might take several weeks, even months - but Teddy knew he could do it eventually, somehow.

In the meantime, he was finding his day-to-day existence at the Home more than tolerable.. He actually enjoyed being with Kelly. Besides sleeping in adjoining beds and eating at the same table, they also spent their mid-afternoon recreation time together. Usually they wrestled or shadow-boxed or ran races with the other boys, trying to keep warm in their unlined fatigue jackets. ("They'll put a lining in later," Kelly explained one day, "when it *really* gets cold.") Sometimes, feeling less energetic, they just sat together and talked under an old maple tree near the west wing. By the end of Teddy's second week at the Home, they were good friends. Kelly was only twelve years old, but already a veteran of several juvenile centers, in and out of custody since the age of seven. The Falwell Home, according to his standards, was better than most. "They don't work you too hard here," he said, "and they keep you away from the big kids."

"What's so good about that?"

Kelly smiled. They were under the old maple tree again, hugging their knees to keep warm. "The big kids like to fuck the little ones. Happens all the time. You get used to it, really. But it's not so bad here."

"I never see any of the older kids," Teddy said, "except during chores." He glanced toward the east wing. "What do they do all day?"

"Same as us, only at different times. They come out in the morning instead of the afternoon, and they eat after we do. You'll find out when you're fourteen, don't worry. They'll move you over there."

"I won't be here then."

"They won't let you out," Kelly said, shaking his head.

"I'll get out, don't worry."

“Oh, *that* way. I guess so, maybe. Some kids run away, some of them make it. But it's dangerous. And it's not so bad here, really. I think you should probably just stay. The food's pretty good.”

Teddy didn't answer. A guard was walking slowly past, hands behind his back. Like all the guards, he was armed with a blackjack and a machine pistol. Teddy watched him all the way to the end of the building, observing his movements. He wondered what would happen if he stood up right now and sprinted for the fence. It was a long run, three or four hundred yards. How far would he get? The guard was out of sight now, hidden by a lilac hedge and a small utility shed; it would take him several seconds to get around them and start back. By that time, Teddy could have been across the lawn and into the trees, well on his way to freedom. He poked Kelly's arm, smiling. “I'm gonna do it, you just wait and see.”

“I think you should stay,” Kelly shrugged. “Anyway, it's getting too cold now. You'd freeze, I bet.”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

The electric buzzer put an end to their discussion. Back inside, they split up to take care of their respective chores. It was Teddy's week to work in the kitchen - peeling and chopping vegetables, taking out trash, lugging boxes. He shared his duties with three other west-wing boys and four of the older east-wingers, who made a sport of taunting and bullying their younger companions - especially Teddy. There was something about him that seemed to excite their hostility. One of them in particular - a tall, pimply boy named Clayton Olson - took special delight in tormenting him. Today was no different. Teddy was carrying a box of canned vegetables when Olson started in on him, laughing and calling him names. “He walks like a little fairy, man. Just look at him. What a little queer-bait.”

Teddy kept going. He recalled Kelly's comment about the big kids being dangerous, about them wanting to fuck the little ones. And he believed it. There was something odd and feverish in Olson's eyes, like desire twisted into madness. Since entering the Home, Teddy had seen that same look in dozens of eyes, from both residents and staff - that same look of desire gone sour and sick, that same look of hatred - hatred because he was beautiful, and because they couldn't have him.

Olson was still baiting him, leaning against the rotary ovens with one of the other east-wing boys. “Walks like he has a corn cob up his ass.” The head cook hobbled by and chuckled. He was an old man with emphysema and sore feet who clearly enjoyed the discord among his young helpers. As long as they did their jobs, he never interfered; their taunts and insults were his only entertainment, a daily theater of cruelty that helped to pass the time.

“Maybe he *wants* a corn cob up his ass,” the other east-wing boy said.

“Yeah,” Olson laughed, “a nice big one, all the way up.” Teddy picked up another box and started back across the room. “Screw you,” he muttered on his way past.

“Say what, fairy?”

“I said to screw yourself.”

Olson stepped forward. “You've got a dirty mouth, punk. Watch what you say.”

Teddy muttered under his breath, then turned away. He took only one step before Olson shoved him in the back, knocking him roughly to the floor. He fell hard against the box in his arms. It felt like a rock hitting his chest. Olson was still laughing when Teddy jumped up and doubled him over with a foot in the gut. The other boys were startled into silence. Teddy danced back a step, steadied himself, then leveled Olson with a roundhouse kick to the head. The cook was already gone, on his way to fetch the guards. The other boys, foreseeing trouble, backed away. Teddy stayed where he was, standing over Olson, ready for more. His face was red; his fists were clenched, raised for action.

He didn't even notice the guards behind him until they had him by the arms, one on each side.

A few minutes later he was in Deacon Thatcher's office, his hands cuffed behind him. “You can take those beastly things off,” the Deacon said to the guards, “and leave us. We'll be fine.” Alone with the

boy, he unwrapped a tiny piece of chocolate and popped it into his mouth. "My only vice," he said, smiling slightly. "An expensive one these days, I'm afraid."

Teddy looked around the office. He had never seen a room like it before - thick red carpeting, wallpaper with velvety gold and brown patterns, oil paintings in fancy gilt frames, dark wood and leather furnishings. Above him, hanging from the high ceiling, was a small crystal chandelier. Deacon Thatcher laughed softly, amused by the boy's open-mouthed gaze. "You like all of these pretty things, Disciple?"

"Yes, sir."

"A lad with good taste, I see. Very encouraging."

Teddy waited for his inevitable punishment, hoping it wouldn't be too severe. The Deacon walked around him in a slow, nonchalant circle, like a prospective buyer appraising merchandise. "I understand you were fighting with one of the older boys, Disciple Cameron. I also understand that you dispatched him rather handily. Is that true?"

"I guess it is," Teddy said. He didn't like the way Deacon Thatcher continued circling him, studying him. "But I didn't start it, I swear."

"Where did you learn to fight like that, my son?"

The question surprised him. This wasn't the sort of disciplinary procedure he had expected. "I taught myself mostly. It comes easy."

The Deacon paused at his desk for another chocolate. He was only two or three inches taller than Teddy, very trim and neat in his brown uniform and black leather boots. "What do you suppose we should do about your unruly behavior, Disciple?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Perhaps a paddling would be in order?" Chewing his piece of chocolate, he once again started his slow, circular stroll. "I wonder if a paddling would serve any purpose," he said, brushing his hand across the seat of Teddy's khaki pants. The boy jerked as if poked with a needle. "Or perhaps we should take more drastic measures. Any ideas, young man?"

"No, sir," Teddy said, his throat tight with fear. "I don't know anything."

The Deacon threw back his head and laughed. "A foolproof answer, I must admit. Still, we can't overlook this nasty incident. You and the other boy will both have to be disciplined."

"Yes, sir."

"The other boy - Olson, I believe - is a dullard, always in trouble. I'm sure he deserved his fate. As for you - well, you were warned about your disruptive attitude, were you not?"

"I guess I was."

"We'll have to take away your recreation privileges for one thing, put you on bathroom duty, make you one of my personal disciples..."

"Sir?"

Deacon Thatcher laughed again. "A priceless expression, my boy. Don't be so surprised. I keep several youngsters on my personal staff, especially the ones with... special gifts, shall we say." He ran one finger slowly across Teddy's cheek. "Very special gifts, offered up for the glory of God, offered up joyfully."

Teddy forced himself to remain still. He could see that familiar dangerous look in the Deacon's eyes - sour and sick. But it didn't seem possible. Deacons were officers of the Church, elite members of the Christian Guards, sworn to a vow of chastity. They were immune to sins of the flesh. Deacon Thatcher must have had a higher motive. Teddy decided to play along with him. Being one of his personal disciples might even prove beneficial in time; having special privileges might make Teddy's escape

easier. But the whole situation still struck him as illogical. "It doesn't seem like punishment," he remarked timidly, trying to avoid the Deacon's eyes.

"Punishment is such a primitive term, lad. I'm in charge of *discipline* here. I'm in charge of *re-education*. Young, disturbed minds such as yours need special care. You'll understand that soon enough. Christ will open your mind and your heart." The Deacon picked up another piece of chocolate. "And don't forget, you've also lost your recreation privileges, and you've been assigned to bathroom clean-up. Perhaps *those* measures will satisfy your craving for penance."

He unwrapped the chocolate from its silver foil and held it out to Teddy. "Take it," he said. "No need to be shy." As the boy reached for it, the Deacon pulled back. "No no, young Edward, not like that. With your *tongue*, not your hand." He put the chocolate against Teddy's lips. "Take it like a good boy."

Teddy reluctantly obeyed. Deacon Thatcher slid the piece of candy into his mouth. "That's right," he crooned, "a very good boy." He drew his finger back slowly, running it over Teddy's bottom lip, down his chin. "Let's hope you perform your other duties just as obediently."

He dismissed Teddy after that, pleased with their first session together. He had been watching the boy closely for the last two weeks, monitoring his behavior. The youngster was definitely worth some extra attention. With the proper discipline and training, he could become something special, one of the elite - perhaps even an officer in the Guards. He was still raw and unpolished, of course, still an awkward young stallion who needed breaking. But that would be no problem. Given time, the boy would find joy in submission. Like all the others.

It was almost time for lights-out. The boys were on their beds, exhausted after another long day. Teddy closed his eyes, still thinking about his earlier encounter with the Deacon. Kelly leaned across the space between their beds and poked him in the side. "Did you get in a lot of trouble before? After the fight? Did you get in a lot of trouble?"

"No, not really. I can't go outside any more, and I've gotta clean the bathrooms every day, but that's about all."

"You can't go outside?"

"I guess not."

Kelly went momentarily silent, disturbed by the loss of his recreation partner. "Maybe it won't last too long," he said finally. "You think maybe it won't?"

"I don't know," Teddy shrugged. "Deacon Thatcher wants me to be one of his personal disciples. I guess I'll be doing that from now on."

"Aw, you lucky dog! He told you that before? He told you that?"

Teddy opened his eyes, looked at the other boy. "Yeah, that's what he said. Is that good?"

"It's the *best*, man! The special cadets can do anything. They're the *luckiest*. They really are."

"I don't think I'm going to like it."

"You've only been here two weeks and you're already a special cadet - I can't believe it! You must be the luckiest guy in the world. I can't believe it."

Teddy put his hands behind his head and stared at the ceiling. Maybe Kelly was right. Serving as one of the Deacon's special cadets might be a lucky break. Besides, it would only be for a little while, just until he could manage to escape. Maybe a few weeks, not much more.

In a way, it might even be exciting.

Two

Over the next month, Teddy was introduced gradually to his new role. By January, he was progressing comfortably, starting to enjoy his special status. He still lived in the dorm with the other boys, but he was no longer an ordinary member of the group. Even his uniform was different now. On his right sleeve he wore a special patch; it was yellow, emblazoned with crossed red sabers, the familiar emblem of the Federation. Unlike the other boys, he also wore a red beret. His routine set him apart even further. Every day while the others were outside, Teddy joined his eleven companion disciples for two hours of combat and weapons training. There was a gymnasium in the main building reserved exclusively for their use - also a sauna and a small pool, private luxuries unknown to the other residents. During Christian Morality and Bible classes, Teddy was often summoned to Deacon Thatcher's office for private lessons in history, sociology, civics, law - sometimes with other cadets, sometimes alone.

. It was during one of these sessions that he asked the Deacon about the Correctional Camps. Despite his special privileges, Teddy never stopped thinking about his mother and Richard; he never abandoned the notion of leaving the Home and finding them. More than anything, he wanted to be sure they were safe and healthy. "I just hope they're OK," he said to the Deacon. "It scares me sometimes."

"A fair enough concern."

"If I only knew what the Camps were like... well, maybe I wouldn't worry so much."

They were alone in the main office. Deacon Thatcher strolled to the window and gazed out. "You needn't worry, my boy. The Camps are reeducation centers, nothing more. In fact, I happen to know that your mother is doing quite well." He turned quickly, leaned back against the sill. "The other one - that Wilson character - is also doing well."

"Good," Teddy said softly. "That's real good." He was on the dark leather couch across the room, holding his red beret on his lap. The Deacon walked slowly forward and stood in front of him. "Perhaps, in time, I can arrange for their release - if, and only if, your training progresses smoothly."

Teddy sat up straighter. "Really? You might let them out?"

"That depends on you, young man. So far, I've been very pleased with your progress. Don't disappoint me in the future."

"I won't, I promise."

"Continue to practice humility, obedience. Remember that you're nothing but a wretched sinner."

"I know," Teddy said, willing to say anything now to appease the Deacon.

"You may be a special cadet, but you're still not fit for anything but scrubbing toilets."

"Yes, sir."

"Demonstrate your humility, boy. Get down on your knees."

Teddy quickly obeyed. From now on, he would do whatever was necessary to help his mother and Richard; he would make any sacrifice, no matter how unpleasant, to win their freedom. The Deacon stepped closer and held him by the head. "Confess your sinfulness, boy."

"I'm a sinner," Teddy responded weakly.

"A sodomite!"

"Yes, sir, a sodomite."

Deacon Thatcher gripped him tighter. "Do you deserve your special privileges?"

"No, sir, I don't."

"Show me what a wretched sinner you are." He pushed the boy down to the floor. "Prove your

humility.”

Not sure exactly what to do, Teddy gave the Deacon's left boot a quick, cautious kiss. But it wasn't enough. “The other one too, boy! Quickly now!” Teddy hesitated, then clamped his eyes shut and started kissing both of the boots. The Deacon watched him - nodding, grinning. “That's right, very good, very good indeed.” Finally satisfied, he ordered the boy to get up. “From now on,” he said, “you'll do whatever I ask of you.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Your soul belongs to Christ, but your body and your mind belong to me. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir, I understand.”

“Your training, until now, has been a mere preparation, a period of transition. But tomorrow you'll be entering a new phase. Are you prepared for the challenge?”

“Yes, sir.” Anything for his mother, anything for Richard. “I'm ready.”

“I believe you are,” the Deacon said, still grinning. “You're dismissed for now. But remember today's lesson, remember that one learns to command by learning to serve. Strength through submission, Cadet Cameron.”

“I'll remember that, sir.”

“We'll make sure that you do.”

Quickly, Teddy left the office.

He spent the next two hours scrubbing and mopping all the bathrooms in the complex, sharing the work, as always, with an older east-wing boy (a different one every week). Afterwards, he joined Kelly for supper and chapel, then marched back to the dorm and dropped exhausted onto his bed. Kelly watched him for several minutes, afraid to disturb him. “You're kinda quiet,” he said finally. “You must be real tired.”

“I was just thinking,” Teddy replied.

“About what?”

“About some kind of new training I'm starting tomorrow. I'm just wondering what I'll have to do.”

“Is it fun?”

“Is *what* fun?”

“Being a Red Beret. You must do a lot of stuff. You're gone all the time.”

“It's OK,” Teddy said. “Some stuff is fun, some is hard.”

“What kind of stuff?”

“Jesus, man, quit asking me so many questions! I'm sick of it.”

“I wasn't trying to make...”

“I can't talk about my training with just a regular kid. Don't be so stupid all the time.”

“Sorry,” Kelly said quietly.

Teddy rolled away from him onto his side. He didn't want to be mean, but there was no way he could discuss his new role with Kelly. He was different now, learning vital lessons that no regular kid could ever understand. Deacon Thatcher's methods still seemed sort of strange - but he was an important, successful man, a powerful officer in the Church - he must have known what he was doing. Strength through submission, Teddy repeated in his mind. Maybe that was right. After just one month of training, he could already feel himself getting stronger and tougher. He felt special. Before long, if he worked hard enough, he could win the ultimate prize: freedom for his mother and Richard. Nothing else mattered besides that.

Next day, Teddy was moved into special sleeping quarters on the third floor of the main building.

There were twelve small rooms in all, one for each cadet. He took advantage of his first few minutes alone to explore his new surroundings. The room had a dark wooden floor, blue walls, a white ceiling. There was a closet, a bed, a small desk and chair, a dresser, a mirror. Teddy walked to the dresser and opened the top drawer. It was filled with underwear and socks. He opened the other drawers and found khaki shirts and trousers, all neatly folded and stacked. Also several pairs of swimming trunks, each a different color and pattern - solids, stripes, checks - skimpy bikini briefs that looked small enough for a five-year-old. Teddy hadn't been allowed to use the pool or sauna yet, but that obviously was about to change. He was being given full privileges now - for as long as he deserved them. There would be no more meals in the dining hall after this, no more classes with the ordinary boys. Teddy's daily routine would keep him in the main building with Deacon Thatcher and the other special cadets. Only his bathroom clean-up assignment would continue unaltered. "A valuable lesson in humility," the Deacon had explained earlier. "Scrubbing toilets is ideally suited to a dirty young sinner."

Later that day, immediately after chapel, Teddy was summoned to the office by one of the other cadets (whose duties included acting as messengers between members of the staff). Expecting another private session with the Deacon, he was surprised to find one of the west-wing boys - a little ten-year-old Latino named Kiko Lopez - standing in the middle of the room. Teddy closed the door behind him, then turned and saluted. Deacon Thatcher waved him forward. "I've been waiting for you, my boy."

"I came as fast as I could, sir."

"Do you know Disciple Lopez?"

"A little," Teddy shrugged. "Not very good."

"It seems he was caught stealing utensils from the dining hall earlier today." The Deacon opened one of his desk drawers and pulled out a wooden paddle, similar to the one Brother Graham had often used, but with a severely waffled surface. "We can't tolerate theft here at the Home, can we, Cadet Cameron?"

"No, sir, we can't."

"How do we handle that type of offense?"

"With... with twenty whacks of the paddle," Teddy responded, taking a guess.

"Thirty," the Deacon corrected. He handed the paddle to Teddy. "And now it's your privilege to administer the sentence."

"But I..."

"No wavering, boy. You're a cadet now, you follow orders without question or hesitation."

"Yes, sir, but..."

"Proceed," the Deacon snapped, "You're in charge now!"

Teddy stepped toward the Lopez boy. "OK," he said nervously, "you know the procedure." The little boy lowered his trousers and underpants, leaned forward against the desk. His skinny legs were trembling.

"Proceed," the Deacon commanded impatiently.

Teddy moved closer, took a deep breath, then whacked the paddle against the boy's bottom. It left a red waffle pattern on his skin. Teddy hit him again. The little boy grabbed the desk tighter. Again and again the paddle smacked against him. After twenty times, he was whimpering from the pain; his buttocks were raw, starting to bleed. Teddy hesitated, afraid to continue. Deacon Thatcher stepped behind him and hissed into his ear. "Proceed, Cadet, complete the discipline!" Teddy forced himself to continue. The Deacon stayed behind him, murmuring encouragement with each smack of the paddle. "That's right," he intoned, "very good, continue now, you're in charge, six more, five, again, continue, continue, one more time - excellent!"

Teddy turned away quickly after the last whack. The Lopez boy was crying and shaking as he pulled

up his pants. Deacon Thatcher summoned a guard from the hallway, warned the little boy about future infractions of the rules, then sent him back to the dorm. Alone with Teddy, he began to pace slowly around the office, obviously trying to arrange his thoughts. "I'm very disappointed," he said after a while. "You still have not conquered your pride and your stubbornness. I had hoped for a more enthusiastic performance from you just now, but you still question your duties, you still react defiantly. We can't have that here. Are you aware of your weakness, Cadet?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you willing to surrender totally to Christ and his Federation?"

"Yes, sir, I am."

"You'll have to prove your dedication and your devotion beyond all doubt," the Deacon said, still pacing in slow, deliberate circles. "You'll have to humble yourself totally, absolutely, before I can be satisfied with your sincerity."

"I'll do anything you want," Teddy said, "I promise."

"Indeed you will, my boy - anything I want."

Afterwards, Teddy returned alone to his room on the top floor. He glanced out the window into the winter night. The horizon was glowing with distant neon. It must have been the city - huge and sprawling and bright - twenty miles to the north. Teddy wondered how many vags lived there. Hundreds? Thousands? He hadn't thought about the vags in weeks - not since coming to the Home. Reading and talking about them with Richard seemed years ago, another lifetime. The memory caused Teddy a faint tremor of guilt. The vags were criminals, enemies of the Federation. What they were doing was bad - unless Deacon Thatcher was wrong about everything. But how could that have been possible? How could it all have been a lie? The Deacon was a churchman; he wasn't allowed to lie. He couldn't.

Teddy wandered to the mirror across the room. He stared at his reflection. After almost seven weeks, his hair was finally long enough to comb; every morning he doused it with water and parted it carefully on the left side, identical to the other cadets. He looked good - clean, neat, proper. Just like a real soldier.

Already unbuttoning his shirt, he turned away from the mirror and walked slowly across the room. He took off his uniform, turned out the lights, then crawled into his new bed. The pillows and sheets were cool, soft.

For the first time in seven weeks, Teddy fell into a deep, peaceful slumber, free of nightmares.

Three

Deacon Thatcher glanced at his watch. He was expecting the Cameron boy in five minutes, waiting eagerly to initiate him into his new obedience training. Not every cadet required such drastic discipline, but this one certainly did. He was a willful, free-spirited boy who resented authority and fought against total submission. Severe measures were needed to curb his spirit once and for all. Any boy could be broken. Cameron was no different. Before long, he would embrace his role without question; he would lose himself totally in the greater scheme of the Federation and become a reliable, efficient soldier for Christ.

A moment later, Teddy appeared in the doorway. He paused for a salute, then strode forward to the desk. Fresh from his first day at the pool, he was still wearing a long white towel over his swimming trunks. His hair was slicked back wet and shiny; his skin was beaded with water. The Deacon stood up and walked to the front of his desk. "And how did you enjoy your aquatic workout, my boy?"

"It was fine, sir,"

"I'm glad."

Teddy shifted from foot to foot, uncomfortably aware of the Deacon's eyes upon him. Letting the swimming instructor ogle him had been difficult enough; this was worse by far. Teddy had been taught, all his life, to feel ashamed of his body - and he did. With Richard, that shame had temporarily vanished, burned away by the heat of other emotions. But it was back now, more acute than ever, making him feel ugly, awkward, exposed.

Deacon Thatcher stepped closer. "You seem nervous, Cadet."

"No, sir, not at all."

"Perhaps you'd feel more comfortable in your uniform?"

"Yes, sir, I think I would."

"A pity," the Deacon said. He took hold of the towel and pulled it off. "This thing is rather nasty and soggy."

"It's not too bad."

"You won't be needing it after this."

The boy tensed, suddenly afraid. Something was wrong; something terrible was happening. He stayed rigidly at attention, clad only in his yellow bikini briefs.

"Do you enjoy displaying your figure, Cadet? Are you proud of it?"

"No, sir, I'm not."

"And rightly so. You're a rather homely creature, unpleasant to look upon. You'd do well to cover yourself."

"I would if..."

"Terribly unpleasant," the Deacon interrupted. "Come now, show us what an ugly creature you really are." He gave the waistband of Teddy's yellow trunks a rough snap. "Take them off."

The boy started shaking his head, fear swelling inside him. "But it... I can't do..."

The Deacon silenced him with a slap across the face. "Arrogant, disobedient cur! Do as you're told, or surrender your special rank forever!"

Trying not to cry, Teddy pushed the trunks down his legs and stepped out. He stood there naked and

shivering in the middle of the bright office. The Deacon circled him, frowning and shaking his head. "A dirty, repulsive creature. Wicked, full of sin, full of evil thoughts and desires. Is that correct, boy?"

"Yes, sir," Teddy whimpered, hardly able to speak.

"Nakedness is an abomination in the sight of the Lord. It lowers you to the level of a beast, to the level of a filthy little dog." Pausing at his desk, Deacon Thatcher picked up a black leather collar attached to a metal leash. "An abomination," he said again, strapping the collar around Teddy's neck. "There now, just what a little dog needs."

The boy opened and closed his eyes slowly, blinking them as if dazed by heat or illness or exhaustion. He could feel the bad dream returning, numbing him, taking him away. The Deacon was still talking, saying, "Down on all fours, mutt, down where you belong." Teddy obeyed. It suddenly seemed right that he should be down there, staring at the red carpet - plushy soft beneath his hands and knees - crawling around the office as Deacon Thatcher led him by the leash. It was just part of the dream, coming back stronger now, stronger, taking him farther and farther away where the pain couldn't reach him.

The Deacon led him twice around the office, chuckling with satisfaction as they went. "Very encouraging so far," he said after the second time. "Now be a good dog and lick my boots." He yanked the leash, snapping Teddy's head downward. "Go on, mutt, lick your master's boots!"

Farther and farther away.

The boy started running his tongue across the oily leather, first one boot, then the other, his mouth filling with the greasy bitter taste of polish. "Excellent," the Deacon said, "a superb display. Are you enjoying it, mutt?" The boy, still licking, didn't answer. Deacon Thatcher yanked his leash. "I asked you a question, mutt! Are you enjoying it or not?"

"Yes, sir," Teddy answered, his words distant and dull, as if spoken from a trance.

"Of course you are. Little dogs love to please their masters. Now then... Can you *prove* your devotion, or must we continue?"

Teddy stared blankly at the floor. Deacon Thatcher's question made no sense to him. Mechanically, trying somehow to comply, he began licking the boots again. But that wasn't good enough. "Wrong," the Deacon snapped. "You've been taught poorly until now. But that's about to change, I guarantee." Dragging Teddy behind him, he marched rapidly out the door and down the hallway to the east wing. It was almost deserted now. All the boys, except four, were at chapel. One of those four was Clayton Olson. Deacon Thatcher briefly surveyed the dorm, making sure that everything was in order, then handed Olson the leash. "Here's your newest student. I'm sure you'll remember him from an earlier encounter."

"Yeah," Olson nodded, "I remember him all right."

"He needs a lesson in total submission. Do you under - stand."

"Sure, no problem."

"Bring him back in an hour," the Deacon said, turning to leave. "That should give you ample time."

"No problem," Olson said again. "We'll teach him real good."

The Deacon headed for the door. "I'm sure you will," he muttered. And then he was gone.

Olson jerked Teddy toward one of the beds. "Come on, dickless, time for class." The other three boys laughed and moved closer. They were all about the same age - sixteen or seventeen - big, heavily muscled, strong. Teddy took a few docile steps, then stopped, roused suddenly from his stupor by a rush of deep, cold terror. He grabbed the chain and pulled back. "No way," Olson snarled, "you're not goin' nowhere, you little fairy bastard!" The other boys rushed forward to help. Teddy tried to fend them off with a spinning kick, but the collar choked him before he could even begin. He lashed out with his fists. Olson jerked harder on the leash, knocking him off balance. "Get him, goddammit, get him!" One of the boys grabbed Teddy's legs from behind; another staggered away from a punch, then dove headlong into

him, knocking him to the floor. Teddy thrashed harder as they cuffed him by the ankles and the wrists. His furious yelps of panic were smothered by a wet rag stuffed viciously into his mouth. Still struggling, he was hoisted by powerful hands and flung onto the bed. All four boys closed around him and started pummeling him with their fists, punching him in the face and gut until he crumpled against the mattress - limp, groaning, his eyes already swollen shut.

"I'll take him first," one of the boys said.

"No way," Olson shot back, already unfastening his trousers. "He's mine. I get to open him up." He shoved Teddy onto his belly, then removed the cuffs from his ankles and spread his legs. "It's pay-back time."

The others stood around the bed and watched - rubbing themselves eagerly, waiting for their turns.

Shortly after nine o'clock, Teddy was dumped naked on the floor of a tiny room adjoining Deacon Thatcher's office. He sprawled there silent and motionless on his back - scratched, bruised, bloody - his jaw hanging slack. The room was little more than a closet, totally bare, dark. One narrow wedge of light fell across him from the open door. Deacon Thatcher knelt beside him and wiped his body with a warm, damp cloth. "Such cruelty," he sighed, cleaning the bites and cuts on Teddy's neck and shoulders. "They really are a bunch of savages. Unforgivable." Setting aside the rag, he began to dab ointment on the boy's wounds, including his badly torn anus. "Still, a valuable lesson. You're mine now - totally, without condition. And you'll prove it in the coming days." He smeared more ointment between Teddy's buttocks. "You'll lie in here like a good little dog, eating and defecating when I see fit, obeying my every word. Do you understand?" Getting no response, he slapped the boy's face. "Do you understand me, little mutt?"

Teddy nodded weakly.

"That's better," the Deacon said. He stood up and stepped backward into the office. "You're mine now," he repeated softly, then shut the door.

Teddy never moved.

Early in the morning, Deacon Thatcher returned with two plastic bowls, one filled with water, the other with dog food. He put them on the floor and nudged Teddy with his foot. The boy groaned. His eyes were still purple and swollen, no more than puffy slits. Groaning louder, he managed to sit up against the wall behind him. The Deacon held out his hand. "Your master is here, little mutt. Show him some affection." The boy raised his head groggily and touched the Deacon's hand with his lips, then remembered his new identity and started licking it obediently. "Good," the Deacon smiled. "Now eat your food, my pup. Go ahead, eat it."

Again Teddy obeyed, desperately anxious to please the Deacon and avoid any further pain. He moved himself stiffly into position over the bowl and started gobbling the greasy hunks of meat and cereal, wincing from the deep cuts on his lips. He knew, by now, that this was no dream. That illusion had been smashed the day before, there in the east wing with Clayton Olson. Even so, he felt no urgent fear now; his terror was gone; as long as he was with Deacon Thatcher, he knew he was safe. He was the Deacon's little dog now; pleasing him was important; it was everything.

Finishing his bowl of food, he looked up and tried to smile. Deacon Thatcher smiled back, gratified by Teddy's expression of eager subservience. He leaned forward, scratched the boy gently behind the ear. "You're coming along well now. You're feeling happier and freer, aren't you?"

Teddy nodded. Happier, freer. Yeah.

The Deacon pulled the leash from his back pocket and snapped it onto Teddy's collar. "Come along then," he said, turning to go, "time for your business." They left the office and headed down the hall.

Teddy, still naked, trailed his master obediently, shuffling and limping along in a painful half-crouch. They stopped outside the bathroom. The Deacon looked at Teddy. "Are these facilities for a little mutt like you?"

The boy thought for a moment, glanced at the door, then shook his head. Deacon Thatcher smiled his approval. "You're learning well, my pup. Come along." He led the boy through the reception area and out the front door. It was a frigid January morning, gray and windy. The ground was covered with a six-inch layer of hard, icy snow. They stopped at an oak tree near the entrance. "Go ahead," the Deacon urged, his voice a low, seductive croon, "do your filthy business." The guards stood behind them on the outer steps, watching and snickering as Teddy squatted beside the tree, urinated between his feet, then started dumping a pile of bloody feces onto the ground. The bitter wind stung his eyes and made them water as he stared blankly ahead. He could hear the guards laughing from behind him, but he felt no shame or embarrassment. He was nothing but a mutt, and mutts were *supposed* to crap outside. As soon as he finished, he looked up at Deacon Thatcher with the same fawning smile as before, proud of his accomplishment.

"Such a good little pup," the Deacon said, taking a piece of chocolate from his coat pocket. He unwrapped it quickly and held it out. "And how does my pup accept his treat?"

Teddy opened his mouth and took the piece of candy on his tongue, still smiling at his master. The Deacon tugged lightly at the leash. "Back inside, my pet. We've done enough for now.!"

A few minutes later, Teddy was back in the dark closet, huddled on the floor. Before shutting him in, the Deacon once again cleaned his many cuts and scratches, taking special care to wash his dirty bottom and smear it with the smelly yellow ointment. Then, alone in the darkness, Teddy closed his eyes and floated in a black, dreamless void, thinking of nothing, feeling nothing. Empty. Numb. He stayed there all day, emerging only briefly in the afternoon and evening to hobble outside with Deacon Thatcher and piddle against the tree. His bowls of food and water were kept full by the Deacon, who appeared every few hours to pet him and murmur gentle words of reminder about the joys of obedience, humility, total submission. Teddy felt safest and happiest during these moments, soothed by the low, hypnotic voice above him, content to lie there forever in the darkness where no one could find him or hurt him.

Days passed. Maybe a week, maybe more. Living in the closet, Teddy soon lost his sense of time. Deacon Thatcher continued to visit him and take him outside every day, washing and tending him until he was healed and healthy and back to full strength, ready for his final test. "You've learned your lessons well," the Deacon said during his last visit. "Your training is nearly finished, my pup." He ran the back of his hand across Teddy's cheek. "Our Lord Jesus is very pleased with his little servant."

Teddy licked the Deacon's hand, mewling contentedly. "Do you know how to prove your submission now, my pet? Do you remember?"

The boy nodded eagerly.

"Total submission?"

He nodded again, grinning with bashful enthusiasm.

"Are you healed and ready?"

Still grinning and nodding, Teddy pushed himself to his hands and knees.

"Well then," the Deacon chuckled softly, "the time has come." He led the boy into the office and removed his collar. Teddy touched his neck, rolled his head slowly, free for the first time in countless days. Deacon Thatcher watched him from behind, then stepped closer. "Time to prove yourself."

Recalling his duty, the boy leaned forward against his elbows and arched his back. His right cheek was pressed against the carpet. He scooted his knees apart, opening himself wider. He heard a zipper coming down, the rattle of a belt being unfastened. And then the Deacon's hands were gripping his hips.

“You want me to do it, don't you, boy?”

Teddy nodded, but the Deacon wasn't satisfied. “Time for you to speak now, Cadet Cameron. Answer your commander!”

“Yes,” the boy rasped, pausing for a swallow to lubricate his dry throat, “please, sir.”

“Louder!”

“Please, sir, please do it!”

The Deacon ran his hands along Teddy's ribcage, up under his chest, holding him steady. “Jesus forgives you,” he mumbled, then thrust himself forward.

Two weeks later, Teddy was lounging in the sauna with three other cadets. All of them were exhausted after an especially tough karate workout, sprawled silent and sleepy on their damp wooden benches. Teddy stood up for a moment to toss another ladle of water onto the rocks steaming in the middle of the room. He was wearing a purple satin pouch tied at the hips with tasseled white strings. His bare behind was striped red from the slats of the bench. Around his head was a rising-sun kamikaze bandana, its long white tails hanging to his shoulders. As he sat back down, a messenger cadet opened the sauna door and summoned him to Deacon Thatcher's office. He jumped up immediately and raced out, not even bothering to fetch his uniform from the locker room.

The office door was open when he got there. Deacon Thatcher was sitting against the edge of his desk, holding the wooden discipline paddle. Beside him, clearly terrified, stood Kiko Lopez, the ten-year-old utensil thief. Teddy strode forward and saluted, then waited for his orders. The Deacon moved toward him. “Young Disciple Lopez has chosen to ignore my previous warning,” he explained sadly. “He seems to enjoy violating our rules. We found him earlier today stealing food from the kitchen, not at all a wise maneuver.”

“No, sir, not at all,” Teddy agreed.

“And how do we handle that type of offense?”

“With thirty whacks of the paddle,” Teddy replied instantly. “Absolutely correct.” Deacon Thatcher handed him the paddle. “Proceed.”

Quickly, Teddy stepped next to the Lopez boy. “You know the procedure,” he said.

Kiko, shaking his head in a panic, backed away. “I'm sorry,” he whimpered, “I won't do it again, please don't make...”

Teddy slapped him sharply. “Just shut up and do it!” He waited for Kiko to pull down his pants and bend over the desk, then began the discipline. He went slowly, taking his time, pausing several seconds between each whack. The Deacon ambled up behind him for some words of encouragement. “You're enjoying it now,” he said quietly. “The power is delicious, exciting, you can feel it growing inside you, you can feel it swelling.” He put his hand on Teddy's ass. “You can feel it deep inside, delicious, delicious. It's exciting, isn't it?”

Teddy nodded, swinging the paddle with precise, eager efficiency. Ten whacks, eleven, twelve. The pouch between his legs started stretching out slowly in front, pushed from within by five hard, pointy inches. The Deacon kept urging him on. “Enjoy it, my boy, savor every delicious moment.” Still murmuring, he loosened the little tasseled bow on Teddy's right hip. “Let the power fill every muscle, every fiber.” He loosened the bow on the other hip. “Feel it inside you.” The flimsy scrap of purple satin dropped gently to the carpet. “Go ahead, boy, enjoy it, savor it.”

Eighteen, nineteen, twenty whacks. With his free hand, Teddy started masturbating. Twenty-one, twenty-two. He glanced over his shoulder to make sure that Deacon Thatcher was watching him, then grinned and went back to work. Twenty-five, twenty-six. His mouth was open, tongue showing. The

Deacon's hands were all over him, groping him, playing greedily up and down the back of his body. Twenty-seven. Twenty-eight. He was breathing rapidly, his legs quivering with tense, coiled excitement. Twenty-nine, thirty. Immediately, the Deacon grabbed the paddle from his hand and nudged him forward. "Finish the job," he commanded. "Give Disciple Lopez his final lesson in submission."

Teddy, still sporting his kamikaze headband, stepped behind Kiko and clutched him by the hips. Kiko stayed bent over the desk, too weak to move, too frightened to protest. Teddy paused for another glance over his shoulder, just making sure once again that he had the Deacon's full attention. More exciting that way. He enjoyed performing for the Deacon. This would be his ninth time, maybe his tenth. Hard to keep track from day to day. The paddling business was all right, but this last part was the best. He was helping other kids to learn submission, humility, obedience; he was doing something important for the Federation; and it felt supreme. Absolute.

He shoved his hips forward, wriggling himself into Kiko. The little boy screamed.

Four

March was off to an unusually warm start. Most of the snow had already melted, leaving behind a mess of slush and mud and matted brown grass. It was Monday afternoon, and the sun was out again, accelerating the late winter thaw. The younger boys were outside for their recreation period, running clumsily around the sloppy, slippery grounds. Inside, Teddy was filling a bucket with soap and water, preparing to mop one of the bathrooms. Despite his status, he still worked as a janitor every day. All the cadets, regardless of rank or privilege, were obliged to perform one unpleasant daily chore (known, among them, as "shit duty"), a regular exercise in humility designed and perpetuated by the Deacon himself. "You may be special cadets," he constantly reminded them, "but you're still nothing but filthy sinners in the eyes of the Lord."

Teddy grabbed his mop and started swabbing, angry that his new partner for the week (one of the east-wing boys, as always) still hadn't shown up. Not very unusual, really. The ordinary disciples were jerks - lazy, stubborn, unreliable. They all needed a good lesson in submission.

Wringing the dirty water from his mop, Teddy heard someone walk into the bathroom behind him. His irresponsible co-worker, no doubt. He straightened up, turned quickly - and found himself staring at Cisco. His hair was shaved off now, and he was a little taller and thinner - but it was definitely Cisco. Both of them stood frozen for several seconds, not sure who or what they were seeing. Cisco was the first to move. He walked slowly forward, smiling. "Man, is it really *you*? Ted?" He poked the other boy's shoulder, still not quite certain. "I can't believe you're *real*!"

Teddy said nothing. He felt sick inside, dizzy. He recognized Cisco as someone he used to know, but he didn't want to remember him. Just seeing him now was dangerous, terrifying, a threat to everything Teddy had achieved in the last three months. He backed up quickly and leaned against one of the sinks, still staring dumbly.

"Damn," Cisco said, "you look like shit, man. What's wrong, don't you know who I am? Are you sick or somethin'?"

"I know you," Teddy mumbled. "I remember you." "Shit, man, you're actin' like an utter weird-out."

"You shouldn't swear."

“Huh?”

“I said you shouldn't swear,” Teddy repeated. The shock was passing now; his stomach felt calmer, steadier. He was a special cadet, in command, unshakable. “It's against the rules.”

For the first time, Cisco noticed Teddy's special uniform.

“You mean *you're* a Red Beret? I can't believe it. Pretty damn lucky, man.”

“Stop swearing, I said.”

“Sorry.”

“Anyway, you're late. You should have been here twenty minutes ago. Where were you?”

“I sort of forgot,” Cisco shrugged. “I just got here last week, gimme a break.” He stared more closely at the other boy. “Man, you sure are *different* than before. What's wrong?”

“That's a stupid question,” Teddy said, grabbing the mop, handing it to Cisco. “Finish the floor, go ahead.”

“OK, OK, but... I mean, what are you *doing* here? Where's your mom? What happened, man?”

Teddy sighed impatiently, already on his way across the room to pour cleanser into the toilets. “I shouldn't tell you,” he said, glancing back and forth over his shoulder as he worked. “We're not supposed to talk with the regular disciples.”

“Come on, man, it's *me!*”

Teddy stopped, looked around at Cisco. He didn't want to remember, but he couldn't help it. Cisco was bringing back all the memories: their karate workouts in the basement, their afternoons spent raking leaves - especially their last night together in Teddy's bedroom. The Ferris Flambee Quartet had been playing “Barbary Sunrise” on the CD box, over and over, background music for their dope-smoking and wrestling and horseplay. Only five months ago. Less than five, really. Teddy shook his head slowly, fighting his confusion. “I shouldn't tell you,” he said again. “It's not right.”

“OK then, don't - if it's such a big freakin' deal.”

Teddy started to turn away, then looked back. “Anyway, what about you? Maybe I should know why you're here, maybe you should tell me.”

Cisco leaned forward against his mop. “It's no big story, man. I got to the city OK and managed to join up, no problem, everything was goin' pretty good for a while. They were gonna send us to North Africa in a few weeks,” he grinned, “it woulda been utterly fierce, man, no shit. But then I got in a fight with some asshole during basic training and they checked our papers and they figured out my ID was fake.”

“I knew it wouldn't work,” Teddy remarked.

“Yeah, well, anyway... they sent me to the Robertson Home, but I ran away from there and then they caught me and sent me here. This place is supposed to be really tight, I guess.” He looked at Teddy, shrugged. “That's about it. Here I am.”

“You ran away from the other place?”

“Fuckin' right.”

“Don't try it here,” Teddy said. “I mean it.”

“You gonna turn me in? Come on!”

“I guess I would, yeah.”

“You're nuts,” Cisco said, laughing softly. He started mopping” the floor. “Somebody fried your brains, man.”

Teddy stood watching him for a moment, then turned away silently and went back to work. They didn't talk again until they had finished all the bathrooms in the complex. As they were putting away the buckets and brushes and mops, Teddy finally broke their uneasy silence. “Make sure you're on time

tomorrow,” he told Cisco, “or I’ll have to report you.”

“Whatever you say, boss.”

“I’m serious!”

“I know, man,” Cisco said, trying not to smile. “I’ll be here, don’t worry.” He gave the other boy a snappy smart-aleck salute, then headed back to his dorm.

Teddy went the opposite way, up to his room for a quick shower before dinner. His composure of the past several weeks was gone now. Being with Cisco had ruptured his emotional scar tissue. He felt nervous and unsettled, afraid to be alone with his own treacherous thoughts. The tune of “Barbary Sunrise” kept running through his head, along with the memories, all the dangerous memories that had been safely buried until now.

With his shirt already off, Teddy paused in front of the mirror. Months of calisthenics and weight-lifting had added a layer of muscle to his arms and shoulders. He flexed his biceps, turned slightly to the left, to the right; he smiled at himself, admiring his own handsome reflection. He was a Red Beret now - strong, smart, tough. Everything about his life was good. In a few weeks, his mother and Richard would be finished with their re-educational training and freed from the Camps; Teddy had the Deacon’s word on that. At the same time, his own training would continue, leading eventually to a junior officer program and (by his twenty - first birthday) to a top position in the Christian Guards. Until then, he had everything he needed or wanted: lots of friends, a great pool and sauna and gym, a great room, great food - and especially the disciplinary sessions in Deacon Thatcher’s office - nothing could have been greater than those.

Still, something was wrong. Thinking about all his special privileges left Teddy strangely cold. Long-forgotten feelings were stirring inside him, deep down, remote and unnameable. Memories, dreams. Scraps of names, faces, voices. The tune of “Barbary Sunrise.” Fishing in Sandburg Creek. The beautiful boy-angel. Vags. Being with Richard - together on the bed. And then the arrest. And Richard’s final howl of pain. _ All coming back now, rushing at him, threatening everything. All because of Cisco.

Slowly, Teddy stepped away from the mirror and finished undressing for his shower.

Next morning, after spending two hours in Deacon Thatcher’s office listening to lessons on pre-Federation American history, Teddy went back to his room to change for gym class. Today he was going to be using the pool. Wasting no time, he took off his uniform and slipped into his favorite swimming togs: pink mesh briefs with a black sateen crotch. They felt supreme in the water.

The pool was empty when he got there. Six cadets were in the gym, pumping weights; the other five must have been in the sauna, already finished with their workouts. Teddy spent almost an hour splashing and paddling in the warm blue-green water, letting his mind drift as lazily as his body. Faintly at first, then more vividly, the memories started resurfacing, crowding into his head. He fought against them by swimming a series of fast, furious laps - but they kept coming, all the dangerous, disturbing images of Richard, of Cisco, of the old neighborhood and the old house. One final lap, and then Teddy hauled himself from the pool and rushed toward the sauna, desperate for some company, hungry for some distraction. He toweled himself off as he went, his feet kicking up splashes of water with each step. He paused outside the door of the sauna to dry his hair. It stood out in messy spikes when he was done, ruffled like some sort of damp blond plumage. He pulled open the heavy door and stepped inside. As expected, the other five cadets were there, bunched together at the far end of the narrow room. It was hard to see what they were doing through the steam. Teddy stepped closer. Then he realized that they had a boy with them, stretched out nude across one of the benches. Nothing unusual. The little west-wing kids were often given extra lessons in submission by the cadets. There was nothing sinful or queer about

it; the little kids needed special discipline in order to keep them obedient and respectful; it was for their own good. The cadets were just following orders and doing their duty as Christians.

Moving a little closer, Teddy saw that the boy was Kiko Lopez, who was brought to the sauna for obedience training at least once a week. The five cadets were taking turns inside him, but Kiko didn't even seem to notice. He stared toward the opposite wall without moving or making a sound, part of him already gone, already dead. Teddy stood nearby and watched. One of the other boys finally noticed him and waved him forward. "Come on, Cameron, take a turn!"

The cadet already humping Kiko looked around at Teddy and grinned. "Almost done, Cameron, just hold on."

"That's OK," Teddy said, "no hurry." He couldn't take his eyes from Kiko's blank, stuporous face. Strange that he had never noticed it before.

The cadet emptied himself into Kiko with a last shivery thrust, then pulled out and sat back onto the bench. "He's yours, Cameron. Everybody is done, so take all the time you want."

Teddy took a step forward, already pulling down his briefs - same as always, just routine. But he couldn't get an erection, no matter how hard he tried to concentrate or focus his energy. He fiddled with himself for a few more seconds, his trunks still at mid-thigh, then gave up. Confused and embarrassed, he pulled up his trunks and headed for the door. "I don't feel like it right now," he mumbled on his way out. "You can let him go."

Back upstairs, he changed quickly into his uniform and started studying one of his catechisms, trying to forget Kiko's face. But it stayed there in his mind, a nightmare vision that wouldn't fade.

He was still feeling shaky when he went downstairs to clean the bathrooms. Cisco again showed up late, but Teddy didn't seem to care. Without a word, he handed over a mop and went back to work. Cisco shook his head. "You're gettin' weirder every day, man."

"I'm all right, just do your job."

"Maybe you're homesick," Cisco said, probing for information, still wondering what Teddy was doing in a juvenile center.

"Mind your own business."

"Does your mom visit you a lot?"

"She's in one of the Camps," Teddy snapped impatiently. "Now shut up!"

Teddy's mention of the Camps seemed to have stunned Cisco. He leaned motionless against his mop, not sure how to respond. "That's too bad," he said finally. "Sorry, man."

"There's nothing to be sorry about. She'll be out pretty soon."

Cisco moved closer, obviously saddened. "Nobody gets *out*," he said softly. "Nobody."

Teddy didn't like the expression on Cisco's face. He put down the brush he was using and looked at the other boy more carefully. "What are you talking about?"

"You really don't know? Sincere?"

"No!"

"It's just that, well, the Camps are like, you know, the last stop. Some guys told me about them during basic training." Cisco was shaking his head, struggling with the words. "They called them extermination centers. Nobody ever gets out, man. They kill the prisoners as soon as they get there. Sorry, really."

"That's a lie," Teddy muttered.

"No it ain't, man. Sincere."

"But Deacon Thatcher said... he said they're OK, he said they're getting out pretty soon. Richard, too."

"Who the fuck is Richard?"

Not bothering to answer, Teddy picked up his brush and went back to scrubbing the toilets - but only

for a moment. With a sudden, desperate groan, he threw the brush onto the floor and faced Cisco. His eyes were wild with fear, anger. "It's a fucking lie!"

"It ain't no lie, man."

"You don't know anything," Teddy shouted. "Richard and my mom can't be dead!"

"Sorry."

"They can't be," he said, not as loudly this time, his fury already subsiding. "The Deacon wouldn't lie."

Cisco shrugged. "Don't be so sure."

"He wouldn't," Teddy repeated. "You gotta be wrong." He shoved past Cisco and headed back to his room, leaving the other boy to finish the job, giving no thought now to things like duty or responsibility. None of that mattered. Everything was coming apart. His insides felt cold and tight. Cisco had to be wrong; the alternative was unthinkable.

Upstairs, Teddy closed his door and stood terrified in the middle of the room, close to throwing up. If Cisco was right, then his mother was dead. And Richard was dead. And if he was right, then Deacon Thatcher was a liar, a murderer, someone evil beyond imagining.

Teddy looked at the clock on his dresser. Almost three thirty. He had an appointment with the Deacon in less than two hours. The thought of going to his office and speaking to him made Teddy feel sicker than ever, sweaty with panic. But he had no choice. He had to go. And, anyway, maybe Cisco was wrong. Maybe he was.

Deacon Thatcher was unlocking a gray metal box on his desk when Teddy arrived. He glanced up with a slight grin. "Come in, come in." Working quickly, he stuffed a wad of money into the box, closed the lid, relocked it. "Petty cash," he remarked casually, then put the box into his top drawer and the key in his pocket. "Now to our business."

Teddy came more rigidly to attention.

"I'm sending you to the city tomorrow, my boy. You'll be accompanying Sergeant Price on his weekly detainee pick-up." The Deacon checked a list on his desk. "He's bringing back five new boys tomorrow. It'll be a good experience for you. Be ready to leave at eight o'clock - in the morning, of course."

Teddy nodded slowly, then cleared his throat. "May I ask a question, sir?" He tried to keep his voice from quavering.

The Deacon looked vaguely annoyed. "I suppose - but make it brief."

"I was just wondering when Richard Wilson and my mother were going to be released."

"Soon enough."

"Three or four weeks, maybe?"

"You're out of order, Cadet. Just do your job, don't worry about anything else. I'll see to their release - all in good time." He waved the boy away. "That's all."

"Yes, sir," Teddy murmured. He saluted, then marched hurriedly from the office.

Everything was coming apart.

At eight o'clock, Teddy forced himself outside to the waiting van. Sergeant Price, the guard who did the driving, was already there, making a cursory check of tires and oil and water before their trip into the city. It was only about twenty miles away, but getting there took over an hour because of bad roads. The old superhighways were virtually impassable now because of chronic disrepair; some people still used them, but most either rode the monorails or improvised alternate routes. The van drivers from the Falwell Home had their own special route, a zig-zag of back roads patched together from years of trial and error. It was bumpy, and it took a while, but it worked.

For the first several miles, Teddy stared out his window at the unfamiliar scenery, drinking it in greedily after so many months of confinement. The fields along the road were muddy, strewn with a few lingering patches of dirty snow. Nearer to the city, the fields gradually gave way to shanty-towns, miles and miles of them, jungles of wood and tin and canvas - the enormous exurban slums that served as refuge for millions of the unemployed, the homeless, the hopelessly poor. Even with the windows shut, Teddy could smell the stench of trash and sewage, all dumped into open, stagnant ditches. "Pretty rank," he said, glancing at the Sergeant.

"You should smell it in the summer," the man replied. Just the thought of it made him wince. "It's one amazin' stink."

"You've worked at the Home a long time, right?" "About ten years, I'd say. Long enough."

Teddy thought of something that caused him to tense suddenly in his seat. "Did you ever work in the Camps?" he asked. "Out west?"

"Nope, never," the Sergeant said. "Don't want to, neither."

"I guess they're pretty bad, hah?"

"That's what I hear. Wouldn't know, myself."

The van bounced through a series of chuckholes. Teddy looked out over the endless sprawl of shacks and tents and smoking tin chimneys, then back again at Sergeant Price. His next question was the hardest. He had to ask it just right, with just the proper intonation. "How do they exterminate them all? With gas, or what?"

The Sergeant gave him an odd, curious glance, then shrugged. "Gas, probably. That's the cleanest way."

"It's good that they exterminate them all."

"So they say," the Sergeant mumbled, not very fond of his overly zealous companion. The cadets were all alike, a bunch of sadistic little thugs. They gave him the creeps.

Teddy looked back out the window. Cisco had been right. His mother was dead; Richard was dead. And yet, Teddy felt little surprise now, little sorrow. In some vague, inexplicable way, he had known all along that he would never see them again. The last three months had been a sort of game; three months of pretending that Deacon Thatcher was his friend; three months of believing that his mother and Richard would eventually be freed, that they would all see one another again, that everything would work out happily. But maybe he had never really believed it, not way down deep. They were dead. Somehow, Teddy had always suspected it. Now he was sure; now the game was over.

Around nine thirty, the van pulled to a stop outside the Cook County Jail. The heart of the City was still several blocks away; but no one ventured that far north. Barricades - some guarded, some not - deterred any motorists or pedestrians foolish enough to try. On the other side, as dangerous as a war zone, was the territory of the vags, the vast ghetto untouched by Federation laws or customs. Thinking about the vags brought Richard suddenly and sharply into Teddy's mind - their hours spent together reading and talking on his couch, looking at the pictures from *Urban Studies Review*. Teddy forced the memories back, fighting against his tears; he had a job to do now; his grief would have to wait. Later, he

would have time for that - and he would have time for revenge. But not now.

Teddy stayed outside to watch the van until Sergeant Price returned with the new detainees. It didn't take him long. He was back after only a few minutes, escorting five boys in handcuffs. Three of them were still in various academy uniforms; the other two were street kids, filthy and ragged, probably picked up for theft or prostitution. Teddy sat with them in the rear of the van during the trip back to the Home. The two street kids appeared jaded, nonchalant, accustomed to this type of routine, but the three schoolboys were clearly terrified, glassy-eyed and shivering. Teddy had seen that same look of terror dozens of times in the last few months; it was a look that inspired laughter and contempt among the cadets, a sign of weakness, of inferiority; it was a look that positively invited obedience training, as exciting to cadets as blood to sharks. But Teddy saw nothing exciting or contemptible now about the boys' terror; he was reminded of himself on the day of his own arrest, a little kid dazed, alone, without hope, worthy of pity, not scorn. The recollection brought everything into sudden, nauseating focus: his own obedience training, the disciplinary sessions in Deacon Thatcher's office, the west-wing boys used for sport in the sauna - all of it brutal, shameful, vicious. Teddy looked away quickly from the handcuffed schoolboys, unable to meet their eyes.

Back at the Home, he helped lead the detainees through their induction process: first the brief interview with Deacon Thatcher, then the shower, then the line-up for their new uniforms, finally the shaving of their heads. Five more pieces of meat added to the larder.

As soon as he was finished, Teddy received a summons to Deacon Thatcher's office. The Deacon was waiting for him behind his desk, hands folded, eyes cold. "I've been receiving some troubling reports recently," he began. "Very troubling indeed."

Teddy stood at attention, listening silently.

"Yesterday," the Deacon continued, "one of the guards discovered your work partner - a Disciple Zepeda - cleaning all the bathrooms by himself, Disciple Zepeda said you were ill. Is that true, Cadet?"

"Yes, sir, it is. I didn't feel very good."

"So you dismissed yourself without authorization of any kind?"

"Yes, sir, I guess I did."

"That will go on your record, of course. Inexcusable behavior. Inexcusable." The Deacon paused, visibly upset. "To make matters worse, some of your fellow cadets tell me that you refused to participate in yesterday's obedience training. Is that also true, Cadet Cameron?"

"Yes, sir."

"Any explanation?"

"I didn't feel very good."

"Another sudden illness?"

"Yes, sir, I guess so."

"I've seen this before," the Deacon sighed, rising from his chair. "The backsliding, the regressive behavior - it happens occasionally, even to the finest recruits." He began his usual circular stroll around the office. "But I'm sure it's simply a minor set-back, nothing for us to worry about. Isn't that right, little mutt?"

"Yes, sir."

"You're eager to prove your loyalty and obedience, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

The Deacon stepped in front of Teddy. "We'll increase your disciplinary chores from now on. I think you'll profit from a more active schedule." He cupped Teddy's crotch in his hand, started rubbing him.

"Imagine it, my pet - every day a different student for you to train. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, sir," Teddy mumbled, struggling against his excitement.

"A different one every day," the Deacon said, "all of them for you." He kept rubbing and crooning until he could feel the boy's response. Satisfied, he stepped back and smiled. "Starting tomorrow, I want you here every day at one o'clock for your disciplinary chores. We'll have you bright-eyed and alert in no time at all."

"Yes, sir."

"No more backsliding after this."

"No, sir."

"All right, then - you're dismissed. Go get some lunch."

Teddy saluted briskly and left the office.

He realized, with sudden clarity, that he wanted to kill the Deacon.

After lunch, Teddy went straight to work cleaning the bathrooms. Cisco, for once, showed up on time, eager to know whether or not his friend was in trouble. "Did you get your ass whipped?" he asked.

"For what?"

"For cuttin' out early yesterday."

"No, I didn't get in trouble. Not really."

"I tried to cover for you."

"Yeah, I know. Thanks." Teddy poured some soap into his bucket of water, then looked back at Cisco.

"I guess maybe you were right about that other stuff."

"What other stuff?"

"About the Camps and stuff like that. I guess you were right."

"Yeah - sorry, man."

They looked at each other as if reunited for the first time, two old friends finally seeing each other clearly. Teddy edged forward. "Did you *really* escape from that other place?"

"Yeah," Cisco grinned, "fuckin' right I did. Why?"

Teddy moved closer, lowered his voice. "I can't stay here," he said, "not after finding out about... about everything."

"You mean you wanna leave, man? No shit?"

"I can't stay," Teddy said again, shaking his head slowly. He paused, distressed by his own admission. Three months of smug, comfortable insulation were crumbling around him. "I know how to get to the city," he said after a moment. "I went there this morning."

"And you came back?"

"Yeah," Teddy shrugged, "I had to."

"You shoulda cut out *then*. You fuzz - brain!"

For the first time, Teddy smiled. "I guess maybe I wanted some company," he said. "You wanna come along?"

"No," Cisco answered sarcastically, then added, "Of course I wanna come along, asshole!"

Teddy lowered his voice to a whisper. "Not so loud, jerk. The guards are just outside."

"So when are we splittin'?"

"I don't know for sure. We can't just walk out. It has to be just the right time. But I'll find you when I go, don't worry."

"Good thing you're a cadet."

"It'll help," Teddy nodded. He grabbed a mop from against the wall and handed it to Cisco. "Now

let's get to work. We're behind schedule.”

For the rest of the day, Teddy carefully maintained his outward composure. Once, alone in his room, he allowed himself a brief cry, giving in to the grief he felt for his mother and Richard - but afterwards, he forced back his emotions and continued with his daily routine, carrying on as normally as possible.

Before dinner, he spent a couple of hours lifting weights and practicing karate, just killing time, trying to keep busy. He was getting ready to take his shower when half-a-dozen cadets came into the locker room dragging a pair of little west-wingers with them. The little boys were two of the new detainees from the morning delivery: one of the street kids (looking mean and sullen, prepared for the worst) and one of the schoolboys (shaking like a frightened pup). The cadets went right to work on them, yanking off their uniforms, plucking them for their obedience training. Teddy tried to sneak out, but the other cadets saw him before he could get to the door. “Hey, Cameron, we got some new students here! Time for their first lesson!”

“I'm in a hurry,” Teddy yelled back, still buttoning his shirt.

One of the cadets sauntered toward him. “What's wrong, Cameron, you backing out again?”

Teddy put on a nonchalant grin. “No way! You guys are just too slow, that's all.”

“The slower we go, the better they like it.”

“But I might have time for a *private* lesson,” Teddy said.

He winked at the other cadet. “Up in my quarters.” He strolled across the locker room to the terrified schoolboy, who was already naked, being held in a neck-lock by the largest cadet. “This one could use some extra attention,” he chuckled, eyeing him up and down.

“You want him?”

“Yeah,” Teddy nodded. He grabbed the boy's arm and jerked him forward. “This one comes with me.”

“OK, but don't make a habit of it,” the other cadet said, giving Teddy a fraternal nudge with his elbow.

“Obedience training should stay downstairs.”

“Just this once, I promise.”

The other cadet nudged him again. “I don't blame you,” he leered. “This one looks like he needs some special lessons. Go ahead, take him up. We'll train him later.”

Teddy pulled the little boy toward the door. As they left, he caught a final glimpse of the street kid being bent forward over a low wooden bench, pinned down and helpless.

Upstairs, he closed his door securely and sat the boy down on his bed. “Don't worry,” he said, “I'm not going to do anything to you.” He stared at the skinny little kid trembling in front of him. “What's your name, anyway? How old are you?”

“My name is Anthony LaRusso, sir. I'm ten years old.”

“You don't have to call me sir,” Teddy mumbled. He hated himself for the excitement he was feeling; he hated himself for wanting to do exactly what the other cadets were doing downstairs in the locker room. There were times when that kind of thing was OK - like that morning in Richard's bedroom; but doing it now would have been cruel, it would have been wrong. “I won't do anything to you,” he said again, throwing a sheet around Anthony's shoulders.

“What's gonna happen, then?”

“I don't know. Just sit here and let me think.”

“I don't understand none of this,” the little boy moaned. “I thought this kinda stuff was a sin. How can you guys *do* this kinda stuff?”

“It seemed OK before,” Teddy shrugged. “I don't know why, it just seemed OK.”

“I don't understand *none* of this!”

“Just shut up, man.”

Teddy wandered to the window and stared out. He didn't know what to do with the kid. They'd have to stay in the room for at least thirty or forty minutes; any less than that would have roused suspicions among the other cadets. He turned away from the window, crossed the room, sat on the bed next to Anthony. “I guess maybe we should talk for a while.”

The little boy touched the patch on Teddy's sleeve. “Are you some kinda soldier or somethin'?”

“I'm a Red Beret.”

“Why aren't you mean like the other ones?”

“I'm not much different,” Teddy said. He paused to consider the boy's question, then looked at him with a sad, tired smile. “I had a friend once. His name was Richard. It's sort of hard to explain, but... but if I hurt *you*. Then I'd be hurting *him*, too.”

“What happened to him?”

“He died,” Teddy said. “But I know he wouldn't want me to hurt you. I guess maybe I forgot that until now.”

Anthony yawned, finally starting to relax, exhausted after his day - long ordeal. “Do you think they'll mess around with me again tomorrow?”

“Maybe not. They might just grab somebody else. We... I mean they train different kids every day.”

“It's not fair,” Anthony concluded softly.

“I guess not,” Teddy said. He touched the little boy's shoulder. “Go ahead and lay down for a while, take a nap. I'll wake you up in about an hour.”

“Serious?”

“Yeah, sure, go ahead. You look worn out.”

“I am,” Anthony said, easing himself onto his back beneath the sheet, clutching it with both hands. “It seems like I haven't slept in a million years.”

“It's OK now,” Teddy said, “you'll be safe for a while.” He stayed there on the edge of the bed, waiting quietly until the little boy was asleep. Then, moving carefully, he stretched out beside him on the mattress. Anthony was still on his back, his lips parted, his breath deep and even. Teddy ran one hand lightly across his newly shaven head; the scalp was peppered with soft black stubble. The little boy nuzzled closer. Teddy put an arm around him and rubbed his shoulder through the cool sheet.

For the next hour, he held Anthony safe against him.

Six

Next day, precisely at one o'clock, Teddy marched into Deacon Thatcher's office. He was still in the doorway when he stopped abruptly, startled by the sight of Kelly standing near the desk. The Deacon grinned, clearly delighted by the boy's reaction. He had made a special effort to identify and locate one of Teddy's former friends from among the west-wing residents; Kelly Dillon had impressed him as the ideal choice - and now he was sure of it. Teddy was obviously flustered. Training the Dillon boy would be the ultimate test of his loyalty.

The Deacon waved him forward. “Come in, Cadet, come in. We have vital business to conduct.”

Teddy walked slowly to the center of the room, his eyes still on Kelly. Deacon Thatcher handed him the wooden paddle. “You know Disciple Dillon, I believe?”

“Yes, sir, I do.”

Kelly stood rigidly near the desk, looking more confused than frightened. He couldn't understand why he was there or why he was about to be punished. He knew it couldn't have been Teddy's fault; then again, maybe Teddy was different now. They hadn't seen each other since January. Maybe Teddy had become as mean and stupid as all the other cadets. Whatever, Kelly knew he was in trouble. Big trouble.

Deacon Thatcher popped a piece of chocolate, into his mouth. He was looking forward to the upcoming performance, pleased with himself for having arranged it. “One of the guards discovered Disciple Dillon stealing food from the dining hall,” he explained, pausing briefly to swallow his candy. “He denies it, of course.”

Kelly was so surprised that he actually laughed. The Deacon silenced him with a hard slap. Teddy gripped the paddle tighter. He knew suddenly what had to be done. He took a cautious step forward. Deacon Thatcher looked at him, grinned again. “Disciple Dillon needs a lesson in submission.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Total submission.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Are you prepared, my pet?”

“Yes, sir, I am.”

“All right, then, begin the training.”

Teddy nodded. He took one more step, then stopped, trying to catch his breath. He faced Deacon Thatcher. He had to do it. Now. The Deacon frowned impatiently. “Go ahead, boy, begin!”

Now.

“Begin, you disobedient mutt!” Now.

“Yes, sir,” Teddy mumbled, then smashed the paddle against Deacon Thatcher's head, knocking him to the floor in a senseless heap. Kelly laughed again, nearly hysterical from fear and confusion. Teddy grabbed him by the arm. “We're leaving,” he announced simply.

“We can't *leave*,” Kelly said, still giggling, still trying to laugh himself back to reality. “They'll kill us if we leave, really, they'll *kill* us!”

Teddy pulled him across the room. “They'll kill us for sure if we stay.” He deposited Kelly near the door, then rushed back to where Deacon Thatcher was sprawled on the carpet. The left side of the Deacon's head was bloody. Teddy stared at him for a brief, desperate moment, then reached down and grabbed the keys from his pocket. Moving at full speed, he took the cash box from the desk, unlocked it and grabbed the thick wad of bills from inside. As he was putting the money into his pants pocket, he spotted a machine pistol farther back in the same drawer, already loaded with a full clip. He pulled it out and clicked off the safety. He knew how to use it, of course: he was trained on all types of weapons. And there was no doubt that he would need it to escape; no doubt at all that he would have to kill to get out.

On his way back to the door, he stopped beside Deacon Thatcher. He wanted to shoot him, right there; one bullet in the brain would have done the job. Easy, fast, no problem. He switched the pistol to semi-automatic. Just one bullet. He aimed. Just one little bullet. But then he turned away quickly and shook his head. Killing to survive was one thing; cold-blooded murder was another. “Let's go,” he said, taking Kelly's arm.

“Why don't you *kill* him?”

“He can't hurt us now.”

Before opening the door, Teddy switched the pistol back to automatic. “Just be quiet and follow

along,” he said to Kelly. “Do everything I tell you. We have to move fast. OK?”

“Yeah, OK.”

Teddy hesitated another moment, going over his impromptu plan one more time. It was almost one thirty; the younger boys were just beginning their outside recreation period; Cisco, with all the other east-wing kids, was eating lunch in the dining hall; the cadets were either doing chores or working in the gym. Everything was set - except for one essential item. “Coats,” Teddy muttered suddenly. “I almost forgot.” He put his hand on the doorknob. “Come on, let's go.”

The guard in the hallway glanced around as the boys came out of the office. He peered with a puzzled squint at the machine pistol in Teddy's hand; but he didn't dare say a word. The Red Berets were Deacon Thatcher's pets; the guards never challenged them; doing that would have been the surest way of getting demoted. With a slight shrug, he turned away and continued his rounds.

Safely past the first danger, Teddy raced upstairs to his room, dragging Kelly alongside him. Never slowing down, he grabbed three fleece-lined jackets from the closet and handed one to the other boy. “Put this on. Hurry up!” He waited at the door, holding the two spare jackets over his arm. “Come on, hurry up!”

“Yeah, all right, all right,” Kelly said. “I guess I'm ready.”

“OK then, let's move!”

They rushed back downstairs to the dining hall, stopped outside the door. Teddy pushed the other boy against the wall and handed him the spare jackets. “Wait out here,” he said, fighting for every breath, his heart thudding against his chest. “I'll be back in a minute.”

He marched through the door. There were four guards scattered throughout the dining hall, two of them near the entrance. Teddy saluted them without breaking stride, then veered rapidly to Cisco's table and banged it with his gun. “Disciple Zepeda, right now, let's go!”

Cisco dropped his fork and jumped up. He knew immediately what was happening. Not saying a word, he followed Teddy obediently to the door - just another unlucky kid on his way to the Deacon's office. Nothing unusual. The guards never even gave them a second glance.

Everything seemed to be going flawlessly - until they got out the door. Kelly was gone. Teddy stood frozen for several panicky moments, then slapped Cisco's arm and ran down the hallway. “There's another kid,” he said over his shoulder. “We have to find him!” He rounded the corner at the end of the hall. Nothing. He ran back the other way, to the other end of the hall, going so fast that he nearly slipped on the linoleum as he rounded the corner. Kelly was there, about thirty feet farther down, being taken away by one of the guards. Teddy ordered them to stop with an angry shout. He ran up behind them. The guard turned; it was Sergeant Price, the driver of the van. He greeted Teddy with a nod of vague recognition. “What's the problem, Cadet?”

“This kid is my responsibility.”

“I found him hanging around the hallway...”

“I know, don't worry about it.”

“... holding these jackets,” the Sergeant added, “and wearing one, too. They're stolen.”

“He's just helping me,” Teddy said. Time was running out. He moved forward. “I'll take him.”

“Three jackets and three kids, ha? And what do you need a machine pistol for?”

“Just let me have him!”

“Take it easy, kid.”

Teddy raised the pistol a few inches. “Now!”

The Sergeant released Kelly's arm and backed away grinning. “All right, bud, be my guest.” He backed off a few more steps, still grinning. “It's about time one of you goddamn cadets fought back. I

hope you make it, too.”

Teddy was too shocked to answer.

“Go on,” the Sergeant said, waving him away, “take off! And good luck, kid.”

Teddy nodded. There was something in the man's eyes that reminded him of Richard. He smiled, raised his gun in a farewell salute, then headed for the door. Kelly and Cisco ran close behind. They stopped at the end of the hall. The exit was just around the corner. Teddy knew, without even looking, that there was one guard inside the door, another outside. Both would have to be incapacitated before he and the other boys could get out. He pulled Kelly and Cisco into a tight huddle. “We'll have to knock out the first guard,” he whispered. “This pistol would be too noisy.”

“I can take him,” Cisco said.

Teddy shook his head. “No, I'll do it.” He handed one of the jackets to Cisco. “Here, put this on. What about you, Kelly? Are you ready?”

“Yeah,” Kelly nodded, “I'm ready.”

Teddy put on his own jacket. “OK, let's go.”

They turned the corner and strode quickly toward the exit. Teddy led the way. The guard tensed when he saw the three boys heading toward him. No one was allowed outside without formal authorization, not even the cadets. He put his hand on the machine pistol at his hip. Teddy, in full stride, walked up to him and landed a sharp kick to his groin. The guard's mouth snapped open in a silent gasp of pain; he collapsed slowly to his knees. Teddy took a step forward and finished him off with a knee to the jaw:

“Utterly fierce,” Cisco grinned, staring at the guard's crumpled body. He leaned down and grabbed the machine pistol. “I know how to use this, don't worry.”

Teddy glanced out the tiny window in the door. One guard was standing on the outer steps, gazing across the muddy field full of boys; two more guards were strolling farther out. Teddy appraised the situation, then nodded. “OK,” he said, “we have to get all the guards up here together.”

“Yeah, right.”

“As soon as I do that,” he said to Cisco, “you've got to shoot them. All three of them. One burst of fire. Can you do it?”

“No problem, man. Just bring 'em up.”

Kelly touched Teddy's arm. “What about me? What do I do?”

“Just hang beside Cisco.” Teddy handed him his gun. “And hold onto this for me.”

He took a deep breath, then opened the door and stepped outside. “The Deacon wants to see your two partners,” he told the guard. “Right now.”

“What for?”

“Are you questioning Deacon Thatcher's orders?”

The guard gave him a look of weary contempt, sick of the Deacon and his smart-ass little cadets. But an order was an order. He yelled across the field to the other guards, beckoning them to the stairs. Slowly, they started in. Teddy edged away from the door. The guard looked at him with an exasperated scowl. “How long are they going to be inside, anyway?”

“As long as it takes.”

“Great, that's all I need.”

“What's wrong,” Teddy sneered, “can't you handle a few dozen little brats by yourself?”

“Piss up a rope,” the guard muttered, turning his back. The other two were only a few yards away now. Teddy edged farther to the side. “You shouldn't swear,” he said vaguely, quietly. “I could report you for that.”

The guard spat on the steps. “Yeah, go ahead.” He shrugged at his two partners as they approached.

“The Deacon wants to see you guys,” he said, then shrugged again. “That's all I know.” They paused at the bottom of the stairs, both of them clearly irritated by this inconvenience. Teddy backed away another step. One of the guards was opening his mouth to complain when the door flew open and Cisco jumped out. The machine pistol sprayed its bullets with a soft, deadly thrum, flinging the first guard headfirst down the steps, slamming the other two violently backwards onto the muddy ground. Finished. As simple as that. Teddy and Cisco stood staring at the three bodies, amazed by the explosive suddenness of death. Kelly crept out timidly behind them. “Are they really dead?”

“Yeah,” Teddy said, “they're dead.” He took the machine pistol from Kelly's hands. “I'm gonna need this at the gate. We're not through yet.”

Cisco started down the steps. “Let's just go over the fence, man!”

“It's charged with electricity,” Teddy said. “We'd fry like bugs. The main gate is the only way.” He climbed down the steps behind Cisco, stepped over the bodies, then realized that one hundred young boys were closing in slowly around them - a horde of slack-jawed, mesmerized spectators. Teddy scanned the group quickly. Anthony was there; so was Kiko - both of them staring, waiting for the next act of the show. Teddy waved the group closer; the boys milled toward him, prepared to obey anything he had to say.

“We're leaving,” he yelled to them, loudly enough for everyone to hear. “Follow behind us if you want to come - but let us take care of the guards first. Then run like hell, man. Don't stop till you're out in the country.” He paused, glancing at Kiko, at Anthony, then at Cisco and Kelly beside him. “I guess this is it. Let's get outa here.”

The main gate was nearly three hundred yards away, hidden by a grove of oak trees at the end of a long, curving drive. Teddy kept his eyes focused straight ahead as he marched. Kelly and Cisco stayed a few feet behind him. The west-wing boys trailed farther back, keeping out of sight until they heard the burst of fire that would signal their freedom.

Teddy quickened his pace. There were still a hundred yards to go, and he knew that an alarm could be raised inside the Home at any moment. He pressed the machine pistol against his leg, holding it as inconspicuously as possible. Cisco did the same.

Eighty yards.

They came to the final curve in the drive. Around it, they could see the gate: a small guardhouse and a wooden barricade striped red and white.

Sixty yards.

Teddy checked behind him. Cisco was grinning slightly; Kelly looked pale and shaky; the other boys were still out of sight behind the trees.

Forty yards.

Two guards came out of the house to watch the boys approach.

Thirty.

Teddy greeted them with a friendly wave. He appeared to be no more than an ordinary cadet leading two other residents - nothing to worry about.

Twenty.

“I have a special message from the Deacon,” he shouted. Ten.

The guards moved forward. Five.

One of them touched his gun.

“Now,” Teddy. Said. He and Cisco raised their machine pistols at the same moment. Two short bursts sent the guards flying onto their backs, blood spraying out behind them onto the dusty road. The three boys scrambled past them under the wooden barricade, then took off running. Behind them came the

west-wing kids, surging forward like a throng of sprinters at the gun. A minute later, they were all beyond the gate, outside the compound - on their way to freedom.

Shortly after two o'clock, one of the cadets discovered an unconscious guard sprawled in front of the main entrance, his jaw shattered from a powerful, expert blow. The subsequent alarm mobilized every guard and cadet in the complex. They quickly found Deacon Thatcher in his office, still on the floor, knocked out with a severe concussion and a fractured skull.

Emergency squads were immediately dispatched to hunt down and retrieve the escaped west-wing boys and their renegade cadet leader. A special roll call revealed that an east-wing resident named Francisco Zepeda was also missing. The squads spent three days searching the surrounding countryside, fanning out several miles in every direction. In the end, sixty-three runaways were returned to the Home. The cadet, the east-wing boy, and thirty-seven west-wingers remained at large.

Seven

Teddy and Cisco and Kelly didn't quit running until they reached the outlying slums of the city, nearly a dozen miles from the Falwell Home. Several times they had to stop and hide from the Jeeps and squad cars passing along the road; but by midnight they were safely lost in the vast maze of shantytowns, free to rest and relax and savor their victory.

They settled down for the night on the edge of a hobo encampment - one of hundreds just off the road - close enough to the fire to get some of its warmth. Several of the men eyed them hungrily as soon as they sat down. Teddy nudged Cisco's arm. "We might have some trouble here."

"No problem," Cisco said. He cradled his machine pistol and clicked off the safety. "Let the fuckin' party begin, man."

Teddy watched the men as they rose and started forward. If it had been daytime, when they could have seen his red beret, they wouldn't have been foolish enough to challenge him. But it was dark, and all they could see were three young bodies, apparently helpless, ready to be taken. One of the men said something in Spanish, laughed hoarsely, pulled a knife. Teddy waited another moment, then fired a short burst into the dirt at their feet. Two of them actually fell over backwards from surprise; the others retreated grudgingly, like wolves before a torch. Cisco sprang up and waved his arms at them, yelling Spanish curses in a sort of improvised war-cry. The men retreated faster. Cisco yelled a few more choice words, then dropped back laughing between Teddy and Kelly. "Utterly kick-ass, man, absolute!"

"I think you scared 'em pretty good," Kelly said, grinning nervously, hoping he was right.

"The best day I ever had," Cisco laughed. He clicked his safety back on. "I ain't never had a better time."

Teddy laid his gun onto the ground. "How many clips do you have left?"

Cisco checked his jacket pocket. Both boys had grabbed extra ammo clips from the dead guards at the gate. "Two more after this one," he said.

"Yeah, me too. We'll have to go easy."

"No shit, man."

They settled back after that, safe for at least the next few hours. Teddy agreed to stay up and take the first watch - just in case the tramps decided to make another try at them. The other two boys stretched out on the ground and hugged themselves to keep warm. It was a chilly March night, cold enough to produce a light frost by morning. Teddy stared at the fire, his eyes burning with fatigue. Cisco was soon snoring beside him. But Kelly remained awake, talking drowsily from the darkness. "Do you think they'll keep looking for us?" he asked Teddy. "Do you think they will?"

"I don't know, man. Maybe, maybe not. I guess we'll find out tomorrow."

"The Deacon won't give up," Kelly murmured. "You should have killed him. Really. He'll never give up looking for you."

"I couldn't just shoot him - not like that, not when he couldn't even fight back."

"He'll never give up," Kelly murmured again, then rolled onto his side and drifted off to sleep.

Teddy kept watch until he could no longer hold up his head. Finally giving in to exhaustion, he shook Cisco awake and traded places with him on the ground. He fell asleep instantly. The Deacon was everywhere in his dreams, chasing him, cursing him as a wicked, disobedient mutt - but always a few steps behind, never quite catching up.

At dawn, the boys resumed their flight into the city, keeping to the route that Teddy had learned from his earlier trip. Avoiding the many search patrols was easy; there were always plenty of hiding places among the shacks and tents along the road. The shantytown residents never bothered them. Teddy's beret was a clear signal of danger; the guns that he and Cisco brandished made the signal even clearer.

They arrived at the outskirts of the city by noon. Shacks and tents and hobo encampments gave way to factories and warehouses, then to more densely populated areas of homes, markets, cafes - areas once comfortably middle-class, now decaying, becoming poorer and bleaker every year. The boys realized at once that their khaki uniforms and guns were no longer an advantage here, not in this tame suburban environment where runaway boys with weapons were nothing but glaring targets for the police. Here they had to be inconspicuous, not intimidating.

They stopped in an alleyway to rest their tired legs and decide on their strategy. Teddy sat on a smelly trash bin and pulled a wad of stolen money from his pants pocket. Neither of the other boys had seen it until now. They both closed in quickly, muttering in astonishment. Teddy started counting it, his first chance since leaving the Home. The other boys stood and waited, already thinking about all the things they could buy.

"Four hundred and fifty-three dollars," Teddy said at last. "Not too bad."

"Fuckin' right it ain't!"

"We should buy something to eat," Kelly said. He patted his empty stomach. "I'm *starving*. I really am. Can we buy something, Teddy?"

"Yeah, of course, but..." He paused to put the money back in his pocket. "First we gotta buy some new clothes, and some sleeping bags."

"No shit," Cisco said. "I froze my fuckin' ass last night!"

"There's a store across the street. I'll get the stuff, you guys wait here." Teddy handed his gun to Kelly. "I won't take too long, don't worry."

He jogged across the street and disappeared into the department store. Cisco and Kelly were left alone for the first time. They glanced at each other uneasily, not sure what to say. Kelly looked at the machine pistol in his hands; he turned it clumsily. "I've never used one of these before. But Teddy uses it real good. So do you. You and Teddy both use 'em real good."

"Ted is one extreme little fucker, absolute."

"I guess you knew him from before, right? From before the Home, I mean. You and him are friends,

right?"

"How'd you know that, man?"

"Your hair," Kelly said. "You just got it shaved off, so that means you just got to the Home, but I can tell you've known Teddy for a long time, so that means you must have known him from before, right?"

"You're right, man, yeah - but you talk too much, no shit."

"Sorry."

Cisco poked the little boy's shoulder. "I'm just fuckin' with you, man. You're OK, really." He glanced across the street, then gave Kelly another poke. "Hey, was you with Ted when they brought him in?"

"To the Home, you mean?"

"Yeah, genius... to the Home."

Kelly wiped his nose, nodded. "Yeah, I was there."

"What did they get him for? D'you know?"

"Not really, not for sure."

"But you heard some rumors, right?"

"I guess so, yeah."

"Well?"

Kelly checked behind him. Teddy was still inside the store.

"Some guys said he was messing around with a fag-crim. But I don't know. It's probably not true. But that's what they said."

"With a fag-crim? Sincere?"

"It's probably not true."

"Shit, man, that's weird," Cisco said quietly. He thought back to all his times together with Teddy, trying to recall any unusual incidents, anything that might seem suspicious in light of Kelly's revelation.

Nothing came to mind. Then he remembered Teddy mentioning some guy named Richard, and that triggered another memory: the man who had lived across the road from Teddy's house. They had raked his leaves one day in October; he had given Cisco a cigarette. His name might have been Richard, but it was impossible to remember for sure. Maybe *that* was the guy. Maybe Kelly's rumor was true.

A few minutes later, Teddy came jogging back across the street, his arms loaded with three sleeping bags and a sack full of clothing. "We've still got about two hundred and fifty bucks left," he said, handing the sack to Cisco. He put the sleeping bags onto the ground. "Come on, let's change clothes. Hurry up."

Cisco was staring at him strangely. Teddy laughed, feeling suddenly self-conscious. "What's wrong? You look sort of weird."

"Nothin'," Cisco said. "Everything's chill, man."

He pulled the clothes from the bag, started passing them around. The boys changed quickly behind the protection of the trash bins. All three of them ended up in blue jeans and gray sweatshirts; new white T-shirts and briefs replaced their uncomfortable khaki underwear. They kept their fleece-lined leather jackets for extra warmth. Teddy also kept his red beret. As he was adjusting it on his head, a long-lost memory popped suddenly to mind. He gave Cisco's arm a light punch. "Hey, man, thanks for leaving me your bandana. In October, I mean... when you left."

"Yeah," Cisco said, "no problem. What happened to it?"

"It got thrown away... at the Home. You know, during induction."

"Oh, yeah, right." Cisco was still staring at Teddy, regarding him with a new fascination. The more he thought about Kelly's rumor, the more likely it seemed. He remembered now that Teddy had never messed around with girls; he remembered also that Teddy's eyes had often been on him, gleaming with a strange excitement. It was weird, absolute, having a friend that might be a fag-crim. But it was OK, too. Teddy

was still the same kid as ever; he looked the same, he talked the same, he acted the same. If anything, he was even better than before - tougher, stronger, an utterly extreme fighter. Cisco had always figured that fag-crimbs were a bunch of hairball little sissies; but if Teddy was one of them, then maybe they weren't so bad. Maybe some of them were actually OK.

He zipped up his jacket. "Too bad they threw it away, man."

"I know," Teddy nodded, "it pisses me off to think about it."

"I could use a headband right now," Cisco said. He ran a hand over his bristly crew-cut. "It gets cold up there on top."

"Here, I got something you can use." Teddy reached into his jacket pocket, fished beneath the two extra ammo clips, pulled out his rising-sun kamikaze bandana. "You can have this one."

Cisco took it with a grateful smile. "Thanks, man, this is fierce." He tied it around his head. With his dark skin and high cheekbones and slanted eyes, he looked very much like a young samurai warrior attired for combat.

After dumping their old uniforms into one of the trash bins, the boys hurried down the street to a little diner, their stomachs rumbling from hunger. They stuffed themselves with hamburgers and french fries and Cokes before returning to the crowded sidewalk and continuing deeper into the city. Teddy and Cisco kept their machine pistols hidden under their jackets, safely out of sight. Kelly found himself with a different problem: his hips were too narrow for the jeans that Teddy had chosen for him; he had to hitch them up constantly as he went along. "I need a belt," he said after a couple of miles. "These pants are too big, they really are."

"I didn't know you were so skinny," Teddy grinned. "I got us both the same size."

"They're too big," Kelly said again. "I really need a belt. Can I buy a belt?"

They were walking along a street lined with vacant lots and taverns and rundown tenement buildings. "Whenever we find a store," Teddy nodded. He looked from one side of the street to the other. "There's nothing around here, though. Just keep your pants on," he added, laughing at his own joke.

"Very funny," Cisco groaned.

"I thought so, too."

They walked for a few more minutes before Cisco stopped suddenly in the middle of the sidewalk. "Where the fuck *are* we goin', anyway?" He looked at Teddy. "I mean, I know we wanted to get to the city, and now we're here, so what happens next?"

"Yeah," Kelly said, "what happens next? How long do we keep walking? Where are we walking to?"

Teddy sat down on the concrete stoop of a tavern, his rolled-up sleeping bag resting on his knees. "In another few miles we're gonna come to some barricades," he said. "The vags live on the other side."

The other boys crouched in front of him. Kelly shook his head. "We don't wanna go *there*, do we?"

"The vags are cannibals," Cisco said. "I ain't gonna mess around with *them*, that's for damn sure."

"They're not cannibals," Teddy replied. "They're warriors, they're free, they make their own rules. They're supreme, man, really."

"How the fuck do you know so much about 'em?"

"Some guy I knew, he taught me. The vags are outside the Federation - that's what he always said. Nobody controls them, nobody tells them what to do. We'd be free there."

"Are you sure about all this, man?"

"It's true - yeah, I'm sure."

There was one other question on Cisco's mind. "Who was it that taught you about the vags, anyway?"

"Just somebody who lived near us."

“Was it that Richard guy?”

Teddy seemed surprised, confused. “How did you know that?”

“You talked about him a few days ago, man. Remember? You said he was in one of the Camps.”

“Yeah, I guess I did.”

Cisco straightened up and adjusted his headband. He was sure now about Kelly's rumor. It was true. “Anyway,” he asked, “how are we gonna get across the barricades?”

“It shouldn't be too hard,” Teddy said. “They don't guard 'em very good, I don't think. But we should probably wait till after dark... just in case.”

“Well, I still ain't too crazy about the idea - but I guess you're the boss.”

“I don't think we should go,” Kelly mumbled. Since leaving the Home, he had been growing steadily more frazzled and morose. He didn't like being on the outside, away from the familiar juvenile-center routine, responsible for his own actions. To him, being free meant being exposed, unprotected, vulnerable to all the world's terrifying, deadly traps. “I think it's too dangerous.”

“Don't come, then,” Cisco shrugged.

“It'll be OK,” Teddy said, “I promise.” Kelly didn't answer.

They walked on, heading farther north. The city became more and more desolate as they went. Like all the other northern cities of the Federation, it had long ago lost its banks and its businesses and its economic vigor to the southern Territories such as Sao Paulo and Amazonia, where the climate was warm and the resources still plentiful. The northern cities were now derelict and squalid, abandoned by all but the poorest and most desperate, crumbling from decades of neglect. Most people no longer even used the old names for them; New York and Chicago and all the rest were just “the cities” now, anonymous urban graveyards, central ghettos surrounded by decaying suburbs surrounded by outlying slums. A few factories still churned out war supplies; thousands of taverns and markets and diners still served the ragged populace; but the lifeblood had long since drained away.

It was getting dark when the boys passed the Cook County jail and stopped to rest in a condemned apartment building. The lobby was heaped with garbage and fallen plaster. Teddy sat on his sleeping bag and unwrapped a hamburger left over from earlier in the day. “The barricades are just a few blocks away,” he said, tearing the sandwich into three pieces. He handed one each to Kelly and Cisco. “I guess we made it.”

“Unless the fuckin' vags eat us for lunch,” Cisco said.

“Yeah, right,” Teddy laughed, “maybe they like Mexican food.”

Kelly chewed nervously on his chunk of hamburger. “I still need a belt,” he mumbled, holding up his pants as he paced around the dark lobby. “There's a store across the street. I could get one over there.”

Teddy shook his head. “I don't think it's open now.”

“It is, it's open, I know it's open.”

“Anyway, it's right next to the jail. It might not be safe to... “

“I really need a belt, Teddy.”

“Let him buy a fuckin' belt,” Cisco said impatiently. “I'm sick of hearin' about it.”

Teddy pulled the money from his pocket, handed ten dollars to Kelly. “OK, here, go get one.”

“Thanks, Teddy, thanks a lot.”

“Be careful, man. I mean it.”

“I'll be real careful,” Kelly said. He rushed outside with the money crumpled in his fist.

Teddy got up and crossed to the door. Kelly was already halfway across the street. “He's a strange little kid, but he's OK.”

“He's an utter weird-out,” Cisco said, finishing the last bite of his hamburger. “Hey, what the fuck *do*

vags eat, anyway?"

We'll find out pretty soon," Teddy shrugged. He was still staring across the street at the little variety store next to the jail. Something was wrong. He could feel it. "Get your gun ready," he said to Cisco. "Hurry up."

Cisco, pulling out his machine pistol, stepped beside Teddy and peered out the door. "I don't see nothin'. What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure - but I've got a weird feeling."

They stood there watching the storefront, waiting for some sign of danger. After a few minutes, Cisco shook his head and turned away. "This is gettin' boring, man. Call me when somethin' good happens." He was clicking his safety back on when Teddy grabbed his arm. Two policemen were rushing from the jail over to the store. "I knew it," Teddy said. "He *wanted* to get caught."

"Who?"

"Kelly! He wanted to get caught, I could tell. He probably tried to steal the damn belt."

"An utter weird-out, just like I said."

The cops reappeared from inside the store. Kelly was handcuffed between them. He glanced furtively across the street. Teddy banged his fist against the wall; broken plaster showered to the floor. "That stupid, stupid asshole!"

"It's his own fault, man."

"Yeah, I know, but..."

"There ain't nothin' we can do, so don't even think about it."

They watched Kelly being dragged into the jail, out of sight. By the next day, he would be on his way back to a juvenile center, probably the Falwell Home - back to the safety of confinement.

Cisco stepped away from the door. "You think he'll talk?"

"I don't know," Teddy said. "If they figure out who he is... well, he'll be in big trouble. And he's not very brave." He thought for a moment, then nodded. "Yeah, he'll talk... if they knock him around enough. That's just the way he is. He can't help it."

"Let's get the fuck outa here, then."

"Yeah, let's go."

The street was dark now. The boys kept close to the buildings as they hurried silently away. At the end of the block they took off at full speed, sprinting side by side through the night, their shoes slapping against the pavement.

It didn't take them long to reach the barricades. Their path was blocked suddenly by a pile of bricks and cinder blocks (designed for stopping vehicles) and a maze of barbed-wire coils. There were no searchlights, no guards, nothing to deter anyone serious about crossing. The boys stepped cautiously forward. Cisco gripped his gun tighter. "What happens now?"

"We just walk across, I guess."

"It seems too easy."

"Yeah, I know."

They looked around a final time, then started to climb over the jumble of bricks and stones. "But I don't think the Federation cares anymore," Teddy added, expressing a vague, half-formed thought. "They don't care about the cities anymore, or about stupid little guys like us. It's all falling apart."

They climbed down the far side and jumped over the first coil of wire. "What's fallin' apart, man?"

"Everything - the cities, the Federation, everything."

"If you say so," Cisco shrugged.

Five more coils of wire, and then the street continued on without further obstructions, stretching away

empty and silent into the darkness.

They were across - as easy as that.

The buildings on either side of the street looked bombed out and gutted, like the ruins in old war photos. The boys walked on, deeper and deeper into the ghetto, putting as much distance as possible between themselves and Federation terrain. They held their sleeping bags in one hand and their guns in the other, feeling jumpier now than they had before, there on the other side. The dangers here were hidden, faceless, mysterious. There appeared to be no one around, and yet the boys could feel themselves being watched from the dark ruins, silently threatened.

They stopped after a few more blocks, too cold and exhausted to continue. Cisco rested his machine pistol against his shoulder. "Where we gonna stay for the night?"

Teddy pointed to the ground. "Right here, I guess." The street was overgrown with grass and weeds, hardly a street at all anymore. "It's as safe here as anywhere else."

"Which ain't sayin' much."

They untied their sleeping bags and spread them on the ground, being careful first to clear away all the pieces of broken pavement scattered in the weeds. "It's fuckin' cold," Cisco muttered. He tossed away a final chunk of concrete. "Good thing we got these bags."

"It'd be warmer if we zipped them together" Teddy remarked. "Saves body heat that way."

Cisco hesitated, not sure about getting that close to Teddy. But then he realized that it didn't really bother him. In fact, it sounded like a good idea. Being next to the other boy would keep them both warmer and safer. And even if Teddy *was* a fag-crim, it still made no difference. None at all. "OK," he nodded, "let's do it that way." He crouched between the two bags and fastened them together. "Get in, man." He held the flap open for Teddy, waited for him to climb inside, then wriggled in next to him. They kept their guns on the ground beside them, close enough to grab in case of attack.

"This is a weird fuckin' place," Cisco murmured after a long moment of silence. "It's an utter spook-out."

"They've been watching us all along."

"I know, man, I could tell."

"At least they haven't *eaten* us yet," Teddy laughed. "Maybe they aren't hungry."

"Fuckin' smart-ass," Cisco said. He poked Teddy with his elbow. "Don't make jokes, it's bad luck."

There was another silence between them. Then Teddy shook his head and said, "I still can't believe how stupid he was."

"Who, that Kelly kid?"

"Yeah. He never even *thought* about all the trouble he'd be in if he got caught. It won't be like the other times. But he's so fucking *stupid*! He never thinks."

"Well, I ain't gonna lose no sleep over it."

"It just makes me mad, that's all."

They were silent after that. Teddy could smell Cisco beside him, a gamey odor of onions and mustard and pungent body-sweat. It was a familiar smell, bringing back memories of karate workouts and glistening brown skin, filling Teddy with a sweet, shaky excitement. But then Cisco broke the spell by rolling away suddenly onto his side. Teddy rolled after him and curled against his back. "I'm cold," he whispered, huddling closer.

"Yeah," Cisco whispered back. He could feel Teddy's breath warm against his neck. "It's OK, man." He stared into the darkness, trying to calm his sudden agitation.

It was almost an hour before he finally fell asleep.

Eight

The bedroom was dim, silent, scented with rose water. Deacon Thatcher lay quietly beneath the sheets, his head wrapped in clean white bandages. Three days had passed since the break-out, and he was just now beginning to regain his strength. Today, for the first time, he was finally able to understand what had happened to him and who was responsible. There was nothing, as yet, that could be done about it; but he was already working on future plans, preparing, mentally for his revenge. One way or another, the Cameron mutt would be tracked down and killed.

The Deacon let himself drift and doze comfortably in the late afternoon silence. Suddenly, he was in the chapel. The Cameron boy was standing in front of the congregation, on trial for his sins. He was nude. The boy looked the same as he had on the day of his betrayal and escape - his blond hair just long enough to be curly around his ears and neck, his eyes devilishly bright, green, wicked. He fancied himself beautiful, but his beauty was nothing but a mockery; he had the pleasing face and form of a satanic tempter. The Deacon stepped in front of him. "How do you plead, Cadet?"

"Guilty, sir."

"You admit your treachery?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

"Then we'll proceed with the execution," Deacon Thatcher said. He led the boy outside. The day was cool and drizzly. A dozen crucifixes were mounted above them on a hilltop, silhouetted against the chill gray sky. The boy started whimpering. From all around them came the sound of praying, a ghostly throng of murmurous, discordant voices. "We're ready now," the Deacon said.

"I'm sorry, your Eminence, please forgive me!"

"Too late for that, my pet."

The boy started up the hill. His feet became black with mud. The Deacon whipped him from behind. "Ugly mutt," he shouted, "disobedient mutt!" The boy stumbled forward, his back glistening with blood. The whip drove him on and on up the hill. The guards were waiting at the top. They shoved him down onto a huge wooden cross. He begged once more for mercy.

"Much too late," the Deacon smiled. He nailed the boy's hands to the crossbeam. The rain was falling harder now. He raised the boy's feet as high as possible on the wooden upright and nailed them into place. The guards hoisted the cross off the ground and planted it deep into the mud. The boy hung there naked and frog-legged.

"And now for the final step," Deacon Thatcher said. He was holding a sharpened wooden stake. "Think about your treachery as you die." He put the pointy end of the stake against the boy's anus, then shoved it up and in. "Our Father," he began to pray, pushing it deeper, "who art in heaven..."

The boy raised his head and shrieked.

"... hallowed be thy name..."

Higher, deeper.

"... thy kingdom come, thy will be done..."

Up through his bowels, his lungs.

"... on earth as it is in heaven."

Through his throat, into his brain. The boy writhed on his wooden spit. Blood sprayed from his mouth in a final, gurgling scream as the sharpened point popped through the top of his skull.

The dream, as always, ended there.

Deacon Thatcher opened his eyes and smiled. In a few more days, perhaps a week, he would be up and about, strong enough to organize a special patrol that would find the boy and bring him back - no matter where he was hiding. And then the dream would become reality. Every detail of it.

Later that evening, a captured runaway named Kelly Dillon was brought to Deacon Thatcher's bedroom. The Deacon sat up stiffly against his pillows and waved the boy closer. "We'll get right to business," he said. "We know you were with Cadet Cameron when he escaped. Where is he now, Disciple? What was his destination?"

"I don't know, sir."

"You were apprehended a few blocks this side of the forbidden zone," the Deacon continued, ignoring the boy's response. "It's obvious that the cadet made an illegal crossing. Who else was with him? Where were they headed?"

"I don't know, sir, really."

"Indeed." The Deacon hadn't expected any immediate answers. He suspected, in fact, that the Dillon boy was largely telling the truth. Even so, the location of his capture had already provided a crucial piece of information. It was clear now that the cadet had crossed into the ghetto, and it was equally clear when and where the crossing had been made. The Deacon's spies among the vags could easily provide the missing details of his whereabouts. Getting official approval for a ghetto expedition would be difficult, perhaps even impossible; but it didn't matter. Deacon Thatcher had already decided on the expedition, with or without formal approval. Before long, the Cameron mutt would be dragged back and punished for his treachery, nailed up as food for the crows.

Satisfied, the Deacon dismissed the Dillon boy and eased himself gingerly onto his back. If the boy had any further information, it would be extracted soon enough. The guard assigned to interrogations was very thorough and very efficient. Nothing would escape his attention.

The familiar dream started replaying itself as soon as the Deacon shut his eyes. The trial, the crucifixion, the sharpened stake - all of it in delicious detail, all of it soon to come true.

Nine

There was frost on the ground when Teddy and Cisco woke up. They huddled together in the sleeping bag to share a few extra moments of warmth. Finally rousing himself, Cisco sat up and looked around at the surrounding ruins. They appeared less ominous now in the morning light. "I guess we're alone, man."

"Looks like it," Teddy mumbled, his voice husky with sleep.

"So where we headin' today?"

"We'll keep heading north, I guess. Maybe we'll meet somebody."

"I hope they've got some food. I'm starvin'."

"Yeah, me too."

They crawled from the sleeping bag and stretched their cold, stiff muscles. Somewhere in the ruins, a

stone or brick crashed abruptly to the ground. The boys froze, one hand on their guns. But nothing else stirred. "Just a false alarm," Teddy said finally.

"Yeah," Cisco nodded, "I guess that's what it was." He set his gun back down and unzipped his jeans to take a leak. Teddy did the same. Side by side they stood splashing onto the cracked, weedy pavement, watching their urine spread away in dusty yellow streams. Peeing outside reminded Teddy suddenly of his obedience training, a jarring memory that filled him with a sick wave of shame and humiliation. He stared down at the puddle of his urine, caught in a sudden emotional warp, once again the Deacon's little mutt, dirty and sinful. Totally submissive. Just a little mutt. A little, wicked mutt. And then, just as abruptly, he remembered where he was and what he was doing, realizing with a soft exhalation of surprise that his penis had gone stiff in his hand. Cisco was staring at it silently, not sure what was happening. Teddy looked at him with an embarrassed grin. He glanced down. Cisco's dick was also out, a big brown thing hanging at a droopy, indecisive angle, still only semi-erect but already much thicker and longer than Teddy's. They stared down at each other for a few more seconds, then laughed nervously and tucked themselves back into their pants. "Gonna freeze it off," Cisco said with a tense smile.

"Yeah," Teddy smiled back, "that's for sure."

Quickly, they rolled up their sleeping bags and started up the street, neither of them saying another word.

By mid-morning, the weather had become mild and sunny, warm enough for the boys to take off their jackets. The ruins on their right gave way gradually to fields and woods, areas that had once been neatly tended public parks but were now wild and overgrown. The boys ventured into the shadowy fringes of the trees, then stopped. Cisco shook his head slowly. "This is gettin' weirder all the time, man."

"It's like being out in the country," Teddy said. "Lake Michigan must be on the other side."

"Should we check it out?"

"Might as well."

"Maybe we'll find a hotdog stand," Cisco said.

"Yeah," Teddy smiled, "maybe."

They took a few steps forward then stopped again, startled by a movement in the trees just ahead - a darting shape that might have been a man, or an animal - or maybe nothing but a trick of the light. Cisco clicked off his safety. "What the fuck was that?"

"I couldn't see for sure."

"Must be vags," Cisco muttered, then fired a short burst into the trees. Furiously, Teddy jabbed his shoulder. "Jesus, man, are you *nuts*?"

"I'm sick of pussyin' around, man!"

"You're gonna get us killed, you asshole!"

Cisco lowered his gun. "OK, OK, take it easy."

"Don't do that again, I mean it."

"I said OK, you little fairy!"

They both went suddenly silent, embarrassed by Cisco's careless insult. Teddy turned away. "Come on," he said softly, "let's go." He started off through the trees.

Cisco stayed where he was for another few moments, wishing he could take back his "little fairy" remark, hating himself for being so stupid. "I'm comin'," he said at last. "Wait up."

In silence, they continued on through the woods.

It became obvious, after a while, that they were being followed and watched. Some of the noises around them were caused by birds and squirrels and other small creatures, but many were clearly human: heavy footfalls, animal - like signal cries, even an occasional murmur of undisguised laughter. The boys

kept their guns up and ready, prepared for an ambush at any moment; and yet, strangely, they felt themselves less and less threatened the farther they went. They knew, after all, that the vags could have killed them long ago. And then an odd, stunning thought occurred to Teddy; he realized with shocking clarity that he and Cisco were not trespassers in forbidden territory, not intruders, not fugitives surrounded by enemies: here, in the ghetto, they were like everyone else, free to come and go; they were their own masters; they were already vags.

He started laughing. "Nobody's going to hurt us," he said. "We've been safe here all along!"

"How can we be *safe* here with all..."

"I told you before, on the other side, remember? The vags are free, they make their own rules. That goes for *us*, too. We're vags now, Cisco, we can do whatever we wanna do!"

He laughed again, then started shouting into the trees. "Hey, you guys, we're chill, man! You can come out, no problem!"

Cisco grinned. He liked this new approach. No more pussyin' around. "Yeah," he shouted, "come out and meet the supremest fuckers around!"

"Supremest by far!"

"Fuckin' right!"

"Extreme fuckin' right!"

They looked at each other and laughed again. They were in a new world now; their chains had been broken.

They waited a moment, but still no one appeared. Teddy shrugged. "Must be shy," he said, heading off once again through the trees.

"Ain't very friendly, that's for sure."

A little farther on they came to a sunny clearing in the woods. It had once been a playground, but was now starting to disappear beneath an overgrowth of weeds and saplings. Most of the equipment was still standing: rusty swings, slides, monkey bars, seesaws. From the paths trampled through the weeds, it was obvious that someone still played on the equipment now and then. Cisco and Teddy sat down to rest on a dilapidated old merry-go-round. They pushed it slowly with their feet; it creaked in a lazy, wobbly circle. Cisco set down his jacket, his sleeping bag, his gun, then carefully adjusted his headband. "I'm really thirsty, man. And hungry, too."

"I know," Teddy said. "We have to find some food and water pretty soon."

Cisco nodded, then gave Teddy a light nudge. "Hey, I'm sorry about before, about what I said."

"That's OK," Teddy shrugged. He glanced at the other boy. "Did you hear some stuff about me somewhere?"

"Not much, just a little bit."

"About me being a fag-crim or something like that?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

The merry-go-round creaked slowly, slowly. Teddy took off his beret and wiped his forehead; his hair was matted down sweaty where the beret had been pressing it. "Do you believe all that stuff?"

"I don't know," Cisco said uneasily. "I guess it don't really matter."

"But what if it was true?"

"Like I said, man - I guess it don't really matter."

Teddy spun the merry-go-round faster with a hard push of his foot. He decided to slant the conversation away from himself, toward something that might make Cisco more comfortable. "Hey, did you screw a lot of chicks when you were in boot camp?"

Cisco smiled. "We snuck out once and went to a whorehouse. But that was the only time. I ain't even

seen no chicks in seven or eight weeks.”

“Poor baby.”

“Do vag chicks like to fuck?”

“I don't think there *are* any vag chicks - at least not very many.”

“Sincere?”

“That's what Richard told me,” Teddy said with a shrug. “Mostly it's just guys - you know, from the army and juvie homes and prisons, places like that”

“Seems kinda weird, man.”

“Yeah, but... I guess guys are just different than girls.”

“Brilliant, Einstein.”

The merry-go-round started to slow down. Teddy gave it another shove with his foot. “I mean, I think that guys just get into more trouble than girls, you know? They run away more and fight more and mess around more. They're... they're just different, that's all.”

“No vag chicks,” Cisco mused sadly. “I sure didn't count on that. It's blue balls forever, I guess.”

“Sorry.”

“But it's better than bein' locked up 'in the Home, I gotta admit.” He held up his right hand and made a quick jack-off gesture. “I always got this here to keep me company. My right-hand man.”

“You're hilarious,” Teddy drawled, trying to conceal his excitement beneath a sarcastic veneer.

“Gets you through the night.”

“Yeah, I guess it does. But they say it's a sin.” “Maybe - but it feels extreme, right?”

“Yeah, absolute.”

They glanced at each other and laughed, suddenly at a perilous dead end in the conversation. Teddy put on his beret and stood up. “We should get going.”

“I guess so,” Cisco said, sounding vaguely disappointed.

He started to pick up his stuff when a twig snapped behind him. He and Teddy grabbed their machine pistols and wheeled swiftly. Two vags were standing at the edge of the clearing - one of them about fourteen years old, the other about ten or eleven, both of them aiming small laser rifles at Cisco and Teddy. They moved slowly forward. “You're new,” the older one said. “Where from?”

Teddy lowered his gun. “The Falwell Home. We ran away.” He was staring amazed at the vag boys. The older one looked Filipino or Polynesian, his black hair hanging to his shoulders in long, wild tendrils. He had a white egret feather dangling from his left ear. His body was draped in a green oilskin poncho that covered everything but his bare ankles and sandaled feet. The younger one was a black boy with thick dreadlocks and some sort of chalky paint smeared across his cheeks in white stripes. He was wearing a man's fatigue jacket that hung past his knees. The jacket was unbuttoned and open, leaving the front of his body totally exposed. His nipples and genitals were painted white to match his face.

The older boy lowered his laser rifle. He looked at Cisco. “Why you shoot before at my friends?” His voice was quick and light, with a pleasantly lilting accent.

“Sorry about that, man.”

“He didn't know,” Teddy added. “He just got scared, that's all. Did he hurt anybody?”

“Nobody, lucky enough.”

There was an uncomfortable silence as' the four boys appraised one another. Finally, Teddy crossed the space between them. “You got any water or food?”

Cisco came up behind him. “Yeah, man, I need somethin' to drink, sincere.”

The older vag slipped a leather water pouch off his shoulder and handed it over. He watched the strangers as they - drank - studying their clothes, their faces, their movements - everything about them.

They looked strong and tough: good fighters who might make good friends. Some of the runaways who wandered into the ghetto were weak, cowardly, without spirit; they usually ended up back on the other side, broken and terrified. Others were sick inside, mean, vicious; they were best left alone, shunned like rabid dogs, unfit for the pack. But these two looked good. Especially the blond one. The dark one looked all right, too - definitely a warrior, fearless, dangerous. But the blond one was special, like a young sun prince, like a fire demon from one of the old island stories.

"My name is Teddy," he said suddenly, wiping his mouth. "This is Cisco." He handed back the pouch. "Thanks for the water. Where do you get it?"

"We got lots of pumps," the little black boy said. "Lots of 'em, all over."

"Old men they digged the wells," the other boy explained. He slipped the strap of the water bag over his shoulder. "My name is Volmikki, but only Mikki for shorter." His face was dark and gaunt, with hollow cheeks and a hawk-sharp nose.

"I'm Topo," the little boy grinned.

Teddy pointed at him, also grinning. "Don't you get cold without any clothes on?"

"It's *nice* today," Topo said, surprised by the question. "And I even be wearin' my coat."

"We got other clothes," Mikki smiled, "for the bad cold. But today and after it gets more and more warm."

Cisco edged closer to Teddy. "You mean these guys don't wear no clothes?"

"Not many."

"Are we supposed to go around like that, too?"

"What's wrong, are you afraid they'll see your little wienie dog?"

Mikki and Topo looked at each other and laughed.

"Very fuckin' funny," Cisco sneered.

"It's not important," Mikki said. "Some guys they wear a lot, some guys they don't wear nothing. Nobody care much."

Topo pulled his coat farther open and wiggled his hips. "It be funner this way, that for sure."

Mikki put his arm around the little boy's shoulders. "The body is special good. Showing it makes everybody happy, hiding it is something sad."

"This is too fuckin' weird to be true," Cisco said, shaking his head. Teddy didn't answer. He was staring at Mikki, almost afraid to believe what he was hearing. Everything Mikki had said was contrary to Church doctrine; it was all sinful, wicked - and totally wonderful. Until now, Teddy had only half-believed his own accounts of the vags; but he no longer had any doubts. All the stories were true, like fairy tales brought suddenly to life, like dreams conjured into reality.

He stepped closer to Mikki, "Can we come with you?"

"To me it's OK," Mikki said. He looked at Topo. "Is it OK to you?"

"They can come," Topo nodded.

Teddy looked back at Cisco and waved him forward.

"Come on, it's all right. We're friends."

"Sounds chill to me," Cisco said. "I just hope you guys got some food."

"At the camp, sure we got food." Mikki turned to go. "It's late now, come on."

During the long hike back to the camp, the boys killed time by sharing stories about themselves. Teddy and Cisco soon discovered that Topo was a ten-year-old orphan from the southern slums, in the ghetto only since May. Mikki had a much longer history. He was from an island in the Polynesian Territories. When he was nine, he and his brothers were shipped to California to work in a munitions factory. Mikki ran away after a few months and headed east, ending up in Chicago about a year later. He

was fourteen now, a warrior in one of the groups that lived near the lake. His tribal group, like all the others, was loosely organized and constantly in flux, shrinking and growing as individual warriors drifted in and out. Tribal allegiance was purely voluntary. Warriors were free to join any of the groups, as long as they helped provide food, build shelters, do occasional black-market bartering in the city - and whatever else was necessary for the group's welfare. If they didn't contribute, they were forced out; if they grew restless, they were free to leave on their own. Each warrior made his own rules; if those rules caused harm to other vags, the renegade warrior didn't live long; otherwise, there were no restrictions.

This credo of personal liberty extended also to sexual behavior. Almost every vag had spent several years in some sort of all-male institutional setting (the army, the church, a prison or juvenile home) and had long experience with forbidden types of sexual activity. Over the years, homoerotic sex had become a badge of distinction among them, both as a proof of virility and as a flamboyant symbol of their freedom - the ultimate expression of anti-Christian, anti-Federation defiance. Like all the warriors, Mikki was proud of his body's strength and beauty, and he admired that same strength and beauty in others. Having come from one of the tiniest of the Polynesian islands, he was free of hang-ups about fag-crims and dress codes and nudity. Topo had also adapted quickly; as a normal ten-year-old boy, he was only too happy to go naked and enjoy his body whenever he felt the urge.

Late in the afternoon, the boys arrived at the lake. They paused at the top of the old concrete flood-wall and looked down at the camp. Wooden huts lay scattered below them along the beach. Smoke from cooking fires drifted out over the water, driven gently by a southwesterly breeze. A dozen small fishing boats were out working in the harbor, pulling in coho salmon, lake trout, perch, bass. The lake, once nearly killed by pollution, had been saved thirty years before by the death of heavy industry on its shores; it now produced a good haul of fish throughout the year, more than enough to feed the many tribes that depended on its resources.

"Utterly fierce," Cisco said, gazing up and down the beach. "This might be OK, man."

Topo hopped down from the flood-wall. "You like it for good and true?"

"Yeah, sincere I do."

"Me too," Teddy smiled. "This is royal."

"Come on," Mikki said with a wave of his hand. "The old Chief he likes to see you."

Cisco and Teddy exchanged a puzzled glance, then followed Mikki obediently into the camp. Pigs and goats and chickens were roaming freely between the huts, scavenging from piles of old bones and food scraps. Warriors were huddled around their cooking fires - some in pairs, some in larger groups - young men, old men, boys. But there were no women, as Cisco quickly observed. "Nothin' but guys," he said glumly. "I guess you were right, man."

Teddy held up his hand. "Remember, you still got one of these."

"Yeah," Cisco laughed, "I'm gonna need it, no shit."

The vag warriors watched the new boys as they passed. Some showed no interest; others smiled, nodded, lifted their weapons in salute. Cisco and Teddy smiled and saluted back. Still walking in front of them, Mikki looked over his shoulder and pointed to a nearby hut. "There I live," he told them. "With Topo and Hava." There was a small fire outside the entrance of the hut; three fish were cooking on a spit above the flames. A boy squatting beside the fire stood up when he saw Mikki. He came trotting across the beach. It was Hava. He was a Samoan boy of mixed parentage - as exotic as some sort of rare island creature - with perfect cocoa skin, slanted Tartar eyes, sleek yellow hair parted in the middle and hanging to his shoulders. His face was round; his cheeks were cherub-plump. Like Mikki, he was fourteen years old. For the last two of those years they had been sharing the same hut and the same bed.

Mikki kissed him on the lips, then introduced him to Cisco and Teddy. They clasped hands in a quick

greeting. "You should see the old Chief," Hava told them. His voice was quiet and husky. He had grown up speaking English, so he had no discernible accent; but he still spoke slowly and carefully, concentrating on each word.

"Now we're going to see him," Mikki nodded.

"I'll wait with Topo," Hava said. "The fish are ready."

Mikki pointed to the new boys. "Two more we need for them. They'll stay with us after today. Is it OK to you?"

"Sure," Hava said, "two more is OK." He was wearing an oversized red T-shirt that hung to his bare knees. An elongated hole had been cut in the front, leaving a cocoa-brown oval of skin from his nipples down to his belly button. He and Mikki kissed again. "Don't take too long," he said, then took Topo by the hand and headed back to the hut.

Mikki looked around at Teddy and Cisco. "Come on," he said, waving them forward.

Cisco nudged Teddy as they started after him. "Did you see them guys?" he whispered. "Did you see 'em kissin' each other?"

"Yeah - I guess they're good friends."

"Good friends my ass." Cisco stopped himself from saying anything else, afraid suddenly that he might hurt Teddy's feelings. "This is a weird fuckin' place, that's all I know."

Mikki led them to a long, narrow bunker made of huge concrete blocks, a structure apparently left over from the last century. Inside, it was warm and dim and smoky. The boys were introduced to an old man resting on a broken-down couch. His skinny body was draped in a long tartan-plaid robe; his head was wrapped in a white turban pinned in front with a gold serpent clasp. He puffed casually on a thin green cheroot as Mikki told him about the meeting in the woods with Teddy and Cisco. The tobacco was laced with something (probably opium) that gave it a peculiar sweet fragrance.

After hearing the whole story, the old Chief nodded slowly, took another look at the new boys, then showed his brown teeth in a wide grin. "You're welcome here," he said with a mellow southern drawl. "I would suppose you'll be staying with Volmikki's group?"

"Yes, sir," Teddy replied.

"You're lucky, then. Volmikki and Menhava are both fine young warriors."

Teddy nodded. "I like them," he said. Apparently, Menhava was the full name of Mikki's friend. "Thanks for letting us stay."

"Yeah," Cisco chimed in, "thanks, man."

The Chief paused for a puff on his cheroot. "Of course, you'll be expected to provide your own food. I see you already have your own weapons."

"We ain't got much ammo," Cisco said.

"You can barter for more, darlin'. We keep our little arsenal full, thanks to the black market."

"Barter with what?"

"Fish, game, firewood, currency - any old thing. We aren't fussy."

"I have this money here," Teddy said, pulling the wad of bills from his pocket. He showed it to the Chief. "Can I use this for ammo and stuff?"

"Oh, darlin', I should say so! Our black market runners could most certainly use that. You just let us know what you want, whenever you want it." He took a puff on his cheroot, blew out a stream of smoke. "Any other questions, my dears?"

"Yeah," Cisco said, stepping forward. "I been wonderin' why the Federation don't just wipe you guys out. I mean, it don't make no sense to me."

The old man smiled. "The Federation has barely enough soldiers to fight its own precious little war,

my dear. The Federation, you might even say, is on the ever-lovin' verge of collapse. Pretty soon the photon missiles will start flying and the plasma bombs will start dropping and... well, the Federation and the Empire will both go poof."

Teddy nodded slowly. "I knew it," he murmured. "I knew it all along."

"The world, my darling boys, will be left with a healthy population of rats, cockroaches, and vags. We, I have no doubt, shall survive the inferno."

The boys had no more questions after that.

Mikki led them back to the hut. Topo and Hava were already inside, sitting together on the sandy floor, eating and talking. The hut smelled good, like greasy smoke and dirty bodies and messy sex. "Here you can put your stuff," Mikki said, pointing to an empty corner. Teddy and Cisco set down their guns and jackets and sleeping bags. There were two other sleeping areas in the hut - one for Topo, the other for Mikki and Hava. Their beds were old sleeping bags laid out flat and covered with a variety of blankets and animal pelts for extra warmth and comfort. Both areas were cluttered with fearsome collections of guns, knives, plasma darts, sonic grenades; also with ragged piles of shorts, T-shirts, parkas, denim pants, vests, stocking caps, sneakers, snow shoes. Mikki added to the clutter by pulling off his poncho and tossing it aside. Underneath, he was wearing nothing but a jockstrap sewn with the feathers of cardinals, bluejays, crows, doves, wild canaries - red, blue, black, white, yellow - a brightly feathered loin-wrap to match his egret-feather earring. His body was lean; sinewy; his skin was smooth and brown, darker than Hava's, with a warm coppery tint.

He looked at his new friends and smiled. "Now you like to eat?"

"Fuckin' right," Cisco said. "That fish smells supreme, man."

"OK," Mikki nodded, "come on."

Ten

On the fifth day of his recuperation, Deacon Thatcher began a more vigorous schedule of exercise, taking unescorted walks up and down the hallway outside his bedroom. His doctor had told him not to exert himself unduly for at least two more weeks, preferably three. But the Deacon was working toward a more rapid recovery. In another few days he intended to be leading his special expedition into the ghetto. He had no official authorization, of course - but it didn't matter. The Deacon was an officer of the Christian Guards; he had ample resources of his own. As the centralized power of the Federation declined, his own personal power increased. Everywhere, local strong men like himself were beginning to grab control: religious authorities, police, commanders of large detention units - these were the leaders now, the swaggering tyrants who wielded nearly absolute power over their petty domains.

After dinner, Deacon Thatcher met with a man named Lazaro - his most reliable spy among the vags, a fearsome warrior known for his great strength and size and for his elaborate red and black facial tattoos. By now, it was well-known throughout the ghetto that a runaway Red Beret had crossed over; defections of that caliber were rare. Discovering his location had been a simple assignment. "He's living with one of the lake tribes," Lazaro told the Deacon. "Up north, near the border."

"A strong tribe?"

Lazaro nodded. "Small but tough. Their chief used to be a colonel in the Guards. He's a powerful sorcerer."

"Blasphemous nonsense," the Deacon sneered.

"The sorcerers are dangerous," Lazaro insisted. "You shouldn't take them lightly."

The Deacon, lying on his bed, unwrapped a piece of chocolate and placed it thoughtfully on his tongue. "An underling should never talk back to his master." He looked at Lazaro with a slight grin. "It could prove a very risky maneuver. Now... sit down and tell me what else you know. I'll need every detail."

Kelly was sprawled motionless on a bare cot in the dispensary. Two days of interrogation had left him bruised and battered. He had long since revealed his entire store of information. Deacon Thatcher stood beside him and pondered his fate. He glanced at the interrogator. "Are you quite certain he's told you everything?"

"Yes, sir, absolutely."

"All right, then, go fetch one of the cadets." The Deacon stepped closer to Kelly. "I'll wait here... with the young disciple."

He sat slowly on the edge of the cot. Kelly opened his eyes, roused by the movement beside him. Deacon Thatcher laughed softly. "Your pain has just begun, you little beast. You can't imagine what lies ahead."

Kelly watched him with a wide, terrified stare.

"You've been an unspeakably wicked child," the Deacon went on. "Our Lord Jesus is very angry with you. Very angry, indeed. Your penance will have to be harsh enough to appease Him." He laughed again. "You should never, never have turned against your Savior."

A few moments later, one of the cadets appeared in the doorway. Deacon Thatcher rose carefully to his feet. "I have a special student for you," he told the boy. "Disciple Dillon here needs extra attention."

"Yes, sir."

"He's yours for the rest of the week - all day, every day. I want every cadet to participate in his training. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," the cadet replied, his eyes bright with anticipation.

"I want his training to be especially... rigorous."

"It will be, sir, I promise."

"Good lad," the Deacon smiled. "Now take him away."

He watched as the cadet yanked Kelly from the cot and dragged him to the door. "Remember," he added, "I want him back at the end of the week."

The cadet responded with a brisk salute, then dragged the little boy out the door.

Alone now, Deacon Thatcher sat on the cot and touched his bandaged skull. Every throb of pain reminded him of the Cameron scoundrel. Getting him back would be easy enough, despite Lazaro's defeatist warnings. The vags were a bunch of ragtag savages, poorly armed and woefully equipped. They had no training, no discipline, no morale. Worse, they were nothing but fag-criminals and traitors - weak, depraved, cowardly - not real men at all. The Deacon smiled to himself, amused by the concept of queer warriors. There was no way they could stand against genuine soldiers, no way they could resist well-trained Christian patriots. Exterminating them would be a pleasure.

Even so, it was always wise to consider every eventuality. Should a direct attack somehow fail, the Deacon was prepared to deal with Cameron on a more clandestine level. Besides being a very clever spy, Lazaro was also a superbly skilled assassin. He was already on his way back to the ghetto to join up

with Cameron's tribal group - a bit of deadly insurance in case the mutt tried to slip away at the last moment.

And then there was the Dillon boy - another bit of insurance, another piece of bait to lure the prey into the open.

The Deacon chuckled aloud. Everything was perfect.

Eleven

Teddy and Cisco were up at dawn with the rest of the tribe. Their first night in camp had been calm and peaceful. After their dinner of fish and rice, they had spent two or three hours talking with Mikki and Hava and Topo - sharing stories, drinking homemade cider, smoking black-market cigarettes. Then, soon after sunset, all five boys had bedded down for the night in the dark, warm hut - Topo and Teddy and Cisco in their separate bags, Mikki and Hava together in theirs.

In the morning, the boys shared a breakfast of scrambled eggs and cold rice. Eggs were plentiful in the camp, along with fish and rabbits and squirrels. In two or three months, the food supply would be enriched by fruits and berries and vegetables grown in the dozens of orchards and gardens along the lakefront. Even now there were some remaining stores of dried fruits and canned vegetables left over from the previous year. And, as the new boys soon learned, there were always abundant supplies of fermented cider, known as “scrumper” among the lake vags.

After breakfast, Mikki and Hava took their small boat out on the lake for a day of fishing. They had agreed earlier to let the new boys rest for two or three days before putting them to work. Cisco made the most of his free time by exploring farther up along the beach. There were half-a-dozen other tribes that lived nearby, and Cisco was determined to find a female vag somewhere among them - old, young, it didn't matter. “I just want a good *fuck*,” he told Teddy before he left. “I'll find a chick if it takes me all day, man.”

Teddy stayed behind in camp, content to laze away the day and do nothing. The last two weeks had drained every bit of his emotional energy. Cisco's arrival at the Falwell Home, their break-out with Kelly, their flight into the ghetto - it all seemed blurry and fantastical, like a bizarre fever dream. Teddy wanted to rest and recuperate now, safe among his new friends; wanted to forget the Home, the Deacon; wanted to stop worrying about poor stupid Kelly. He wanted to start over, keeping alive only the memories of his mother and Richard, wiping out everything else.

Back in the hut, he found Topo working over a collection of small bowls and pots. The little boy looked up with a smile. He was naked, as usual. Teddy knelt beside him on the sandy floor. “What're you making?”

Topo held up one of the many bowls scattered in front of him. “It's my paint... for tomorrow night.”

“What's so special about tomorrow?”

“It's a festival day,” Topo said. He put a few more dried berries and a splash of water into the bowl, then continued mashing his red paint. The other bowls already held white, yellow, blue, and black, each concocted from a variety of dried berries and charcoal and colored clays. “It's called the spring equal-

not.”

“Equinox,” Teddy corrected.

“This gonna be my first one. I don't know much about it. There be lots of singin' and dancin' and everybody be drinkin' and eatin' special stuff.”

“What else?”

“Don't know,” Topo said. “They got somethin' called the feeding ceremony too. Mikki and Hava is gonna be in it, but I don't know what they gonna be doin'.”

“What about you?”

“I got my paints, and I gonna be in one of the big dances.”

“It sounds like fun,” Teddy said.

Topo looked at him with another smile. “You want I should paint you?”

“What... now?”

“Sure - right now.”

“I guess so,” Teddy said. “What should I do?”

“Take off your stuff.”

Teddy hesitated, then pulled off his sweatshirt and his undershirt. “All right?”

“Your pants, too,” Topo laughed. “I gonna paint you all over.”

“OK,” Teddy shrugged, “if you say so.” He took off his shoes and socks, his pants, finally his undershorts, then stretched out on his belly and waited for Topo to begin. The sandy floor felt scratchy and cool beneath his body.

Topo stuck his fingers into the bowl of red paint and smeared an experimental stripe across Teddy's back. “It looks good,” he decided. “Goes on just right.” He drew designs up and down the length of Teddy's body - stars, circles, dots, squiggles - using all his different colors. Teddy lay silently until Topo started drawing concentric circles on his behind. “That tickles,” he laughed softly.

“You like it?”

“Yeah,” Teddy said, “it feels good.”

Topo picked up a rag and dabbed it across the finished designs, removing the excess moisture. “OK,” he said, “now the other side, too.”

Teddy, excited by Topo's roaming fingers, had sprouted an erection several minutes before. His first reaction had been shame, an unsettling resurgence of all the old feelings and memories from his days at the Home. But then he remembered that he was free now; that life was different here, better; that enjoying other boys was natural and good and healthy. He didn't have to be afraid anymore.

Forcing away the last of his embarrassment, he rolled onto his back and smiled up at Topo. “Go ahead, I'm ready.”

The little boy looked at Teddy's stiffened penis, then started finger-painting a bull's-eye around the bottom of it, beginning with a small red circle. “You don't got no skin on your crank,” he said, pausing to touch the exposed knob. “I don't got none on mine, neither.”

“Yeah, I already noticed.”

Topo drew a larger yellow circle around the red one.

“Mikki and Hava got skin on theirs.”

“Yeah,” Teddy said, “so does Cisco.” His eyes were fixed on Topo's hand. “His thing is *really* big.”

“So is Mikki's. He got himself a *big* old crank. But Hava's ain't so big.” Topo drew a final black circle around the red and yellow ones, completing the bull's-eye, “It's about like yours,” he said, “only a little fatter.” He started stroking Teddy's erection with his clean hand, just doing what seemed comfortable and appropriate between friends. Then he asked what seemed an equally appropriate question. “Do you

ever suck on Cisco?”

Teddy shook his head slowly, too flustered to answer. He spread his legs a few inches, raised his knees. Topo kept on stroking him. “And don't Cisco never suck on you?”

“No, we've never done it before... not with anybody.”

“I'll do it right now,” Topo offered quickly. “I ain't never sucked on one like yours before” - meaning, apparently, a white boy's pink, circumcised variety. “You want me to?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

Eagerly, Topo leaned forward and took Teddy's penis into his mouth. Teddy raised his hips in a slow spasm of pleasure. He could feel Topo's dreadlocks brushing against his tummy like soft, teasing fingers.

After only a few seconds, Topo stopped and looked up. He wiped his lips. “Can you make stuff come out?”

“Yeah,” Teddy said hoarsely, “keep going, it'll come out.”

“I figured you could, 'cause you already got hair.”

“Yeah, keep going.”

“I'll swallow it for you,” Topo grinned. “It'll make us more better friends.”

“OK,” Teddy nodded, “just keep going.” He closed his eyes as Topo went back to work. He wanted this moment to last forever, like a delicious, endless wet dream; but he could already feel himself tightening and swelling, getting ready to spill a big, messy load. He opened his legs wider, licked his dry lips, smiled. All his shame was gone now. No more fear, no more guilt. The Deacon couldn't hurt him anymore. He was outside the Federation now. He was free. He was a vag. And then his hips went rigid, and Topo started gulping.

Cisco returned to camp shortly before sundown. His day-long search for sexual kicks had been fruitless; the few female vags he had encountered had either laughed at his advances or chased him off with curses and threats. He was alone now and homier than ever, out of ideas and out of hope, feeling tired and gloomy after his futile expedition.

Mikki and Hava were kneeling in front of the hut when he got back. They were cleaning a heavy catch of fish, mostly trout and bass. Cisco crouched next to them. “You got a shit-load of fish here, man.”

“Today we done good,” Mikki said.

“Ain't there too many for us to eat?”

Mikki looked at Hava and laughed. “Most we take to the storehouse,” he explained. “We get other things back, like wood and meat and dried fruit.”

“Fuckin' OK,” Cisco said vaguely. He glanced up and down the beach. “Where's Ted?”

“With Topo, inside. Today they making themselves special friends. All day.”

Cisco stood up and stepped toward the hut. “Special friends,” he mumbled. “Everybody here is a goddamn special friend.” He looked at Hava before he left. “You don't say much, do you, man?”

“Not much to say,” Hava shrugged, in the process of gutting and scaling a big lake trout. He and Mikki were both wearing long, raggedy T-shirts that covered them down to mid-thigh. Cisco wondered briefly what, if anything, they were wearing underneath, then turned away quickly and ducked into the hut.

It took his eyes several seconds to adjust to the darkness inside. At first, he could hear only the splash of water, the sound of someone washing. Then Teddy said hello, and Cisco was able to focus more clearly on the dim scene in front of him. Teddy was squatting in a metal tub full of soapy water; his hair was white with lather. He looked at Cisco and grinned. “Any luck?”

“Fuck no,” Cisco muttered, staring at his friend. He had never seen Teddy without clothes. “Maybe I'll try again some other time.”

Topo, standing beside the tub, ladled clean water over Teddy's head to rinse away the soap. Cisco put his gun and his jacket next to his sleeping bag. “It was warm today,” he remarked quietly.

“It's springtime for good and true,” Topo agreed.

“Yeah, man, I guess it is.”

Finished with his bath, Teddy got out of the tub and started drying himself with his sweatshirt. All his painted designs had been washed away. “I feel a whole lot better,” he said. “We haven't washed since last week.”

“No shit, genius.”

“You should take a bath, too, Cisco.”

“Maybe later.”

Teddy put on his sweatshirt and his underpants. He ignored his jeans. “We won't have any hot water

later. You should do it now.”

“Come on,” Topo waved. “I gonna help you.”

“I can do it myself,” Cisco said. “I ain't no fuckin' baby.”

He started to undress. “And you don't gotta watch me, neither. I don't need no fuckin' audience.”

Topo stepped away with a friendly shrug. “Maybe we oughta help with the fish,” he said.

“Yeah,” Cisco told him, “go do that” He slipped off his white briefs. “I don't want you starin' at me.”

He stepped into the tub. Topo took a good look at the big dangly thing he'd been waiting to see, then smiled at Teddy. “You was right about it for sure,” he whispered.

“Come on,” Teddy smiled back, “let's leave him alone.” Cisco waited for them to leave before allowing himself to relax in the warm water. It felt good to wash away the days of dirt and sweat. He soaped his body all over, taking his time, thinking about Teddy and Topo. He was glad that they liked each other; he was glad that Teddy finally had a friend to mess around with - and there would be plenty of others, too, no doubt about it. Teddy looked OK, good enough to mess around with anybody he wanted. Mikki, Hava - anybody. He was like a stud on a goddamn sex farm. Cisco tried to imagine another place like this, a place with chicks instead of guys, hundreds of them running around naked and waiting to be fucked. It didn't seem fair that Teddy should have all the fun. But that was the way it was. Cisco was stranded in fag-crim paradise - at least for a while, until he could make his own plans and move on.

Working faster, he yanked off his kamikaze bandana and soaped his crew cut. The water in the tub was starting to get cold. He finished lathering his hair, then rinsed himself clean and stood up. Following Teddy's example, he used his sweat-shirt to dry himself. As he was wiping his arms and chest, Mikki stepped into the hut. He eyed Cisco curiously, then walked over to the pail of clean water and picked it up. “This we need,” he said. “You're finished now?”

“Yeah,” Cisco said, “go ahead and take it.”

Mikki started away, then turned back quickly. “You like the girls?” he asked.

“Sure I like girls.”

“Teddy tells me that, he says you like the girls.”

“He's right, I do.” Cisco noticed Mikki staring frankly at his crotch. He wrapped the sweatshirt around his middle, feeling suddenly foolish and self-conscious. “I like chicks a lot, man.”

“Never the boys?”

“Never - not before, not now.”

“Too bad,” Mikki said. “To me your cock looks good.” With that, he ducked through the low entrance and disappeared. Cisco stared after him without moving. Everybody here was an utter weird-out, completely nuts, going around queering off on one another all day. Then Cisco looked down at himself standing in the cold water, hiding his wiener like some kind of fucked-up little sissy, and he started laughing. Utterly weird. He stepped from the tub and put on his shirt, his underpants, his jeans. “My cock looks good,” he repeated to himself, still laughing. “I can't believe this place.”

He put on his bandana, then went outside.

The festival started early next day. Reed mats had been laid out everywhere along the beach, each one covered with bowls of pickled eggs and onions, brown bread, dried apples and pears and plums all soaking in black-market sugar and brandy; also pitchers of scrumper, gallons of it drawn from huge wooden barrels. The scene reminded Teddy of the Hawaiian luaus he had seen pictured in geography textbooks. He was taking a walk along the crowded beach with Cisco, both of them sipping from glasses of scrumper as they observed the first stages of the celebration. "This is gonna be royal," he said. "It's like a party all day."

"Might be OK," Cisco nodded. "I dig on this scrumper stuff. It's kick-ass shit."

It was early in the afternoon, another warm and sunny day. Teddy was wearing his red beret and his underpants and an old green army shirt borrowed from Mikki. The shirt was hanging loose and unbuttoned. His feet were bare and powdered with white sand. Cisco was still wearing his usual outfit of jeans and sweatshirt and bandana. Mikki and Hava and Topo were off somewhere else with their other friends, temporarily lost in the noisy confusion. Eating, drinking, smoking, wandering from group to group - that was how the feast day was celebrated. Later, after sunset, the mysterious feeding ceremony would take place; but, until then, there was plenty of time for more spontaneous, undisciplined forms of revelry.

By early evening, Cisco and Teddy were feeling groggy from too much food and scrumper and hashish. Wherever they went, warriors offered them fresh glasses of cider and ceremonial pipes of hash. It was Teddy who especially excited their attentions. Several times he found himself giggling with embarrassment as one of the older men pulled down his underpants for a quick look and feel inside. There was nothing rough or frightening about these encounters; the warriors were simply expressing their appreciation for a beautiful boy by caressing and admiring him. And, after getting over his initial shyness, Teddy found himself enjoying it. He liked the men to touch him and tell him how pretty he was; they reminded him of Richard, and that made him happy.

Cisco, meanwhile, tried to ignore the boisterous sexual goings-on by concentrating on the food and drink. He and Teddy both ended up drunk and stoned by' nightfall, roaming dizzily through the mad celebration, blearily euphoric. Dozens of bonfires were keeping the beach bright and warm for the nighttime festivities. Shadows jerked like flittery black demons against the sand. Music was coming from everywhere, fueling spontaneous outbursts of singing and dancing through- out the camp. Teddy and Cisco drifted to the edge of the biggest, noisiest gathering. Topo was just finishing his performance when they arrived. He was in full body paint, one of a large group of young boys dancing to the music of a huge battery-powered boom box. As the music faded, he spotted Teddy and Cisco and jogged over to see them. "I been dancin' forever," he grinned, trying to catch his breath. "Was you watchin' me?"

"We just got here," Teddy said. He took a sloppy drink of scrumper, wiped his mouth. "But you look real good."

"Is you stayin' for Mikki and Hava?"

"Sure. When do they start?"

"Right now," Topo said. "We can sit over there." He led Teddy and Cisco to a clear spot next to a mat full of little clay bowls. Each bowl contained two brown clumps of something that looked like soft, wadded mud. Teddy picked up one of the bowls and sniffed the contents. "What is this stuff?"

"Special mushrooms," Topo said. "For the ceremony. I done took some once and they be somethin' *wild*, for good and true."

An older warrior, apparently watching over the mushrooms, stepped in front of Teddy and tapped the bowl with his long dagger. "Are you in the ceremony, boy?"

"No, sir."

“You don't want to feed one of your friends?”

“He's new,” Topo explained to the man. “He doesn't know much about it yet.”

“Watch the others, then. You'll learn fast enough.” The warrior smiled. “I bet you'll be doing it next time, no problem. And you too,” he said, pointing to Cisco. “But for now you'd better leave the mushrooms alone. They're for the dancers.” He tapped the bowl once more, then walked away.

Teddy put the bowl down carefully on the mat. Cisco took a long drink, belched loudly, then grinned at the other boys. “I'd like to try some of them mushrooms,” he said. His eyes, like Teddy's, were droopy and red. “Wonder what you gotta do to get into this fuckin' ceremony deal.”

“You done gotta feed your friend,” Topo shrugged.

“Don't sound so hard to me.”

“They're starting,” Teddy said eagerly. Music swelled around them. Drums, vibrapipes, horns, sitars - the real things now, played by at least a dozen painted musicians - all thudding and wailing beneath a bright crescent moon. From everywhere in the crowd, pairs of young men and boys stepped forward into the sandy clearing. Each pair was uniquely costumed in matching studs, chains, belts, ribbons - just enough paraphernalia to embellish their proud, supple nudity. Mikki and Hava were one of the pairs. They started dancing together languidly on the far side of the clearing. Both of them were costumed like brightly colored birds - Mikki in red and blue, Hava in white and black - adorned from scalp to ankle in feathered headbands, earrings, necklaces, armbands, bracelets, belts, leg-bands. They fluttered their feathers gently by moving their arms and legs and hips in slow, graceful undulations. Their costumes were carefully designed to leave their buttocks and genitals exposed; it was easy to see both boys gradually becoming erect, easy to watch their cocks wagging out longer and harder as they danced.

The music grew louder, faster, wilder. Each pair of dancers, moving in sync, glided past the mat for their bowl of psychedelic mushrooms. It was Mikki who picked up the bowl for himself and Hava. He caught Teddy's eye as he passed, then Cisco's, greeting them both with a bright, gleeful smile. Hava also smiled, but with a shy tilt of his head and bashfully downcast eyes. His long hair was shining like golden silk in the firelight.

Cisco nudged Teddy's arm. “They ain't gonna fuck each other, are they?” He was forced to yell over the tumult.

“I don't know,” Teddy yelled back, never taking his eyes from the dancers. “I guess we'll find out.” The firelight and music and scrumper were swirling him higher and higher. “I hope they do.”

“Huh?”

“I said I hope they *do* fuck each other!”

“That's sick, man.”

“They look utterly fierce,” Teddy shouted. He drained the last of his scrumper, then poked Cisco in the ribs and started laughing. “Mikki's wiener is even bigger than yours, I bet. It's really *huge!*”

The music wailed louder.

“Don't be so generic, man. You're talking like a queer.”

“I guess I *am* a queer,” Teddy laughed again.

Cisco started laughing too. “You're sick, absolute.”

“So is it bigger or not?”

“What?”

“Mikki's wiener! Is it bigger than yours?”

“Fuck no!”

“Prove it, bitch.”

They were laughing harder, punching and jabbing at each other between comments. “I ain't gonna

flash my dick for you or nobody else, asshole!"

"Look at Mikki and Hava," Topo pointed suddenly. "They be doin' the special part pretty soon."

The two boys were near the center of the clearing now, dancing more and more feverishly to the wild drums and pipes. Mikki, still holding the little bowl of mushrooms in one hand, was doing rapid pelvic thrusts as he whirled in the sand. Hava was moving more slowly, grinding and rolling his hips in syncopated rhythm to the music. They never took their eyes from each other, never stopped following each other's movements. The music continued to swell and race. Mikki whirled faster, then stopped suddenly and stood panting in the lunatic firelight - still doing his pelvic thrusts, but even harder now, getting closer and closer to orgasm. Hava circled him and waited.

"This is too weird," Cisco said as he watched.

Teddy just nodded.

The music soared higher.

Mikki closed his eyes and held the bowl in front of his erect penis. Still thrusting rapidly, he grimaced and stiffened and started ejaculating onto the mushrooms. Hava waited until his partner had milked himself dry, then began the final stage of his own routine. The trick (obvious by now) was to bring yourself to orgasm without using your hands. Hava's technique was subtler than Mikki's; he undulated his whole body in slow, shivery ripples, writhing his hips to focus his sexual energy. Mikki crouched in front of him with the bowl held ready. Hava started rubbing his own ass, still pumping and rolling his hips, drawing up his sap. The black and white feathers around his midsection fluttered in gentle rhythm to his movements. The entire crowd was watching him now; warriors were stomping and clapping and flinging cupfuls of scrumper in his direction, the ultimate gesture of admiration and respect. Cider rained over him as he pumped more vigorously. Mikki held the bowl closer. He and Hava were both wet and dripping. The music hit its frenzied climax. Hava bent his knees, arched his back, paused on the final note - then started spurting into the bowl, adding his own fresh, warm juices to the slimy stew inside.

Again the music started up. It was slower this time, a seductive interplay of drums and strings and pipes. The dancers circled their partners in a stylized mating ritual. Hava and Mikki glided around each other like sleek, strutting birds. It was time for them to reaffirm their friendship by feasting on each other's essence. Still dancing in gracefully languid circles, Mikki plucked one of the mushrooms from the bowl and held it out. It was slippery with cum. Hava circled closer, then opened his mouth and accepted his lover's offering. Next it was his turn to do the feeding. He took the bowl from Mikki and picked out the second mushroom. It too was coated with the glistening ooze of their mingled semen. He placed it gently into his lover's mouth. Mikki smiled eagerly as he chewed it and swallowed.

Cisco shook his head at this final display. "Utterly sick-out," he muttered.

Teddy looked at him quickly, as if startled from a dream. "It's the supremest fuckin' thing I ever saw." His underpants were sticking up at the crotch.

"Then you're sick, too."

"I think it be fun," Topo said. He glanced at Teddy's underpants. "You gonna jerk off now?"

Teddy looked down at himself and giggled. "Yeah, I guess I will."

"Do it now," Topo urged again.

Teddy put down his empty glass. "That sounds like... like a kick-ass fuckin' idea," he nodded. His words were clumsy and slurred. Cisco pushed himself unsteadily to his feet. "I ain't gonna sit here and watch you queerin' off," he mumbled.

Teddy removed his army shirt and tossed it in the air. "Yep, it's time to queer off," he yelled, laughing louder. The warriors close enough to hear him looked around and started watching. Cisco backed away. "You're bein' a sick-out, man."

“He just havin' fun,” Topo smiled. He put his hand on Teddy's bare shoulder. “Jerkin' off don't never hurt nobody.”

“Yep,” Teddy said, “that's utterly fuckin' right!”

The pipes and drums were still weaving their seductive melody. Mikki and Hava and the other dancers had already drifted off to spend the rest of the night in chosen places of seclusion, to share their visions and make love until dawn. “You gonna need a friend now,” Topo said to Cisco. “Everybody here got one 'cept you.”

“Forget that shit,” Cisco replied.

“Stay and watch us,” Teddy called out. “My underpants are comin' off next!” The warriors around him greeted this announcement with cheers and laughter.

“Sick, man.”

Teddy twisted around to look behind him. “I'm fuckin' sincere, Cisco, stay with us! I want you... I want you to stay. I want you here, absolute.”

“It's too weird,” Cisco yelled back. He turned away quickly and ran off.

The hut was empty when he got back - silent, dark. Mikki and Hava had apparently chosen some other hide-away for their special night together. Cisco crouched in the entrance, suddenly tempted to accept Teddy's invitation and return to the celebration. But he couldn't. It was too fucked up. He wasn't a fag-crim; he didn't want to sit around and beat off with other guys.

Feeling raw and exhausted, he crawled across the sandy floor and stretched out on his sleeping bag.

Too fucked up.

Outside, a warrior sat alone on the flood-wall, silently watching the hut. He had arrived in camp earlier in the day. His chest was crossed with bandoliers; a black machine pistol lay beside him on the concrete. As the music drifted to him from the beach, he stroked one hand lightly across his tattooed face.

And then he grinned. He knew that his prey was down in the midst of the celebration, feeling safe and smug. “Enjoy yourself,” he whispered into the darkness. “Enjoy yourself before you die.”

The music swelled louder.

Thirteen

It took two days for the warriors to recuperate from their equinox festival. The first day was gray and cool, perfect for huddling inside a warm, quiet hut with a special friend. The second day was a sunny return to spring. Fishing boats headed back out onto the lake; the camp once again became filled with noise and activity. Early in the morning, sentry patrols returned from their three days of wandering the outlying woods: it was customary for groups of warriors to take turns patrolling the miles and miles of lake front ghetto, each group staying out three days before coming in for relief. Today it was time for Mikki and his group to begin their three-day stint. Topo stayed behind to watch over the hut; the others started off after breakfast. Hava went south with Teddy; Mikki and Cisco headed west. Each boy carried a weapon, a sleeping bag, and a backpack stuffed with ammo and provisions and extra clothing.

It was Mikki's idea to split into two groups; a sentry patrol of four warriors would have been a waste of personnel. Sending Teddy and Cisco out on their own would have been equally unwise; they both needed someone to guide them over the unfamiliar terrain. Cisco protested at first, then gave in with a grumpy what-the-hell shrug and followed Mikki into the woods.

They walked in silence for almost an hour. Cisco watched for unusual landmarks as they went, trying to commit every detail to memory. Mikki observed him with a smile. "Already you make a good warrior," he said after a while.

"A good warrior how?"

Mikki touched his own eyes. "You see good." Then his ears. "And you listen good." Then he touched Cisco's arm. "And you got good muscles, too."

"You think so, sincere?"

Mikki nodded.

They climbed over the fallen trunk of an oak tree.

"I always wanted to be a soldier," Cisco said.

"A warrior," Mikki corrected. "The soldiers are pigs."

Even now, such a blatantly treasonous remark took Cisco by surprise. He had been taught, for fifteen years, that the only thing worse than a fag-crim was a traitor (though, of course, the two usually went together). Referring to soldiers as "pigs" was as weird and startling as grabbing another guy's dick. The boldness of it made Cisco laugh. For the first time, he thought that Mikki might actually be an OK guy.

"Yeah," he chuckled, "a warrior."

"It's funny, you think?"

"This whole fuckin' place is funny, man."

"But always you look not happy."

"Ain't much to be happy about," Cisco shrugged.

"You don't be happy with Teddy?"

Again Cisco shrugged.

"He looks like a good friend," Mikki said.

"Yeah, he's the supremest friend."

"Then you should love him more special."

Cisco pushed a low branch out of his way. He wanted to change the subject as quickly as possible. "So where are we goin', anyway?"

"We go all the way to the tunnels, then back again."

Cisco didn't know what the tunnels were, but he nodded anyway and kept walking.

They stopped about three hours later for a quick lunch of bread and jerky, then went on. Where the trees started giving way to ruined streets and buildings, Mikki slowed his pace and looked warily from side to side. Some distant sound had caught his attention. He took a few more steps, then stopped again.

A sudden breeze ruffled his green oilskin poncho. He switched on the power disc of his laser rifle. Cisco, not asking questions, clicked off the safety of his machine pistol. They stood side by side on the weedy path. The trees were behind them. Rows of abandoned, crumbling warehouses were on either side. Even Cisco could hear the sound now - coming from in front of them, getting closer, louder - recognizable suddenly as barking and braying.

"A big pack," Mikki decided.

"Wolves?"

"Wild dogs - maybe fifty or sixty."

"Holy fuck."

"In here," Mikki said, heading toward one of the warehouses. "Fast."

Cisco followed him into the maze of ruins. "Can they get in here?"

Mikki nodded. "They get in, no problem. Come on, up here."

The barking grew louder, more rabid.

The boys climbed the remnants of a concrete stairway - seven steps in the middle of a rock heap, seven steps ascending to nowhere, ending abruptly in mid-air. They stood together on the sixth step. The barking seemed to explode as the dogs rounded a nearby corner and came racing down the path. "They're hungry," Mikki said.

"No shit, man."

A dark shape came flying through one of the many openings in the outer wall. Two more followed, then four, then ten, then a dozen. The barking swelled to a vicious frenzy of yipping, howling, snarling. Mikki fired. There was a soft buzzing noise from his gun; a bright shaft of pink light sliced across the dim interior of the warehouse. The first dog skidded yelping into a pile of rubble, its head smoking from a direct laser hit. Mikki fired again. Another dog tumbled to the side. Then a third and a fourth. Still firing, Mikki jabbed Cisco in the ribs. "Shoot your fucking gun!"

Cisco obeyed with a short burst of fire. The noise and vibration of the machine pistol snapped him back to life. He fired another burst into the charging pack; four dogs flipped backwards in a mess of fur and blood. He laughed, fired again. Dogs were coming at them from three sides, leaping and snapping. A pair of fangs grabbed the bottom of Mikki's poncho and ripped away a strip of fabric. Mikki stumbled sideways, then caught his balance. The fangs snapped again. Mikki lowered his rifle and lasered a sizzling beam into the open jaws. Two more dogs leaped over their fallen pack-mates onto the bottom step. Cisco blew them off with a spray of bullets. He tried to squeeze off another volley, but the clip was empty. "Cover the steps," he shouted, grabbing for the extra clip in his sweatshirt. Mikki swept the bottom with his laser; another dog went down with its skull burned through. But the others kept coming, maddened by the smell of blood. Cisco jammed the new clip into his gun and sprayed the pack with short, deadly bursts. Four dogs crumpled on the left side of the stairs; five more went down on the right. Mikki kept the bottom step clear with steady pulses of laser fire. Finally, the dogs began to lose spirit. Half the pack lay slaughtered around the base of the concrete stairs. The other half advanced with low, desperate growls - cautious, fearful, driven by blood-lust and hunger. They stalked forward over the piles of dead bodies. Mikki jumped down two steps and let out a furious war-cry. The pack froze. He whooped again, then jumped down another two steps and opened fire. The dogs retreated before his scorching laser. Cisco climbed down beside him, also firing. And then it was over. The dogs turned and ran, beaten back by the onslaught of bullets and laser blasts.

The boys looked at each other in stunned silence, then started laughing. They put their arms around each other's shoulders and climbed down over the bloody carcasses. "Utterly kick-ass," Cisco said. "Absolute!"

"We done it good," Mikki nodded. He gave Cisco's cheek a quick kiss. "To me you're a strong friend."

Gently, Cisco pulled away and smiled at Mikki. "Sorry I almost fucked up at the beginning."

"How did you almost fuck up?"

"I sorta forgot to shoot," Cisco shrugged. "I guess maybe I got a little scared or somethin'. Sorry."

"Scared is nothing bad," Mikki said. "You done good anyway." He stepped closer and gave Cisco another kiss.

"You don't gotta keep doin' that, man."

"What?"

"Kissin' on me like that."

Mikki seemed genuinely confused. "All the warriors they kiss," he said. "Even before, on my island, the men they kiss together. How is it bad?"

"I ain't sayin' it's bad," Cisco said. "You just don't gotta do it, that's all."

“OK,” Mikki shrugged, “I don't do it.”

Back outside, they took a cautious look up and down the path. The dogs were gone. Mikki switched off the power disc of his rifle. “No more trouble,” he said, brushing the shaggy tendrils of black hair away from his face. “We should go.”

“Yeah, I'm ready.”

The boys took one more glance at the ruined warehouse behind them. “kick-ass,” Cisco said again.

“I think so,” Mikki agreed.

They looked at each other and grinned.

Fourteen

Teddy and Hava hiked south until they came to the old field house that served as a sentry station. Several tribes used the station as a place to eat and sleep and trade bits of news and information. There were already six other warriors inside when the boys arrived. Hava seemed to know them all. He contributed a recently killed rabbit to the communal pot, then took a seat on the floor among the older men. Teddy sat beside him.

They spent the rest of the evening eating stew and listening to the latest news from around the ghetto. One of the warriors reported rumors of an upcoming raid by Federation troops. The others treated the report as something of a joke, but the warrior wouldn't back down. “The source is a good 'un,” he said, packing marijuana into his pipe. To Teddy, he sounded like a hillbilly from an old vid show. “They's gettin' ready to move right now, and that ain't no fuckin' lie.”

“It doesn't make sense,” someone else said. “The Federation wouldn't send troops against us.”

The warrior paused to light his pipe. “It ain't the Federation, friend. It's a renegade group, out for some fun and games.”

“From where?”

“A juvie home.”

Teddy sat up more rigidly. “Which juvie home?”

The warrior blew out a thin stream of smoke. “And who might you be, little friend?”

“He's with me,” Hava said quietly. His hair was tied back in a long ponytail that hung past his shoulders. He was dressed in leather moccasins, pink corduroy shorts, a blue Marine Corps jacket with gold buttons and braids. “He's OK, don't worry.”

The warrior pointed at Teddy's red beret. “Where'd you get that fancy cap, boy?”

“It's mine... from before.”

“You was a cadet?”

“Yeah,” Teddy said, “at the Falwell Home.”

The warrior stared at him in sudden recognition. “Damnit, boy, it's *you* they's lookin' for!”

“The runaway cadet,” another warrior nodded. “That's who they're after,” a third one agreed.

Teddy got up quickly and hurried to the door, too upset to stay with the others. Hava followed him outside. The night air was damp and cool. Teddy shivered. He was wearing nothing but gym shoes and denim cut-offs with Mikki's green army shirt. He pulled the shirt more tightly around himself and hugged his arms across his chest. “What should I do, Hava?”

“What choice do you got?”

“Run farther north.”

“They'll follow you.”

“Or go back.”

“They'll kill you for sure.”

Teddy nodded. “Yeah, I know... but I can't fight 'em all by myself.”

“Not by yourself,” Hava said, putting his hand on Teddy's shoulder. “You got me and Mikki and Topo, and you got Cisco.”

“You'll help, sincere?”

Hava's teeth flashed white through the darkness. “Sure,” he smiled. “We don't like the Fed pigs comin' here.”

Teddy clasped Hava's hand. “Thanks, man.”

“A good fight is fun,” Hava shrugged, looking away shyly.

“The Feds are tough.”

“Us too.”

“No shit,” Teddy grinned. “The toughest, absolute.”

They clasped hands again, then went back inside.

The other warriors were still swapping stories around the stew pot. Teddy and Hava gathered their stuff and retired to a dark corner of the field house. They spread their sleeping bags on the dirty cement floor. “I wonder how many there are,” Teddy said softly.

“Fed troops?”

“Yeah.” He stretched out beside Hava, took off his beret. “Probably a lot, right?”

“Don't worry now,” Hava said. He already had his hash pipe out. He lit it, took a hit, passed it to Teddy. “We'll go back to camp tomorrow. Now just rest.”

Teddy took two deep drags on the pipe, passed it back. The hash hit him instantly, filling him with a dull, cottony warmth. “Just rest now,” he said to himself. He watched the light from the central fireplace jerking and dancing across the ceiling. “Like ghosts,” he murmured.

“Fire demons,” Hava murmured back. “Open your mouth, Teddy.”

“Huh?”

Hava leaned closer. “Open your mouth.” Drowsily, Teddy obeyed. Hava took a long hit on the pipe, put his lips against Teddy's and blew the smoke into his mouth. Teddy held the smoke in as long as he could, then laughed it back out. “That was chill,” he said. “Do it again.”

“Once more,” Hava nodded. He inhaled another mouthful, pressed his lips against Teddy's, then blew the smoke in and lifted his face away. “Good?”

“Extreme.”

“Mikki and me do it all the time.”

“I like Mikki,” Teddy said in a sleepy whisper, smoke still leaking from his lips. “I think he looks fierce - sort of like a... like a hawk.”

“He's a strong warrior.”

The boys were lying face to face in the dark corner, close enough to feel each other's breath as they whispered back and forth. “But you're a lot prettier,” Teddy smiled. “Your hair is the supremest. Can I touch it?”

“Sure,” Hava said. He untied his ponytail and let his hair fall free. Teddy combed through it with his fingers. It felt just as silky and soft as it looked. “It's really great.”

“I like yours better.”

“Mine?”

“It's nice and curly.”

“Go ahead,” Teddy said, “you can feel it if you want.”

Hava reached out and ran his fingers across the thick, feathery curls. Teddy was only the third boy he had ever touched. Mikki and Topo were the others. Hava had always kept to himself, too timid to mingle with the other warriors. It was Mikki's idea for them to participate in the special feeding ceremonies; Hava (with the help of plenty of scrumper and hash) always agreed to take part, but he never enjoyed being one of the dancers. He considered himself odd, almost freakish - a brown boy with straight yellow hair; he didn't like people looking at him or talking about him; he treated compliments with suspicion and impatience. But he didn't feel that way with Teddy. Somehow, Teddy was different, the only boy besides Mikki and Topo who made Hava feel comfortable and relaxed.

The hash was doing its job. Teddy was already asleep, snoring softly into Hava's face. His breath was oniony from the stew. Hava continued petting him, stroking his hair slowly, gently, lulling himself to sleep at the same time.

And then the door of the field house swung open. A lone warrior stepped inside. He paused near the entrance - a large man with beefy arms and shoulders. His chest was crossed with bandoliers; his heavily tattooed face glowed red and black in the firelight. Ignoring the other warriors, he headed quickly to one of the dark, private nooks along the back wall of the field house. He positioned himself across from the two boys. He set down his gun and gazed at the pair of sleeping, helpless bodies. Exterminating the cadet - right here, right now - would have been a simple task. But the Deacon wanted that pleasure for himself. Lazaro could do nothing but watch and wait - impatient for the smell of fresh blood.

Fifteen

Mikki and Cisco arrived at the tunnels shortly before midnight, still exhilarated from their victory over the wild dogs. The tunnels, once part of the subway system, were now used as shelters by the western vags. Mikki led Cisco past the first two tunnels to the third and largest one. A boy was sleeping outside the entrance, lying on the ground beside a pack of guard dogs. The sudden eruption of barking brought him hastily to his feet. He grabbed his gun and took a startled step backward. “What you guys doin' here?”

“Friends,” Mikki called out, “from the lake. I know Phoenix. This tunnel he lives.”

“Not no more,” the boy called back. His voice was young, still unchanged; his silhouetted form was small, thin. He might have been twelve, no older. “Phoenix moved north with Jimbo and Piper. So what you want, anyway?”

Mikki stepped closer. “On sentry patrol,” he said, “me and him,” pointing to Cisco. “Phoenix is my friend, I liked to see him.”

“He's gone,” the boy said again. He yelled at the dogs to shut up, then looked back at Mikki. “So just fuck off and leave me alone, OK?”

“Don't tell us to fuck off,” Cisco shouted at him. “We ain't done nothin' to you.”

“I'll blow your damn head off,” the boy snapped back.

“Dumb shit!”

Mikki started forward. He was in no mood for pointless squabbles. “Enough,” he said simply. He

strode toward the boy. "Put down your gun."

"Eat me!"

"Down," he ordered again, never breaking stride. He swatted aside the boy's gun and cuffed him lightly on the head. "Don't fuck with friends."

"You can't do..."

"You're new, I think."

"Yeah, sorta," the boy said. "So what?"

Cisco laughed as he came up behind Mikki. "That was fuckin' chill, no shit."

"New kids is stupid," Mikki said. "You gotta fight Fed pigs, not friends."

The boy shrugged and turned away. "I just wanna go back to sleep, that's all." He yelled once more at the noisy dogs, then sat next to a small camp fire and angrily tossed down his gun. "Everybody around here is fucked up." The light from the fire played across him. He was wearing a soiled blue uniform from a junior-high academy; his reddish brown hair was still fairly short, but dirty and uncombed. His face was pale, freckled, mousy. He hugged his knees to his chest and muttered at the flames.

Mikki sat beside him. "How long you live here?"

"I don't know. Maybe two weeks. I hate this fuckin' place."

"The tunnels is bad," Mikki nodded. "Dark, full of bugs, bad smells. By the lake is better."

Cisco crouched beside them. "So why does anybody live here?"

"Some warriors they think it's OK. They stay warm in winter. Phoenix he liked it pretty good."

"He's gone," the boy mumbled absently.

"No shit, genius," Cisco said. "You already told us that. What an utter..."

"Come on," Mikki interrupted, "no more of the fighting. We gotta sleep."

Cisco pointed at the dark entrance of the tunnel. "I ain't gonna go down *there*. That's for sure."

"I hate it down there," the new boy agreed, still mumbling dejectedly. "This place is shit."

"We all sleeping here," Mikki told them, "it's OK." He untied his sleeping bag and spread it on the ground, then looked at Cisco. "You sleep on here, too. Your bag we put on the top."

"Yeah," Cisco said, "I guess that's OK."

Mikki waved the new boy over. "Come on, you be with us."

"I don't need to be with nobody."

"Good," Cisco said, already crawling between the two sleeping bags, "more room for us, then."

Mikki took off his poncho. He was wearing his feathered jockstrap underneath. The damp, chilly air made him shiver. He crouched beside the bags and held the top one up for the new boy. "One last chance," he said. "Hurry up, get in."

The boy shrugged, then stood up slowly and came over. "It might be warmer," he admitted. "But I don't want nobody messin' with me." He crawled beside Cisco. "Everybody around here is a goddamn fairy."

"Don't worry," Cisco said, "I ain't no fairy. Just shut up and go to sleep, turd-face." He could hear Mikki settling down on the other side. The new boy, nestled between them, smelled as rank and sour as an unwashed dog. Cisco rolled away from him and closed his eyes. Exhaustion dragged him down quickly into a warm swirl of dreams. He was back in Teddy's basement. Rebecca, his girlfriend from the old neighborhood, was with him. They were lying together on a big, smelly pile of underwear. "It stinks," Cisco muttered. He was inside Rebecca, humping her slowly. The basement was dark and warm. Rebecca was singing "Barbary Sunrise" in a soft, sad voice. "I can't stay long," Cisco whispered into her ear. "Really, babe, I gotta go."

"I'll never see you again."

“You will, I promise.”

She was crying. Cisco wanted to cry too, but he couldn't, it would have been pussy - like a queer, he thought, but he knew that was somehow wrong. “You will,” he groaned again. They were on the beach now. There was music coming from behind them, a crazy uproar of vag drums and pipes. Cisco buried his face in the girl's hair, humped her faster. “Almost too late,” she said, but her voice was strange - husky, boyish. It was Teddy's voice. Cisco reared back. “You tricked me,” he said angrily.

“Almost too late.”

“I thought you was a chick.”

”We have to hurry.”

The dirty underwear smell was stronger. Cisco felt paralyzed, unable to pull away from the warm body beneath him.

“We have to hurry,” Teddy repeated.

“I ain't no fairy.”

Dancers were circling them rapidly, the music getting louder, wilder. Teddy grabbed Cisco in a desperate hug. “You gotta feed me now.”

“I can't.”

“Feed me, please.”

“I ain't no fairy,” Cisco shouted again.

“Feed me!”

The dancers moved closer.

“Feed me!”

Cisco struggled once more to free himself, then surrendered.

It was still dark when Cisco woke up. He looked around in a panic, totally disoriented. Someone was beside him. He touched the other boy's arm. “Teddy?”

“Huh?”

“What the fuck...”

“I'm Max,” the new boy said. He was sitting up, shivering violently. “I don't know any Teddy guy.”

Cisco pushed himself up onto his elbows. “Never mind, man.”

Mikki was also awake. “What trouble is it?” he asked groggily.

“Ask *him*,” Cisco said. “He's the one who's shakin' all over.”

“I can't help it,” Max shot back. “Just leave me alone, you jerk.”

Mikki sat up suddenly, roused by the feel of something cold and damp against his leg. “You pee your pants,” he said to Max.

“I couldn't help it!”

“Terrific,” Cisco muttered, sitting up straighter. “That's all we fuckin' need.”

Max put his head down and started crying - silently, his chin against his chest, a terrified little boy far from home, without friends, without hope. Cisco watched him for a moment, then poked him gently in the shoulder. “Hey, man, don't cry. Sincere. It ain't no big deal, really.”

“Yeah,” Mikki added, “no big deal. But being wet is no good. You shaking 'like a rabbit.”

“I'm OK,” Max mumbled, his head still down. “Leave me alone.”

Mikki, ignoring him, threw back the top sleeping bag and pulled the boy to his feet. “Take the pants off fast.”

“I'm not gonna take...”

“Fast,” Mikki ordered. “Don't be stupid all the time.”

Max was too cold and tired to keep arguing. He unfastened his blue trousers with shaky hands and pulled them off. Mikki was kneeling beside him, stoking the fire back to life. He took Max's pants and put them next to the flames, close enough to dry by morning. "Now the other," he said, holding out his hand. Max peeled off his soaked underpants and handed them over. His legs, bare between his shirttails and his black socks, looked skinny and white in the glow of the fire. Shivering more violently than ever, he scrambled back between the sleeping bags. Cisco rolled away from him quickly. "Smells like piss," he said quietly - too quietly for Max to hear.

Mikki grabbed a T-shirt from his backpack and rejoined the other boys between the sleeping bags. "Now you gotta get dry," he said to Max, already wiping him between the legs, using the T-shirt as a rag. Max shook his head in sudden panic. "Don't do that down there."

"It hurts?"

"No, but..."

"Then don't be stupid." Mikki finished wiping him and tossed aside the soggy T-shirt. "You like it a lot, I can feel." He knew that Max was skittish and fearful because of inexperience' a newcomer who needed a strong friend to love him and make him feel better. Being especially gentle, he unbuttoned the boy's shirt and ran his hand across the flat, hairless tummy. "It feels good to you, I know."

"It's a sin," Max murmured. "It's queer."

Mikki ran his hand lower. "Sin is bullshit. Queer is bullshit, too. There, you like this nice and good."

Cisco was listening to all this from the other side. He had his eyes shut, trying his best to ignore what was happening behind him. But sleep wouldn't come. There was a cold knot inside him, something strange and tight down deep in his gut. He could hear Max being kissed and caressed, breathing noisily as he became more and more excited. Mikki was whispering to him, telling him how nice he felt, encouraging him to relax and enjoy himself. And then the whispering stopped and Cisco could hear nothing but soft wet saliva sounds, the sounds of something being licked and sucked.

"I'm gonna take a walk," he said suddenly, already clambering to his feet. Never glancing back, he grabbed his gun and hurried off toward the ruins of a nearby church. The dogs barked and snarled at him as he passed.

Off by himself, he huddled against a pile of rubble that had once been an altar. In the moonlight, he could see graffiti painted everywhere around him: stars, crescents, zodiacal signs, phalluses. The drawings and scribbles reminded him of the graffiti beneath Sandburg Creek bridge - and that reminded him of Teddy. The cold knot in his stomach tightened even more. For the first time since October, he felt homesick and scared; he felt, in some strange way, that he was losing Teddy as his friend, losing him to Mikki and Hava and all the others. He felt alone.

The sun was already up when Cisco returned to the tunnel. Mikki and Max were seated near the entrance with a group of other warriors. Cisco joined them in time to hear a report about Federation troops preparing for a raid into the ghetto. The target of the raid, according to the sentry making the report, was a runaway Red Beret from the Falwell Home. Mikki and Cisco looked at each other in startled silence, then jumped up and began gathering their packs and sleeping bags. "We gotta warn Teddy," Cisco said, hastily rolling up his bag.

"Already he knows."

"Maybe not, man."

"He knows," Mikki said again. "Best thing is going back to camp."

"You think he'll be there?"

"Hope so."

They strapped on their gear and grabbed their weapons.

They were about to leave when Mikki suddenly remembered Max. The little boy was standing behind them, confused by the sudden turmoil. Mikki waved him forward. "You like to come?"

"With you guys?"

"Sure."

Max stepped closer. In the daylight, he looked like a walking scarecrow; his school uniform was ragged and dirty; his hair was sticking out like rusty straw. "Right now?"

Cisco was already sidling away. "Yeah, genius, let's go!" Mikki put his arm around Max's shoulders. "You like to come or not?"

"Can I stay with you?"

"I think so, sure."

"OK:, then, I'll come."

"Let's go," Cisco yelled to them, "we gotta get back!"

Mikki patted Max on the butt. "Come on, hurry now." For the first time, Max smiled.

Sixteen

"A good day to do battle," Deacon Thatcher smiled. He was standing with his cadets on the outer steps of the Home, inspecting the assembled troops. There were five trucks and two half-tracks waiting in the drive; a total of eighty-five soldiers were lined up in front of them - fifty regulars and thirty-five auxiliaries from the east-wing - more than enough to retrieve the Cameron mutt.

Deacon Thatcher, with a cadet supporting him on either side, advanced down the steps. With a flick of his hand he sent his troops scrambling into their vehicles. The Deacon himself climbed stiffly into a black armored car at the front of the column. Beside him, slumped comatose on the front seat, was Kelly. The Deacon glanced at him and smiled. "You'll be rejoining your young friend very shortly, little beast. And then I'll nail both of you up, I guarantee." He signaled the driver to proceed.

With a roar of engines, the column moved forward.

It was almost noon when the trucks arrived at the southern barricades. Deacon Thatcher waited inside his car as the obstacles were cleared away. Kelly never opened his eyes. Several days with the cadets had killed something inside him; his initial pain and terror had given way to a numb, empty stupor. He was dead inside, cold, far away - too far away to ever come back.

Again the column started forward. The Deacon stared impatiently from his window as the car bounced and lurched past the miles and miles of deserted ruins. The streets soon degenerated into weedy, rutted paths, slowing the pace of the column to a cautious crawl. Deacon Thatcher began to wonder about the reliability of Lazaro's directions; it seemed there must be a speedier, more direct route to the lake than this long northern loop around the wooded parkland. But he knew nothing about ghetto topography; he had to trust to Lazaro's expertise.

He glanced at his watch. The column had been traveling for almost three hours without encountering any signs of life - nothing but the endless ruins to the west, the woods to the east. At this maddeningly slow pace, it would take until dark to circumvent the miles of overgrown parkland and reach the lake.

And then, according to Lazaro's information, it would take another several miles of backtracking to reach Cameron's camp.

The Deacon was still calculating times and distances when the column was hit by its first ambush. Bullets rattled suddenly against the armor of the Deacon's car. A sonic grenade went off directly behind; the explosive percussion sent the car skidding to a sideways stop. The half-tracks began an immediate counterattack. Their turrets swung into action, blasting the trees with machine-gun fire, churning branches and bark into showers of splinters. Laser fire and two more sonic grenades came back from the woods. But the Fed vehicles were armored with super-dense alloy shields, strong enough to withstand anything but the largest photon or plasma weapons. A few more seconds of machine-gun fire from the half-tracks put a swift end to the ambush. Deacon Thatcher sent a squad of soldiers into the woods to check for enemy casualties. They returned quickly with three corpses, all of them blown open from the heavy-caliber machine-gun cartridges. Deacon Thatcher, still inside his armored car, nodded his approval, then gave orders for a display of trophies. Using their combat knives, the soldiers hacked off the heads of the dead warriors and planted them on wooden stakes along the side of the road. "The first three offerings," Deacon Thatcher smiled. "Our Lord is surely pleased."

The column moved on.

Every mile after that brought a fresh ambush - some little more than sniper attacks, others full-scale assaults involving dozens of warriors. One of the Fed trucks ended up badly damaged by a barrage of plasma darts; two soldiers were killed and four others injured. But the vags suffered much bloodier damage. The Fed column left behind dozens of heads as trophies. Vag warriors unlucky enough to be captured by the Deacon were tortured and mutilated before being killed; they died shrieking in agony, choking on their own bloody genitals.

By dark, and after nearly two dozen attacks, the column had finally reached the northern apogee of its route. An old dirt road ran directly east to the lake. From there, it was a drive of four or five miles back south to the mutt's hideout. And then the Deacon would have his revenge. Cameron would be back in custody by the following evening; if he tried to escape beforehand, he'd be assassinated by Lazaro. Either way, he stood no chance.

The Fed troops bivouacked for the night in a crumbling old school building. Deacon Thatcher set up his quarters in what had once been a classroom; desks and rusty filing cabinets were still visible beneath the overlying heaps of rubble and broken plaster. The Deacon surveyed the debris while his cadets set up electric lanterns and heaters and a cot shielded by portable bomb-screens. "Barbarians," he muttered. "No respect for property, no respect for authority." Kelly was beside him, chained to a bare heating pipe, huddled on the floor like a beaten dog. The collar of his chain was a loop of barbed wire. His neck was bleeding from dozens of nicks and punctures. The barbed collar was part of his penance, an instrument of pain reserved for the very worst sinners. Deacon Thatcher gave it a tug. "Does it hurt, little beast? Such a pity. But our Lord demands vengeance." He gave the chain another harder yank, drawing a weak groan from the boy, then strolled away into his bomb-roof shelter. His cadets positioned themselves around the cubicle in a tight, protective circle.

Outside Deacon Thatcher's quarters, the other troops were still settling in for the night, laughing and back-slapping after their victorious encounters against the vags. They were looking forward to the next day, when they could wipe out a whole camp of the queer bastards. A taste of blood had made them thirsty for more.

Not all the soldiers were inside the building. There were six sentries on patrol outside, plus two gunners in each of the half-tracks. The five trucks were parked safely against the building. Everything was secure, peaceful, quiet.

And then the vags struck - five hundred of them from an alliance of northern tribes. They rushed the building from all sides, howling and whooping and blasting away with their weapons. The six sentries were cut down instantly. Only the half-tracks saved the Feds from a massacre. Their machine guns slowed the on-rushing vags long enough for the troops inside to rally and begin a counter-fire. Tracer bullets and laser blasts flared back and forth through the darkness. The vags kept coming, wave after furious wave of them. One of their berserkers managed to fight his way through to the trucks; he planted a thirty-pound plasma bomb directly beneath one of the engine blocks before being shot down. Five seconds later the truck exploded in a ball of white-hot flame. The trucks next to it were blown onto their sides like battered toys. The front wall of the school was also blown down, crushing a dozen soldiers beneath an avalanche of rubble. The vags rushed forward with renewed fervor. But the half-tracks were too powerfully armed for them to overcome. The heavy machine guns blasted them back again and again. Over one hundred of them died before they finally pulled back, still lobbing grenades and firing plasma darts as they retreated.

The school building was nothing but smoking ruins by the end of the battle. Nearly thirty Fed soldiers had been killed or wounded. Two of the cadets were dead. Deacon Thatcher, safe in his bomb-shelter, waited until the fighting was over before coming out to inspect the damage. He found his troops shocked and demoralized; their recent back-slapping enthusiasm was gone, shattered by the terrible reality of vag ferociousness. But the Deacon didn't let them brood for long. He set them to work digging out equipment from the ruins, body-bagging corpses, upturning the two damaged trucks - more than enough work to keep them busy until morning.

In the meantime, the half-tracks remained poised for further action - just in case the vags decided to make a second attack. Satisfied that the situation was under control, Deacon Thatcher returned to his demolished quarters. The cadets were clearing away as much debris as possible. Kelly was still chained to the heating pipe; some falling rocks had opened a cut on his scalp, but otherwise he was unharmed. The Deacon stared at him for several pensive moments, then prodded him with his foot. "You may serve a valuable purpose yet, little beast. Extremely valuable."

Quickly, he ordered his senior cadet to bring him one of the wounded vags. (Fifteen had been taken prisoner; fourteen would be dead by morning, sliced to pieces by their Fed captors.) The cadet brought back a warrior who had been knocked out with a minor head wound. "Perfect," the Deacon said. He stepped closer to the vag. "God has smiled upon you, my friend. You won't be dying tonight."

The warrior, his face streaked with dried blood, stared in silent defiance.

"I'm sending you back to your comrades," the Deacon told him. "Take a message to them. Tell them that I have the runaway cadet's friend. There," he pointed, "his name is Kelly Dillon. If the runaway doesn't give himself up by sunset tomorrow, I'll put his friend's head on a stake. Take that news to your comrades, make sure it reaches the cadet. Do you understand?"

The warrior remained silent. Deacon Thatcher drew back his hand to slap him, then stopped. There was something dark and dangerous in the warrior's eyes, something that froze the Deacon's hand at his side. "Make sure the news reaches him," he said again, then turned away.

The warrior was taken out.

Deacon Thatcher retired to his private shelter, trying to ignore his growing anxiety. The battle with the vags had shaken his nerve. He realized, for the first time, what a fierce and formidable opponent he was facing. There was no way he could simply march down the lakefront and pluck the cadet from his camp. By morning, there would be thousands of vags ready to move against him. Already he had lost almost half his troops; one of his trucks had been destroyed, three others damaged. And getting to Cameron's camp was only part of the challenge; that accomplished, he still had to get *out* of the ghetto.

The Deacon shook his head. Impossible. In the end his troops would be overwhelmed by sheer numbers. Using the Dillon boy was his only hope. With luck, Cameron would give himself up to save his friend; he would call off his vag comrades; he would serve as the Deacon's passport back to safety.

If not, it would be up to Lazaro to strike him down. And then the Deacon would be on his own. It would be a simple battle for survival after that, a race to escape the ghetto before the vags could fully coordinate their forces.

The Deacon touched his throbbing head. The pain reminded him suddenly of his purpose: to bring a traitor back to justice. Even if he died in the process, his mission would remain a noble one. Feeling calmer, he knelt beside his cot and folded his hands in prayer. He asked God for strength in the coming struggle. His confidence came surging back as he prayed. All doubt vanished. He knew, with sudden certainty, that Jesus would work a miracle against the heathens. Faith would triumph over evil.

"Though I walk through the valley of death," the Deacon murmured, "I shall not fear."

Seventeen

Teddy and Hava got back to camp shortly before midnight. They went immediately to the Chief's concrete bunker. He was conferring with a group of his most trusted warriors, finalizing plans for the next day's battle. An alliance of lake tribes had already been forged. At dawn, over a thousand warriors would be converging two miles to the north, where the largest tribe had its camp - and where two plasma canons were waiting to blast the Fed vehicles into vapor.

The warriors fell silent as soon as Teddy and Hava came in. The Chief waved them forward. He smiled at Teddy. "We've been waiting for you, darlin'."

"What's happening? Is it bad?"

"There's been a good deal of excitement, my dear. You seem to be a very precious item, much in demand." The Chief paused to light one of his opium-laced cheroots. He was resting, as usual, on his dilapidated old couch. "The Feds have had an extremely busy day. They're about seven miles away at the moment - licking their wounds, poor things."

The other warriors looked at one another and laughed. Teddy forced a smile, but he felt as confused and anxious as ever. "You mean they got beat, or what?"

"Their posteriors were royally kicked," the Chief nodded. "We'll be disposing of the leftovers tomorrow. Sort of a breakfast tidbit, one might say."

"How many warriors killed?" Hava asked.

"Too many," one of the men grumbled. "We've been fat and lazy too long."

"Our losses were high," the Chief agreed. He blew two perfect smoke rings above his head, then shrugged. "Too many young warriors trying to be heroes, showing off for their lovers. I've seen it before. They're fine boys, but foolish."

Teddy shook his head slowly. "It's all my fault. They got killed 'cause of me."

"Don't be melodramatic, my dear, Every man in this room has a price on his head. Fed posses come after us now and then. It's all part of the game."

"I told him that before," Hava said, "but he don't listen."

"I should've killed the Deacon when I had the chance," Teddy mumbled. "It's my fault."

The Chief blew another ring of smoke. "I do believe you need some sleep, my dear. You're not thinking very clearly." He put down his cheroot, then got off the couch and walked over to Teddy, moving slowly, calmly, as wiry as an old tomcat. His slippers shushed against the concrete floor. He took the boy's head between both hands and stared into his eyes. "You're a beautiful young buck, no argument about it. But you're green and dreadfully naive. Try to relax now, release your guilt." Still staring him in the eyes, he massaged the boy's temples. "A warrior must never waste his energy on self-pity."

Teddy could feel. His tension and fear slipping away. The Chief's hands were strong, warm. They seemed to scramble something inside Teddy's head, making him forget why he was afraid. "I'm tired," he said softly.

The Chief nodded. "You feel better now," he smiled. His voice sounded fuzzy and far away. "Go back to your hut, my dear, Be happy with your friends."

Teddy turned silently and headed for the door. He didn't even notice Hava beside him until they were both outside. The fresh air snapped him back to life. He felt suddenly alert and strong. He looked at Hava with a baffled grin. "I can't figure out why, but I feel better."

"The Chief is a strong sorcerer."

"A sorcerer? You mean like a magician?"

"A little bit," Hava said, sounding vaguely distracted. He glanced toward the distant flood wall, then at Teddy. "He doesn't do tricks and things, but he has power. He can get inside people and change them."

"Like a psychic?"

"I don't know that word," Hava shrugged. "He can make people see things and think things and feel things. And he can go places without his body."

"Weird."

"He's a strong sorcerer," Hava said again, taking another glance toward the flood wall. "Come on, let's hurry up now."

"Why, what's wrong?"

"I'll tell you in a minute."

They rushed back to the hut. Cisco was waiting outside, sitting cross-legged in the sand. He jumped up as soon as he saw Teddy. "You're back! Shit, man, where you been?"

"We got here as fast as we could," Teddy said. "It was a long walk."

Cisco almost hugged him before catching himself and forcing back his excitement. "We got back a couple of hours ago - me and Mikki and some new kid named Max. They're sleeping inside."

"You know about the Deacon?"

"Yeah," Cisco said, "of course we know! That's why we came back early." He looked at Hava, who was gazing silently toward the flood wall. "What's your problem, man?"

Hava crouched near the entrance of the hut and waved the other boys down beside him. "Somebody followed us since yesterday," he said quietly. "I wasn't sure at first, but now I am. Over there," he nodded, "by the wall."

"I never saw anybody," Teddy whispered. "You sure?"

"I'm sure, yes. He followed us everywhere."

"For what?"

"Probably to kill you," Hava said. "The Feds, they send their assassins here all the time to kill their enemies."

Cisco whistled softly between his teeth. "That's extreme shit, man." He peered across the beach. There were three small camp fires near the flood wall. "Which one is he?"

“There, on the left.”

Teddy clicked off the safety of his machine pistol. “So we have to kill him, right?”

“But we don't know for sure,” Hava said. “We can't kill a warrior only because he follows us. Maybe he's an assassin, maybe not.”

“So how do we find out?”

Hava looked away, trying to come up with a plan. “We gotta be close to him,” he said. “We gotta talk to him.”

“Yeah?”

“But we can't have our guns. The assassins are like the sorcerers. They have special powers, they know special things.” He paused again, then nodded. “If I talk to him long enough, I can know... so we gotta go with no guns, like three friends crazy on the hashish, laughing a lot, being hot together.”

“Wait a minute,” Cisco interrupted. “Why do we gotta get queer with each other?”

“You don't know the assassins,” Hava snapped, obviously impatient with the other boy, “so you talk stupid, and that gets you killed. Don't come if you can't be one of us.”

“Fuck you, man!”

“Stop it,” Teddy said. “We've got too much to do for this kind of bullshit. If Cisco doesn't want to come, then we'll do it alone.”

“OK,” Hava said, “no more fighting.” He pushed back his Marine Corps jacket to check the knife on his hip. “I can use this if he's an assassin... but you gotta use only your hands, Teddy. That would be better. He'll be watching you with all his power. If you have a weapon, he's gonna know.”

“All right, whatever you say.”

Hava pulled out his hash pipe. “We'll smoke one bowl now, for better luck.” He lit it, took the first hit, then held it out to Cisco. “Do you come or not?”

Cisco reached for the pipe. “I'll do it for Ted, yeah. Anyway, I wanna see what this fucker looks like.”

“If he's an assassin,” Hava said, “we'll know it fast.”

Lazaro tossed another twig onto the fire. It was a calm, mild night; the fire was a small one, just big enough to chase away the dampness. The flames gave Lazaro's tattooed face the look of a painted war mask - eerie, lifeless, inhuman. His eyes were fixed unblinking on the three boys approaching from across the beach. His machine pistol was on his lap, its safety off, ready to fire.

The boys were laughing as they approached. They sounded drunk or stoned. The one called Hava was making the most noise, calling out for someone, anyone, to give him more hashish. He stopped at a nearby camp fire to ask for some there, then moved on, stumbling foolishly through the sand with his two companions.

Lazaro took a dagger from his belt and planted it in the sand near his right hip. His eyes never moved.

The three boys stopped in front of him. Hava was in the middle. He flashed a friendly grin and held out his empty pipe. “You have any hashish, brother?”

Lazaro shook his head slowly.

Hava knew better. No assassin would be without hashish. He decided on a bluff. “I saw you before smoking some, brother. Give me just a little, for me and my friends.” He put his arms around Teddy and Cisco, kissed them both on the cheek. “We want to make better sex with the hash.”

Lazaro stared silently. He looked like a seated Goliath in the firelight, a huge man with bulging weight-lifter muscles beneath his camouflage fatigues. Getting nervous, Hava grabbed his own crotch and stepped closer. “Please, brother, just a little. My cock is already hard.”

Lazaro still made no response.

That's when Cisco stepped forward and jabbed Hava's arm. "This fucker ain't chill," he snarled, pointing at Lazaro. "He's like some kinda hairball dummy, man!"

The other boys froze. Lazaro stared at them for another moment, then nodded slowly. "All right," he rumbled, "sit down, smoke some, then go." He was watching Cisco with special interest. There was something like amusement in his eyes. He pulled a foil packet from his shirt pocket and filled Hava's pipe with three pellets of hashish. The boys sat beside him - Hava on the left, Teddy and Cisco on the right. They lit up and started passing the pipe.

"It's a nice night for making sex," Hava remarked. He gave the other boys a subtle glance. Teddy picked up the signal and leaned against Cisco. He started singing "Barbary Sunrise" in a loud, raucous voice. Cisco joined in. He put his arm around Teddy and started rocking him from side to side like a boozy barroom crooner, both of them laughing at their own sloppy, off-key renditions.

Lazaro accepted the pipe from Hava, took a hit, passed it to Teddy. He seemed barely aware of the boys; his eyes were distant, cold, focused inward. Teddy knew something was wrong; he could feel the giant warrior's power touching him, probing him. Quickly, he stopped singing and told Cisco to open his mouth.

"For what, man?"

"Just do it," he said. Cisco obeyed. Teddy took a long drag off the pipe and blew the smoke into Cisco's mouth. Hava laughed at them from the other side of the fire. Cisco reared back in surprise, then blew the smoke out and started laughing along with Hava. "You almost choked me, man! Jesus Christ!"

"You loved it," Teddy said.

"Bitch!"

"Jag - off!"

All three of them were laughing now. Teddy grabbed Cisco and wrestled him onto his back. The warrior's power was fading. Teddy could feel it growing weaker, slipping away. He started kissing Cisco - all over his face, his neck, his mouth - grinding against him, crotch against crotch. Cisco, playing along, slipped his hand into the back of Teddy's denim shorts. Both boys were kissing now, using tongues, licking inside each other's mouths. They were no longer playacting. Their excitement was hot and real - hot enough to totally block Lazaro's power, like static wiping out a radio signal.

Seizing the moment, Hava slipped the knife from beneath his jacket and shoved it into the warrior's ribcage. "Now!" he yelled, grabbing for the machine pistol. But Lazaro was too strong. He cuffed Hava aside with one huge hand. The other boys jumped up. As Lazaro raised the machine pistol, Teddy smashed it with a sharp kick, cracking its barrel. Lazaro threw it to the ground. His expression never wavered. He grabbed his dagger from the sand and sprang to his feet. Contemptuously, he yanked Hava's knife from his ribcage and flung it aside. His camouflage shirt was dark and wet around the wound. Hava, again, came after him. Lazaro slashed him across the chest, then knocked him backwards into the sand with a powerful punch. Teddy and Cisco were next. Lazaro stepped forward to finish them. Cisco grabbed a handful of sand and threw it into the warrior's eyes. At the same time, Teddy landed a spin kick to his gut, then another. Lazaro stumbled backward. Cisco came at him with another kick. The warrior blocked it, then sent Cisco flying to the sand with a cobra-quick jab. He turned toward Teddy. For the first time, he allowed himself the luxury of a grin. He put the dagger back into his belt and moved forward.

Teddy held his ground. He was tired of running from his enemies. He thought of his mother, of Richard, of his long months of degradation at the Home. Anger and hatred boiled up suddenly to replace his fear. He glared at the giant assassin and started circling slowly, his fists up, moving lightly on his

toes. Lazaro swung a foot at his head. Teddy dodged it easily. He danced in closer and jabbed the side of his foot against Lazaro's knee. The warrior grunted, staggered back a step, managed to block Teddy's next kick. The boy faked a retreat, then darted forward again and slammed his foot between Lazaro's legs. With another sharp grunt, the warrior reeled away. He recovered his breath and his balance in time to fend off another of the boy's cat-like attacks.

They faced each other once more. Lazaro pulled the dagger back out of his belt. He realized now that the boy was an expert in hand-to-hand combat, much more highly skilled than the average Red Beret. Exterminating him would take a bit of effort.

Teddy was looking around frantically for Hava's knife, but the beach was too dark. In desperation, he rushed the assassin and aimed a flying kick at his midsection. Missing that, he tried a spin kick, then a roundhouse. Lazaro dodged and blocked them all, then retaliated with a stunning flurry of kicks that sent the boy tumbling to the sand. Teddy tried to ward him off, but the man was too big, too strong. He kept coming at Teddy, pounding him back, almost toying with him now, totally in control.

Behind Lazaro, Cisco managed to rise to his knees. Groggily, he felt Hava's knife beneath his hand and picked it up. The assassin was about half-a-dozen paces away, bearing down on Teddy. Cisco shook himself alert, looked at the knife in his hand. He had to use it. Now. Just like the old days, just like throwing his pocketknife into the tree stump by the railroad tracks. Easy. No problem. He took the blade between his thumb and forefinger and flexed his wrist, measuring the distance, taking aim. Lazaro, still having his fun, knocked Teddy down a final time, then drew back his dagger for the kill. Cisco cocked his arm, let the knife fly. It buried itself in the base of Lazaro's skull, clean to the handle. The assassin collapsed silently to his knees. His massive body swayed there as if in prayer, then crumpled against the sand. Dead.

Hava was sprawled unconscious near the camp fire. His chest was smeared sticky with blood. Teddy and Cisco, both of them hobbling from their own bruises and sprains, carried him quickly back to the hut and roused Mikki from inside. A moment later they were all carrying Hava to the concrete bunker. The Chief was there, still awake, meditating serenely on his couch. As soon as the boys entered, he hopped up and took charge.

Hava was put on a cot near the central fireplace. The deep gash across his chest was cleaned and stitched and wrapped in linen bandages. The chief did it all himself, murmuring intently the whole time - strange words that sounded like nursery-rhyme gibberish to Teddy and Cisco. "Words of power," Mikki explained quietly, "to make Hava more strong."

Teddy nodded vaguely. "Is he gonna be OK?"

"I think maybe yes," Mikki said. "The Chief can make things good."

The old man was still hovering over Hava, adjusting the linen bandages and murmuring special charms. Cisco leaned closer to Mikki. "Wouldn't a real doctor be better, man? I mean, this stuff is..."

"Doctors is for the Feds," Mikki interrupted, "not for us." He sat on the floor and crossed his legs. "Here I'm waiting tonight."

The Chief finished his work and came over to the boys. He exchanged a few words with Mikki, then turned toward Teddy and Cisco. "Are you all right, my dears?"

"Yeah," Teddy said, "we're OK - just a little beat up, is all."

"I think perhaps you should tell me the whole gruesome tale, my boy."

Teddy happily obliged. The Chief listened carefully, then patted both boys on the cheek. "You did well, I see. I'm quite amazed you're not dead - all three of you. Now... go back to your hut and get some rest. The sun will be up in about three hours."

“What about the body... on the beach?”

The Chief put up his hand. “Leave it be, my dear! Even a dead assassin can be dangerous. Their spirits are remarkably potent. We'll dispose of him tomorrow, I assure you.”

He ushered the boys to the door. “Now get some rest,” he said again. “Völmikki and I will look after Menhava, don't worry.”

Teddy and Cisco thanked him for his help, then went back to the hut. Inside, Topo and Max were still sleeping comfortably. “That's the new kid,” Cisco whispered, pointing from the entrance. “He's a real weird-out, absolute.”

“It's too warm in here,” Teddy said suddenly. He ducked past Cisco and went back outside. His legs were sore and shaky. He sat down in the sand and took several deep breaths to calm his nerves. Cisco followed him out and sat beside him. “You OK, Ted?”

“I guess so. What about you?”

“Never better, man. Can you believe we really *killed* that fucker?”

“He was the biggest guy I ever saw.”

“No shit, absolute - like a giant or somethin'. But we took him out, all the fuckin' way.”

They could still see Lazaro's fire flickering across the beach. Teddy shook his head. “I don't think I can sleep tonight. Not after all that.”

“Me neither, man. I wish we had some scrumper or hash or somethin' like that.”

“I know - but we don't”

“I need somethin' to chill me out,” Cisco grumbled. “I'm tight all over.” He looked at Teddy and laughed nervously. “That was funny before.”

“What was?”

“Before, when we was actin' queer with each other.”

“It worked,” Teddy shrugged. He leaned back against the wall of the hut, wincing as he lowered himself into place. “You even had a hard-on. I could feel it”

Cisco laughed again. “Yeah, I guess I did. It's weird, but I still feel horny.”

“Go use your trusty friend,” Teddy chuckled, holding up his right hand. “I won't watch.”

Cisco paused, said, “You had a hard-on, too.” He nudged the other boy's crotch. “You was diggin' it for real, man.”

“Yeah,” Teddy nodded, “it was extreme. I liked it.”

“Sincere?”

“Yeah, of course.”

Teddy pulled off his beret and rolled onto his stomach.

“Go ahead and feel me again, like before.”

“Are you for real?”

“Yeah, I want you to.”

Cisco, still chuckling nervously, slid his hand into the back of Teddy's shorts. “I feel stupid,” he mumbled. “What should I do now?”

Teddy reached beneath himself and unfastened the button and zipper of his fly. “Just rub my butt, that's all.”

“You want your pants off?”

“Yeah - and my shoes, too.”

Cisco tugged off the ratty old sneakers. “Where'd you find these things?”

“They were with Mikki and Hava's stuff.”

“These shorts, too?”

“Yeah,” Teddy said, lifting his hips, “they're Hava's, I think.”

Cisco pulled them off, dropped them to the sand. Teddy was still covered to mid-thigh by his long army shirt. He wasn't wearing any underpants. Cisco flipped up the shirttail and started petting his bare bottom. “Is this OK, man?”

“Supreme,” Teddy sighed. “Feels great.”

Cisco shook his head and smiled. “I can't believe I'm doin' this.” He ran his hand up beneath Teddy's shirt, then all the way back down over his ass, his thighs, his calves - carefully feeling every inch of him, fascinated by the lean curves of his body - not better than a girl's body, just different. It was sort of nice being able to feel all the hard, strong muscles; sort of nice being able to see and feel the hair on his legs.

“This is utterly weird, absolute.”

Teddy glanced back over his shoulder. “Hey, Cisco... do you think we can beat the Deacon tomorrow?”

“Sure, man, we'll kick his fuckin' ass! Why? You scared?”

“A little bit, I guess.”

“Don't worry too much,” Cisco said, “it'll be OK.” He was still running his hand up and down Teddy's legs. “Ain't you cold, man?”

“No, not at all. This sand is nice and warm. I don't even need this shirt on, really.” Moving slowly and stiffly, Teddy sat up and took off the army shirt, then stretched out naked on his back. He grinned up at Cisco. “Look at my royal hard - on.”

“This is queer, man, no shit.”

“Queer is all right here.”

“Anyway... you're all messy with sand,” Cisco said. He brushed off Teddy's legs, then his chest and stomach. “And your dick too,” he added quickly.

“Wipe it off for me.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, do it.”

Cisco used two fingers to brush the powdery sand from Teddy's penis and scrotum. “OK,” he said softly, “it's clean now.”

“Keep going,” Teddy urged. “Go ahead and jack me off.”

“No - you do it. I'll just watch.”

Teddy hesitated, then nodded and started masturbating for his friend. It felt good. His days at the Home no longer threatened him or interfered with his pleasure. He put one hand behind his head to make himself more comfortable. He wanted to take his time and enjoy himself. Performing for another boy made it even more fun. He glanced at Cisco. “You still feel horny?”

Cisco shrugged, not sure what to do or say. Teddy reached out with his free hand and pinched him between the legs. “What's this thing?”

“Fuck you,” Cisco smiled. “Quit playin' with my dick.”

“You dig it, punk.”

“Go to hell.”

“You afraid to let me see it?”

“It's bigger than *your* little wienie.”

“So bring it out.”

“What a queer-boy,” Cisco laughed. He yanked off his sweatshirt and tossed it aside. “There. Now you can see my royal bod.” He readjusted his crooked headband.

Teddy, still fondling himself lazily, pulled down the zipper of Cisco's jeans. “These next. Come on,

let's see your big old thing.”

“This is gettin' too weird, man.”

“Chicken-shit!”

“Bitch!”

Ignoring his sprains and bruises, Teddy pushed himself up and grabbed Cisco. They fell together onto the sand, both of them cursing and laughing and grappling for position. Teddy ended up on top. Cisco stopped struggling. They looked at each other and laughed once more. Teddy went to work quickly. He pulled off Cisco's shoes, socks, jeans, underpants, then paused to take a look. Cisco's erection was curved back like a cocoa banana against his belly - thick and long and bone-hard. His ball-sac was swollen fat and tight. Hungrily, Teddy climbed on top of him. They started humping each other like a pair of randy pups, letting their cocks and nuts rub together, giving each other a rough, hot pubic massage. Teddy could already feel his stuff on its way up, about to shoot out. Just a few more thrusts were all he needed - and then he was doing it, squirting warm and slippery onto Cisco's stomach.

He was still leaking a few last drops when Cisco grabbed his shoulders and urged him down. Teddy eagerly cooperated. He nestled between Cisco's wide-open legs and started working on his first blowjob, not quite sure how to proceed. The first thing he tasted was his own stray semen. But the taste and smell of Cisco's sweaty, unwashed penis was even stronger. Teddy could get only the first few inches of it into his mouth. He worked his tongue around the big knob, licking beneath the dirty uncut foreskin, lathering it with spit. He had one hand between Cisco's legs, groping inside the crack. He started pushing his middle finger into the fuzzy asshole, a little at a time, wriggling it up and in until he could feel the mucousy slickness of the rectal chute. Cisco's hips stiffened; his back arched. Teddy sucked harder, then nearly choked on the sudden warm gush of his friend's load. Some of it drooled onto his chin before he could recover and start swallowing. A final spurt hit the back of his tongue. It was tart, sharp, like a mouthful of stale walnuts.

He kept sucking on the penis until it went soft and floppy in his mouth. Cisco stayed on his back for another few moments, then quickly wiped Teddy's jizz from his stomach and started to get dressed. Teddy also started cleaning himself off, using the army shirt as a rag. “You look like you're mad,” he said after an uncomfortable silence.

“No,” Cisco mumbled back, “I ain't mad.” He zipped and buttoned his jeans. “Just don't tell nobody, that's all.”

“Don't be stupid,” Teddy said. “Who am I gonna tell?”

Cisco pulled on his sweatshirt, straightened his headband. “I'm serious, man! Don't tell nobody what we done here.”

“You still think it's wrong?”

“I ain't sayin' it's right or wrong or anything else - just don't never talk about it again.”

“OK, I won't, don't worry.”

“Good,” Cisco said, tying his shoes. He glanced at Teddy. “But I ain't pissed off, man. Sincere I ain't.”

They were sitting side by side against the hut. Teddy started untangling his shirt. “So are we still best friends?”

“Yeah, man, the supremest.” Cisco looked away with a sudden uneasy frown. “But what about Mikki and Hava? Ain't they your best friends now?”

“No way,” Teddy said, “not even close!”

“Seemed like maybe they were.”

“That's stupid, Cisco, really.”

“I guess so.”

“I'll always like you the supremest, absolute.”

“OK,” Cisco nodded, “that's chill, man.”

They clasped hands to seal their allegiance.

Teddy, finally succumbing to exhaustion, rubbed his eyes and yawned. “Maybe I'll sleep now for a couple of hours,” he said. “I feel pretty beat.” He started to put on his shirt. Cisco stopped him by grabbing his arm. He was looking at Teddy with a strangely sheepish grin. “I think you oughta leave it off,” he said. “Just sleep raw like that.”

“Why?”

“It's warm enough, ain't it?”

“Yeah, but..

“Maybe I just wanna watch you,” Cisco mumbled impatiently. “Don't make no big deal about it.”

“OK,” Teddy smiled. He put his shirt down. “I just didn't think you...”

“We ain't gonna talk about it, remember?”

“Yeah, no problem.”

Teddy curled nude against the warm sand, lying on his side, facing Cisco. He closed his eyes, then murmured, “It's OK for us to love each other here. Sincere it is.”

Cisco didn't answer. He sat staring at his friend, watching him sink into a deep, peaceful slumber. After a safe interval, he nudged Teddy gently onto his back, careful not to wake him. Teddy made a soft mewling noise and curled his hands into tight fists beneath his chin. Cisco spent the next hour gazing at him, no longer even trying to analyze or understand his feelings. He knew the ghetto was making him crazy and queer, that's all; he didn't want to speculate any farther than that.

Teddy's eyelids started fluttering. He must have been having a dream. He rolled his head to the side and whimpered. Cisco reached out and touched his hair. Teddy whimpered again. “Don't worry,” Cisco said, petting him cautiously, timidly. “We'll be OK. Sincere we will.”

Eighteen

Shortly before dawn, news of the Dillon boy reached the camp. Mikki ran back to the hut to tell Teddy and Cisco. He was surprised to find them outside on the sand. Teddy was sleeping naked, stretched out on his back with one knee bent to the side. Mikki paused to admire him. His body was perfect, even slimmer and prettier than Hava's, something delicious to be touched and tasted and savored. “Beautiful and strong,” Mikki smiled, crouching next to Cisco. “You think the same, I can see.”

“Never mind what I think,” Cisco muttered. “How's Hava doin'?”

“He sleeps too, like Teddy. His wound is bad, but he don't die.

“That's good news, man.”

“Other news too,” Mikki said. “A boy called Kelly Dillon, he's with the Feds. Like a prisoner. How do you say it?”

“A hostage?”

Mikki nodded, then went on to give Cisco the rest of the report. “If Teddy don't go,” he concluded, “the Feds they kill his friend. By sunset is the time they say.”

Cisco shook his head, let out a long, exasperated breath.

“This shit is startin' to piss me off, man. That Deacon guy is a fuckin' pig.”

“I think we tell Teddy now.”

“No,” Cisco said quickly. He took Mikki's arm and led him away from the hut. “We can't tell him. Not yet. You don't know Ted like I do, man. He'd try to give himself up to save that stupid Dillon kid. That's just the way he is.”

“Tell the Chief,” Mikki shrugged, “not me. Come on, let's go.”

“In a minute, man. Go on, I'll catch up.”

Cisco jogged back to the hut. He grabbed Teddy's army shirt and threw it over him. Teddy rolled away onto his side and clutched the shirt for warmth. “Ain't nobody gonna hurt you,” Cisco whispered, then turned away quickly and hurried after Mikki.

Warriors were beginning to gather around the bunker when the boys arrived. Inside, the Chief was sipping coffee with his companions. He smiled when he saw Cisco. “You're very prompt, darlin'. Would you like some coffee?”

“No, thanks, I don't drink that stuff.”

“Where's young Teddy, my dear?”

“He's asleep,” Cisco said. “I didn't wanna wake him up. He needs some rest.”

The Chief paused for a sip. “That's sweet of you, lad, but I think young Teddy should know about his friend.”

“He can't know till later,” Cisco replied quickly. He stepped closer to the couch. “He can't know till after I leave.”

Mikki shook his head. “What do you talk about?”

“I have an idea for cleanin' up this whole fuckin' mess,” Cisco said, looking from Mikki back to the Chief. “But if Ted finds out now, he'll try to stop me, I know. So let him sleep, tell him later.”

The Chief, grinning slightly, sat up on the edge of his couch. “I'm intrigued, my dear. I see power in your eyes. Tell us about this mysterious plan of yours.”

“I ain't got it all worked out yet, not exactly.”

“Just give us the essentials, darlin'. Perhaps we can help with the rest.”

“First thing I gotta know is the assassin's name.”

“Simple enough,” the Chief said. “I've already taken a look at the body. His name was Lazaro, my dear, a warrior of quite exceptional talents.”

“And I'll need his dagger.”

“More and more intriguing,” the Chief smiled. “Go on, lad, tell us more.”

Cisco paused to arrange his thoughts, then continued.

Deacon Thatcher took another glance up the dirt road, then returned impatiently to his quarters. The ruined school building had been cleared of rubble and fortified with laser shields and heavy machine guns. The surviving troops were huddled behind the walls - exhausted, nervous, jumpy. It was already mid-afternoon, only three hours before sundown, and still there had been no response from the vags. Any hope for the runaway's return was growing more and more bleak.

The Deacon strolled across the debris-strewn classroom and nudged Kelly with his foot. The boy flinched. He seemed barely alive now. His face was thin, yellow, waxy. “Three more hours,” the Deacon told him, “and then I'll have the pleasure of taking your head.” The boy didn't move.

Deacon Thatcher stepped away, started pacing around the room. Three more hours. If the Cameron mutt didn't give himself up by then, it would be Lazaro's job to cut him down. The Deacon was clinging

to that prospect as his one consolation. He had little or no hope of escaping the ghetto without Cameron as a hostage; but the certainty of Cameron's death was a comfort, even so. Of course there was also the comfort of the Lord's presence; a successful escape might still be possible with His help. There was no greater ally than Jesus.

A sudden stir of voices caught the Deacon's attention. He crossed quickly to the door. Outside, a young Mexican boy was arguing with the cadets. He was dirty and wild-looking, wearing nothing but a jockstrap and moccasins and a camouflage vest. His hair was shaved off on the sides, leaving a short, bristly Mohawk down the middle. A typical vag savage.

All argument stopped as soon as the Deacon appeared. The vag boy stepped toward him. "I got a message from Lazaro," he announced, "so call off your fuckin' punks, man!"

The Deacon was startled by the boy's insolence. He waved his cadets back. One of them held out a machine pistol and a dagger. "He was carrying these weapons when we found him, your Eminence."

Deacon Thatcher took the dagger in his hand and inspected it quickly. It was Lazaro's. He looked at the boy. "Why did Lazaro give this to you? Where is he now?"

"I ain't saying nothin' with all these fuckers around," the boy muttered.

"Quite right," the Deacon smiled. He slipped the dagger into his belt. "Come with me." He ushered the boy into his quarters, then faced him impatiently. "Now give me some answers, you impudent beast!"

He pulled his pistol from its holster and held it against the boy's head. "Begin with your name. Quickly!"

"Cisco," the boy said, glaring unafraid into the Deacon's eyes.

"And your last name?"

"Last names is for Feds, not us."

"Typical," the Deacon sneered. He lowered the pistol and backed away. "Now let's hear your report."

"The runaway is hidin' out in the tunnels with a bunch of his friends," Cisco began. "Lazaro followed him there."

Deacon Thatcher shook his head. "What are these tunnels? Where are they?"

"About an hour away, back the way you came. The western tribes live there."

"I didn't see any tunnels, boy! What kind of nonsense is this?"

Cisco glanced at Kelly chained in the corner, then back at the Deacon. "They're a few hundred yards off the road, man. Don't get all jacked up about it."

The Deacon ran his finger slowly up and down the barrel of his pistol. "I still don't understand why Lazaro would send you here. He has his orders. Why would he be sending messages with a filthy mongrel like you?"

"Listen, man, do you want the runaway alive or 'not?'"

"Of course I do!"

"Then go get him. Lazaro says he can kill the little fairy, but there ain't no way he can grab him alive, not without help. There's too many warriors around him."

"What about the other tribes? Where are they? Why haven't they attacked us yet?"

"That's the best part," Cisco grinned. "They're all waitin' for you on the lake. There ain't no more than about two dozen warriors left at the tunnels. If you take off now, man, you can grab your fuckin' cadet and get clear by morning, no shit."

Deacon Thatcher almost smiled. His prayers were being answered. A miracle was happening. But he couldn't quite dispel his suspicions. He lifted his pistol and pointed it between the boy's eyes. "Why should I believe you? Why shouldn't I execute you right now as a spy?"

Cisco pointed to the dagger in Deacon Thatcher's belt.

“How do you think I got Lazaro's knife, man? I'm his friend, he gave it to me.”

The boy was right, of course. There was no other way he could have gotten the dagger. Lazaro was the fiercest and strongest of all the assassins. His immense physical and psychic powers made him virtually invincible. The Deacon lowered his pistol. “You're an insufferable young wretch,” he said, “but apparently you're telling the truth. Now... what exactly does Lazaro advise?”

“He says you gotta get to the tunnels as fast as you can. He says if you don't move fast, man, you're gonna lose everything.”

“Only two dozen vags there?”

“About that,” Cisco shrugged. He casually scratched himself between the legs. “You can wipe 'em out in a few seconds, then grab your fuckin' Red Beret and take off. But you gotta move right now, man, sincere.”

Deacon Thatcher called to his cadets and issued orders for an immediate pull-out. He kept two cadets behind to guard Cisco. They handcuffed him to Kelly for extra security. “Put them both in my car,” the Deacon commanded. He gave Cisco a last, cold stare. “If anything goes wrong, my insolent friend, I'll put a bullet in your brain. If not, then I'll return you to Lazaro - with my gratitude.”

Cisco pointed a thumb at Kelly, who was propped against him like an upright corpse. “What about this kid?”

“He's none of your concern.”

“He ain't hardly alive, man.”

“On the contrary,” Deacon Thatcher chuckled, “you've just given him a new life, my friend.”

“You ain't gonna kill him tonight?”

“I'd prefer to execute him with his companion. A fitting end for a pair of traitors.” The Deacon signaled his cadets. “Now take these two out,” he snapped. “We're wasting precious time.”

The mobilization went quickly. An hour after Cisco's arrival, the Fed column was retracing its route south, moving at top speed along the same rutted, grassy road. The Deacon's armored car was at the front, followed by the four remaining trucks and the two half-tracks. Cisco was in the back seat of the car, staring at the Deacon's bald scalp, trying to keep himself calm. Kelly was huddled against him. Even in his current stupor, the little boy seemed to recognize the friendly warmth and safety of the body beside him.

Cisco glanced out the window. There were dozens of heads planted on stakes along the side of the road, some of them already chewed clean by wild dogs. Cisco watched them until he could no longer suppress his nausea, then looked away.

It was almost dark when the column finally reached its destination. Deacon Thatcher looked back at Cisco. “Is this the spot?”

Cisco peered carefully out the window. “Yeah,” he nodded, “this is it, man. The tunnels is over there,” and he pointed southwest, “about ten minutes away.”

“Through the ruins?”

“Yeah, man, through there.”

“Perfect,” the Deacon smiled. “A twilight raid, in and out swiftly, then back to the city. The Lord is surely with us.”

He quickly assembled a commando squad of thirty soldiers. Proceeding on foot was the only possible tactic, due both to the terrain and to the need for silence and surprise. His cadets and officers urged him to stay behind, but the Deacon ignored them. He could feel a surge of divine strength within him; he could feel himself filling with light, with power. The Lord wanted him to command this holy

crusade against the heathens. It was his duty, his obligation - his privilege. "No one can deprive me of this pleasure," he smiled. "The mutt is mine, he belongs to me." He pulled his pistol from its holster. "I intend to drag him back myself."

Cisco was beside him, his hands cuffed behind his back. "I wish you'd take these fuckin' things off me," he grumbled. "Lazaro ain't gonna like it."

Deacon Thatcher slapped him. "I'm tired of your arrogance and your filthy mouth," he said angrily. "Can't you sense the Lord's presence, you pitiful beast? Can't you feel His power?"

"Sure, man, whatever."

"But of course you're a racial degenerate," the Deacon recalled. "Your blood is unclean. You can't possibly appreciate the wonder of pure, Christian passion. It's foreign to your nature."

Cisco responded with an indifferent shrug, then glanced toward the ruins. "It's gonna be dark in a few minutes, man."

"Does the darkness frighten you, my friend?"

"Shit, no, but..."

"Good," the Deacon interrupted, nudging the boy with his pistol, "then move. Lead us to Cameron's hideout. We'll do the rest. And please," he added with a smile, "don't make me kill you."

Moving silently and swiftly, the Fed squad headed into the maze of ruins.

Kelly was left behind in the armored car. A soldier stood guard on the road. The rest of the troops remained in their trucks and half-tracks, ready to race for freedom as soon as the Deacon returned with his prisoner.

From the darkening ruins, a lone figure suddenly appeared. It was one of the Red Berets, apparently hurrying back with some sort of message from the Deacon. The soldier guarding the car took an uncertain step forward. There was something unusual about the cadet's uniform; it looked dirty, ragged. The guard advanced another step. "You're back too soon," he said. "What happened?"

"Bad news," the cadet answered, only a few feet away now.

"What's wrong?"

The cadet grinned. "I'm the fuckin' runaway," he said, "and you're dead." He stuck a knife up under the soldier's sternum and into his heart, then pushed him backwards against the car, careful to keep him upright in case someone was watching. With his free hand he quickly opened the back door of the car and pushed the dead soldier inside. Kelly was slumped against the opposite door. Teddy shook him by the knee, but there was no response. The little boy was letting himself die. He was hardly breathing now.

"Hang on," Teddy murmured, "just a little bit longer." He grabbed the keys from the soldier's pocket and climbed into the front seat. He had never driven before, but he knew the procedure: put the key in, start the engine, set the automatic transmission, press down the accelerator. The car lurched forward. Teddy gunned it faster. He didn't have to get very far. A few hundred yards would be enough.

The driver of the truck behind him sat up in sudden confusion, startled by the sight of the command car driving away into the darkness. That wasn't part of the Deacon's plan. Something was wrong. The driver looked in his rear view mirror; none of the other vehicles was moving. More confused than ever, he started the engine of his truck.

But it was already too late. Teddy, safely away from the column, jammed on the brakes and grabbed a small radio device from the pocket of his leather jacket. He pressed the button. The Fed vehicles disappeared in an eruption of mushrooming white flames, vaporized by a dozen plasma bombs planted in the road beneath them. The force of the explosion slammed the armored car forward, knocking Teddy against the steering wheel. He kept his head down for the next several moments, letting the light and heat subside before glancing back at Kelly. "Don't worry," he said, "it's almost over now." He patted the little

boy's knee, then jumped from the car and headed sprinting for the tunnels.

In the ruins, the Fed troops were just beginning to pick themselves off the ground, stunned by the explosion behind them. Deacon Thatcher grabbed Cisco by his camouflage vest and held the pistol against his throat. "More treachery," he hissed. "I'm surrounded by sinners and traitors!"

"You callin' Lazaro a traitor, man?"

"Sinners and traitors," the Deacon repeated, ignoring Cisco's question. "All of you, every single one - all the same!"

Cisco tried not to move. The pistol was pressed cold beneath his chin. "But it ain't my fault," he mumbled. "It's the fuckin' vags, man. They tricked us."

Light from the plasma cloud was glowing across them like stark blue neon. There was a hot, sulfurous odor on the breeze. The Fed troops were huddled nearby, watching the Deacon with wide, panicky stares. He gave the boy's head a sudden blow with his pistol. "Take me to Lazaro, you filthy mongrel! Where is he?"

"There," Cisco pointed, his head bleeding, "just past that old church."

Deacon Thatcher struck him once more, then started dragging him forward, still clutching him by the vest. The troops followed them like a pack of frightened hounds - stumbling through the ruins, clambering over the scattered heaps of rubble, terrified.

They were in sight of the tunnels when the pale blue light suddenly exploded in a brilliant white flash. Showers of sparks sizzled from the sky. The soldiers managed to stand their ground for only a few moments - and then they broke and ran, scattered in every direction by the scorching plasma fall-out. Even the cadets bolted. Deacon Thatcher fired after them with his pistol, cursing them for their cowardice as they disappeared into the ruins. "This is devil's work," he screamed, still holding Cisco. The blue and white sparks showered against them like hot sleet. "Evil tricks, illusions!"

"A simple harnessing of plasmatic energy," someone replied. "Not devil's work at all."

Deacon Thatcher wheeled swiftly. A tall, thin figure was standing behind him. It was an old man, his body surrounded by a brilliant red light. "You've done a great deal of damage here," the old man said. "Frankly, Deacon, we're tired of your little games." As he spoke, the plasma storm burned itself out, leaving behind a residue of ash that glowed like snow in the moonlight "It's time for you to leave."

The Deacon shook his head slowly. "Demons," he muttered. "There's nothing but evil here."

The old man strode forward. He was wearing a turban and a long tartan-plaid robe. "Time for you to leave," he said again. There were six other figures behind him, each of them as radiant as a laser flash. The Deacon pushed the barrel of his pistol into Cisco's mouth. "I'll kill this mongrel if you come any closer," he shouted. The old man stopped. Deacon Thatcher raised his head and laughed. "So that's it, then! A spy after all. And Lazaro is dead, no doubt." He pushed the barrel deeper into Cisco's mouth. The boy gagged on the oily metal. He was on his knees, still handcuffed and helpless, his arms and legs blistered from the plasma storm. Deacon Thatcher gave the barrel another shove. "I'd enjoy killing him," he shouted at the silent, impassive figure. "Come closer, watch him die!"

He never once looked behind him - never saw Teddy stalking toward him, moving barefoot through the soft ashes. "Where's your power now, you devils? Why don't you save your filthy little friend?"

Stalking closer, closer.

"Pathetic savages," the Deacon chuckled. "Helpless in the face of the Lord." And then he stiffened. His smile vanished. Something flashed inside him. "Cameron," is all he managed to say before Teddy's foot slammed against the side of his head. Cisco yanked himself backward. The pistol discharged harmlessly into the ground. Teddy knocked it flying with his second kick. He was paying it all back now - for Richard, for his mother, for Kelly - for himself. He advanced coldly, efficiently, pummeling the

Deacon with his feet and his fists, crippling him with powerful blows to the gut, the groin, the knees. He pounded him down, smashed his nose with one expert jab, cracked his collarbone with another. The Deacon ended up crumpled on the ground, staring up at Teddy, grinning at him with broken, bloody teeth. "A savage like all the others," he laughed, flecks of red saliva spraying from his lips. "Nothing but a dirty little mutt!"

"And you're a fuckin' maniac," Teddy muttered. He snapped his foot into the Deacon's face, shattering the cheekbone. He positioned himself for a lethal kick to the throat. The Deacon managed one more smug, crooked grin. "I forgive you," he said, his tongue thick and slushy with blood.

Teddy slowly lowered his foot, stepped back. "You can't forgive me," he said softly. "I won't let you."

Deacon Thatcher tried to raise his head. "Filthy sodomite," he snarled. More blood sprayed from his mouth. "Finish your job!"

Teddy didn't answer. He backed away another few steps and crouched next to Cisco. Hundreds of warriors were visible now around the clearing, all of them watching silently as the seven sorcerers stepped forward and surrounded the Deacon. He glared at them with bruised, puffy eyes. "So you're going to finish the coward's job," he mumbled, hardly able to work his swollen jaws. "Seven brave executioners."

The Chief, flanked by his six companions, laughed gently. "We're not executioners, Deacon. We don't employ your brand of ritual murder here. We fight and kill to defend ourselves - but never for power, and never for sport."

Suddenly the Deacon became aware of a strange, terrible energy crackling around him. For the first time, he actually felt afraid. Something was fighting to overwhelm him, to destroy him. He struggled to sit up, but his injuries were too severe. "You're working some sort of spell," he screamed. "What are you doing to me?"

"Your assassin is returning," the Chief said, pointing to the dagger in Deacon Thatcher's belt. "Your own negative energy is summoning him - not ours."

The dagger started to glow, burning hotter and hotter against the Deacon's stomach. He raised his hand to the sorcerers. "I command you to stop this witchcraft! In the name of Jesus Christ, I command it!"

"Time for you to leave, Deacon."

The sorcerers joined hands around him, uniting their strength against the eruption of evil power, confining it within their circle of light. Teddy, his arm around Cisco, never quite understood what happened next. As the Deacon howled and thrashed, something emerged from the dagger and spread across him, something dark and shapeless, like a shroud of black gauze. There was a sudden reek of death, a stench as pungent as rotten cabbage simmering in the sun. The dark spirit of Lazaro burrowed into the Deacon and started gobbling him from the inside, tearing him apart. His body churned like a sack full of piranhas; his face shriveled and collapsed into his hollowed-out skull, his brains already eaten away. Invisible claws shredded his uniform, ripped his boots, splintered his bones. A moment later, there was nothing left of him but a few bits of meat and gristle and hair, scattered like the bloody scraps on a butcher shop floor.

The Deacon was gone.

Only Lazaro's dagger remained.

The sorcerers backed away. Their job was finished. The Chief took a few moments to let his power stabilize, then hurried over to Teddy and Cisco. "How are you, my dears?"

"Sore," Teddy murmured, still staring at the Deacon's gristly remains. "But Cisco's hurt worse than I

am.”

“Plasma burns,” the Chief nodded. He helped the boys to their feet. “Not too serious, I hope.”

“I’ll be OK,” Cisco told him. “It ain’t no big deal.”

The Chief looked at Teddy. “And how’s your other friend?”

“He needs help. I think maybe he’s dying.”

“Oh, terrific,” Cisco muttered, “after all we...”

“No time to waste,” the Chief interrupted. “We’ll do our best to help him.”

Teddy pointed to the dagger. “But what about that thing?” “Our brothers will dispose of it,” the Chief explained, busy fiddling with Cisco’s handcuffs. He managed, somehow, to spring the mechanism. “Now, my dear, let’s go help your friend.”

Quickly, they headed for the road.

Nineteen

For several days, Cisco stayed in the bunker with Kelly and Hava, recuperating from his plasma burns. He was already a hero around the ghetto. It was his plan, and his bravery, that had led to the total defeat of the Feds. Both he and Teddy were respected as berserkers after that, warriors of proven fierceness and courage.

After the first week, Cisco was well enough to return to the hut with Teddy and Mikki and the other boys. Hava rejoined them a day later. But Kelly stayed behind in the bunker, still under the Chief’s care. He had no visible injuries or wounds; the cuts on his neck had already healed; but several days of anal rape had left him torn and ruptured inside. Something else inside him had also been broken, something that no potions or herbs could mend. Not even the arts of a sorcerer could repair the damage within him.

“A stronger boy might have pulled himself through,” the Chief explained to Teddy. “But his spirit was weak from the start, I’m afraid.”

They were standing together beside Kelly’s cot, watching helplessly as he slipped away. “You’re right,” Teddy nodded, “he was always like that - sort of scared and mixed up, like a little lost kid.”

“I’m sorry, my dear.”

Teddy looked at the Chief with a sad smile. “You’ve been real nice,” he said. “You did everything you could.” He knelt beside the cot and touched Kelly’s hand. It was thin and cold. “He just wanted to stay at the Home, that’s all. He never wanted to run away.”

“But it was his decision to go back,” the Chief said. “He could’ve stayed here, he’d have been safe.”

“He was afraid,” Teddy replied softly, still petting Kelly’s hand. “He was always afraid.”

“Blame the Feds, my dear - not yourself.”

Teddy remained there for the rest of the day. Shortly before sundown, Kelly finally stopped breathing. Teddy stayed with him even then, holding on to his icy hand, staring at him. He still couldn’t shake his feelings of guilt, regret, frustration; if he had killed Deacon Thatcher at the Home, on the day of the escape, Kelly would still have been alive. From the very start, way back in November, Teddy knew he should have done more, he should have fought harder. If he had escaped then - instead of waiting, instead of becoming a cadet and allowing himself to be brainwashed - he might even have managed to save his mother and Richard. But now it was too late.

Or maybe not.

Teddy realized suddenly that he had to leave the ghetto; he realized that he had to make his way out west to the Correctional Camps, no matter how difficult or dangerous the journey. Until he knew for sure what had happened to his mother and Richard, he could never rest. Maybe one of them had managed to survive; maybe even both. If so, then Teddy had to find them and rescue them - and he had to do it now. The hope was a faint one, of course; Teddy realized that he was probably being foolish; but he had to try.

Kelly's body was cremated the following day. A warm April breeze blew the dark smoke out over the lake. Out of respect for Teddy and Cisco, hundreds of warriors attended the ceremony, all of them dressed in their most flamboyant apparel. Vag funerals were more festive than mournful; they were joyous farewell celebrations fueled by plenty of food and scrumper and hashish.

By evening, the festivities were starting to wind down. Teddy and Cisco were stretched out on the sand near the smoldering pyre, watching the smoke drift away on the breeze. Cisco, already a little drunk, took another gulp of scrumper. "It's weird," he said, "burnin' somebody up like that."

"I think it's a good way to go."

"Better than being buried, I guess."

"No doubt."

Cisco wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his sweatshirt. "Makes me mad, though."

"What does?"

"Just think about it, man. We busted our asses to rescue him, and then he goes and dies anyway. It don't seem fair."

"That's stupid," Teddy said, shaking his head. "You must be drunk."

"Suck my dick, man."

"Later, asshole."

They looked at each other and grinned.

Topo and Max suddenly ran past, their feet kicking up plumes of sand. They were both naked. (It hadn't taken long for Max to start discarding his clothing - his shoes and his shirt one day, his trousers the next, his underwear after that. He no longer felt bashful or self-conscious about showing himself off. It had seemed sort of queer and stupid at first, but now he liked it. Going around naked was fun, especially when the older guys whistled at him and patted his behind. They always teased him affectionately about his pale skin and about the freckles on his butt. Like Topo, he was still just an immature pup, a preadolescent twelve-year-old waiting for his first trace of pubic hair and his first ejaculation. He was still too young to enjoy the special status and prestige of a full-fledged warrior. But Max didn't mind. He could still drink and smoke and do whatever else he wanted with the other little boys, and he kept plenty busy goofing around with Topo all day. He also shared Topo's sleeping area, which gave them ample time to play with each other's peters whenever they felt horny. Every night, Max hoped that Mikki might join them - and do that special thing with his mouth one more time. But Mikki was always too busy in the bunker, helping the Chief with Hava and Cisco. That's when Max started noticing Teddy, off by himself on the other side of the hut, alone in his sleeping bag; that's when he started wondering if Teddy could do the same special things as Mikki. But he never asked, and he never said a word to Topo about his secret thoughts. Messing around with another kid was weird enough; talking about it would have been utterly sissy - out of the question.

At midnight, when the moon was high in the sky, Kelly's ashes were taken out onto the lake and scattered. And then it was over. Cisco and Teddy and the other boys wandered back to their hut for a few final pipes of hash. They sat together outside the entrance. After the first bowl, Teddy revealed his plans for leaving the ghetto and traveling west. No one seemed very surprised. Cisco, for one, greeted the

announcement with outright elation. "This is extreme," he said. "When are we leavin', man?"

"You gonna come with me?"

"Yeah, of course! It'll be kick-ass, man, no shit." "Tomorrow, then - first thing. You feel strong enough?"

"Fuckin' right I do!"

Mikki took a hit off the pipe, then passed it to Hava. "We going to miss you for sure."

"Yeah," Hava agreed, "a lot."

Topo took the pipe next. "Why you be leavin' so fast, Teddy?"

Mikki reached over and poked the little boy's arm. "Teddy don't gotta say no more to you, Topo. Tomorrow he goes, that's all."

Max leaned forward excitedly. "You'll be going to real cities and stuff! And eating at McDonald's and places like that?"

"Yeah," Teddy smiled, "as long as our money lasts. We got a little over two hundred bucks."

"Can I come with you?"

Teddy wasn't sure how to respond. "We hardly know each other," he shrugged. "And it might be dangerous, too."

"I don't care," Max said. "It'll be great havin' real food and stuff. Can I come?"

Teddy shrugged again. "If you want to, yeah. It's up to you, I guess."

"All fuckin' right!"

"Terrific," Cisco muttered. "That's all we need is some stupid little kid."

"I ain't no little kid," Max replied angrily. "I can take care of myself."

"I hope so, man, no shit."

They all smoked one more bowl, then drifted inside to their separate sleeping areas. Cisco was already dozing off when a hand nudged him back awake. He blinked sleepily and looked around.

"What's wrong, man?"

Teddy was up on one elbow, facing him. "I never really thanked you for... for everything - last week, I mean."

"No problem," Cisco murmured. "You did OK yourself, man."

"We both did pretty decent," Teddy nodded. He was silent for a moment, then cleared his throat nervously. "I was really worried about you last week - when you were hurt."

"It wasn't so bad."

There was another silence. The boys were staring at each other, both of them waiting for the same thing. Teddy made the first move. "It's OK," he whispered, unfastening his denim shorts, "nobody can see us."

"You sure, man?"

"Yeah - they're all asleep."

Cisco hesitated another moment, then pulled off his sweatshirt. "But we gotta be super quiet."

Teddy nodded. He slipped the shorts over his feet, tossed them aside. "Don't worry about it."

"I can't help it, man - it makes me nervous."

"Come on, take off your pants."

"Yeah, OK, hold on."

Teddy, already undressed, waited for Cisco to finish, then scooted against him. "You've got a lot of hair around your dick," he whispered. "More than on your head." He brushed his fingers across Cisco's bristly Mohawk. They were lying face to face, crotch to crotch. "It's still soft."

"Huh?"

“Your dick,” Teddy said, “it's still soft.” He started moving his hips, rubbing against Cisco. “But it's so fuckin' *big*, even now.” Cisco shook his head and laughed. His breath was strong with scrumper, like bruised apples. Teddy rubbed a little faster. “There, now it's getting hard.”

“Fuckin' right.”

“Getting huge.”

“Feels pretty fierce.”

“Big old donkey-dick.”

Cisco laughed again. “So whose dick is bigger?... mine or Mikki's.”

“Probably yours, I guess.”

“Fuckin' right it is!”

“Too bad we'll miss the next feeding ceremony,” Teddy whispered. “You won't get to show it off.”

“Shit, man, that ain't my style.”

“Too many guys watching?”

“Way too many guys, for sure.”

Teddy ran his hand over Cisco's ass. “Nobody's watching now,” he smiled. “Right?”

“Yeah,” Cisco said, “right.” He looked around once more to make sure. There were feelings inside him that he didn't like, things he wanted to do now with Teddy that embarrassed him. This was more than just fooling around; this was different from the last time when Teddy did all the work, different from just lying back for a quick blowjob. Cisco wanted to do things with Teddy that made him feel nervous and uncomfortable inside. But it was dark in the hut, and everybody else was asleep; no one could see them; no one would ever know. “So what should we do, man?”

“We should feed each other,” Teddy whispered back. “Don't worry, I won't ever tell anybody.”

“I ain't worried.”

“...because we're friends.”

“I know,” Cisco nodded, “the supremest.”

Teddy pushed himself around the other way. He settled into a comfortable “69” position for their private ceremony, then went to work with his tongue, nice and slow and easy. Cisco didn't move. He stared at Teddy's erect penis in front of his face, so close he could smell it. The odor was strong and spermy, just like any other kid's smelly, unwashed dick - but for some reason, the dirty smell seemed special now, exciting, even sexy. Cisco liked it; he wanted more. Queer or not, he actually wanted to suck on Teddy's hard-on; he actually wanted to make it cum in his mouth - just this one time, just to see how it felt and how it tasted.

No one would ever know.

Next morning, Teddy and Cisco went to the bunker to say goodbye to the Chief. He gave them each some extra money and some spare clips of ammo for their machine pistols. As a farewell token, he also gave Teddy a small green stone on a silver chain. Teddy slipped it around his neck. “It's like a good-luck charm, right?”

“You could call it that,” the Chief smiled, watching the boys from his couch. “Let's just hope you won't need it.” He lit one of his green cheroots, then appraised Teddy with a keener gaze. “You know, dear boy, I do believe the stone likes you.”

“How can a stone...?”

“It's a bit difficult to explain,” the Chief laughed. “I'm afraid you wouldn't understand at the moment.” He paused for a puff of sweet-smelling smoke. “But you have special power, I can see that clearly enough - power to master the Old Secrets.”

"I still don't really understand," Teddy said.

The Chief set aside his cheroot and stood up. "Don't worry about it now, darlin'. We'll discuss it some other time - after you've come back to us."

"I'm not so sure I'll be back."

"You will," the Chief said. "Someday we'll meet again."

He gave both boys a final hug. "Be strong, my dears - and fight well."

The boys thanked him once more, then headed back to the hut.

Max was waiting for them outside. Like Teddy and Cisco, he was dressed in an old pair of jeans and a sweatshirt – an outfit that would arouse no suspicions outside the ghetto.

Remaining inconspicuous was essential from now on. Teddy already had his red beret stashed in his backpack; the machine pistols were also packed away. Cisco, in order to hide his Mohawk, was wearing a backwards baseball cap. They were ready to go.

"Come on," Max shouted, "it's gettin' late!"

"I'm sick of that kid already," Cisco muttered.

"He seems OK," Teddy shrugged. "He's just not a warrior yet, that's all."

Cisco replied with a dubious grunt.

Mikki, who was down by the water preparing his fishing lines, came jogging back to the hut when he saw the other boys. "Now you leave, I guess."

"Yeah," Teddy said, "we're leaving right away."

Mikki stepped closer, touched the green stone around Teddy's neck. "The Chief he gives this to you?"

"It's for good luck," Teddy nodded.

"It has power in it, for sure. Keep it with you."

"I will," Teddy said, "don't worry." He slipped it under his sweatshirt for safekeeping. Mikki leaned forward and gave him a kiss, then turned toward Cisco. "Every day after this I'm thinking about you and Teddy," he smiled. "You're good warriors and strong friends."

"You're OK too, man," Cisco said. "Sincere." He put his arms around Mikki in a brief embrace, then turned away quickly to hide his embarrassment. As he was picking up his pack and his sleeping bag, Hava and Topo came out of the hut. Topo was nude, as always - but Hava looked like a different boy. He was wearing a pink T-shirt and a pair of green camouflage pants; his hair had been clipped short - a hasty job done crudely with a pair of old shears, sort of a Dutch-boy cut with shaggy, uneven bangs. He was carrying a backpack in one hand, a sleeping bag in the other. He looked at Teddy with a nervous grin. "I think I'm going too - if it's OK."

"Are you serious?"

"If it's OK, yeah."

"Sure it's OK," Teddy said. "But I thought... I thought you liked it here."

"Time for something different," Hava replied. "But what about you and...?"

"It's OK," Mikki cut in. "Me and Hava we say goodbye last night. He likes to go, so it's OK. I know we see each other again."

Teddy looked from Hava to Max to Cisco, all of them holding their gear, waiting to leave. "Listen, you guys, this isn't going to be an easy trip. I mean, it might even be really dangerous. Some of us might get hurt."

There was a long silence. And then Cisco stepped forward. "It don't matter," he said. "We're warriors. We're comin' with you." Max and Hava nodded. Teddy was their leader now, their new chief. They were eager to follow him.

"All right," he told them, "let's go."

They shouldered their packs and started across the beach. “Come back real fast,” Topo yelled after them. We be waitin' right here, for good and true!”

Teddy looked over his shoulder. Topo was standing beside Mikki. They were waving. For a moment, Teddy almost lost his nerve. The task in front of him seemed impossible. But he kept going, forcing himself along step by step. He raised his hand in a final salute, then turned away.

The morning sun was warm against his back.