

The Fire Next Time

by [Karen Winter and Sylvia Stevens](#)

Dedicated to Nan Mack. She kept clapping her hands until we came back to life.

CHAPTER ONE

He'd thought Snake Plissken would be taller. The battered, unconscious figure on the bed looked nothing like the menacing outlaw on the Police Channel broadcasts, or the romantic desperado with the sexy sneer and arrogant swagger who led off each week on the Public Enemies List on America's Most Immoral. For as long as Rain could remember, Plissken had been the brilliant criminal who successfully thumbed his nose at the USPF. His colorful hairsbreadth escapes and daring criminal career had brought excitement and a thrill of vicarious fear into the drab living rooms of Middle America. Rain recalled the endlessly repeated grainy clip from the security cameras at the Denver Federal Reserve Depository, and the more recent footage from Plissken's trial. Snake had stared out at the news cameras with contemptuous unconcern, steadily refusing to respond to the prosecution's accusations and questions. For long periods while the anchors rehashed and rehashed, Rain had turned off the sound and watched the man on trial. Plissken set himself, with unwavering defiance, against the entire mechanism of the State and faced it down, and his conviction was more a victory than a defeat for him and his legions of covert supporters.

Rain shook his head, remembering the filthy, disheveled, half-delirious figure he'd found in the forest. The man he had tracked might as well have sent up a signal flare. He'd left an obvious, unmistakable trail of footprints, broken branches and blood that ended in finding the fugitive only half-hidden under a scrubby bush, feverish and stinking of sweat and sewer water. Rain had brought him back draped unceremoniously over his horse like an old saddle-blanket. Only the eyepatch and the face, older and more damaged than it had appeared in the ubiquitous broadcasts, convinced him this was the person he had been sent to find rather than some homeless drifter or gas-crazy refugee. Rain watched the man tossing feverishly in the restraints and tried to decide what he thought of him, and how to reconcile the media image and the reality of the helpless body in front of him.

Rain was confused and a bit disappointed. The man on the bed didn't seem very dangerous or romantic now, but there was something that kept Rain studying him, trying to solve the puzzle. He would be cautious, and make no assumptions; after the stories he'd heard, there was no telling what Snake Plissken might be capable of.

Snake returned to consciousness, clear-headed at last, struggling up out of darkness. He lay very still, eyes closed, and kept his breathing slow and easy, listening. It was never a good idea to give up the element of surprise until he had to.

Checklist: Under him, smooth cloth with a smell of soap and bleach; a pillow. He was in a bed. Faint smell of disinfectant. Overriding it was another, stronger scent of warm grass, eucalyptus, and living earth. Not a hospital, then. Prison? Unlikely. Hint of a breeze across his face. Silence, except for distant sounds of birds. The wound in his leg was still painful, but the searing agony had been replaced by a dull throb, and he felt as though his raging fever had broken. The knife-cut across his chest itched and his head ached, and he was tired. Infinitely tired.

He opened his eyes a slit. Bright fire stabbed through his damaged eye, and he flinched involuntarily, breathing out on, "Shit!" His patch was missing. Daylight flooded the blown pupil, permanently fixed at full dilation; without the black cloth that filtered light to the paralyzed iris of his left eye, his field of vision became a blazing white blank that slammed in the afterburners on his headache. He swallowed sudden nausea. As his hand moved reflexively to cover his eye, he was brought up short by a tug against his wrist. With rapidly mounting apprehension, Snake tested his other wrist and his legs, pulled, twisted, lunged upward, muscles bunching with the strain as he tried to regain control of his body, then stilled, breathing hard. He was immobilized in four-point restraints, blinded and captive. He heard the scrape of a chair. So much for the element of surprise.

"Hey — easy. EASY," came a calm tenor voice.

"Gimme the goddamn patch."

The fingers that replaced his patch were callused, as if they were familiar with tools or weapons. Snake wondered if they belonged to the voice, or if there was more than one of them. Band slid into groove worn into his skin, patch slipping back into place, familiar if not quite comfortable even after all these years. At least the thing no longer reeked of his own sweat and L.A. sewer water. "You were feverish, thrashing around. We were afraid you'd hurt yourself.... Or somebody else."

There was the snick of a quicksnap being released, and Snake's arm, the cuff still buckled around his wrist, was free on his left side — his blind side, Snake noted. This guy was taking

no chances. Snake reached over, felt around, found the wide nylon band of the other cuff on his right wrist, found the buckle on the inside, and opened it, releasing his right arm as well, all the while trying to focus.

His headache retreated from excruciating to merely unpleasant: background data, base-line reading. Snake ignored it. By the time the dazzle in his damaged eye faded enough to allow him a clear view, the person who had released him had moved out of reach. Snake lowered his hands to the blanket covering him, making no sudden moves, and considered his position as he unbuckled the cuff on his left wrist as well, and pulled off the nylon band.

The first thing he noticed was the powerful crossbow, cocked and ready to fire, pointed unwaveringly at his head from across the room, between him and the door. The second was the young man holding it. Long, dark hair caught at the nape of his neck with a band, body wiry but well-muscled, sun-browned skin, regular features. It was an unremarkable face except for the grim mouth and hard eyes, an expression Snake had seen turned his way many times, but seldom with such self-confident conviction. Snake gave himself an inch or so, perhaps twenty pounds, and maybe twenty years experience on the kid. That might make up for the faster reflexes of youth if Snake's bum leg were healed, but right now he didn't want to push his luck. The boy was wearing brownish-gray, dust-colored pants tucked into laced hiking boots and a sleeveless vest of the same material. Snake suddenly realized that, under his blanket, he was completely naked.

"Who're you?"

"Let's just say we're not blackbellies," the boy answered.

Great, Snake thought; they're not blackbellies. That's one down. Now which of the many other assholes he'd pissed off recently did this bunch belong to? And why was he still alive?

"He's awake," the boy was saying over his shoulder in a louder voice, never taking his eyes off Snake. "Go get Jack."

"O.K." another voice floated back from somewhere out of sight, followed by the sound of departing footsteps.

Snake moved his right hand slowly down, pushing aside the blanket and sheet, eyeing the boy with the crossbow, trying to stare him down and take control of the situation by sheer force of will. The boy stared back, expressionless, but made no move to fire as Snake uncovered his legs, and, with glacial deliberation, unbuckled the restraints on first his right, then his left, ankle, keeping his hands in plain sight the whole time. That accomplished, he moved the sheet farther aside to get a look at the wound in his leg. Just how much of a handicap was this fucker going to be, anyway? Gingerly, he lifted the loose bandage to look underneath. He could not see the entrance, but the exit wound on the front was visible. A neat incision ran about two-thirds of the way down his right thigh, surrounded by purplish bruises and the brown-red stain of Betadine on the puffy flesh, and an inch or so of gauze drain protruded from each end of the cut. It stank of infection. Shit. He wasn't going anywhere fast under his own power, not any time soon.

Snake fell back against the pillow with a snort of frustration. After a minute, he levered himself into sitting position again for a more complete survey of his surroundings. His guard was still regarding him silently, crossbow no longer aimed at him but cradled in the boy's arms ready for action. At least this kid wasn't the gabby type. Snake was tired of people he'd just met telling him they thought he was dead — or taller. This looked like some rich asshole's guest bedroom, all polished wood and colors like washed-out desert khakis. By the

side of his wide bed was a nightstand littered with medical-looking crap. Across from him was a big no-color chair, next to a no-color table, in front of a set of heavy no-color drapes framing an open, screened window with something green outside. The whole place annoyed him.

There were several sets of footsteps heading in his direction now. They stopped in front of the closed door, and a new voice with the brusque tone of authority sounded from outside: "Rain?"

"It's O.K.," the boy responded. He tapped the stock of the crossbow once, lightly, with his fingertips, reminding Snake of his vulnerable position with an economical movement. At the faint sound, Snake's glance flicked back to the weapon. No need for theatrics, the gesture said; we understand each other.

As Rain stepped aside, the door opened to admit three men. Two of them moved smoothly to flank and cover the third, a heavy-set, middle-aged executive type with beautifully tailored sport shirt and slacks, and an air of understated menace. Mob boss, Snake read him: Not to be fucked with. He'd run cigarettes for men like this. The man gave him a knowing smile. "Relax, Snake; Jack Ormsby."

"Jack Ormsby. I've heard of you." Ormsby was reputed to be one of the top bosses on the west coast, head of the Dayglo organization which owned most of organized crime in California and Oregon. "Why am I here?"

"Paul Frees hired you for the job in New Vegas. He works for me."

Snake nodded. "What happened?"

"Paul got away clear. We got the money. We lost what we would have made on your other matches, but that was chump change. All the fuss over capturing the notorious Snake Plissken kept the blackbellies busy while Paul and the others made an exit by the back door. We owe you."

Anger flashed through Snake. "You set me up to cover another deal!" He started to lunge for Ormsby and was brought up short by a wave of pain as he tried to move his injured leg. It gave him time to become aware of the two handguns and crossbow leveled at him, and he fell back, glaring at Ormsby and panting. Ormsby made a gesture and the guns disappeared again.

"Knock it off!" Ormsby growled. "I don't treat my people like that. We set up a pickup for you in Hollywood. You never showed."

"I got sidetracked."

"Better late than never." Ormsby smiled again. "Not everybody slags the whole network when his hit series is cancelled. We saw that business on the Police Channel, then everything shut down. No power, no phones, no computer. Everything's dead. What the hell did you do?"

"Pulled the plug." Snake made a low sound of satisfaction, deep in his throat. "Massive electromagnetic pulse. Shut down the power, all over the earth. Every fucking bit of it. The whole goddamnn world..." he made an eloquent gesture, "...blown away."

"The whole world...?" Ormsby's voice was almost a whisper. "Permanently?"

"Happily ever after." Beneath the controlled surface of Snake's features, something moved with deadly, predatory joy, and his good eye glittered.

"Jesus Christ! Talk about the ultimate cosmic fuck!"

Snake bared his teeth slightly, somewhere between a grin and a snarl. "The bitch was asking for it."

A faint hiss of indrawn breath from the direction of the boy with the crossbow drew Snake's attention back to him for a moment. There was a look of masked ferocity and a bone-deep lust for vengeance that matched Snake's own in the boy's expression. For a moment, surprised and uncomprehending, Snake felt himself sharing an unwelcome and unintended intimacy with this stranger in their mutual hatred, whatever the reason behind the boy's reaction.

Disturbed, Snake pulled his glance away and back to Ormsby.

"How did I get here?"

"When we saw you push that button, we knew every USPF goon in southern California was going to be on your tail, so we sent people out to find you before they did. Rain, here, found you under a bush, about fifteen miles from where your chopper went down. We nearly missed you; you'd done a good job of getting under cover before you passed out. But Rain's their best tracker."

Their best tracker? Who's 'they'? Snake wondered. So this boy wasn't one of Ormsby's thugs. "I'm all choked up by your concern for my safety."

"Don't flatter yourself, Snake," Ormsby said wearily. "You know too much about my organization. My contacts told me you didn't sing while you were in custody, before you went into L.A. That's why you're still alive." He shrugged, elaborately casual. "The blackbellies are a little slow, but sooner or later they put two and two together. Once they got it through their tiny brains that you and I might be connected on the business in New Vegas, they'd have beaten it out of you. I couldn't take that chance."

Snake nodded slowly. That he understood. "So here I am," he said. "Where's here?"

"You're just a bundle of questions, aren't you? I don't trust you that much. Now get some rest. If you promise to be a good boy, I won't have them put the restraints back on."

Snake glared at Ormsby's departing back as the boss and his two men turned and walked out, imagining Ormsby's brains splattered against the wall. No gun, his leg for shit, stark-ass naked, under guard in Ormsby's fortress in the middle of god-knew-where. He'd seldom felt so defenseless, and it pissed him off big time.

Rain uncocked his crossbow and lowered it to his side. "Take it easy, Snake. You're going to be here for a while, so you might as well take advantage of the hospitality. I'm going to go get you something to eat; you've been living on an IV since I brought you in."

Snake looked down, noticing for the first time the bandaid on the back of his hand and the gray lines of dirty adhesive residue on each side of it, then back to Rain. "You want to try tyin' me down again?"

Rain shrugged. "You're not going anywhere on that leg. If you want to try crawling down the hall and out the door without being noticed, be my guest." He walked over to a door, opened the closet, and rummaged around briefly. He threw a pajama top in Snake's direction, and Snake's rough fingertips caught on the silky fabric as he fielded it. Rain draped a heavy, luxurious robe, the same no-color as the rest of the room, over the foot of Snake's bed. "Bathroom's over there." Rain gestured toward the room's other door. "If you want to make the effort. If you don't, urinal's in the nightstand top drawer. Enjoy."

"Fuck you," Snake grated.

A brief half-smile flickered across the boy's face, and his look held Snake's for a moment. Still testing me, Snake thought, and dismissed it. Rain turned and stepped briskly out the door, and Snake heard the snap of a lock as the thick slab of wood closed behind the boy. Snake settled back against soft, clean sheets. It had been awhile, and he was very tired. His eyes closed almost before he could complete the thought, and he slept.

For a while, Snake did very little except eat and sleep. He was not sure exactly how many days passed as time compressed and expanded like a liquid to the rhythms of his pain and weariness and the process of healing. The total lack of privacy fed the paranoia within him. He felt vulnerable, exposed, and the need for a gun, for some tangible means of defense, was an emptiness inside him, a physical craving stronger than his need for nicotine. The medic came and went, handling him like a piece of meat. Just like the hospital in Helsinki; God how he hated hospitals. Only the knowledge that he couldn't run with his leg out of commission kept him from trying to strangle the man when he came within Snake's reach, and escape. Any day now, Ormsby might decide he'd made a mistake, that Snake was worth more dead than alive. Plug him, hand the USPF his head on a plate. Shut his mouth for good, and earn Ormsby some brownie points that would divert suspicion from the old bastard. It was all so obvious.

The only one who didn't seem to be a part of it was Rain. He was never there when the humiliating medical procedures and nursing care were going on, but he knocked on Snake's door occasionally, and, when grudgingly invited, slipped in with a meal tray or a clandestine cigarette. He never stayed long or said much, and in spite of the fact that Rain always seemed to be watching him, waiting for something, Snake discovered the boy had a remarkable talent for not making him feel crowded. As Snake began to recover slightly and find himself awake for longer periods, more clear-minded, he decided it was time for a little intelligence-gathering, and that Rain was the obvious place to start. Reconnaissance.

The next time Rain brought him a cigarette, as the boy turned to leave, Snake motioned to the big chair next to his window. "Sit." He fished out the matches hidden in his bedside drawer, lit the cigarette and took a deep drag, then extended it in Rain's direction. "You smoke?"

"Not tobacco." Rain shook his head. "I can't stay long." He stayed where was.

"Leave when you have to." Snake paused, wondering how to get the kid to open up. Pumping uncooperative informants without the help of a shotgun was not his best subject. He closed his eyes, riding on the nicotine buzz. This was the real thing. He hadn't felt it like this in years. After a minute, he opened them again. "Ormsby said you brought me in." The boy nodded. "How'd you find me?"

"I know that country around Firebase Seven. I found where your chopper went down and started moving out in a circle from there. When I found where you dropped the camera thing and the black box, I just followed your trail from there. Wasn't too hard. You were moving like a bull elk. I can't figure out how the blackbellies missed you." He snorted softly.

"Course those USPF shitheads couldn't find their own dicks in the dark with both hands and a map."

Snake chuckled appreciatively. "Quite a welcoming committee Ormsby set up here. Medic—"

He got no farther before Rain broke in. "Oh, Mendez isn't a human doctor."

"WHAT?"

"Nah — he's a vet. He runs Ormsby's stables, and takes care of his animals. Ormsby gets his jollies showing. Carriage horses." Rain's voice turned cold and vicious. "I hate fucking breeders." The last word came out through clenched teeth. He sighed. "But he's not as bad as some of them. And we have to work with him."

"I'm being treated by a goddamn VET?" Snake's voice cut across Rain's last few words. He dropped the cigarette on a dish amid the clutter of his nightstand and sat up straight.

Rain shrugged. "A wound is a wound." The corners of his mouth turned up slightly. "A rat is a pig is a dog is a boy."

Snake's smoldering paranoia burst into flame. He struggled toward the edge of the bed. As he started to rise, a wave of dizziness broke over him. "I want out of here. Now." I want a gun. He stood, tried to put weight on his bad leg, and pain lanced through him. He grabbed hold of the headboard to steady himself. "Shit." The leg gave out under him and he fell back against the bed, his head swimming. Sudden cold sweat stung his good eye as he lowered himself to the surface of the bed again and sat down. His breathing slowed gradually. This was more than the infection in his wound. So Plutouxin Seven was just a fast case of the flu, eh? It wouldn't be the first time the government had underestimated collateral damage on a new bioweapon: Agent Orange, Gulf War Syndrome, anthrax, Compound R, probably more he didn't know about. Maybe the blackbelly bitch at Firebase Seven had lied to him twice. The irritation he felt transferred itself to the young man in front of him, and Snake glared at Rain, waiting for some suggestion of "I told you so" from the boy in response to his failed attempt to stand up.

Rain's face remained carefully neutral. "As soon as you can travel, I want you to come with me up north, to my people. It's too hot around here. There's already blackbelly patrols out on the roads, knocking on doors and asking questions, looking for you. One of 'em showed up here two days ago. They're offering three million dead and seven alive, no questions asked, and a Morals Exemption for a year to whoever brings you in."

Snake let out a breath. Grease for a year. Freedom from prosecution on non-violent morals infractions: smoking, drinking, women, meat, gun possession. The cynical carrot that went along with the government's legislative stick. Snake could think of twenty men he'd worked jobs with who'd scan him in for that kind of loot. Some of them in Ormsby's organization. He retrieved the smoldering remains of his cigarette, knocked off the ash, and drew in a deep lungful of nicotine. He held it for a long minute, then released it in a plumed sigh.

Rain was continuing. "You'll be safer up north. It's mostly forest, isolated, lots fewer people, and we keep to ourselves. Nobody will notice you coming or going. Nobody knows much

about us, and we like it that way."

Snake dragged his injured leg back onto the bed, breath hissing painfully between his teeth, then lay back. His head hit the pillow and he exhaled sharply, his eye closing briefly. He opened it again and regarded Rain suspiciously. "Why? You got something to hide?"

"We're growers." Rain smiled faintly. "Government wants to shut us down; raiders want to steal our crop."

Snake considered. Growers. "Marijuana?"

Rain nodded. "Ormsby buys our crop. I was down here on a delivery run when you decided to push the button." He crossed his arms, leaned against the door frame, and added lightly, "Thanks. You really fucked up my schedule. My truck isn't going anywhere; I'm going to have to borrow a boat to get home."

Snake gave his little guttural snort. "I'm cryin'."

"Yeah, I know," said Rain, grinning. "So there'll be room for another passenger if you want to come along. Think about it. I won't be leaving for a few days. It beats walking on that leg."

Snake heard the sound of distant footsteps approaching down the hall outside. He snubbed out his cigarette in the saucer and started to dump it behind the headboard. Rain was there before him, holding out a hand. "Let me get rid of that." Snake surrendered the ashes, and, regretfully, the unsmoked butt. Quickly, Rain dropped the remains in the toilet, flushed, ran the saucer under a sluice of water, and slapped it back on Snake's nightstand in one smooth movement.

"Ormsby hasn't given me any heat about raiding his stash," Rain said. "I haven't asked and he hasn't told. I'm not even sure he's noticed. But I don't want to shove it in his face. Bad manners to steal a man's dope if you want a repeat invitation." He crossed to the door and stepped outside, intercepting whoever it was that was coming down the hall. After a muffled exchange of words, he reappeared with Snake's evening meal tray, set it down on Snake's bedtable and settled it over his lap as Snake struggled into sitting position. Rain backed up a few paces, his nose wrinkling. "Damn stuff smells — you know that?"

Snake snorted. "Smells better than that fucking ten-per-cent American shit. Tastes better, too — it's prime. Real Turkish. Ormsby's got a good supplier. Wonder how much he cuts it for sale."

Rain shrugged. "I dunno; that's not my end." He smiled. "Wait'll you try our grass. It'll blow your socks off."

"I'll pass." Snake bent over his tray and started enthusiastically cutting thick chunks of the rare beef on his plate and forking them into his mouth. It had been a long time since he'd been able to afford anything except gray, cardboard-flavored textpro. Frozen. With the power off, refrigeration's gone. Ormsby's using it up before it goes bad. I'll bet he's righteously pissed; this shit's worth its weight in gold on the black market. He smiled around a mouthful of steak that suddenly tasted even better.

An expression of revulsion passed over Rain's face. Snake looked up, paused, fork in hand, and glared at him. "You got a problem?"

Rain looked away and swallowed. "Vegetarian," he muttered. "I have to go now." He paused with his hand on the door, took a breath. "Anything else you need?"

"How about some firepower?" Snake's tone was artificially light, belying the intensity of the need within him and his sense of vulnerability. He's not buying it.

Rain regarded him levelly. "I'll see what I can do." He turned, walked out, and the door clicked shut behind him.

Snake finished his meal, shoved aside the water carafe and pill bottles on his nightstand, and set down the empty tray. He lay back against the banked pillows, thinking regretfully of the cigarette stub that had disappeared down the toilet, and closed his eyes. He could feel the deceptive comfort of the bed under him, of the smooth, soft pajama top he wore, of the clean bandage, the good food in his stomach, and the painkillers in his system, trying to lure him into letting down his guard. This place was a deathtrap. He was wearing a For Sale sign a yard wide and, no matter what Ormsby said, it wouldn't be long before somebody decided to take the blackbellies up on the offer. He had to get out of here. Soon. But should he go with the boy? Was it just another trap? He shifted, feeling the slow, rhythmic beat of his pulse in the throbbing pain in his leg, in his head. Sometimes you just had to go on instinct — grab the first thing going in the right direction. Or what might be the right direction. Better to be a moving target; it made you harder to hit. Doing something — anything — was better than lying here and waiting for them to come and get him. He made his decision. He was going with Rain.

After he left Snake's room, Rain made his way to Ormsby's study in the other wing of the vast house. His knock, slightly louder than a deferential tap, was answered in Ormsby's firm tones, "Come." Rain opened the door and stepped in, his feet silent on the thick Oriental rug. The room was part library, part office. Wooden filing cabinets ranked along one wall faced tall oak shelves crammed with books. A Mario Puzo novel lay open beside a leather wing chair next to the fireplace. Ormsby sat at a huge desk in the opposite corner. A scatter of papers lay before him, and beside them, a dead computer terminal covered in Post-It notes. The older man looked up. "Yes?"

"Plissken's not happy."

"I'd be amazed if he were. What's the problem?"

"He wants to leave. He wants a gun. I think he may try to take off on his own."

Ormsby sighed. "Mendez says he's treated herd stallions with colic who had better tempers. He's a little afraid of him. Plissken will stay put for a while, though. He's not a fool. That's why he's lived long enough to become a legend."

"Legend?" Rain said. "He doesn't look much like a legend lying in that bed. He didn't look much like a legend when I brought him in to your house. I keep remembering the way he looked on the Police Channel. I watched the trial. I wonder how much of it was real, and how much was the blackbellies building him up just to make themselves look good when

they caught him. You and I both saw him being marched into LA. Not very impressive. He didn't even put up a fight."

"But he made it back out. You saw the results. I'd say that was impressive enough." Ormsby's glance traveled to the monitor screen and back to Rain. "Plissken's no coward. He's reckless and he's got a temper, but, as I said, he's not a fool. He plays the hand that's dealt him and waits for an opening. Don't count him out." Ormsby leaned back in his chair and picked up reading glasses, signaling the end of the interview. "Oh, about the gun. Don't worry. String him along and I'll settle it when he leaves."

He turned back to his work and Rain slipped out quietly. On the way back to his guestroom, he turned Ormsby's words over in his mind. Ormsby hadn't gotten where he was by hiring the wrong people, and he'd put a lot of effort into saving Snake. And there had to be something to that legend. He couldn't believe it was all government propaganda. There were some things impossible to fake.

By the end of the following week Snake was able to move, painfully, on his injured leg as long as it was tightly bandaged. He reluctantly accepted the aid of a...stick (not a cane...he wasn't an old man yet), but drew the line at a pair of crutches. He stumped back and forth across his room, then up and down the hall outside, pushing himself, dealing with the pain as he always had by turning it into anger, and the anger into strength and purpose. Rain watched his progress and began to see what Ormsby saw in the man. There was something of the legendary outlaw he had expected in Snake's grim, uncomplaining battle with his uncooperative body. When Snake could make it from one end of the house to the other in one effort, the two of them decided it was time to go.

Ormsby met them by the front steps, this time alone. Even this far south of the giant naval munitions-works at Santa Barbara, the air had a faint yellowish tinge and a sweetish, acrid undertone beneath the masking scent of eucalyptus. Snake found himself breathing shallowly at his body's memory of the smell of gas. He coughed once, his good eye watering, then steadied. Wraparound dark glasses replaced his trademark patch, filtering the gray winter sunlight, and beneath them, his bad eye was protected by a dressing taped to his nose and the side of his cheek. A soft cap with his hair secured under it, a long waterproof winter coat, a shapeless workman's shirt, loose jeans, and worn workboots borrowed from one of Ormsby's grooms completed Snake's disguise.

They were traveling by day. If they did meet anyone, it would be easier to explain a group of stable hands out exercising a team of Ormsby's show horses than the same group driving a horse carriage along the remains of Highway 33 by night, and the local authorities were well paid not to be overly curious. A forest-green, four-seater phaeton and a matched team of bays was drawn up to the mounting-block. As Snake struggled into the rear seat, one of them shifted from one back leg to the other, blowing softly. Snake sat down carefully and gripped the side edge as the carriage bounced a bit. Rain lifted first his own, then Snake's, backpack onto the floor next to Snake's feet, then swung up into the front seat next to the driver.

"There's a drop point up beyond Ventura, off old 101. Pete knows it." Ormsby said, nodding in the direction of the driver. "There's a shipment due tonight. They know Pete. They'll take you north." He reached into a pocket, pulled out a stack of bluebacks, peeled off several, and handed them to Snake. "Your cut from New Vegas. Traveling money."

Snake eyed him, invisible behind his shades. "Less two weeks room and board, and medical."

"Consider it operating expenses," Ormsby said.

Snake recognized the claim Ormsby was subtly trying to make on him. He thinks I'm part of his organization now. He let it pass. This wasn't the time to make an issue of it. "I'll take part of it in smokes."

Ormsby chuckled. "You got part of it that way already. I keep a close eye on my personal stash. Here." He handed Snake three packs of the blue-wrapped cigarettes Rain had brought to Snake's room during his stay. He turned to Rain and added, "Next time, ask. I'm a reasonable man. I never try to get between a man and his habit." Snake's mouth quirked as he and Ormsby shared the joke at Rain's expense. Rain's face remained carefully impassive, but he squirmed slightly in his seat. Ormsby turned back to Snake. "Make 'em last. Just one more thing." He went back inside the house, returning a few minutes later with a familiar piece of leatherwork draped over his arm. Snake's stomach lurched as he recognized his gunbelt. In the formerly empty holsters were two new Cyclops .357 Magnums. In the crook of Ormsby's arm was a box. He passed the gunbelt over to Snake, then set the box down on the seat next to him. "Ammo," he said. "Better make it last, too. After your little caper, every source from here to the East Coast is going to come up dry."

Snake breathed out, a soft sound. I owe you, Ormsby. Big time. A second thought followed instantly: shit but I hate that. He checked the safety and the cylinder, slid one handgun into the inside pocket of his coat, then unchambered a round in the other and dropped it into his pocket, lowered the hammer over the empty chamber, reset the safety, opened his pack, and folded the gunbelt with the remaining gun into the clothing inside and added the box. He looked across at Ormsby, composing and discarding sentences in his mind.

Ormsby smiled. "The word you're looking for is 'Thank you.' Don't sweat it. It's a matter of perspective. I picked you up, dusted you off, and handed you back your life. But the way I see it, I'm just making a good investment. There's more involved here than your little one man war. A lot of people have decided that this scumbag President and his government are bad for business, and they're doing something about it: corporations, industry, my...organization...."

"And I just pulled the plug on all of 'em," Snake said. A beat: "You don't seem too broken up about it."

Ormsby snorted softly. "Every major organization — every one that's going to survive — has a file of doomsday contingency plans. This is probably covered in at least three of mine. I run with the big dogs, Snake. And they're backing you."

"Why me?"

"You're doing what needs to be done. If you pay off, you pay off big. If you don't... I'm out two guns, some ammo, and a few smokes. Now go on. The boat will be waiting."

Ormsby's driver clucked to the team, slapped the reins, and the carriage moved off down Ormsby's driveway and out onto the remains of Highway 33. War and earthquake had

detoured around Casitas; the road was mainly intact. The horses trotted along easily over the cracked pavement. Snake gritted his teeth at each jolt, in spite of the carriage's good springs. He opened the thick woolen lap robe folded on the seat beside him, stuffed a section under his injured leg as padding, and braced his other foot on the backpacks to cushion impact. They rode for a time in silence, except for the driver's low-voiced conversation with his horses, who responded with occasional flicked ears and tossed heads. The driver, a burly man with large hands and a shapeless outfit topped by a battered felt hat, ignored his passengers, concentrating on threading a pathway between the major potholes.

Rain finally broke the silence. "It's good to be moving again. I'll be glad to get home."

Snake grunted a noncommittal sound. It had been a long time since the word home had any meaning for him.

Rain continued, "You know, Snake, pretty soon those bluebacks aren't going to be worth much. Banks are down — ATMs, credit cards, all that stuff. People aren't going to trust paper money."

"Better see if we can trade 'em for something useful before everybody else figures that out," Snake said. "Maybe this guy with the boat's been out of touch." He went back to staring at the dusty yellow areas of parched grass growing along the road. Wonder if those gold coins I picked up in Mexico are still stashed in the belt.

Two and a half hours of travel down the deserted road brought them to the junction with U.S. 101, the coastal highway. It had been battered by enemy bombs and sabotage, outlying tremors from the L.A. quake and pounding waves from a Pacific Ocean that no longer matched its name. Long stretches of the shattered road had been dragged aside and piled up in untidy mounds, replaced by rammed earth that served nearly as well. Most north-south traffic had moved inland, away from the worst threat of enemy offshore shelling and USPF fortifications around L.A. Even before 666 there had been little movement along this stretch of coast; now there was none. They met no one on the road, and Snake began to think his elaborate disguise had been a waste of time. Here the carriage slowed, the horses picking their way carefully between upended chunks of concrete too large to be moved and occasional abandoned vehicles, some of them new, some of them rusty hulks.

Another hour's travel northward brought them to a barren stretch of beach with absolutely no distinguishing characteristics that Snake could identify. Pete pulled the carriage off what was left of the road and unhitched, then opened a storage space under the front seat and took out water for the horses and a lunch for the humans. So that's where he hides what the ship brings in, Snake thought as he watched.

Snake dug in his pocket, pulled out his patch. He stowed the dark glasses in the pack, removed the dressing over his bad eye, and, with eyes closed, replaced the patch. He was tired of hiding. He looked around. The sky, sea, and sand were hardly less colorless with the glasses off: a dull expanse of overcast overhead, dirty, oil-streaked rocks and gritty shore, slate-gray waves moving in and out, crested with leprous white foam. The stench of rotting seaweed and dead flesh, the smell of polluted water, filled the air, which felt vaguely greasy against Snake's skin. There was no sound but the crash of water: no cry of gulls. The air tasted metallic against the back of his throat as he inhaled. The place bothered him, but he could see no immediate threat. He finished eating his thick slab of bread and cheese, wiped his fingers, and settled back against the side of the phaeton, lighting up one of Ormsby's smokes. Hurry up and wait. Just like the Army.

The afternoon dragged on as Snake dozed uneasily and Rain explored the shore for some

distance around the carriage. No one passed on the road. Towards evening, a sail appeared on the horizon, slowly becoming a ship that moved in and anchored a short distance offshore, as Pete harnessed up his team and drove the carriage up onto the paved surface. "You'll have to get down now," he told Snake, "We gotta load." Snake climbed over the side of the phaeton and worked his way slowly across the shifting, uncertain dry sand to a large rock, where he sat down. Snake watched as the ship lowered a rowboat loaded with boxes and the crew rowed in toward shore.

She had been a beautiful boat once, a trim little sailing yacht, someone's weekend pleasure cruiser. Now she was battered and shabby, her paint dull and weathered, her sails and hull patched with mismatched repairs. Snake remembered a news item he had read once, back when such things mattered to him. War and a crumbling economy had destroyed the sport of sailing. Many of the former pleasure boats had been sold to small-scale fishermen and converted back into the fishing boats from which their design had originally been derived. As the price of fuel rose, they turned more and more to sail, sliding back into the technology of the nineteenth century. The big, ocean-going fishing trawlers with their mile-long drift nets no longer existed; the fishing grounds were empty, fished out. These small-scale fishermen eked out a miserable living harvesting the few remaining trash fish still to be found in the off-shore waters. Most of them, Snake knew, supplemented their income with smokelegging and smuggling.

The two men in the rowboat jumped out and pulled it up onto the sand. Pete and Rain went down to meet them, and Snake strained to hear fragments of conversation over the sound of the waves. He caught, "Ormsby...passenger...yeah, he's guaranteed...." The taller of the two men nodded and made a gesture toward the loaded boat. All four joined in, working quickly to unload the rowboat's cargo, carry the boxes up the beach, and stow them in the hidden compartments under the front and rear seats of the phaeton. The horses stood quietly with their reins tied around one of the larger chunks of concrete along the side of the road. When the cargo had been transferred, Pete handed an envelope to one of the men, who opened it, leafed quickly through the contents, and slipped it into an inside pocket of his jacket. They turned to the silent figure sitting on the rock, smoking a cigarette.

The man in the lead, the one who had accepted Pete's envelope, was a gaunt fellow with a lined face the color of old rope and pale eyes, who looked as worn and beaten as his boat. Iron-gray hair escaped from under his cap and straggled down to the collar of his weathered oilskins. Snake estimated his age at somewhere between sixty and death. "Pete says you and the young fella are looking for passage north," he said. The voice sounded like sandpaper.

Snake debated getting up, and decided it wasn't worth it for this one. He angled his glance toward the speaker. "Yeah." Smoke drifted up into the man's face.

He studied Snake for a moment, then his puzzled expression shifted into recognition. Snake caught the look and felt his usual twinge of irritation. "Snake Plissken," the man said. "I heard you'd been deported, on the news. I figured you'd be in Mexico by now."

"Goin' north. Ormsby said you were...reliable...."

Rain broke in. "We only need to go with you as far as San Francisco Bay."

"Maybe." The man looked at them sideways and his expression hardened. "It'll cost you."

"Two thousand. Bluebacks," Snake said.

"Let's see it, Plissken."

"Snake." A beat. " On board. Half now; half when we get to Frisco."

The man drew himself up. "And if I decide to take all of it, right now?"

A feral glitter lighted Snake's good eye and he smiled slightly, but he made no move for his gun. "Yeah," he breathed, barely above a whisper, "Come on...." Snake heard Rain inhale, about to speak, turned a glance on him, and silenced him with a stare. Rain subsided, looking confused and a little awed.

The man relaxed, spread his hands, and a genuine smile cracked open his face. He gave a half laugh which conceded the point, and said, "O.K., Snake." He held out a hand. "Name's Tomlinson." He gestured with his head in the direction of the ocean: "That's my boat, the Afternoon's Delight."

Snake rose to his feet, flicked away his cigarette, and took the man's hand. "Pleased to meet both of you."

Tomlinson turned to Pete, who had been standing, silently observing them, next to the phaeton's team. "You'd better be getting back, Pete. Tell Ormsby it'll be the same time next month, same deal."

"Right," Pete said. He climbed back into the driver's seat, picked up the reins, clucked to the horses, and headed back in the direction he had come.

Tomlinson turned and walked back toward the rowboat. The second member of his crew approached Snake. "Jacobs," he said. He gestured toward Snake's pack. "C'n I give you a hand with that?"

Snake nodded. "Thanks." He headed toward the boat, standing a little straighter, moving a little more easily. Rain shouldered his own backpack and followed him.

Rain followed Snake to the tiny forward cabin which had been allocated for the two of them. It had probably been used as a storage space, Rain decided: the once-beautiful oak paneling was dull and scored with scrapes and grooves, as if heavy objects had been dragged over the floor and shoved up against the walls. A miniscule triangular sink in one corner was cracked and gray with dirt that suggested it hadn't been used in a long time. Both Rain and Snake had to duck their heads to clear the overhead, and when Tomlinson showed them how to pull down the bunks, there was hardly room for one person to walk sideways between the two beds. Snake took the bunk to the left, as Rain hesitated, and each man shoved his pack under the shelf-like object. Chain supports sang as Snake dropped onto the bunk, on top of the gray-green Army blanket, and stretched out, the bulkhead brushing the top of his head and

the soles of his boots. He seemed at home in the cramped quarters that gave Rain a sense of claustrophobia.

"Dinner at six o'clock," Tomlinson said from the open hatch. "You don't make it, you go hungry. This is a working boat." He backed out and walked away without waiting for an answer.

Silence stretched between them, and for the first time, Rain was uneasy with it. The exchange on the beach had changed something, for him at least, but he was not sure exactly how to handle the new tension within him. The one across from him, almost touching him, was no longer a helpless sickbed patient or a problem in logistics. He was a strong man with an air of command as natural as breathing, and, Rain realized as he ran his gaze over Snake's compact, muscular body, damned attractive. Rain felt a stirring in his cock, and was glad he was wearing loose fatigue pants. He pushed the thin pillow up against the bulkhead at the head of his own bunk and put his booted feet up on the bed. He wished he had a magazine or something.

Snake gave a sigh and opened his good eye. Rain noticed how blue it was, how intense. Snake rolled over toward the edge of the bunk, dragged out his pack, opened it, and rummaged inside. He pulled out the gunbelt, removed the second gun from inside his coat and put it back in the empty holster, then hung the rig within easy reach over the chain supporting his bunk. He dove back inside the bag, pulled out the medkit, and set it down on the bed, then stood up, balancing on his good leg, and shrugged out of his coat. He opened the small storage compartment over his bunk and stowed the coat inside, shut it again and closed the latch. His zippered fly was inches from Rain's face.

Snake unbuckled his belt and let his pants drop, revealing tight black briefs. Rain was acutely aware of the corded muscles of Snake's thighs, pale against the dark cloth, and the auburn hairs, like short coiled wires, that escaped from the elastic around each leg opening and spread in a fine powdering across the firm flesh. Above them was the thick log of Snake's cock, mounding the cloth in a wide, straight column, and, below it, the rounded outline of Snake's heavy balls. The rich scent of Snake's crotch rose to meet Rain, and his mouth opened involuntarily, the tip of his tongue reaching his lower lip before he realized what he was doing and hastily shut it again. His own cock was hard. He could feel the rough cloth of his pants pressing against it, massaging him almost like a hand, and the painful fullness in his balls. He swallowed. He sat up, took off his own jacket and laid it as casually as he could across his lap.

Snake seemed utterly oblivious to Rain's distress as he sat back down, spread his legs, and carefully removed the dressing over the exit wound in his leg. He snapped the catch on the medkit, opened a small foil packet from inside it, wiped his hands and the area with an antiseptic towelette, then used another to smear a thick layer of yellow antibiotic salve over the area. Snake's shirttail threatened to drag across the sticky stuff, and Snake unbuttoned it and took it off. Rain felt his balls tighten further at the sight of Snake's broad chest and flat stomach, the strong definition of his solid pecs and arms. Snake's breath caught and released as he pressed the salve firmly into the edges of the wound. Rain knew that it had to hurt, but he spared it only a little attention, concentrating on the way Snake's cock shifted under the briefs between Snake's wide-open legs, as he turned and moved, added a clean dressing, taped it down with adhesive.

When he was done with the front, Snake twisted to look at the smaller entry wound on the back of his thigh. He evidently realized he couldn't reach this one properly, because he looked over at Rain and held out the medkit in his direction. Rain accepted the kit automatically. "Do it," Snake said softly, then rolled over on his left side.

OhGodOhGodOhGod... The beautiful round globes of Snake's firm ass burned their way into Rain's consciousness. He wanted to feel them between his hands, to feel himself thrusting into the sweet hole he knew was hidden between them, and he knew at once it was completely impossible. He couldn't imagine this powerful man bottoming to anybody. Not now, not ever. Rain's perspective shifted, and he imagined himself on the receiving end of Snake's big cock. He bit his tongue to avoid making a betraying sound, as he felt sticky wetness soak the absorbent cotton of his shorts. For a moment he was almost light-headed with relief, then he turned thankfully to the practical task of dressing Snake's injury. When Rain had finished taping the dressing in place, Snake pulled his pants back up, fastened his belt, lay back against his pillow, and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He lit up, drew in a deep lungful of smoke, held it, and then slowly breathed it out. His face smoothed, and he sighed again. Rain also lay back against his own pillow, feeling the throb in his bitten tongue, grateful for the distraction. It was going to be a long trip to San Francisco in this cabin.

It was the last cigarette Snake enjoyed spontaneously for some time. He and Rain joined Tomlinson and his crew of three for a meager meal of textpro and boiled vegetables. Snake and the rest chewed their way steadily through the dinner, refueling. Conversation was restricted to laconic exchanges of information about the state of the ship and demands for the salt. The crew seemed uninterested in their passengers and incurious about their identity. Whether this was a pose, or they were simply too dispirited to care, Snake could not tell. In either case, he was glad of it. Rain seemed subdued also, keeping his eyes on his plate as he pushed the tasteless food around with his fork. Snake surveyed the crewmen briefly, cataloging them. The single chemlight lantern cast a cold greenish glow over their tired faces. Besides the shriveled Jacobs, whose pointed red nose and blinking eyes reminded Snake of the rats he had seen in New York Max, there was an older black man with a missing little finger and a gray tone under his dark skin that suggested gas-poisoning. The last crewman was a scrawny teenager with lank, shoulder-length blond hair and acne. Snake wondered, momentarily, who was piloting the boat, then remembered the lurch he had felt her give as he sat down at the table. Without lights or functioning instruments, he realized, they must have had to drop anchor until morning light allowed them to navigate by sight. There were too many bits of stray debris in these clogged coastal waters to depend on the charts.

Jacobs looked up from his plate and cleared his throat. "We gonna run out t'nets, t'morra, Skipper?"

Tomlinson nodded. "Sure, run 'em out. We may as well pick up what we can. It don't get any better until Vancouver."

Snake downed the last gluey bite of a jam duff that was mostly flour, leaned back, and reached into the pocket of his flannel shirt for his pack of smokes. He tapped one loose and then looked around at the crew once again. Poor bastards ran smokes, but probably couldn't afford them, themselves. Some half formed impulse made Snake raise the pack and look

around in silent offer. The boy declined, but the other two accepted, taking one each from the pack.

"Take 'em topside!" Tomlinson barked. "No cigs belowdecks!"

Fucking asshole. Who the hell are you? Snake's glare seared Tomlinson, as he shoved his chair backward abruptly and started to walk out.

Tomlinson bristled. "Look, Plissken, fuel gas is heavier than air. Any of it leaks, it lies in the bilge and fills up the whole boat. You light a match in the wrong place below deck and you'll blow us to Kingdom Come."

Snake stopped, gave the captain a long, unintimidated look, then nodded briefly. Shit. I'll have to go up on deck every time I want a damn smoke. This fucking cruise couldn't end too soon for him. He stalked out of the room and headed for the ladder.

The crew followed him up into the night. The air was still and close, heavy with the smell of the water, hardly more refreshing than belowdecks. Snake handed matches to the other men, then took another one to light his own smoke. The Black man, who stood nearest him spoke first. "You military, ain'tcha?" he said in a thin voice that had been roughened by long bouts of coughing. Snake looked at him, nodding almost imperceptibly. "Won't go three on a match," the man continued, and laughed in a way that sounded all too familiar. "'Sif these cancer sticks won't kill ya fast enough. Now we got the damn gas, too. It's a bitch. You Air Force?"

Snake drew a long breath, enjoying the nicotine buzz. He knew he'd have to taper down eventually. Not now. He ignored the other man's effort to draw him out. One cigarette was the extent of Plissken's hospitality. He remained silent as the man tried again: "Radio's out. And the motor. Instruments. You know anything about that?"

"Why would I know?" Snake's tone was neutral.

"Figured you'd been on land the last few weeks. Maybe heard something. Something's going on."

Jacobs came closer. "Your lousy repair job's goin' on, Nap." He hawked and spat over the railing into the fetid depths. "So you're Snake Plissken. Still runnin' eh?" He grinned ingratiatingly, revealing bad teeth. "Slicker'n greased eels, that's you, Snake! Nearly got your ass whopped in Cleveland, so I heard. Ain't heard much since. Only two thing stayed t'same all along: one, we all gonna die; t'other, they ain't NEVER gonna ketch ole Snake Plissken. Hell, Snake, I'd buy ya a drink 'f we's anywhere that had good booze." He turned back to his shipmate. " Radio's yer problem, Nap. Keep fuckin' with'er 'til you get 'er fixed. You don't get that sucker in workin' order soon, you gonna lose another finger."

"You going to bite it off, Jacobs?" Nap shifted his attention to Snake. "Plissken, eh? I heard the name. H'm. Well, keep on running. Heard what you did in Chicago, too. Time somebody stuck it to those bastards." He took a weary breath. "I better go see what I can do with the fucking radio. We're going to have to put out hard cash to get this tub patched up this time. Hell, give me twenty bucks, and I'd scuttle the bitch myself. If it ain't one thing, it's another." He dropped the butt of his smoke into the water and went back down the ladder.

Snake had had enough of this depressing floating party, and wanted solid land under his feet. The meal he had eaten rolled slowly in his stomach, keeping time with the Afternoon's Delight's steady motions. As a pilot, Snake had never been prone to motion sickness, but something was definitely making him feel queasy. Maybe Rain had been right to eat as little

as possible. Wordlessly, he nodded goodnight to the crew, and started for the ladder to belowdecks, thinking about getting some sleep.

Rain was already asleep in his bunk when Snake returned to his cabin. He felt his way in the darkness to his side of the tiny space, located the hard slab that was his own bed, and sat down to pull off his boots. He stripped to his briefs and dropped his clothes on top of the footgear into the space below the bunk. He hesitated, then slid the thin band of his eyepatch off of his head, pulling it free of his wind-tangled hair, and hung it through one of the links in the chain supporting his sleeping platform, next to his guns, inches from his fingers. What little air there was felt good on the sweaty flesh of his cheek and the damaged eye. His background headache seemed to ease slightly. Probably his imagination, he told himself; the damn thing couldn't weigh a quarter of an ounce, but the patch was leaden on his face when he wore it. Gas damaged nerves, that was all.

He slid his feet under the blanket and pulled the thin, rough cloth up over his shoulders, more for the illusory sense of protection it gave him than because he was cold. The rise and fall of the boat around him in the darkness disoriented him, making him feel strange and alien, out of touch with his own body's responses and sense of balance. There was something hypnotic and almost drug-like about the steady, rocking motion in a world without sight. He drifted somewhere in limbo until his trance state deepened into sleep.

Snake dreamed.

Black sky above, filled with rolling clouds. He stood on a rocky promontory, staring overhead. A chill wind blew, high and fierce; a wind from the end of the world, carrying with it the smell of a dying planet heavy with the weight of too much life. Hair-fine lines of fire streaked from horizon to horizon, glittering gold from an inner light-source. His vision widened to take in the vast plain below him, filled with crawling human creatures. Corruption flowed out from them like a noxious tide, covering the earth. He reached upward toward the blazing threads, and his eyes filled with the light. As if in response, they swirled, coalesced streaking toward his outstretched fingers like streamers of starfire. Lightning swept down his arm, down his spine, filling his body, becoming himself. He was burning, and he danced in the flame, welcoming it into him as it filled him, reached the frozen, black core at the center of his being and destroyed it. Flames pulsed, curved, and began to whirl around him, passing through flesh and bone as if he were made of smoke. He was at the center now, fire in the whirlwind, and the flames swirled higher, sparks spinning outward from his body, covering the whole earth, burning it clean as sun-bleached bone, purified. His hair curled and flamed in the wind of his burning. He drew a long breath, filling his lungs with fire. The ecstasy of destruction filled him, and he shouted aloud. This time, he would remember! Now he could carry the vision back with him to the shadow world where the one-eyed outlaw clawed and struggled uselessly amid the cinders of civilization. It was time, now.

"Snake!"

Plissken snapped awake, hand going for the gun. He paused a second, orienting himself. The bed rocked, its chains creaking with the motion of the boat. There was a splash of the waves against the hull. Right. He shook the smell of fire from his nostrils and heard Rain again.

"Snake... It's just a dream. Sorry to wake you," Rain was a voice in the darkness, "But you were thrashing around."

"Yeah." Snake tuned him out, trying to return to the dream, to recapture the feelings, the images... Fire... The blazing 'copter over L.A.? The crash, the sheet of flame behind him as he pushed the button? He felt no lingering unease, as with a nightmare, but rather the spent

emptiness which followed his infrequent dreams of sex. A dull sense of loss filled him, as if he had been dragged away from... something.... Snake gave it up and rolled over to sleep again. He had a lingering memory of threads of fire, unconnected to anything else. He puzzled over it for a brief, half-waking moment, then dismissed that thought also and it faded. The steady motion of the vessel rocked him into sleep, this time without dreams, and his breathing lengthened into muted snores.

Snake hated the waiting. It would be three, maybe four, days, as this ancient rustbucket tacked its way laboriously against the prevailing winds up the coast to San Francisco. The ship wallowed in the light breezes, trying to find a good heading in the thick gray air that seemed too heavy, too clogged with water and chemical sludge, to move at all. Everything was in-between: it was too cold to be called hot, too hot to be called cold; the blood-warm air weighed him down, making even breathing an effort. The dim light that filtered into the cabin Snake shared with Rain was like twilight, neither night nor day. Everything he touched felt sticky, as if it was covered with a thin film of oil. Or worse. Snake shifted on the hard, scratchy surface of his bunk. It felt like everything was covered with some kind of organic residue. Fish guts, maybe. That's what it smelled like. The whole damned boat reeked of rotting fish.

He heard the sound of activity overhead, the thump of feet, the rattle of some kind of machinery, then a heavier thud and a scraping sound as something was dragged across the deck above. There were muffled voices back and forth, then Snake heard Rain's voice raised in a furious shout. He could not make out the words, but there was no mistaking the tone of rage and pain. Snake's guts twisted. What was going on up there? His boots hit the deck as he snatched up his gunbelt. He reached the ladder just as he heard a rumbling sound, a few splashes, and a putrid stench broke over him like a wave. Snake gagged, grabbing harder at the railing as he climbed, ignoring the protests of his injured leg. He hit the top of the ladder with his gun drawn, his finger on the trigger, and ducked behind the hatch, looking for a target.

He stopped short. The deck was covered with flopping fish. Tomlinson and his crew, in slickers and tall rubber boots, were wading through them, pushing at them with brooms, turning over individual fish with gloved hands, now and then picking one up and throwing it back over the side of the boat. Snake looked for Rain. He could still hear Rain's voice, at intervals, in a kind of choked cry, from across the deck by the opposite hatch, hidden from his view. No one else seemed to be paying him any attention. Snake took another, more thorough, survey, and saw nothing but the crew and the fish. Now that he had a better look, he could see that there was only a thin scattering of them over the surface. He flipped the safety on his gun — he didn't intend to blow his own foot off if he slipped on this mess — but kept the pistol at the ready as he made his way carefully over decking slick with an oily, iridescent film of fish slime and polluted seawater.

Tomlinson gave him a quick look as Snake passed him, then returned to calling out orders to his crew, who were bagging up the fish and dragging them down the rear hatch toward the hold. "Get 'em in the salt, Kenny," Snake heard Tomlinson shout down the hatch opening, as the two of them reached it, almost at the same time; "Got another load coming in!" The captain turned to Snake. "Put that thing away," he said; "your damn kid's freaking out, that's all." Snake eyed him for a moment, then holstered his gun.

Snake looked down. Rain was standing with his head bent, his forehead against the side of

his arm, one hand clenched on the hatch-frame, the other balled in a fist. As Snake watched, Rain smashed his fist into the bulkhead, once, twice, three times, with an inarticulate, strangled sound.

"Rain! Hey! Rain!" Rain looked up at him. Snake saw the boy was shaking, his face set in a snarl of fury and hatred. "What the fuck's wrong with you?" Snake added in a slightly lower tone. Rain didn't answer. Snake jumped down to the lower level, next to Rain, and a bolt of pain ran up his bandaged leg as he steadied himself on it. Rain reached out toward Snake and Snake brought his forearms up inside Rain's, turning his hands to grasp Rain and hold him steady, immobilized. "Talk to me, Rain!"

"The bastards; the bastards!" Rain gritted, "The fucking bastards! Look; look what they've done! They're killing her!"

Snake released Rain and stepped back a couple of paces, pulling out his gun and flipping off the safety in one smooth movement. This sounded like gas talking. He stared at the boy, searching for some hint of rationality, ready to fire if necessary.

Rain's glance shifted from Snake's gun to his face and back again. He was suddenly very still. "I'm O.K., Snake," he said. To Snake's practiced ear, there was forced calm, but no suggestion of insanity, in his tone.

"Then what the fuck are you talking about?"

Rain took a deep breath. "Mother Gaia — the World-Ocean, Snake. She's dying. The water's being poisoned, all over the whole earth." Snake eyed him suspiciously, puzzled, and Rain pressed on. "Snake — look at the fish!"

Snake slowly holstered his pistol, but kept his hand close to the grip as he backed a pace or two, then swung up one step on his good leg for a quick look over the hatchway to the deck. As he did so, he heard Tomlinson calling, "Watch out — here she comes!" A second netfull of fish swung over the side on the rattling winch and deposited its scanty load on the decking. The crew moved into their dance among the bodies under the captain's direction. Slowly, Snake's hand fell away from his side as he stared at the catch. The fish were a patchwork of mismatched pieces, shriveled here, bloated there, with crippled or missing fins and strange, diseased colors. Eyes bulged like tiny, distended balloons, or disappeared into the distorted heads. Some fish listed sideways on the flat surface, supported on huge puckered tumors; others were covered with fungoid growth, or had mouths held open in a perpetual gape by the white cottony stuff emerging from their interiors, and some were covered with open, rotting sores. A rank wave of sickness and decay from the pile rolled over Snake, and he breathed shallowly through his twisted mouth. Snake remembered a picture he had seen in one of his college courses years ago, a surreal vision of Hell by a painter named Hieronymus Bosch. The creatures in it had looked like this.

Snake made his way to the top of the ladder and out onto the upper deck. Tomlinson was watching him, a sardonic half-smile on his face. "Horrible, aren't they?" he greeted Snake; "Wouldn't eat 'em, myself."

"What do you do with them?"

"You ever had Mrs. Foster's Frozen Fish Sticks?"

Snake nodded queasily, remembering the familiar blue-and-white box that had been a childhood staple in his mother's kitchen.

Tomlinson continued, "We salt 'em down; take 'em into port, and sell 'em to the big packing companies. They boil 'em down into mush, so nobody can tell what they look like, and make 'em into all kinds of frozen food. About fished out down here, though; there's not even much of this stuff left. Figure in a year or two, we'll have to go north." Tomlinson sighed and leaned over the railing as his crew bundled the last of the fish below and started washing down the decks with sea water only marginally less malodorous than the departed catch. He stared into the distance. "I've fished these grounds since I was Kenny's age. Used to be beautiful out here. Blue sky, clean sea. Used to make this run with the dolphins racing us, playing in the water. Then the big boys with the drift nets got into it, and took it all. Don't see 'em any more — the dolphins. Nor the whales. Nor the sea-lions. They're all gone. Hell, even the gulls are sick, dying out. Used to be hundreds of 'em when we made a catch — now look."

Snake looked up at the sky. Three or four gulls circled, crying. One of them landed at the other end of the deck and hopped to a scrap of flesh, pecking at it. The bird's neck was as bare as a vulture's, and one leg was a stump without a foot. "Gas in the water?" he asked.

"Maybe. Some kind of pollution. It goes into the plankton, concentrates in the fish, moves up the food chain."

"Can't you do something about it?" Tomlinson and Snake turned to look at Rain as he spoke from behind them. The boy had climbed up to join them. He looked calm, the furious outburst become smoldering rage and deep sadness visible in his eyes.

Tomlinson shook his head slowly. "We used to take Polaroids of the weirder ones and send 'em in to the government, hoping somebody'd do something. Nobody ever did. They all look like that now. Toss back the good ones, if we catch any, hoping they'll breed. Doubt they do, though."

"Then where do you think those...things...come from?" Rain was almost whispering, staring down at the water like someone watching a horror movie, waiting for the demented slasher to leap out from hiding.

The crippled gull gulped down a last morsel and clumsily flapped away. Tomlinson watched it as it disappeared into the overcast gray sky. "There's some healthy ones — well, healthier ñ up north, up into Canada and Alaska. We don't fish there much; been saving them. Don't eat your seed corn, y'know? Maybe some out in the deep ocean, too. Maybe not. Nobody knows." Tomlinson's voice grew more distant. "I thought someday my son would inherit this boat. He died in the war, off the Bering Sea. Enemy subchaser. Annie, my wife, was killed in the bombing. Gas got my daughter and her baby. Now I don't have anything left. When they're gone here, we'll go north and fish it out up there."

"You can't!" Rain protested.

Tomlinson rounded on him angrily. "I can't? Look, boy, I hate like hell t'sell this crap, but there are people these days fishing off the docks in L.A. and Frisco with bent safety pins, and eating what they get if they catch anything. For a lot o' people, what I catch is the difference between life and death. You tell some mother, her kid dyin' from kwash, she can't feed it that last fish. Who d'you think you are, you snot-nosed little Greenpeace punk?!"

"You're the ones who did this!" Rain retorted, his voice rising steadily with passionate anger. "It was your generation, your technology, that raped the land, killed the forests, poisoned the oceans. Killed all the animals. You left nothing for us. You laid the world waste. Now we're living in the garbage dump you created!"

Snake's voice cut across the argument, silencing it. "Fuck the fish," he said, Mrs. Foster's Frozen Fish Sticks weighing heavily on his mind, "What about the people who eat this shit?"

They both turned to look at him. Rain was panting with fury. "Who cares?" he snarled. "Let them all die and get out of the way. Give the rest of the world a chance. Mother Gaia's killing us off, and good riddance. We deserve it." He turned and stalked off down the deck to disappear into the forward hatch.

Tomlinson glared at the boy's back. After a minute, the captain calmed, dropped his eyes, then looked back out over the railing. His former air of weary resignation returned. "Yeah. The people. Lot of 'em go crazy, bleed out, go blind. But it's not just the gas in the water. There's cancer. They get all crippled up from the mercury and stuff. And they say something in the fish makes you sterile." He shot Snake a challenging look. "I didn't do it, somebody else would. People gotta eat." He turned and went down into the hold.

The Afternoon Delight's crew finished cleaning fish slime off the deck and separated to their various duties, detouring around Snake's spot at the railing. Snake stood for a few minutes watching featureless gray sky and metal-color waves swirled with oil-slick green, hearing the faint shrieks of the gulls overhead. He reached into his pocket and ran a finger over his pack of cigarettes. What the hell. Living is fatal. The wound in his leg hurt and he wondered if his jump down into the lower deck had pulled loose any stitches. It didn't feel as if anything major had let go, he decided, as he worked his way back across the deck and below. He was healing, getting back up to speed, getting so he could trust his body again. His mood lifted slightly as he made his way to his cabin. The stench from the hold was overpowering at first, but his sense of smell dulled as it adjusted. It was livable. Barely.

Rain sat on his bunk, staring intently at nothing with a look that could bore through bulkheads. His jaw was set, and he was biting his lip as if only pain could prevent rage turning into tears. Snake recognized the expression. He sat down on the opposite bunk with a grunt as his leg twinged. "Somebody ought to give a shit, right?" A beat. "They don't." Hard lesson, Snake thought. Rain looked up at him. Snake recognized the sense of despair that threatened under the rage, and wondered if Rain himself was aware of it. Give up and you die now rather than later, kid.

"I care," Rain said. "I don't want to let those bastards just get away with it." Rain slammed his fist into the bulkhead. "But nobody else does. They just don't care. They don't do anything. They just stand there with their thumb up their butt like fucking Tomlinson. God damn, I hate them!"

"Welcome to the real world. You're on your own out here." Can't depend on anybody; cuts off your options. Run alone and you're free.

Rain dropped his hands into his lap and stared down at them. His shoulders sagged. "Then what can you do? Give up? Die?"

A bitter, humorless half-smile and a snort. "Not until you get me where I'm going. You don't run out on me, Rain." Snake could see himself, twenty-six years earlier, in the kid. He'd asked himself the same questions. "You want to die, die. Your decision. But if you do, they win."

Rain's shoulders straightened again, and his bent head came up. He looked directly into Snake's single cold blue eye. "You hit the button. You shut it all down; you fucked all of 'em. You won!"

"A skirmish. Not the war. They're still out there." Snake paused, and a dark satisfaction crept into his voice. "But I evened the odds a little. Yeah, like you said, let 'em all die. We're going the same way, Rain. Different reasons, maybe. Same target." There was a tentative question in the intent look Rain was giving him, and Snake answered it. "Carry your own weight, though; I travel light."

From where Snake sat, it looked as if Rain was thinking about it, but at least the boy wasn't going belly-up on him. He'd won one. Maybe they would make it to this bolt-hole of Rain's. The grim line of Snake's mouth softened, though he did not go so far as to smile. He rose stiffly, favoring his bad leg. "All that shit goin' on up there, could've ripped something loose. Want'ta take a look at it for me?" He reached down, pulled out the medkit, and extended it in Rain's direction, then unbuckled his belt, skinned out of his jeans and stretched out on his bunk.

The bandage didn't appear bloody. Snake watched as Rain carefully peeled the dressing back and found that the stitches had pulled sharply, but hadn't torn free of the flesh. The wound was reddened, but sound. Rain cleaned away minor blood seepage and rebandaged the front and rear wounds, smearing them with more antibiotic salve. The tube of yellow goo was almost empty.

"Looks a lot better," Rain said, and started putting the medkit back together.

"Good."

"Suppose Captain Tomlinson'd feel any better if he knew about the satellites?" Rain asked as he snapped the lid closed on the medkit. Snake got the impression the boy was feeling a little bad about his run-in with the skipper.

"No. And don't you tell him."

"But, hell, Snake... you got the fuckers who screwed up his ocean. He probably wouldn't care that the bluebacks aren't worth anything any more. He'd probably be happy."

"Bullshit."

"You don't trust anyone, do you?"

Snake sighed inwardly. "No. Especially when I've got this big a price on my head. How long d'you think it'll take Tomlinson to figure out he can retire if he hands us over?" Rain startled, and Snake's mouth twitched in amusement. "Yeah, you too. Accessory after the fact. Aiding and abetting." Rain remained silent, a thoughtful expression on his face. Snake finished pulling up his pants and leaned back on the bunk. "I'm going back to sleep." The more of this damned cruise I can spend unconscious, the better. A vagrant thought followed: There was a dream.... He dismissed it, and closed his eyes.

Rain slipped out of the cabin and back up on deck. He was too restless to sit watching Snake try to sleep, too distracted by Snake's body so close to his, as he tried to sort through his scattered thoughts and emotions. He stood at the railing, watching the curl of foam as greasy waves slid past the bow. The smell of fish, the sound of the gulls and the crew, had faded. The pale, blank sky and darker-gray sea were a silent, luminous bubble floating in nothingness.

He hadn't really thought about what a danger Snake Plissken would be to his own community if he brought the outlaw back with him to Napa, and he had no way now of getting in touch

with them to bring it up before the Meeting. All the phones were out. Maybe he should leave Snake in San Francisco, go on alone. He wondered how things were going at home. He was late from his delivery run — very late. He knew they would be worried about him. But with everything that had happened, they would have plenty of worries of their own, too. There would be refugees spreading out from the cities soon, if they weren't already, looking for food and a safe place, or a place to plunder. His people would need him and his crossbow.

If he could persuade Snake to stay with them, Snake would be a real asset in defending Rain's home group. He was a strong man, skilled in weapons, decisive. Rain remembered the scene at the beach with Captain Tomlinson. Snake was a man others would follow, if he were willing to lead. Rain continued the thought into half-reluctant fantasy, remembering the alpha-wolf authority in Snake's cold blue stare, remembering the beauty and power of Snake's body. He let himself, for a brief moment, imagine his mouth on that impressive cock.... He felt his own body begin to respond. No; there was no time for that now. He shoved the thought aside.

But here Snake was, after all. He had shut down the machine. He had provided a new beginning, a chance for Earth to heal from the savage wounds humanity had inflicted on Her bleeding body. How could those who had pledged to fight for Mother Gaia refuse to give sanctuary to the man who had given Her, for the first time in centuries of Man's destructive hegemony, a faint, green-sprouting hope? The Group could not turn Snake away. He would take Snake with him to Napa, if Snake was willing to go. After that, it was up to Snake.

He wondered how Snake Plissken felt about gays.

By early the next morning, the Afternoon's Delight had cleared the deserted ruins of Carmel and Monterey and was coming up on the outskirts of San Francisco. Snake made his way above decks to watch their approach to The City from the starboard railing. Highway 1 was an occasional crumpled streak of silver visible through gaps in the sheer cliffs. He had dreamed again, but he could remember nothing of it except jumbled images of fire and destruction and a strange sense of satisfaction. Fog drifted, thickening to a slight drizzle, hiding the shore. The bombing and a major earthquake in 2010, an echo of the one farther south in L.A., had decimated the once magnificent and exciting city he remembered. Snake's thoughts turned to the last time he had been here, to the hummer station and Taylor. Sadness crept out from a place he usually kept under guard, and engulfed him. Sarge. Only man he could ever really trust, the only one who had not run out on him in the end. Snake felt a cold sense of loneliness and loss. It had been sixteen years since his partner's death at the hands of the blackbellies, but the pain was as fresh as the day he had stood watching Bill Taylor bleed to death on the station floor. Violent anger swirled and his hands tightened on the railing.

Time was deceptive. Sixteen years was an eternity, over in an instant. More than twenty years of fighting and running. With Taylor it had been ... not glorious, but certainly less cold. Isolation had distilled the rage and focused it, but to what purpose? He could recite the names of his men killed, years ago, as he had done so many times. Each name was a promise, a pledge not to forget or forgive, but Snake knew that would never bring the men of Black

Light back, nor would they be properly remembered as long as the system that had destroyed them and created the outlaw survived. There would be no justice until he brought it down, or died trying.

He remembered Rain's triumphant cry: "You got the fuckers!" Had he? No. Life wasn't a movie where the victor walked triumphantly away, ending the tale. Life went on. The world had not ended when he pushed the button. It was only a matter of time until the survivors crawled out from under the rubble of technology and began again. He would have traded ten years of his life, just then, for a ten-minute talk with Taylor. Rain was too young, too new — untested and uncertain — but the rage was there, true and strong. The boy was headed in the right direction. Maybe they could make the journey, or part of it, together. Or was that just the loneliness talking? Was he willing to allow the boy to follow him, just to have someone to talk to? The ache rose dangerously, threatening his equilibrium. From habit, he turned it into anger. He felt the darkness rise within him, expand to fill him, then collapse like a black hole to a burning core of rage. He'd need that strength later, but for now back it went into the empty places where it lived, alone. He smoothed his mood back into contemplation of the foggy San Francisco coast.

Rain came silently to stand beside him. Snake flicked a glance at the younger man. "Hell of a fuckin' world," Snake said softly, pushing the last remnants of his mood back into their accustomed place. "Place is for shit, now."

"Yeah," Rain said. "The City used to be a beautiful place, back in the old days when they had hippies and disco and freedom. My grandfather told me all the stories. He and my grandmother lived there then; that's where my mom was born. They named her Free Bird, after the song." He sighed. "City's a real wreck now. Ever been there?"

Snake made a low sound in his throat but didn't answer. Rain gave him a puzzled look and continued. "The USPF took over, and then the army re-garrisoned the Presidio, and shut down the national park. Everybody else has pretty much either cleared out or dug in. Crazies have Golden Gate Park. We'll have to go through the Park, down Haight, up Market, all the way to the Ferry Building to get across the Bay. Place is crawling with police. But I know some people, a place we can get supplies. We get our weapons and bicycles from them. If we get separated, go to the DMZ Group: 45 Haight Street. Near Market. Tell 'em you were with me and ask for Josh. They'll get you out of the City."

Snake looked at the young man with new respect. "We'd better get our shit up here. Tomlinson said he'll be dropping us off at Ocean Beach."

[Part Two](#)
[Back](#)

CHAPTER TWO

The Afternoon's Delight's rowboat dropped them off at a dilapidated dock below the abandoned Cliff House. Snake and Rain watched as the ship set sail and disappeared into the drizzle to round Point Lobos, heading for her next drop-off point somewhere on the overgrown shore of Lincoln Park. They scrambled over rocks and down to sandy beach below the tall concrete wall skirting the highway. Rain led the way to a dark opening among the tumbled boulders. "There's a little cave in there," he said. "It floods at high tide. Too bad; otherwise we could sleep over here and start out in the morning." Cautiously, he checked inside, while Snake watched the flat plain of open sand curving southward, then he called out, "O.K., Snake; it's clear."

Snake entered and found himself in a small open space, not much higher than his head, with a round opening like a porthole at the opposite end which let in enough light for them to see clearly. They stopped to arm themselves and prepare for the next leg of their journey. Snake checked and loaded the Magnums, settling his gunbelt into a familiar, reassuring weight around his hips. He snapped the leg straps, then checked his boot knife, flipping open the safety strap for quick access. *Not enough; he needed an automatic.* He watched as Rain took his crossbow from its case and braced the bowstring. The young man slid his throwers, small dart-like knives, three to a side, into their holders on upper sleeves of his olive-drab nylon jacket, checked the shurikens and wire garrote in his belt-holder, slid the pair of slender boot knives and the heavy commando blade at his waist into their sheaths. Finally, he unpacked his crossbow bolts and strung them in their quiver at his hip. Snake wondered how good Rain was at using all his pretty toys. He expected he would find out soon enough.

"We have to go through the Park," Rain said. Snake nodded. To the north, between the Park and the Army garrison in the Presidio, were impassible, jumbled and fire-blackened ruins left by the 2010 quake. To the south was the walled enclave of the Sunset, patrolled by private security and sheltered by air-scrubbers from the low-lying "insanity fog" off gas-filled ocean water that regularly drenched the homeless encampments along the beach and inland. Despite the gas-crazies who infested it, the product of war, poverty, and the fog, Golden Gate Park was their best route into the City. Rain and Snake settled their pack bags on their backs and moved out onto the paved strip that ran along the beach. Snake noted that his leg was still sore, but stronger. He settled into a steady pace, concentrating on the path ahead, which ran between low pastel buildings on the left and dunes topped with ice-plant and bunch-grass on his right. Rain automatically fell into step behind, covering Snake and walking rearguard.

Several blocks from their starting point, a tall shape like a giant saltshaker stood at the entrance of the Park. As they came closer, Snake could see through the gray haze that it was a windmill. For a nervous moment, he wondered if the fog was getting to him, and he stopped, gazing up at it, then glanced over at Rain as the young man came up to stand next to him. "Windmill?" Snake asked.

"Windmill," Rain assured him.

Snake relaxed. A rare, antic grin spread across his face as he contemplated the incongruous sight, and his hand fell to the butt of his gun. He glanced around. Broken and forgotten, the windmill stood in an unkempt stretch of lawn, surrounded by weeds and graffiti-covered debris, with no sign of people anywhere in sight. Snake unholstered one of his Magnums, raised it, sighted at the tower. He stood for a long minute and finally squeezed the trigger. The hammer clicked harmlessly on the safety, and Snake slowly reholstered the weapon.

Rain stared at him and fingered his crossbow. "What are you doing?"

"Tilting at windmills. Been accused of it for years."

"What?"

"Never mind. C'mon, Sancho. We've got a park to cross."

Rain shrugged and took up the rear again. Snake walked point, setting the pace to favor his bad leg and keep them from getting separated. They followed the asphalt trail created by the old road, an open track between trees. Crazies were usually too confused to plan an ambush from cover. Snake was more afraid of a disorganized rush, and wanted space around him. He could feel the adrenaline tingle, the heightened awareness danger always created in him, sharpening all his senses. He heard occasional sounds in the distance, and caught a hint of wood-smoke, but if anyone was tracking them, there was no sign. Golden Gate Park lay in ruins: wind- and quake-topped trees rotted on tangled grass and brush; here and there were thickets of dead, yellow exotics that could not survive on fog and neglect after the gardeners had abandoned them. He saw no evidence of birds or wildlife. The sun, heading toward noon, burned a brighter, round patch of glare in the overcast sky above.

A loud crashing and crackling of brush brought them up short, alert, weapons at the ready. Several yards in front of them, a shaggy brown head parted the tangle of vegetation at the roadside. Heavy, wooly shoulders followed as slowly, with a certain massive dignity, a full-grown buffalo bull stepped out onto the asphalt. A nearly-healed wound cut across the animal's side behind the hump. The bull lowered his head and snorted at them, shaking his horns. Snake raised his gun and sighted, wondering if even the .357 had enough power to drop a buffalo.

"Don't," Rain said. "He just wants to be left alone."

"It's... a buffalo..." Snake said, his voice low.

Rain moved up to stand beside Snake. "Probably from the paddock. They had a herd of bison here in the Park. Just stand still and wait him out. He'll move on."

No problem. Snake's survival training had not covered half a ton of pissed off pot roast.

They waited and the beast finally wandered across the path and into the opposite tangle of vegetation. As they continued on their way, Rain mused, "Poor guy. Looked like

somebody's been trying to have him for dinner. I hope he makes it. I'll bet he's hungry; so much of the good grass dying off. Damn crazies. They'll probably get him eventually." He paused, then added, "I wonder what's happening to the zoo animals. I hope to hell they got out of all this. Maybe the SPCA's on top of it. Good people."

Snake trudged onward in silence. He suspected Rain would not appreciate his opinion of the SPCA and didn't want to waste energy to arguing about it.

Farther down the old road they heard the sound of motion and human voices drifting through the trees. Snake dismissed thoughts of escaped tigers and held up a hand, but Rain had already stopped and brought up his crossbow. They advanced cautiously around a curve. To their left was a small lake; to their right a homeless encampment sprawled tents, tarps, blankets, shopping carts piled high with nameless flotsam, across trampled earth. Here and there the hulk of a gutted automobile squatted among the debris. Dark figures in shapeless layers of clothing, some of them small enough to be children, huddled on the ground or picked their way over and through piles of trash.

Dogs wandered everywhere; a few began barking as Rain and Snake came into sight. It couldn't be because the watchdogs scented them, Snake thought ironically; the stench of human and animal waste, garbage, and unwashed humanity must paralyze the olfactory nerves of anything within fifty yards of the place.

The inhabitants of the shanty-town watched them as the two men threaded their way through the obstacles on the pavement. Most of them stared apathetically, their faces blanked by hunger or gas or some other, more private, misery. Snake stepped around them with impatient unconcern, as if they were pieces of paper trash blown across his path. Some shrank back at the sight of their weapons. One large man rose from beside a burned-out auto chassis. "Hey -- you with the patch!" He pulled a kitchen knife from his belt and advanced on Snake. "Gimme your money!" Two or three others stood up, moving in their direction also.

Wordlessly, Snake drew and fired in one swift motion. The man with the knife went down and the rest backed off. The crowd melted away on each side of Snake and Rain as the pair continued down the road to the edge of the encampment and out onto unobstructed asphalt. Rain kept glancing back, watching their rear. A slender shape detached from the group and padded after them. "Snake. One behind us." Rain turned, raising the crossbow.

"Don't shoot!"

The girl came closer. Snake turned and stood, alert, covering Rain.

"I want to come with you. Please take me with you." Unfocused dark eyes dominated a pointed face with blade-like cheekbones above hollows, framed in long, matted hair. A hand like a claw clutched a filthy quilt around her shoulders. She was clearly starving. "At least take me as far as Stanyan... I'm scared to go alone."

"Why?" Snake rasped. He wanted any information on this hellish place he could gather.

"The trees! They come down on you! I hear them talking at night, planning to kill me.... You can fight them. They're afraid of your guns." She opened the quilt, exposing her skeletal body. Her flesh was larval-white between streaks of dirt, the insides of her thighs to the knees chapped and wet. She thrust one hand between her legs, the quilt slipping to the ground, then held out sticky fingers toward them, smiling in a parody of seduction. "Look! I am the Vessel of Perfect Love -- lie with me, and be purified. Then the trees can't hurt you either...."

Snake's stomach turned over. He fired and the ground exploded a foot in front of the girl. Her eyes and her mouth opened wide. "No! You have to take me to Stanyan!"

Snake fired again, sending fragments of dirt and gravel in the girl's direction, peppering her body like buckshot. "Get out of here," he snarled. She snatched up her quilt and fled back in the direction of the encampment. Snake watched until he was sure there were no more from the encampment following them, then turned and went on down the path as Rain took up rearguard again. "Fuckin' crazy bitch," he muttered, then turned a lopsided half-smile on Rain. "If you want some, I can wait."

"God, no!" Rain said fervently. Snake's grin widened. After a minute, Rain broke in again with, "Wonder if there was anything to that bit about 'trees coming down on you'? I've heard rumors there's a big group over by Stow Lake somewhere that jump people going through the Park. It's just up ahead." He shifted his crossbow into the ready position. Snake turned his complete attention back to the tangle of trees and bushes encroaching on the path. adrenaline sang in him.

The words were hardly out of Rain's mouth when several figures exploded from the grove of trees ahead and charged at them, yelling. Snake took an instant inventory of their weaponry as he reacted: no guns; mainly sticks and pipes, a few knives. He heard Rain's bowstring snap behind his left ear, and the one in front of the pack fell in a gurgle of blood, a bolt through his throat. Snake mowed a semicircular path and then began picking off the remainder. The flash and roar of the Magnums drowned out the *thwick* of Rain's weapons. Three of the attackers made it to hand-to-hand range. A smash to the head leveled one, and a quick body-blow sent the other to the ground. He made a last lunge at Snake before a well-placed kick and a final shot disposed of him permanently. Snake turned to see Rain pulling his commando blade from the body of the third man. Two more lay still with Rain's throwing knives in them. Snake watched as the rest of the group scattered and fled, disappearing into the trees, then he lowered his guns. They had a breathing space. "You O.K.?" he asked.

"Sure." Rain cleaned the blade of his larger knife on his victim's tattered shirt and sheathed it, then began methodically collecting his lighter throwing knives and steel tipped arrows from the bodies of the dead. He gave the bloodied metal a quick wipe down and replaced the weapons in their holders. His manner was calm and professional, his movements economical, as if he had done this many times before. As he approached one body, it began to move. With a lunge, the wounded man rolled toward his stomach, struggled to his hands and knees, and began to drag himself away. Blood left a trail on the pavement behind him. With no change of expression, Rain took three long strides after him, pulled back his boot, kicked the man in the head to stun him. The injured man collapsed again, face down on the path. Rain knelt behind him, unsheathed his belt-knife, and in one smooth motion, pulled up the man's head by one hand in the matted hair, and, with his blade in the other, slit the man's throat. The body stopped moving. Rain shoved it over on its back with a rough push of his boot, then with considerable effort, tugged his bolt loose from the man's shattered chest, checked the point, wiped the arrow on the dead man's pant leg, and replaced the bolt in his quiver. The dead man's chest was a mass of blood and grass. Calmly, Rain walked over to one of the other bodies and finished cleaning his blade on that one's clothing, then resheathed it. *Can't afford to waste his arrows*, Snake thought to himself. Snake had his answer to more than one question

Snake shrugged out of his pack, dug into it for his ammunition, and reloaded. Cleaning would have to wait until he had more time. He settled the pack on his shoulders again and rose. "Let's move," he growled. Rain nodded, and they headed off down the path at a faster pace. As they neared the east end of the Park, buildings multiplied. Snake

considered holing up in one for the night. They passed the white bones of the Conservatory, its glass shattered by the 2010 quake, its plants long gone, and circled down across the open space, past deserted tennis courts, and through a last dense tangle of trees and spiky brush out onto a hilltop. Below them was a wide meadow, now mostly mud and trampled earth, and on the other side, a tall red-sandstone building.

They made their way over to it, but as Snake's foot hit the first step up to the building's door, a warning shot sang past his head and a rasping voice shouted, "Go away! Get outta here!" Snake decided not to dispute possession of the hall; there were easier ways to find a place to sleep.

Snake and Rain went on, under the highway overpass and out on the eastern edge of the Park. In the graying twilight, a few dispirited figures huddled on bare earth near an empty concrete pond. They ignored the travelers who trudged up the last steps to street level, where Haight and Stanyan made a wide intersection. Guttled remnants of a supermarket and a McDonald's dominated the corners opposite the Park. Snake looked up critically at the sky. It would be full dark within an hour or so. "You know anywhere to hole up for the night?" he asked.

"Not around here," Rain answered. "We'll just have to look."

Most of the buildings in the area had been occupied and barricaded, but a short walk down Stanyan, past Waller, brought them to a deserted shop with a boarded-up bay window and a tattered blue awning which read ...AL...CRACK.... Gun drawn, Snake shoved open the door. Inside was a narrow series of rooms leading to a tile-floored center section, and, beyond it, another room with the back door and a small, grimy window. Against one wall stood a big wooden desk which had evidently been too heavy for looters to move. Out of habit, Snake flipped the light-switch. Nothing happened. He unbolted the back door and looked out onto a concrete slab which had been the back yard of the old Victorian. There was no sign of anyone occupying this former store.

"Wait. I have an idea," Rain said. He slipped out the door and returned a minute later with a battered garbage can lid. As Snake relocked the series of bolts and chains up the back door, Rain took the lid into the center section and set it down on an open section of tile. "We can light a fire in this thing. It ought to be pretty fireproof. Not much heat, but at least we can have a little light." He pried up a couple of loose boards, pounded them into smaller pieces with the hilt of his commando knife, and, borrowing a match from Snake, lit a small blaze in the improvised hearth. By the wavering light of the fire and the last fading daylight from the back window and the front door, they made a survey of the rooms, picking their way carefully over the sagging and broken floorboards. A dank urine odor and occasional rustling noises in the corners suggested rats. Empty dog and cat food bags, bottles of shampoo and flea spray, broken boxes, cat trees, littered the rows of shelves in the front section. Pegs for collars and leashes were empty, looted for useful lengths of nylon and leather. One section held a shoulder-high stack of unopened blue-and-white bags of cat litter. Snake and Rain piled them into a windbreak-cum-barricade along the bottom of the front door and windows. Neither the icy night wind off the ocean nor any unannounced visitors would get in easily over the pile.

Snake checked the bathroom. No, he didn't want to use it. Picking up a final bag of the litter, Snake carried it to the back office and poured it into a large plastic litterbox in a sheltered area, to create sanitary facilities that were much safer and more comfortable than the concrete slab out back. A search of the dusty pegboard wall uncovered a number of fluffy cat toys in cellophane bags. Snake shook one, listening to the merry jingle of its little bell, then dropped a handful of them next to the cat box. Musical toilet paper.

He headed back toward the front section. Rain was arranging empty pet food bags behind another improvised windbreak of cat litter around the little fireplace. The insulation and padding made a serviceable sleeping area. Snake sat down, leaning against the wall of bags, and the two opened their packs, retrieving bottles of water and cold rations packed aboard the Afternoon's Delight that morning. Rain stacked a few more boards on the fire, and settled back himself. The two chewed companionably in silence for a while.

"Must've been a pet store," Snake finally ventured.

"Pet supply store," Rain answered. "They refused to sell live animals. Man who owned it ran the business into the ground helping animals of the homeless people in the Park. Food. Vet bills. I used to stop here for supplies for my dog once in a while, when I was in the City, until I decided it was too dangerous to bring her with me any more. Animal Crackers."

"What?"

"Animal Crackers. The name on the awning outside. Good place, 'til it fell apart. Craziest must have taken the food." He pulled up the hood on his jacket. "Damn, it's cold down here."

Snake grunted acknowledgement. He cleared a place on the tile floor, pulled out his equipment, and began cleaning and reloading his guns. Rain followed suit, checking over his bow and removing the residue left by his cursory wipe-down of his knives and arrow-points in the Park. They worked easily in the flickering firelight, both professional enough to handle their weaponry by touch. Snake remembered his practice at field-stripping, cleaning, reassembling, and loading machineguns, blindfolded. This was a piece of cake. When he had finished, he leaned back and lit one of his dwindling supply of Ormsby's cigarettes. He took a long drag, letting tension ease out of him with the smoke. "You're good," he prompted.

"I've been on Security at Napa since I was apprenticed there four years ago. We foster out at about fifteen or sixteen. Got my first bow when I was nine, back home in Humboldt." Rain was thoughtful for a moment. "Made my first kill when I was seventeen. Raiders. I took down two of them. Didn't puke 'til I went to collect the bolts."

Snake laughed, very softly. "I was nineteen. Nailed a guy in a firefight. I didn't heave, but I relived that shot for about a week. Kept seein' him come at me." He took a final puff and ground out his cigarette on the tile floor. "I'll stand first watch. Wake you in four hours." He indicated Rain's low-tech winding

wristwatch. "Let me borrow that." Rain surrendered his timepiece without argument and curled up on the dog food sacks to sleep until it was his turn to stand guard. Snake sat on the hard pile of cat litter, moving into that Zen-like state of patient watchfulness that he remembered from so many other missions, letting his mind float while his senses kept watch. He was feeling better about this trip.

The next morning, Rain outlined their route: "We'll go directly down Haight Street. We can get breakfast at the street market. It should be fairly safe. USPF's not popular in this neighborhood; tend to lose a couple of men every time they make a sweep. Snipers. They don't come down here any more often than they have to." He flashed a humorless smile. "DMZ's down at the place where Haight turns into Market Street".

They left the abandoned supply store, turning right down Stanyan. In the gray morning light, the ruined neighborhood was a jumble of crumbling Victorian relics and makeshift shelters that reminded Snake of his trip down Sunset Boulevard in L.A. They turned onto Haight, and Snake saw that the street was beginning to fill with an assortment of people emerging from boarded-up storefronts and apartment buildings. Tables were being brought out and set up, blankets and quilts laid out on the cracked cement sidewalks and hung up to form improvised booths, colorful banners and a wild assortment of goods materializing in the cold morning air. "Coffee! Morning coffee!" sang a voice farther down the street. Snake moved toward it, Rain following. Over a fire, a heavysset girl was stirring a huge vat of black liquid that gave off a familiar enticing aroma. "Ten dollars a cup! Coffee!" Snake handed the woman a crumpled blueback for two cups of the bitter brew and a pair of suspicious-looking flat pastries. Wordlessly, he handed a cup and one of the buns to Rain, and they settled on a broken window ledge to eat and study the crowd.

Snake caught what he thought was recognition in an occasional glance from the motley figures passing them, but they sauntered on, ignoring the two men. This was a neighborhood where people minded their own business, where Snake Plissken the Outlaw was, perhaps, still a folk hero. It was people like these who had helped and sheltered him, casually, clandestinely, all across the country, and allowed him to slip out of the grasp of the blackbellies time and again, an inch ahead of the net. No Police Channel, no cars or computers or electronics: all they had were rumors, a technology no more advanced than that of the old Wild West that had made a hero of men like Billy the Kid and Butch Cassidy. The satellite pulse had made no difference in their lives. They probably hadn't even heard about the new price on his head. Snake allowed himself to relax, fractionally, and sipped the coffee.

The black brew wasn't quite the worst he had ever had, but it was definitely in the running. Snake wondered where the water for it had come from, then decided he didn't want to know. At least it was hot and strong. The rolls were heavy, gluey, and tasteless, with only a trace of sweetness, filled with anonymous crunchy flecks. Snake picked out some of the larger bits and flicked them away without examining them. He swallowed the last mouthful and slid off his perch to continue his journey. Rain followed down the narrowing open space between vendors of a flea-market mixture of old clothes, household goods, crafts, food, various medicinal and recreational drugs, toys, and less identifiable items.

Snake heard a faint bell-like sound coming down the street toward them, joined, at intervals, by a kind of sing-song chanting. He cocked his head, scanning the area for the source. "*-shna, Krishna, Hare, Hare. Hare Rama.....*" the words gradually became clear amid the clang of silvery hand cymbals and the beat of a small drum. Two men dressed in orange robes covered by shabby coats and blanket capes came toward them, keeping time to their instruments in a shuffling dance-step, while two more followed them pushing a large wheeled cart.

The little group stopped, and people crowded around them as they ladled out mounds of a vegetable-rice mixture from the big, steaming, metal vats on the cart into the various containers thrust out toward them. An appetizing smell of warm cooking spices, together with an undertone of patchouli, floated on the air. As Snake and Rain reached the spot, one of the group, a tall man with a shaved head and tired eyes, greeted them with, "Good morning, Brothers. Would you share Lord Krishna's good *Prasadim* with us?" Snake walked on without answering. A moment later, he looked back to see Rain in conversation with the man, putting a handful of bluebacks into his palm. "Rain! C'mon!" Snake called.

Rain pressed the man's hands between his in farewell, then hurried to catch up to Snake. "It's the Hare Krishnas. They feed the homeless people here every day for free. I didn't know they were still around." He paused, then added, "I always used to give them something if I ran into them. I like their ideas on animals."

Snake snorted derisively and lengthened his stride. *Crazies. Couldn't even blame this bunch on the gas.* Rain opened his mouth, then closed it again as if reconsidering whatever he had been planning to say. He trotted after Snake, caught up with him, and the two continued side by side, each absorbed in his own thoughts. Snake threaded his way between blankets spread on the sidewalk, littered with junk jewelry and kitchen pots. He passed a table set up with rows and rows of shriveled strips of meat threaded on skewers, and a hand-lettered sign which advertised: RAT JERKY CAT STRIPS PIGEON JERKY TERIYAKI. Below that smaller print read: Rats: Street \$5.00, Building \$8.00, Bakery \$10.00 FRESH KILLED or SMOKE DRIED." He moved on.

As they reached Haight and Ashbury, a girl in a long tie-dyed skirt and tunic and sandals approached them. She had a good-sized reticulated python around her shoulders. She held out a dirty hand, "Spare change?" Snake handed her a blueback and grated, "Feed your snake." as he walked on.

Rain smiled. "Into snakes, huh?"

Snake nodded once. "Had some when I was kid. Gave 'em all away, except one." He allowed thoughts of the sleek white cobra to surface, briefly, then put her back with the other memories. Her faded image remained on his body. That was enough. "She was killed." His flat tone discouraged further inquiry.

A gang of street punks blasted past them on rollerblades and skateboards, nearly mowing down a disheveled woman standing in their path. "Where's my birdies? Where's my..." " she called as they swirled around her. "We ate 'em, bitch!" yelled the leader as they skated on, laughing. Rain glared after them, then hurried to catch up with Snake again.

As they moved down toward the intersection with Market Street, buildings began to look less shabby, better repaired, cleaner. Sidewalk stalls gave way to regular stores opening for business, and the people walking along began to look as if they had somewhere else to sleep beside the sidewalk. A quick glance into some of the open doorways showed shelves with many blank spaces. Without trucks and planes, the system of distribution was breaking down, but shopkeepers and customers seemed to be joining in a pretense that everything was normal. This was The City, where the end of the world was no more than a minor inconvenience.

Ahead, a massive pile of rubble loomed where an overpass had collapsed across Haight, blocking the street with tilted pieces of concrete-and-rebar. Snake and Rain clambered over the remnants, another victim of the 2010 quake, working their way from foothold to foothold. They paused at the top of the pile, in the lee of a tall gray slab covered with layers of competing graffiti, to catch their breath and check out the territory below.

On the other side, a narrow path had been cleared down the center of the street, rubble piled neatly behind sandbags and coils of razor wire. A narrower path led to a group of tall Victorian apartments behind a two-story wrought-iron fence topped with spear-point spikes. The building on each side of it had been ripped down to create cleared space, and the razor wire continued in an impenetrable tangle around the block of flats, creating an isolated, highly defensible tower. The street was deserted. "There it is," Rain said; "DMZ."

Snake grunted. It looked as if Rain's buddies were prepared for unfriendly visitors.

They worked their way down the other side of the rubble and up to the locked iron gate. Three levels of curtained and shaded bay windows fronted the old wooden building. Two sets of stairs led down into a pair of miniature cement courtyards where doors indicated basement flats. Between them, a third staircase led upward, like a wooden drawbridge, to another pair of carved doors behind a columned porch. A locked steel lattice gated the doors and bars covered the windows. The glass behind the bars was unbroken, and the number over the door read 45.

A row of white buttons set into the side of the gate indicated the building had formerly had an electronic security-buzzer system. Above them, a bell had been attached to a chain pull. Rain gave it a determined tug, and a loud clanging announced their presence. A window on the left center flat slid up a few inches, and the barrel of a high-powered rifle poked through the lace curtains that hid the interior from view. A deep voice called, "Who is it?"

Snake stood still, his hands visible. Rain pushed back the hood of his jacket, revealing his face, and called back, "Wolf! It's Rain! I've got someone with me."

"My god, it is Rain!" The rifle barrel jerked impatiently in Snake's direction. "You! Keep your hands where we can see 'em." More faintly, "Michael, get the door." The front door opened, and a slightly pudgy younger man with curly reddish hair emerged, carrying a machine pistol. Snake noticed that the man was wearing a wide leather collar with a small lock, in addition to an ordinary dark-blue sweatshirt and pair of jeans. His snub-nosed face was intent. Covered from two points, Snake and Rain stood still while Michael unfastened the series of locks.

The young man showed them up the flight of steps and into a windowless dirty-white hallway. It was probably eleven feet high, but Snake could have spanned it easily with his arms spread. A door in the blank wall opened, and Michael waved them into a long narrow room with a small marble fireplace. An arched alcove to their right opened onto the window they had seen from the street. A sagging green sofa stood against one wall; the others were lined floor to ceiling with unpainted wood bookcases stuffed with a jumble of volumes. Papers, books, magazines, cups and glasses, dishes, gun parts, and an assortment of boxes covered mismatched armchairs and littered a rug of some indeterminate color obscured by years of grime, and smelling faintly of mold. Through a pair of curtains on the left, Snake caught a glimpse of a metal four-poster bed and, farther back, a linoleum-floored kitchen. The flat's only other window was beside a back door in the kitchen's wall.

A muscular Black man faced them, rifle in hand, smiling broadly. "Rain. We thought you'd be up north by now." He turned and gave the other newcomer a critical examination. His expression passed through confusion and dawning recognition, to disbelief and, finally, reserved welcome. "Snake Plissken. What are you doing in San Francisco?" Without waiting for an answer, he continued, "Toymaker will definitely want to see you. Josh, too." He lowered the rifle. "I'm Wolf. What can we do for you, Snake?"

"We need guns - automatics - and ammo. Supplies. Transit. We need to get across the bay," Snake answered.

"He's going -" Rain began

Wolf held up a restraining hand. "Don't tell me. Need to know only. I'm just the welcoming committee. The rest of DMZ is over at the Mint. I'll take you."

Snake regarded Wolf with new respect. Subtle signs in the man's bearing and movement, his clipped, authoritative speech patterns, said "military." He had the same aura of relaxed command Lieutenant Plissken had responded to in Bob Hauk. "Special Forces?" he asked.

"Marines." A look of understanding passed between the two men. "Let's go," Wolf said. "Michael, keep an eye on things until I get back. Nobody gets in."

"Yes, Sir," Michael answered softly, lowering his head a little and looking down. Snake was puzzled; that was not a military response. Something was going on here that he did not quite understand. He shrugged mentally. *More need to know*, he decided, and ignored it. He and Rain followed Wolf down the front steps, and Michael locked the series of bolts and padlocks on the gate behind them.

They walked the block to Market and took a right, Wolf moving easily with an assault rifle slung openly over his shoulder. Snake gritted his teeth and lengthened his stride to keep pace, trying not to limp visibly. His wounded leg throbbed, and his whole body ached with fatigue from the exertions of the last two days. Rain glanced at him, frowning, but looked away again at Snake's angry glare.

A few more blocks' walk brought them to a large, square, yellow-brick building set on a rise in the middle of an empty space. It was surrounded by heavy cyclone fencing topped with more razor wire. Wolf unlocked the main gate and motioned them inside, but as Snake took a step toward the path leading to the front doors of the building, Wolf again held out a warning arm. "Uh-uh...mined. Follow me." He led them around to a side entrance, where another of the improvised warning systems was attached to the doorjamb.

Wolf sounded the clanging bell, and a minute later a metal plate in the door slid open. "O.K., Wolf," came a female voice, followed by the click and scrape of more locks and bolts being slid back. The door opened to reveal a muscular middle-aged woman in black jeans and T-shirt. "Two to see Josh," Wolf said. The woman nodded and stepped out of their way.

The interior was dark and windowless. Wolf picked up a lighted lantern from a table to one side of the door and led them up a flight of stairs and down a long passageway to another door, which opened into a much wider hall with floors and dado of marble squares and tall polished-oak doors alternating with high, narrow windows framed in elaborate woodwork.

It was an elegant, official Victorian interior, but it had clearly seen better days: the floors were gouged and scraped, the woodwork chipped, and the old plaster covered with large and small cracks. The late-afternoon light through the dusty windows was already fading. A few turns brought the trio to a large corner office overlooking the building's front yard. Wolf knocked once and leaned into the room. "Josh? It's Rain and...a friend of his. I thought you'd be interested in meeting him." Snake could hear the amusement in the Black man's voice.

"Welllll...Rain! How're your people? You guys were here a month ago. What'd you run out of?" The speaker was a heavyset man with a mass of salt and pepper hair and a short beard, also dressed in black T-shirt and jeans. He was buried in the drawer of a massive executive's desk piled high with papers and charts, his attention on whatever he was seeking in the cluttered interior.

When Rain did not answer, he glanced up, and froze with an expression of surprise on

his round face. A second later, he broke into a delighted grin. "Snaaaake PLISSSkennnn....!" The voice had undertones of a vanished Brooklyn. "MAJOR Whomper of Federal Ass, baddest man in America, and Friend of the Revolution!" This last was delivered in a stagy, fake-Russian accent. "Like, Seriously Irresponsible Threat to Society. Yes! Thought they had you for sure, in Cleveland. What can we do for you, Snake?" Snake stared at him for a moment, nonplussed, then repeated what he had said to Wolf. "Piece of cake," Josh said, gesturing expansively. "DMZ Supply, Outfitters of Expeditions and thorn in the side of the USPF, at your service. We have everything you need. C'mon downstairs and meet the Toymaker. He'll fix you up."

"I'd better be getting back," Wolf said; "Michael's by himself until John and Terry come in at seven." He headed back the way he had come, as Rain and Snake followed Josh down several flights of stairs into a large open workroom lined with metal shelves and filled with tables and workbenches full of weapons and mechanical gadgets in various stages of construction. The small basement windows were covered in blackout cloth, but the room was brightly lit with numerous chemlamps, while a wood fire in the Victorian hearth added some further light and a considerable amount of heat to one end of the long rectangle. The air smelled of machine oil and Pine-Sol. Near the fire, a slender man with thick, dark, shoulder-length hair was seated at one of the benches, probing delicately at the interior of a handgun, a frown of intent concentration on his face. As they entered, he lifted his head with a sharp, bird-like motion.

"Daniel," Josh cried jovially, "We have company. Snake Plissken! Came all the way from Los Angeles to see us, to get some guns and passage through the City."

"Glorioski! Hang on a minute..." Methodically, the man replaced the lid on the tube he was using, wiped his hands on a white rag, and rose to his feet. He extended a hand. Snake ignored it. "We saw you on the Police Channel. Sword of Damocles EMF Pulse satellites. Hard act to follow." He turned briefly toward Snake's companion. "Oh, hi, Rain. How'd the shoulder-strap for your heavier crossbow work out? Was the balance O.K. while running or climbing? I've been thinking, -"

"It's fine, Dan," Rain said hastily. Snake had the impression he was afraid to surrender his gadget back to its inventor for further tinkering, for fear he would never see it again.

"Oh. O.K.," the Toymaker said. He sounded a bit disappointed, but he brightened again as he turned back to Snake. "Nice guns. Cyclops .357 Magnums. That's what I thought when I saw that Police Channel story on Cleveland, but I wasn't sure. The camera was at a bad angle. Same ones? They look a little different." He cocked his head slightly. ".357's aren't my style - loud, and lots of flash; but, of course, that doesn't matter if you're fast. I believe in good sound suppression, myself." He smiled faintly. "I like to work with slower, quieter bullets from as far away as possible."

Snake had almost decided that if this techno-geek didn't stop talking, he was going to give him a direct demonstration of the Magnums' capabilities at close range. He dammed the flow of words with: "I need supplies."

Josh added, "They need, uh, lots of stuff..." He turned to the newcomer. "Snake?"

"I need automatics. Food. Transport."

Rain broke in. "We're going back up to Napa. I was south on a run when Snake hit the button. Killed the truck, and I had to leave it there. Ormsby sent me out to find Snake, after we saw the broadcast, and then he came up the coast with me. It's too hot in L.A."

"That was, like, weeks ago," Josh said. "You came on foot?"

"We were... delayed. We only started out a few days ago. Took the Fish Run up, crossed the Park, down Haight, and here. I don't know what's going on at home. I haven't been there since before this all happened. I've got to get back." Rain's concern was evident in his voice. "We need transport. Bicycles, if you have 'em. I'll bring 'em back next time I'm in the City."

"We'll buy," Snake interjected shortly. This motor-mouth engineer in his plaid flannel shirt and slacks, and the over-age-in-grade hippie relic were beginning to irritate him intensely. Pain and fatigue warred with his desire to get this transaction over with and get out of San Francisco as quickly as possible.

The atmosphere in the room changed abruptly. The camaraderie which Snake had been a part of a moment before shifted to exclude him, and he became a customer. Josh eyed him coldly. "Not with bluebacks, you won't. The only thing they'll be good for in a month is wiping your ass." He turned to Rain, with another of his expansive gestures, and smiled again, adding wryly, "But as a favor to a friend, we can extend credit. We trust you. And, like, it's a seriously bad idea to piss off a weapons dealer who knows where you live, you know?"

"Thanks, Josh," Rain said. He smiled back at the man with what looked to Snake like genuine affection.

"Gold," Snake said flatly, unimpressed by Josh's implied threat. "See if you've got what I need. Settle on prices then."

"Dan?" Josh turned to his colleague, who had resumed his seat at the workbench. Snake took in the man's pale skin, stooped posture, and slightly hesitant movements. This one was not well, but whatever it was, was nothing obvious. The symptoms didn't look like any kind of gas-poisoning he recognized. Maybe one of the bioweapon viruses from the war, he decided.

"I'm way ahead of you." Dan was already producing touchstone and acid bottles, setting up an assay kit on the workbench.

Snake slipped fingers inside his gunbelt, withdrew a coin, and tossed it on the table in front of the Toymaker. "Mexican. 22 karat, alloyed with silver. One ounce, Troy."

Dan busied himself with stone and chemicals. "It's good," he announced as he wiped the coin and handed it back to Snake. He exchanged looks with Josh, who nodded. "So, you want something semi-automatic, Snake? I've got a couple of really trick Barret 82A1's. They'll take .50 caliber BMG cartridges; go through anything up to, and sometimes including, medium armor plate and engine blocks."

"Good," Snake said, with deep satisfaction. "Ammo?"

"I can come up with, maybe, a thousand rounds. I definitely believe in a man carrying as much ammunition as possible."

"Like, a very comforting thing in these troubled times," Josh agreed. "You know, Daniel, I think you had a Mexican bandito somewhere in your family tree. Inherited a fondness for seriously large capacity magazines."

The Toymaker laughed. "So, let's go see what we've got." He rose, picking up a cane from the side of the workbench, then stopped. "Wait a minute. Snake, do you have one

of the new ID cards?"

"No. Blackbellies took all mine when the fuckers arrested me."

The Toymaker nodded. "If you're going straight through The City, likely you'll be stopped. With all the traffic lately, the USPF have been pulling snap searches, setting up roadblocks at random to check IDs. I'll work on it while you put your supplies together. Josh, can you show them around?"

"Certainly," he replied. "Gentlemen, allow me." While the Toymaker returned to his workbench, Josh began circling the room, pointing out supplies and equipment on the cluttered shelves in the style of an enthusiastic used-car salesman. Snake and Rain shrugged out of their packs, shed their jackets, and followed his progress through DMZ Supply's inventory. It took several hours to assemble weaponry, sleeping bags, lightweight freeze-dried food packets designed for camping trips, bottled distilled water, and two heavy dirt-bikes with trailers to carry all of it.

After a bit of technical discussion, a swiveling gun mount with centering springs was attached to the handlebars of one of the bikes. The Toymaker provided a Heckler and Koch 91 for the mount. A quick push down and rearward jerk installed the gun; a reverse shove forward and up removed it. Snake took one of the Barrets, added boxes of ammunition, an extra cleaning kit, and extra clips. Clothing came next. Snake selected two sleeveless tops, a warm, dark pullover, a pair of snug-fitting, lightweight nylon pants, a hooded mountaineering parka with a removable jacket-liner, and a pair of sturdy boots. With the addition of a change of underwear and socks, he felt properly outfitted again.

While the rest of them selected gear, Dan worked on a small square of paper, bent nearly double with his nose only inches from the surface of his table, as with press on lettering, fine-point pen, and X-acto knife, he modified a standard blank form into a fake ID card. Finally, he leaned back out of the pool of light from the chemlamp and cried, "All right! Come take a look at this." Snake came over to observe his progress, and the Toymaker smiled up at him in satisfaction. "There you go, Mr. John Davis. Ready for the photo."

He stared back down at his masterpiece, and frowned again, then sighed. "I don't know how well this is going to fly. Our laminator was electric, so we can't use it, and I can get a photo, but we don't have flash. Just hope the USPF don't get too curious. We'll have to do our best to make you look like an inoffensive ordinary citizen here. The shirt's O.K. Hmmmm..." He reached into another drawer, pulled out a baseball cap and a hotel-style grooming kit in a plastic wrapper, complete with disposable razor and miniature cake of soap. "Here. Shave, and stick your hair up under the cap. Take off your eyepatch, and just close your eyes; I can draw them in on the card. The picture will be really small. Probably nobody will notice, but you might want to wear dark glasses and hope for a sunny day for your trip." He pointed. "Bathroom's over there. There's a mirror."

Snake shaved with cold water and soap, shoved his hair up under the backwards-facing Giants cap, then went to stand against one of the room's limited areas of open white wall space. He straightened. Josh smiled and stood back, hand on chin like an artist contemplating a work of art. "No, no, my man. Slump. Snarl a little. Try to look like you've been waiting at the DMV for four hours, then discovered you're in the wrong line, and have to fill out a different form and start over. Think about trying to convince a surly clerk you have so paid all your traffic tickets. Like, method acting."

The Toymaker chuckled. "No - that's the way he looks in all his photos. Let's go for

something completely different. Try for a smile, Snake. That should confuse them "

"Shit," Snake all-but-whispered, exasperated. The other three were joining in friendly laughter, inviting him to share in it. That was something he had not done for a very long time, not since Taylor, and he was not sure exactly how to respond. He removed the patch and stood against the wall, eyes closed, trying to look casual. He hated being photographed; any occasion demanding it was almost certain to be one he wanted to avoid. With effort, he produced an insincere smile. Dan took several shots with an old-fashioned camera as Snake held the pose.

"Perfect!" Josh crowed. "Cut... and print." Dan took the film away for processing, while Josh and Snake negotiated a price for DMZ's services that took over three-quarters of the coins in Snake's gunbelt. He wondered if he would have enough left to pay for passage through the City, and how much longer he could pass off his remaining bluebacks on less-astute merchants than these.

When the money had exchanged hands, Josh leaned back in the chair he had taken over and dusted his palms together. "Done and done," he said, sounding pleased. He turned to Rain. "O.K. It's getting late. You two are staying with us tonight. We've got lots to talk about." He grinned. "Hey - I've been wanting to pick Snake Plissken's brain for, like, years. Talk, have something decent to eat before you hit Tofu Gulch. And, like, Dan will never forgive you if you don't try out his new gravity hot-water shower and tell him how great it is."

Snake bristled at the man's casual assumption of authority, but let it go. He and Rain would be out of here tomorrow, and it wasn't worth sacrificing a meal and a relatively safe place to sleep for the sake of a pointless pissing contest. He snorted softly, and said nothing, fixing Josh with a stare that suggested he was not planning to submit gracefully to becoming the evening's entertainment. Rain simply chuckled good-naturedly and held up his hands in a position of surrender.

"There it is," Josh added. "We'll get you set up, and then the subs ought to have dinner ready soon." He glanced at his winding watch, a twin to Rain's own, and held it up. "Seven o'clock. Remember when I traded John for this antique? I had a feeling it might come in handy someday, if the world really went down the tube, and I was right. As I always am, of course." He placed the be-watched hand and wrist on his ample chest with an expression of comically exaggerated satisfaction.

"There it is," Rain echoed, and the two shared a laugh.

"Let's go." Josh pushed back his chair and led the way toward the workroom's door. Rain and Snake picked up their packs and followed Josh down the former Mint's wide marble corridors, dimly lit by the portable chemlamp their host was carrying, and back to the building's central hall. As he climbed the stairs, Snake tried to ignore the ache in his wounded leg and the dull pain behind his eyes. Rain trudged ahead of him, looking equally wilted and weary. Snake wondered when they would be able to get away and get some sleep. His temper, never the best, was rapidly fraying. They reached the second-floor landing and headed down another corridor, as Josh kept up a running monologue: "Guest bedrooms are down here. And here," he stopped and flung open a door with a dramatic gesture, "is the famous McCarthy Post-Apocalyptic Hot-Water Shower!" Inside was an ordinary bathroom, except for the plastic tubing running from the shower and the sink out the window and upward. "There's a big storage tank on the roof that catches the rain and filters it. We light a fire under it to heat it, then the hot water flows down pipes from the roof. Open and close it with the hose-clamps. Voila! As Dan says, really trick." Their narrator looked as triumphant as if he had invented it himself.

"Cool!" Rain said. He sounded genuinely enthusiastic. "I haven't had a hot bath since we left Ormsby's. I'll take you up on the offer. Snake?"

A half-smile, giving credit for the ingenuity of the gadget, flickered over Snake's face, and he nodded. "Yeah."

One of the doors down the corridor opened and a shadowy figure stepped out into the hall. When the bright circle of light from Josh's chemlamp reached it, the shape became a muscular, dark-skinned, sharp-faced man, a hair shorter than Rain, who moved as if he was trying to claim as much space as possible. He was clad in black, sleeveless, kevlar-spandex top, camouflage pants and buckled boots. *Another Snake Plissken wannabe*, Snake thought; *The only thing missing's an eyepatch*. He stopped in front of Snake, and the two stared at each other. The other man recovered almost at once, his surprised expression shifting into confrontation. Snake didn't move, other than to narrow his good eye.

Josh's voice was wary as he began, "Donnie, this is...."

"Snaaaake Plissken," Donnie drawled, "The television star."

The words brought up in Snake's mind an instant flash of memory, of the smug, blustering blackbelly officer who had paraded him in front of the television cameras on his way to the deportation station at Los Angeles. Snake felt himself bristling, and deliberately let his face relax into the unreadable expression that was itself a defense, countering Donnie's look. He'd met this bullying little asshole in a hundred bars and alleys. The USPF was full of men like him. Not worth the effort.

Snake brushed on past as if the man weren't there, feeling Donnie's stare burning into his back as he walked on down the hall. Snake listened for any sound that might mean attack from behind, but kept moving. Rain followed, executing the same neat side-step around Donnie.

Josh caught up to them and opened another door, ushering them into a room with two double beds. He produced another chemlamp and set it out on one of the room's two dressers. "Drop your stuff and we'll go on down to dinner," he said. He seemed to be deliberately ignoring the confrontation he had just witnessed in the hallway. Warily, Snake dropped his gear on one bed, Rain on the other, and the three retraced their steps toward the first floor. Donnie had vanished by the time they got out the door.

Dinner at DMZ Supply was the best meal they had eaten since their stay at Ormsby's house, a hearty bean stew with chunks of some kind of meat, which Rain carefully but uncomplainingly removed from his share, homemade bread, and a salad from the building's backyard greenhouse. It was served by four people wearing the same kind of collars Snake had seen on Michael at the apartment on Haight Street. After serving, they retreated to one end of the heavy walnut table they were all sharing, until it was time for them to clear away the dishes. This had probably been an executive conference room or club-room at one time, Snake concluded from the polished wood paneling and the huge granite fireplace on the wall opposite him. Afterward, there was coffee and cigarettes, both of them fairly good quality. After trying one, Snake negotiated a price on several packs of the smokes to take with him. As he was finishing, Michael slipped in quietly to join the group.

Snake leaned back, silent, observing as Dan and Josh talked with Rain. Finally, he let curiosity get the better of him; there was something odd going on here, and he wanted to know what it was. He jerked his head in the direction of an attractive curly-haired

woman who was kneeling to put more wood on the fire. Snake noticed, with a twinge of memory, that she had a distant resemblance to Brain's Maggie. Light from the flames glinted on her inch-wide silver-metal collar and the small padlock dangling from it. "What's - all this?" Snake asked.

"That's Rayna, my slave," Wolf answered. The woman looked up in his direction and smiled. He snapped his fingers and she rose gracefully, crossed to his side, and stood with her head bowed slightly. Wolf laid a hand lightly on the back of the woman's neck. "Beautiful, isn't she?" The woman's smile deepened, and, at Wolf's gesture, she gave a slight bow and moved away to join the other collared ones at the end of the table.

"Slave!" Snake blurted. *They snatch people and enslave them?* He tensed, judging the distance to the room's doorway.

The Black man chuckled and added, "Voluntary, of course." He nodded to the man at the head of the table. "Josh, do you want to explain it?"

Josh leaned back, cigarette in hand, with the posture of a raconteur about to begin an elaborate tale. "Slave, as in master and slave. Dominant and submissive. S&M.

We're most of what's left of the organized leather community in San Francisco." He flicked ashes into the fire and took a swallow of coffee. "We've been here all along. I've lived at 45 Haight for over 20 years. Dan and I've been friends for about that long, and he joined me up here when LA went. When the Judgment Day Massacre went down in 2009, we holed up there. Then, after the quake in '10, we took over the Mint building and started ferrying queers and the leather community to safety. An underground railroad for the kinky underground," Josh said, through a curl of cigarette smoke.

"Judgment Day?" Snake vaguely remembered hearing the term on a news broadcast several years back, when it had been the lead story on America's Most Immoral for about a week.

"Yeah. President kept babbling about the Bible and how the fags were going to be punished on Judgment Day. A lot of the community thought it was just his usual bullshit, but Dan and I were worried. We'd been expecting them to pull something like this, watching the Christers taking over, moving in on our people. Gearing up for the Pogrom. My motto's 'if you think you're being paranoid enough, you're not being paranoid enough.' Too bad I was right." Josh shifted in his chair, stubbed out one cigarette and lit another, drew in a deep lungful of tobacco smoke and blew it out. "Then, that summer, the blackbellies were broadcasting spot announcements on every channel, putting up billboards, like, everywhere - even the bus stop shelters -- telling everybody they'd be listed as deviants and moral criminals if they took part in the Freedom Day Parade. That's -- officially - the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and, like, Little Green Men's Chowder and Marching Society, Freedom Day Parade. Idiot name. Everybody just called it The Parade.

Karen and I went anyway. Hadn't missed one in fifteen years, and didn't intend to start with this one. I regard it as my mission in life to piss off the fucking President. Like, my personal Categorical Imperative, you know?" Josh paused, and his expression turned completely serious. "We noticed that the barriers were heavier than usual on Market Street, but we didn't think anything about it, particularly. As soon as the Dykes on Bikes hit Civic Center, the USPF choppers came over and strafed the whole parade-route with machine guns. Then they sent in the ground troops to take out the survivors."

"Shit," Snake breathed, his face a stone mask.

Michael took up the story. "I was marching with the leather contingent. We were one of the prime targets. They got almost all of us. I only got out because," he swallowed and looked down, "because my Mistress threw me down and covered me with her body. She died saving me." His voice faded into silence.

"They shot Cassandra." Wolf's voice and face were like black ice. "I couldn't get to her; didn't have a gun. I just watched her die."

"They attacked the staging area and the Festival grounds, sprayed the whole area with machine gun fire," Josh continued. "Final body count was well over two thousand dead. Lots more wounded. That was the end of the San Francisco sex-radical underground. Week or two later, the queer executions began in Harvey Milk Plaza, and they began making regular sweeps of the Castro. Karen, my partner, was captured in a raid on Different Light bookstore and executed as a "moral degenerate."

Snake considered. "They didn't deport them to L.A.?"

"No. The penalty for homosexuality in the New Moral America is death." Rain put in.

Snake turned a look on the young man, reading his anger and hatred. "So that's why he didn't say anything about homosexuals," Snake said softly, pulling up the memory of the pompous USPF officer who had sent him into L.A. "...atheists, prostitutes, runaways... moral criminals.... But that asshole didn't mention...." "

"Yeah. Queers, leatherpeople," Josh finished for him. "Here in SF, they just shot or fried them. There aren't as many executions as there used to be. People are a lot more careful, and the ones that aren't good at hiding are mostly dead. But DMZ has managed to get over two hundred fifty out of the City." Josh paused for a long moment, then added in a tone of bitter irony, "Christians are fucking dangerous, y'know? Never trusted 'em. They've been murdering my relatives for centuries."

"You said your partner's name was Karen," Snake said. "So you're not...."."

"Gay?" Josh finished the sentence for him. "No. Just kinky. And Jewish." His eyes grew cold as the stones in San Francisco's winter rain, and he no longer looked in the least jovial or amusing. Snake remembered the iron faces of the partisan leaders he had seen during the war; they had looked like this man's face. "Never again," Josh said, grinding out his cigarette. "They're not herding us into the ovens this time without a fight. Three years. But we've taken out most of the officers. I got the one who executed Karen."

Snake nodded slowly.

"I am." Snake turned at the sound of Rain's voice. "I am," Rain repeated, "Gay, that is."

The Toymaker was calmly swallowing the last of his coffee. His tone of emotionless scientific detachment was as chilling as the others' anger. "You and Lonnie were at the parade, weren't you?"

"Yes," Rain answered. "We were with the Action for Animals contingent. We got over the barriers, but he was hit by flying glass from a store window. I got him back to Josh's apartment. He bled to death on the couch. I was holding him when he died."

"We lost a lot of people." Donnie's voice came from the shadows. He was sitting on the fireplace's wide hearth, a little away from the rest. "There are two kinds of people in

the world: doers and droolers. The doers dug in and fought." He measured Snake with a stare, his mouth curled in a faint sneer. "The droolers posed for the cameras."

Snake slowly straightened, balancing on the edge of his chair, and froze, his hand poised above his holster. *Make it worth a bullet to me, Asshole.* His single eye burned blue fire.

"Hold it, hold it!" the Toymaker said sharply, standing up and raising both hands, palms outward. "Everybody, calm down." He looked from one to the other of the two men poised on the edge of violence. "Donnie, you're out of line. Snake," his glance took in the others in the room, "you're outgunned. The USPF would like nothing better than for us to kill each other off and save them the trouble. Let's not give them the satisfaction."

Donnie rose and, without a word, stalked out of the room. Snake leaned back with his little, almost soundless, snort, and relaxed. He reached over, picked up a cigarette from the container in the center of the coffee table, struck a match to light it, sucking in smoke, blowing it out in an indifferent gesture. The Toymaker pointedly turned the conversation to weaponry, and soon the DMZers were involved in a lively discussion. Snake got the impression they were deliberately giving him space, and found himself filled with a low-key, unfocused irritation. He had been shut out - shut himself out - once again, even here. He shrugged mentally. Why should he care?

Rain was sitting quietly in the chair next to Snake's, listening but not taking part in the conversation, as if there were something else on his mind. Finally, he said softly, "O.K. I'm gay. Does that bother you, Snake?"

Snake regarded the younger man levelly. "Doesn't mean shit to me. Long as you remember I'm not." *Gays Yeah, he'd work with 'em, even fuck 'em, as long as they didn't try any romantic shit on him.* Snake's mind brought up a flash of memory: Carjack, back in Cleveland, posing provocatively for him in a slutty red dress, wig, and patent-leather spike heels. He'd had to slam Malone up against the wall a couple of times to readjust his attitude, but after that there'd been no further trouble. Carjack had rolled over for him just like a woman, and liked it. He wouldn't roll for any man, Snake thought to himself. He was no faggot.

It hadn't been like that with him and Taylor. What they'd had with each other had been something totally different. He remembered Bill Taylor sitting on the couch next to him in that cheap little hotel room in Chicago, feet up on the coffee table and a beer in his hand. The television showed clips of the San Francisco Freedom Day Parade, with the queers in dresses and leather drag posturing and cavorting self-consciously to the disco music. Snake lit a cigarette and handed it to Taylor before lighting one for himself, and they shared a laugh at the fags before changing the channel to another news program for a report on their latest robbery.

The discussion turned to Snake and Rain's journey through the Park, Josh and the Toymaker drawing both of them back into conversation with questions. Snake answered shortly, thinking about heading back to his room to sleep, until the subject of Rain's crossbow came up.

"I'm switching him to an AK-47 as soon as I get him trained," Snake growled.

"Hell you are," Rain answered, his smile defusing the flat statement. "High tech stuff's what got us into this; crossbow and knives are fine with me."

"A bow's single-shot, and it takes too long to reload. Forty yard's your limit; velocity and penetration go to shit before that. "

"In my business, you don't need more than forty yards," Rain said. "I can reuse my bolts, they don't misfire if they get wet, and there's no sound or flash to give away your position."

"Rain's got a point," Josh said, and sidlined the argument by launching into a historical discussion of the value of the bow in warfare, its revolutionary effect at Crecy and Agincourt, and the relative merits of longbow vs. crossbow. Some of the others at the table began to fidget. Snake listened, interested, and batted comments back and forth, calling up long-forgotten lectures and textbooks at OCS. Rain joined in with examples from his practical experience. Finally, Rain was overcome by a yawn in the middle of a sentence.

"Josh," the Toymaker prompted, "These guys need sleep."

"Oh, Right," Josh said regretfully. "Well, while I'd love nothing better than to yack all night, it's going to be a long day for everybody tomorrow. We'd all better turn in." He looked around at the people still left at the table. "Wolf, you and Michael O.K. with first watch?" The Black man nodded, and Josh added, "Regular rotation then." He raised his voice slightly, and the woman Snake and Rain had met guarding the door earlier looked up. "Gayle, show Snake and Rain back to the guestroom." He turned to Snake. "You guys ready?" Snake and Rain nodded, and the group rose to go their separate ways.

Rain lay in bed, waiting for Snake to get back from his turn at the shower. It felt wonderful to be clean, fed, and comfortable, and he was exhausted, but he had no hope of sleep yet. He replayed Snake's words in his mind: *Doesn't mean shit to me. Long as you remember I'm not.* Whatever happened, he was glad it was out in the open. Among his own people, it didn't matter any more than the color of your skin or whether you were a man or a woman, or something in between, but in this outside world, where you were assumed to be straight until proven otherwise, being in the closet made him feel dirty and dishonest. He wondered how his revelation would affect Snake's attitude toward him. So Snake was straight -- or at least said he was. Rain wondered about that; the other man's body language didn't ring quite true to him. How honest had Snake been, even with himself? Sometimes the closet cases were the worst homophobes. The next few minutes, when Snake returned, would give him some answers. Rain shifted restlessly on the smooth sheets.

Snake padded into their room on strong bare feet, as graceful and lethal as a wild cat, naked except for the bath-towel wrapped around his waist. Rain's jaw clenched with the effort of not reacting to the beautiful body in front of him. Snake walked over to his own bed, calmly dropped the towel, pulled on a pair of the briefs he had bought from DMZ that afternoon, then slid under the covers. There was no indication in his way of moving, or his indifferent expression, that anything at all had changed between them. Rain relaxed; Snake couldn't be that good an actor.

"Get the light," Snake said, and Rain reached over to the chemlamp on his nightstand

and turned the key, darkening the room. He heard Snake settling in for sleep. Outside, through the window next to his bed, Rain could see ranks of dark cloud sweeping past on the endless San Francisco wind, alternately revealing and hiding the full moon. Cold silver light flickered and disappeared, flickered and disappeared. Rain closed his eyes, satisfied, and slid toward sleep.

Comfortable beds and an unexpected hot shower, combined with the knowledge that others were on guard for a change, allowed Snake and Rain to get a good night's sleep. If Snake dreamed, he didn't remember. He woke in predawn half-light, slipped on his patch, and lay back to think and gather himself for the day. He considered one of Ormsby's cigarettes and regretfully passed on the idea; he had less than half a pack of them left. He settled for one of the inferior DMZ brand. Ahead lay the trip up Market Street into the heart of unfamiliar blackbelly territory. The disruption caused by 666 had set the city in motion, with refugees fleeing to and from the outlying areas. Their party might be able to lose themselves in the general confusion, but he wouldn't relax until his feet hit solid ground on the Oakland side of the bay. Adrenaline coiled in him like a tight spring as he rose and dressed, sliding his new biking gloves into the pocket of his jacket. It felt good to be wearing things that fit again and wouldn't tangle him up in a firefight. He walked over to the window and studied the sky. The overcast was lifting slightly, and it did not look like rain.

He and Rain finished repacking their gear and joined the others downstairs for breakfast. Bottled water, heated in a large kettle over the fire, made oatmeal and coffee that was actually drinkable. The servers added bread toasted on long-handled forks, thick preserves, and fresh strawberries from the backyard greenhouse with canned milk and sugar. As he sat by the fire in the Victorian kitchen, looking out into the neatly tended garden in back, Snake had the sense of being transported into a bedtime story for survivalist children.

They ate quickly, with minimal conversation. Josh insisted that the escort up Market was free, a favor to Rain and his people, who would reciprocate if it was ever needed. "We aren't out to skin you alive. There are a lot of people subsidizing us on the quiet. We manage." Josh spread his agile voice into a whispery Don Corleone imitation: "Some day, and that day may never come, I may ask a favor of you, Snake Plissken, and you will be glad to do it, because we are friends...." Rain chuckled. Snake eyed Josh for a second, then gave up and smiled, as he gave his little voiceless snort. Josh grinned triumphantly. "I knew I could get you, eventually, Snake. You're one tough audience."

Snake shook his head, and rose. There was no point in putting it off any longer. "Let's go."

"Donnie and Wolf will escort you down Market," Josh said. Snake frowned, but said nothing; he had to trust that the man knew his people. "Stop by next time you're in the City. You're always welcome." Josh extended a hand in parting. Snake hesitated for a moment, then shook the heavyset man's hand, silently, to seal the alliance. It would be useful to have contacts here if he ever needed them, but he hoped he would never see San Francisco again. The very ground here would always stink of Taylor's blood and his own failure.

The group would travel in diamond formation, Donnie and Wolf on street bikes taking point and rear, Snake and Rain with their dirt bikes and loaded trailers in the middle. Donnie warned Snake to avoid the ventilation grates in the street's center section, which hadn't been repaired since the BART subway trains stopped running after the earthquake, and which gave way under almost any weight. Parts of the tunnel system

had collapsed; the rest had been occupied by squatters and crazies. "You go down, you don't come back up. It's a long way down to the tracks," the little man added with a sort of macabre relish. "If the fall doesn't get you, the crazies will - they're hungry down there." Snake nodded, remembering the sewers under New York Max.

The Ferry Building, their goal, was visible from Haight and Market at the other end of Market Street's broad cement canyon, and Snake was reminded again of how small the City actually was. He made a final quick check of his guns -- the Magnums hidden inside his parka, the HK 91, wrapped in padding, slung across the handlebars -- and moved out behind Donnie.

This early, there were only a handful of people out on the street, bicycles, pedicabs, and carts mixed with foot traffic. At each major intersection, a civilian traffic cop directed movement, replacing the electric traffic lights that had vanished with 666. The four pedaled slowly, each silent and absorbed in his own thoughts. Snake caught a glimpse of Rain's closed and bitter expression as they moved through buildings, sidewalk, and pavement scarred by bullets. Ahead was the hummer station at Market and Montgomery where Taylor had died. Face set, eyes invisible behind the wraparound dark glasses, Snake allowed the memory of Taylor's dying to surface, tasting desolation that caught in his throat and twisted into rage. He compressed anger into the determination that fueled him and pedaled faster, almost passing Donnie, until the smaller man motioned sharply to him and Snake fell back into place.

They saw the barricades, funneling traffic into the USPF checkpoint at Van Ness and Market, a block before they reached it. "Shit," Snake hissed, his body tightening into the familiar tense, lucid calm of fight-or-flight as the four bicycles slowed to a stop.

"Shit," Donnie echoed. "We can't go around; that'll tip 'em off for sure. Have to try going through." He considered. "Snake's the only one whose ID won't hold up. We'll have to cover him." He unzipped his black leather jacket and shifted his own semiautomatic into position for a quick draw.

"I'll take Snake's trailer," Wolf said. "Rain and I can run interference." Rain nodded understanding, his own expression grim but composed. Snake also nodded, once, sharply, as he kicked loose the latch on his trailer hitch and loosened the wrapping on his handlebar-mounted gun so that a single sharp jerk would free it for action. Wolf dismounted and reattached the loaded trailer to his own lighter bike, then turned to Snake with a humorless grin. "Then all you have to do, if the shit hits the fan, is pedal like hell." Snake gave him an expressionless look, unsmiling.

"If we get separated, regroup at Vaillancourt Fountain," Donnie said, and each of the men nodded once more in final confirmation. They drifted into a more open formation, Rain and Wolf pedaling ahead together like a pair of delivery-men taking a cargo into the commercial district farther down Market. Donnie followed at some distance, with Snake not far behind him.

The roadblock was manned by six bored-looking blackbellies. One on each side was actually monitoring the light early-morning traffic, while the other four clustered on the sidewalk to one side of the barricades, styrofoam cups in their hands sending up little trails of steam into the cold air. The USPF patrol glanced at the first two men's identification and waved them through without any hesitation. A few yards past the check point, Rain and Wolf slowed, then stopped with their bikes spread across the center of the street, and began a conversation, Wolf pointing toward Van Ness, Rain onward down Market, as if they were having an argument over which route would be better.

Donnie stopped, surrendered his ID, passed through to the other side of the barricade, and took the card back from the blackbelly manning the checkpoint. He wheeled a few feet farther, just out of reach, then turned. Making a show of reaching into the inside pocket of his jacket to stash the card, he scowled and addressed the guard with, "Jesus, another one of these frickin' checkpoints. What a pain in the ass. What the fuck are you looking for, anyway...?"

"None of your fucking business," the first guard growled. "Move along."

While the first guard was occupied with Donnie, Snake arrived at the checkpoint. He set a foot down on the ground for balance, keeping the other on the raised pedal opposite, and fumbled in his pocket, trying to look innocent and slightly fuddled. He pulled out the fake ID the Toymaker had crafted for him and held it up, hoping it would pass by visual inspection. Snake cursed silently to himself as the guard held out his hand for the ID, and tensed for flight as he handed it over. The man looked from it to Snake with slowly dawning suspicion as he ran his thumb over the unlaminated cardboard. "Hold it -"

The blackbelly died in a salvo of gunfire as Snake drew and fired. Snake whirled, blasting the second officer, and, in the same movement, slammed the bike into top gear and took off, shoving his gun back into his inside coat pocket. As he sped forward, he heard the rapid stutter of Donnie's weapon behind him, covering him, and, from the corner of his eye as he flew between them, saw Wolf and Rain drawing together to create a barrier the pursuing blackbellies would have to detour around, giving him precious extra seconds. From behind, he heard shouts and the shrilling of whistles, as he swerved back and forth across the wide street, weaving an evasive flight through the other traffic. A stray shot sang past his ear. For a moment, Snake thought of USPF choppers and police cars, then he realized the blackbellies would be pursuing on foot and bicycle as well. The police whistle sounded again, faintly, in the distance, and elation leaped: this time there would be no radio or computer to track him; the contest with the USPF would be, for once, equal. Sheer mad exultation flamed within him, and the bicycle hit top speed.

Ahead, directly in Snake's path, was one of the sagging gratings hanging on rusted bolts. By the time he saw it, there was no time to swerve. He made an instant decision, clamped his hands around the handlebars and, with desperate strength, threw himself and the bike upward and forward into an airborne arc. *Come on, Sweetheart!* For what seemed forever, his wheels spun on empty air. He landed hard, back wheel catching briefly on the metal frame of the grate before momentum carried him onward. Bone-rattling impact jarred his whole body, shooting pain through his bad eye. Wheels caught and he was off at full speed down the long slope toward the waterfront. He heard shouts behind him, the crack of shots growing more distant. Flashes of pain flared in his injured leg as he pushed himself, flying on the adrenaline rush, gulping air and pedaling furiously, weaving through the thickening traffic and swerving to avoid the treacherous gratings.

With the USPF in hot pursuit, Snake blasted past the hummer station entrance where Taylor had fallen; there was no time now, thankfully, for memories. Ahead, Snake saw a group of blackbellies gathering in his path, attracted by the sounds of pursuit behind him. With a quick pull, he freed the HK 91 from its covering, and, cursing mentally, swung the barrel back and forth, scything the area in front of him with bullets. He brought down several of the uniformed figures, and the rest scattered. He slalomed through the crowd, doing forty miles an hour, bent over his handlebars, dodging the few answering bullets of the blackbellies with presence of mind enough to fire at the terrifying apparition bearing down on them, and skidded sideways into an alley off

Market street, barely avoiding the cracked green-marble facing of the old bank building on the corner. He threaded a course through the alley, back and forth across several streets, through a parking lot, and finally slowed to a stop beside the metal slab of a big department store's backdoor roll-up delivery entrance. He paused, trying to catch any sounds of pursuit audible over the rasp of air in his own lungs, as he lowered his head to the handlebars, fighting blackness at the edges of his vision and the pain in his head. *Fucking Plutoxin-7!* There was nothing except the faint noise of normal traffic from the streets beyond his alleyway. He had lost them.

When his breathing slowed to normal, Snake dismounted from his bike, removed his parka, and tugged off the sweat-soaked black pullover underneath. He rewrapped the gun on his handlebars with the pullover, tying it down with the sleeves, to hide it from view, then turned his parka inside-out and slipped it on again. Blackbellies looking for a flying fugitive in a shiny olive-drab nylon parka would see a sedate bicyclist in a dull black jacket. Snake pedaled slowly back out onto Market and on down toward the waterfront, ignoring the occasional uniformed figure he passed, and turned left, heading for the fountain. When he reached the jumble of square metal boxes that stood like an eerie echo of earthquake debris in the middle of its little green park, he leaned his bike against the side of the structure and sat down on the ledge, dangling his boots over the sidewalk and gazing out over the bay like any visiting tourist. He held the pose, outwardly unconcerned, inwardly ratcheted to the point of snapping with tension, adrenaline singing like a drug in his veins.

It was about twenty minutes before Rain came sauntering down the sidewalk toward him, looking the very picture of casual concern. "This way," Rain said softly as he passed Snake's position, and Plissken slid off the concrete ledge to follow him at a short distance.

Rain led the way down another side street and into an alcove behind a tall metal dumpster labeled 'Cardboard Only.' Wolf and Donnie were waiting for them there, along with all three bicycles. Wolf smiled at Snake. "Guess you'd like this back," he said, and leaned down to detach the connection to the trailer on his bike.

"Thanks," Snake said, as he reattached the loaded trailer to his own bike. He wished the pain in his head would back down a little. The headache stretched his temper to the breaking point and made it hard to concentrate.

Donnie was actually grinning at him. He blew out a breath. "Some evasive maneuver you pulled back there, Snake. Nice job clearing that BART grating." The grin widened, and Snake saw the sarcasm in it. "'Course I didn't actually see it. I was...bubusy...atat the time, taking care of those other four blackbellies you... uh... I left behind for me."

Snake fixed the annoying little asshole with an icy blue stare and said nothing. He turned to Wolf again. "What about the ferry?"

"Next sail ferry to the Napa side is in an hour. When the crowd picks up, you can try to blend." The group pulled back as far as they could behind the dumpster, out of sight of any casual traffic passing down the alley, and waited.

When the crowd gathered for the next sail ferry crossing, Rain slipped into the swirling mass of people heading for the dock, to reconnoiter the situation. In ten minutes, he was back, and the expression on his face was not encouraging. "No way," he said. "Blackbellies've cordoned off the pier. They're checking IDs and searching everybody getting on the ferry. I think they're looking for us."

"Shit!" Snake spat. There was no point in trying the fake ID again, now that the blackbellies were alerted. They would have to find another way across the Bay.

"You're not taking the boat, that's for sure," Donnie said, stating the obvious. Snake gave him a glare.

"Now what?" Rain muttered. Three pairs of eyes turned automatically in Wolf's direction. The tall Black man stood silent for a moment, frowning, then said, "We'll take the Bay Bridge."

Donnie whistled soundlessly again. "I don't know, Wolf. Upper deck's out - it's barricaded and patrolled. Lower deck's possible, but it's in such bad shape I don't know if we could get the bikes through. Plus, we've gotta double back to Fourth. Through Bloods territory."

"Bloods know me," Wolf said. "If I can get to Pharaoh, we've got safe passage to Fourth. We take the Bridge over, lower deck, get these two to Oakland, back home by morning." The former Marine's voice was quietly confident. He measured Snake with a glance. "You fucked the System that killed my Cassandra. I owe you, man." Wolf moved out toward Market Street with a firm military stride.

Snake gave his voiceless snort; gratitude made him uneasy and he dismissed it. "So all we have to do is get to Fourth. And what?"

"Fourth and Mission," Donnie said. "Gang territory. We stay here; Wolf'll go negotiate." He zipped open his leather jacket and reached inside, then took a clip of ammo from his bike pannier, emptied the old clip, and slapped the new one home in the butt of his semiautomatic before replacing the gun in its hiding place.

Snake nodded, silently. He was willing to keep truce while working with the man. Personalities just endangered the objective. He checked his own guns, reloaded and replaced them, then settled down next to Rain to wait for Wolf.

It was close to three hours before Wolf returned, accompanied by a dark-skinned, athletic Black man dressed in an echo of Wolf's Urban Unobtrusive outfit of loose gray-cotton pants, shirt, and windbreaker, with the addition of a red bandana around his head. He observed them impassively, his face neutral, as Wolf introduced him. "This is Pharaoh. He's agreed to take us to the Bridge onramp at Fourth. Pharaoh: Donnie, Rain." He paused, then gestured toward the last member of the group. "Snake Plissken."

The young man's expression softened and he held out a strong hand in Snake's direction. "Snake Plissken. You knew DeWayne Wilson."

Snake took the offered handshake firmly. "My wingman." Wilson had died at Leningrad. Sorrow and anger moved in Snake, but never reached his still, intent face. "Friend of yours? Family?"

"He was my dad." Pharaoh said quietly. "I never really knew him; he was killed when I was a baby. Mama told me you were his C.O. Said you wrote her a letter, three pages, and sent his pictures and tags back. And this." He reached into his shirt and produced a gold wedding ring on a beaded dogtag chain. The dogtags and the ring took Snake back to the day he had written the letter. The labored scrawl, so unlike his usual neat script, had been the result of his gas-blurred vision. It had taken him a week to write letters to every one of the forty-eight families.

"He was a good pilot," Snake said simply. "How's... R Reba?"

"Mama died in a blackbelly sweep. They were lookin' for somebody else," Pharaoh answered. "Man, we all got a reason to hate this government!"

"No shit," Snake rasped softly. "The Bridge....".

"I'll get you to the ramp. Cross when it's dark. Be careful, though: earthquake wrecked the whole lower level. There's places where the roadbed's gone; just the side railing and a catwalk left. Once you're in Oaktown, you talk to Chaindog. He'll send you on through."

"Split up," Wolf said. "Rain, you go alone; you know the way. Donnie, you go with Snake. Pharaoh and I'll meet you at Mission and Main."

He and Pharaoh slipped out of the alleyway. Rain followed in about ten minutes, and Snake and Donnie brought up the rear a few minutes later. It was a short but nerve-racking block to the end of the plaza and the beginning of Mission Street. The cordon of USPF was gone, probably until the next scheduled ferry, but a scattering of uniformed guards remained. Donnie and Snake strolled past a squad of blackbellies "searching" a frightened young woman in a business suit and heels who might have been a secretary from one of the office buildings farther up Market. They were laughing as they passed her roughly around the group. Snake lowered his head, letting his hair hide the side of his face; every muscle tensed as he waited for an alarm from behind him, but the blackbellies were too interested in manhandling the girl to pay him any attention. As they reached Mission and turned right, Snake heard a faint sound, suspiciously like a sigh of relief, from the direction of his companion, and smiled ironically to himself.

A block past the old post office, the neighborhood changed abruptly to grimy commercial buildings and run-down hotels advertising weekly rates. Scattered among them were blocks of crumbling nineteenth-century flats, their brick and wood facades black with age and dirt. Above liquor-stores, greasy-spoons, and discount shops at ground level, tenement apartments loomed up into the gray sky. The few empty lots, filled with weeds and earthquake rubble, were tagged with elaborate swirls of bright-colored graffiti. People who had somewhere else to be hurried along, heads down and shabby coats pulled tight around them to keep out the damp, penetrating wind blowing down the urban canyon off the ocean. Those who didn't -- most of them men or teenage boys -- loitered in doorways, on steps, on street corners. Snake caught sight of a few children's faces through the grime of bare, closed windows. Sullen hostility shimmered in the air, and a prickling sense of danger that reminded Snake of New York Max, but these were not crazies. The dark faces tracking him down Mission were quite sane, casualties and combatants in a very real war of race and class. Snake felt their hatred, an impersonal hatred that targeted, not Snake Plissken, but an anonymous, symbolic invader in a territory under siege.

Snake and his companions reached the twisted supports of the Bay Bridge onramp at Fourth Street, cracked concrete pillars rising out of a tangle of interlaced freeway entrances and exits, and found a spot to wait for dark, out of sight of passers-by, among the abandoned cars in a nearby parking lot. Pharaoh looked up at the structure. "You really gonna try to make it across? Shit, man." He shrugged. "Your ass. Like I said, you get to Oaktown, you call on Chaindog; tell him Pharaoh sent you. He hangs at that truck yard just off the Bridge, to the left. I got to get back." He turned to Snake, and they traded a long look before Pharaoh added, "Anybody can make it, Snake Plissken can." He extended his hand one more time in parting. "Luck, Snake."

Snake studied the young man, son of a fallen member of Black Light, fellow-warrior in a war that was both different and the same as his own, with complex emotions invisible on his closed face. Here was both the success, and the terrible failure, of his unit's mission, and Snake Plissken's success, and his bitter personal failure, as its commander. "You, too," Snake said, as he shook Pharaoh's hand, once, hard. It was all he could say, but in it were his pride in the men of Black Light, his respect for the young man in front of him, and the benediction of one generation on its heir and its successor. The gang leader smiled quietly, with a look of satisfaction, then moved off, melting into the cityscape. Snake watched him go.

A few seconds' effort by Snake with the butt of a gun shattered a window, -- no more alarms -- and the four remaining men climbed into the rear of one of the abandoned vans in the parking lot, out of sight from the bridge's upper section or the street, and out of the wind. Wolf reconnoitered this time. "Pharaoh's right," he reported. "We'll have to wait for dark. The upper level's crawling with blackbellies." He turned to Snake and Rain to explain, "Lights are out on the bridge, so they shut down the upper level, too, between dusk and seven A.M. Just a couple of guards at the entrance. We can get across then."

They settled down to wait with as much patience as they could muster. Wolf and Rain chatted quietly about mutual friends and DMZ. Donnie leaned against the spare tire, crossed his arms over his chest, propped up his feet, and closed his eyes. Snake spent the first hour on a final check of his weaponry, his supplies, and his bike. Finally he ran out of things to check, and sat back also. His mind turned to past times he had spent waiting like this, to past missions. He called up memories of DeWayne Wilson and Black Light, of the cold fall, so like this cold fall, before takeoff for Leningrad, and the cold metal walls of the glider hanger, so like the cold metal wall behind him now. A sense of weary foreboding threatened, and he shook it off impatiently. *Don't jinx it, Snake.*

By five-thirty, the shortened winter day was close to full dark. With the night came a thick fog, and the temperature dropped sharply. The four of them climbed back out of the van, stiffly, and stood stamping feet and shaking feeling back into numb hands, preparing to move out. "Better get started," Wolf said. "Donnie, you take point; Snake, Rain - I'll take the rear. Stay close to the railing and test your footing. Bikes in front. Let's move." They found their way to the bridge in the last gray scraps of twilight, and started across in darkness.

Over land, the onramp was intact, and at first Snake stepped easily, feeling the solid footing under him, guiding himself with one hand on the railing, guiding his bike with the other. As he moved forward, the utter darkness pressed in on him from all sides. Never, except in the darkness behind his eyes, had he known such total lack of light. No reflected sky-shine, no twinkling white points of light, no neon colors, came from the blacked-out city on either side of the Bay. Fog hid stars and moonlight.

Background sound behind him fell away into silence, and all he could hear was air blowing past his ears. Onramp gave way to bridge superstructure; Snake felt, rather than saw, the massive weight of the upper deck above him. Fog curled around him, wrapping him like layer upon layer of iced gauze, and Snake breathed shallowly, remembering gas. Far below him, the killing-cold waters of San Francisco Bay sent up dank fumes of pollution, the smell of a rotting world. A new prickling unease crept along Snake's nerves.

"Thin place ahead." Donnie's voice sounded too far away, muffled by the fog. "Keep left; push the bike first. It's about... three, maybe four, feet wide... n no, less...."

Snake relayed the information to the men behind him and moved slowly forward, feeling with his boot for the drop-off to his right. "Slopes to the right; two and a half foot wide," he called in a low voice back over his shoulder. Wet railing was slick and numbing-cold under his gripping hand. Wind off the Bay burned his face and bit through his jacket. He heard a voice behind him, passing on his words. The path widened again for a space, than narrowed sharply. He felt loose concrete shift. He followed a warning voice ahead into blackness. Sound and feeling faded, sight did not exist; his numb fingers and toes barely registered railing and concrete under them. He moved forward into void, wet cold freezing him, turning him to black ice.

The wind smelled like snow. Like Russia. Stumbling through treacherous, poisoned snow in total darkness, burning-blind eyes wrapped in a silk aviator's scarf stiff with frozen blood. Safety was somewhere ahead of him. Wind howled in his ears, pushed at him, disorienting him. He was shivering furiously. You can't get water from the snow, they had told him; the snow is full of gas. It'll kill you."He tried to swallow, but his mouth was too dry. Water, deadly water, all around him... he clung desperately to Taylor's arm, his hand growing steadily number.... .

CRACK! The surface under Snake's feet shuddered. A scream, and Snake lunged toward it, grabbing for the sound. His right hand closed on the hem of Tay... of Donnie's leather flight jacket. The scream's echo boomed in the metal supports of the bridge, and a second later Donnie's falling bicycle clanged, once, loudly, on metal and then hit water with a splash. Snake's own bicycle fell against his side, and he braced it with his knee. The scrap of leather twisted in Snake's grasp as Donnie struggled for a purchase, sliding toward the broken edge. Snake's boots skidded on the fog-slicked surface, as Donnie's weight dragged Snake forward after him, and Snake's numbed hand slid down the railing toward emptiness. Donnie was dangling, thrashing, in Snake's one-handed grip now, pulling Snake down toward the drop into the Bay. *Him or me*, Snake thought, and made an instant decision. He let go. As he hauled himself, two-handed, back from the splintered concrete, Snake heard a meaty thud of impact that choked off the screaming, and then another splash. Snake clung to the railing, breathing hard, fighting to find his anger. Leningrad, the Russian winter, the blindness, the pain of his fresh wound, receded and the rage of the betrayal rose like some elemental spirit to take its place. Snake raised his head, looking up, out over the Bay. Thin, high, bright threads of fire streaked across the black sky above him. Snake straightened up slowly as he watched them, and took hold of his bicycle again, ready to move on.

Then there was a hand gripping his shoulder tightly, and Snake heard Rain's voice in his ear. "Snake! What happened?"

"Him or me," Snake said, his voice expressionless. "I let him go. He's down there somewhere in the Bay."

"Fuck." Rain was silent for a minute, then his voice changed as he said, "Snake - are you O.K.?" Rain was the faintest outline next to him of black against lighter black. Something in his tone caught at the memory of Russia and Taylor that was fading from Snake's mind, but the wind blew it away.

"We have to go back." Wolf's voice came from behind them. "We can't do this in the dark. Donnie was a rock-climber; if he fell, it's because there's nothing to walk on. I won't risk losing another man"

Tactical withdrawal. Snake remembered ordering the retreat from Leningrad, and

nodded, invisible in the darkness, then said, "Yeah." His voice sounded rusty in his own ears. He dragged his bike around and prepared to go back the way they had come.

He heard Wolf's voice ahead of him. "Damn, it's dark! Can't see a thing."

"This is country dark," Rain's voice answered. "No light from the city."

"Get moving," Snake growled. He heard the faint sound of footsteps and the whisper of tire-treads on wet concrete, and followed them, backtracking carefully. Their return trip, weighted down with fatigue and Donnie's death, was no easier than the outward journey. When they reached their starting point again, the three remaining men sheltered by a support pillar under the onramp overpass. Not daring to make a fire, they sat close together, glumly sharing silence in the damp cold, as Snake mentally sorted through what had happened to him on the bridge. *Waking dream? Flashback? Gas getting to me at last? "Bullshit!"* he muttered, dismissing the questions. *Lack of light is all; sensory deprivation. Perfectly normal....* . He called up safer, more familiar, memories, drawing strength from the black, burning core of anger within him, fighting darkness with darkness. His own darkness rose and filled his world, driving out everything else.

As the first pale dawn light wrapped a luminous white sheet of fog around them, hiding them from any unfriendly eyes, the cold, hungry, and exhausted trio started across the Bay Bridge again. This time, Snake took point. When they reached the broken place where Donnie had fallen, they discovered that the catwalk had collapsed entirely. The passage was so narrow they had to sling their bikes from their shoulders with a length of rope from Rain's pack and crabwalk across, holding on to the railing for support. They unpacked the trailers, passed the supplies over the gap, one-handed, from one to the other, and repacked them on the far side. By the time they were finished, it was late morning and the fog was beginning to lift. Fifteen feet farther on, the roadway widened, almost intact, and they were able to pedal, slowly, to Yerba Buena Island.

The center tunnel section of the freeway had collapsed in the quake, replaced by a jury-rigged section of infill and blacktop. "We can detour around, overland, and go back up on the other side," Rain suggested, and the others agreed. A short distance from the roadway, they found a sandy depression hidden by a stand of gnarled bushes, where Rain cleared an area and lighted a small fire. Here they warmed themselves, dried their damp jackets, and ate a meager lunch before continuing. About a quarter mile on the other side, the freeway sloped back up to rejoin the pre-quake structure.

Snake, Rain, and Wolf climbed back up to the lower level, pulled the bicycles and trailers up after them, and wheeled on toward Oakland, detouring around the broken sections of paving. Twice more, they had to dismount and edge their way along the side of an open section, looking down through the gap in the concrete at the green water foaming and splashing around twisted supports below, sending up rank spray to dampen them. By the time they reached the far side, Snake's skin and hair were sticky with dried saltwater.

They came off the freeway into the Oakland waterfront, an area of warehouses and industrial buildings, blacktop parking lots ringed with chain-link fence, weed-choked vacant lots, and unpainted Victorian houses with broken windows and sagging porches, set in bare earth. Many of the dilapidated automobiles lining the streets looked as if they had been abandoned there long before 666. A block to the left brought them to the old truck-yard. Inside was a low stucco building surrounded by cars, semi cabs, and pieces of heavy machinery. Several men lounged in the yard, leaning against the sides of the trucks and sitting on front seats, talking loudly and laughing. A strapping young Black man with an AK-47 was standing at the gate in the tall chain-link fence as they came up to it. He eyed them coldly and shifted the rifle to a ready position.

"Wha'chu want?"

"Yo, bro," Wolf said, "We here fo' Chaindog. We down with Pharaoh over Mission. This Snake Plissken." He gestured in Snake's direction.

"Wait." The guard turned to one of the other young men and handed him the rifle, then gestured to Wolf to follow him. As they walked to the building's door, he held out his hand, and Wolf surrendered his gun to him without a word. The two disappeared inside.

Fifteen minutes passed as Snake and Rain waited under a barrage of hostile stares. Snake kept his hands visible and away from his guns, but poised, as the young man covered them with the AK-47. Finally Wolf and the first guard returned, accompanied by a massive Black man a full head taller than Snake and probably half again as heavy, dressed in loose-fitting dark pants and a bulky black Raiders jacket. The cold, suspicious expression as he faced them brought back memories for Snake of his encounter with the Duke of New York. "Th' Wolf say you Snake Plissken," the big man rumbled. "You frontin' me, I fuckin' snake yo' white ass, SEC!"

Snake gave him an impassive stare in return, and stood motionless as Wolf spread his hands, saying, "Proper-T, Chaindog; you make 'im. He all ovah d'Box. It's up."

"Maybe." Chaindog folded his arms and glared at Snake. "Show me, man."

Snake allowed a hint of annoyance to surface visibly as he rasped, just above a whisper, "Show you what?"

"S to the D Snake Plissken one righteous badass muthafuckah. Got a fuckin' tat down his dick. Back yo' game: whip it out, suckah!"

"Fuck you!" Snake spat. His hands hovered over the butt of his Magnums. The AK-47 shifted, pointedly, in his direction and guns appeared in the hands of several of the other men in the yard as they came to alert attention, facing the visitors.

Wolf moved to stand next to him. "Snake, this guy owns Oakland," he muttered in Snake's ear. "If you want to make it through...."."

Snake allowed himself the brief luxury of imagining this Black asshole smeared all over the blacktop by a spray of bullets, before taking firm control of his smoldering anger.

For a moment, he held the other man's eyes with his own unwavering blue stare, the line of his mouth hard, calmly taking up the challenge and returning it as his hand moved slowly to his fly. The faint hiss of the zipper was audible in the charged silence.

Snake briefly ranged with his good eye, then a wide, hot, stream of urine arced, smoking, through the cold winter air and hit the step just below Chaindog's hi-tops with perfect aim, splattering off concrete onto leather. Snake heard the intake of breath from Wolf in his ear, and soft exclamations from Chaindog's men. From the corner of his eye, he caught Rain's intent expression. Spreading his feet slightly in a gunfighter pose, Snake hooked his thumbs lightly over the top of his gunbelt, fingers pointing downward toward the thick length of his exposed cock. Inked line of the cobra's tail, clearly visible on pale flesh, curved down the heavy shaft and ended in a black band that circled the head.

Chaindog followed the line down with his eyes, then looked back up to meet Snake's menacing, stony glare, locked in a contest of wills that was almost visible, as those around them stood frozen. Finally, the larger man broke off the conflict. "God damn! Yeah, you Snake, man; proper-T. C'mon inside."

Snake calmly tucked, zipped up, and followed Chaindog up the step and into the building, with Wolf and Rain on his heels. They walked past a deserted repair garage and storage areas to a large office with a frosted-glass window in the door neatly labeled "Manager." Inside was a large executive desk and several

upholstered chairs. Chaindog waved his three visitors to them, sat down in the big chair behind the desk, and pulled off his hi-tops. "Yo, J.T!" he called. The door opened, and a skinny teenager stuck his head in. Chaindog threw the shoes in his direction and the boy fielded them. "Clean 'em off," Chaindog told him shortly, "An' tell th' General c'mere." The boy disappeared with the wet shoes, and Chaindog turned his attention to the group in his office. "I oughta make you do it, muthafuckah," he grumbled in Snake's direction, but it was clearly pro forma.

Snake gave him a level, expressionless stare which made it quite clear just how successful Chaindog would be if he followed through on his threat, and didn't bother to respond. "We're passin' through," he said softly; "Just stopped to... pay our respects." *We're not looking for trouble, but we can handle it if it shows up*, his tone said.

"Sheee-it..." Chaindog drew the word out in a way that indicated disbelief combined with admiration for Snake's sheer bare-faced effrontery. Snake could feel the delicate balance shifting in his direction.

"Pharaoh said you'd send us through," Wolf said steadily in a tone that added, silently: *Are you going to make him a liar? Do you want to take the chance of starting a gang war over this?*

Chaindog leaned back in the wide upholstered chair and gave Wolf a considering, sideways glance. "Pharaoh's my bro. He know I don't take shit off nobody." He leaned forward and slapped one hand on the desk. "You disrespected me. I got a mind to light you up just for that, Plissken."

"Call me Snake."

Chaindog sighed. "Shit, man, you got 'em! Get yo' stank ass out ma face, 'fore I change m'mind." He raised his voice to a peremptory bellow: "GENERAL!"

"Yo, Chaindog." Snake, Wolf, and Rain rose slowly to their feet as the door opened and another of Chaindog's group entered, a slender young Black man dressed in a replica of the gang leader's uniform of Raiders jacket and dark pants, along with a black military beret pulled down over his forehead and an AK-47 slung over his left shoulder. Four USPF eagle rank patches were sewed down one black nylon sleeve, and two on the other. For a moment Snake contemplated them, baffled, and then the hint of a smile flickered over his mouth and was gone: *taking enemy scalps*, he thought.

Chaindog leaned back in his chair again and gestured first at one and then at the other: "General E-lectrik. General, this the Snake. You take 'im on through and see he get there." He turned to Snake and growled, "Get on out ma town." He turned to Wolf and added. "You, too."

Wolf nodded slowly, solemnly. "Thanks, Chaindog. I'll pass on back to Pharaoh."

"See you do," Chaindog answered shortly, in a tone that suggested it was both an admonition and a threat, and jerked his head toward the door in a final gesture of dismissal.

The rest of the group filed out of Chaindog's office and made their way to the outer fence around the truck yard. At the door, Wolf turned to Snake and Rain and said, "I'll leave you here. I want to get back across the bridge before dark. Give my best to your Group, Rain." He nodded a farewell to the General, then faced Snake and gave him one quick "thumbs up."

Something from deep within Snake's past stirred, a half-forgotten memory carrying with it the memory of an old emotion he had discarded long ago. Poker-faced, he echoed the gesture, and said softly, "Semper Fi."

Several emotions chased themselves across Wolf's dark face: surprise, pride, pain, and finally, with an ironic smile, he answered, "F.T.A. Good luck, Snake." The smile became genuine and then faded as he turned and started walking back toward the Bay Bridge.

Snake gave his short, voiceless laugh, and for a moment, actually grinned. "Asshole," he muttered in a surprisingly cheerful tone.

Rain and the General both gave him puzzled looks, and Rain arched eyebrows in Snake's direction. "F.T.A.?" The young man finished unpacking and reassembling his crossbow, and slid it over his shoulder in a carrying-strap, ready for easy access. From the satisfied look on Rain's face, Snake got the impression the young man felt he was fully armed again.

"Fuck The Army," Snake answered, and turned to the General: "Let's get moving."

"Where you goin'?"

"North," Snake answered shortly. The General slung the strap of his rifle over his shoulder and started out purposefully down the street. For a block or so, they walked along in silence through deserted industrial-park buildings of stucco and glass, Snake and Rain pushing the bicycles. The General gave the impression that he was trying very hard to look cool and unimpressed while guiding the famous Snake Plissken across his territory. Finally, Snake made the first move. He gestured at the patches sewed down the General's sleeve: "Blackbellies?"

The young man grinned and nodded, his face lighting up. "Dead blackbellies."

Snake gave a single, slow nod and the hint of a grave, congratulatory smile that clearly said: 'good job.' The General preened a bit. "Snake Plissken. Shit. You got one serious badass game, Snake." The General walked on for a ways, his steps taking on a rhythmic cadence. Gradually, he added a finger-snap in counterpoint to the thud of footstep on concrete, and broke into patterned speech: "I be strapped an I be on it; in a muthafuckin' minute/ I be snakin' out the bacon, jest as soon as we get in it/ The BBs, they be illin' bout the killin' they be riskin'!/ So I bagged they fuckin' payroll, pullin' off a Snake Plissken." His footsteps returned to his regular stride as he finished with: "Man, you in all the fuckin' raps!" He gave Snake a sly sideways glance and added, "Bet you ain't heard 'em, though. They got a bonk Outside on ever'thin' got your name in it."

Rain evidently noticed Snake's puzzled expression and chimed in with, "A bonk's a Parental Advisory. It's illegal to play anything with a PA." He chuckled. "Not that it matters any more."

"My name is illegal?" Snake said, bemused.

General E-lectrik's grin widened. "It gangsta, man! Snakin' be bustin' banks, wastin' th' bacon. Bangin.' I be a Oaktown Playa." He slapped the USPF badges on his left sleeve. "I been snakin' fo' years."

"And... 'pulling off a Snake... Plissken?'"

"Killin' a PO-liceman. Or lightin' up a crowd with a Glock. Flyin' bullets very snake!" The young man glowed with a reflected pride. "I be down fo' you, Snake. You bad!"

Snake snorted and returned to silence, but Rain grinned in return and said, "So what are some of the other raps about Snake?"

As they moved on through block after block of tumble-down Victorian houses toward the outskirts of Oakland, the General responded with a torrent of rap verses, some of which, he informed them proudly, he had composed himself, featuring Snake's name as, variously, noun, verb, or adjective. The people that they passed glanced at them, and quickly away again as soon as they caught sight of the General's garb and the trio's collective firepower. Finally, the houses started to spread out, becoming bungalows and more modern designs, and greenery started to creep in among them. Their guide slowed and stopped. He regarded Snake rather wistfully, as if reluctant to give up possession of his trophy, then said, "I don't go no farther." He shifted from one foot to the other, as if trying to think of something further to add, and finally sketched a salute. "Later, Snake." Without waiting for a response, he turned and started back the way he had come. Rain and Snake mounted their bicycles and pedaled onward toward the edge of Oakland. Taking the back streets and keeping a sharp watch out for blackbelly patrols, they reached the suburbs without incident and wheeled on into the countryside. A few miles out of Oakland, they found a protected spot under an overpass and settled down to wait out the night, one wrapped in his sleeping bag while the other kept watch.

CHAPTER THREE

Snake half-woke in the gray pre-dawn, recognized the sounds of motion near him as being produced by Rain, and went back to sleep. A while later, he woke to crisp winter sunshine and the smell of coffee. Rain had built a small, almost smokeless, fire on the concrete of the underpass and was boiling up bottled water for coffee and instant oatmeal. After breakfast, they set out again, Rain leading the way along the network of back roads paralleling I-80, skirting Berkeley and heading northward. Snake enjoyed the sun's warmth on his bent shoulders as they wheeled through the rolling hills, green with the winter rains and sheened with a silvery layer of dew. Each blade of grass sparkled in the morning light. Here and there little plumes of mist rose, melting away before they reached waist-height.

They met no one on the narrow country road. Most travelers used the easier, better-marked route of the interstate, and the local population had either sought refuge in the nearest town or retreated to a more defensible spot away from the highway. For the first time in days, Snake felt he could really breathe, away from the gas-laden fog of San Francisco. He drew in great gulps of the bright air as he pedaled. He could feel the pull of the muscles in his wounded leg, but the pain was almost gone, and the bicycle

rolled forward with a smooth, silent, almost effortless motion that reminded him of glider-flight. He swooped down the long, shallow hills, feeling the bike respond to his every movement, bringing up memories of his Gulffire floating down a sweeping curve of air.

As they continued onward after the noon-break, Snake began to notice a change in the air around him: a hint of damp breeze, a smell of moist earth, as overcast crept in again over the sky, darkening into a cloudbank toward the horizon. Snake's mood darkened with it, memories of the Gulffire turning to painful images of falling toward earth on a dark wind. ...the crash, Lt. Plissken crawling from under the wrecked fuselage, covered in blood, snow, and broken glass.... Snake snarled to himself and brought his thoughts back to the road ahead, wondering angrily why it was that every time he relaxed a little, some inner demon brought up past images to torment him. He glanced up toward the clouds gathering as if in response to his mood, blotting out the blue, turning the sky threatening with promise of rain. He thought of gas in the falling water. "Rain," he muttered; then, more loudly, "Rain!"

The young man ahead of him slowed and called back, "What is it, Snake?"

"It's going to rain," Snake said, a snap of irritation in his tone.

Rain slowed to a complete stop and Snake drew up next to him. Rain looked at the lowering clouds overhead. "Probably will. This is the rainy season in northern California."

"We need to get undercover. No telling how much gas it'll be carrying. You know any places around here?"

Rain chewed his lower lip, considering. "Yeah," he said. "I sure do. The driveway's right along here. I passed it every time I came down south in the truck, and it pissed me off every time I drove by. There's a place up off the road that used to be a little family winery. Really nice people. Didn't bother anybody. They ran it as a hobby. The government seized the property when drinking was made illegal. This blackbelly Commander fixed the DEA auction and got it for practically nothing."

"There's a reason this pissed you off more than usual?"

"The scumbag's growing a pot crop in the winery -- under grow-lights, with a generator to keep it off the power-grid -- and selling illegal booze. He's got connections to keep the narcs and bottle-Nazis off the place, and he sics the Feds on the competition when he can. We know he tipped off some of the raiders that hit Rivendell. I'd love to take him out."

"Sounds familiar," Snake said dryly. He looked up at the dark clouds overhead. "We'd better get moving. What's the guy got?"

"Got?"

"Defenses."

"He has an electrified fence and an alarm system....".

"No problem now."

"...And a couple of really nasty dogs. A Rott and a Presa Canario."

"A what?" Snake asked.

"Big ugly fighting dog."

"How many people?"

"Just him. He's too cheap to share."

"Hpf," Snake acknowledged. "Let's get going."

Drops of rain began to come down at intervals. Several anxious minutes later, they rode up to a stone wall with a locked iron gate barring entry to a driveway. Above it was a metal arch with dangling chains which showed where the old winery sign had once hung. A blacktopped drive led away from the gate into a tangle of untrimmed oleanders and overhanging trees.

"How far is the house?" Snake asked.

"It's a ways up the road."

Snake drew his Magnum and shot the lock off the gate. The two men stood listening intently for any reaction, while Rain prepared and cocked his crossbow. Nothing broke the stillness except an occasional patter of raindrops on the leaves above them. They moved off down the drive, pushing their bikes, weapons ready for instant access. About a mile up the road, around several twists and turns, they came to another tall metal fence with curved spikes along the top, and another, more businesslike lock. Inside, almost hidden by overgrown trees and bushes, was a one-story brown-shingled bungalow, its windows covered with protective bars disguised as ornamental grillwork. No lights were visible, but that, Snake reflected, didn't mean any longer that there was no one at home. The door was ajar, opening into darkness. A drop of rain hit him on the forehead, and he decided he and Rain were going to stay here overnight whether or not the property owner objected.

"Cover me," Snake said.

Rain nodded. They left their bicycles at the side of the road, and Rain stood guard while Snake knelt down on one knee and concentrated on the tricky task of quietly picking the lock. It sprang open with a click. Snake stood up and pushed on the tall, heavy gate, which swung slowly open with a faint protesting groan. As he stepped through, a brindle blur came rushing around the side of the house and launched itself at him. Snake whipped up his gun and aimed, but before he could fire, Rain's crossbow snapped, and the dog went down twenty feet from them. The entire thing had taken place in almost total silence. Snake exhaled and looked at Rain, and the two of them looked back at the dead dog. It was the big male Presa Canario, muscular and scarred, but gaunt to the point of emaciation.

Wordlessly, they exchanged glances again and continued toward the building. Snake gestured, sending Rain around the house on one side while he went the other direction. They arrived back at the front porch at almost the same time. At Snake's questioning look, Rain shook his head. Guns drawn, crossbow cocked, the two men slipped through the entrance and split up to check out the interior. Toward the back of the house, Snake found another half-open door. Through it, he could see the foot of a large bed with a rumpled coverlet. A faint smell of something unclean was seeping through the opening. Finger on the trigger, body tense, Snake stepped around the door, into the room, and stood still, taking in the scene in front of him. Strewn across the bloody bed were the decomposing remains of the house's owner. Large parts of the corpse were missing, and several of its bones had been gnawed bare and disjointed. *What happened?*

Snake wondered. Scattered among the bones were little white pills. Snake found an amber pill-bottle next to one of the pillows and picked it up. The label read "Nitroglycerine." Snake snorted. *Bad heart. It wasn't even 666.*

He heard Rain's voice from behind him. "Snake, I found the other dog. The one I shot had been eating him."

"Looks like one of 'em got here first."

Rain came through the door and joined Snake in staring at the mess on the bed. The muscles in his jaw bunched, but his face betrayed no other emotion. After a minute, he said evenly, "Couldn't have happened to a nicer guy." He looked over at Snake. "I'm just sorry about the dogs."

The two men wrapped the scattered fragments of the corpse in the bed linens and dumped the whole bundle into bushes in back of the winery-building-turned-pot-farm behind the house. Then they pulled their bikes inside the house's front hallway and locked the door, just as the rain that had been threatening began to come down in earnest.

"Nice place," Rain murmured.

The house did indeed look like a gentleman farmer's weekend retreat, cozily decorated in expensive country style, with large amounts of polished wood, overstuffed furniture, imitation folk art, and retro burgundy-and-hunter-green plaid. To one side of the front hall was a small room, evidently the former children's bedroom, with two single beds and a view of the porch, driveway, and gate, where they decided they would sleep. In the very back of the house was a family room with a stone fireplace that took up half a wall, a fire neatly laid on the grate, ready to light. Just beyond was a kitchen and pantry, a shrine to Williams-Sonoma full of hand-painted Italian tile and designer gadgets. Rain ignored the gigantic side-by-side refrigerator-freezer, a useless relic now, but explored the well-stocked cabinets crowded with gourmet cans and bottles, many of them imported and filled with now-illegal goodies. "Snake, look!" he called.

Snake joined him at the kitchen window as Rain pointed to a tank visible in back of the house, and added, "Propane! The pilot's out, but if there's enough pressure in the tank, I bet we can light the stove and the heater."

Snake, who had gone back to reconnoitering the cabinets, stopped short with an awed "Shit!" as he pulled open one door. "Look at this!" Inside was a wine-rack full of French and German vintages and a row of bottles. He pulled them out, reading labels: Cointreau, Triple Sec, Chambord, Grand Marnier, Kirschwasser, Courvoisier. His hand slowed: Stolichnaya... Glenlivet... Chivas Regal. He picked up the last bottle and regarded it with delight. "Shit, this fuckin' stuff's worth twice its weight in gold by now."

"Too bad we don't have room to pack 'em," Rain commented over Snake's shoulder. "Maybe we can send people back down here to pick up this stuff. Trade goods."

"If they're still here by then," Snake said. He separated out the bottles of Scotch and carried them over to the coffee-table in the family room. He gave Rain a hard look. "Trade goods, my ass. This place is mine; yours and mine. I'm not letting you give it away."

Rain opened his mouth as if to protest, and then, at Snake's unyielding expression, nodded. "O.K., Snake. It's yours."

Rain found a hand-operated can-opener at the back of a drawer, after some searching, Snake set about relighting the stove, then the two of them selected a feast from the collection of cans in the pantry. They drew the drapes and ate by the dim light of a chemlamp from their supplies. A stock-pot full of water from the tap, heated on the stove, even allowed them a sketchy sponge-bath. Afterward, they adjourned to the family room and lighted the fire, deciding that the darkness and rain would mask the smoke from detection by any casual passersby who might dare the wet weather. Snake settled back against a sofa with a long sigh of contentment and picked up the bottle on the table. "Never could afford this shit," he commented. A drink -- the good stuff -- a cigarette, savored slowly, dry and warm. Luxury. He poured Chivas into a heavy glass he found near the liquor cabinet, contemplated the deep-amber liquid for a moment, his good eye half-closed, then took a sip, rolling the expensive liquor on his tongue, letting the flavor carry him into a mood of relaxation. "Damn," he said softly, "This is living." He set the glass down, took out his last pack of Ormsby's cigarettes, pulled out one, and lit it. *Only eight left. Shit.* He sucked in the strong smoke, tasting the mingled flavors of prime tobacco and whiskey, and, momentarily, gave himself completely to the experience. A paranoid voice inside him, part of the warning system that never let him rest, screamed at him not to let up vigilance, not here, not now. He felt a stab of irritation. No place would ever be safe, for him. He took a swallow of the Chivas and damped the alarm at the back of his mind. Dammit, for a little while he was just going to be instead of being on guard.

Rain curled up in a corner of the matching sofa, parallel to the one Snake was occupying on the opposite side of the fireplace conversation group, and sipped at the glass of sweet port he had chosen from among the bottles. He was not particularly fond of alcohol, and he especially disliked the harsh, metallic taste of distilled liquor. Wine at least had something left of the flavor of the living plant that had been used to create it. He breathed in the scent of wood smoke, listening to the soft crackle of burning logs, and watched the man opposite him as firelight flickered over Snake's features. Snake was hard to read, wary of revealing himself, but Rain was beginning to recognize the changes in Snake's mood. The key was subtlety: the faint tensing of muscles around his good eye, a movement of his mouth so small and quick it was lost to the casual observer, a shift in posture. Rain admired the way Snake's dark pants and tight sleeveless top showed off the man's hard, powerful body, and the way the red light turned Snake's dark auburn hair into a dense, curling mass that gleamed like cooling lava. Rain imagined the way that hair would feel, heavy in his hands, and remembered the scene at Chaindog's headquarters: Snake's beautiful thick cock, his air of fearless self-confidence. Rain sighed inwardly, and shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "That guy - the rapper - he was something, wasn't he," Rain said, apparently apropos of nothing.

"Yeah," Snake answered. He took another slow swallow of his drink and gestured with the glass. "Thing is - what is it I do that everybody thinks is so special? I'm just an asshole."

Rain stared at him, nonplussed; the man was apparently sincere. "You're the one who stood up to the System, said no to it and made it stick. Even when they caught you, they couldn't break you. You're the one who shut down the machine."

"Bullshit. Enough pressure, everybody cracks. L.A. and New York Max, I was lucky; they needed me for something. Lot of people died because of it." Snake returned Rain's considering look, suspicion visible on his features, and his voice hardened. "What do *you* want me for?"

I want to make love to you. Rain paused and shifted mental gears, searching for words

to describe his larger vision. "That's not what this is all about, Snake. It's what we owe you, for what you've done for the whole earth." He stared into the flames leaping in the fireplace, turning the dead wood to ashes. The ashes would return to the earth, and out of them, eventually, with rain and sunlight and the hidden seed, would grow a new green plant. Destruction and creation were a cycle, each dependent on the other. "There's too many of us humans. We have too much power. We need to restore the balance. We need to see that the rest - the animals and the mountains and the rivers and the trees - have just as much right to be here as we do. We're just part of it."

Snake was staring at him as if he had gone gas-crazy. Rain took a deep breath and struggled on, trying to make the man across from him understand. "That's what my grandparents and the rest of them wanted to do when they first set up the Groups, back at the end of the 'sixties: create a place where people could live in harmony with the rest of nature, create a model of how things ought to work, so that when the System destroyed itself, we could rebuild in a better way." Rain paused and drained his glass of wine, and his own voice turned cold and hard. "They said it was to be built on Love. They were wrong. It's not love, it's justice. Justice is what's true. There's no mercy in it. Sometimes it's cruel, but it's what is right, what restores the balance. Like that lady holding the scales. What the people who run the System did was wrong, and they have to pay for it. Now they will. When you pushed the button, you gave the world a chance for a new beginning. My people couldn't do that. All they could do was hide." Rain's voice held a complex swirl of emotions: desire, frustration, and an anger with too many targets. He fell silent in confusion.

"You're fucking crazy," Snake growled. He poured a second glass of the expensive scotch, considered a second cigarette and decided against it. He drew a mental line at the top of the bottle's label: *just to that line. I can handle it.* He took another swallow, feeling it burn down his throat. "Justice," he muttered to himself, and snorted softly, remembering the men of Black Light. Rain was watching him. Something about the younger man was subtly disturbing, a nagging impression at the back of Snake's mind. Snake frowned slightly and studied him, trying to place it.

"What?" Rain said. A stray lock of his hair drifted over one of Rain's eyes, and he tossed his head and brushed it back impatiently.

The small gesture snapped it into focus for Snake. Taylor. Taylor used to do that. Rain had the same wiry build, the same dark hair, longer than Snake's own, the same direct gaze. He was younger than Taylor had been, but he had the same assurance and bearing. Seeing it now, Snake was vaguely surprised that it had escaped him before. He set down the glass. "You remind me of someone."

"Who?"

"Taylor," Snake said.

"Taylor?"

Snake felt everything around him contract to a single cold, lonely point. There was a whole world out there that did not remember Bill Taylor, to whom the name meant nothing. "Partner. Killed in San Francisco, Market Street hummer station." He drew a long breath and exhaled heavily. Rain was still looking at him as if he expected Snake to make sense of it all. Why the fuck did they all want something from him? Didn't they know everywhere he went, everything he did, he carried death with him? Snake knocked back the rest of his drink and angrily splashed more into the glass. He could feel the edges of his self-discipline being eroded by the alcohol, but he was still in control.

"Snake...?"

Rain had a worried, uncomfortable look on his face, and he seemed to be trying to find words. Snake's internal sense of paranoia seized on an interpretation. "I'm not drunk. I can handle it." A scrap of remembered dialog surfaced, and Snake's mouth twisted in a painful imitation of humor: "'We're professionals; don't try this at home.'" At Rain's blank look, he added, "He used to say that all the time.

The professionals thing. We'd pull a job, have to fight our way out... make it by the skin of our teeth... and he'd say that. Always got me to laugh, the bastard." Snake shook his head, remembering his old partner's insouciant one-liners, the easy banter, the understanding, and the trust. Somehow, being with Taylor had made the whole deadly, violent struggle into a game, an adventure. Taylor had never blamed him for the failure of Black Light, for the deaths of Snake's men. The two of them had survived, and Bill Taylor had never looked back. He had given Snake his full, uncompromising loyalty. And died for it.

Snake swallowed the last of the liquor in his glass in one gulp and slammed the glass down on the table. "Shit!" he snarled. He rose to his feet and looked around, then grabbed a small lamp-table by the side of the sofa and a large dictionary from the shelves. He stamped to the back door, set the table down directly in front of it with two legs of the table on the book, unbalancing it, then piled a stack of fragile china dishes on top of the table. The slightest inward movement of the door would send the whole thing crashing over, creating an ungodly racket. "Fuck setting a watch. Let's see 'em get through that without waking me up!" He headed for the bedroom.

Rain remained curled on the couch staring at the dying fire, turning over what had happened in his mind. Just being near Snake in an almost-peaceful situation like this made it hard to think about anything except how much he wanted Snake. Not just his body; he wanted into... Rain considered, searching, ...into Snake's self, the thing that made him Snake. Snake was a puzzle, an interlocking set of closed and guarded boxes, and he wanted to open them, to find out what was inside. Why? He wasn't sure. If there was an answer to that, he wasn't ready to deal with it yet.

Taylor was the key. "*You remind me of someone.*"

Snake's dead partner. Rain remembered the broadcasts of grainy, out-of-focus footage from the USPF cameras, showing the capture of a much younger Snake Plissken after the Denver robbery. He remembered images of Snake's dark-haired, slender accomplice, the USPF bullets knocking him down, the camera tracking Snake as ran for the exit, then turned and came back to stand by his fallen friend, even as the dying Taylor croaked desperately, "Go on, Lieutenant." Snake had not been captured; he had surrendered rather than leave his partner to die alone. The shots of Plissken being shoved down, cuffed, and marched out past Taylor's lifeless body had showed Snake blank-eyed and unresisting, as if some central part of his identity had been left behind on the hummer station floor.

You remind me of someone. There was that to build on. Rain stretched, yawned, and got to his feet, then set about rigging another table-and-dinner-plate alarm system by the locked front door. That should give them plenty of warning of any intruders. He moved into the front bedroom on silent feet and stood for a few minutes watching

Snake's sleeping form, before he turned out the chemlamp and slipped into the other bed.

Snake found the door to the bedroom by faint light from the family room at the other end of the hall. Rainwater drummed heavily on the roof, gurgled down the gutters, ran down the dark square of window like blood from an open wound. Snake watched it flowing on the glass as he stripped off his clothes, and thought of gas. Memories rose of crazies, drowned husks of humanity shuffling and drooling; of filthy, stinking, shapeless figures chasing him, of hands reaching up through splintered wood and dragging a screaming woman down to her death. Snake slid under the covers and pulled the bright-colored down comforter up to his chin as he fought his usual battle with surrendering his defenses to sleep. Finally, he slid into restless unconsciousness. Some time later, he dreamed.

He stood atop the high iron-black cliff, staring down into a valley carpeted in the twisted, charred bodies of the dead, a charnel-house world. Across it the one-eyed outlaw staggered and stumbled, groping uselessly among the corpses, his boots crunching sickeningly on burnt flesh. Here and there a face, a figure, was still identifiable before it crumbled under his step: the men of Black Light; farther on, scattered shapes: Cabbie, Maggie, Brain, Taslima, Carjack... others... so many. They were burned beyond pain now, but never beyond the outlaw's memories. Behind him, chained to him by links he refused to break, the half-blind fool dragged another blackened corpse, slender and dark-haired, that bumped and rattled over the uneven surface, each thud an accusation. Cinder-laden wind whistled and pushed at him, carrying the stench of death.

The figure on the cliff looked upward to where thin, bright streaks of fire swept across the black sky. He reached for them and pulled them out of the sky. They coalesced, streaming through him down toward the world below. Burning drops fell around the outlaw like rain, and as they touched him, he caught fire, flaming upward like a torch. Sparks spattered out from him, setting the charnel-pile alight, covering the world in a sheet of flame. At its center, the one-eyed outlaw danced in the fire, burning, until there was nothing left, and he was freed of the bones and the memories.

Rain woke abruptly to muffled sounds from the other side of the room. He fumbled with the chemlamp on his nightstand and turned it to a dim green glow. Across from him, Snake was thrashing and muttering, tangling himself in bedclothes. "Snake," Rain called softly, then, louder, "Snake!" There was no response. Rain stood up, stepped over to Snake's bed, and gingerly reached out to shake him.

Snake shuddered and froze, then sat bolt upright, his breath coming in labored gasps. There was no awareness in the glazed stare to turned in Rain's direction: his good eye was wide, blind; his damaged eye, half-hidden behind a lock of hair, was white and dead. Rain swallowed, and forced himself to look at the scarred flesh, as a sympathetic tingle of pain lanced through him. "Snake," he said again, "You're having a nightmare. Wake up." Snake mumbled something unintelligible, then quieted. His breathing

slowed to normal and he slumped sideways, his eyes closing. Rain reached out to keep him from falling over, and, for just a moment, held Snake's body against his own. He felt Snake's silky auburn hair against his shoulder, sleek skin over hard muscle, solid, compact weight. Rain drew in the clean, masculine scent of Snake's body, and felt himself growing hard. A stubble of beard brushed the younger man's body, Snake's breath, warm against bare skin, mingled with Rain's own. Snake's mouth was only inches from Rain's, and Rain fought an urge to claim it with his own. Reluctantly, he lowered Snake's sleeping body to the bed and pulled the covers up over him, as Snake dropped into deeper unconsciousness. Rain paused for a few seconds, looking down into Snake's wounded face, then returned to his own bed. He slipped into fantasy as his hand found his own cock, moving rhythmically.

Snake woke to the bright stab of morning light through the bedroom's window, and reached hastily for his patch. He felt groggy and drained, only mildly hung over, and not entirely pleased to find that he remembered last night perfectly. He went to the window and opened it. The rain had stopped, the sky was a crystalline blue, and the trees shone as if polished. "Another beautiful day in fucking Paradise," Snake grumbled half-heartedly.

From behind him, Snake heard Rain's sympathetic chuckle, and turned to face him. The younger man yawned and sat up. "Morning. You OK?"

"Yeah, why?"

"You were having some kind of nightmare last night. I couldn't wake you."

Snake frowned. "Slept like a rock," he rasped, "Must've been *your* dream." He kneaded the tightness at the back of his neck as headache stabbed his damaged eye. For a moment, bright streaks like lines of fire flared across the black interior of his patch, and he shook his head to clear it. This was new. He adjusted the thin cords holding his patch and pulled his hair free from underneath them, wondering what was going wrong with the fucking eye now. Nothing he could do about it. He shrugged mentally and started pulling on his clothes.

Rain outdid himself by producing a breakfast of hot biscuits, coffee, orange juice and fruit from the cans and boxes in the pantry. Snake added a large slab of canned ham, and wrapped the rest in foil to add to his pack. Rain sighed and settled back, interlacing his fingers behind his head, saying, "Man, I almost hate to leave."

"Good place, easy to defend, but it's too close to San Francisco, and that SOB's customers will come looking for their connection eventually. I'm packing what I can." Snake traveled light, with no home base, and memories were the only things he could hold on to permanently. The Chivas and Ormsby's cigarettes would be one of the few good ones. Snake paused by the front hall table, saw the house keys on a ring there. He picked them up and pocketed them.

Snake and Rain managed to fit four bottles, heavily padded with clothing, into their supplies. They exited the bungalow, leaving the doors and windows locked, wheeled their bikes and trailers back through the gate, and rode onward, savoring the bright autumn day. Leaves gleamed like stained glass in the sunshine, birds swooped past, calling in various voices, and blacktop flowed on in front of them, bordered with rolling hills dotted with trees. The very air smelled green and alive, and even Snake's spirits lifted as he pedaled along, feeling the new strength in his healing body. Past Pinole Creek, the road began to rise gradually, and the two men settled down to a steady

uphill effort. They came over the last rise above Carquinez Bridge and pulled up, looking down toward the water. At the base of the hill, in front of the bridge, was a barrier and a toll plaza, with a one-room shack set back slightly from the edge of the pavement. As Snake and Rain studied the layout from the top of the hill, the door of the building opened a crack, and a figure appeared briefly in the opening, then ducked back inside. Light flashed on metal as he moved; he was armed.

"Looks like we have a welcoming committee," Snake said.

"This is the only way to get across, unless you go all the way around to Martinez," Rain said. "Last time I came through it was O.K., but I figured somebody was going to set up a shakedown here eventually."

"One man couldn't hold it by himself."

Rain grinned. "Think you can look dangerous? Get him to call out his reinforcements?" Snake snorted softly.

They pedaled down toward the bridge. A burly man with short-cropped brown hair, dressed in fatigues, stepped out in front of the barrier and held up one hand. The other pointed a functional-looking pistol in their direction. "Halt! Hundred dollars toll. Bluebacks or gold," he said as the two men came up to him.

Snake and Rain exchanged glances. They dismounted, dropped the kickstands on their bikes, and moved out in front of the machines, spreading out slightly. The man eyed them warily and growled, "Keep your hands where I can see 'em." The door to the shack opened, and two more men emerged, carrying rifles. They moved to cover Snake and Rain, one on each side of the pair. "Drop your weapons," one man said, gesturing with his rifle in Snake's direction. "Now."

Snake moved his hands slowly toward his gunbelt. He gave a sudden sharp nod. At the signal, Rain dropped and rolled, pulling one of his throwing knives from a shoulder holder as he went down. The blade buried itself in the throat of the guard across from him as Rain rolled into the legs of the one on his side, pushing him off balance. Snake's Magnums roared as he drew and swung around, catching the guard in front of him, and then the one Rain had knocked off-balance, before the men could recover and fire. As Rain rose to his feet again, Snake blasted the man Rain had hit with a final bullet, as insurance. The two of them ducked behind the toll-booth structure and waited tensely for evidence that there were any more of the gang left inside the shack. When none showed themselves, Snake ran, crouching, to the side of the building, and slammed the door open, guns at the ready. There was no one inside.

Rain stopped to recover his throwing knife from the dead man's throat, then joined Snake in searching the inside of the shack. They found weapons and ammo, along with a collection of valuables looted from travelers. They discarded the useless bluebacks and credit disks, but took the jewelry and other items which fit in their bike-trailers and still looked useful for bartering. Snake replenished his gunbelt stash with all eight of the gold coins they found, after Rain refused his offer to split them with him. Several extra boxes of ammunition also went into Snake's trailer, but he discarded most of the guns. The exception was a sleek and deadly Walther PPK semi-automatic pistol which he found hidden in a drawer, and claimed as his own by picking off a white plastic initial attached to the butt. It lacked the raw power of his Magnums, but it was a beautiful piece of gunsmithing, easily concealed and very accurate. With it was a flat case with a shoulder-holster, barrel-extender, flash suppresser, telescoping shoulder stock, extra clips, and a good scope. The set was elegant and expensive-looking, clearly custom-made, and obviously stolen. Snake wondered who had originally owned it.

[Part Three](#)
[Back](#)

CHAPTER FOUR

Snake and Rain paused for a quick wash of hands and face, and a long drink of water, then wheeled around the corpses, over the bridge, and on toward Napa. Toward the end of the day, the two bicyclists arrived at what appeared to be a dilapidated and long-abandoned wooden shack. The single building, of weathered, unpainted wood, was half-covered with growing vines and bushes, and looked as if the first strong wind would reduce it to separate boards. Snake followed Rain up to the sagging doorway and stopped. "This is it?"

Rain smiled. "Almost." He dialed the numbers on what looked like a rusted combination lock, gave a push, and the rickety-looking doors slid back easily on well-oiled tracks to reveal a tidy garage. It held an old but well-maintained pickup and a green Volkswagen. Between them was an open stretch of concrete which had once, Snake deduced, housed the delivery truck Rain had abandoned down south. Shelves and sections of pegboard, covered with tools, hardware, boxes and bags, lined the walls. Rain lifted a kerosene lantern off a hook near the door and lit it, then he and Snake wheeled their bikes into the room, and Rain shut and locked the door behind them. By the light of the lantern, Rain led Snake to a door in the windowless wall, and through it to a small room in back. Two single beds and a table and chairs, set on colorful rag rugs, a waist-high bookshelf filled with magazines and paperbacks, and a kitchen/pantry area created a cozy space. One corner of the room held a wood-burning stove and a neat pile of fuel for it. "We can sleep over here," Rain said.

"Where's this Group of yours?" Snake asked as he settled into one of the chairs. He gave a sigh, shook his hair out, and leaned back, closing his eyes. The dull pain that was always there behind his bad eye seemed to get worse when he was tired.

Rain started the process of laying and lighting a fire in the wood-burning stove, his back to Snake. "This is just the garage. The settlement's a lot farther up in the mountains. There's no road, just trails, and it's a long way in. Takes most of a day to get there, even if you know exactly where you're going." He closed the door on the stove as the fire caught, and turned to smile at his fellow traveler. "We try to make it as hard to find as we can, and once in a while, we lose it, too. The beds and stuff are here because nobody wants to try to follow the trail in the dark, and if you get here too late in the day, it's better to sleep over."

"Place looks like a good wind-storm would take it out."

"Give the wall a whack," Rain said. Snake complied, and his fist connected with unyielding wood in a solid thump. "It's a lot stronger than it looks. The guy who built this, back in the seventies, was a genius at this kind of stuff. Worked for some movie company - Industrial Light Something - before he dropped out to join the commune."

The fire was beginning to take the chill and damp off the room as the two men rummaged in their bike-trailers and pulled out rations to heat on the stove's flat top surface. Rain hung up several more lanterns on hooks set into the wall, adjusted the ventilation ducts in the walls, and they ate in the cheerful golden light. "Lots less creepy than the chemlamps," Rain remarked. "Those things always make everything look all green and weird."

Snake had to agree. He found himself relaxing in the comfortable little space. After dinner, he spent a while leafing through a pile of old magazines he found in one corner:

The Animal Agenda, Whole Earth, Kindred Spirit, Pangaia, Raise The Stakes, and at the bottom of the stack, a few dog-eared copies of Anarchy. He snorted softly and set them back down unread, after noticing that the address labels had been carefully peeled off the covers. He was getting a mental picture of the people who had stocked this place: left wing, counter-culture nature nuts, detail oriented and paranoid. Tree huggers. He picked up a tabloid with a clenched-fist logo holding a monkey-wrench, and reconsidered. Tree *spikers* was more like it. Eco-terrorists. He paged through and found an interesting article on sabotage. He ignored the rhetoric, concentrating on the practical suggestions.

They slept soundly in the comfortable beds. The next morning, Rain spent some time refilling the lanterns and restocking the woodpile, then dug into the storage area to find two large metal-frame hiker's backpacks. "Can't get the bikes through," he explained. "We pack everything in by horse or on foot. Leave everything you don't really need here." They transferred the contents of the trailers to the backpacks, leaving most of their food and water on the shelves for the next occupants. Reluctantly, Snake left the bicycle-mounted gun, but insisted on salvaging the rest of his weaponry and the bottles of Scotch he had liberated from the winery. Rain spent a few minutes looking around the front section of the garage before they started out, smiling to himself. He patted the truck's dented fender. "Junk," he said cheerfully. "Scrap metal. From now on, the world belongs to feet again." Snake gave him a sour look and said nothing.

A barbed-wire fence set the shack off from the land behind. Rain lifted one of the fence-posts from its socket, laid the wire flat, and stepped over it. When Snake had followed, he replaced the post, leaving the fence looking solid and undisturbed, and started out confidently into the unbroken wall of vegetation beyond. Rain never faltered, although if there was a path, he was the only one who could see it. They climbed steadily upward, farther into the mountains, ducking and winding between redwoods and pine trees, through underbrush, over narrow, fast-flowing streams bridged with rocks or fallen tree-trunks, where sword fern grew thick beside the foaming water. After several hours, they came out into a clearing and Rain stopped. "Midway point," he said. "Rest here."

"Here where?" Snake asked, sitting down on a fallen tree. He was glad to note that his wounded leg was not giving him much trouble, and he was keeping up with Rain even over the difficult groundcover. He looked around at the featureless tangle of trees and vegetation. It looked the same as every other featureless tangle they had passed. "You sure you're not lost?"

Rain nodded. "We're still several hours out. See that tree?" He pointed. "Lightning damaged. We're beyond the ridge behind that tree, across the next valley. I've been back and forth this way a lot."

"No wonder Ormsby sent you to track me."

It was late afternoon, and the sun had slid down behind the tops of the trees, by the time they reached the commune. Rain turned onto a faint deer track that wound a barely visible path through dense stands of trees, up and down steep slopes covered with slippery fallen leaves and lush winter foliage. They crested a final hill and halted by a big redwood tree overlooking a valley covered in an unbroken carpet of green. "There it is," Rain said.

"There what is?" Snake said wearily. "All I see is more fucking trees."

Rain grinned at him triumphantly. "That's all you're supposed to see." He cupped his hands around his mouth and produced a complicated liquid trill, like some exotic bird

call. "I want to warn them we're coming before we get into bow range," he explained. "Some of the security shoot first and identify the body later."

Snake eyed the interlaced branches in front of him with a distinct lack of enthusiasm and tried to imagine himself reproducing the sound. "Can't you just yell, 'Hey, you?'"

Rain laughed. "Everybody has his own call. That way, they know, not just that somebody's coming, but who it is. You can use 'hey, you.'" A variation of the call was repeated from a distance in front of them, and Rain added, "That's Linden."

A lithe figure slipped out from between the trees ahead and ran toward them, light-footed on the slippery leaf groundcover, long brown hair and homespun cape flowing out behind her. Over her shoulder she carried a crossbow like Rain's. "Rain! You're back!" She threw herself into Rain's open arms and hugged him fiercely. "I'm so glad to see you! We'd just about given you up for lost." She turned to Rain's companion and her expression became wary. "And you are...."

"Lin, meet Snake Plissken," Rain said with a note of pride in his voice. In a few quick sentences he related the events of the last month, finishing up with, "We rode up to the garage on some bicycles we got from DMZ and walked in today."

Linden eyed Snake soberly. "Snake Plissken. You're the one who shut down the Machine, aren't you?" At Snake's nod, she continued, "Gwen was monitoring the News Channel when it happened; she told us about it. You pressed that remote at Firebase Seven, and all the power quit; everything just stopped. It took a while for it to sink in, that the Machine was really gone for good. Thank you. Mother Gaia may just have a chance now." She reached forward and took Snake's hand in a light clasp between her own hands, then released it, smiling at him. "Welcome to Rivendell, Snake."

Linden turned and disappeared into the trees again to take up her post on watch, and the two men continued on their way down into the valley below. Snake found himself uneasy and irritated. Once again, he was coming into alien territory wearing somebody else's identity with his name attached to it. He remembered pushing the button, his feelings of rage and disgust. *To give Mother Gaia a chance?* He snorted softly to himself. *Not fucking likely.* His shoulders prickled with the feeling he was being watched every step of the way by armed and invisible defenders of this place.

He and Rain passed a few outlying buildings nestled among the trees: storage sheds, workshops, two- and three-room cabins with neatly cultivated kitchen gardens and a few plump chickens clucking and scratching around the fenced enclosures. A large orange cat lifted his head and yawned as they passed, then curled back into sleep on the porch of his cabin; a dog wagged a greeting and came over for a sniff and a scratch behind the ears from Rain; a tame crow cawed from a gatepost. Wild finches squabbled around a big feeder, and a squirrel frisked up the trunk of a tree to watch them fearlessly at eye level. As they went by, people called and waved, then came down to the winding path to welcome Rain back. They greeted Snake with a wary neutrality.

A clearing at the center of the settlement held a larger building, a rustic, circular hall sided with vertical redwood boards and topped with a conical shingled roof. It reminded Snake of a giant water tower. "The Lodge," Rain identified it, as he pushed open the door and invited Snake to follow him inside. "We have to let everybody know you're here as a guest," he explained to Snake, "Or somebody might take a shot at you in the woods." Snake's ever-present paranoia ratcheted up a notch.

Inside, the Lodge was warm and welcoming, the wooden walls decorated with

handmade quilts and macramé hangings, Navajo blankets, and pictures. Two wide stone fireplaces stood at opposite points around the circle, and a cheerful blaze crackled in one of them. Baskets of dried flowers and feathers, and potted plants, stood on the floor or hung from the ceiling, while braided rag rugs in bright colors were scattered over the broad floorboards. A wide alcove held kitchen equipment, including a big wood-burning cook-stove. Large and small wooden tables were scattered around the room, along with handmade chairs in several styles and sizes. As they entered, a general cry of "Rain!" went up from the six or eight people engaged in various tasks inside, and the young man was buried under a loving avalanche. One little red-headed girl danced up and down, eagerly tugging at Rain's sleeve, as the young man struggled out of his backpack frame and set it down against the wall of the room. Snake followed suit, as a matronly woman with a ruddy complexion and long, dark braids came over to hug Rain. Rain kissed, hugged, laughed and greeted in return as the people crowded around him. Snake backed away toward the wall, looking for breathing space.

"Enough. We have a visitor." A firm voice cut through the hubbub, and the group fell silent as Snake turned to see a tall, slender, elderly woman striding toward them.

Snake took in her olive complexion, strong, determined features, dark eyes, and mass of fuzzy gray hair caught in a single thick braid. The woman wore a russet tunic belted over a full, ankle-length green skirt, and sandals. She carried herself with an unmistakable air of competence, and the rest yielded to her with what seemed to Snake to be an almost unconscious deference. "Come with me, please," she said, gesturing to Snake and Rain, and led the two to an area near the fireplace with a desk and several chairs. The rest fell back slightly, out of immediate earshot, and returned to their former tasks, although Snake could see them casting sideways glances in his direction. "Please, sit. Be comfortable." The woman settled into a large armchair and Rain took the one next to hers. Snake lowered himself to the edge of another chair, feeling anything but comfortable.

"It's good to have you home safe, Rain. We all feared the worst, with you down south," she began, then looked over at Snake. "Snake Plissken. Do you seek sanctuary with us?" The words had the cadence of a ritual formula.

"Who are you?"

"I am Ray Lee," the woman answered. "We don't have 'leaders' here, but I am one of the elders of this Group. My partner and I were among those who founded Rivendell Commune, back in the 'seventies." She looked down for a moment at her hands folded neatly in her lap. "It seemed like poetry then: the Last Homely House East Of the Sea, the hidden place with strength to resist and defend against evil. But now, with a very real Dark Power risen all around us..." Her voice trailed off, and she raised her calm gaze again to Snake's face. "Snake Plissken, do you seek sanctuary with us at Rivendell?"

"I'm thinkin' about it," Snake responded.

"Snake was hurt getting out of L.A.," Rain supplied. "The blackbellies shot him." Reaching into his jacket pocket, he produced a folded, tattered paper and handed it to Ray Lee. "The blackbellies want him real bad." Snake glowered at him: *Idiot*.

"Yes, Rain; we all heard." Ray Lee scanned the faded paper, then put it down. "That's quite a reward." She looked at Snake. "You know, what you've done has created a nexus point for radical transformation. You are a catalyst, an agent for changes we can't yet even begin to imagine, for good or ill. The consequences are... beyond anything Gaia and her children have faced for centuries." She shut the paper in a drawer of her desk and sat down again. Snake thought about asking for the wanted

poster back, and then shrugged mentally. Ray Lee continued, "But there is hope in this for the Earth. If you ask for sanctuary, no one here will turn you over to the authorities, and if they trail you to this place, you will be defended."

"I take care of myself," Snake said shortly.

"I have no doubt of that. But here we all take care of each other. If you choose to stay, we will ask you to help with our defenses or contribute in some way, but that can wait until you have recovered from your injuries. We have a traveling doctor due by here soon, if you want to see him." She paused and assessed Snake with a level, considering gaze. "You have a reputation as a dangerous and violent man, and I believe it is deserved. I will ask for your assurance that we, here, are safe from you. Give us your word, and we will accept it."

Snake was used to being considered dangerous, but it had been years since anyone had offered to take his word for anything. It threw him off-balance. After a moment, he answered, "I have no quarrel with anybody here. Leave me alone, I'll leave you alone."

Ray Lee's mouth turned up slightly at the corners, but her voice did not change. "It may not be that easy if the blackbellies come looking for you here. But they are our enemies, too. We'll give you as much space as we can while you're with us."

Snake was not sure whether or not that sounded like a threat. He frowned in Ray Lee's direction. For now, he had nowhere better to go, and the blackbellies were hot on his trail. Time to hide out, and wait to see what developed.

"He can stay with me," Rain offered. He turned to Snake. "If you want to." Snake paused, then nodded once.

"Very well, Snake; I'll take that as a 'yes.' I'll put it before the Meeting. If the consensus is against you, I will have to ask you to leave as soon as your wounds are healed, but I doubt you will be turned away." Her eyes shifted pointedly to the Magnums in Snake's holsters. "You may want to leave your weapons in your cabin if you aren't working security."

"No," Snake said in a tone that left no room for negotiation.

"As you wish. Most of the people here, especially the older ones, don't like guns." Ray Lee looked as if she was trying very hard to keep her face and voice neutral. She turned to Rain. "Morgan, I believe, has an extra bed."

"I'll ask her if I can borrow it," Rain said.

He started to stand up, but she made a "wait" hand gesture, and he paused. Her expression turned somber. "We can use you on security tomorrow, Rain. I wish I could give you more time, but we had raiders here while you were gone. Storm was hurt, and we lost Sequoia."

"They killed Sequoia?" Rain looked away and down for a moment, then back at Ray Lee. "The raiders?"

"Buried where we put the last batch. Nobody got away; we're safe. Sequoia, we buried under his favorite thinking spot at the Rainbow Circle. Rhiannon moved in with Storm. They were handfasted at Meeting."

Rain nodded slowly. "I'm glad I'm back."

"We're glad to have you back. We need you, Rain. Go and get settled in." She turned to Snake, and added, formally, "Welcome to Rivendell, Snake."

Snake and Rain picked up their packs, and Snake followed Rain to Rain's home on the outer edge of the settlement. The snug little cabin was set in a cut between two outcroppings of rock, part way up the side of the hill, and behind it a winding trail led toward the top of the mountain. "Sniper blind's up there," Rain said as he pointed up the path. As they climbed, Snake was able to get a better look at the settlement from above. Cabins and outbuildings, including a large greenhouse, dotted the valley in no particular pattern, clustering along a stream that wound through the bottomland.

Farther off was a corral and a shelter for several horses, and a similar one for a small herd of goats. Some distance farther on was a group of boxes on stilts, which Snake identified, after some puzzling, as beehives. On the other side - Snake stopped dead as he figured out what he was seeing, and took a longer look. Fields for growing crops had been cleared, leaving a sprinkling of trees among the curved rows of cultivated land. A series of light camouflage nets had been spread from tree to tree, masking the signs of human activity beneath from casual aerial surveillance. No wonder the valley had looked like untouched forest land as they had come over the top of the hill. *Simple, low-tech, and effective*, Snake thought to himself. "Won't have to worry about that any more," he said, pointing toward the nets.

"Right," Rain answered. "We'll get a better yield with more sunlight. That'll be a point in your favor at Meeting."

Snake snorted softly, and they continued up to Rain's unlocked cabin door. Rain opened it and took a lantern from a hook by the door, then lighted the fat white candle inside. "C'mon in, Snake," he said, and gestured the other man inside. Snake stepped into the single oblong room and looked around. The last light of twilight came through the windows' open shutters, joining with the warm candlelight on unpainted wooden walls and worn board floors spread with more of the woven rag rugs. In the center of the room was a wood-burning stove, and at the rear, a door to a bathroom with a Clivus Multrum composting toilet. One corner held a bed and a wardrobe, and along the same wall was a rack of knives, throwing blades, crossbows and bolts, and equipment for taking care of them, plus a target pad on a stand. The other side of the room held a table, chairs, and a cabinet/bookshelf. Rain pulled them down toward the door and pushed them closer together, creating an open corner opposite his own sleeping area. "You can put your stuff there," Rain said. "I'll go get that bed for you." He trotted out the door and off down the path toward the valley floor.

Snake shrugged out of his pack and set it down against the wall, then took off his jacket. He'd hidden out in worse places, over the years. He remembered the dump in Cleveland he'd shared with Carjack and Texas Mike, where roaches ran out when he lifted the telephone receiver, and a crop of mushrooms sprouted periodically next to the shower. It would feel good to stop moving for a while and let the wound in his leg heal. He could still feel an ache deep in the damaged muscle. He sat down in one of the handmade wooden chairs and stared at the stove, weighing the effort required to light a fire. These people might run interference between him and the blackbellies if the USPF came looking for him, but.... . He thought about the long journey through the woods and wondered where he would go if he had to run. Instead of a refuge, this place could be a trap. He sat there thinking for a while as the twilight deepened outside.

He heard the sound of voices, and opened the door. Rain and a sandy-haired, middle-aged man were struggling up the path carrying a single mattress. Behind them was a teenage boy with the metal bed-frame slung over his shoulder, and behind him, a woman who looked like the boy's mother, carrying a wooden chest and, with her, a

half-grown girl holding the chest's two drawers. Snake stepped back, and the group trooped into Rain's cabin and deposited their burdens on the floor, leaning the mattress up against the wall. Rain said, "Thanks again, you guys."

They trooped out again, heading back down the path, and the older man paused at the door. "You're welcome," he said, smiling. "Since we fostered Raven out, this stuff has just been sitting in the back room. We won't need it till spring."

"Where's your new one coming from?" Rain asked him.

"Oregon, I think," the man replied. "The doctor said there's a boy there that wants to foster here." He eyed Snake, who was leaning casually against the wall, his hands at his sides near the gleaming twin Magnums he was still wearing. "Well, I'll be going. I know you're tired. Anything else you need, Rain, let us know." The man eyed Snake sideways again. "Ray Lee's called Meeting for before dinner to decide on..." he paused, as if a bit embarrassed, then finished, "...on Sanctuary. She asked me to see if you wanted to speak, Rain."

"Yes, I do." Rain went to the door, then turned back toward Snake. "I'll be back in a little while. I don't think there'll be any problem. Make yourself at home, Snake."

"Fuck that." Snake picked up his jacket.

"If Meeting is deciding on a membership, the person isn't supposed to be there, so everybody can talk freely with no bad feelings afterwards. Snake," Rain said urgently, "If you try to crash the Meeting without being invited, they'll turn you down for sure."

Snake struggled briefly with himself, then let his instinct for survival win out. Rain knew more about the dangers here than he did. Snake watched the two men heading down the trail, his nerves tingling as he shifted into fight or flight mode. Who the fuck did those assholes down there think they were, trying to play god with his life? Too angry to sit still, he turned to setting up the furniture crowding the cabin. The new mattress and bed-frame went in the corner opposite Rain's bed, and the two-drawer chest next to it. This final effort, on top of the long day's walk, drove home his bone-deep weariness. He sat down abruptly on the edge of the bed, feeling the heavy ache all through him, the more specific throbbing in his damaged leg and in his head. He shook back his hair, sighing, and closed his eyes.

After a few minutes, he got up again and went to light a fire in the wood-stove. Evening chill was creeping in on the mountain air, sharpening the pain in his leg-wound, and his whole body wanted food and then sleep, but he was too restless to relax. *You're losing it, Snake*, he thought; *never even considered that they might not let you stay*. The kid had seemed so certain. *Stupid asshole*. The anger shifted: *stupid fucking asshole Plissken; don't you ever learn? Keep making the same fucking stupid mistakes, trusting people. What happens if they decide to kick you out? You know they're here now, the one thing they've gone to so much trouble to hide*.

Buried where we put the last batch." Snake pulled out his Magnums one at a time and checked them. He took out the Barret, loaded it, and laid the assault rifle on the bed. Finally, he clipped the elegant little automatic in its holster to the waistband of his pants, hidden at the small of his back, and slipped the pullover on over it. He found himself pacing back and forth from one window to another, trying to see into the gathering darkness quickly becoming full night, and stopped himself. Waste of effort. He took a breath, felt himself slipping into that single-minded, knife-edge focus on the next sixty seconds that carried him through action, as he settled on his unmade bed

facing the door, rifle ready, coiled and waiting.

Rain climbed slowly up the dark path to his cabin, feeling tired and drained. Meeting had been intense. He had been surprised and disturbed to discover how much opposition there was to having Snake stay at Rivendell, and he'd had to argue hard before the consensus to grant Sanctuary had been reached. He mulled over the opposition's points and admitted, reluctantly and with a touch of fear, that they made a sort of sense. Snake *was* violent and paranoid; he had a quick and savage temper, and tended to settle arguments by casually blowing his opponents away. He had no reason to be loyal to Rivendell or the Group's people. *Sociopath* a ghostly voice from the Police Channel whispered in Rain mind. He had brought Snake back with him because he could not bear to leave him behind in danger. Back at Rivendell, with his responsibilities for his Group's safety heavy on his shoulders again, it seemed almost a foolish act of self-indulgence.

As he neared the cabin, Rain walked more heavily, deliberately making noise. He stopped outside the closed door and called out, "Snake, it's Rain." The door swung open and Rain found himself staring down the barrel of the leveled assault rifle he had been half-expecting. Stamping down his own defensive reaction, Rain froze. "It's O.K., Snake," he said in a deliberately calm voice, "I'm alone."

Snake eyed Rain over the weapon. "What'd they say?"

"They said you could stay." Rain breathed out, but remained standing still until the gun barrel lowered and Snake backed away from the opening. Moving with an air of unconcern he did not feel, Rain slipped in and closed the door behind him. His mouth quirked. "I told them you weren't going to go around pointing guns at people."

Snake snorted and said, soft and cold, "What conditions?"

"Probationary." With a sigh, Rain dropped into a chair and unzipped his jacket. "Most of them are afraid of you, because you're from outside and because of what they've seen on the Police Channel. A lot of them think what you did at Firebase Seven was a good thing. They're glad you shut down the Machine, for the sake of the Earth, but they want to be grateful to you from a long way away. They wish you'd go someplace else. Best I could do was wait and see." He paused, then added in a neutral tone, "Can you blame them?"

The man across from him silently shook his head. He set the rifle down on his bed and leaned forward with a long, slow exhalation of breath, then reached with one hand to knead the muscles at the back of his neck. Rain could read the weariness and tension in him from across the room. The hard edge and hair-trigger reflexes that came out of Snake's constant battle with the world were bought at a great price. Snake lived with the safety off.

At the thought, Rain was flooded with desire and a fierce tenderness. He imagined what it would be like to have Snake's strong body under his hands, working the knots out of Snake's back and shoulders, easing him. He imagined that soft, intense voice rough with passion, and the sweet flavor of Snake on his tongue. He wanted to make love to Snake. The phrase - making love - curled through him like narcotic smoke and dissolved into nothingness. Rain drew in a breath and shook off the image. Living here in such close quarters with Snake was going to be every bit as uncomfortable as the cabin on the Afternoon's Delight.

"Dinner's in an hour," he said. "I think we ought to eat at the Lodge. I don't have anything here."

"O.K." Snake answered. He set about moving in with a maximum of efficiency. The bed, chest, and a chair established the boundaries of his territory, setting off a smaller square within the larger square of the room. He made the bed, using sheets, pillow, and blanket from the drawers of the chest, tossing the unzipped sleeping bag over it for warmth, and unpacked his backpack, stowing clothing in one drawer and gun supplies and cigarettes in the other. The pullover and automatic returned to storage. The boots from his stealth outfit went under the bed, along with the Barret and the salvaged bottles of Scotch, and, finally, the pack and frame itself. He removed a lantern from its peg above his bed and set it on the table, creating a place to hang his gunbelt within easy reach, then sat down again on the bed. Meanwhile, Rain did the same with the contents of his own pack, trying not to watch Snake as the other man moved, reached, stretched, and bent over.

They went to dinner, heading down the trail by the faint light of moon and stars toward the brighter golden light of the settlement below. Rain moved surefooted and confident; Snake followed the unfamiliar trail more cautiously. As they stepped through the door to the Lodge, a wave of warm air met them, carrying mingled scents of piney wood burning in the wide fireplaces and good cooking, along with the sound of cheerful chatter. Many candles filled the room with flickering light that was surprisingly bright once their eyes adjusted to it. Snake and Rain headed over to a loaded table to pick up plates and food set out pot-luck style. Snake was alert and unsmiling as he studied the gathered population of Rivendell. Rain tried to see the group with a stranger's eyes. Thirty-five or so people filled the room, a few older, a scattering of children, several knots of young people clustered by themselves, talking animatedly. Many of the older women wore flowing skirts and blouses like Ray Lee's. Most of the others were in practical jeans and workshirts, enlivened with colorful scarves and jewelry. Rain smiled to see Snake's reaction to the three or four men also dressed in skirts among the crowd. Most, men and women alike, had long hair down their backs, with, here and there, a close-cropped head in deliberate counterpoint. *I don't know*, Rain thought, *we just look like us*. He wondered what Snake thought of them. The man's expression was guarded and non-committal.

"Food looks good," Snake commented as he loaded his plate.

There was a hint of surprise in his tone, and Rain remembered Josh's comments about Tofu Gulch. He grinned. "Yeah. Vegetarian isn't just bean sprouts and steamed veggies." He filled his plate, too, with spaghetti in a thick homemade sauce, fresh salad with wild mushrooms, cornbread, garden vegetables, and warm apple cobbler with goats'-milk cream. They headed for a pair of empty chairs at one of the tables, followed by many pairs of eyes.

Ray Lee rose from her seat at one of the tables. "Friends, let us take a moment," she said. Conversation stilled, and when she had their attention, she continued. "We thank those who helped prepare this good food, and those who planted and reaped the harvest, for their hard work. We thank Mother Gaia for the gifts of her bounty. We thank all of you for your contributions." She turned toward the spot where the two men sat, and smiled. "Today, especially, we welcome back Rain, who has returned to us safe and sound. And as you know, we have someone who has sought and been granted sanctuary with us, Snake Plissken. He is a friend, and we welcome him. Thank you, Snake, for giving us new hope." She paused. When

Snake said nothing, she finished with, "Let us eat together and share our strength."

She sat down, and conversation resumed around them. Snake ignored it, concentrating on his meal.

As Snake and Rain dumped their empty dishes into the double tubs of hot water where the clean-up crew were washing up, the little girl they had seen earlier at the Lodge came up to them. She stood looking up at Snake thoughtfully. "Daddy says you steal stuff. Do you?"

Snake eyed the child for a moment, then said in a neutral tone, "Yeah."

"Why?"

Rain thought of all the possible answers to that, and trying to explain to a child the difference between stealing stuff and fighting the System. For a disillusioned second he wondered if there was one.

Snake's voice roughened with an ironic honesty that seemed more for his own benefit than for that of his audience. "Because I want to."

"You're not supposed to steal stuff. That's bad." The girl pointed toward the Magnums holstered at Snake's sides. "You got guns. Like the bad guys who came. Mommy said you kill people." The child frowned and seemed to come to a conclusion. "You're a bad guy! I don't like you."

Snake turned to go, his voice darkening. "Good. Then stay out of my way."

The girl persisted. "Are they gonna kill you back?"

"Yeah. Eventually." Snake picked up his jacket and began to walk off.

Rain looked around, wondering where Astrid's mother was. Astrid hurried after Snake and caught up with him as he and Rain threaded their way toward the door through the maze of tables and people. "Can I see your guns?" she asked.

"Astrid!" A heavysset woman appeared out of the group of people and caught hold of the child's hand. "Come on, honey." Her face and her tone were darkly suspicious as she faced Snake. "I don't want you talking to my daughter." Rain could see the muscle in Snake's jaw tense in response, but the other man did not answer.

"He's a bad man." Astrid trotted alongside as her mother started to lead her away. "Can I watch when they shoot him?"

The mother turned to stare at Snake, but he had already slipped outside. "No, you can not watch when they.... . They're not going to shoot him! What did he say to you, Astrid?" Rain heard fading away behind him as he went to catch up to Snake.

The door to the Lodge closed behind him, and he stepped out into the sharp chill of winter evening. He shrugged on his fleece-lined denim jacket. Snake was ahead of him, a dark figure silvered by the moon. Light caught on the pale flesh of his bare arms and glinted on his guns. "Snake!" he called. Snake slowed marginally, shrugging on his own jacket, as Rain caught up to him. "Why'd you say that to Astrid?" Rain asked. *He never explains himself*, Rain thought. Snake paused and turned to face Rain, his head thrown back and cocked at an angle, his whole posture expressing sardonic cynicism: *Why not?* "Sociopath" suddenly had a concrete meaning. Snake, Rain realized, had

rejected not just one System, but all of them. Rain felt a chill. Knowing it was the wrong thing, he said, "Look, we're trying to teach Astrid and the other kids that stealing and killing are wrong."

Snake's direct gaze focused on Rain. His face was white against the darkness, the patch a black slash across it. Moonlight glittered in his good eye. His soft snort was eloquent. All of Rain's potential justifications sounded ridiculous, sanctimonious, even to himself. He fell back on honesty, hoping Snake would understand. "They have to believe that. We all do. We have to be able to trust each other, or Rivendell and the Groups would fall apart. We can't depend on the law or the police here."

"I don't give a fuck about your Group."

"But, Snake," Rain said, trapped in an argument he knew he could not win, "Society depends on -"

"Society's just another name for somebody else's rules."

"Was that why you pushed the button? To get rid of the rules?" That made sense to Rain. The old image of the romantic outlaw surfaced: Snake as the clear-eyed rebel fighting to bring down the lying, hypocritical System. Of course he did not trust them at Rivendell yet. He had been hurt and betrayed too often. Trust would take time. Something dark and bitter moved across the outlaw's face as Snake turned away, without answering, and started back up the path. Rain followed. If Snake went to sleep like this, he'd surely have another of his nightmares, Rain thought. A practical idea struck him: the baths. It was where he had always gone, since he had moved to Napa, when he was too tense and upset to fall asleep. He caught up to Snake again. "Snake, I've got an idea."

Was that why you pushed the button? To get rid of the rules?"

Fuck it. Get your own answers. Memories of tortures and beatings, deaths and betrayals, stirred in Snake. There were so many reasons, all of them personal. He eyed the young man across from him on the moonlit path, the young man with the quick gestures and the looks that reminded him of Taylor, but who was not Taylor - who would never be Taylor - and knew that Rain would not understand, and that it was not worth trying to explain. Rain was too young. He still thought in terms of causes and idealism. There were no causes. There was only survival and revenge. Pain flared behind his bad eye and knotted in his tense muscles, riding on a weariness too deep for easy sleep. He needed to work it out. He heard Rain suggesting a visit to the hot mineral baths, and decided that it couldn't hurt. He followed Rain as the young man turned in a different direction.

A path threaded its way down toward a hollow near the base of a hill, where lantern-light glowed from narrow openings around the roof of a low redwood building. As they entered, warm air swirled around them, and Snake drew in a breath of thick, slightly sulfurous, vapor, halfway between fog and steam. He coughed hard, fear rising in him, and hesitated as pain flared again in his head. Rain turned a concerned look toward him. "It's all right, Snake. There's no gas in the water. The vents go down a long way."

Snake stared at him for a moment, then decided to accept this. He looked around at the large, dimly-lit room, where men, women and children splashed in several pools carved into the rock. Most of them were naked, a few wrapped in towels, as they chatted

casually, sitting on the edges of the pools or the redwood benches lining the wall, or floated, or played in the water. At one end, a low barrier along the floor sectioned off a group of communal showers that reminded Snake of his Army barracks. Cubicles, some of them filled with clothes, lined a wall at the other end. Snake noticed that there were no doors on the storage boxes. At least, he thought, he could keep an eye on his stuff while he soaked. He had no intention of letting his Magnums out of his sight. As it was, he would have to give the guns a good cleaning to get rid of the moisture they had picked up from the air.

Ignoring the other people in the room, Snake stripped off, folded his guns inside his shirt, folded his shirt inside his pants, added his underwear and boots to the top of the pile in one of the wood wall-boxes, and covered it all with his jacket. Rain followed suit, then waved in the direction of the showers. "We have to wash first," he explained. Snake nodded, remembering the Japanese baths he had visited in New Vegas, and complied. It felt wonderful to get rid of the mud and grime of the journey. Afterward, he slowly lowered himself into one of the pools, next to Rain. His body gradually adjusted to the steaming-hot water as it crept up to the middle of his chest, then to his shoulders. Snake settled onto the bench carved along the side of the pool and leaned his head back against the smooth rim, feeling the heat soak through him, easing his tight muscles, pulling the tension out of him. He sighed and half-closed his good eye.

After a few minutes, he asked, "Where'd this all come from." The wave of a dripping hand took in the whole building.

"They only put this in about twenty years ago," Rain answered. He wore a blissful expression of total content as he lounged chin-deep in the hot water. "Blasted the pools out of the rock, capped the geothermal steam vents to use the pressure for heat and power. The hot water is mixed with cool water from the spring that feeds the river. It's filtered through a lot of rock that pulls out most of the gas, and the temperature's high enough, the rest fractions off. That's about all I know about it: the water's safe. There used to be a lot of resorts and spas up in this area, but most of them went out of business because of the war."

Snake grunted an acknowledgement and relaxed into the all-enveloping hot water, trying to let his mind, except for the segment keeping track of his guns, go blank. For the moment, he refused to let anything bother him, not even the gawky teenage girl he noticed casting sideways glances at him from two pools over. He came back to attention abruptly as a new woman entered the room. Her graceful, swaying stride caught Snake's eye, and he breathed out raggedly, instantly aroused, as she slipped out of her cloak and long skirt and blouse. Her naked body was spectacular: long legs, rounded hips curving into a slim waist, full breasts that quivered enticingly as she lifted her slim arms to tie up long, thick hair the color of prime Scotch. A natural blonde, Snake noted, as he caught sight of the soft golden triangle below. She was perhaps in her early thirties. Snake focused on her as she glided to the edge of the central pool and slipped into the warm water. "Who's that," he asked, his voice low and rough.

"Dawn. Our Healer," Rain answered, in a tone that begrudged the information.

The woman greeted people around the room, chatting briefly with several of them, as Snake watched her. She turned in his direction, and hesitated as Snake raked her with a frankly predatory stare. Her expression shifted to nervousness, and, a moment later, to anger and disgust tinged with fear. She turned away, climbed out of the pool, pulled her clothes on quickly, and walked out of the building without looking in Snake's direction again.

Snake thought briefly about following her, and then thought, *why bother?* The look on

her face had been enough. A wave of overwhelming exhaustion swept through him, and he felt almost too heavy to move. He went with it, not fighting. *Getting older*, he thought with a sort of fatalistic resentment, *slowing down, not bouncing back the way he had after Leningrad or the Max, or even Cleveland*. He looked down at himself, naked under the water: not bad for forty-six, but forty-six he was. There was only so long he could count on his body to give him what he needed in the crunch. *Sooner or later, they get everybody*. The scars, the battered features, the eyepatch and four-day stubble, were enough to scare off any woman. *Body's not too bad, but the face is for shit. No wonder she took off*. He gathered himself together, and said gruffly, "I'm going."

He climbed out of the water and dried off with one of the big, fluffy towels from a pile on a table near the cubbyholes, then dressed, feeling glad to be rid of the vulnerability of nakedness. The satisfying snap of his gunbelt locking back into position made him feel whole and complete again, and as close to secure as he ever got. His freshly washed hair tickled the back of his neck, and he pushed it away impatiently, readjusting the strap holding his patch in place, then picked up his jacket and walked out into the darkness. The trail he had taken down from Rain's cabin was clear in the bright moonlight, and he retraced it easily. Rain followed. Behind them, sounds from the Lodge of guitar, harmonica, rhythmic handclapping, laughter, and singing faded out into the quiet of the night. They reached Rain's cabin and shut the door behind them. The two men undressed in weary silence and climbed into their respective beds. Snake slept, restlessly, and dreamed of drowning.

The teenaged girl who had seen Snake at the bath pulled on her clothes and dashed down the path to the Lodge. She found her little clique of girlfriends in their usual spot, an isolated table they had moved to an alcove near the kitchen preparation area. After the dinner cleanup, it provided as much privacy as could be found anywhere in Rivendell. Here they gathered to giggle and talk, exchange gossip and confidences with each other, away from parents and boys. The girls were poring over a tattered piece of paper, talking eagerly.

"Aspen! Summer! Feather! Guess what!"

"What, Sierra?"

"You'll never, *ever* guess who I saw!"

"Who?" came the chorus.

"HIM!" Sierra said. She pointed dramatically at the image of Snake Plissken on the wanted poster from Ray Lee's desk drawer, which had migrated through successive hands until it reached this table.

Running fingers through her long dark hair, Feather put on a bored expression. "So? Hef deal. We all saw him, at dinner. My Mom says they argued like cats fighting at Meeting over letting him stay."

"He sat four places away from me," said Summer, trying for the same tone the older girl affected. "All he did was talk to Rain and stupid Astrid."

Aspen leaned over to whisper conspiratorially, "He was wearing guns. Two of them. I saw them."

"Of course, you dube! For protection. They're after him." Feather picked up the wanted poster and read from the grimy page: "Reward. Two Million New Dollars for information leading to the capture of S.D. 'Snake' Plissken. Do not attempt apprehension. Suspect is armed and considered extremely dangerous. Notify USPF if sighted."

"Wow - bluebacks!" Aspen said. "He must really be dangerous."

Feather smiled with superior adolescent cynicism. "They always offer a big reward and say the person they're after is just so bo-kew dangerous. It makes them look better when they catch one of them. They're just mad 'cause Snake demagged their drive."

Impatiently, Sierra waved her hands in the air, fingers splayed. "No, I saw him... in *the baths*." She leaned over Feather's arm and pointed to the line on the paper under the glowering image of the wanted man: "'S.D. 'Snake' Plissken.' I know why they call him Snake!"

Feather snorted. "Yeah. It's 'cos he slithers outta trouble so easy. Police Channel said that years ago."

"Nuh-uhh, Ms. know-it-all Feather-brain," Sierra taunted. "It's his tattoo. It's a... snake. A cobra. And it's..." she paused to whisper in Feather's ear.

"NO!"

"Yes!"

"What?" demanded Summer and Aspen in unison. Feather turned and whispered to Aspen, who gasped, "Ewwwww! That is so toxic!"

"What is it?" Summer demanded, bouncing in her chair in frustration.

"You're too young to know," Feather said with a bored roll of her eyes.

"I'm going fostering soon! I'm meg old enough! Tell me!" Summer cried.

"Pin it, Summer," Feather said, "two years isn't 'soon.'"

"Oh, tell her, Feath. She's gonna bug us until we do," Aspen sighed. She wound a light-brown curl around her fingers and then pulled it straight again. It fluffed back into place.

Sierra beat the other girl to it. "It's on his... penis!"

"That wasn't the word you used to tell me," commented Feather, smugly.

Summer sat, stunned into silence, for a moment, and then whispered, "The whole thing?"

"Well, the head is on his stomach." Sierra gestured, descriptively. "It goes down all the way and the tail is...." She grinned wickedly and made a curling motion with her forefinger.

"I don't believe it," Summer said. "Nobody would put a tattoo *there*. It'd hurt too bad."

"Maybe that's why he's so 'dangerous'." Aspen clapped a hand over her grinning mouth, and the entire group broke into a gale of embarrassed giggling.

"Bet he isn't really. Anybody who isn't into 'Peace, Love and Understanding' is dangerous, according to my folks," Feather retorted when the giggling died down again. "Haz-mat old retros! Snake is totally bo-kew dreem, and I bet he isn't anything like the poster says, or my folks either."

"Anybody wrung enough to get his choad tattooed isn't 'dreem'. He's *gassed*," Aspen said firmly.

Summer sat silently for a few minutes, staring down onto the surface of the table as she chewed pensively at one side of her lower lip, then she looked up at her friends and said defiantly, "I'm going to see it. Private showing."

"Tack away! How?" Aspen cried. "Don't tell me you're going to march up and ask him. Nobody's *that* gassed."

"Only way to get up close enough to Snake Plissken to really see that tattoo," Feather drawled, with an attempt at ever-so-adult sophistication, "is to sleep with him."

Sierra adjusted the black velvet ribbon she had begun wearing around her neck with what she hoped was an air of provocative sexiness. "Hey, he can park that dreem bod in *my* bed *any* night!"

"Then that's what I'll do," Summer said; "Sleep with him."

The three girls stared at Summer with shock and disbelief. Feather flounced and made a moue of disgust. "Oh, virtual! Like you would." Her eyes narrowed and she lowered her voice. "I dare you, Summer!"

"Watch me," Summer said firmly, and got up to leave.

The little group watched her depart with determined chin held high, then broke into scandalized and disbelieving chatter for a little while longer, before returning to their separate homes for the night. Feather slipped into her bed and settled down, pulling the hand-made blanket up to her chin. If Summer really did get together with Snake, it would sure make the rest of them look like for-sure dubes. But she wouldn't. Summer was just a kid. Plissken wouldn't be into anybody like that. And he really was scary, even if he was extreme-dreem sexy. Summer would chicken out, like she did with most of her wild plans. Feather smiled to herself, and drifted off to sleep with misty fantasies, vague on concrete details, about what nights with the exciting newcomer might be like.

Snake woke in the morning to a muted chorus of animal noises from beyond the shuttered windows of Rain's cabin: hooting of mourning doves and twittering of finches and sparrows from the trees right outside, quarrelsome honking of geese and crowing of roosters from down in the valley, the distant bleating of goats and barking of dogs.

Rain opened the shutters as Snake sat up and reached for his patch, and scent of wood-smoke drifted in along with pale dawn light. Snake lit one of his dwindling supply of cigarettes from DMZ, wondering how long he could stretch them and when he would be able to get more. He'd seen no evidence that anyone else at Rivendell smoked tobacco or traded for it.

Rain was already dressed and preparing his crossbow for his shift on Security. "Forget sleeping past the critters' wake-up call," he said cheerfully. He watched Snake shove the clothes he had worn since their purchase at DMZ into a corner of his bedroom space with his foot, and reach into his dresser drawer for a new set, and he smiled. "If you want to get those clean, I'll show you where the wash-house is on the way down to breakfast."

Might as well try looking a little less feral, Snake decided. He dressed, combed out his hair, and shaved with water heated on the top of the wood-stove, using the mirror hung on Rain's wall, then the two men headed down to breakfast at the Lodge through the crisp morning air. The lack of a lock on Rain's door bothered Snake, but he settled for drawing the door closed and pulling down the cross-bar latch. Green leaves flickered around them, moving in the light breeze, as they descended, and, below, the clear stream, flecked with whitewater, glinted silver where the rising sun climbed over the hilltop to fall on it. A crow cawed a warning to its fellows as they passed under its tree, and a smell of clean damp earth and pine-needles rose from the red-brown path before them. Snake saw Rain drawing in deep, appreciative breaths and smiling, clearly glad to be home. As they passed the door near the kitchen area of the Lodge, Snake noticed a flock of chickens, mixed with a few geese, crowding around it, as a middle-aged man with Hispanic features scattered food-scrap to them. Snake spared them a quick sideways glance. They were the first live, unconfined chickens he had ever seen.

Rain caught his look. "Chickens will eat anything. Even better than pigs. Anything we don't compost goes to them."

"When do we get chicken on the menu?"

"We don't kill animals unless we have to, for protection or something like that. We use some of the eggs, but we let a lot of them hatch," Rain answered. Snake took note of the intent expression on the younger man's face, and remembered the fish catch on the *Afternoon's Delight*. *More of this crazy animal stuff*, he thought.

Snake studied the flock. "How many's 'a lot'?"

"Predators get some of them, either eggs or chicks: foxes, owls, hawks, coyotes, sometimes the cats. The hens are pretty good at defending their nests, though --

I got pecked a lot when I was on egg-collecting duty as a kid."

Snake stopped and turned to stare at Rain. A scattering of Rivendell residents detoured around the two, heading into the open door toward breakfast, as they paused. "Predators? You don't kill them off?"

"No. It's their home, too. We're all part of the balance, part of the pattern Gaia is weaving out of our" -- Rain waved a hand, clearly searching for the right word -- "relationships. There's a mountain lion who lives up farther in the hills and raises cubs every year. The cubs move on, but she stays. Every so often, she gets one of the goats or a horse, but she keeps the deer from overrunning our crops, too. The coyotes take some of the fawns, and help keep the cats under control. The cats take mice and rabbits that eat our crops, and some of the birds. The birds eat our seeds and fruit, but a lot of insects, too. We don't use chemical pesticides for the insects: that would kill off the bees that give us honey and wax, and pollinate the crops. There's a pair of hawks nesting on the ridge up there" -- he pointed -- "and turkey vultures down by the apple orchard. Raccoons, possums..." Rain shrugged and broke off with, "It all fits together."

"You're overrun with them," Snake muttered. "It's a zoo."

Anger flashed over Rain's face and he answered sharply, "Not a zoo! Not a farm, either. Rivendell is part of the forest. We live *with* the plants and the animals. We share with them, we don't just use them."

Snake snorted. "Everybody gets used." Images of New York Max rose in his mind. *Everybody's somebody else's dinner.* He started to walk on.

Rain's expression shifted, and he held out a hand to slow Snake down. "Snake, don't you see? In the city, everything is buried under concrete and glass, under buildings hundreds of stories tall. Underneath, the Earth is totally dead. You can feel it: Gaia crying for her lost children, crushed under the cement. For me, living there would be like suicide. But here, the dying gives life. It's part of the pattern."

Snake snorted again, and turned away from Rain, without speaking, to enter the Lodge. Rain seemed to take Snake's reaction as a hint. The two of them filled their plates in silence from the buffet, then took seats at one of the tables scattered around the room. Once again, Snake noted, the food was very good. There was fruit, fresh bread with jam and honey, hot cereal, eggs, and cheese, along with goat's milk and coffee. Rain ate hurriedly, his eyes on his plate, and after a few minutes stood up again and shouldered his crossbow. He walked off, his back stiff.

Snake ate slowly, stretching the activity as long as possible. He was at dead stop. For a month, he had been pushing himself all-out, without rest, to reach this place, and now that he was here, he had nothing to do. He observed the inhabitants of Rivendell as they bustled in and out for breakfast, eating quickly and departing again immediately as soon as they were finished. In this hard-working farming community, which grew or made most of what it needed, no one had much spare time for socializing during the precious daylight hours. A few people greeted him with a cautious smile as they passed, most ignored him, and a few seemed to be deliberately avoiding eye contact. No one spoke to him. Snake felt as out of place here as he did everywhere else. He refused to let it bother him.

"Hi," said a light, hesitant voice at Snake's left elbow.

Snake's head snapped in the direction of the voice, and he saw a girl with a breakfast tray in her hands. He took in the wide blue eyes and cascade of brown hair half-way down her back, the clear skin with its dusting of freckles over her little nose, and the slender but rounded figure. *Nice*, he thought.

"Can I sit here?"

Snake nodded permission, reserving judgment but inclining toward welcome. The girl slid her tray onto the table beside his, and sat down in the chair next to him. He noticed she had a clean, flowery scent, like lavender soap. He tried to guess how old she was. Once, he would have said eighteen, but it was impossible to tell any more. She wasn't exactly his type, but she was definitely attractive, and apparently interested in him. It had been a while. His mouth relaxed slightly, taking on a less grim line.

"My name's Summer," the girl went on in a slightly breathless rush. "I saw you when Ray Lee introduced you at dinner last night. I always thought from the vid you were about seven feet tall." She studied him. "You're lots better looking than your pictures."

Snake was suddenly glad he had shaved that morning. "Never thought about it."

"I bet they pick the really *bad* pictures, 'cause they don't like you," Summer said. She looked down and then back up at him with innocent flirtatiousness, and favored him with a smile that sent a twinge through Snake's groin. "But I do." Summer pushed her food around on her plate with her fork for a moment, as if at a loss, then looked at Snake again. "If you need an extra blanket, I have one you can have. I do weaving. Blankets, shawls, rugs, stuff like that. They're really warm. I could bring one by your cabin."

"Sounds good, baby." Snake finally smiled in return. That was as clear an invitation as he'd ever heard. No reason not to take her up on it. "When?"

Summer hesitated, seemingly startled by the direct question. "Uh - soon." She stood and picked up her tray, clattering the dishes together in her haste, looked away toward the door and then back at Snake. "I've got to go." She paused and then said quickly, almost as if it required an effort, "See you later." She dumped her tray by the cleanup area and hurried out, brushing past a dark-haired girl standing near the door.

Snake watched her go, admiring the way Summer's long hair bounced against her back above her cute little ass. Nice body. Definitely fuckable. She was young, but she looked old enough, older than a lot of the hookers he'd seen on the streets of Bangkok and New Vegas. He'd never gone for the kids. He wanted a woman, and one with experience, but he wasn't in the mood to be picky. With a pretty girl coming on to him, forty-six didn't seem nearly as old as it had last night. This one knew what she was doing, he was sure of that. *You want it, baby; I'll give it to you. 'Soon,' eh? It's a deal.*

He smiled to himself as he dropped off his own dishes and went out into the winter sunshine. He caught the dark-haired girl scowling in his direction, and ignored her. He had more pleasant thoughts on his mind as he walked down the path through the center of the settlement in as upbeat a mood as he ever achieved. The day was bright and cool, painted in brilliant shades of blue sky, green plants, and red earth, the air fresh, and the sound of the brook nearby a soft rushing noise accented by birdsong. In this place, Snake thought, Rain's ideas might make some kind of sense. He'd explore, scope out the lay of the land. He smiled to himself again at the mental pun. Yeah, he'd have Summer show him around. There were probably a lot of private spots out of sight in the forest around here.

"Snake!"

Snake turned at the sound of the voice to see a man a little older than Rain, who, he remembered, had been seated some spaces down from him at dinner last night. With him were two other men and a plain-faced, rather chunky woman. Snake stood still, wondering what they wanted from him.

"Morning, Snake," the man said, shifting the weight of the ladder he was holding to his other flannel-clad shoulder. Snake eyed him silently. In spite of Snake's lack of encouragement, the man seemed to feel the need to introduce himself and his little group. "I'm Roberto. Yarrow, Mark, Sky," he pointed to each in turn. "We're going to take down the camo nets over the fields. Thanks to your, uh, efforts at Firebase Seven, we won't be needing them anymore. I wanted to thank you for that." He grinned as if Snake's success had been his own. "Come on and give us a hand, and see what you've done for us." As Snake hesitated, his automatic negative streak rising to the surface, Roberto added, "I heard you got shot up pretty bad in L.A. It's O.K. We'll do the climbing and take 'em down. You and Yarrow can fold. C'mon, Snake." He

waited, smiling in friendly invitation.

"Yeah, O.K.," Snake said at last. He was irritated at the suggestion he was too crippled to do the job. He had a half-conscious, purely animal, need not to appear vulnerable among a group of strangers who might be potential enemies. He followed the group out of the houses and into the wide, tree-sprinkled fields he had seen on his climb down into the valley. They were surrounded by a thick, high hedge of thorn-bush with gates at intervals. *Natural fencing*, Snake concluded.

Yarrow, a shorter, older man with oriental eyes, fell back slightly to walk at Snake's side. "Roberto and I spoke up for you at Meeting," he said. "When the power went off, I knew things were going to turn around at last. We've been waiting a long time, hiding. Now, we can start to take back the earth for Gaia, make things the way they ought to be." Snake remembered a similar conversation he had had with Rain.

Evidently there was a militant group here at Rivendell who wanted to see him as some kind of hero. He regarded the idea with considerable misgiving, answering with a skeptical, non-committal little snort. He tucked it into the back of his mind as he helped take down and fold camouflage nets, listening to the conversation around him among the others and storing information about them.

Snake spent the next few days sleeping, resting his wounded leg, recovering, and settling into the routine of life at Rivendell. In the cold mountain mornings, he felt every scar and every half-forgotten wound. Here were peace and sanctuary of a sort, but he never counted on any good thing lasting. He would take it as it came, day by day, survive and heal.

CHAPTER FIVE

Somewhere near Los Angeles:

Rance Farris trudged along the pot-holed road toward Firebase Seven. He had set out a little over three weeks ago, when news reached him of Snake Plissken's escape from Los Angeles and the final broadcast setting off the Sword of Damocles satellites. Rance had been tracking Snake for a long time, following up on cold trails that led nowhere, from one false Plissken-sighting to another. Now he had a solid lead, and he was determined not to lose Snake again. Plissken owed him, and he planned to collect, no matter how long it took. The bluebacks the USPF was offering were only the down payment. The real reward would be seeing Plissken die, preferably slowly and painfully.

Plissken had been badly wounded, they said, in Los Angeles, and he couldn't have gone far without transportation, now that the satellites had knocked out the power. Vicious satisfaction twisted in him: *shot yourself in the foot again, didn't you, Lieutenant? Took everybody with you again, like you did before, you fucked-up bastard. This time, when I find you, you'll finally pay.* Rance had heard rumors of a man in Los Angeles who might know something, somebody connected with the dead revolutionary, Cuervo Jones. When he got to the island, he would start there and take up the trail again.

Over the next few days, Snake spent most of his time sleeping, and the rest studying the Rivendell group while keeping his distance. He avoided the social gatherings in the evenings, and seldom talked to anyone except in response to greetings, whose friendliness seemed forced and artificial to him. They seemed to be addressed to a Snake Plissken who did not exist except in the minds of the radical segment of Rivendell society. He knew he was being watched, the potential threat they saw in him tracked by many pairs of suspicious eyes. The pretty girl who had come on to him seemed to have disappeared.

By the time she reappeared, Snake had had enough sleep that he felt almost rested and the inactivity was beginning to grate on his adrenalin-junkie's nerves. He was sitting on the log bench just outside Rain's cabin one morning, trying to will himself into stillness without great success, when he saw Summer climbing up the path toward him, carrying a square gray bundle. As she stopped in front of him, he noticed she was breathing a little fast and there was a trace of heightened color in her cheeks.

"Snake, you're awake!" she said. "Remember? What we talked about? I brought you something." She smiled self-consciously as she unfolded a beautiful gray blanket with a pattern woven in blacks, whites, and dark reds. "It's a pattern from the First People. I got it from a book. It's called Sky Rattlesnake. See," she pointed, "that's the rattlesnake, and those are the lightning flashes and the clouds. I made it for you."

Snake reached out and touched the pattern lightly. "You made this for me?" He looked up at her. The last time he had been given anything, just as a gift, was beyond memory.

"Well, I started it last year, but I didn't finish it. After we talked at breakfast, that day, I got it out again and finished the background and the edges. And I signed it."

"How do you sign a blanket?"

"See that triple band of dark blue wool at the edge? That means I made it."

Summer traced the black and red zigzag of the rattlesnake image with her fingers. "Sky Rattlesnake is a sacred pattern, the book said."

Snake picked up the lower edge of the mohair blanket and let it flow through his hands. It was soft and thick, warm and almost weightless. His fingers brushed Summer's, and he smiled at her, letting the contact linger, feeling her quiver slightly under his touch. "This'd be great to... share on a cold night...." He put invitation into his one good eye.

Summer inhaled, then exhaled sharply, and sat down next to him on the bench. "Yeah," she breathed, moving over toward Snake. He spread the blanket over their laps and slid an arm around her to bring her closer, reaching up with his other hand to stroke her long hair. His fingers tightened in the silky mass, turning her face up toward his, and he lowered his mouth to hers in a kiss. It built in intensity, turning hard and demanding as he felt his body begin to respond to her. She turned and melted against him, raising her arms to hug him in turn. She made a soft sound as her hands opened on his shoulders. He pressed her back toward the bench. His arm moved down, tightened, circling her, pulling her to him. He felt her stiffen, and realized that he and Summer were sitting in a very public area, in full view of the settlement below. He

loosened his hold and said huskily, "Want to go inside?"

Summer hesitated, drawing back slightly, out of breath from the kiss. "Oh, god, Snake, I... I I want to... but, can we make it later?" she stammered. She paused, wide-eyed, her mouth slightly open, then added quickly, "It's... umm, you know... that time...."

Snake was mystified for a moment, then caught on. "Hell, I don't mind," he murmured. His hand shifted, moving under her jacket to cup a rounded breast, and his thumb brushed across the hardened nipple beneath her shirt.

"No, I can't," Summer said, more firmly. She put her hands on his shoulders, pushing. "Let's wait... 'til later, OK?"

She started to back away, shakily, but Snake caught her hands. He looked down into her eyes, unwilling to let her go so easily, annoyed by her sudden reluctance. He hadn't had a woman blow hot and cold like this with him since his dimly remembered dates in high school, before he discovered the more satisfying simplicity of hookers. He didn't understand it any better now than he had then. "That's later, baby, not never, right?" he rasped softly, in the rough, warm lower registers of his voice as he squeezed her imprisoned fingers.

Summer's voice was uncertain, close to tears. "Snake... y you're so beautiful! I... I I want to...bebe with... you, honest. Just... just... later. Please. Let go!" She tugged at his grasp, and he did let go. She turned and all but ran down the path.

Snake started to go after her, but, with an effort, restrained himself. He sank back on the bench, harsh breath hissing through clenched teeth. He was a stranger here, an outsider, and Rivendell might be possessive about its women. He'd never had to force a woman, and he wasn't about to start with this one. If she wanted to wait, he'd wait.

But only so long. The functioning of a woman's mind and body were largely a mystery to Snake, but his own familiar body was telling him in no uncertain terms exactly what it wanted. He lifted the soft mohair and held it to his face, inhaling Summer's scent there like an animal tracking prey, and growled under his breath. He carried the blanket back inside Rain's cabin and spread it over his bed. *Sky rattlesnake*, he thought, and saw the sleek black Gulffire in his mind's eye. *Yes*. He reached into his drawer for a cigarette and lit it, as frustration slid into baffled anger. That at least was familiar, and, in a strange way, comforting.

Summer fled down the path, shaken and confused. She had had every intention of going inside with Snake, but a sudden wave of fear had drowned her plans: fear of herself, of Snake, and most of all, of the unknown. Her whole self was still electric with reaction. She had felt her will draining out of her, the core of her body turning molten, and the sheer intensity of her response to Snake had terrified her into flight. She climbed to the place she went when she wanted to be alone, high up the hill where a waterfall that fed Rivendell's stream tumbled down toward the valley, and sat there, heart pounding, while she tried to gather her thoughts.

It had started with the tattoo, wanting to see the tattoo, wanting to beat Feather at her game of "I'm so grown-up and sexy." She had never expected it to become something like this, something that would reach right down into her center and trouble her in ways she didn't understand. They said that when she was fostered out to a new group she would find someone and have sex with them, some day find someone to partner with. She hadn't expected this to find her here. It wasn't time, it wasn't right. This stranger who disrupted the whole world of Rivendell drew her in a way she could

neither completely refuse or accept. She couldn't think. It was too confusing, and her heart was beating too hard.

She saw him again, the sun glinting red in his hair, his hard body and strong face full of self-confidence and experience. She tasted the memory of his alien tobacco-flavored mouth, and heard his voice that sounded like her mohair felt: soft and rough and warm. She remembered the feel of his hands. The boys she knew at Rivendell all seemed suddenly ridiculous. Snake wasn't a boy. He wasn't any known quantity at all. He was a man, and she wanted him. She was scared to death of him. She relived the kiss and felt herself go liquid again. She had acted like a little kid, running away like, she was sure, her friends had all predicted. Next time, she wouldn't. Please, let there be a next time! She'd prove to him she wasn't a little girl any more, and prove it to herself. And she *had* to see that tattoo. She huddled on the mossy stone, feeling miserable.

When Rain poked his head inside the cabin door some time later, he found Snake stretched out on his bed on top of the new gray blanket, staring at the ceiling. Several cigarette butts and a half-empty glass of Scotch occupied the dresser-top next to him. Snake sat up as Rain entered. "Snake," the younger man said, "the circuit doctor's here. You need to see him."

"No, I don't," came the flat reply.

"Yes, you do. He wants to vaccinate everybody here. He says that cholera, typhus, all kinds of stuff, are starting up in the cities and the refugees are bringing it with them. Plus, you need an exam by a human doctor instead of a vet."

"Bullshit."

"Come on, Snake," Rain said, "You need to find out what those fuckers at Firebase Seven really did to you."

Rain could see uneasiness creep into Snake's face, and congratulated himself on finding something that would convince Snake to go for medical attention. He wondered just how long it had been since Snake had voluntarily visited a doctor. "Shit," Snake growled; then finally, "Yeah, O.K."

"I'll have him come by the cabin later tonight," Rain said. One look at Snake's truculent expression made it obvious Snake was not going to stand in line with the rest of Rivendell's population.

Better warn the doctor he's going to have a less-than-cooperative patient, Rain thought, as he made his way back down the trail to the Lodge, where the circuit-riding doctor was setting up his treatment area. People were already gathering outside as Rain slipped in by the side door to talk to the doctor alone. "Hi, Spence," he called out to the short, gray-haired man in jeans and flannel shirt who was setting plastic boxes out on the long serving table by the fireplace. Rain broke into a wide grin as he caught sight of the doctor's assistant, a broad-shouldered young man with coffee-colored skin. "Kestrel!" he cried, "What are you doing here?" The two men hugged and exchanged a brief kiss, and Rain added, "Are you with the doctor now?"

The doctor greeted Rain, then turned back to his preparations as Kestrel explained, "Yeah. I'm going to be his apprentice." He smiled. "I got tired of the winters in

Idaho." The two men had grown up together, and Kestrel had been fostered out from Rain's home Group to one in Idaho about the same time Rain had been fostered to Rivendell.

"He's going to take over for me some day," the doctor said, smiling over his shoulder in the direction of his new intern. "I can't keep on doing this forever you know."

"I decided I wanted to learn about medicine," Kestrel said. "Spence says he's going to teach me himself, because the medical schools and hospitals are going to be really screwed up for a while." His dark eyes sparkled. "Gods it's good to see you again, Rain! We've got to get together tonight."

"Definitely!" Rain said. "I can come over to the guesthouse after dinner." He trusted Kestrel, but he preferred to keep Snake's presence at Rivendell on a Need To Know basis. He turned to Dr. Spencer. "How are you, Spence?"

"Fine, fine," the older man answered. "It's good to see you again. Your mother and father say hello. Oh, and here." He fished in his bag and brought out several envelopes. "Mail."

Rain took the envelopes and pocketed them. "How long are you here for?"

"A few days. As long as I'm needed. You'll have time to write replies, but don't take too long. I'm not hanging around for you to finish."

"I'll have them ready by the time you leave," Rain said. He drew the doctor away a few feet and lowered his voice. Kestrel tactfully tuned them out. He was learning medical ethics already. "Will you have time for a private exam?"

"I can make time. What's the matter, Rain?"

"Not for me. It's for... the person staying with me. He had a badly infected wound, and he's been really sick with the Plutoxin-7 virus."

"Plutoxin-7! How did somebody here get exposed to Plutoxin?"

"It's... a a long story. I'll let him tell you about it, if he wants to," Rain said.

The doctor nodded and dropped the subject. "Anybody else here come down with it?"

"Not as far as I know, Spence."

"Good. I'll come to your cabin as soon as I'm done here."

Late in the afternoon, Rain and the doctor, his medical bag slung over his shoulder, climbed up the path to Rain's cabin and knocked on the doorjamb beside the open door. Snake looked up from the book on woodcraft he had picked up to read from Rain's limited library, and gestured unenthusiastic permission for the doctor to enter.

Rain started to follow. Dr. Spencer turned to him with a smile. "Rain, you're hovering," he said. "I'd like to talk to the patient alone." Rain went to sit on the bench outside.

Dr. Spencer was frowning slightly as he stepped inside. Plutoxin was nothing to be dismissed lightly, especially now. If Rain's guest really had it, he could start an epidemic. As his vision adjusted to the lower light level, he got a good look at the man standing in the center of the room. The doctor's glance flicked from the brace of Magnums hung over the peg on the wall to the grim eye-patched face in front of him.

Could it be...? ? He deliberately cut off speculation. If this was the outlaw the USPF wanted so badly, it was none of Dr. David Spencer's business. The man was here as a patient. On the other hand, Snake Plissken had a reputation for deadly and explosive violence. He would proceed with caution.

"I'm Doctor Spencer, most people call me Spence." He held out a hand, which the other man ignored. "Rain tells me you wanted to see me. What can I do for you?"

The suspicion in the other man's good eye was balanced by the closed neutrality of his face. "Gunshot wound," Snake rasped, "Almost healed." He took a breath. "What've you got for headaches?"

"That depends on what's causing them." Dr. Spencer began to unpack the case of medical equipment he had brought with him. "Since the power went," he said into the interior as he dug around inside, "It's interesting to see what I have that still works."

"Nothing electrical," Snake offered as he sat down on the edge of the bed, watching the doctor intently.

"No. That's what I discovered. You know," the doctor continued, "In some ways, this gives us back something we'd lost, with all our technology. I think a lot of doctors today aren't comfortable unless they have machinery between them and the patient." He smiled wryly and quoted, "'Look upon it as a challenge.'"

Dr. Spencer kept up the cheerful chatter as he assessed his patient, trying to put Snake at his ease, with what appeared to be limited success. Plissken -- he was all but sure now that it was Plissken -- was smaller and lighter than the posters and the televised images had led him to expect. Powerful, compact body, good reflexes, alert: the man looked healthy, if slightly weather-beaten. Dr. Spencer relaxed and concentrated on the receptivity he needed to conduct a good exam. He kept his manner calm, telegraphing his movements; he doubted this was a man who liked surprises. He checked the one good eye, ears, nose and throat. The other man's responses to touch and voice were guarded, but rational. *Not the gas case the late, unlamented Police Channel warned us about, then*, he decided. He picked up his stethoscope, and Snake silently removed his shirt, displaying a patchwork of old scars and the tattoo that confirmed his identity. Dr. Spencer listened carefully, frowning: the heart was strong, with the slow, steady beat of the athlete, but the lungs could be clearer. "I'd like to see the wound," he said, and Snake complied. Front and back, it was closed and healing well. "It looks fine," Dr. Spencer said; "Whoever patched you up did a good job."

"It was a goddamn vet," Snake growled.

"A good one, I'd say." Dr. Spencer smiled. "Well, I've done my share of emergency surgery on the non-human members of the Groups myself. In some ways, we're all a lot alike. We're all animals."

Snake snorted as he pulled up his pants and started to shrug back into his shirt. Dr. Spencer held out a hand. "Are you up on all your inoculations?"

"I don't like needles."

"I don't blame you." Dr. Spencer laid down his stethoscope and looked directly at Snake, all pretense dropped. His face darkened angrily. "I've heard about what happens to prisoners of the USPF. Damned blackbelly bastards!" Snake started and his hands twitched reflexively, as if reaching for his guns, as his good eye narrowed

again. The doctor went on in a calmer tone, "There are needles and there are needles. I think you know this is necessary. There's a lot of disease starting up in the cities, and it's spreading. I can't force you, and I wouldn't if I could, but...." He picked up a syringe and a transparent vial. Snake nodded once, silently, his expression sullen. The doctor completed the injections, and Snake finished pulling on his shirt. He dropped the used needles into his sharps container and faced his patient squarely. "I'm recycling needles when I can. They're going to be difficult to replace. Have you been exposed to... anything contagious?"

Snake hesitated, scowling. Dr. Spencer waited, patient but inexorable. "Plutoxin-7," Snake rasped. "Before I went into L.A."

"Hm," Dr. Spencer said. "There were rumors the USPF was experimenting with it. We were lucky it didn't get loose when they bombed Sandia during the war. Nasty stuff."

Snake looked away, then back. "They said it would kill me in ten hours." A sardonic smile flickered across his mouth. "Government propaganda."

"The original virus certainly would have. Apparently this one's been modified -- or it's mutated by itself."

"What does it do to you?"

"Long term?" Dr. Spencer looked him in the eye. "I don't know. I do know you can't get rid of it; it stays in the system permanently, like a retrovirus. It depresses the immune system. Beyond that, it hasn't been around long enough for anybody to find out. We aren't even completely sure how it's transmitted. You're a carrier, but I don't know if you're infectious, or how, or for how long."

"Shit."

There didn't seem to be anything Dr. Spencer could add to that assessment. The two men were silent for a few moments, then the doctor gave a short sigh and moved on. "You say you have headaches? How often?"

"All the time, but they've been getting worse."

"Do they concentrate in any one area?"

"Left side and back. And lately..." Snake hesitated and then continued with obvious reluctance. "...Lately, I've started getting flashes, like lightning. Never happened before."

Dr. Spencer tried to keep the concern he felt from coloring his voice. "They're probably from your injured eye. May I..." He reached out a hand, tentatively, and stopped. Snake removed the patch, flinching. His eyelid snapped shut by reflex. He forced it open again, and the pale, puckered socket watered violently.

"Sorry," the doctor muttered. "It'll just be a minute." No wonder the man had headaches. He had only seen gas injuries to the eye this severe in a few casualties from the front, early in his medical career, and most of them had not survived. The usual treatment was to remove the eye. He nodded, and Snake slipped the patch back in place with obvious relief. "Well," Dr. Spencer said dryly, "I think we've found the source of your headaches." He was rewarded with a soundless laugh from his patient, and relaxed a bit, hoping that meant he was gaining Plissken's trust. He girded himself for the announcement he dreaded making. "I hate to say this, especially with conditions

as they are, but you should have that left eye removed."

"FUCK that!" Snake exploded.

"Has anyone warned you about what can happen? You're at risk for a pressure buildup in the damaged eye, or sympathetic ophthalmia. You could go completely blind."

"Nobody touches my eye!" Snake snarled. He leapt to his feet, grabbed his guns and his jacket from their pegs, and slammed out of the cabin.

Dr. Spencer followed. He stopped on the flat rock just outside the cabin door which served as a stoop. Rain got to his feet. The two watched Plissken disappear into the trees, and the doctor commented, "That didn't go well."

"He's really touchy about medical stuff. I can try talking to him, but...." Rain looked worried. "He could really go blind?"

"You were listening," the doctor said, annoyed. "Yes, he could. Ophthalmia, glaucoma - they're both possible with that eye. Tell him to watch out for sharp pain, reddening, or any signs of infection in either eye. That's the best I can do." Dr. Spencer went back into the cabin, reached into his bag, and took out a packet of pills. He handed them to Rain. "Give him these. Demerol, for the pain. They're all I can spare. Drugs are running out fast, and I don't know when I'll be able to get any more. No electricity means no labs, no drug companies. We're back to the days of wise women and herbal medicine."

"Dawn does a lot with herbs," Rain offered. "When I fell and ran that branch through my arm, she treated it with arnica and goldenseal and pennyroyal, and it healed fine."

Dr. Spencer smiled. "They weren't called wise women for nothing. There's a lot of value in traditional medicine too. It wouldn't hurt to have your friend visit Dawn. Maybe she can help him." He paused, then added, "Mark my words, Rain: the human race is in for some tough times. This has given us all a new chance, a new hope. Maybe it will all come out for the best in the long run. But one thing for sure - it's going to get a lot worse for humanity before it gets better." He shouldered the strap of his medical case. "Tell your friend I'm not coming after him. There's nothing more I can do, and he'd make a very unpleasant enemy. I'll give your love to your parents when I see them." He headed off down the path, back toward the settlement.

Snake strode angrily away from Rain's cabin. He chose a half-overgrown trail at random and followed it, bulldozing through the brush and ducking under overhanging tree-branches, until he came to a clearing with a rough circle of old logs arranged around a firepit. New grass was sprouting among them, and the smudge of old ashes and charred bits of wood were mingled with fallen leaves and wind-blown debris. It was obvious the place had not been used in some time.

Snake sat down on one of the logs, his head pounding and his bad eye throbbing from its exposure to the light during the doctor's examination, wishing he had brought his cigarettes, wishing he'd been able to con the medic out of some decent painkillers. He considered going back for the smokes, but decided against it. He'd had more than enough contact with people for a while. He shut his eye, willing the pain into

submission. *Background noise. Baseline reading. Recalibrate the instrument.* In the dark behind his closed eyes, the wood around him was full of elusive sounds: wind moving through the needles of the pine above him, rustlings in the dead leaves, sudden trilling of birds. Cool air brought him the smell of wet earth and old wood. He shifted on the tree trunk beneath him, ignoring the damp cold of its bark, and absorbed the solitude, welcoming it.

Dr. Spencer's warning came back to him, and he pushed it aside. *Just leave me the fuck alone!* Images of the Surgeon General of Beverly Hills surfaced, of the trays of body parts, the bright blade reaching for his face, to steal his eye. His whole self revolted at the memory: *nobody's going to cut on me!* He saw Taslima and the dark expressive eyes that had drawn him. So pretty. So dead. *The future is right now. That's all there is.*

The pain in Snake's head eased gradually, and he opened his good eye. He felt as though he were becoming invisible, safe, as he listened to the sounds around him: the squawk of scrub jays, the resonant drumming of a woodpecker on a nearby tree, the sound of something, maybe a deer, moving through the brush. As he watched, sitting absolutely still, a skunk ambled across one section of the campfire circle and stopped to hunt for grubs under the flaking bark of the logs. It sniffed in his direction, then wandered off grumbling to itself. The cool air deepened into evening chill as Snake watched the trees turn into black lines of silhouette against the sunset sky. The quiet of the place was almost nourishing, and he drew back from the need to return to the human world. A loud crackling in the underbrush, heading his way, brought him out of his reverie. He thought about the mountain lion Rain had mentioned, rose and drew his Magnums, realizing that there were dangers even here, among the deceptive peace. He stared tensely into the deepening twilight until he heard Rain's voice.

"Snake, it's Rain; don't shoot." The younger man stepped into the clearing as Snake lowered his guns and reholstered them.

"Thought maybe you were the lion."

"If I had been, you'd never have heard me. They stalk silently and they hit you from behind. But you don't have much to worry about unless you're a deer." In the deepening dusk, Snake thought he saw Rain stifle a smile at his reaction. "Spence finished the vaccinations. He'll be leaving soon."

"He'll keep his mouth shut?"

"Yes. You can trust him -- we all do," Rain said seriously. "He just said watch out for sharp pain or infection in your eyes." He chuckled softly. "You made him kinda nervous."

"Returning the favor," Snake growled. He gestured, indicating the area around them now sinking into full darkness. "What's this place?"

"This was the old Rainbow Circle campfire, where the first Group used to meet before the Lodge was built. Before they found the geothermal vent, everybody lived on the other side of the hill, in the old cabins down by the lake."

"Anybody there any more?"

"No. They're pretty primitive -- no running water, no plumbing, no heat. Full of black widow spiders. Nobody goes down there."

The description appealed to Snake: quiet, isolated, with a bit of danger to keep nosy

people out of his way. He decided to check it out in the morning. Rivendell was too fucking crowded. He moved toward Rain's dim shape in the dark. "Let's get back." He needed to sleep.

December. Los Angeles. Evening:

The man sat, with the still patience of a hunting spider, in a darkened corner of a dive on Hollywood Boulevard, a glass of oily gin by his hand on the cracked Formica tabletop. Flaring torches and lanterns provided fitful illumination and added their smoky reek to the thick air. Another man slipped into the seat opposite him, a skinny creature with the quick, nervous movements of a jackal, his face a crosshatch of fresh burn scars, his nose recently broken, and one arm, broken and badly set, cradled at an awkward angle against his shallow chest.

"You Rance Farris?" the jackal asked. The other man nodded, his face lost in shadows, and the newcomer grinned in satisfaction and held out a hand. "Map-To-the-Stars Eddie. You want anything in this town, I'm the man to see. I've got connections, man - A-list people. I hear you're after Snake Plissken. You want him, Baby, you got him. He breezed into town, lookin' for a comeback. I handled him. We were goin' places; makin' it happen. He was hot, I'm tellin' you, man. Then he dropped me and left, just like that. You want his ass, it's yours. All I'm askin' is twenty per cent, and a photograph of the body when you bring it in for the bluebacks. He owes me. The man has absolutely no loyalty. Hey - we had a deal! I loved the guy like a brother. Treated him like a prince. Gave him everything, and he screwed my client and blew me off. He's dead in this town, man!"

"So where can I find him?"

"I know somebody you've gotta to see. Talk to Saigon Shadows, man. They hate Plissken. He had big plans, gonna be a real smash hit, he said. Suckered 'em into backin' him; deal fell through, and he left 'em holding the bag. The Shadows want Plissken's nuts on a platter, I'm tellin' you. I can introduce you...."

Farris rose, pushing back the chair abruptly. "I'll find them myself. Here," he threw down a handful of greenbacks. "Buy yourself a new line of patter. You need it."

"Hey!" Map-To-The-Stars Eddie stared after Farris, open-mouthed. "Hey - you can't just take off like that. You need somebody to show you the ropes, put you in touch with the right people. You don't get anyplace in this town without connections, man."

The bounty hunter ignored him and walked out into the milling crowd on Hollywood Boulevard. Now he knew where he was going. It was only a matter of time before he found Plissken.

Over the next few weeks, Snake found himself restlessly exploring farther and farther from the settlement, avoiding people, avoiding the necessity of making a decision on how he would pay for his room and board. He felt as though he were being gradually

wound 'round and 'round with gossamer but inescapable threads of spider-silk, like an insect in a web. His instinct was to back away. Trust was an invitation to betrayal.

He located the cabins Rain had mentioned and explored them, finding them run-down but still solid and weather-proof. Something in him responded to the forest solitude and the quiet of the deep woods, away from the irritating whirl of human activity at Rivendell. When the headaches got bad, the silence was healing. With nothing to distract him from it, the pain behind his injured eye flared up toward the level he had known during his early days in the hospital in Helsinki. He finished the Demerol and started, reluctantly, working his way through the bottles of liquor he had liberated from the dead blackbelly's house. He hated using the expensive Scotch as a painkiller. His uncertain temper was fraying toward the breaking point, and after he had been on the receiving end of it several times, Rain suggested it might be a good thing if Snake went to see Dawn. Grudgingly, Snake agreed to visit the Healer.

Dawn lived alone, in a small cabin in the midst of a neatly-tended garden, its soil now brown and bare with winter. Snake knocked and ducked inside. One quick glance took in a cluttered space filled with bottles, books, boxes, and tables covered with objects that meant nothing to him. A fire crackled in the hearth at one end of the room, and the warm air was sweet with the scent of the dried herbs and flowers hung from the ceiling in bunches. The Healer was decanting something into a number of miniature glass bottles as Snake entered. She rose from her chair at the wooden table in one fluid motion as Snake stepped through the door. Her hands clasped in front of her long sage-green skirt, the fingers twined tightly together, and Snake recognized the apprehensive expression on her face as one he had seen turned his way many times before, but when she spoke, her tone was controlled and level.

"Do you come to me for healing?"

"Yeah."

"What is your complaint?" The voice was soft and slightly husky, like velvet, and Snake found himself responding to the sound more than the words.

"Headaches. I need something for the pain."

"Come. Sit down...uhuh..." She gestured toward a chair next to her massage table.

"Call me Snake." His voice was dry and feathery, as soft as her own, but far less gentle.

"Snake." She seemed to find some disturbing significance in that, beyond the simple fact of his identity. "Yes. Well... there are many herbal painkillers. Willow - that's salicylic acid, the active ingredient in aspirin. You probably need more than that. Syrup of poppies - that's opium, morphine. It's addictive, of course. Cannabis, to relieve the pressure in your eye. You're already treating yourself with tobacco." Her nose wrinkled. "I can smell it on you."

Snake snorted lightly. He had never thought of tobacco as a medicinal herb.

"Here, take one dose of the syrup now," Dawn said. She poured thick liquid into a glass cup and held it out to Snake. "Swallow it quickly - it's very bitter." Snake did so, tasting the bitterness under the honey. Dawn hesitated and her small white teeth caught at her lower lip. "I think I should examine you, see if there's anything I can do with massage, acupressure. Maybe aromatherapy. I want to read your aura and see how badly your chakras are blocked. Let's see..." She inhaled, obviously nerving herself, and reached toward Snake's blind side.

As her slim fingers touched the strap of his patch against his head, Snake's hand snapped out and caught her wrist in a hard grip. He pulled her hand away. Her skin was smooth and soft, the blue veins shadowy in the milky flesh next to his thumb. "No," he said, a breath of cold menace. Dawn startled, eyes widening. For a moment they stood frozen as Snake studied her. He was half annoyed, half aroused by the vulnerability he read in the woman. It called to a place in him that had not taken prey in a long time, and even the relentless pounding now ebbing in his head was no match for his rising desire. This was a woman completely to his taste, far more so than the young girl who had given him the blanket. Wavy red-gold hair. Full lips. Ripe, curved body. Snake remembered the look of her naked body in the baths, imagined what the round, full breasts rising and falling under her light gauze blouse would feel like under his hand, and moved, almost unconsciously, toward her.

"Snake!" Dawn's voice was sharp, anger over the fear now. Snake released her and she took a step away, then held her ground, rubbing the red mark on her wrist absently. With obvious effort, her face cleared and her voice returned to a studied calm. "I want to help you, but you're going to have to cooperate with me."

Snake nodded impatiently. *Go along to get along.* Taylor used to say that.

"Take off your shirt." Snake did so, and Dawn came up behind him, running her hands lightly over his head and neck. She chose a spot, pressed down, and sharp pain flared in Snake's head. He twisted. "Hold still!" Dawn said sharply. She held the point, then released it. Pain receded. "How does that feel?"

Snake considered. "Better." Between the syrup of poppies and this pressure technique, the pain in his head had declined to a bearable level, better than it had been in some time. He was feeling almost human, and very aware of the woman behind him.

"Good. A lot of your pain comes from tension in your muscles. Let's try a massage.

Undress and lie down on the table over there." Dawn began warming a bottle of scented oil over a candle stand, watching him carefully. She pointed to a table next to the larger one, draped in deep-blue velvet and scattered with crystals and stones.

"Pick out the stones on that table that feel good to you."

Massage... yeah.... Snake's experience with massage had been limited to the garish and sleazy establishments in the various red-light districts he had visited, which had, indeed, relieved some of his tension. Swiftly, he was out of his clothes and padding naked to the table. Maybe he'd found the perfect cure: a gorgeous, sexy blonde to work the kinks out of his muscles -- all of them -- and smooth the fire from his brain. He was already half-hard at the thought. She was still waiting for him to pick out some of the fucking rocks. Impatiently, he scanned the collection, then set several of them aside, choosing quickly and without thought: a bright yellow citrine, gold tiger-eye, deep-red garnet, obsidian, a silvery chunk of metallic rock. His hand came to rest on a rutilated quartz pyramid. He picked it up, holding it in his palm, staring at the fiery gold threads streaking through it, feeling drawn to it in a way he did not understand. It reminded him of something he felt he should remember, but there was nothing except vague unease. Disturbed, he set the pyramid down.

"Interesting. Yes." Dawn looked over his selections, gave a satisfied nod. "You've chosen all reds, golds, and black. And a meteorite. Firestones. Sun. Aggressive masculine energy." She glanced away from him again, unease flickering over her features, then hurried on in a professional tone. "O.K., I'll select for the higher planes. You're badly blocked."

Snake paid no attention to her choices: blue, green, white. Aside from the deep cerulean of the sky around his Gulffire, the white of clouds, the dangerous green of the earth far below his craft, those colors meant nothing to him. He lay down on his back on the table, drew a breath, and smiled at the woman next to him. "I'm ready. How about that massage."

"Turn over. I have to reach your chakra points."

He continued smiling at her, trying to put the sexual invitation into his expression that had worked with Summer, with other women. "Don't I have any on this side?"

Dawn sighed in exasperation. "Roll *over*, Snake. I need you on your stomach."

Irritated and frustrated, Snake did so. Dawn began stroking his back, moving up from the base of his spine, to his shoulders, out and back down, the touch barely grazing his flesh. Her strong hands pressed down on his shoulders, kneading hard into the clenched muscles there, down next to his shoulder blades, up the back of his neck. Pain flared and flowed away, tension loosening. Snake gave a long sigh.

"Good," Dawn said. "Now you're more relaxed, I can read you better." Her fingers touched the base of Snake's spine, almost between his buttocks, and he felt his breathing deepen. "Here," she said, "Base chakra: Muladhara, basic survival. It's wide open. That's good. Most people's are, you know." He felt her massaging warm oil into his spine, pressing harder now, then she laid something on the spot, balancing it in the hollow of his back. "Kundalini energy here. We can raise that energy up your spine and open you. I'm putting a garnet there to establish the flow."

Snake felt himself tensing again under her touch as the warm oil-coated fingers worked their way up his back, gently probing. "Manipura. Second chakra," she said. "Your sexual center." She pressed gently, and Snake felt sudden heat. He shifted uncomfortably. He was fully hard now and definitely wanting more than a fancy backrub. *Come on, woman. Get to the point.*

"Don't move! You'll disturb the stones. Your second chakra's open, but it's wildly out of balance."

"Let's balance it." Snake's voice sharpened and he sat up, scattering stones.

"Snake! I haven't finished!"

"Enough of this bullshit. You're too pretty to play stupid like this." Snake stood up, his good eye dark with frustrated anger, as Dawn backed away from him. "First you get my clothes off and start rubbing me, then you cocktease me. Doesn't work with me, baby."

Dawn stood holding the bottle of massage oil in front of her like a shield, her face frightened but determined, filled with an anger that matched his own. "Snake, I know you would like to have sex with me..." Her eyes moved from his erection and the cobra tattoo that seemed to rise from it back to his face. "... but you're too unbalanced. You're way over into the fire end, fire and air. I'm earth. If I let your energy into my aura, it would be destructive and dangerous for me." She held out her flattened hand, warding him off. "You need Kundalini work, you need..."

"Hey, hey, hey!" Snake protested, clenching his fists. "I know what I need, and it's not this bullshit! What's wrong with the women in this fucking place?" He grabbed for his

clothing, and began dressing with short, irritated movements. Yanking his shirt over his head, he snapped "You get one free ride, baby! I only take that answer once!" He snapped on his gunbelt with an angry click.

"Snake, I meant what I said. As you are, you're unbalanced - dangerous and destructive. I can't help you." Dawn reached into a drawer and pulled out a square of orange silk, dropping it over the clear pyramid with the fiery gold lines inside. "Maybe this will. Take it. It's... it belongs to you. Look into it, use it to unblock your flow. And here," she set a medicine bottle down next to the orange square. "Take some of the poppy-syrup, too. Now go."

Snake reached for the stone, trying to close his hand over hers, but she drew back, evading his touch. He glared at her for a moment, then shoved the stone and the bottle into his pocket and stamped out, slamming the door as he went.

Shivering, Dawn sat down hard next to the velvet-covered table and ran her hands over the stones there, seeking calm. She tasted again the image of Snake, his guns at his hips, the colors of danger surrounding him: too much red and orange, not enough blue; too harsh, too violent, the colors of danger. She felt again the darkness that welled up out of him under her hands, remembering the way his aura flamed and grew darker and hotter as he moved. No, she couldn't help him. The violence and pain were too strong in him. She knew how close she had come to succumbing to the forces of destruction swirling within him. He was more than just fire. There was a black vortex there, something she was not sure was entirely human. She turned away from the thought, cold with fear. This was something beyond her power and her training. She knew just enough to know she had touched the edge of something much larger and more dangerous than she had ever dealt with. She was glad, now, that Snake hadn't been interested in deeper chakra work. There were things there she could not control, things that should not be opened. She wanted no contact with them. She hoped Snake would leave Rivendell soon. She took a shaky breath, and went for the salt and oils to clear her crystals, thinking that she would need a long soak in the hot baths to feel clean again.

Snake remained in a vile mood for the rest of the day, tension clawing at his nerves and his eye lancing at him, the pain catching him off-guard. *Bitch*, he thought; *Why are the pretty ones all such cunts?* He didn't care, at this point, what it looked like, he wanted a piece of ass. He'd take that girl, Summer, up on her promise, and she'd better not try to play the same game with him. *I only take that answer once.* He slipped down to the old cabins again, looking them over as a plan formed in his mind.

When he returned that evening to the quarters he and Rain shared and threw himself down on his bed, he landed painfully on the point of the pyramid stuffed, forgotten, into his rear pocket. He pulled it out and unwrapped the scrap of orange silk to study it more carefully. Bright-gold hair-thin threads snaked across the inner depths of the stone. As he watched, they seemed to flicker like lightning across a cloudy sky. The stone fascinated him, bringing up vague fragments of forgotten dreams, and he sank into contemplation looking into it. He came back to himself hearing Rain calling his name, asking what was wrong. "Nothing," he said shortly.

He rewrapped the pyramid and dropped it into his pack. "Outta balance," he said to the air; "Prickteasing bitch!" Disgusted, he went to wash the perfumed oil from his skin.

For the next several days, Snake kept an eye on the path to the Lodge, and his patience

was finally rewarded one afternoon when he saw Summer making her way down after lunch toward the weaving-house. Snake caught up with her. Summer," he said softly, trying not to startle her. When she turned toward him and broke into a smile, Snake was relieved. He hoped she wasn't regretting her promise. He matched his pace to hers as she slowed, and said, "Are you... uh... feeling better?"

"I feel great. Why?" She stared at Snake, brow wrinkled, for a moment, then the confusion seemed to clear. "Oh, that. Uh... yeah." Pink colored her cheeks, and she looked down. "Sorry." She stopped and looked back up at him. "I'm O.K. now."

Careful. Easy. Don't blow it this time, Snake. "Good," Snake murmured, "Because... I've been busy. I've got something to show you." He smiled at her. To distract himself from his pain and frustration, he had gone down to the other side of the hill and found a cabin that was in better shape than the rest. He had strained his meager carpentry skills to the maximum, re-hanging a door and patching the roof, then channeled his thwarted energy into a broom and dustpan, soap and water. The results had surprised even him, and he felt the place was ready for a private party. It wasn't the Ritz, but neither was it the backseat of his old Mustang, and it was still his secret. He hadn't shown it to anyone, yet.

Snake spent the rest of the day with Summer, deliberately slowing his pace and reining in his impatience, encouraging Summer to trust him. She seemed to glow under his attention, responding eagerly to his somewhat rusty attempts at conversation. Snake had always been blunt and straightforward with women, and those he had slept with had seldom required much in the way of suave persuasion, but he was determined not to let Summer get away. All his restless, driving energy was channeled into pursuit and capture of the objective. She wanted him, too, he could tell, but in a skittish, uncertain fashion that confused him. The women of Rivendell were confusing and strange, unlike the equally straightforward women he was used to, but he had no doubt Summer would serve his purpose as well as any other woman. After they ate dinner together, Snake told Summer to wait for him at the Lodge and slipped off quietly to the cabin he shared with Rain to pick up a lantern and the sky rattlesnake blanket. For luck.

"Where are you off to?" Rain asked. He was re-tipping his crossbow bolts at the table.

Snake paused at the door. "I'll be out. All night, if I'm lucky."

Rain looked up, an expression of mild alarm on his face. "Don't go crashing around in the bushes at night, Snake. Security'll put an arrow through you."

Snake snorted softly and walked out without answering. Rain's concern, with its faintly proprietary air, was beginning to get on his nerves. He met Summer behind the Lodge and, with the lantern shedding a soft light along the rough path, he led her to the top of the hill beyond the Rainbow Circle and started down the other side. A narrow trail twisted between silvered tree trunks and pools of shadow, down to where moonlight glinted lightly on the surface of the lake and the weathered-gray wood of the old cabins' roofs. A flickering shimmer showed the spillway where the lake drained out, running down to join the river below Rivendell on its path to the sea. Mist curled around the edges of the dark water.

Summer drew back and stopped, turning her face up to Snake. When he put his arm around her, he could feel her shivering slightly under her yellow jacket. "Snake, we aren't going to the old cabins, are we? They're full of spiders and snakes."

"I fixed one up. For you. Come on, Summer." Snake tightened his arm around the girl's shoulders and drew her down with him toward the buildings. He pushed open the

door to the cabin he had chosen and ushered Summer over the threshold, pausing a moment for them both to contemplate the results of his hard work. The interior was swept clean, the walls and floor patched and polished, the double bed he'd found, abandoned in another cabin, made up with clean linen "borrowed" from the washhouse, and the last bottle of his good whiskey set on a rickety table along with two glasses from the Lodge. Snake hung the lantern from a peg on the wall and, with a flourish, shook out the handmade blanket and laid it atop the bed. "What do you think?" he asked softly, and before she could answer, drew Summer firmly to him. He wasn't waiting any longer.

Summer's breath caught as she came willingly into Snake's arms, pressing herself against him. He bent his head, claiming her mouth in a long, fierce kiss, and her lips opened under the insistent pressure of his tongue, hesitantly at first, and then more eagerly, following his lead. He ran his lips down her neck, feeling her heart beating, hard, in the soft hollow of her throat as he ran his hands over her, reaching down to cup her rounded ass in her tight jeans, upward to the curve of her waist and her small breasts, warm under the thin fabric of her T-shirt. The kiss broke, and Snake pulled the hem of her shirt free. "Get outta that," he growled softly, releasing her. Summer nodded, breathless, slipping out of her jeans, jacket, and shirt as Snake pulled off his own shirt, unclipped his gunbelt, and sat down on the bed to unfasten his boots, and remove his tight-fitting pants. He slid out of his briefs in one quick motion and his cock sprang free, hard and urgently demanding, as he pulled back the covers on the bed.

Summer looked up from untangling her legs from her jeans and paused, a surprised and disconcerted expression crossing her face. An amused surge of pride tickled Snake: *Nice big one, eh, baby.* She started to step back, but he caught her hand and pulled her insistently to the bed with him, and then his hands were all over her body. He bent his head and began licking and nipping at her delicate soft breasts, holding himself back with difficulty from entering her at once. He felt her hand under his hair. Tension on the thin cord of the eyepatch told him what she was doing, and he caught her hand quickly. "No," he breathed, "No. Leave it." He kissed her again, his body demanding her. She kept pushing at him, trying to get him on his back, but he resisted her.

She touched his cock and slid her fingers around it. Snake moaned deep in his throat and shuddered at her touch. *It's been so long!* He guided her exploring fingers, shivering with the little explosions of pleasure. *Now. NOW!* He thought of her mouth on his cock. There was no time for that. He wanted inside her. He was aflame, wanting her hard now. He rolled her over, roughly, and slid over her, holding her down with his weight and his hands on her. She seemed to startle, hesitating. He pushed her legs open with determined knees and began to slide into her. "Snake..." she whispered, "Snake!" He didn't hear her through the blood pounding in his ears as he pushed violently into her. He threw his head back and began thrusting vigorously into the tight hole between her thighs.

"SNAKE!" Her voice rose to a scream as she pushed against his shoulders, dug at him with her nails, scratching his back. He stopped her mouth violently with his own, muffling her as she bucked under him. Her hand tangled in his hair and pulled, hard. The sharp pain on his left side roused him, anger and adrenaline surging together into a savage need to take the woman under him. He grabbed her hand, pinioning it to the bed. *You want it rough, Baby? You got it!* Lust raged in him, his cock hard inside her as he built, violently, toward his explosion. Her flesh, where he thrust into her, was suddenly wet against him, deliciously slick. He surrendered to the insistent voice of his own desire, blocking out everything else until he came explosively, shuddering hard, and finally collapsed on top of her body, panting raggedly.

"Stop! You're *hurting* me! Let me up!" Summer was crying now, the high pitched sobs of a child, as tears rolled down her face. She pulled herself out from under him, backing away across the bed and gathering the sheets around her as Snake raised himself on his forearms and rolled off of her. She sat up as Snake moved away from her, bewildered. "I don't want to do this," she gulped. "It hurts!"

"Hurts?" Snake floundered. "I thought..." *...thought you wanted it rough.*

"It's my first time!" she wailed. "I didn't know...."

Snake stopped, frozen by her words. Horrified, he looked down to see the smear of bright blood along the length of his cock, flecking the dark hair above it: a deflowered virgin's blood. He had never been anyone's first before, and an almost superstitious fear and distaste filled him. "Why didn't you *tell* me?" he demanded. "Shit!" He slammed a fist against the log wall of the cabin. "Shit! You fucking *lied* to me, bitch!"

"Don't you call me that!" she cried angrily. "I've played around with guys, but I never... I thought... you'd be nice!"

"You sure as *hell* played around with me!" Snake snarled at her.

Summer sobbed into the gray blanket. "I o-only wan-*ted* to see the tat-too...."

Outraged, Snake exploded into fury. He backhanded her, sending her sprawling on the mattress. *Fucking goddamned cunt! Wanted to see the television star, the sexy outlaw, the fucking TATTOO! I'm not real to any of these people. I'm just a picture on a wanted poster, something from a Police Channel broadcast.*

Summer scabbled backward, pressed against the wall, her eyes wide, her voice rising to a hysterical shriek that Snake finally deciphered as, "You raped me; you raped me!"

That did it. Snake whipped a hand around and grabbed her by the hair, pulling her head back hard as she cringed and covered. She pushed against his wrists in a useless, ineffectual gesture. "Listen, you fucking cunt," he grated in a savage whisper, "You fucking lied to me. Led me on. Then when you get in over your head, you blame it on me. *Bullshit!* I don't rape women. What you got, you asked for!" With a powerful shove, he sent her onto the floor and got to his feet. "Get your clothes on and get out of here."

Summer scooted across the floorboards to her clothes and gathered them to her, then huddled there, looking up at Snake, shaking, sobbing, too frozen with shock to put them on. The terror on her face, her thin young body, her keening wail, snapped Snake into a memory from long ago:

*Snow and smoke. Burnt wood and twisted buildings, fragments of a shattered world, sharp and black against glaring white. Acrid pall of gas-filled mist in his respirator; cold searing his lungs, numbing his hands and feet. Novosibirsk. Black Light Squadron on a search-and-destroy. The feral, starveling Russian children, doomed survivors, foraging like elusive ghosts in the bombed ruins for a bit of food or firewood. Most fled from him, but he remembered one bundle of rags with a little girl's face running toward him, holding out her hands wrapped in lumpy cloth, calling in a high, desperate voice, *Amerikanske! Amerikanske!* Whether it was for food, or safety, or to detonate a grenade in his belly, he never knew. He remembered the flash of fire as he shot her and she crumpled at his feet, crying in the high-pitched scream of a fatally-wounded child.....*

Suddenly, suspicion darkened Snake's face. "How old are you?" Summer looked back at him through disheveled hair. "Hey, hey, hey!" his impatient voice cut through her hysteria. "How old are you?"

"Twelve," she whispered.

Shock seared cold-hot through him. "Shit," he breathed, then louder, "SHIT!" *He should have asked; he should have known.* Horror, fury, betrayal clawed at him. She had done this to him, the lying bitch. "I ought to frag you, cunt," he snarled, dropping into a sandpaper whisper, "You wouldn't be the first kid I've killed." He was momentarily gratified by the stark terror in her eyes as she was jolted into silence, her mouth open on an indrawn breath. Then something in the huddled, childish figure touched a part of him even deeper than the rage. Snake drew back. This wasn't Siberia; this wasn't a partisan child. She was no threat to him. She was, he grudgingly admitted to himself, an innocent. In a more controlled tone, he said, "Get your clothes on. I'm taking you home."

"I can go by myself," Summer began, quavering.

"No!"

Summer dressed quickly, sniffing to herself. Snake slid into top and pants, boots and jacket, and strapped on his guns, silently raging. He wanted to blow the bitch away and drop her in the lake, but he knew he couldn't. He was going to be in enough shit with the Rivendell group as it was. If she died, it would be even worse. How was he going to get out of this one? He grabbed the bottle from the table and took a long pull off of it. His head was throbbing again. Taking another swallow, Snake slammed the bottle back down on the table, grabbed the lantern, and shoved Summer roughly out the door. They walked back to the clearing by her cabin in silence. Summer cast occasional glances in his direction, but didn't dare set rage on Snake's face. When they stopped outside her door, he grabbed her arm and spun her to face him, glaring at her. *Shut her mouth. Cover your ass, Plissken,* he thought, but the words of explanation, of apology, of justification, of threat, stuck and died in his throat. He couldn't think what to say. Finally, he released her and shoved her toward the cabin.

Shaking with reaction, Summer glared back at him. "They were all right: you're gassed! No wonder everyone's scared of you! *Go away!*" Bursting into fresh sobs, she ran into her cabin. Snake heard a man's voice, muffled, demanding information, then another, higher female voice joining it. Snake didn't even bother to look back as he stalked away.

Snake retraced his route to the lakeside cabin in long, angry strides, crashing through the brush. The whack of branches across his arms, his legs, were like cane-cuts beating the reality into him, the pain almost welcome as a brief distraction from the pain inside him. *Yes, it happened.* He threw open the door, slammed it behind him, hung up the lantern, grabbed the whiskey and dropped onto the bed that was still crumpled and smelling of his scent mingled with the girl's. He drank straight from the bottle, wanting to drown in it. *No wonder everyone's scared of you!* He choked on the whiskey, shotgunning it. *Go AWAY! Go AWAY! Go AWAY!* Raw pain welled up in him. All the hurt, the loneliness, the grief for Taylor, his men, his parents, his lost hope, his dead idealism, rolled over him, burying him under a dark wave of memories breaking through the barriers he had set against them. He felt shattered. It was more than the sex, more than the girl, more than the searing memory of the dead child in Novosibirsk:

you did it again, Plissken, you stupid fucking asshole! Hadn't he learned: don't trust anyone, don't open himself to anyone? Don't give them a chance to get into you. How many times does it take, you stupid fucker? He lay on the handmade sky rattlesnake blanket and drank, soundlessly screaming his rage at the world and, most of all, at himself. He was still screaming inside when he blacked out.

His Gulfstream's weathered wings were shuddering and creaking, the fuselage cracking under the strain of over twenty years in flight. The craft yawed and pitched wildly as Snake fought the stick for control, looking for a place to land. Alaska, Mexico, San Francisco had refused him clearance. He could hardly remember how many fields had turned him away already. His instruments blinked phosphorescent green, indicating a landing strip some miles ahead, and he flew for it. He was exhausted; it was time to set down.

Napa Tower, Delta Tango Foxtrot Four Five Niner, requesting landing clearance, over," Snake said.

Delta Tango Foxtrot... negative on that; you are not cleared for landing; do you copy?"

Napa, where am I to land? Please advise."

Delta Tango Foxtrot... if you try to land, I'll shoot you down! If you climb out I'll burn you off that wall! Get moving, Plissken! Go AWAY!"

Gas-filled rain beat against the canopy of the Gulfstream, icing the fragile wings, weighting him down, dragging him toward earth. The aging glider shuddered. He had no choice. He had to set down. Snake turned in a wide arc and flew on. His men were gone. Even his partner, Taylor, had been given landing clearance. He was the only one left aloft. Wouldn't he ever find a place to set down? His instruments showed a level area large enough to land the Gulfstream. No identification. No voice answered his request for clearance. Fuck it, he snarled to no one in particular, and wearily began his descent. At last he would stop: stop running, stop flying, stop struggling. As he committed to landing, he saw that beneath him was a bombed and blackened city. Updrafts of smoke and cinder from the smoldering ruins tossed and bounced him, pushing him out of control. He tried for forward momentum to straighten out and gain altitude, but the fuel in the glider's tail jet was gone and even his anger couldn't push the craft upward. He bounced once as his wheels touched down, and rolled to a stop. An orange flash, and fire exploded, filling the cockpit. Get the trucks rollin'. We're on fire. Shit. SHIT!" Snake ducked and whirled, slapping at the flames, but the entire craft was burning now. His body went up in flame as his goggle cracked and fire seared his left eye, burning it from the socket. He felt the eye explode and melt, as his hair caught and blazed and he became one with the fire, a part of it.

Desperately, he thumbed the cockpit hatch release and the canopy slid back. Around him were broken buildings black against the snow, black against the rainy sky, and scattered at his feet on the runway, the bodies of the men of Black Light, his men, in twisted shapes of death. He crawled from the cockpit, over the wing of the Gulfstream, trying to reach them, and as his burning foot touched down, the tarmac beneath flamed into fire. A sheet of fire spread out from him, covering the ground, as his dead men caught one by one, flared briefly, and disappeared. His burning moved out from the ruined city to cover the world with flame. The holocaust raged out of control as the one-eyed outlaw lay on the tarmac, unable to move, charred now and guttering into ash. A Russian child with a rattlesnake blanket thrown around her thin shoulders walked out of the sheet of flame

that was the world. Her hair was red as fire, her eyes blank and empty as burned coals. She pointed at him and said in a sweet, high, childish sing-song, You RAPED me, Snake. The name's Plissken. No, it's not,' she said; you did it,' and pointed again. He looked down and saw she was pointing to a bloody wound hacked into his belly. It was in the shape of a rearing cobra.

Snake woke with a strangled shout to find his clothes and hair soaked through with cold sweat. He rolled to the edge of the bed and vomited miserably onto the floor. His bad eye stabbed at him, re-igniting the fire in his head, as he sat up, shivering in the damp morning cold. *Where am I?* He looked around the cabin and remembered. *Shit.* The kid's parents and everybody in the fucking Group were probably out with dogs and guns after the brutal child-rapist, Snake Plissken. "Shit," he spat forcefully, and winced. He picked up the nearly-empty bottle of whiskey, chugged the remainder, and threw it against the far wall, where it shattered with a sharp sound that pierced his aching brain. He felt as if he could hear every glass sliver as it fell to the floor.

Feeling utterly wretched, he stripped naked, climbed to his feet, and staggered outside and down to the lake. In the gray early-morning light, it was shrouded in thick mist. The water beneath was gray-green, choked with weeds, moving slowly in waving patterns that set up an uneasy response in his unsettled stomach. A boulder stretched out into the water. Steeling himself, Snake walked to the edge, stepped forward, and plunged feet-first into the water. The force of the drop took him completely under, and icy water closed over his head. He hit bottom, his bare feet sinking to the ankles in slimy mud filled with sharp fragments, stirring up puffs of greenish debris that swirled around him in the dark water. Cold hit him like an explosion, paralyzing him momentarily. With his breath held and eyes shut, he thrashed to the surface and swam for shore. He touched solid ground and climbed back out, soaked and shivering violently in the November cold, but lucid. He returned to the cabin, shaking the water and bits of pond-scum from his hair as he went. It wasn't the Finnish sauna, but the effect was the same. He was sharp and functional again. He dried himself sketchily on the bedsheets, dressed, strapped on his guns, grabbed the rattlesnake blanket and wrapped it around himself, then sat down to think.

He could infiltrate the settlement, pick up what he could, and just disappear, but this was unknown terrain. He had a general knowledge of California geography and basic survival skills, but it would be hard going through featureless woods, in winter, without map, guide, compass, or supplies. He could stay here and defend himself. There were no police here, no prisons. Would they come after him to lynch him? The cold weight of his Magnums reassured him, and he smiled sourly. Forty untrained civilians, most unarmed, most non-combatants, couldn't drive him out if he wanted to stay and hold this position. Either way, he wouldn't explain. What had happened was between him and the girl, and the only person he had to explain it to was himself. This fucking Group didn't own enough of him to deserve an explanation. They didn't own any of him.

Snake heard a voice, distant and distorted, calling his name. He sat up abruptly. For a moment he wondered if it was his imagination, then it sounded again, nearer: Rain's voice. Quickly, he stood up, checked his guns, and stepped out onto the cabin's porch to scan the area, keeping a wary hand on his Magnums. Two figures were descending the trail to the lake, a taller one in long brown skirt and shawl, carrying a hiking staff, a shorter one in gray-green jacket and pants. He recognized Rain and Ray Lee. Neither one was apparently armed.

"Snaaaa-aaake! It's OK... It's me, Rain," the voice came again. Snake grimaced. Rain

was making damn sure Snake knew who it was before the people approaching came into range of his guns. Not a good sign, though Snake didn't blame him.

"I hear ya," he called back. His head rang with the sound of his own voice.

Snake stood eyeing them silently, his face impassive, as they came up and stopped in front of the porch. Ray Lee seemed a trifle winded by the climb, but stood as tall and steady as ever. "We want to talk with you about last night," she said. "May we come in?"

Still silent, Snake moved aside and allowed the two to step up to the porch and into the room behind him. Belatedly, he realized the place wasn't exactly his best advertisement. The table was overturned, the bed in disarray, pieces of shattered glass from the bottle were everywhere. The stale air reeked of vomit and whiskey. Ray Lee hesitated for a moment, then took a seat gingerly on the edge of the tangled bed. Rain set the table upright and went to join her. Snake leaned against the wall next to the open door, watching them coldly, his fingertips brushing his holsters, keeping his line of escape open and waiting.

Ray Lee cleared her throat. "When Summer Martin came home last night, she told her parents that you raped her. This morning, I heard her side of the story. I want to hear your version, Snake." Her tone was not accusing, but calmly neutral.

Anger, suspicion and hostility glittered in Snake's good eye. "Why?"

"Because you wouldn't do that!" Rain burst out passionately. "I told them you wouldn't do that!"

Several confused, only half understood, only half acknowledged, emotions collided in Snake's mind, paralyzing him. *So you believe in me, do you, Rain? Fucking asshole. Figure you stand up for me and I owe you. Fuck that! Don't hang your shit on me.* His whole self revolted against anyone trying to confine him within their expectations.

Shadowy guilt flickered beneath the resentment: *I did it. Yeah, I raped her.* Anger, familiar and heartening, flared immediately, shouting down the guilt: *She fucking set me up; she lied to me!*

"I wasn't going to let them do this to you without hearing your side!" Rain continued in the same furious tone.

That kicked Snake's ever-present paranoia into high gear. "Do what?" he grated.

"This is preliminary to a full Meeting on the matter," Ray Lee said calmly. She folded her hands in her lap and studied Snake without expression, clearly reserving judgment.

"I don't give a fuck about your Meeting," Snake spat, as automatic defenses snapped defiantly into place. *Let them think what they want. Doesn't mean shit to me.* Every instinct in him screamed to brazen it out. No explanations. He heard the rasp of Rain's breath, turned his glance in that direction, and the look of desolation on the young man's face hit Snake, in spite of himself, like the icy lake water closing over him again. There was something in that look that destroyed his defenses as no direct attack could. He looked away from the other two and ran a hand through his wet hair. In a low voice he said, "She came on to me and I took her up on it."

Ray Lee nodded. "Summer told me she only wanted to see a mark, a tattoo, you have. I understand why that made you angry. Summer realizes now that what she did to you was wrong, and she was partly at fault. She violated the principle we try to teach our

young people here about not objectifying others." The older woman sighed softly. "Snake, we don't have an 'age of consent' here. We feel everyone has a right to control his own body. Our young people begin sexual activity when they feel they are ready, and go at their own pace. We will not make anyone, even a child, the property of another person. But giving people freedom means they have the chance make mistakes. Summer didn't know exactly what she was doing. That was her mistake, and she admits it."

"She's twelve, goddamn it!" Snake rasped. He thought of the pitiful painted children he had seen on the streets of New Vegas. *She didn't look twelve*, he thought to himself, resenting the thought and the need to think it.

"Somebody could have told him!" Rain burst out. Snake smiled wryly to himself. *No excuses. Plissken, you asshole, you could have asked. But I wanted a piece of tail, and she came on to me.*

"Yes." Ray Lee frowned, ignoring Rain's outburst. "It's a problem. Pollutants, chemicals, gas in the air: we don't know what it is, but young people are growing up earlier and earlier. Girls reaching puberty at nine or ten. Unfortunately, mental development doesn't keep pace with the physical." There was understanding in her face, neither sympathetic nor condemning. "Snake, I'm a generation older than you are; it's even harder for me. You're a stranger here, and you don't know us the way we know each other. You reacted the way any man might in the same situation, and the fact that you walked Summer home shows you didn't intend to harm her. But you did hit her and frighten her, and you did have sex with her. That was wrong, and that is your responsibility. You are an adult." *You should have known better. You should have had more self-control* was unspoken but clear in Ray Lee's words.

"I'm getting the fuck out of here."

"No." Rain and Ray Lee chorused. The older woman continued, "I blame myself, as well. I should have taken Summer aside and told her to be more careful. I should have told you she was young and inexperienced. Snake, we're not going to make you the villain. We're all of us involved in this. We should put this before Meeting, explain what happened, and settle the matter."

"Fuck that. I'm gettin' out of here," Snake repeated. The idea of having this experience rehashed in front of the population of Rivendell and letting them judge him had all the appeal of a month's vacation, unarmed, in the sewers of New York Max. "Rain, I'll get my shit from your cabin."

"Snake, no...." There was a desperate note in the younger man's voice. "Ray Lee...."

The woman's voice cut across Rain's, effortlessly silencing him. "Snake, our Group functions on the basis of voluntary compliance with certain rules agreed upon by the entire community. Any disputes or problems are settled by the Meeting, and everyone agrees to abide by its decision. We will not hold anyone here against his will. If you set yourself outside the Group, we cannot, and will not, punish you or judge you. Or judge for you against anyone who has injured you. We will revoke the Sanctuary you asked for, and received, when you first arrived. If you refuse to go before the Meeting, you will be outside our help and protection."

"Good." Snake's tone was cold and satisfied.

"Snake...." Rain began.

Ray Lee cut him off again firmly. "Rain, it's his choice." She turned back to Snake. "If you want to stay here in the old cabins until spring, we won't drive you out. And, since you're leaving unexpectedly, we'll provide you with some basic supplies..." Snake stirred in protest. Ray Lee held up a restraining hand and continued before he could interrupt. "...as a gift. You will need them. After that, you're on your own... Mr. Plissken."

Rain shifted in his seat, opened his mouth, and closed it again as both of the others turned uncompromising looks in his direction.

"Good," Snake said again, with finality. "Just stay away from me, all of you." His fingers shifted on his guns in unspoken but unmistakable threat. Standing in a room full of silent evidence of his destructive anger, with lank, wet hair stinking of pond-scum, slept-in clothing, and grim, unshaven face, he looked every inch the dangerous, violent psychopath of the Police Channel broadcasts.

Ray Lee returned his stare with the unruffled determination that had faced down generations of Rivendell's enemies. "Very well. We will leave you strictly alone. I won't even mention our conversation today. I hope this place will be healing for you, Snake Plissken. You have more wounds than are apparent on the surface. Come on, Rain." She rose, picked up her staff, and walked out. Snake heard the sound of her footsteps going across the porch and down the step.

Rain started to follow her, but hesitated just outside the door, looking back at Snake. "Snake, I'll get your things and bring them over here. But I really wish you'd come back with us."

Snake dropped his voice, even though Ray Lee was already some distance down the trail. "Rain, don't tell anybody over there I'm still here. Tell 'em I left." He paused. "Fuck it. I'll go as soon as I get my shit."

"Where?"

Snake eyed Rain for a moment, debating whether to respond, and then said grudgingly, "North. Canada."

"In winter? On foot? Snake, the roads won't even be cleared any more. You can't go north until spring. That's insane!"

Snake gave a bitter little snort of laughter. "Who said I'm fucking sane?" After a moment of thought, he added, "I'll stay 'til spring. But don't tell anybody I'm here."

"O.K. If that's what you want." Rain radiated worry and unhappiness. "Snake, if there's anything you need..."

"Go!" Snake's voice was a low snarl.

Rain went. Snake watched suspiciously until he and Ray Lee had gone over the top of the hill and were out of sight, then he turned and went back inside the cabin.

Even at a discouraged trudge, Rain soon caught up with Ray Lee. She smiled ruefully at the expression on his face and said, "Well, unfortunately, Snake Plissken seems to be living up to his legend."

"He looks awful," Rain said. "I'm worried about him. I wish I could do something."

"He looks angry. Furious, in fact; and that's understandable. He feels he's been set up, betrayed, and unjustly accused of a horrible crime. And I suspect he's feeling guilty and defensive as well." She stopped and turned to face him.

"It just isn't fair!" Rain said through clenched teeth.

"Fair?" Ray Lee said. "He raped Summer. He broke his word to us. I don't believe he meant to do it, but he should never have allowed the situation to get to that point. I think we're being quite fair to Mr. Plissken."

"He said she led him on."

"Rain, Summer is twelve. Snake is a grown man. That's not an excuse." Ray Lee regarded Rain gravely until he dropped his eyes. Her face softened with affection for the young man across the path from her. "He can take care of himself, you know. He's survived everything the USPF could throw at him for more than twenty years. That takes formidable intelligence and extraordinary anger. And considerable luck." Her expression sobered again. "To shift the entire world onto a new course... that takes a remarkable man."

Rain nodded unhappily. "What can we do?"

"Support his decision: provide what he needs, as a start, and leave him completely alone afterward. Don't underestimate his strength, Rain, and don't make him into a martyr. He'll be all right." She set off again down the trail, and Rain followed her.

His head pounding, Snake retrieved the towels he had taken from the communal bathhouse from the spot where he had shoved them out of sight, and moved around the cabin, mopping up liquids and collecting broken shards of glass, making the beginnings of long-range plans. If he was going to live here, he had to get the place weather-tight and fixed up. Defensible, too. After what the old woman had said, he doubted anyone from the settlement would come after him, but he didn't want to be an easy target.

Shutters for the windows and bolt-locks on the thick wooden door should take care of it, unless they tried to burn him out. He doubted they would. The work would take his mind off the pain.

There were fish hooks in his boot knife handle and he still had plenty of ammo. The woods were full of game; there were ducks on the lake; Rain had showed him the trails near the orchard where the deer came down for the windfall apples. He could rig up a smokehouse in one of storage sheds. There was the stone barbecue pit at the lake edge, a fireplace and some old pans in what had been the mess hall, where he could boil the lake water to purify it. Piece of cake. Time to revive his Special Forces survival training. Snake finished cleaning up the worst of the mess and took the towels outside. He stood in the afternoon winter sunlight and looked out at the green hollow of forest that held him like a cupped hand, open but secure. He took a long, slow breath of the clean and silent air, and a lopsided smile twisted his mouth.

CHAPTER SIX

Rain brought Snake's belongings over the hill and left them where Snake could find

them at the edge of the clearing by the lake. Snake disappeared. Rain suspected he slipped in sometimes, long after everyone in the settlement had gone to bed, to use the hot-water baths. On nights Rain was on watch, he occasionally saw a dark Plissken-shaped figure moving like a shadow through the settlement, and afterward some useful supplies would turn up missing from the storage areas near the Lodge. Rain knew he should challenge the intruder, but he could not bring himself to do it. Occasionally, Rain heard the crack of gunfire in the distance, and now and then he found a snare, which he carefully disabled, set in the bushes. He knew Snake was subsistence hunting. *He's gone feral*, Rain thought.

What Happened At The Lake, as it came to be known, was a topic of conversation in the settlement for a month, and then was replaced by newer gossip. Summer's friends giggled and whispered behind her back for a while, and then seemed to forget the matter, while the adults sympathized with her and told her to see it as a learning experience. When her period came, right on schedule, she was relieved but, secretly, just a trifle disappointed: carrying the outlaw's child appealed to her sense of the dramatic. It was agreed she would foster out as soon as possible.

In the months that followed, Rain found himself thinking of Snake frequently, even as he settled back into the routine of life at Rivendell. His casual encounters with the young men he occasionally slept with were pleasant but strangely unsatisfying, and he found himself fantasizing that his partner was the auburn-haired, unshaven outlaw. His best friend, and frequent bed-partner, Lynx, learned to recognize, by Rain's familiar distracted expression, when Rain had Snake on his mind.

"Forget about him, Rain," Lynx commented impatiently. They lay next to each other on the two single beds pushed together, near the woodstove's crackling, flickering warmth, in Rain's cabin, after a lazy evening of sex. "You told me he was straight, and he treated you like shit. You're obsessing. It's not healthy."

"I don't know what it is. I really don't. It's just -- the whole thing seems so stupid." Rain sighed and propped his head up on one elbow. "I hope he's O.K."

"Aren't you getting enough? I'm doin' my best." Lynx's tone was teasing, but there was a bite to it underneath the surface lightness. He ran a hand gently down Rain's back and cupped his ass. "You want some more?"

Rain returned Lynx's kiss and they began exploring each other again. As he moved into the rhythms of sex, Rain wondered: it felt so good ...why wasn't he content? His body responded to the man whose arms were around him, but his mind kept returning to the shadowy figure in the night. When Lynx rolled over and fell asleep, Rain lay beside him for a while, musing. He was tired, but not sleepy. At last he got up and walked over to the window, pulled back the shutters, and stared out into the blackness in the direction of the lake. Faint light from the woodstove's fire behind him made the blank square a misty mirror reflecting dim images of himself, the cabin, and the indistinct shape of the man sharing his bed. Rain's mind wandered into fantasy.

Rain, Snake's voice came from behind him. Rain turned to see Snake standing by the bed, looking at him. C'mere, he said in a soft, predatory tone, like a tiger purring. Rain waited a minute, letting the energy build between them as he ran his glance up and down Snake, naked in the firelight, savoring the image: the sweep of Snake's broad, defined chest and rounded biceps, the flat belly, and the beautiful cock already half-hard between corded, muscular thighs. The cobra curved across Snake's belly and down his thick rod to where the wide black band of the tail circled the head. It was an image as dangerous and

deadly as the man who wore it. Warm chiaroscuro made the compact, athletic body a figure of shadows and bronzed highlights. Come on, come on,'Snake said, rougher now, more urgent, commanding. Rain crossed to Snake and pressed himself against the other man as Snake wrapped an arm around him. He slid a callused hand up under Rain's hair and grabbed hold, pulling Rain's head back until Rain's mouth met Snake's in a passionate kiss. Sandpaper stubble rasped Rain's chin as Snake's tongue thrust into him like a promise of things to come, and Rain tasted the bitter flavor of tobacco and scotch.

Snake's strong arms were still around him, holding him tight, as Rain moved his own arms up the hard, smooth curve of Snake's back. He clung to Snake, dissolving into the power of Snake's body and Snake's will. Snake's mouth moved to Rain's throat, nipping down to the hollow where Rain's heart beat, as Snake lowered Rain, with effortless strength of bunched muscles, to the bed's surface. He followed him, holding Rain down with the weight of his body. Snake shifted, sucking Rain's nipple in, rolling it between lips and tongue, then nipping lightly. The twinge of pain roused Rain farther. He twisted, and Snake released the nub of sensitive flesh, shifting to the other one, flicking it lightly with his tongue, then sucking it, too, into his mouth, biting down painfully. Rain writhed and groaned, feeling the sensation through his whole body. The solid muscles of Snake's shoulders were warm under Rain's clenched hands, Snake's long, thick hair a silky weight against the backs of them, and Snake was all around him, an irresistible force.

Snake let go and laughed softly. He rolled over on his back and pulled Rain after him, then shoved Rain's head downward. Do me,'he rasped, his voice low and intense. 'Get me hard for you, baby,' Rain heard in his mind, but even in fantasy could not imagine Snake saying it. He slipped down eagerly between Snake's thighs, breathing in the warm, rich scent of Snake's body, feeling himself growing hard at the sight of Snake's impressive erection. The heavy shaft jutted up strongly out of a tangle of wiry auburn hair, and a drop of pre-cum oozed from the slit to glisten on the wide mushroom head. Below were round, full balls. Rain leaned down and slid his lips over the wonderful cock he wanted so badly.

Snake's strong hand reached down and twisted painfully in Rain's hair, holding his head at the angle Snake wanted, pushing his mouth down on Snake's shaft, as Rain savored the sweet, mingled flavors of male flesh, clean sweat, and pre-cum. His eager tongue found the slit, teasing it open, tasting the faint salty flavor, then swirled round and round the satin head. Rain opened his mouth wider and slid down all the way, taking the entire length of Snake's manhood into the back of his throat. His tongue caressed the shaft as he moved up and down, up and down, licking and tasting. With his other hand, Rain reached down and lifted Snake's heavy round balls on his palm, rolling them lightly in his hand, feeling the soft warm suede of them. He stroked the little hollow behind them with his fingers as his tongue stroked the sensitive underside of Snake's cock down to the base. Snake was fully erect now, unyielding satin and steel.

Snake's hand in his hair pulled Rain's head up, pulled Rain's mouth off that beautiful cock. Now, baby,'Snake said, and Rain rolled over on his back, raising his knees as Snake prepared to take him. In the dim firelight, Rain could see Snake's rough, fierce face, intent, unsmiling, dark with stubble; see the black slash of patch, the hot, feral glitter of desire in the other bright blue eye. There was nothing in that face of gentleness or tenderness even in love-making, only determination, strength, and passion. Rain yearned toward him, wanting to feel Snake inside him. Impatient fingers slick with lubricant shoved into Rain's asshole and started working it open. Rain moved into Snake's hand, wanting it, feeling his tight hole loosen and welcome the invasion, stretching to take

Snake's fingers to the knuckle. He hooked his knees over Snake's shoulders as Snake dug iron fingers into Rain's ass-cheeks and dragged him peremptorily into position. Snake shifted one hand to his cock, positioned himself, and drove himself into Rain's ass.

Sudden pain became ecstasy as Snake began thrusting in deep, long, hard strokes, putting his entire weight behind them. Rain heard the rasp of Snake's breathing as Snake pushed into him, slamming against Rain's ass-cheeks. Rain braced himself, arching to meet each thrust, taking Snake into him until Rain felt that the other man was at his very core. His breath caught in his throat, and his whole body felt flooded with liquid light as his hand moved on his own cock, and he exploded into orgasm.

Snake collapsed on top of him, gasping, and Rain felt the final throbbing of Snake's cock inside him before Snake pulled out and rolled over on his back beside Rain. The older man gave a low, rasping growl of satisfaction deep in his throat, and exhaled in a long sigh. He smiled at Rain, holding the young man's glance with his own for a long moment, then turned over and pulled his blanket up over his own shoulders. When he could tell by Snake's even breathing that the other man was asleep, Rain turned toward him and raised himself on one elbow. Looking down into Snake's face, as he had in the house on their journey, Rain reached out and lightly laid the tips of his fingers against Snake's cheek.

The outlaw stirred but did not wake. Rain bent down and brushed his lips, feather-light, against Snake's mouth in a kiss. The words he wanted to say, the pledge he wanted to give, sank into silence unspoken.

Rain turned away from the window and moved on silent feet back across the room. He stood for a moment looking down at the lightly snoring figure of the man sharing his bed. No, he thought; all wrong: the hair too light, the body too tall and slender, the face too young and unmarked. Then his perspective shifted and he sighed softly. Lynx was a good friend, a good lover. He was sweet and generous, fun to be with, and he cared about Rain. Why wasn't that enough? Rain sighed again, slipped under the covers, taking care not to wake Lynx, and lay down to sleep, contemplating the winter of his discontent.

Early January, Newhall Pass, California

Rance Farris had found the trail. He learned from the Blackbellies at Firebase Seven that Plissken had been sighted, traveling north, immediately after the helicopter crash.

They filled him in on the Sword of Damocles Network, the President's last broadcast, and the destruction Plissken had wrought when he pushed the button on the weapons prototype. The USPF was swamped with the aftermath, fighting the invasion from Los Angeles, trying to re-organize without computers, motorized transport, or even telephones. They were happy to enlist bounty-hunters to chase the criminal that had brought civilization to its knees. They gave Ferris what they could spare: a couple of horses, some supplies, and a handful of gold coins. "Bring him back, dead or alive.

There won't be any questions," Malloy said. "You'll earn the gratitude of every decent American."

Malloy gave him a list of suspected criminal elements who might possibly try to help the fugitive escape justice, and Farris followed up on the leads. He came up dry until he checked out the country estate of a rich businessman believed to have mob connections,

some twenty miles north of the USPF base. For a price, Farris learned from one of the stable-hands that the wounded Plissken had been there about two months previously, and had spent some time recuperating there before leaving, a month and a half ago, with a second person. The stable-hand had heard something about a group 'up north', but was vague on the details, and guessed that the two had headed for Canada.

It had been twenty-one years, but Farris would finally get the man who had stolen everything that should have been his. If it hadn't been for S.D. "war hero" Plissken, Lieutenant Farris would have led the mission to Leningrad. The decorations and honors that "Snake" had thrown away would have been his. Instead, he'd been cashiered, and Plissken had led Black Light Squadron, his squadron, to their doom. It was all Plissken's fault. Vengeance was slow, Rance Farris thought, but it would be his. It was what he lived for, all he had left. He set out northward, riding up the coast road, heading for Santa Barbara. He would find Snake Plissken. He was sure of that.

As time passed, Snake stopped counting days, weeks, or even hours. He rose with the sun, checked his traps, did whatever needed doing, then slept. For hours at a time, he simply existed in the unthinking patience of a wintering animal. The solitude of the redwood forest soothed and healed nerves scraped raw by too much human contact. His nightmares diminished, and he slept more easily. Sometimes, after nightfall, he would climb the hill separating his cabin from the settlement, and sit in the darkness watching the last human stragglers heading home to bed, or listening to the sounds of music and laughter from the gatherings at the Lodge. He observed, uninvolved, and at the first sign of being noticed in return, he slipped back into the trees. Often, he saw Rain walking to and from the Lodge in the company of a taller, lighter-haired man, and once he saw them kiss in the light from the Lodge's windows. As winter deepened, Snake was constantly cold, a feeling as much internal as external, but he grew used to it, and, finally, indifferent.

One night, as he watched, he noticed an unusual amount of activity in the settlement below. The Lodge blazed with lights for hours longer than usual. Everyone in Rivendell seemed to be bustling back and forth, carrying things, laughing and exchanging greetings in noisy, excited voices in the central square. Snake puzzled over it for some time, until a memory from the world he had abandoned came back to him and he recognized the ritual. *It must be Christmas*, he thought. He slipped away, back to his silent cabin, wanting to put as much distance as possible between himself and the unwelcome commotion.

Below, in the Lodge, the Year End celebration was winding down as Rain and the rest of the clean-up crew finished washing the dishes and putting away the leftovers. "That was a beautiful sweater Paul and Jennie gave you," Tina was saying as she separated out food scraps for the animals. "It looks really warm."

"It is," Rain said, looking over at his little pile of Year-End presents with the bulky moss-colored garment of mohair from the commune's goats folded on top. "Jennie knitted it. My old one is just about worn out." He smiled, thinking fondly of the older couple, who reminded him of his grandparents back in Humboldt, and continued, "That was some dinner! This has been a wonderful Year Ending." He and Oak, one of Rain's fellow Security, started turning the large extra tables on their sides and folding them to go into the storage room, while Lynx put chairs back into position. Rain looked around at the warm, lighted hall filled with hand-made decorations and evergreen branches twined with holly and ivy. The remains of the big Yule-log still

crackled in the fireplace, sending out spicy pine scent to mingle with the smells of cinnamon, nutmeg, and sage. This wasn't quite like the celebrations of his Humboldt childhood. He missed the songs and customs his parents and his Group had taught him, growing up, but the laughter and camaraderie of Rivendell filled him with a new sense of home and belonging.

He finished storing the tables and stepped outside the Lodge's front door for a moment of quiet. The clear, cold winter air was like crystal, the stars bright in the sky, and he breathed in deeply, savoring the silence as counterpoint to the cheerful chatter from inside. In the midst of his own happiness, his mind turned to the solitary outsider in the dark cabins by the lake, and he wondered what Snake was doing for Year End. He suddenly realized that Snake probably didn't even know what day it was. He remembered the silent, secret figure he had occasionally glimpsed slipping like a shadow, lightless, through the night. Somehow, darkness and Year End were incompatible, contradictory, impossible. Rain's heart wrenched at the thought.

He went back inside. "Tina, do you have some of that casserole left? And the yams?"

"Don't tell me you're still hungry," Tina laughed.

"No, it's for... for later. Could I have some of the cookies?"

"Sure. Take whatever you want, Rain. There's plenty left over."

Rain packed up some of all the festive dishes, then gathered decorations and greenery, and stashed the collection out of sight in the storage-room. When everyone had finally said good night and scattered to their homes, Rain went back down to the darkened Lodge. He took a table and set it up outside the door, spreading it with a cloth, scattering it with pine branches, and arranging the food neatly in the center. He added several fat beeswax candles from his own store and a jug of lantern-fuel, and set his new Gerber blade in its belt sheath next to the plate. On impulse, folded the gift sweater and set it beside the pile. He thought of leaving a note, but discarded the idea; Snake would know who the things were for. Rain was sure the outlaw would also know who had left them for him.

Most of Rivendell slept late the next morning, tired out by the excitement of the celebration. Rain spent a restless night tossing and brooding, and, in the early gray light of pre-dawn, slipped out of his cabin to return to the spot where he had left his table of gifts. The food and the rest of the presents were untouched, but in the dirt beside the path were the unmistakable prints of Snake's boots. Rain stood staring at them. He was so lost in thought that he jumped when he heard a cheerful voice from behind him.

"What's up?"

Rain whirled. "Oak!" He exhaled sharply. "Don't do that!"

"Do what?"

"Sneak up on me like that."

The other young man raised his eyebrows. Rain was not usually the sort of person it was easy to sneak up on. Oak shifted his crossbow to the other shoulder of his camo jacket, further disarranging his untidy brown hair, and jerked his head toward the table. "What's all that stuff for? Do you know?"

Rain hesitated, then answered reluctantly, "I... uh... I left it for Snake." Oak had mentioned glimpsing the shadowy figure of the outlaw occasionally during Security rounds. "He came by. See the prints? But he didn't take any of it."

Oak grinned. "For Snake?" In an affected Old Prospector imitation he rasped, "Waah, they'll nevvah ketch Ole One Eye. He's slicker'n the Currumpaw Wolf. Trap-wise an' pizen shy. Bin roamin' these here hills sence...."

"That's not funny!" Rain snapped. He started picking up the items on the table and putting them into a box he had brought with him from his cabin.

"Oh, come on, Rain," Oak said. "He's an antisocial jerk. He steals stuff from the Lodge. He's fucking gas-violent! After what he did to Summer..."

"Nobody got his side of that," Rain said angrily. "Snake was...." An inner warning sounded and Rain trailed off. He knew Snake would not want him discussing what he had heard on his visit with Ray Lee to Snake's cabin, or making what Snake would consider, Rain suspected, excuses for his behavior. He let it drop.

"Hey, I know you've got the serious hots for Snake. Everybody knows it. But you're making him into this big fantasy thing. Give it up, dude. He's not really like that." Oak paused, looking into Rain's scowling face, shifted from one muddy boot to the other, and blurted out, "Look you've got a good thing going with Lynx. He's a nice guy. Don't blow it."

Rain silently finished packing up everything he had brought and moving the table back inside the Lodge, as Oak watched. When he was done, he said shortly, "O.K., Oak, it's all out of your way, so forget it." He picked up the box and walked away, back toward his cabin. Oak shrugged and headed off in the opposite direction to continue his patrol.

Rain's steps slowed gradually as he started the climb. Finally, he came to a complete stop and stood, holding the box, looking across the valley toward the green ridge of forest that hid the lake from his view. He wrestled with himself for a while, then came to a decision. Nobody should be alone and without friends at Year End. He turned back and headed for the trail to the old cabins. The sun crept over the top of the surrounding mountains and sent long shadows down the path in front of him.

Some time later, Rain crested the hill and stood for a moment looking down at the blue lake cupped in the dark-green tangle of evergreen and eucalyptus. Most of the area looked untouched, but the space around Snake's cabin had been cleared of brush, the roof repaired, the door and windows straightened and solidly fitted into their frames. A heavy bar-lock, made from a tree-branch, was propped next to the cabin door. The lakeside barbecue pit had been cleared of leaves and debris, and there were new ashes in it. The root cellar and one of the old storage sheds showed similar signs of renovation. Snake seemed to be settling in and making some kind of a home for himself here, Rain thought. He set off down the hill in a slightly more cheerful mood, calling Snake's name loudly in warning of his approach. As he stepped up onto the cabin's porch, he noticed that the formerly sagging and rotted railing had been replaced by new wood solidly nailed in place. So that was where the missing axe and hammer and the box of nails from the storage room had gone. "Snake?" He knocked firmly on the cabin door. "It's me, Rain."

After several repeated calls from Rain, there were muffled sounds from inside, the cabin door slowly moved, and Snake appeared in the opening. He stared silently at

Rain for long minutes and at last, in a voice low and rusty from long disuse, said grudgingly, "Yeah?"

"It's Year Ending. We had a big party. I thought you might like some..." Rain paused, "...some of the food." Rain stood studying the man in the doorway. Snake was thinner, his hair longer, uncut but carefully combed, and as thick and wavy as ever. His beard was dark and full, and the good eye still as suspicious, as startlingly blue and intense, as Rain remembered. Rain shifted the box in his hands. "Can I come in?"

Snake stepped back and silently allowed Rain to enter, then positioned himself leaning against the wall. The inside of the cabin was neat and clean, the bare plank floor swept, the bed made, the few items in the room organized with the orderliness of a military barracks. The Magnums still hung, pointedly, next to Snake's bed, within easy reach.

Rain set his box on the table and, after a second's hesitation, sat down on the bed's gray blanket covering. "I should have come up here sooner," he began uncertainly.

The unwelcoming expression on Snake's face gave the lie to Rain's words even as he said them. "Snake, I'm sorry. I've...."

"Don't."

"Don't what? Come up here, apologize, or bring food?" Rain tried a smile.

Snake's silence lengthened uncomfortably. Rain looked away again, around the room, avoiding the other man's impassive stare, trying to give him space. Snake's jacket hung to one side of a built-in storage area, and on the shelves next to the clothes-bar were Snake's meager supplies. Among them, Rain recognized items looted from the settlement: coffee, salt, a few bottles and cans, some dried vegetables, a plastic jug of drinking water. Rivendell's missing tools hung in an improvised rack on the wall. In one corner, neatly cut snares were stacked beside the assault rifle Snake had bought from DMZ. On the table by the bed sat a crystal pyramid. It looked strangely out of place in the utilitarian setting.

"If there's anything you need, I can bring it over for you, Snake." Rain wished the older man would say something. Snake seemed to be waiting, listening, for something. Rain wondered what it was. He tried again: "Are you going to stay here from now on?"

"'Til spring."

"Where are you headed, then?"

Snake did not answer. Rain thought back to the last time he had been here. "If you're going north to Canada, you'll need supplies and provisions, and information. Ray Lee has maps for the trails the blackbellies don't know about. The Drinking Gourd Trail is the one we use. Let us know before you leave, and we'll give you directions."

"Who's 'we'? Who knows I'm still here?"

"Nobody except me and Ray Lee. Everybody else thinks you're gone." With reluctant honesty, Rain amended, "Well, some of the Security people know you're still around somewhere, but nobody wants to go looking for you."

"Good." Snake's voice was low and husky, intimidating.

"Here." Rain reached into the box he had brought and took out a big chunk of lasagna, corn pudding, and some honey gingerbread. "I thought this stuff would make a nice change from..." he looked at the snares and away again "...from what you've

been having." At sight of the set and unresponsive face opposite him, he faltered. "At least take the sweater and the knife."

I refuse to owe you anything Rain read in Snake's closed face. "Leave me alone," he said, soft but deadly serious, "All of you."

Rain reluctantly got to his feet, leaving the items on the table. "O.K., I'm going. No obligation, Snake; this is just extra stuff I found when I cleaned out my closet." He paused, feeling that he was going to burst if he didn't give vent to some part of what was in his heart. At last, he said rapidly, "I won't run out on you, Snake. Take it or leave it. It's my promise to myself."

Snake shrugged. "Your choice," he said. He crossed to the door, opened it, and stood looking at Rain.

Rain left quickly. As he hiked back the same weary way he had come, he felt frustrated and sad. He had hoped the gesture might let Snake know he wasn't totally alone. Instead, Snake had driven him away. If Snake wanted to be left alone, Rain thought, he would not intrude on him again. He said goodbye, rather wistfully, to his warm hand-knitted sweater and his new knife.

As the short days lengthened toward spring, Snake felt himself growing into the forest, finding a place in its wordless and innocent cycle of life and death, where concepts like "war hero," "criminal," "psychopath," and even "Snake Plissken" no longer had any meaning or power. He explored the area he had claimed as his own around the lake valley until he was familiar with every inch of it, and polished the foraging and hunting skills he remembered from distant Special Forces survival training. After some experimentation, he mastered the technique of smoking the extra meat. Even though someone from the settlement was determinedly destroying his carefully-set snares whenever Snake did not hide them well enough, Snake found he had no trouble harvesting enough game to eat well in the mild California winter. He killed quickly and cleanly, taking no joy in it. His war was with mankind, not the animals. He made occasional forays into the settlement for necessary supplies, moving even more cautiously now that he knew he had been seen, and taking only small amounts of any one thing, trying to avoid a recognizable pattern. Nobody intruded on his solitude, and Snake stopped listening for voices from the settlement. Occasionally his thoughts turned, briefly, to Rain, the only one from the world of humanity who still haunted him, and the puzzle of the young man's strange, uninvited promise. More and more, Snake avoided the community below and, instead of watching them, would climb to the top of the hill and spend long hours simply sitting, drinking in the forest around him, and looking northward, ever northward, toward Canada and freedom.

In the silent, self-sufficient round of unmarked days and nights, Snake healed and hardened. His hair and beard grew thick and full. Long hikes exploring the valley, running trap lines, hunting, hauling wood and water, keeping up the cabin and storage sheds, burned away whatever excess flesh his body had ever carried and honed him to pure muscle. His leg wound became a scar, and even his headaches diminished as the tension behind them receded. Deprived of cigarettes and alcohol, his senses of taste and smell grew keener and his lungs cleared and strengthened. His good eye's vision sharpened, accustoming to wilderness distances and natural dark and light. He slept deeply for long hours, getting fully rested, and, on a diet of wholesome food and clean water, he regained a state of fitness he had hardly known even as a young Special Forces lieutenant. He would be forty-seven years old in the spring, and he had never felt stronger.

Snake learned to recognize the plants and animals around him, although he often had no name for them, and see the ways they interacted with and sustained each other.

They, in turn, seemed to accept him as one of themselves, part of the pattern. Rain's long-ago words began to make a certain amount of sense to Snake. One bright, crisp morning, as Snake was out checking his sets, a flash of color and movement caught his peripheral vision. He looked up to see the mountain lion he had heard about, but never seen, jumping up onto the horizontal branch of a dead tree some distance from him.

The rising sun glowed on her tawny fur as she stalked down the branch. The big cat, eight feet of sinuous strength in her full prime, stretched out and began tearing at what she had been carrying in her jaws. Tufts of gray-brown fur floated down, and Snake realized it was a rabbit. As he stood motionless, she raised her head and gazed at him with the amber eyes, alert and curious but untroubled, of an innocent killer. Snake saw her, beautiful and perfect, in one clear moment of understanding and fellowship. She licked the rabbit's blood from her paws, then rose and stretched on the snag branch, sharpening her claws on the wood. With a last glance at the human a handful of yards distant, she leapt to the ground and trotted away. Later that day, Snake found the snare she had raided, but he didn't begrudge her the rabbit. They were both just predators trying to survive.

Early February. Monterey:

Farris's trip up the California coast had been slow and unrewarding. He asked at each town he passed, but there was no word of the one-eyed outlaw or his traveling companion. He began to wonder if Plissken had given him the slip again, but in the confusion following the breakdown of civilization, news was spotty and unreliable, and the roads were full of nameless, desperate refugees. The man could be anywhere.

Farris decided to stop in San Francisco to replenish his supplies and try again to pick up the trail. If Snake was going to make contact with confederates in the underworld, it would probably be there. The City was full of malcontents and criminals.

His need for revenge fueled Farris's resolve like a slow-burning, subterranean peat-fire. Once, he had envied Lieutenant S.D. "Snake" Plissken, back before Leningrad, when Snake still had both eyes. Farris had tried to copy and outdo the war hero, tried to insinuate himself into Snake's circle of admirers, even had a similar tattoo done. People had commented on how much alike they looked, and Farris had traded on that, first as a joke and then in all seriousness. Farris was taller and had gray eyes, but with the tattoo, he found he could pass as Plissken well enough. Now, after all these years of hard living, tracking his prey across the country, always a step behind and a little too late, he was as timeworn and weather-beaten as the man he followed, and all but indistinguishable from him. Dark hair, worn nearly shoulder length, and unshaven stubble completed the effect, except for the missing eyepatch.

Farris still had two good eyes. Ex-lieutenant Ransom Farris, formerly of Lt. Plissken's Company, was one of the unit's only two remaining survivors, bound to that identity by his hatred and his purpose. When he finally killed his former commanding officer, Farris would become all that was left of Black Light. Now, that was all that mattered to him.

Farris began his search for a certain weapons dealer whose name one of his contacts in Los Angeles had given him. If Snake had been looking for ammunition in San Francisco, Farris would soon know about it.

Shortly after Snake saw the mountain lion, the northern California rainy season arrived in earnest. Water poured down day after day from a leaden sky onto sodden ground. The creek flooded, every hollow became a mud-bottomed pit-trap, and every incline turned into a rivulet. On the days it did not actually rain, the air was thick with fog and drizzle. Snake retreated to his cabin as much as possible, but even there he could not escape the bone-chilling damp that filmed the unheated wooden walls. He clothes and bedding never seemed to dry out. Stoically, he endured.

In the endless hours spent listening to the downpour on his roof, Snake searched for things to occupy him and take his mind off his fear of gas in the water. He cleaned and repaired every piece of equipment, took apart and reassembled his guns several times, braided snares, worked on the interior of the cabin, and at last ran out of projects. In his boredom, Snake's mind turned to the crystal pyramid he had set down on his table and all but forgotten until now. He spent long periods of time holding it, looking into the strange, clear shape where golden threads twisted like lines of fire. Often he found that his mind had gone blank, and time he did not remember had passed before he came back to reality, stiff and chilled, with an odd sense of disorientation. Still the pyramid fascinated him.

He stared into it:

He stood on a wide, featureless basalt plain slicked with rainwater, looking out over a world burned down to clean rock. Black walls of night formed a triangular space around him and rose to a peak far above his head. No sound, no motion, marred the perfect stillness. No life smeared its stain and stink of decay, like a slug's glistening trail, across the pure dark surface. He breathed in the thin, cold, untainted air. He was one with it, at peace, empty of pain and struggle. His fire had gone out. Below his feet, the rock shifted and a crack appeared like a burning line. It widened, opening as he stepped back to avoid falling into the growing gap. Below, a red lake of lava moved and swirled. He felt the life in it, eager and malevolent and powerful, straining toward him. He screamed and backed away. Fire surged upward from the crack. The edge of it touched his foot, and he burst into flame. The fire burned like a flaming Phoenix. Its white-hot talons sank into him as it leaped into the black air, carrying him with it. Sheets of incandescence, like great wings, beat around him, bearing him upward. He knew if he was carried to the peak above him, he would burn utterly to ash and be no more. Fear shot through him, and he writhed in the fire-being's grip. As he struggled, fear turned to anger. His rage flared up, scorching the being clutching him with his own stronger, hotter fire. It released him, and he fell like a blazing comet, burning brightly toward the distant world.

Snake came to himself abruptly, feeling the sky rattlesnake blanket solid and clammy under him once again. The dream drifted away from him like smoke even as he tried to grasp it, and all that was left was vague images of fire and the memory of the anger.

With a cold shock of fear, Snake realized he had not been asleep. Hastily, he put the crystal pyramid he was holding back down on the table and pushed it away.

Hallucination, gas-craziness his mind screamed at him. He had seen too much madness. He brought up vivid images of the shuffling, filthy crazies crawling out of the subways of New York Max, coming after him, hunting him for meat. His stomach lurched. He thought of the mountain lion ripping the rabbit to pieces, and his fear sharpened. He had seen himself in her, seen their similarities. *...just another predator,*

trying to survive.... . No! he thought; he would not sink down into that. His self was all he still had. If he lost the driving will that made him who he was, Snake would be dead, even if some mindless, shambling hulk still wandered through these woods. Wind gusted, driving loud pattering drops against cabin window, and Snake flinched. The fucking gas was everywhere, in the water, in the air. There was no escape from it, not even here. He could escape people, but he could not escape the world. If he stayed here, he would go gas-crazy, and never even know it. To save himself, he had to get out. If he stopped running, stopped fighting, lost the anger that fueled him and kept him sane, he would die. Snake would be destroyed and become one more burnt-out cinder between the teeth of an indifferent world. A nagging inner voice questioned: *am I still sane?* Impatiently, Snake dismissed the question. *Fuck it; if I can still ask, it doesn't matter.*

Snake looked around the cabin. Suddenly, it was too small, too closed in. The rain beat down heavily on the roof and the dank air pressed in on him, smothering him. Before, he had slept away the torpid, wet days; now he refused to surrender to any of it any longer. Rage, deep and real, blazed up in him, and an inner voice snarled: *Plissken, you goddamn asshole, you're not going to let them do this to you!*

Snake glared down at the zigzag lightning pattern on the gray blanket under him, remembering the fierce anger that had driven him here to this place outside human society. All the various "thems" of his past rose up in his mind and he revisited them, gathering his issues around him, fueling the flames. Black Light Squadron: The government had sacrificed his men uselessly for a lie. A scrap of memory chanted in the back of his mind, "Forty-nine will not rest 'til the fiftieth dies!" He thought of his house, burned out, his parents, dead and buried in a single pauper's grave; thought of the medals they had given him to shut him up, that he had thrown back in their faces. He thought of Taylor, gunned down in the hummer station like a fucking stray dog. Snake began pacing the confines of the room, ricocheting from anger, to loss, to grief, to paranoia and back to anger. He was alive again.

Farris found the arms dealer whose name he had been given in the South of Market slums. He bought ammunition and an old Tokarev pistol from the thin, scarred man. "It's all I got. Cleaned out. Nobody's got anything these days. Best you're gonna do in the City," the man said.

Farris paid him what he asked, then threw down a few extra coins on the scratched glass countertop. "You seen Snake Plissken?" he asked.

"I ain't seen him, but I heard he went through here two, three months ago, on a bicycle. Blackbellies chased him all the way down Market." The man shrugged. "I never heard nothin' more, so he must've got away."

Farris's letter of introduction from Malloy gained him the cooperation of the San Francisco USPF. They told him there had indeed been a sighting and a pursuit, but the criminal had eluded capture. Plissken had been seen last heading for the ferry building. The city-wide dragnet hadn't picked him up. He had been alone, they said, and heading north. They named an astronomical sum that had been posted as reward for Plissken's capture, and promised Farris any assistance they could offer. "We really want that son of a bitch Plissken," the desk sergeant said. "Bring him in and you can name your price. Alive, if you can do it; we've got plans for him. But we'll take him any way we can get him."

Farris got a USPF escort through the Oakland war zone and headed north. The trail was warm at last.

As soon as Farris had left, the weapons dealer took the money he had made on his sale and headed for DMZ. For what the out-of-towner had paid, the merchant could buy some good stuff from Josh and peddle it down in Daly City, outside DMZ territory. He made his way across Market to the fortified Victorian enclave at the Mint, and rang the bell. "Hey, Raff!" Josh greeted him genially when he had been ushered into the DMZ office, "What can we do for you today?"

After the deal had been negotiated to both parties' satisfaction, Josh and Raff settled back to share some of Josh's high-grade contraband cigarettes and exchange City gossip. There was never any way of knowing what useful information might come out of stray tidbits dropped in casual conversation. "So, anything, like, interesting going on down in your neck of the woods?" Josh asked.

Been pretty quiet lately. Got a man comin' through this morning, though, askin' after that one-eyed guy, Plissken. Unloaded that old Tokarev on him, as a matter of fact. Man, I thought I was never goin' to get rid of that piece of crap! Got three hundred for it, too." Raff chuckled in satisfaction at the way he had suckered the rube.

"A blackbelly?"

"Nah, I don't think so. Looked like a bounty hunter to me."

"He should've turned you in for ripping him off like that," Josh grinned ironically. "Genuine entrepreneurial spirit, Raff. Bill Gates would've been proud."

"You and your big words, Shaw," Raff grumbled. "Them and ten dollars'll get you a cup of coffee at Starbucks."

Josh managed to keep a light tone in his voice and a smile on his face as he exchanged idle chit-chat for a few minutes more and finally bade Raff goodbye. The moment the weapons dealer was out the door, Josh went to find Wolf. They had to get someone up to Napa to warn Snake, as fast as possible.

Snake made his decision: he was leaving as soon as the weather broke, going north to Canada. He organized and checked his weapons, equipment, and change of clothing, discarding everything that wouldn't fit into his backpack, and began building up supplies of smoked meat for the trip. He was glad to be active, planning and working toward a goal again.

Canada was as close to a home as Snake still had. Taylor's people lived in a small village just across the border in Ontario, and the pair had often hid out there when things got too hot for them in the United States. Snake was not a wanted man in Canada. He had no quarrel with the Canadian government, and he had been careful not to violate any local laws. The Canadian government had never agreed with the United States' ideological shift to the right, and turned a blind eye to the stream of political exiles and expatriates traveling back and forth from one country to the other. Many of them were U.S. fugitives from the USPF, seeking temporary refuge or a base for revolutionary activity against the U.S. government. For many Canadians, memories of the Vietnam era were still vivid, and attitudes on both sides of the border, familiar. Snake knew he had a safe hideout in Canada, if he could reach it.

On the first day when the deluge let up temporarily, Snake slogged along the muddy path over the hill and down to the Lodge in Rivendell, looking for Ray Lee. He found her studying a diagram of the settlement's fields, trying to decide on a proposed planting schedule to present to the next Meeting. At the sound of booted footsteps on the Lodge's wooden floor, Ray Lee looked up from her drafting tablet to see a bearded, long-haired figure striding purposefully toward her. It took her a second or two to identify this vigorous-looking man as the same Snake Plissken she had last seen at the old cabins by the lake. She quelled a momentary twinge of alarm, composed her features in a familiar, carefully cultivated, expression of calm neutrality, and waited. *Let him make the first move*, she thought. He was no longer one of theirs, and she need offer him no more than common courtesy.

"I'm leaving. I need maps for the trails north, and supplies. I'll pay, gold."

Ray Lee swallowed annoyance at Snake's brusque tone. The man was as abrupt and overbearing and overwhelmingly macho as she remembered. This was the kind of patriarchal male, she thought to herself, that Rivendell had been created to eliminate. She had been willing to overlook Snake's attitude when he first arrived, in gratitude for the healing gift he had given Mother Gaia, but the events since had strained her forbearance. She would be happy to see him go. In fact, she would be happy to do anything she could to get rid of him.

"Very well... Mr. Plissken," she said gravely. Snake did not correct her. Ray Lee reached into a drawer of her desk and took out a page photocopied from an old atlas. As Snake watched from the chair next to her, she spent some time outlining two routes on the map with a fine-line yellow overliner. When she finished, she looked up. "I will ask you not to let this fall into the wrong hands. If you are captured by the USPF, destroy it. You understand there are people's lives at stake."

Snake nodded sharply.

"All right," Ray Lee continued. "There are two routes north we use. One is the Drinking Gourd Trail. That one runs through rough, unmarked, uninhabited terrain, mostly forest, all the way up into Canada." She outlined the winding line on the paper with her forefinger. "The other way is much easier, following the old interstate, but it does pass through a number of towns, and it's a lot less safe. We've had people picked up on it. I would imagine, though, that the USPF surveillance is less effective now." She smiled briefly, and Snake echoed it with his little breathless snort. "If you're traveling without an experienced guide, I would advise you to take the inland highway. You'll go through Calistoga and Clearlake, and, just past there, take the right-hand road, here." She indicated it on the map. "Then follow this route." She finished tracing it on the map with her finger, then pushed the piece of paper over in front of Snake.

Snake stood up, folded the map, and put it in the zippered pocket of his jacket, then reached into a compartment on his gunbelt and tossed three heavy gold coins on the tabletop in front of Ray Lee. "O.K. We're even."

Ray Lee considered refusing the gold. What was a new hope for the earth worth, balanced against some stolen supplies and a map to safety for one man? But she could tell from the determined expression on the outlaw's face that the payment was as much symbolic as anything else for Plissken. He was buying his way free of any obligation to them. *Well*, she thought, *that can work both ways*. Unsmiling, she picked up the coins and dropped them into her belt-pouch, returning his challenging look levelly. She

deliberately did not thank him. "This is worth more than what you stole from us," she said, her voice intentionally matter-of-fact but uncompromising. "We can make up the rest with supplies for your journey."

When they had settled on the items Snake wanted to make up the difference, he picked up the cardboard box Ray Lee had packed with them and turned to leave. She looked at him expectantly. He ignored her and started toward the door.

"Mr. Plissken." When Snake did not respond, she repeated, firmly, "Mr. Plissken!" He turned to look at her. His face was a hard, unyielding mask that conceded nothing. "Will you be telling Rain yourself that you are leaving, or shall I let him know?"

Snake eyed her coldly. "No."

"You're not going to say goodbye to him...." There was absolutely no expression in Ray Lee's voice, not even an inflection. Snake turned and walked out of the Lodge without answering.

Ray Lee stood looking after him, turning over in her mind what had just happened, and came to a decision. Snake's response, or rather, lack of it, to her final question gave her the answer she needed, and stilled her doubts about what she had determined to do. She felt a rush of relief: they were rid of Plissken at last. He had been a source of trouble and discord in Rivendell since the first acrimonious Meeting had agreed, unwisely, to grant him Sanctuary. That was partly her fault. Yet what else could they have done then, except offer Sanctuary to the man who had shut down the Machine? Now, by Plissken's own choice, that debt was paid and they were free, with, she was sure, the blessing of Mother Gaia. Ray Lee bent her head in a brief wordless thanksgiving to Her.

She could understand Plissken's appeal to the young ones like Summer and Rain. She had felt something of it herself at her first meeting with the legendary outlaw. He had a charisma that drew people to him, like the dark and dangerous gravity field of a black hole. For a spirited young man like Rain, chafing under the dull routine of the familiar, it would be all but irresistible. She could remember so well the same adventurous spirit in her own life partner, when the two of them were young. That restless spirit had taken her from her family and her old life, and sent her and her partner, with a handful of other restless young people, to San Francisco, and then, when the Scene turned ugly in the Haight, to Rivendell.

But she wasn't a girl any more, and she would not make the same mistake with Rain that she had made with Summer. She felt fierce protectiveness well up in her. They were all her children, here at Rivendell, and she would not let Snake Plissken hurt or destroy any more of them. Rain was young and inexperienced, and not ready yet to know his own mind. If she told him Plissken had left, he might want to follow him.

She had seen, just now, how selfish and unloving, how utterly insensitive, Plissken was, and how little he cared for Rain or Rain's welfare. She had a duty to protect Rain from himself, until he was old enough to understand that Plissken would mean nothing but heartbreak for him, and he, too, was well rid of the destructive outlaw. It would be best for everyone if she did not tell Rain that Snake Plissken was leaving Rivendell. It was for his own good, and someday Rain would understand.

She wished the words didn't sound so hollow, even to herself.

Snake thought about saying goodbye to Rain, and discarded the idea almost at once.

Rain was the asshole who had suckered him into coming here in the first place, trying to turn him into a hired gun for this flock of fucking gas-crazy sheep. Snake never wanted to have anything to do with any part of Rivendell again.

He spent the rest of the day preparing for the journey. He tossed the crystal pyramid into the pile of things he was leaving behind, but every time he passed, his eye was drawn back to it. Finally he picked it up and studied it for a moment. It was small, no more than three inches across at the base, and not heavy. It wouldn't take up much room in his pack. It seemed to have some significance, some connection with him, he felt, but couldn't identify. *That's bullshit*, he thought to himself, *but what the hell*. He wasn't going to leave it behind for the bitch who had cockteased him to get it back. He tossed the pyramid into a corner of the large metal-frame hiking backpack he would be carrying. The sky rattlesnake blanket went in on top of it. No sense in throwing away a light, warm blanket that would be useful on the trail, Snake's practical mind insisted. Everything he was not taking, he buried in the woods or burned, clearing the cabin of any sign that he had ever lived there. He didn't plan on leaving anything behind that might provide a potential pursuer with any clues on how to track him.

As soon as it was light, Snake shouldered his pack and headed out through the foggy drizzle, swinging along with purpose and determination, glad to be moving again. As he passed the settlement and headed up the cow-path toward the highway, he caught sight of a shadowy figure muffled in a waterproof poncho, all but hidden among the trees, watching him out of sight. *Rivendell Security*," Snake thought.

He ignored it and went on. When he reached the settlement's garage at the edge of the paved road, he spent a few minutes studying possible ways of entering, and finally decided on the simplest. Stepping back a few paces, he sighted with his Magnum and blew off the lock. An hour later, he had retrieved his bicycle, packed as much of the freeze-dried rations on the shelves as would fit, lashed his backpack to the trailer, and pedaled off down the road. Having the swivel-mounted gun on the handlebars in front of him again put Snake into a mood that could almost be described as cheerful.

The road was fairly easy in his fit and rested state, and he rode along at a comfortable pace, taking his time. The drizzle lifted, becoming no more than dark clouds and a light wind. He slept that night in the woods, and the next morning, stopped briefly in Calistoga to buy matches and the few miscellaneous items he still needed to complete his supplies. The only store still open in the nearly deserted town, an old Seven-Eleven, was full of half-empty shelves and seemed to be hanging by a thread.

"I'm going to cut my losses and close the store, soon as my stock runs out," the storekeeper commented as he accepted the handful of metal change his taciturn customer offered, after refusing one of Snake's remaining bluebacks. "Move in with my son-in-law, on the ranch. At least me and the wife'll eat. You're the first customer I've had in three days." He nodded toward the bicycle and trailer Snake had pulled into the center aisle. "Nice bike. Looks like you're packed to travel. Where ya headed, buddy?" Snake didn't reply as he unzipped one of the compartments and stowed the items he had bought in his backpack. "Hope you're not heading north," the chatty clerk continued with a sort of gloomy enthusiasm. "I hear it's bad up there. Lot of people froze during the cold spell in Oregon and Washington State, and it's even worse in Canada. Bodies piling up everywhere, and no way to get rid of them. He laughed shortly. "If they ever catch that guy that shut down the power in the middle of winter, they're gonna string him up for sure."

"Where'd you hear that?" Snake asked, keeping his voice casual.

"People from there, passing through. Everybody that can get out is heading south.

Reminds me of the refugees during the war. It was a bad winter, and they didn't have any time to get ready for it before everything got knocked out by those satellite things. No heat, no fuel, no way to ship in food, no way to get word out asking for help. Not that it woulda done them any good; there wasn't any way to help. No trucks, no planes. I hear the death toll was in the millions in Canada."

He reached down under the counter by the register and produced a large poster with an old picture of Snake on it. "WANTED" it screamed in large hand-blocked type. "By the Royal Canadian Mounted Police: S. D. Plissken, alias "Snake," for the destruction of world civilization. Fifteen Million New Canadian Dollars Alive Or Dead."

"Fella brought this in couple of weeks ago," the shopkeeper said. "Wanted me to put it with the old one, but I didn't get to it yet." He jerked a thumb, and Snake noticed for the first time among the dusty clutter on a back wall, tacked on a bulletin board layered with old flyers and 3x5 cards, one of his old USPF wanted posters. "'Cept for the beard, you look kinda like th' guy," the clerk said, examining Snake with a considering expression. "Bet everybody tells you that, huh? Must be the patch." He laughed. "Better not let the Mounties get their mitts on you. Be kinda hard to prove you're not him, what with all the computers down."

Snake stared at the image. A younger, fuller faced, less weather-beaten Snake Plissken stared defiantly back at him from the piece of paper. "I'll remember that," he said ironically.

The poster haunted him as he pedaled on northward. Towards the late afternoon, he slowed and finally halted, thinking about making camp for the night. He'd been moving on inertia all day, Snake realized. There wasn't any point in going on in the direction he was headed. The unthinkable had happened, something he had never included in his plans: his safe bolt-hole had been slammed tight shut. Snake Plissken was as wanted, as hated, as hunted, in Canada as he was in the United States. Worse, he thought morosely, the Mounties were far more dangerous and efficient than the buffoons and crazies of the USPF. Snake came to a low stone wall along the side of the road, dismounted, and sat down to think. If not north, where? Return to Rivendell commune was impossible. He had no place there any longer. He had no place anywhere, no plan, no haven. He was completely out of options.

With half an ear, Snake heard the sound of hoofbeats heading in his direction down the paved road. In his dreary state of mind, it took a minute for his usual paranoia to kick in. The tempo of the hoofbeats increased, shifting into a canter, and Snake looked up in sudden alarm. When he saw what was bearing down on him, Snake leapt to his feet, grabbing for his gun. The opportunity was lost before it cleared the holster.

"Wouldn't do that, if I were you..." growled the rider as he reigned his horse to a stop, drawing a bead on Snake with an assault rifle. Snake froze, assessing the situation. "Drop the gunbelt, nice and slow, and back up." Raging inwardly, Snake did so. A gloating note entered the rider's voice. "Well, 'Snake,' you and I are going back to Los Angeles...."

Snake stared hard at the man. The voice hadn't changed. "Rance Farris," he rasped. *Shit.*

"That's right, 'war hero,' the man covering Snake drawled. "Rance Farris, who should've got those medals you threw away. Who could have saved Black Light, if you hadn't pulled rank on that last mission." The voice turned hard. "Down on your face, put your arms out in front of you. Do it slow." Snake stretched out on the ground. A second later, the butt of Farris's rifle connected with Snake's head on Snake's blind side, stunning him briefly. Snake returned to consciousness a moment later to find his hands cuffed behind his back and his face shoved into the dirt by the force of the blow. "Don't move," Farris's voice came again from behind him, "Don't even breathe hard. You're slowing down, 'Snake,'" Farris added mockingly. "I couldn't have done that twenty years ago."

He couldn't have done it now, if you hadn't been sitting there on your dick like a fucking lame-ass, shit-for-brains idiot, Plissken, Snake thought to himself. He shifted his head to one side, spitting out mud, trying to ignore his rising apprehension and concentrate on forming a plan of action.

Farris had wrapped a length of rope around Snake's wrists, knotted it, and snugged the other end around the pommel of his Western saddle. He backed the chestnut horse a few steps, pulling the rope tight and wrenching Snake's shoulders painfully. Snake tried to squirm toward the horse to ease the strain on his arms. A bullet smacked into the ground beside him, and he lay still again.

"You're worth a lot of money to me, and I plan to collect it. You're the President's pet project, you know that?" Farris said. "He wants you alive, as a trophy - wants to drag you around the country, show you off, see just how many games his crazies can play with you before you die, and take photos of your execution. Should be quite a show. Maybe they'll pickle your corpse and take it on the road as a traveling exhibit: Snake Plissken, Public Enemy Number One, the greatest mass murderer of all time."

Mass murderer. The words slid into him, through him, like the beam of a laser, painless at first but deadly. Snake ignored it and concentrated on the moment of now, bracing himself, keeping his full attention focused on anticipating Farris's next move.

Farris's mouth twisted into a cold smile as he eyed his prisoner. "I've got a few plans for you myself, first, before I let the USPF have fun with you. I've been looking forward to this for a long time." Farris approached Snake's prone body, stopping just far enough away to be out of range of Snake's kick. "No MPs, no stockade, no court martial, no pulling rank this time... Lieutenant Plissken. Just you and me. Not such a smart-ass now, are you?" Farris's booted foot lashed out, catching Snake in the ribs, and Snake curled forward in pain. "Maybe I should just drag you back to Los Angeles."

"Little hard on the horse," Snake wheezed, trying to breathe.

Farris brought his quirt down hard on Snake's ribs, twice, and kicked him again, moving back out of reach just in time as Snake swept his legs around to try to catch Farris's feet in a scissors grip. Snake lunged after Farris, flopping on his back like a landed fish, then gave up when he saw it was impossible. "Go on, Farris," Snake grunted between gasps. "Fuck me up good enough, asshole, and you'll have to carry me back to L.A." He managed an ironic sneer through the pain. "You always were a stupid son of a bitch."

"Shut up!" Farris backed off and stood glaring at Snake. Snake could tell he was furious, but the logic of Snake's comment had evidently penetrated whatever passed for Farris's brain. *Good.* If he could keep Farris from beating him to a pulp in a fit of

pique, Snake thought, maybe he could figure out a way to get loose and get out of here.

"You're gonna walk every inch of the way back to L.A., 'Snake'. Play nice, or that'll be *crawl*." Farris tugged sharply on the rope. "Now get up."

Snake stumbled to his feet as Farris watched, covering him with the rifle, then the bounty hunter prodded Snake into a walk ahead of him. Farris found a spot where they were hidden from the sight of any passing traffic behind a stand of trees and set up camp for the night. He cuffed Snake's hands securely behind him around the trunk of a small tree, and went back to wheel Snake's bicycle out of sight as well. "You and me, we got a lot of stuff to talk about, eh, Lieutenant?" Farris said as he moved about, building a fire and tethering his horse. "We're going to make up for lost time, old buddy! I've been after your ass ever since I got loose from the Service, and you know what? Now I've got you, I'm gonna make every minute count. You're gonna pay for what you did to Black Light. What you did to me." He opened his rations and sat down next to the fire to eat. He didn't offer any to Snake.

Snake twisted his hands behind the tree, trying to feel out possible weaknesses. He caught Farris looking at him and stopped, returning Farris's stare with cool contempt. Farris scowled. "Forget it. You're stayin' right there until morning, unless you can pick that tree up and walk off with it. Wanna try it? Always used to think you could walk on water, didn't you, 'Snake'? Acted like your shit came in baggies." He laughed shortly. "I don't *think* so. You're stuck, fucker. This time I'm giving the orders." Farris opened his bedroll and slid into it. "Sleep tight, 'Snake'."

For a while, Snake struggled, fighting the cuffs, then accepted the inevitable and stood still, conserving his energy. For now, he was, as Farris had observed, stuck. Snake slid himself down to the base of the tree and took up as comfortable a position as he could manage to wait for morning. He shoved aside the prickling agony in his shoulders and bound hands, the sharp pain in his side, the pounding in his head behind his bad eye, and tried to think. There had to be some way to push Farris into losing it, making a mistake, and giving him an opening.

He thought back to when he had known the man. Lt. Ransom Farris had been a wet-behind-the-ears shavetail, just out of the OCS wartime crash-course with a shiny new commission. After the heavy losses in the Russian campaign, the Army was taking just about anything, even the marginal crazies like Farris. The newcomer had resented S.D. Plissken, the war hero and involuntary media star, from the moment he was assigned to the Company where Snake was senior lieutenant, and had tried to beat Snake at everything Snake did. When he found out about Snake's tattoo, he had even had one done to imitate it. Snake snorted mentally at the memory. Typical of the ball-less wonder, Chickenshit Farris had puppied out when it counted. Farris's tattoo was a rearing cobra, all right, and above the waist it looked just like Snake's. But the tail ended on the lower belly.

Farris had taken to letting hero-worshipping civilians and men from other units mistake him for Snake when Farris went off-base, and Snake had often ended up taking the blame for Farris's public fuck-ups. Shortly before the Leningrad Ruse, Farris had been picked up by the MPs for killing a civilian in a drunken fight in a Helsinki whorehouse. The Army brass had tried hard to hush it up, but it had gone public. Farris had been scrubbed from the mission, and eventually cashiered. When Black Light hadn't come back, Farris had blamed Snake.

Snake remembered Farris throwing it in his face, when Farris had come to see him in the hospital at Helsinki, bitter and accusing. Farris claimed he should have led the mission; claimed the brass had told him it was his. Said that if he'd been in command

instead of Snake, he would have achieved the objective and gotten his men out safely. In Farris's mind, Snake had stolen what rightfully belonged to him. Ransom Farris, not S.D. Plissken, should have been the war hero.

Occasionally, Snake wondered what would have happened if Farris had taken his place. The Leningrad Ruse had been a suicide mission, intended purely as a diversion. No doubt the men of his unit would still have died, but the blame, the medals, the searing shame and anger, would have been Farris's. Snake would have died in the blood-soaked Russian snow with the rest of Black Light. There were unwary moments when the memory blindsided him, and he longed to join his men in that cold peace, but the burning core of rage in him would not let him surrender until he had gained justice for his dead.

Justice. The word fell into an empty place inside him and woke ironic echoes. Snake twisted in the cuffs, trying to ease the pain in his shoulders that would not let him rest. *Greatest mass murderer of all time....* . Farris's words came back to him, and he thought of the shopkeeper and the poster in Calistoga: *wanted for the destruction of world civilization*. This time he could not take refuge in the iron moment. The cold, clear-eyed, self-accusing realist in him, the one who hated bullshit, faced it squarely. *He did it... he shut down the Earth!* Utopia's voice quavered in remembered darkness.

How many innocent deaths, Plissken? It had been so easy. He remembered the wall of fire from the crashed helicopter, the USPF circling his hologram image, Malloy gabbling at him, *For God's sake, Snake, don't do it!* He remembered the slight pressure on the remote, a humming more felt than heard, and then silence and blackness as the lights cut out and the engines died, everywhere. Snake felt his soul icing like the wings of his Gulffire. Images rose in his mind of pilots fighting suddenly unresponsive controls, their instrumentation useless, as their planes plunged earthward. How many aircraft had been in flight when he pushed the button? How many passengers had died in the impact? He pictured autos and trucks crashing as electronic brakes failed, subway trains thrown from the track, hummer-cars crumpled against underground concrete walls. Those who had died instantly had been the lucky ones. He thought of hospitals, babies in incubators, people on life support, surgeons in the midst of operating; thought of workers trapped in buildings with electronic doors and no windows, thought of people crushed by the heavy machinery they were operating when the power failed suddenly. He saw the shopkeeper's face again, and remembered the man's story of refugees coming down from the north, fleeing the second wave of death from starvation and cold. Megadeath, gigadeath: dry military terms for the unthinkable came back to him from his training; wave upon wave of death: the image crashed over him and he felt himself drowning under it. He had stopped both armies and disappeared, temporarily, but he had not considered the rest, the millions of innocents who had died, who would die. Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot: his toll had passed theirs already, with more to come, unintended civilian casualties in his war. Reality wavered at the impossible image. *What d'ya have to say, Plissken?* the memory of an arrogant, accusing voice asked in his head.

There was no answer. He should have known there would not be. Snake never answered questions.

Anger rose in him, driving out accusation. The Sword of Damocles was a government prototype weapon, no different than any other weapon. The President's engineers had designed it, and the President had intended to use it. Cuervo Jones had stolen it and had intended to use it. Whoever had managed to grab hold of the fucking thing would have used it, eventually, just like the atom bomb or the gas. It was just the luck of the

draw that Plissken's finger had pushed the button first.

He had no intention of letting the fucking murdering USPF assholes with the blood of Black Light, of his own dead - their own dead -- on their hands, call him on this one. In his mind, he faced his accusers: *you have no right to try me; I refuse to recognize the authority of this court.* Only Snake Plissken had any authority he recognized to judge, convict and punish Snake Plissken. The verdict on his life was already rendered, long ago: *I thought you were dead. I am.* He shoved everything down into the inner core guarded by his rage. Chewing on himself like this, now, was a luxury he couldn't afford. *Focus on the moment, the next sixty seconds.* Justice would come, if at all, later, and it would be his justice, not theirs.

Exhausted, Plissken settled himself for the night as best he could, crouched with the rough bark of the tree behind him scraping his back raw, and stared into the darkness, watching time pass.

Rain woke abruptly, some time past midnight, to the sound of someone pounding on his cabin door. He pulled a T-shirt over his head and padded over on bare feet to answer the knocking. "What?"

He opened his door to see Linden dancing impatiently on his stoop. "Rain," she cried, "You have to come to the Lodge, quick! Somebody's after Snake!"

Rain threw on his pants and boots, and bolted for the Lodge. When he got there, he found Ray Lee, looking sleepy and tousled, with her long hair down around her shoulders and an old bathrobe belted over her nightgown. With her was a disheveled man in sweaty, travel-stained clothes. It was Michael from DMZ.

"I got here as fast as I could. I was held up at the bridge, and I got lost on the trail in," Michael panted. "A bounty hunter came through San Francisco six days ago, looking for Snake Plissken. If he's here, he's in danger!"

"He's safe," Rain said. "He's living in the old cabins over by the lake."

Ray Lee shook her head. "No. He left here about three days ago, going north." At the sight of Rain's stricken face, she added, "Rain, I'm sorry."

Linden's fist flew to her mouth and her eyes widened. "Oh my god! I saw him that morning." A sheepish look crossed her face. "I didn't report it. I.. I didn't want to get Snake in trouble. He never takes much, just a couple of candles or something...."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Rain demanded.

"He... asked me not to," Ray Lee said. Her voice sounded tightly controlled.

"Was he on a bicycle?" Michael asked,

"He was on foot when I saw him," Linden put in.

Rain spared Linden an annoyed look. "Maybe he took the bicycle we left at the garage on his way out," he said. His mouth set in a determined line. "We have to find Snake and warn him. I'm going."

"I'll go with you, Rain," Michael said.

Rain took in the rumped, exhausted figure. "No, you're tired out, and you don't know the way as well as I do. I'll be faster by myself. I'll find him." He turned and started toward the door to the Lodge,

"Rain." Rain stopped, halted by the familiar quiet authority in Ray Lee's voice. He looked back at her, his face hurt and angry under his impatient fear for Snake. "I'm sorry, Rain," Ray Lee repeated. Her voice was calm and even, but Rain could hear the pain in it. "I was wrong not to tell you." She considered for a long moment, then said slowly, reluctantly, "Plissken told me he considered he had paid his debt to us, but we can never pay ours to him, for what he has done for the Earth. I was wrong about that, too. Rain, if he will come back here...."

She got no farther before Rain burst out furiously, "He'll never come back here! Not after the way all of you treated him. And I'm not coming back either!"

There was a look of sad resignation in Ray Lee's eyes. "I understand," she said. "Go on. I won't try to hold you here." She raised her hand in a formal gesture, her face solemn. "Gaia bless and guard you, Rain, and guide you on your path. May you find everything you seek."

Rain plunged out the door, with Linden right behind him, before Ray Lee had even finished. Linden hurriedly saddled Rain's black mare, while Rain threw some supplies into a saddlebag and grabbed his weapons, crossbow and bolts. When Rain came back from his cabin, Linden was already mounted on her gray gelding, her own bow on her back. The horse sidestepped nervously and tossed his head as Rain came running up. "I'm going with you," Linden said firmly.

Rain hesitated a second, then nodded. "O.K.," he said. He fastened his saddlebag on the mare's back, took the rains from Linden's hand, and vaulted into the saddle. "Let's go, then." The two of them took off at a canter down the path out of Rivendell .

Ray Lee was still standing on the front step of the Lodge when Rain and Linden came flying by, mud spattering from their horses' hooves. She watched them out of sight down the path, then turned and walked slowly back to her cabin. She poked up the banked ashes in her woodstove, added a few sticks of firewood, and sat down in her chair, drawing her robe around her, shivering in spite of the fire's warmth. *I should have known better, she thought. I wanted to protect Rain from... from all of it. From life, I guess. Rain loves Snake. Or thinks he loves him. He wouldn't believe me if I tried to tell him what Plissken really is. I lied to him. Betrayed his trust. He'll never trust me again. Never believe in Rivendell again. Rivendell is built on trust, on honesty; I should have remembered that. If Plissken is dead, Rain won't come back here. He'll track the bounty hunter and kill him. If Plissken is alive, Rain will follow him, wherever he goes. Whatever Plissken really is, Snake is Rain's heart.*

She pulled a well-worn volume off her bookshelf and held it in her hands, tracing the title on the cover with her thumb as she stared into the dancing light of the stove. The book fell open on its own to a familiar page, and she glanced down at it, reading the words as much by memory as by sight: "Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. They come through you but not from you. And though they are with you yet they belong not to you. You may give them your love but not your thoughts. For they have their own thoughts. You may house their bodies but not their souls. For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams." *Yes, Ray Lee thought, and the shadowy text*

blurred with unshed tears.

You have to follow your heart, no matter what it costs. Memories of herself as a slim teenaged girl with long, ironed hair, in tie-dyed skirt and sandals, came back to her. She saw herself standing in the doorway of her parents' house, Jess's Volkswagen van revving in the driveway, and her father shouting at her. They had lied to her, burned the letters Jess had sent, tried to keep her from following him. Even now, over half a century later, the pain was still fresh and sharp when she remembered it. She couldn't do that to Rain. It had been wrong to lie to him. *Your children are not your children.* She hoped she had finally made it right by sending him on his way with her blessing. *Gaia keep him safe; please keep him safe,* she repeated to herself, feeling her throat tighten. *Please grant that I'm wrong about Plissken. Please make it work out for Rain.* She wondered if her parents had ever forgiven her. Not that it mattered. She had forgiven them long ago.

She went to the small alcove where she kept her chest of treasures, and took a long strand of colorful glass beads out of the top drawer. *Where have all the flowers gone...?* Sorrow and memory were bittersweet. *Where have all the young men gone...?* she hummed softly; *gone to soldiers every one. When will they ever learn?* She fingered Jess's love beads. "Sleep well," she murmured to the dead man, and the long-ago memory. "I miss you."

Rain and Linden slowed to a trot, and then a fast walk, when they reached rough ground, but they kept moving, stopping only briefly to rest and water the horses, pressing them as hard as they dared. When they saw the broken lock on the garage at the edge of Rivendell territory and discovered that the bicycle with the mounted gun was gone, Rain gave a shout of triumph. Now he knew which route Snake had taken north. "If he's not pushing it, he should be a little past Calistoga by now," Rain said, and Linden nodded. They remounted and headed north, riding hard.

Snake came fully awake, coughing, as a cloud of dirt kicked at him by Farris stung his face. "Come on, you one-eyed bastard, wake up!" Farris snarled. "You and me, we got a lot of ground to cover."

Snake's whole body ached from his cramped position against the tree trunk. His arms were numb, and his head pounded violently. Spitting dirt, he struggled to a standing position, levering himself upward on scratchy bark that crumbled into sharp little fragments and made its way, as a further annoyance, down the inside of his shirt and pants. He made it upright, and stood glaring balefully at his captor.

"What are you looking at?" Farris strode over to the tree, scowling, and kicked Snake's feet out from under him, slamming Snake's falling weight down on his backward-strained shoulder joints. Snake grunted with pain and lashed at him with a foot as he went down. Farris evaded it easily. "Don't look at me like that, you hear me?"

Snake slowly climbed back upright, and spent the next half-hour watching Farris eat a quick breakfast and rifle through the contents of Snake's backpack. The bounty hunter took the guns and ammunition, and as much of the preserved food as he could fit in his own saddlebags, then pushed the bicycle into a bush and left it. Snake made a mental note of the bush's location. When he had finished, the bounty-hunter gingerly released Snake from the tree. With a gun in Snake's ribs, Farris ran a rope through the chain

between the cuffs, whipped it across Snake's throat, and then ran it back through the cuffs and jerked the rope taut. It gouged into Snake's windpipe, and he breathed shallowly against the rough fiber. Snake's opinion of Farris, reluctantly, went up a notch. The simple but fiendish length of rope assured that if Snake wanted to take a deep breath, he would have to hold his bound arms upward in an awkward and uncomfortable position; if he lowered his arms, he would half-choke himself. That would definitely keep his mind occupied during the walk back, he thought sourly.

Farris dribbled some water into Snake's mouth, which somewhat relieved Snake's raging thirst, then tied Snake again to the pommel of the saddle and shoved him into motion back down the road in the direction they came. Snake trudged along numbly, gritting his teeth against the pain. Periodically, Farris yanked on the rope, sending a wave of fire through Snake's shoulders.

When they reached Calistoga, they stopped at the Seven-Eleven where Snake had bought matches. At Farris's halloo, the storekeeper came out. He grinned broadly when he caught sight of the bounty hunter and his captive. Farris leaned down from the saddle and tossed the man a handful of coins. "Just like you said, Pops," Farris said, "I got him!"

"Thought maybe it was him," the older man laughed. Then to Snake: "told ya if they nailed the guy responsible for all this, there'd be hell to pay. You know, if I was a younger man, I'd help take you down to San Francisco and turn you in. You've screwed up your last planet, Snake!" He looked at Farris. "Remember, you promised me fifty thousand, when you get the reward." Chuckling, he went back into the store. Snake had no doubt the storekeeper would never see any of the money, and he suspected the other man knew it as well.

"Get moving!" Farris barked at Snake.

The day's march was a painful blur in Snake's mind. Farris's harassment as he yanked Snake along was as bad as anything the blackbellies had ever dished out. Snake considered trying to jump Farris, or spook the horse into throwing its rider, but the rope tied to the saddle stopped him. Being dragged by a runaway horse was a nasty way to die. Disarmed and helpless, but coldly, furiously, determined to survive, he kept up the pace Farris set for him in front of the horse and rider.

When evening fell, they were halfway between Calistoga and the turnoff to Rivendell commune. Farris, again, fastened the cuffs around the bole of a large tree, forcing Snake to spend another exhausting night half standing, fighting the agony in his wrenched shoulders. Farris finally spoon-fed him a few bites of food and gave him another drink, then left him. Snake's misery was compounded by the damp stain soaking his pants. Farris had not released him from the cuffs even to take care of his most basic needs. Snake thought, sardonically, that he ought to feel flattered that Farris was so afraid of him, but he really could have done without the compliment.

The next morning, Farris boiled up freeze-dried stew for breakfast before setting out on the next day's march. Snake's empty belly cramped at the smell of the food, hunger fighting for attention with the pain in the rest of his abused body. From his seat near the fire, Farris taunted Snake. "Quite a reward the USPF's offering for you, eh, 'Snake'? Up to ten million now." He chuckled. "Never thought you'd be so popular, did you, Plissken? Everybody wants you. Maybe I should hold out for a better price. What d'ya think I could get, top dollar, for a terrorist scumbag who fucked up the whole world? For a one-eyed fucking loser like you, huh, Plissken?"

"Maybe they'll give you a medal," Snake grated.

Farris scrambled to his feet, his face contorted. "Yeah - you got medals -- and you threw 'em away. Think that makes you a big man, don't you? I got shit." He advanced on Snake. "I know why you threw 'em away, too. Even you didn't have the nerve to keep 'em after what you did, you lying son of a bitch! Only reason you made it back from Leningrad was, you ran out on Black Light, War Hero. Ran out on your own men, you gutless bastard!"

Rage and grief, and a survivor-guilt he could not escape, flamed into a blank, red impulse to attack. Snake threw himself toward Farris, twisting in the cuffs, tearing his wrists open on the metal and wrenching his shoulders. The rope tightened across his throat; his vision grayed. He kicked toward Farris, and this time felt his boot connect solidly. With a yelp of pain, Farris backed off a pace, smashed his hand into Snake's face, slamming him back into the tree, then drove a fist hard into Snake's belly. Snake grunted, doubling over, blood dripping from his damaged face. Farris lunged for the quirt hanging from his saddle, raised it, and, with a yell, advanced once again on his prisoner.

There was a sharp snap and loud rustle in the bushes on the edge of the campsite, and, a second later, a harsh sound like the muffled tearing of heavy cloth. As Farris dropped the quirt and whirled, grabbing for his gun, a crossbow quarrel hit him in the throat. A second bolt smashed into his head; he crumpled to the ground, flopped once, and died. The bushes parted, almost silently, and Rain stepped through the gap into view. A few seconds later, Linden followed.

Snake sagged against the tree. "Shit!" he breathed out in a gust of relief.

Linden crossed to the body of the bounty hunter as Rain hurried over to Snake. "He's dead, Rain," the girl's clear voice announced calmly as she rose to her feet again.

"Where's the key?" Rain asked.

"Left back pocket," Snake answered. Linden shoved the dead body over, fished out the keys to the handcuffs, and threw them to Rain, who fielded them and unlocked Snake's bonds. He pulled the rope loose from around Snake's throat, frowning at the deep burn it had left in the flesh. Snake took a few staggering steps, hissing on his inward breath as he pulled his arms back around to the front of his body. Rain gave an angry exclamation when he saw the torn flesh on Snake's wrists. Snake straightened, moving more certainly, pulling away from Rain's supporting hands. He stumbled over to the fire and sat down abruptly next to it. He smiled wryly at Rain and Linden. "Hell of an entrance," he said.

"You O.K.?" Rain said

"Yeah."

"You don't look O.K.," Linden chimed in indignantly.

Snake and Rain looked at each other, and understanding passed between them. "What happened to the bicycle, Snake?" Rain said.

"Left it back in the bushes at our last camp," Snake answered, "along with my pack and most of my shit. Not far." He gave a concise, military description of the location in a few quick words.

"We're going to need it." Rain turned to the girl and said, "Linden, you go get the bike and bring it back here. I'll stay with Snake."

Linden looked from one to the other of them. Finally, she grinned indulgently. "O.K., guys. I'll give you some time to yourselves for a touching reunion. Enjoy." She looked over Farris's sturdy chestnut and swung into the saddle, taking up the reins of her own lathered gray to lead it as a packhorse. "I'll take it slow, and give the horses a rest," Linden said. "See you in the morning." She moved off at a trot.

Snake took a deep drink of water from Farris's canteen, then slowly spooned the bounty hunter's breakfast stew into his own mouth. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Rain continued unsaddling and wiping down his tired horse. He took one of his own canteens off his saddle and poured water for the horse into a fabric feed-bag. The horse slurped noisily. "DMZ sent Michael up to Rivendell to tell us this bastard was after you." Rain nodded at the body of Farris. "I've been tracking you for two days."

Snake stared at him. After a long, slow moment, he said softly, "Why?"

Several emotions chased themselves across Rain's face, and finally settled as ironic humor. "Shit, Snake, I couldn't let him take you back in and turn you over to the blackbellies. Not after all the trouble I went to last time. Gotta protect my investment...."

Snake snorted softly.

Rain's expression turned serious. "I'm going to Canada with you," he said flatly; "I'm not going back to Rivendell." He put the horse's feed-bag down again and tied the black mare to a tree.

"I'm not going to Canada."

Rain sat down beside Snake, looking into his face. "Why not?"

"They had a hard winter. When the power went out, a lot of them died."

Rain whistled softly. "Shit, yeah," he said. "Bet they froze by the thousands."

"Millions. Froze and starved. Storekeeper in Calistoga had a wanted poster he got from some Canadian guy coming south. Fifteen million dollars reward, in gold, for me. Dead or alive." His mouth snapped shut in a grim line.

"So, where are you going, then?"

"Somewhere." Snake shifted his weight, threw back his head, winced at the pain, and ran his hand through his long, tangled hair. "Farris got his info on me from the blackbellies in San Francisco. They know I'm alive, and where I was headed. Soon as they get their shit together, they'll be after me."

Rain chuckled. "No problem. We can settle down here and die of old age first."

Snake remained grim. "Farris wasn't the only bounty hunter out for the reward. The whole fucking world's on my ass this time." For the first time, Snake looked in Rain's direction. "Get out of here, Rain. You're not in this any more."

"You're not listening, Snake," Rain said with relentless patience. "I said I'm going with you." His tone took on a sudden passionate intensity. "No matter where you're going. I won't run out on you. I'm giving you my word, here and now."

Snake stopped cold. He stared at the younger man with such concentrated attention that his face looked blank. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Snake...", the younger man seemed to be struggling to find the proper words. "Snake, I swear... I'll guard your back. I'll stick by you and I won't run, no matter what. I promise!"

Snake hesitated, stopped by the raw urgency in Rain's words. "Hey, hey, hey," he said, almost whispering, "Don't go postal on me." He fixed Rain with his single piercingly blue eye and spoke slowly, spacing each word singly. "Everybody who sticks by me, dies. You come with me, you end up fucking dead."

Rain matched his tone. "It's my life."

Snake gave his little breathless snort. "Yeah. It is." The two men faced each other, testing each other, glances locked, challenging. *...You really mean it? You understand what you're saying? ... Yes, I do... yes, I do, Snake... you can't scare me off....* Finally, Snake nodded. His grim expression softened. "By the way... thanks." Rain's declaration was accepted in the silence which, for Snake, was more meaningful than words.

Rain grinned. "No problem." His tone turned businesslike. "If I remember right, there's a stream along here somewhere. I'll go get some water." His nose wrinkled. "In case you hadn't noticed, Snake, you stink." He shared a laugh with Snake. He stood up and headed toward his saddlebags for a canteen. As he passed the dead body of the bounty hunter, he nudged it with his foot and added, "I'll hide him." He reached down to pull the body over to the edge of the campsite.

"Rain..."

"What?"

"I have a better idea. Take a look at his chest."

Rain pulled up the dead man's black shirt and studied the cobra tattoo on the pale flesh. "What the fuck?"

"It's a copy of mine. He had it done to piss me off, when we were both in the Army."

"You knew him?"

"Yeah. He was always giving me shit, even back then. Fucking crazy."

Rain looked at Snake. "I guess I don't want to know."

Snake climbed painfully to his feet, feeling each individual wound and bruise stiffening and protesting. He limped over to the body and stood glaring down at it. "You're going to impersonate me one more time, asshole."

"Huh?" Rain said.

Snake produced a fair imitation of the female Police Channel reporter who had announced his entry at Firebase Seven: "You see before you the corpse of the most notorious outlaw in U.S. history. War hero, criminal, the Force's most wanted man." A beat "Snake Plissken."

There was a moment while Rain digested this, then he said, "It'll never work. He has the tattoo in the wrong place. His eye..."

"None of the descriptions of me have the exact location listed." Snake was thinking aloud. "Just a 'cobra tattoo' on the belly. And unless someone's seen me without this," he indicated his patch, "they won't know what my left eye looks like."

Rain cocked his head dubiously. "Fingerprints. Retina scans."

"Electronics. Information system's down."

"Snake," Rain said, weakening visibly, "All they have to do is look at his face."

Snake raised a booted foot and smashed it down on the corpse's head, twice, hard, hearing the body's facial bones snap with a wet, pulpy sound under his heel. He glanced from the ruin of Farris's face to Rain's, his own face expressionless except for a glitter of savage satisfaction in his good eye. "No problem." He paused. "I'm officially dead. I've got the fucking USPF off my ass. We've got ten million."

"Shit," Rain said. "It could work..."

Rain found the stream he remembered and brought back water, which he heated over the fire to clean Snake's wounds. Snake skinned out of his stinking clothes, sponged himself off, and scrounged through Farris's saddlebag for a clean shirt and pair of pants. They fit him fairly well. Snake retrieved his gunbelt from the corpse, muttering, "I'll take my guns back now, asshole," and pulled his case of spare patches from a zippered pocket inside the belt. "He's got to have a patch, one of mine."

Rain leaned forward, intrigued. "OK. What's the difference?"

Snake held up the patch. "Thin cord instead of elastic." He put the new patch on, tying the cord around his own head, feeling the new fabric stiff on his face, then took his old patch and went over to the corpse. "Eyes aren't quite the same shade as mine, but they go kind of colorless anyway, once they're dead a while. Help me with this before he gets stiff."

Rain and Snake dressed the corpse in Snake's discarded clothes. On the slightly larger frame, they were snug, but not too much so. All of Black Light Squadron's pilots had been assigned based partly on compact body size. With reluctance, Snake surrendered his boots as well to the cause. It took some force get them on, but the boots' new owner didn't object to the rough treatment. Snake tied on the worn eyepatch and arranged the corpse's hair around it.

Snake hefted his gunbelt in his hand. If this ruse was going to convince the USPF, Snake Plissken's famous modified Magnums had to go along with his dead body. After a brief struggle with himself, Snake removed the most valuable items in the belt's compartments, snapped the fastenings shut around the cold form, and slid one of the Magnums into the holster. "Tell 'em the other one's lost." He snorted. "They'll expect you to keep it anyway." He narrowed his good eye, putting all the force of his command presence into it. "I want this fucking belt and the goddamn gun back. Part of the reward is a year's grease on possession. Tell 'em it's a goddamn trophy, and make it stick." He eyed his handiwork critically, decided it would pass, and reached down to pick up the case holding his remaining spare patch. As always, he paused momentarily before replacing it to glance at the faded Presidential Seal embossed on the cover. It was the case his medal had come in, the award for the Leningrad Ruse.

Snake stuffed it back into his pocket.

Snake took Farris's bedroll, Rain unrolled his own, and the two men settled down around the fire to wait for morning and Linden's return with the bicycle. Finally, they banked the ashes and turned in for the night. Even with the pain of his wounds and the ache in his arms and back, Snake slept soundly, surrendering to his weariness.

Morning dawned cold and misty. Snake stumbled painfully into the bushes, and returned from his necessary trip to find Rain standing over Farris's corpse, toeing it speculatively with one booted foot. The body was stiff and wet. "It's soaking," Rain commented. "It's going to really rot as soon as the sun hits it. Going to stink like hell, too. I have to take this... thing... into the City?" He sounded as if he was only half-joking.

Snake grinned wolfishly. "More it rots, harder it'll be to identify exactly. Nobody'll want to do a thorough search of it, either."

"You're enjoying this way too much."

The outlaw tipped his chin at the body, his good eye sparkling. "Hell, I've been waiting for that asshole Plissken to die."

Late in the morning, Linden returned. Snake's bicycle, trailer, and backpack were strapped to the chestnut gelding, and she was riding her own gray once more. When she heard about the plan to take Farris's body in for the reward, she crowed with delight. After they had rested her horses for several hours, they distributed Farris's supplies between Rain's and Linden's horses and Snake's bike-trailer, and loaded the corpse onto the long-suffering chestnut. Snake dug into his pack, found the map Ray Lee had made for him, and fed it to the flames, then doused the campfire and scattered the ashes. Rain mounted his black mare, leading the chestnut, Linden took the gray, and Snake climbed aboard his bicycle. Snake was pleased to see that everything he had brought with him, including the mounted gun, was still in place. They moved off slowly down the road, adjusting the pace to Snake's still-sore muscles. As he warmed up, he found the going easier, and by the time they had been under way for an hour or so, he was almost back up to speed.

They reached the turn-off to Rivendell and halted to pick up Rain's bicycle and trailer, shift supplies to it, wrap the corpse in a tarp, and strap it on top. Rain paused for a brief leave-taking with Linden.

Hesitantly, suddenly awkward, she said, "Don't you want to go back to Rivendell and pick up your stuff? Say goodbye to everybody? Aren't you going to take Moonwind with you?"

"No," Rain said firmly. "I've seen all I ever want to see of Rivendell Commune. There's nothing there I need any more." He smiled sadly and stroked the black horse's soft muzzle. "Moonwind will be better off here. I don't know if I could take care of her on the road. She's yours now, Linden."

Linden choked and her eyes were suspiciously shiny as she said. "Thanks, Rain. I'll take good care of her for you." She bit her lip. "I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you, too, Linden," Rain said. His voice was a bit unsteady. "Yeah... well... I'll let you say my goodbyes for me. He swallowed, "Tell Lynx... tell Lynx, I'm sorry. It just didn't work out."

"O.K., Rain," Linden said. She mounted her gray, took up the lead-ropes of the other two horses, and, with a final glance back at Rain and Snake, trotted off down the faint

trail leading back toward Rivendell.

Rain mounted his bike. "What do you say, Snake? You want to wait for me at the old winery while I take... you... into the City?"

"Sounds good. I'll have a chance to liberate that good hooch if it's still there."

Rain grimaced. "Hello, my name is Snake Plissken and I'm an alcoholic..."

"Bullshit!" Snake snorted, and actually smiled.

[Part Four](#)

[Back](#)

Rain chuckled in response. He took one final look backward toward the wall of green that hid the trail leading to Rivendell, then sucked in a breath and squared his shoulders. When he looked back to Snake again, there was a new sparkle in his eyes.

He glanced over his shoulder at the bundle behind him and grimaced slightly as he pushed his bike into motion. "At least it isn't summertime. Maybe he won't smell too bad. Off to the City. Free and easy, Snake."

At the words, Snake went cold inwardly. He kept his expression carefully neutral as he pedaled along the road next to Rain, but memory rose from a dark place within him.

He saw his old blue Mercury cruising down the highway, Springsteen's "Born to Run" blaring from the car radio, Bill Taylor belting an off-key accompaniment at the top of his lungs, and Snake tapping the beat on the steering wheel as he drove. "We made it, Snake; free and easy," Bill Taylor said as the song faded to its end, "Free and easy!" At Snake's automatic "Bullshit," Taylor grinned and lit a smoke, pronouncing his partner "fucking pro-found."

Snake returned to the present and the similarly slight figure with long, dark hair, who was pedaling along next to him. Rain was not Taylor. Nobody would ever be like Taylor. Snake shoved the thought back into hiding and concentrated on the road ahead. At least he was moving again. His mood lightened gradually.

The steady pace lulled them both into a contemplative state, and they rode on in companionable silence, each man lost in his own thoughts. They finally stopped at the top of a grassy hill to rest and eat a light lunch from the rations. Snake noticed Rain's thoughtful expression as the younger man sat watching Snake steadily working his way through a freeze-dried energy bar, chewing without really tasting. Finally, Snake raised a questioning eyebrow in the younger man's direction. "What?"

"I was wondering, Snake... what's it like? Flying, I mean."

Snake thought back to his final training missions in that cool, damp Finnish spring, so much like this northern California spring. For a moment he hesitated, unwilling to open something that was so much a central part of him to anyone else. Taylor understood. *I never had to talk to him about shit like this.* At the same time, something starved within him wanted to connect with another man on the neutral ground of technology and machinery, where men talked to each other in a code that communicated more than words. He paused to consider. "Depends. Powered flight's fast and noisy: riding the engines; going where they take you. With a glider, you're more in control. It's like the machine's part of you." His face softened as he remembered the soaring freedom and exhilaration of flight. *Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of earth... Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue....*"The familiar poem quoted itself on his inner ear, in silence. It was too personal to speak aloud.

Rain was still listening intently, waiting for him to go on. "In glider flight," Snake continued, in the dry voice he had used to instruct his new pilot recruits, "You use air currents, like a bird soaring. Thermals, updrafts, mountain waves, fronts of rising air, carry you up," he gestured with his free hand, a flowing, palm-upward move, fingers curled, "and then you descend in long arcs." His hand turned over, flattened in a long sweeping glide. "If you're good, you can stay up forever." Snake smiled at the old joke. "The jet jockeys used to give us glider pilots shit. Said we couldn't handle the speed of a fighter. We said it was like sex; it's all in the technique: you can do it fast, shoot your wad and pull out, or you can do it right and make it last, and come in for a landing when you want to." Rain laughed with him at the image, and Snake backed away skittishly in automatic retreat. "The only things that'll fly now are hang gliders and hot air

balloons," he finished shortly. *No more Gulffire.*

They got to their feet, buried the remains of the ration packets, and moved on.

Carquinez Bridge was undefended this time. As they crossed, Snake noticed a dead body washed up against a rock farther down stream. "Getting predictable around here," he said as he pointed it out.

Rain turned to him and grinned. "Michael said he was held up at the bridge."

Snake snorted softly in acknowledgement, thinking back to the last time they had come this way. Rain was a good man to have at his side in a firefight. Not many marksmen could hit a moving target with a crossbow bolt or a knife with Rain's range and accuracy. The younger man could think on his feet, act on his own, but coordinate an attack with him nearly as well as Taylor had, and he had good nerves. Snake could almost see Rain and himself as partners. Accomplices, the blackbellies would call it, Snake thought, remembering the pompous Police Channel reports on his exploits with Bill Taylor. Snake smiled inwardly, then darkened. Rain seemed to want more than that. There was something in the younger man that made him press against the unspoken boundaries Taylor had instinctively respected. With Taylor, he'd never had to explain that shit either, but with Rain.... Snake left the thought unexplored. He wheeled onward, keeping pace with Rain, parallel but separate.

By the time they reached the old winery, it was midnight. A cautious survey showed that it was still uninhabited, undisturbed, the gate and door still locked. Snake found the key he had dropped in the bottom of his pack so long ago, and made use of it. The bicycles and provisions went inside, the corpse of the bounty hunter, on the back porch.

It was already beginning to be fairly unwelcome. This night there was no time for conversation by the fire. Snake took watch, while Rain fell into bed for a few hours sleep before pushing on at first light. Snake was tired from a full day's ride on the bicycle, but he knew he would have a day or so to rest while Rain rode on into San Francisco with the dead meat.

In the morning, Rain lashed the corpse onto his empty bike-trailer and moved out at a brisk pace. "I'll be back as quick as I can," he promised. *If I make it back* hung unspoken on the air. If the blackbellies discovered the ruse, they both knew, Rain would never be back at all. Snake deliberately did not watch Rain leave; some deeply buried superstition suggested it might be unlucky. Instead, he set about systematically looting the house and preparing for the journey. Snake avoided thinking about the question of a destination and concentrated on the immediate practical details. He would wait a week, he decided, and if Rain did not return by then, he would decide where he planned to go.

A search of the garage turned up two canvas sacks, which fitted in the bottom of his bike-trailer, and some useful, and expensive, camping equipment, which went into the pack. He filled the bags with the last of the cans from the pantry and a whole box-full of self-heating meal pouches he found with the camping supplies, as a supplement to the dried rations. The best of the remaining full liquor bottles, he wrapped in warm blankets from the bedroom. If he was going to be sleeping outdoors for a while, he could use the bedding. Then he went through the bounty hunter's pack, retrieving his belongings and repacking them. The cheap Russian pistol went into the discard pile, the bullets reclaimed for use. Snake destroyed everything that could connect him to the dead bounty hunter, taking a grim satisfaction in obliterating Farris and his belongings.

One more dead. One to go. Someday. Snake stirred the ashes thoroughly and went back to looking through the house.

The large desk in the study yielded a handgun and more ammunition. Snake tossed the gun, but kept the ammo again, since his trusted Magnums were designed to be used with

a wide variety of bullets. He was stockpiling, knowing that ammunition would be almost impossible to buy anywhere by now. *Rain had better bring back my other gun and the belt*, he thought grimly. Rummaging through the desk, he found the usual collection of items in the drawers below the now-useless computer equipment and telephone. As he picked up the former inhabitant's address-book, a business card fell out, and, glancing at it, Snake read, "Jules Diebold 156-4582" in scrawled handwriting across the back.

He was about to drop it back into the drawer when his instincts tapped him on the shoulder, and he took a second look. No seven-digit telephone number started with a one. Diebold? Jules? Smiling to himself, Snake picked up the card and began a thorough search, knocking on walls, turning pictures, examining the backs of bookshelves and closets. Finally, he found what he was looking for. Removing a heavy gilt-framed painting from the wall, he uncovered the safe. A Diebold. Snake allowed himself a soft exhalation of satisfaction.

The next step was to get it open. Snake preferred commercial safes or bank vaults, and high explosives, to residential burglaries, but he had targeted a few government officials' houses in his criminal career, and the experience came in handy now. He studied the little card. No spacing or commas gave him the numbering to the combination. First, he tried dialing the final number and tugging at the handle. Sometimes, safe owners just left the combination set there for convenience. The door refused to budge. *Shit*. Snake settled in for a protracted effort. He drummed his fingers sharply on the wall to sensitize the tips, then, lightly resting his hand on the balls of his fingers, he began carefully turning the knob, listening and extending his senses 'into' the mechanism, trying to connect with the tumblers. His mind blanked in an alpha state of concentration. Periodically, he would stop and tap his fingers to regain the nerve edge required for successful safe cracking.

For half an hour, Snake methodically, and unsuccessfully, tried every spacing of the numbers on the card. While notoriously short-tempered with people, he had the patient persistence of a glacier when it came to machinery. He knew that on most residential safes the combination lock was factory-set for five turns, alternatively right, then left. This was something that the purchaser could change, but, in Snake's experience, nobody ever did. All Snake had to do was figure out how the owner of the safe had spaced the pseudo-telephone-number in five turns. Had the old bastard changed the fucking combo and not tossed out the card? Snake wondered, exasperated, as he sat back, staring at the smugly uncooperative mechanism. *Anyone stupid enough to leave the numbers lying around....* . Suddenly, Snake smiled again. Anyone that dumb might think it was clever to.... . He dialed the numbers in backward. The first try, 2, 85, 4, 65, 1, was futile, but the second spacing, right 2, left full turn past 2 to 8, right 54, left 65, right rewarded him with a sharp click and the door opened easily. *Ha! Give the asshole a C for clever, but nothing more*. Snake stretched his sore shoulders and took a moment to savor his success before turning his attention to the opened wall safe. *Hello Jules!*

He sorted efficiently through the contents of the safe. Several items that looked like treasured mementos -- a silver locket with a strand of hair inside, a class ring, two old tintypes, and a tiny, child-sized gold ring -- he left. Their monetary value was nil. He picked out the items of jewelry that looked valuable to his trained eye, and a collection of old gold and silver coins, then closed the door and spun the lock a few times to reset the tumblers. With a grim sort of mischief, he took the inscribed card and set it on fire, dropping the paper into an ashtray as it burned. If anyone else ever happened by this house, he'd make the asshole work for this shit. *Good*, he thought, *I'll have a stake, even if Rain doesn't make it back*. There was a lot that could happen, and ten million was a very tempting prize. He wouldn't count on the younger man bringing it back, even if the blackbellies fell for the ruse. Rain might still take the money and run out on him.

He completed his plundering expedition by lifting a wide-brimmed, waterproof hat, an

English all-weather full-length overcoat, and a handsome pair of custom-made motorcycle boots from the bedroom closet. The boots were slightly too big for him, but an extra pair of socks would take care of that, and the sturdy black leather was too good to pass up. He cleaned out the medicine cabinet in the bedroom's master bath, scoring a big bottle of prescription pain-killers and some unexpired antibiotics. A final search of the back of the closet also uncovered a carefully hidden box of premium, highly illegal, Cuban cigars. Snake decided to quit while he was ahead. He fixed himself a meal from the last of the cans in the kitchen, smoked one of the cigars, and turned in early, after setting up his crockery alarm system. A good night's sleep in a comfortable bed was just what he needed.

Rain rode for San Francisco at the fastest pace he could manage. The sight of Snake's gunbelt and Magnum, and the dead body slung across the trailer, evidently convinced the residents of Oakland that Rain was not an appealing target, and he made it through the town without being attacked. He crossed the Bay Bridge openly on the top level. He was a successful bounty hunter with nothing to hide, bringing in the body of the notorious Snake Plissken. The USPF guards at the bridge checkpoint cheered him on his way across the structure and on into the City, and assigned a uniformed officer to escort Rain and his burden to the central USPF headquarters in the Presidio. Rain let the man lead the way, keeping a sharp eye out for any attempt by the blackbelly to ambush him and highjack Rain's prize for his own benefit.

It was high time to part company with the decomposing body of the bounty hunter, Rain thought. A few blocks from the Presidio gate, Rain dismounted and strapped on Snake's gunbelt and single hand-gun. It would be natural enough for a bounty hunter to wear the belt instead of leaving it with the corpse, and he intended to keep it on his body if he could, and out of any eager blackbelly hands. The belt rode heavily on his hips, the one Magnum dragging at him, as he tightened the fastenings and swung up onto the bike again. He rode into the Presidio garrison, pulled up at the entrance guardhouse, and yelled, "Hey! Any of you in there want Snake Plissken?"

The effect was very much like kicking a hive of killer bees. Black-uniformed police swarmed out and crowded around Rain's bike, deluging Rain with a flood of questions and loud comments as they dragged the body off the trailer and carried it jubilantly into the building. The commander of the garrison, a large, rawboned man with the face of a dyspeptic sheep, came out of his office to greet Rain.

"I'm Commander Davis. Who're you?"

"Roy Patterson," Rain said, using the alias from his drug trafficking. He had the papers to prove it, if they insisted. They didn't.

"Where'd you find him?" Davis eyed the smelly corpse dubiously from several feet away.

"I was up past Calistoga," Rain said, sticking to the essentials of the story. "I ambushed him. The reward is alive or dead. I knew I couldn't bring him in alive."

"Jesus Christ, it *is* Plissken!" cried one of the men. He pushed the tight shirt upward on the dead body to reveal the tattooed cobra on slack, pale flesh. "Kinda ripe," he muttered. He backed away, rubbing his hands on his uniform trousers.

A blackbelly sergeant pointed at the gunbelt Rain was wearing. "That his? Looks like the one I seen in th' pictures of Plissken."

Rain laid his hands on the straps of the belt and gave the man a level, challenging look. "Was," he said. "It's mine now. Right of salvage. I'm keepin' this one -- as a little memento." To his surprise, the bluff worked, and the blackbellies let him keep the rig after verifying from old photos of the outlaw that it was, indeed, Snake's.

"We'll fingerprint and photograph the body, just in case the computers ever come back up," Commander Davis told Rain. "All the data's in L.A. or Lynchburg, but it'd be pretty hard to fake that old tattoo. I'd say it's him, all right. I guess we owe you the reward for bringing him in." He pulled out a book of government certificates and started to write in the amount.

Rain shook his head. "In gold," he said firmly.

Commander Davis gave him a crafty smile. "We don't have that kind of money in gold here. We'd have to have it transferred from the Denver Depository, and get an authorization from Lynchburg. It'd take months, at least, to get a messenger there and back, these days. Of course, you're welcome to wait...." His voice trailed off suggestively.

Not a chance, Rain thought. "I'll take what you've got in gold," he said.

"Suit yourself," the blackbelly officer shrugged.

Rain stood, looking menacing and dissatisfied, until the blackbellies brought out as much gold as they were prepared to turn over to him. It was far less than the promised ten million, but still an impressive, and heavy, pile of metal. Rain loaded as many of the small, flat ingots as he could carry comfortably into a canvas bag. He lowered the bag into the bike-trailer, smiling to himself at the look on the Commander's face. The other man clearly thought he was doing a brilliant job of cheating the gullible bounty hunter, and kept having to wipe the self-satisfied grin off his face every time he caught Rain watching him. Rain managed, with considerable effort, to keep his own expression greedy, dull-witted and apparently unsuspecting. The Commander also handed over the "grease for a year" certificate absolving the bearer of all non-violent moral crimes for the duration. Rain's alias and the dates were inscribed, along with the USPF seal and the Commander's signature. "Use that wisely," Commander Davis said. "A year goes pretty quick."

Rain nodded. "Yeah, I know." He patted the Magnum strapped to his thigh. "And for my first grease, I'm hanging onto this."

The Commander seemed willing to surrender the gun to Rain to distract him from the issue of the reward money. "Where are you staying, in case we need to contact you?" he said. "You're a hero, you know; killing S.D. Plissken. Everybody's going to want an interview."

"I'll be staying at the Westin St. Francis. I can afford it now," Rain answered, with what he hoped looked like a convincing grin. *Right*, he thought; *as if I'd hang around and wait for you bastards to catch up with me*. As he strode out of the station, the blackbellies were cheering and the atmosphere was carnival. The commander was twirling the eyepatch on a finger and several cops were arguing over whether they should bury the boots with the body or keep them as a trophy of the kill. Keeping his face blank, Rain swung onto the seat of his bike and moved out, heading for Market Street and one last errand before leaving the City.

When Rain dismounted at the DMZ building on Haight Street and tugged on the bell-pull, Michael came hurrying down the steep flight of wooden steps to unlock the tall

spiked gate and let him in. "Rain! Did you...?"" he began.

"Yes. I found him in time. I'll tell you all about what happened, but first I need to check in with Josh."

Rain stayed the night at the guest quarters at the Mint. He went straight to bed. It was late and he was too tired, he said, for detailed conversation. He mentioned, casually, that Snake had gone off on his own after the rescue, heading north toward Canada.

Rain was already thinking ahead, covering tracks not yet made. As much as he trusted the members of DMZ, what they did not know, they could not tell.

The next morning, before he left, Rain joined Dan and Josh in Josh's big office on the Mint's second floor. The City's gray winter fog curled thickly outside the window, and the sill was slick with drizzle. Rain sat on the window seat built into the wide bay, looking down at the indistinct shapes of the entrance walkway below, thinking that the curled razor-wire barrier in the fog made it look like a scene from some old black-and-white war movie on late-night television. "I owe you guys," Rain said.

"Anything for one of our good customers," Josh responded with an expansive wave of his hand. His swivel chair creaked as he leaned back and stretched his legs out in front of him.

"No. I'm talking about money."

"What?" both of the DMZers chorused, and Josh's chair-back snapped upright.

"Rain," Dan began seriously, "Your people and ours are allies. You would do the same for us. What we did, we did out of friend....".

Josh cut him off. "No, no, Daniel! If the lad is mentioning money, I say 'hear him out!'" A grin lit his face and his dark eyes sparkled. "So-o, Rain, my good and loyal friend..." a beat "...what are we talking, here?"

"Twenty per cent of the reward. Gold." Rain said.

"What reward?" Josh's eyes narrowed and his tone turned hard.

"The one I got when I turned in Snake's body."

"Uh... hold it." Dan held up a hand, forefinger raised, and sat with his mouth open, as if trying to frame his question in exactly the proper words.

Josh had no such problem. He took a puff on his cigarette, stubbed it out in the overflowing ashtray on his desk, and leaned forward. "Run that one by me again, Rain?"

Rain was laughing silently now. He loved seeing the quick-witted DMZ boss put off-balance, but hardly ever got the opportunity. He outlined the events of the last few days, and described turning the dead body of the imitation Snake Plissken in to USPF headquarters. He avoided mentioning his intention to rejoin Snake at the abandoned house. He wanted to leave absolutely nothing behind him linking the two of them any further, and he wanted no suggestion that anyone connected with Rivendell might know anything about Snake's future plans. For the safety of both Rivendell and DMZ, Snake had to disappear.

"If you hadn't sent Michael up to warn us, Snake would be dead," Rain said. "I figure I owe you part of the reward. Twenty per cent." He shifted in his seat. "I wish it could be more, but....". *...but I need it as a stake for Snake and me* he finished silently to himself.

"No, no, Rain. Twenty per cent is fine," Dan said hurriedly. "I know things are tight at Rivendell right now."

Rain dumped the gold ingots out on Josh's desk in a shiny pile, and the three men divided the money. "Thanks," Josh said, when they had finished and Rain's portion had been returned to his canvas bag. The humor had left Josh's expression, and he looked tired and worn. "This will really help, Rain. Things are falling apart in the City and we're fighting just to keep our heads above water. The blackbellies are coming down hard, now that they're starting to get their shit together again. It's getting ugly out there."

Rain smiled. "Glad I could do it." He said hesitantly, "Maybe it's time for you to get out, go up north over the border."

Josh's expression hardened. Rain turned to Dan and saw the same stone determination echoed in the other DMZ leader's face. "No," Dan said softly, "Not while there are still some of our people here." He gave the hint of smile. "You know, that's what being a good top is all about: taking care of people who trust you and put their lives in your hands. We always used to talk about that. I guess now it's come down to proving it."

Josh nodded slowly. "It was always about proving it, Dan. The blackbellies have raised the stakes, that's all." He turned his head, stared out the window at the gray swirling dampness outside, then turned back toward the other two men. "Besides, this is my city. The damned USPF's not getting me out of here except in a body bag. This one's my war."

Rain rose and shook hands with both of the others, feeling a resigned sadness within him. These men had been good friends, and he would miss them. He slung the bag with the remaining ingots over his shoulder, and walked slowly down the wide marble corridors of the old Victorian building, through the kitchen where he and Snake had eaten strawberries for breakfast so long ago, and out into the back garden where his bike waited for him. He swung up onto the seat, pulled the hood of his jacket up over his head, and rode out into the rain-slicked city streets. As DMZ headquarters disappeared around a corner behind him, Rain's heart lifted. He'd be seeing Snake again soon.

When he heard Rain calling his name, Snake jumped to his feet and headed for the door. He watched Rain slide down, rather stiffly, from the seat of the bicycle and start unfastening the straps of the trailer-cover. "Good," he said, as Rain handed him the gunbelt and gun. Snake looked both of them over thoroughly and smiled fleetingly when he found them in good condition. "The reward?"

"I got it. Well, part of it." Rain hefted the heavy canvas bag and carried it back to the family room at the rear of the house. He dumped its contents out on the big game table, where the ingots gleamed dully in afternoon light from the overcast sky outside. "I'll go pull the bike inside," Rain said, and retreated the way he had come.

Snake counted the gold, enjoying the smooth feel of the metal against his fingers, calculating value. With inflation and the new worthlessness of paper money, each slender ingot was worth several times the amount stamped on its surface. Still.... . Snake looked up with a scowl as Rain came in through the door, stamping mud and grass from the front yard off his boots. "This is way short. They fucking screwed you."

"Yeah, but I figured it was better to get what I could in gold." Rain shrugged out of his jacket and dropped with a thud into a chair next to the table as he detailed his run-in

with Commander Davis and his men. "You want me to go back and argue with 'em?" he asked. At Snake's ironic snort, he added, "Plus, I gave part of my share to the guys at DMZ. They need it."

"You tell 'em where it came from?"

"Yeah." Rain's smile flickered. "Josh says he hopes you stay dead. Says it's safer that way."

"You tell them anything else?"

"No. As far as they know, you disappeared on me, lit out on your own for parts unknown, and I have no idea where you went."

"Good," Snake repeated. His face remained deliberately expressionless, damping Rain's broad grin in response to his laconic praise, hiding his irritation at the younger man's enthusiasm. *It's never as easy as it looks*, he thought.

Rain opened a can of stewed tomatoes and a box of crackers that Snake had left behind in the pantry and sat spooning the contents wearily into his mouth. "So," he said at last, "Where are you -- we -- going?"

"I'm thinkin' about it." Snake stared silently out the sliding glass doors into the back yard for a long moment. Thunder rumbled in the distance, and fat, wet drops began to patter down on the flagstone patio. "Shit," Snake mumbled disgustedly. He turned back to Rain. "Someplace out of this fucking rain," he said with deep feeling.

Rain laughed and nodded. "Well...." He sat back, ticking off points on his fingers. "Canada's out. With the power gone, we'd better stay away from places with really cold, snowy winters."

Snake nodded. He'd never been fond of cold and wet, and ever since Russia, he'd had a hatred and fear of snow that had only been offset, marginally, by the freedom of Canada. Now that was gone, he never wanted to see snow again. "Mexico's out," he said. "I'm wanted there. From before. Political shit." He didn't elaborate.

"Back east is Blackbelly Central. Crowded, full of cities, cops, nosy people. Polluted as hell since the gas and the biobombs," Rain said. "What about Oregon, or maybe Humboldt County? I know that country. My people...."

"No!" Snake's face darkened. He had no intention of moving in with another bunch like the ones at Rivendell. He cast about for some other place, as far away from Humboldt County as possible, and long-buried memories surfaced of his childhood in Arizona and his days as a young pilot at Luke Air Force Base, before they ran out of water and shut it down. He grabbed at the idea. "Southwest," he countered decisively. "Arizona, New Mexico, maybe Utah. Beautiful country. Dry. Good climate. Not a lot of people any more."

"Yeah," Rain said. "I guess the cities pretty much dried up and blew away when they tapped out the aquifers. My teachers used to use it as a bad example of what happens when you don't live bioregionally. I heard a lot about it when I was a kid."

"Nothin' left but Indians." *The Tribes never had much modern technology anyway*, Snake thought to himself, remembering the bare, parched land around Window Rock. *They're dirt-poor, but they can still grow or make just about everything they need. Live off their own land. If anybody could get through this shit in one piece, it'd be them. Reservations aren't even U.S. territory. And they fucking hate the USPF and the*

government. Been screwed over by them for years. Make that centuries.

"Snake, we could hide out there forever!" Rain was sounding eager and excited now. "Just like the renegades and outlaws in the old days."

"USPF'll be back to posses on horseback, too," Snake said thoughtfully. "Wild West shit. No planes, no cars, no electronics. Back to Geronimo and Billy the Kid."

Rain went on, elaborating details. "There's old pueblos in the canyons and the cliffs, whole cities carved into the bluffs by the Anasazi, then abandoned. One of the Groups found a place not even the archaeologists knew about, in New Mexico. I went there once when I rode the Circuit, training to guide. There's water. We could grow food.... . Slap on a coat of adobe, and move right in." Rain grinned. "No worse than those damn cabins down by the lake, that's for sure."

Snake considered for another long moment, and finally said. "Yeah. An old pueblo." *That's the last place anybody would think of looking for me. Squelch this fucking Group idea right now, though.* "Not one of yours. Someplace else."

Rain looked troubled, then seemed to come to a decision. "O.K., Snake. Anyplace you want to go."

Snake thought back with longing to the off-duty hours he had spent exploring the mesas around Luke on those long, burning summer days. He remembered the silence, the vast space, the solitude, the brilliant colors of the barren rocks in the clear, bright air, the startling, sudden green of the occasional isolated bush, the crunch of ancient earth under his boots, the smell of the endless dry wind. *You can see for miles up there*, he thought. *Closest thing to flying with your feet on the ground.* He nodded slowly. "Arizona."

Rain smiled. "Arizona it is. We can figure out where when we get there, I guess." He got up and dropped the flattened tomato can with a flourish into the blue basket in the kitchen closet, as if he were ridding himself of all of California with the gesture. *Why bother? It's not like they're going to be coming around to collect the recycling any time soon*, Snake thought, then smiled to himself. *Old habits.*

Snake was relieved to be rid of the horses for this trip, and glad he didn't have to talk Rain out of bringing them along. He felt more comfortable with machines and his own muscle-power than with large, potentially uncooperative, pack animals. He and Rain spent a while scouring the crowded floor-to-ceiling bookshelves in the family room, and finally found the detailed atlas they were almost certain would be there somewhere. They spent the rest of the day planning out their journey. The

easiest route would be to take the central valley roads back south, avoiding the Sierra Nevada mountains, and swing east above Los Angeles, following I-40. It would be a long, hard, dangerous trip, but they had all the time in the world. Early the next morning, in a fine misting drizzle, they rolled down the driveway of the abandoned house and out onto the highway, heading back south on their heavily-loaded bikes. As he pedaled along the rain-slicked blacktop, Snake thought to himself that he couldn't wait to get back into desert country. He could do with a lot less water.

CHAPTER SEVEN

For the first leg of the journey, they followed the back roads and stopovers of Rain's old smuggling route to Ormsby's, conserving their supplies for the hard push across the

desert, buying food whenever they could. Rain did most of the negotiating, keeping Snake out of sight as much as possible, and often a hard-faced, narrow-eyed contact would find a little something he could spare and a place for them to spend the night when his old friend and pot connection, Rain, showed up at his door with hard coin in hand.

A little less than a week's travel brought them to the turn-off above Bakersfield, and they swung east toward the gap in the mountains, the four-thousand-foot summit of Tehachapi Pass, and the Mojave desert beyond. Constant biting wind swirled around them as they struggled upward toward the summit, walking the bicycles through the layer of mud and slush laid down over the road by the early spring runoff. The air grew cooler, then cold, and the road became a narrow track of lumpy, hard-packed snow trampled down by the few travelers who had preceded them along this route. A sheer wall of dark rock rose on one side of the road, and a sharp drop-off fell down toward an indistinct jumble of snow-covered scree, brush, and scrubby trees on the other. A thin black line in the white at the bottom of the slope showed where a little stream was hidden under late-winter ice and snow.

Snake called a halt when a light drizzle began falling around midafternoon, and they wrapped their packs in the rainproof tarps he had taken from the old winery's garage. He and Rain pulled the hoods of their parkas up over their heads and slogged on through the wet, pushing the bikes, looking for a sheltered place to set up camp. The drizzle became rain, which froze on the packed snow, and they slipped and slid on the slick, uneven surface, slowing their progress to a cautious walk. Snake squinted against the flat whiteness around him, and Rain read, in the cat-footed gait of the body ahead of him, Snake's narrow, needle-sharp concentration on the next second, the next step, the next necessary shift in his balance-point. The wind drove strands of his long hair across Snake's white face like tiny whip-strokes as he raised his head, scouting ahead, questing as if he smelled threat in the wet, cold air. Rain found himself admiring the leashed power, the surefooted grace, of the other man as he moved. His attention strayed, briefly, from his own footing.

There was a scraping sound beside him, and Rain felt his bike slip and skid sideways toward the edge of the road. He half-fell, half-flung himself, after it in a reflexive lunge, slipped on the wet ice, and slid into the slushy snow beyond the packed surface, losing his grip on the bike. The machine and its trailer slithered down the incline and splashed through a thin layer of ice into the little stream below. Snake made a futile grab for him at the same moment the bank crumbled under Rain and the younger man snowplowed downward.

"Shit!" Snake set his own bike's kickstand in a depression in the packed snow and edged to the overlook. Halfway down the slope, Rain was struggling up out of a pile of slush, and, a good fifteen feet below him, his bike lay on its side in the freezing water, one of the trailer's wheels on the top side spinning slowly. Rain braced himself against a scrubby bush, melting snow dripping down his face, and looked back up the hill toward Snake.

"Stay there." Snake dug into his own trailer and pulled out a length of rope. He went to work a short way back from the edge, hacking at the hard ground with his boot knife until he had created two rough depressions in the frozen snow and rocks where he could brace his feet, then passed the rope around his own waist and tied it off in a firm knot. He called down the slope to Rain, "Can you tie a rescue knot?"

"Yeah," Rain grunted through teeth clenched against the cold. He was shivering hard as icy water soaked through his clothes and trickled down the back of his neck under his parka.

Snake threw the free end of the length of rope down the embankment to Rain. Fighting his rapidly numbing fingers, Rain doubled the rope, passed it through and yanked it firm into a three-looped harness, then tightened it around his waist and legs. He felt the harness pull against his body, and began climbing up the muddy slope, balancing against the rocks, feeling for footholds in the loose scree. As the ground shifted under him and pebbles rattled downward, Rain could feel Snake's solid strength through the line, steadying him, pulling him upward hand over hand to safety. Rain belled over the shoulder of the road and struggled to his feet. He pulled off the rope harness, taking a quick inventory of his battered body: nothing broken, as far as he could tell, just a few cuts, scrapes, and bruises, and a long, knife-like gash on one forearm, where his sleeve had slid up when he grabbed for the falling bike. *That'll teach you to keep your mind on where your feet are, Rain*, he thought. The two men stared wordlessly for a moment down the slope at the bike and trailer half-buried in slush and broken ice.

"I'll go back down for it," Rain said at last.

Snake eyed him. "You ever climbed in snow and ice?"

"No," Rain admitted.

"Right. *I'll* get it."

Rain's fingers and toes were wooden with the cold, and he could hardly feel his legs below the knees, where the icy water had soaked his pants. There was no time to worry about that yet. They had to retrieve the trailer before its contents became completely water-logged. Working together, he and Snake anchored the rope around the largest outcropping of rock on the other side of the road, then Snake rappelled down the hill to the bike. Rain watched as Snake unhitched trailer from bike, pulled both of them up onto the bank, then lashed the bike on top of the trailer and its pack and secured the whole package with a knot on the front hitch. Snake stood for a few minutes looking back up the slope, then positioned the trailer pointing uphill. He struggled back to the roadway, pulling hand-over-hand up the taut rope, then turned and braced himself in the improvised footholds he had cut into the ground.

"Snug it up," Snake called back over his shoulder in Rain's direction, and the younger man nodded. Snake planted his feet and pulled slowly, steadily, guiding the heavy, unwieldy load of bike and trailer up the hill through the loose scree and brush to the surface of the road. Rain kept the rope taut, adding his strength to the effort and wrapping the loose rope around the rock outcropping to secure it as Snake pulled the load gradually upward. When the bike and trailer were safely back on the road, Snake and Rain stood for a moment, breathing heavily.

"Dry off," Snake ordered shortly. There was a military snap in his tone, distant echo of a young Lieutenant Plissken. Rain realized his brain, as well as his body, had been slowly going numb as the cold of his wet clothing sank into him. He started toward his rescued pack, but before he could reach it, Snake was rummaging hurriedly through the contents. He shook his head. "It's all soaked. You'll have to use mine."

Snake opened his own trailer, removed a blanket and handed it to Rain, then pulled out a set of dry clothing. Rain undressed under the blanket, which cut the worst of the wind, and clumsily pulled on jeans, shirt, pullover, socks, and Snake's spare pair of boots, then his own waterproof parka. He shoved his wet clothes back into his pack, as Snake reassembled Rain's bike and trailer, and the two of them moved a little way down the road until they found a wider area where they could set up camp on the upper shoulder. The afternoon grayed toward dusk and the temperature dropped, as the rain turned to flurries of snow and then died away altogether. The wind cut like broken

glass against Rain's face. Numbly, he helped Snake stretch two of the soggy blankets between some of the taller rocks and weight them down with stones to form an improvised windbreak, then gather some bits of dryer wood from the tangled bushes at the side of the road. Pitching the tent on the opposite side created a relatively sheltered area where they were able to keep a fire going and thaw out slightly. Self-heating foodpacks from the camping supplies helped warm their interior. As they crouched near the little blaze, downing the last of their coffee, Rain glumly contemplated his clammy possessions.

Snake glanced up at the sky, where the wind above the peaks was driving away the last streaks of cloud. "It's clearing," he said. "There'll be a hard freeze tonight." He swallowed the last of his black coffee, shook out the cup, and replaced it in his pack. "There's a trick I learned in Russia: spread your wet shit out on the rocks. What doesn't evaporate will freeze, and we can shake it off in the morning."

Rain thought about this for a minute. "Freeze-dried clothes."

"You got it." Snake almost smiled, and Rain was warmed by the hint of unspoken approval he thought he read in the other man's expression. The two of them set about triaging the contents of Rain's pack. They dropped the opened packs of food into the slush at the side of the road, where they would freeze solid and not attract animal scavengers, and repacked the sealed ones. Soaked cloth was weighted and spread out over rocks, bikes, and scrubby bushes before they doused the fire and retreated into the interior of the tent for the night. By the cold green light of a chemlamp, Rain set the rest of his damp equipment out on the floor of the tent to dry, as Snake unrolled his warm multilayer sleeping bag. One of the casualties of the stream had been Rain's own sleeping bag, which was stretched over several tangled bushes outside. Snake stripped to his underwear, ignoring the frigid temperature inside the tent, sat down on the edge of the sleeping bag to pull off his boots, then folded the bag up around himself. As Rain hesitated, Snake growled, "Come on; get in here."

Rain shucked Snake's borrowed garments down to the underwear, and slid into the sleeping bag next to the older man. He curled against him, spoon-fashion, as Snake zipped the bag closed. Rain laid his head down and closed his eyes. Slowly, as their combined body warmth filled the narrow space, Rain began to thaw out, and his body relaxed. A drowsy peace washed through him. He shifted, feeling himself cupped in the security of Snake's strong, hard-muscled body. He didn't have to try so hard any more. Snake knew what to do. He could handle this icy wasteland. He could handle whatever they would meet; he and Snake could handle it together. He, Rain, had steered them wrong every time he'd tried to take over, leading them to the disaster at Rivendell, leaving a trail for the bounty hunter. From now on, Snake would make the decisions. Rain smiled, feeling a great weight lift from him, and sighed softly, sinking toward sleep. His body curved against Snake's.

With an abrupt shock, he came back to wakefulness. The thick bar of Snake's erect cock was hard against him, pressing into his ass. He tried to ignore it. *It's just some kind of reflex; it doesn't mean anything*, he thought. Snake's hand reached down between them and cupped Rain's buttcheek, then paused. Rain felt the unasked question. *Why? Why now?* he wondered. *What's this all about?* Joy and wonder leaped in him. *Who cares why?* "Wait, Snake," he said softly. He unzipped a corner of the sleeping bag and fumbled for his toiletries case, reached inside and fished out a little tube of lubricant. He rezipped the bag, and slipped the tube down between them into Snake's questing hand. He heard Snake's soft, half-laughing snort next to his ear. After a moment, Snake's hand slid down inside Rain's shorts, and Rain felt the rough rasp of callused flesh gripping his bare butt. Hard, slick fingers shoved into his asshole, working him open. The request became demand, and Rain surrendered to it eagerly.

Snake felt Rain's body, cupped against his own, gradually warm and stop shivering, felt the rigid tension drain out of it. Faint residual glow of the chemlamp, turned to its lowest setting, picked out the dark mass of Rain's long, thick hair on the headrest next to his. A stray strand was partway under his cheek, soft against his own bearded flesh, smelling faintly, not unpleasantly, of woodsmoke and snowmelt. The smooth silk of it stirred old memories, old responses. The lithe, wiry body curled against him had a familiar shape and proportion. *Exactly Taylor's size...* The round curve of Rain's ass against his belly was inviting. Snake felt his cock start to harden, felt the younger man tense slightly, then move closer into Snake's own body. *Make a decision, Snake. Now.* He remembered Taylor lying like this against him, remembered what they had shared wordlessly and without any need of labels or explanations or definitions. *Never again; not like that.* Why did this kid make him think of Taylor? Snake's mind jumped to Carjack, to the occasional other men over the years. *It's just sex. Yeah. That's all.* His mind brought up the bedraggled, dripping figure of Rain shivering on the roadway, waiting for Snake to give directions. Rain *wanted* to take it up the ass from him. That was a strength for Snake, not a vulnerability. Snake could punk him, the way he had punked Carjack, and the kid would roll over for him. *It's just sex, Snake.* Lust surged through him and his cock hardened further.

Snake moved his hand down between them and cupped Rain's ass, gripping it firmly. He could read the surprise, anticipation, and uncertainty in the small movements of Rain's back and shoulders as the younger man reacted. Snake smiled inwardly, knowing that Rain was probably scrambling madly for some explanation. *Hph! Let 'im wonder.* Snake was going to enjoy himself, that was all. He felt Rain twist, unzip his side of the bag and reach for something. What? Rain twisted back, handing what he had extracted from his small personal possessions bag, over his arm and shoulder, to Snake. Snake squinted in the weak light at the small plastic tube of lube. He snorted softly. *These faggots are always lookin' for it.*

Snake kneaded the frozen tube and the gel within until it was warm in his fingers, opened it, and reached a hand down, running the lube over his hard cock. Familiar, all of it. He slipped lubricated fingers inside Rain's ass, worked it open, pushing harder into the slick passage as his hand remembered decades-old skills. Snake slid his hips forward, wrapped an arm like an iron bar around Rain's body, and pulled the younger man to him. His cock found Rain's asshole and slid home into it, thrusting, his body returning to rhythms it knew so well. He felt Rain pushing backward against him, taking Snake farther into him, deepening the contact, and a fierce, pure, animal drive took Snake. Eyes closed, mind blank, Snake's powerful body drove against Rain's and felt Rain respond. Snake felt the lifting surge, felt it crest, felt himself cum, then slid hard, like his Gulffire down the front of a storm cloud, into the trough, gliding home on descending force to a stop.

Rain was awakened by morning sunshine turned pale and milky by the blue walls of the tent. He opened his eyes and, very slowly, shifted his position, turning his head to look at Snake. Still asleep, his face relaxed, the man lay next to him breathing quietly. Rain studied Snake's strong face. The eyepatch, still in place, seemed a part of him, like the scars and the weathered features. Snake was a fighter who could never afford mercy for himself or anyone else, a fierce and dangerous man, an unsentimental survivor living on iron will, quick wits, and nerve. But Rain thought he saw in the sleeping face a bone-deep weariness, a bleak loneliness, that was invisible in Snake's determined waking expression, and the younger man responded with a rush of confused emotion. A

strand of auburn hair, captured by the thin cord of the patch, lay against Snake's forehead, curled like a question-mark.

Rain lay perfectly still, hardly breathing, but as his gaze touched Snake's closed eye, the other man awoke, effortlessly and instantly crossing the boundary between sleep and awareness. Snake opened his eyes and looked back at Rain. The visible eye was ice-blue and intense, challenging. It was Rain who jumped. "What?" the raspy, sleep-roughened voice inquired.

Snake's good eye tracked Rain as the younger man backed away. Fabric tightened around the two of them, cold against Rain's back, and he heard the faint scrape of nylon on nylon in the silence, as the sleeping bag moved on the tent floor. Warm air with the mingled scent of their bodies flowed up from the sudden gap between them. *It had happened. Neither of them had dreamed it. What was Snake going to do about it?* With an effort, Rain held himself completely still and quiet, keeping his face neutral, not forcing the issue. Anything he did now could be a mistake. *Don't spook him.* He had to let Snake take the lead.

The cold challenge in Snake's eye did not change, but a half-smile curved his mouth, softening it. Deliberately, he raised a hand and ran a thick strand of Rain's hair slowly through his fingers, giving it a little tug as he released it. It was a sensual and somehow proprietary gesture, sexual but not in the least tender. There were no words, but Rain was satisfied: Snake acknowledged what had happened. Rain considered a kiss and quickly discarded the idea. This was something different from what had been between him and Lynx, between him and Lanny. There was a barrier between him and Snake that he did not understand and could not cross. He knew now they would not talk about it, and realized that, strangely, that made it all the more real and meaningful. *The more important something is to Snake, the less he talks about it,* Rain thought to himself. He smiled warmly at the other man. "I'm O.K., Snake," he said.

Snake snorted softly. He unzipped the sleeping bag. In a few forceful movements, he was out of the cloth cocoon and on his feet. He picked up the clothes he had left on the tent floor the night before and dressed with economical efficiency. Rain turned over and stared up at him. "Time to get up," Snake growled, roughening his voice. "C'mon." He turned and stepped outside, into the wind. Rain watched the tent's entry-flap fall shut behind Snake's confident exit, then went to dress and begin the task of reclaiming his freeze-dried supplies, smiling to himself.

As they moved out into the lowland basin, the problem became, not an excess of water, but a lack of it. Days passed and winter shaded into spring, the temperature rising toward the killing heat of summer, the sun beating down through the clear air, scorching them with ultraviolet through the depleted ozone layer. Miles that had whizzed by in hours by car took strenuous days of pedaling by bicycle. Rain drew on hazy memories of his one trip around the Circuit, the summer before he had fostered out to Rivendell. They were not much help. Rain's guide had drilled him on the bioregion and the natural ecology of the route they were following, but he was surprised to find how academic the information became when he was faced with practical problems of survival: food, shelter, and, above all, drinkable water. He found himself depending on Snake's distant memories of sketchy Special Forces training for fighting in Mongolia and Afghanistan, and even sketchier memories of his Arizona childhood.

Rain rode along with his face set in a mask of fierce concentration, searching for the creek the map claimed was somewhere nearby. Flat, tan ground stretched out in every direction, broken by an occasional Joshua tree or scrubby creosote bush. He tried to remember landmarks and connect them with the symbols on the flat paper surface. Four years ago, coming from the opposite direction in a van, there had been a line of

buttes. Yes, there they were. Or maybe they were some others that looked like the ones he remembered. Anxiety settled in Rain's belly as it was brought home to him once again that if they failed to find water, both he and Snake might well die here in the unforgiving desert.

"Rest stop," Snake called over his shoulder from up ahead. He squinted up at the angle of the sun in the afternoon sky, and pedaled more slowly, scanning the road, evidently looking for a good place to pull off and wait out the heat of the day. At the top of the next shallow rise in the blacktop was a good-sized boulder casting a shadow, barely wide enough for two people, away from them. The ribbon of pavement was visible for a distance in either direction, giving them advance warning of any other traffic along the road. Although they often saw no one for days at a time along the desert highway, they both wanted to be cautious. Rain drew up beside him as Snake dismounted and dropped the kickstand of his bicycle. The older man sat down in the strip of shade and pulled off the wide-brimmed hat he had brought with him from the old winery in Napa, wiping sweat from his forehead with a khaki-cotton sleeve. Snake had accepted that, much as he hated to have his arms and head covered, the UV was too bad here to travel for long in the open with bare skin exposed. He took a sip from his canteen, rolling it in his mouth a moment before swallowing. Rain knew Snake's water-bottle, like his own, was almost empty.

"Hot," Rain said. Snake gave him a look, disdaining to respond to the obvious, and fanned himself slowly with the hat as he studied the road. Rain sighed once, and dug in his pack for his copy of the map. He pored over it for a while, hunting for landmarks in the vicinity of the small creek they were looking for, and finally muttered, "Damn!"

"What?"

"The creek's somewhere along here."

Snake took the map from him. "Here's that side road we just passed. I remember the sign." His forefinger, with its short, ragged nail, stabbed down on the paper, pointing. "I'd make it, we're about here." A fine, squiggly, blue line indicated an arroyo not far ahead. "Wash should be another two miles."

"Yeah, I see it." Rain leaned over for a better look, frowning. "I should be better at this. I was being taught to guide, but this is my first trip without someone who knows the water stops."

"Final exam time." Snake's tone sounded almost indifferent.

Rain felt a chill along his backbone at the bleak fatalism he saw in the other's expression. Here was a man, Rain thought, who had looked his own death in the face without fear and accepted its inevitability without surrender. "Yeah," he repeated, feeling very inadequate.

They rested through the hottest part of the day, and resumed their journey when the air had cooled a little. Several miles farther on, they found the spot where a culvert passed under the highway, and tracked the fine gray gravel of the wash back to the creek. Rain and Snake filled all their water containers, drank, and rinsed off in the tepid, ankle-deep liquid, then set up camp out of sight of the road, in the lengthening evening shadows. They would take advantage of the little stream for a stopover, to conserve the water they carried.

Snake sat down on a smooth, flat stone near the rivulet of spring runoff in the arroyo

and rested, feeling the first faint breeze of evening across his cheek. In the stillness, he could hear the almost soundless flow of the stream in its shallow bed of pebbles. A flicker of motion caught his eye, and he turned to see a desert rattlesnake emerging from its daytime shelter under a large slab of rock. Snake froze, perfectly still, absorbed in the sight, as the serpent began nudging at the rough edges of the outcropping, rubbing its head against the gritty surface. The rattler seemed oblivious to him, intent on its own private purposes in its silent world where humans had no place. If he did not bother it, Snake thought, it would not bother him, but there was no way he could reach it, except to call forth its angry defense.

The snake pushed its head back and forth against the rough rock until dry skin split and came away from its jaws, then began gliding forward, struggling to work itself free. As the translucent husk peeled back, Snake saw the new scales shining in glossy diamond patterns down its back and sides. The snake gradually pulled itself out of its dead shedding, adding one more dark button to the rattles on its tail, and Snake watched the graceful, gleaming creature as it turned and flowed away over the ground toward its evening hunt. The last flick of its tail as it disappeared into the slanting light seemed like a salute or a signal. How many lives, how many identities, had he gained and shed since the time, years ago, when he had watched the white cobra whose image he bore shed her skin? Snake thought about the cobra circling restlessly within her herpetarium before a shed. He remembered her, her eyes turned milky with old scales, bunting blindly against the invisible glass walls of her prison, looking for a way to free herself from the uncomfortable, too-tight skin that bound her in outgrown patterns.

Which was he, Snake wondered, the rattler or the cobra? He looked over to where Rain knelt, blowing bits of brushwood kindling into a fire, and shrugged as he rose to go join the younger man. Behind him, desert air plucked at a filmy remnant of shed skin clinging to the stone.

A streak of brownish-gray exploded out of a low bush in front of Snake's feet. Snake froze, following its path with his eye, and several yards farther on, the streak slowed and became a rabbit. It looked around, nose twitching furiously, then hopped over to begin nibbling on some green leaves growing near the edge of the wash.

Dinner.... Snake dug in his pack for the elegant little automatic pistol he had taken from the shack by Carquinez Bridge, smiling to himself as he loaded the .38 and clipped on stock and sights. There would be a lot of rabbits coming down to the wash in the evening to drink and look for tender green vegetation fed by the spring runoff. He slipped off the safety with a satisfying click.

Rain was on his feet now, a look of alarm on his face. "What are you doing?"

"Want to see what a Magnum would do to a three-pound chunk of bunny? "

"No," Rain said, " I mean, why kill something? We're O.K. on food."

Snake eyed him. "We need to conserve what we've got." Rain stirred and opened his mouth as if to protest, then closed it again, evidently defeated by Snake's unyielding expression and air of command. "Stay put," Snake said shortly. An image of the sprung snares he had come across in the woods around Rivendell rose in his mind. "And be quiet," he added in Lieutenant Plissken's voice.

Snake moved out along the stream-bed, scouting and stalking in the timeless patience of the hunter until he had the small brown form of a rabbit sighted in the .38's crosshairs. He squeezed the trigger delicately, adjusting for the Walther's light action. The recoil barely registered after the Magnum's familiar heavy kick. The rabbit disappeared in a puff of dust stirred up by the bullet and reappeared an instant later flat on its side, head

blown open, fur matted with fresh blood. Snake felt a surge of grim satisfaction. It was good to be taking control of his own basic survival again. He walked over, picked up the still-warm carcass by a hind leg, and hefted it in his hand. Not much there for a good meal. *Snakes get hungry after they shed.* Snake missed the next rabbit he shot at, but killed the third. He skinned and cleaned them, leaving the pile of entrails for the desert scavengers, and carried his prey back to cook over the campfire.

Neither man spoke as Snake spitted the meat, roasted it over the flame, ate it with evident enjoyment, and disposed of the bones. The small fire of creosote bush and dry desert sage crackled in the silence between them, sending up a sharp scent to mingle with the savory smell of roast rabbit. Glowing flecks of fire scattered upward into the growing darkness. At last, they snuffed out the fire and rolled up in their respective sleeping bags for the night. The silence lengthened as each man lay still, wrapped in his own separate thoughts.

The kid seemed to be learning to keep his mouth shut, Snake mused, with slow approval. Maybe the Rivendell shit was wearing off. Snake thought back to the night he and Rain had shared a sleeping bag on Tehachapi Pass. They hadn't repeated it, and so far Rain had kept his own silence, the same kind of calm silence Taylor had given him. Snake and Taylor had never needed words; they understood each other: two pilots on parallel flight paths. They had been exactly the same distance apart on the day Taylor died as they had been nine years earlier when they become partners in Black Light Squadron. Snake brought up memories of his graceful Gulffire. Contact, in midair, was fatal. Safety lay in maintaining perfect spacing. Rain seemed to be grasping that. Good.

His mind returned to the rattler he had watched shed its skin. For the moment he, like the snake, seemed to have slithered free of all the identities other people created to hold him captive, all the glass boxes. He turned his head to see the indistinct shape of Rain's sleeping-bag, a faintly darker blur against the pale desert floor. *How many more skins to shed?* Snake closed his eyes and sank toward sleep on the sound of the desert wind.

At the same time, Rain lay staring toward the distant mountains, watching the first bright points of light fill the darkening sky. Images of the limp, dead rabbit-bodies dangling from Snake's hand filled him with a churning mix of sorrow and pain, guilt and confusion. He hadn't eaten any of the meat - at the thought, acid bile rose in the back of his throat and he swallowed hard - but he hadn't done anything to stop the slaughter either. Why? It wasn't just that Snake had told him not to interfere. Rain shifted restlessly, staring up into the black void of the night sky. Killing his own game, Snake had seemed so natural....

Rain thought back to the snares he had destroyed in the Rivendell forest, Snake's snares. *He's gone feral.* No, a conviction slowly formed out of the confusion: Snake always had been feral, always would be. He was something more and less than fully human; he was a part of the wild world. That was why Mother Gaia had chosen Snake for her great purpose, the destruction of the Machine. Rain remembered his glib comment to Snake: "Here the dying gives life. It's part of the pattern." He had said it, but he had not really believed it then. Now he did. The owl and the mouse; the wolf and the deer: Snake was a part of that pattern, too. In Gaia's wild world, as he had been taught, life created death created life: the rabbit who cropped the grass, and the fox who killed her, and the innocent swarming life forms that broke down all of their dead bodies into the rich humus out of which new life grew, and the equally innocent ones - Rain thought with a sudden chill of his conversation with Dr. Spencer - that brought disease and death to all of them. It was all part of an interwoven pattern with Snake at the center, but the pattern, like Snake, was an alien and disturbing mystery beyond human understanding, beyond human definitions. It was not his place to judge or

interfere with the role Mother Gaia had chosen for Snake, Rain thought to himself. An uneasy resignation, full of unanswered questions, settled over him. He rolled over to face Snake's sleeping bag. A faint smell of burnt ash from the scattered fire drifted to him on the light desert wind as he turned. He noticed it was getting cold. "Good night, Snake," he called softly into the darkness. From the other sleeping bag, a neutral sound of acknowledgement answered him. Rain closed his eyes and settled himself for sleep.

They woke early and traveled on, riding in the morning, resting through the hottest part of the day, and traveling again late in the day when the air was cooler. When the moon cast enough light, they sometimes slept by day and traveled by night. They felt no need to hurry, and set no timetable. Snake kept a certain distance, concentrating on the journey, keeping his flight path parallel. He let himself become a part of the rhythm of movement, the sweeping open spaces, and the solitude. The miles stretched ahead and behind, an empty ribbon of concrete carrying them farther and farther toward their goal. They met no other travelers, now, on the road. Either people were avoiding the desert crossing, or the whole world had died. Snake told himself he didn't much care which. Now and then they passed empty vehicles, cars or trucks, left abandoned on the road when the power had gone out. The few big rigs had been opened, their cargoes rifled. An occasional campsite, where one of the cars had been pushed to the side of the road and a makeshift shelter set up beside or beneath it, told a silent story. Snake remembered the public service announcements he had seen printed and heard on the news channels: If your vehicle breaks down in a wilderness area, stay with it until help comes. Don't leave your car. Patiently, or desperately, hoping for assistance from the highway patrol, the passengers had obediently stayed with their cars, growing weaker and weaker as the days passed, until at last they had died there, waiting for the official help that never came. Snake and Rain pedaled on past without stopping.

A few miles past the ghost town of Barstow, a scatter of bleached human bones along the side of the road caught Snake's attention, and he stopped to examine them briefly. The mysterious gnawed fragments left behind by the desert scavengers looked as though they had been there for months. Still, he and Rain rode on warily, weapons at the ready. A few miles farther, and Snake caught a flash of light reflected off something some distance from the road. Glass? Snake wondered; metal? Whatever it was might prove useful, or at least provide some answers. He and Rain parked their bikes on the shoulder and approached the reflection cautiously. They came over a rise to find metal chunks spread across the other side of the hill and down the slope into the flat land beyond, where something had plowed into the ground with considerable force and been broken apart by the impact.

"It's a plane," Rain said at last, pointing toward the tip of a wing standing half-buried in the sand like a giant metal surf-board.

"Was," Snake agreed. He studied the wreckage. "Big one... transcontinental, looks like."

They worked their way downhill between charred and crumpled pieces of metal. One large section of fuselage was relatively intact, although fragments of bone and cloth still strapped into the seats showed that the passengers had not survived the crash. A sun-faded strip of red fabric twisted in the fitful wind, drawing Snake's eye to the motion. A cross-section of the compartment had flipped, leaving the seats attached to what was now the ceiling, and through the jagged metal semicircle created by the broken hull, Snake could see the mummified remains of a woman hanging suspended from her locked seatbelt. The dangling shreds of fabric were what was left of her

clothing. In the seat beside her was a smaller mummy, its dry brown flesh partially covered in rags that had once, apparently, been a blue dress. It no longer had a head. Snake looked down. Next to his own boot, almost buried in wind-drifted sand, was a candy-colored blue plastic sandal, its strap broken. Snake pulled his attention back to the passenger cabin. An empty seat close to him had a newspaper shoved into the fabric seat-back holder. Snake reached in, pulled it out, and unfolded the brittle sheets of paper. At the top of one of the less-faded inside pages, he could make out a date: the Lynchburg Times, Early Edition, for October twenty-third, 2013. The day he had shut down the world. Snake dropped the page of newsprint, and it blew away across the ground on the wind. How many planes had been airborne, Snake wondered numbly, when he pushed the button on the Sword of Damocles remote? Out of the corner of his eye, Snake caught movement. He turned to see Rain staring at what was left of a tattered stuffed toy he had picked up from the dirt at his feet. Gingerly, the younger man pressed a control in the toy's back. Nothing happened. Everything had shut down when he pushed the button, Snake thought: *planes, automobiles, computers, refrigerators, toasters... talking toys... everything.... . Gone, all of them.*

Snake and Rain looked at each other and silently turned away, heading back toward the place they had left their bikes. They didn't bother to explore any further. On the way they passed a burned-out section of the plane's tail. Beyond it was a neat row of rocks with a chevron of rocks at one end, an arrow marker laid out on the sandy clay to show the direction the survivors had taken. It pointed toward the road and the way Snake and Rain had come.

The two men returned to the spot at the side of the road where they had left their bikes, and pedaled on without speaking. Rain seemed subdued, and Snake was glad of the silence. "*The name's Plissken !..click.... .*" Snake's imagination called up vivid pictures: the sudden silence of the jets, the downward plunge as the desperate pilot fought unresponsive controls, the shattering impact, the upward roar of consuming flame, then nothing. He imagined the screams of the passengers, abruptly silenced, or, for the burned and mangled who survived for a time after the crash, less abruptly silenced. For a morbid moment Snake wondered if the mummified girl's head had been ripped off by flying debris before or after he had lighted his American Spirit cigarette and stumped off into the dark to "disappear." At the thought, Snake was flooded with a raw, sharp remembered craving for nicotine. The last of the cigars had been smoked days ago. *No, he thought, it didn't just stop when I shut down the power. It doesn't just end. There are always consequences.*

Snake's hands, clenched on the handlebars, were like ice. A corner of his mind said he ought to be able to see his breath; the air was so cold.... . He saw the flaming ruins of Novosibirsk, the shape of his Gulffire, dark between fire and snow, and the child he had shot, dying at his feet. Collateral damage... just collateral damage.... . Memories of the black cold of November in New York Max, lit by flickering fires, of the charred wreckage of the President's plane, and Hauk's voice: *It's the survival of the human race, Plissken; something you don't give a shit about....!"* Visions of the frozen dead in the snows of Canada. Another voice: *So what happened to you, War Hero? Whadda you have to say, Plissken...? ?* Snake pedaled grimly on, feet moving up and down mechanically as he drove himself forward, legs pumping furiously as if to outpace the images, the thin remembered smell of gas in his nostrils, his thoughts swirling and dissolving like smoke on the wind. *Welcome to the human race.... .* He heard Rain's voice behind him and slowed to allow the other man to catch up to him. The two rode onward side by side in silence.

At last weariness forced them to stop and make camp for the night. Banked clouds on the horizon suggested a rare spring storm might be in the offing, and they reluctantly pitched their tent. They still had not exchanged more than three or four laconic

sentences since leaving the site of the crash. Snake chewed a few mouthfuls of something without tasting, before he and Rain unrolled their sleeping bags and smothered the last dying embers of their campfire. Snake pulled the nylon close around him, trying to force himself into sleep, fighting the visions. Sleep was a long time coming. When it did come, he could not defeat his dreams.

He stood at attention before the court martial. Behind the judges, to one side, stood the American flag, the way it had stood on the day he had accepted his commission. To the other side stood the standard of Black Light Squadron. The judges stared at him coldly, their faces set in expressions of contempt and formal disapproval: his father, Colonel Robert J. Plissken, in his Air Force dress blues, the braid on his cap and his silver eagles glinting in the harsh light; to one side of him Colonel Bailey, commander of Black Light. With puzzlement, he recognized the third figure: his ROTC instructor. What was he doing here, among all the brass? On the polished wooden tabletop was the black box of the Sword of Damocles remote, the red numbers glowing balefully 666. He could feel the presence of observers behind him, but didn't dare turn around. He looked down; the colored bars of his ribbons showed on his chest, and, farther down toward the floor, USPF rod handcuffs gleamed dully against his uniform.

Plissken, Steven David, Lieutenant."

Snake's head snapped up and he focused. He had two good eyes. The voice came again, crisp and precise: Taylor's voice, reading the charge. Lieutenant Plissken, you stand accused of crimes against humanity. How do you plead?"Snake's hot guilty'stuck in his throat. The small, dark-haired man faced him accusingly: Why'd you do it, War Hero?"

I... d don't know..."Snake felt his words, burning dry and hot in his raw throat. The sides of his neck ached. He could feel pellets there, dissolving.

You don't know!'his father's scornful voice mocked him. You never do know, do you, Steven? You didn't think, did you? You live in a world of collateral damage. The last man standing, aren't you, Steven? The only one left alive."

There was a rising murmur from behind him, indistinct sounds, and Snake threw a look over his shoulder at the crowd of observers. In the dimness beyond the courtroom railing they stood, bloodied and broken: the men of Black Light... Cabbie, his head a shattered mass... Maggie in her bloody dress... Fresno Bob, a skinned horror... Brain...a figure burned beyond recognition that might have been Carjack Malone... Taslima...a crowd of others. So many, all his innocent dead. Their voices rose wordlessly, like a wind, and they swayed like plants in an ocean current, blindly, holding out their hands in his direction.

To one side Dawn stood by herself. As Snake watched, she raised her arm and pointed in his direction, her face grave and disapproving. What do you have to say for yourself, Plissken?"Taylor barked at him.

Snake turned back, clenching his jaw hard, staring straight ahead, pulling himself up to more rigid attention. At last he grated, No... e excuse, Sir."As he stared, bloody letters slowly formed, oozing from the shining oak paneling behind the judges' heads. My Lai, they read, Andersonville... Wounded Knee... Dresden... Hiroshima... Baghdad ...Moscow... more names, the letters scrolling down, blurring into each other. Snake's ROTC instructor read the list in a droning, lecture-hall tone. He stood and stretched out a classroom pointer, and the wall dissolved into a TV screen, flickering in black-and-white footage from a late-night documentary program: piles of emaciated corpses. Crimes against humanity.... . The wall reformed, the letters on it glowing like liquid fire. As the blood dripped down, it began to bubble, steam, spark into flame. S. D. Plissken: Planet

Earth, 'his instructor's emotionless voice finished the roll call.

You self centered, irresponsible, arrogant bastard! Taylor's voice dragged Snake's attention back to his old sergeant. You were responsible. You knew." The stark white letters on Taylor's name badge read Collateral Damage. "A hard, painful knot coiled in Snake's belly, burning. He heard an echo of another desperate voice: For God's sake, Snake, don't do it!"

The gavel in his father's hand slammed down. Guilty. "Guilty," repeated each of the other judges. Snake felt his guts twist, felt himself choking as he struggled to catch his breath. His searched the unrelenting faces of his accusers. What punishment?

The sentence is death, 'came Col. Bailey's emotionless voice. Living death, among the death you have created. You carry death with you: whatever you touch will wither; whoever trusts you, will perish. You are the murder of the innocent. "The three chorused, You are Destruction."

Taylor came forward in formal parade-step, his face like stone, and began methodically stripping Snake's uniform, tearing away decorations, insignia, cutting away buttons. Military snare drums sounded a measured cadence, drumming Snake out of the Service, out of Black Light. Shame and guilt raged in him, and a cold fear. Snake heard the sighing murmur of the observers rising behind him. The knife in Taylor's hand flashed upward. Pain flared, and, as Taylor stepped back, Snake saw in his partner's hand, his now sightless left eye. Blood flowed down Snake's mutilated face like tears. Taylor dropped the eye into the snow on the courtroom floor. He slipped a black eyepatch in place over the oozing wound, saying Here. To remember us by. You lived!"

The figures flickered and disappeared into tainted mist rising from the snowy floor as the letters on the wall roared into a sheet a flame, turning the mist blood-red. There was a wrenching agony in his belly and Snake looked down to see the white cobra rear up into life out of his flesh, You are Plissken, 'she hissed, twisted, and lunged forward to drive her fangs into Snake's chest, pumping poisonous rage that burned like acid into him. He heard the screams of the observers behind him as he struggled to free himself of the handcuffs, and, in a final moment of terror, he felt the capsules in his neck exploding. The courtroom dissolved into bloody live steam thick with the stench of gas and putrefaction.....

Rain was jerked out of his own uneasy sleep by the muffled sounds from Snake's sleeping bag. He reached over and turned the chemlamp on at the lowest setting. In the dim greenish light, he saw Snake, still asleep, thrashing within the nylon cocoon, struggling with some creature of his own imagination. Rain unzipped his sleeping bag and moved over toward the other man. In the cramped space of the tent, the air was thick with the smell of Snake's sweat and fear. *It's a bad one*, Rain thought. "Snake," he called softly, "Snake, wake up." Snake continued throwing his head from side to side and moaning, and Rain shifted across the nylon floor toward him. He raised his voice: "Snake! It's a dream. Wake up!" Finally, he reached out and took hold of the other man's shoulder, shaking him at first gently, then harder. Snake's teeth were gritted as he strangled on bits of unintelligible words, shuddering toward wakefulness. Rain felt the tremors in the body under his hands as Snake's gasping breath slowed. "It's O.K., Snake," he said. "It's all right. It's just a dream." Snake's intensely blue eye fluttered open. He unzipped his bag part-way and struggled toward a sitting position as Rain released his hold and rocked back on his heels. Snake ran a hand over his wet face and pushed back strands of damp hair, still breathing raggedly, staring fixedly at nothing. Finally, his eye focused, and he glanced around the tent, his expression still confused and

disoriented.

"You O.K.?" Rain asked. Snake gave a rasping cough but didn't answer. Silence stretched awkwardly as the two men sat staring at each other, only inches apart. Rain reached out and put his hands on the other man's shoulders. When Snake did not pull away, his grip tightened. "I'm here, Snake," he said. "I told you I wasn't going to run out on you." Snake was rigid in his grasp, except for a slight flinch as Rain's hands met Snake's flesh. For a long moment Rain held the pose, willing Snake to feel, through his touch, his determination. Whatever Snake had done, he, Rain, would not betray the pledge he had made to Snake and to himself. Snake needed him. There was nobody else. The older man raised his hands slowly to Rain's forearms, moving like an automaton. It was all the permission Rain needed. He slid forward and wrapped his arms around Snake, pulling the other to him in a hard embrace. Short, ragged nails bit into Rain's shoulders as he felt Snake's body shuddering against him, felt Snake's breath in sharp, warm gusts against the side of his neck, felt Snake's face buried in his hair against his shoulders. After a minute, the shuddering stopped.

For Snake, it was a confused, chaotic slide from nightmare into wakefulness. The first thing he recognized was the warmth of bare flesh and the feel of thick, silky long hair against his sweaty face. At the touch, he was flooded with a desperate, angry hunger, and a mindless need to regain contact with the real world. His body remembered other nightmares, and the waking nightmare of his life; his flesh remembered fear and pain, darkness and blood, the putrid stench of New York Max, and all the other things, and remembered driving them down into the place where he could control them, conquered in the flesh of his willing partners, with his face buried in their hair. The hair had been blonde, or red, or dark; the body female or male. It made no difference in the moment of his need. Snake pulled himself loose from Rain's grip and unzipped his sleeping bag the rest of the way open. Desperate for simple contact, for grounding in reality, he reached out. With a wordless growl, he turned Rain over, shoved him down to the tent floor, and took him with animal passion in that oldest of all communications. The sex was rough, almost violent. Snake was relentless, driving fiercely into Rain, biting his shoulders, his fingers digging deep, his thrusts slamming the breath out of both of them, his cock burying itself in Rain as if trying to merge with him. Snake came hard, with a strangled shout, and collapsed across Rain's back, breathing heavily. He pulled out, rolled off, and lay still with his eyes closed.

For a long moment Rain lay still also, as if stunned by the intensity of Snake's assault. Then he turned and levered himself up on one elbow, looking down into Snake's face. He breathed a shaky laugh and smiled slightly, then leaned down. His lips brushed Snake's, lightly, quickly, and were gone again. Snake felt too tired to object. With a little voiceless snort, he pulled Rain against him, spoon-fashion, and zipped up the sleeping bag with both of them inside it. Spent, lulled by the warmth of each other's body, the two men drifted into sleep again, a sleep, this time, without dreams.

Snake was quiet the next morning as they struck camp, distant and preoccupied. He seemed drained of all emotion, running on automatic. He pedaled steadily all day, unwilling to stop until he and Rain put distance between themselves and the wrecked aircraft. That night, the two slept together again, Snake silently motioning Rain into his sleeping bag and taking him almost mechanically. By the next day, the older man's stoic air of self-control had resurfaced, but the remoteness in his good eye remained. Both men maintained a deliberate silence.

A few more days travel brought them to a big truck stop on the outskirts of Needles,

where they halted to reconnoiter. Snake studied the wide, deserted slab of concrete and felt the hairs on the back of his neck slowly rising. The instinct he depended on for survival was screaming at him that something was wrong. The hulks of several dusty and sun-faded automobiles dotted the pavement, and two abandoned long-haul eighteen-wheelers loomed in the shelter of the big service bays near the gas pumps, their cargo trailers open and stripped clean. Beyond them was the squat, rectangular shape of the station's convenience store, glass front wall shattered, shelves almost empty. In the center of the bare end-cap facing them, just inside the open door, was a case of red-and-white cans of soup. Rain started forward, but stopped before he had completed the first step and looked back toward his companion. Snake had not moved. Rain raised his eyebrows and a grim little smile curved his mouth.

Snake nodded. "Yeah. Bait."

The two men pulled their bikes behind the gas pumps opposite the shop and armed themselves. Rain cocked his crossbow and steadied it across his handlebars. Snake's Magnums were a comforting weight at his sides as he removed the Barrett's protective covering and shifted it into firing position. They skirted the edge of the service plaza, pushing their bikes, like scouts moving into enemy territory. A flicker of almost-invisible movement behind a side window alerted Snake. He ducked sideways, with a quick hand-signal to Rain, a second before a bullet flew between them, then raked the building with return fire from the Barrett. Chunks of stucco and glass flew as the big gun smashed a smoking hole in the side of the building. Shattering sound was followed by tense silence, as the hidden gunman evidently thought better of the unequal contest of firepower. Snake and Rain moved quickly out of range, and headed in toward the center of town for a last try at replenishing their supplies before the long, barren stretch to Flagstaff.

"How stupid do they think we are?" Rain muttered as he pushed his bike along.

"Not stupid," Snake said, "Desperate. Anybody coming in from the desert's going to be low on supplies." He snorted softly. "Needles always has lived off people passing through. The more things change, the more they stay the same."

The pair moved on, cat-footed and alert. Needles seemed deserted. The houses, drab stucco squares set in bare, packed yellow dirt, were quiet and seemingly abandoned.

Here and there, a door hung open on its hinges and a rectangle of light slashed into a dark interior of dull-white walls and faded linoleum flooring. Whatever else was hidden inside was invisible in the dazzle of sun on the street, but Snake had a crawling sensation that he was being observed by something in the silence. He hoped it was his imagination.

They came to a asphalt parking lot where red-plastic letters on a bigger stucco building identified BASHAS SUPERMARKET. The store's windows were shattered and its doors jammed open to reveal an interior littered with ripped boxes, bags and cartons, empty tin cans and bottles, overturned metal shelves, and broken equipment. Smashed glass and shards of plastic glinted on the floor. A faint, disgusting odor that reminded Snake of a fast-food dumpster on a hot summer afternoon drifted out to where he stood.

Black stains on the walls and concrete in front gave evidence of an earlier violent struggle, but Snake saw no fresh blood. By the doors lay a bicycle with a pack strapped to the rear. A thin tire-track in the dust indicated that the bike had recently arrived, but there was no sign of its rider. Snake and Rain exchanged glances, then lowered the kickstands on their bikes and began a wary exploration of the building's exterior.

Snake's hands hovered over his Magnums, and Rain's cocked crossbow was held at the ready. As the two men rounded a corner of the building, three figures huddled over something on the pavement suddenly exploded into flight. Snake caught a glimpse of staring eyes, matted hair, and filthy rags, wrapped in an unmistakable stench that

instantly brought back memories of New York Max. One of the group fired hastily over his shoulder at Snake and Rain before all three vanished around a corner of the store's wall.

On the ground lay the body of what looked like the bicycle's owner. There was a bullet wound in the back of the skull, and deep knife-gashes carved into the flesh of his back where the dead man's denim shirt had been slashed open. A long cut in the thick muscle of the man's tanned thigh oozed blood. Snake took another quick look around, then squatted by the body and touched it with the tip of his finger. The corpse was still warm. "Cannibals," he said in a matter-of-fact tone. Rain nodded, looking more than a little green, but standing his ground. *Good man*, Snake thought as he rose to his feet again.

Surreal images rose in his imagination of the bloody struggle that had taken place here between desperate defenders of the market and the town's starving inhabitants, fighting for survival. Multiply that by the population of Chicago, London, Paris, Shanghai, Calcutta, Mexico City... every city, everywhere. The whole world had become New York Max. No trucks, no trains, no airplanes to bring in supplies: first had come hunger, and then worldwide starvation, millions dead, the survivors turning on each other. Snake felt a thin chill down his spine as the dark vision brought back an echo of his dream. He pushed it away, down into the hidden place where S. D. Plissken still existed.

"We've got to get out of the open," Rain said. His voice was emotionless.

Right. They'll be back for their kill. And for us, Snake thought. The two men backtracked to the supermarket's open doors and wheeled their bicycles inside, out of range of gunfire. Snake noticed Rain's nose wrinkling. The dumpster-stink of decaying meat was thick in the hot, still air. "Watch out front," Snake said shortly, and went to investigate the interior of the market. A quick reconnaissance was all he needed. The store's shelves had been stripped bare of anything useful. Bubbled linoleum, blackened concrete subflooring, and charred splinters of bone showed where the cannibals had lighted fires to cook their victims. At the right of the entrance, Snake found what had been the store's deli. Behind a bank of glass cases, wide metal doors to walk-in coolers stood open, and inside one hung a human body, headless, gutted, and rotting, with ragged chunks of flesh hacked away. Battlefield memories rose in the back of Snake's mind. He swallowed hard. *You never get used to the smell*. He turned and walked back to where Rain was standing next to their bicycles, watching the approaches to the building.

"Nothing here," Snake said. "Let's go."

"Yeah," Rain answered. His expression suggested he was having a battle with his stomach, and would be as glad as Snake to get out of Bashas Market. His mouth became a grim line. "They're still out there."

"I'll see if I can get up on the roof," Snake said. "You stay here with the bikes." *Sniper situation*. Snake thought back to search-and-destroy missions in the streets of Russian cities, and old training clicked into place. Red swinging doors in the back led to the warehouse. In gray light filtering through their windows, Snake saw the store's back entrance. Rolling doors to the loading lock were secured with thick looped and padlocked chains and barricaded with a heavy mechanized pallet-jack. Everything that could be moved had been piled on top and around it. Nothing was getting in that way. Snake gave a single short nod of satisfaction and moved on.

After a bit of searching in the dimness, Snake located the access panel to the store's roof. He pushed the rolling ladder across the wall, its rusty wheel squealing along the track,

until it was under the panel, and climbed up. The panel was wedged firmly shut and locked. Cursing under his breath, Snake climbed back down. More searching uncovered a pile of tools that had been dumped out of one of the lockers piled on the pallet-jack, and Snake returned to the top of the ladder with a heavy hammer. A few solid whacks broke the trap-door loose. Snake pushed the access panel open, listened, then pulled himself through the opening onto the store's roof. Hot, gritty tarpaper burned against his belly as he worked himself over to the edge of the flat surface. After the store's dark interior, the street below was a dazzle of light on white stucco walls and pale cement. Snake squinted, his good eye watering, until his vision adjusted. He finally located three ragged figures crouched next to a wall across the street from Bashas Market, facing the supermarket's front door. *Waiting for us*, Snake thought. The one at the front of the huddle was holding a handgun, one held a knife, and the third clutched a black something that might be a length of pipe.

Snake returned to where Rain was waiting for him. He gave a short outline of the situation and finished up with, "Give me five minutes, then throw something out the door to get their attention and take it from there." Rain checked his watch, and nodded understanding.

Snake climbed back to the roof, located his targets, and waited, guns drawn and ready. Shortly after, a wooden produce box arced out from the inside of the market and thudded onto the parking lot. The figure with the gun jumped and his weapon swung toward it, discharging in the direction of the box. Snake smiled to himself. *Amateurs*. The first blast from his Magnums took out the one who had fired. The one with the knife made the mistake of stepping out from the shelter of the wall, looking around wildly for the source of Snake's fire, and Rain's crossbow bolt caught him squarely in the chest. As the third started to run along the wall in the opposite direction, Snake's bullets dropped him.

Snake rejoined Rain, who was still waiting near the bicycles. In grim silence, they detoured around the dead cannibals and headed out of Needles, alert for any further attack. At the edge of the Colorado River, they stopped and disarmed, replacing Snake's Barrett and Rain's crossbow in their protective coverings, and remounted their bikes to ride on. Halfway across the bridge, Rain halted his bike again and pointed downriver. "Look!"

Snake squinted against the glare off the water. Some distance down the bank they had just left, he saw a squalid little group of listing tents and knocked-together shelters in a trampled patch of bare ground and rubbish. Earthworks surrounded the encampment, giving it the look of an ancient Roman bivouac or an archaeological dig. Part of the area was set apart with another low earthen wall. It was filled with mounds of dirt, some newly dug, to judge by the darker color of the soil, some older. A few had crude crosses set at one end. Graves, Snake realized. In one corner of the enclosure were several cloth-covered heaps that Snake identified, after a moment, as bodies still awaiting burial. A ragged figure sat slumped against the wall of the graveyard, a rifle lying on the ground next to his motionless hand. Snake wondered if he was dead too. Several vultures patiently circled overhead, riding the thermals.

"I think we found where the rest of Needles went," Rain said.

"Yeah," Snake said, and pedaled on across the bridge. After a minute, Rain followed him. On the other side, they stopped to boil water from the river and refill their storage containers, then headed out into the long, dry stretch of road toward Flagstaff.

Snake was glad to be leaving California and moving into Arizona. The late-spring landscape, dotted with quick-blooming desert plants, seemed greener and warmer than he remembered from his childhood. Dust in the air from the relentless bombing of the

west coast was part of it, he supposed; there was a little more runoff. The ban on red meat in the New Moral America had removed much of the market for the locust-like herds of beef cattle and sheep that had done so much to strip the range bare. Now and then he spotted a feral cow grazing near the small groups of pronghorns in the distance, but that was all. The sheep were gone. Along the way they passed through the sad little ghost towns along Highway 40. They searched the deserted, tumble-down motels and abandoned feed stores, but found almost nothing useful. The drastic drop in America's population caused by war, gas, and the plagues, the shift to hummer and air freight for the few luxuries that still traveled cross-country, had dried up through-traffic except for a few long-haul trucks, and local mining and ranching had disappeared. The ravaged land was slowly being reclaimed by its original inhabitants. Rain eagerly pointed out the spots where a few patches of tough bunch-grass had sprouted beyond the mesquite and gray-green creosote bush. Snake occasionally heard Rain humming cheerfully to himself as he pedaled along.

One morning, somewhere between Peach Springs and Seligman, they came over a rise to find the highway below blocked by the wreck of a giant truck. A big eighteen-wheeler stacked with tiers of plastic crates had jackknifed across the pavement onto the shoulder and tipped sideways to lie like a sun-blasted metal wall, higher than their heads, across the road. They stopped and dismounted, then went to explore. Rain disappeared around the back of the trailer to check out the truck's cargo. Snake climbed up to the cab and, with considerable effort, wrenched open the door. Ignoring the long-dead occupant of the driver's seat, who was wedged between the steering column and the opposite door, he worked his way over the tilted arms and chair-backs, and pushed through the black curtain into the cramped sleeper box behind. To his delight, he found that the truck had not been looted. A search of the latched cabinets uncovered, among mummified packages of sweetrolls, candy, and potato chips, a good-sized cache of canned and dried food, juice, and soda. Prying open the miniature refrigerator netted several cans of very warm beer and four large bottles of water, which had been protected from evaporation by the cabinet's airtight seal. Snake wrapped the useful items in a blanket from one of the bunks and lowered his find to the pavement outside the truck, then went back for a more thorough search. As he expected, he finally uncovered, hidden at the bottom of a drawer under some dusty T-shirts, the dead driver's pistol and a small box of ammunition. Snake appropriated the ammo and climbed back down to the road's surface. Rain was waiting for him. The younger man's face had a strange expression that Snake could not interpret.

"What's it carrying?" Snake asked.

"Take a look."

The two of them crunched around the back of the overturned truck through the sand and stones of the shoulder. The strip of pavement on the other side ran straight as a ruled line through gray-brown desert dotted with stubby scraps of grayish-green toward distant hills swimming in heat-haze. Sun blazed down from the blank blue sky, bleaching the landscape to pastels in the glare. Across the roadway and down the gentle slope on each side were scattered hundreds of small crates jammed full of little skeletons. Some of them still had shreds of dried flesh clinging to them, and even a few white feathers.

"Chickens." Rain sounded as if he was pushing the words out past something stuck in his throat. "It was a chicken truck."

Snake snorted. *That would have been useful, if we'd gotten here earlier. Not any more.*

"Battery hens," Rain murmured, staring at the plastic boxes. "From Chicken Hell." He turned to look at Snake. "They were the worst, the chicken factory farms." He

returned his gaze to the highway. "They burned off their beaks, crammed them together shoulder to shoulder, standing on bare wire, living in their own shit, rubbing off all their own feathers, hurting and killing each other, until they were too worn out to lay eggs any longer. Then they shoved the ones who survived into these little boxes to ship 'em to California for slaughter. Days on the road with no food or water or shade."

"Sounds familiar," Snake rasped dryly. There was no hint of sympathy in his cold blue eye. "It's the same for everybody. We're just in bigger boxes."

"It doesn't have to be that way, Snake. Don't you remember our chickens at Rivendell? We took some of their eggs, but they were happy and free."

"And got eaten by coyotes. What's the difference?" Snake felt irritation rising in him, drawing a reluctant response. Here, now, in the middle of nowhere, he couldn't just walk away. There was nowhere to walk to, and he needed Rain.

"The difference was, we didn't kill them. And they had good lives before they died, lives that were important to them." Rain gestured toward the highway, his tone growing more insistent as Snake's grew deliberately flatter and less expressionless. "Look. Those were the last generation that's going to have to live like that. When you shut down the Machine, you ended factory farming. It can't exist without power and technology. Chickens will still die, humans will still use them, but they won't have to live like this any more. None of the animals will. Maybe it was all worth it, just for that, for Mother Gaia. Maybe She thought we owed our lives for theirs, for what we'd done to them."

Snake stared at him, caught between disgust and disbelief. His good eye smoldered a midnight blue. "Bullshit! I didn't do it *for* anything. I just did it." For a moment the automatic angry response surged up in him: *don't tell me who I am; don't put your fucking hero bullshit on me!* Then what he had said became real to him and he felt a bleak emptiness. *I shut down the Earth - did all this - for nothing.* He turned away, cutting off Rain's answer, and walked back toward the bicycles. He added the things he had taken from the truck to their packs in silence, fencing Rain out of his world, rebuilding barriers that had begun, slightly, to crumble. He reached for his anger, bringing up images of Malloy and the President and the Blackbelly bitch who had given him the Plutixin, of Eddie and Cuervo, and the President's stupid cunt of a daughter, and found something he could call a reason in familiar rage, but there was a new hollowness at the center of it. ...nothing.... Rain was silent too as they detoured around the wrecked truck and pedaled onward, but the last look he gave it could have etched glass. *Crazy talk*, Snake thought, and deliberately pushed the whole subject aside. Let the kid think whatever he wanted; all that mattered was their survival.

They refilled their water containers at a wash just outside Seligman and detoured around the town, not wanting a repeat of the incident at Needles. A few miles farther they came to an imitation Wild West trading post set at the side of the road, an attraction for passing tourist traffic in some happier time. A sign, faded nearly blank, advertised, under a picture of a jackalope: Indian Trading Post/ Souvenirs/ Desert Wonders Museum and Zoo.

Snake and Rain cast long shadows across the hard ground in the late-afternoon sun as they pulled up to a stop and studied the shabby building. Finally, Snake drew his Magnum and exchanged glances with Rain. "Let's take a look."

Rain nodded. They stepped across the splintered, creaking wooden porch and pushed open the weathered door. Inside was a deserted store filled with dust-covered junk: plastic turquoise jewelry, fake Indian drums and moccasins, Navajo rugs woven in Taiwan, T-shirts, post cards. Shelves advertising cactus candy and pecan logs stood

empty; the snack bar and glass-fronted refrigerator unit at one side were equally bare. Snake snorted in disgust. A door in the back opened into a storeroom with bare shelves and unoccupied living space for the store's former caretakers. Snake holstered his gun. A Formica table with a torn plastic tablecloth sat in one corner, under an uncurtained window, next to a chipped sink. An experimental turn of the tap produced no water, and neither the light nor the stove was in working order. Rain bounced on the edge of one of the two sagging cots on the other side of the room, grinning broadly and sending up a little cloud of gritty dust. "Real beds, Snake!"

A thorough search of the living area's cabinets and refrigerator uncovered nothing but a few empty jars and a container with a bit of petrified French's mustard at the bottom. Snake unhooked the catch on the back door, pushed open the ripped screen, and the two men stepped down into the rear courtyard. On the packed bare earth was a rectangle of board with a flaking painted sign. DESERT WONDERS WILDLIFE PARK, it announced; LIVE ANIMALS LIVE! Beside it was a row of small, dirty concrete-and-wire pens, each with its crudely lettered sign identifying the former occupant: coyote, rattlesnake, fox, javelina, pronghorn. The cages were empty, the doors open.

Rain felt a rush of relief. "Somebody let them go."

"Or had them for dinner." Snake's sardonic drawl left no space for Rain to continue the conversation. He turned on his heel and stepped back up into the building without glancing in Rain's direction.

Rain stood looking out past the empty cages. The swift desert night was falling, deep purple behind the silhouette of distant hills, black above sprinkled with the first bright stars. Air against his face brought a faint cool scent with no tang of humanity in it. *Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight*, Rain's lips moved soundlessly, and he smiled to himself as he let the rest of the thought dissolve and float away. Even the most city-bound humans had tried, with their little incantations, to reach out and communicate with the natural world around them, to make Her hear them. Now, in the great silence Snake had created when he shut down the Machine, perhaps they could hear Her instead. He hoped the poor captive animals in the cages had been released. Snake had brought a new freedom for them and the whole wild world when he had taken away so much of Man's power to enslave Gaia's other children to his will. The land was returning. The Great Die-Off would, in the end, bring about a better, more equal balance, and healing for the earth.

It was full dark now over the desert. Rain turned to look back through the window behind him into the house. He could see Snake sitting at the table, a dim shape in the chemlamp's glow. He wished Snake could see the green shoot he had planted growing up out of the bare earth, wished he could show Snake some other world, some place that was not full of death. He wanted to see the cold, closed face filled with something beside cynical bitterness or anger or the mask of indifference. Snake was badly damaged, crumpled and twisted like his crashed Gulffire, but he had soared once, an idealist with a goal and a hope for a better future. He had been able to believe in heroes, too, once. He had been willing to be a leader. Maybe, Rain thought, he could be again.

Snake got up and moved away from the table, and Rain realized that the night air had turned cold. Shivering, he stepped back inside. Snake had already wrapped himself in his sleeping bag and turned his face toward the wall beside the cot he had chosen for his bed. He was clearly not interested in talking. Rain unrolled his own sleeping bag on the other cot and prepared to settle down for the night. Before he turned the key on the chemlamp, he sat for a while moodily studying Snake's muffled figure, wishing he could understand how to reach him. He knew better now than to try to push Snake or make a direct approach. He would have to wait for Snake to make the next move. He snapped

off the light and drifted into sleep, wondering what it would take to span the distance between them.

Over the next two days, as they pedaled onward, Snake was even more silent than usual. He withdrew into himself, trying painfully to grapple with unaccustomed introspection. On the second evening, Snake sat by their dying campfire gazing into the flames. Rain had already rolled over and gone to sleep. It was such a beautiful night they had not bothered to set up their tent. A full moon above turned the world into bright silver and black. Night was crisp and silent, elusively scented with pion. The light breeze shifted, and drifting smoke sandpapered his gas-scarred throat, bringing back memories: the scene near Firebase Seven, beside the crashed helicopter: the sharp reek of burning fuel and flesh curling around his defiant form, roaring flame and darkness, and the remote held high in his hand. *For nothing.* His fingers remembered the slight resistance, the click of the button. *For nothing.* He imagined again the Sword of Damocles satellites opening like baleful nightflowers into the black sky and beaming down the end of technology. *For nothing.* His mind replayed the scene like a hamster caught in a wheel, spinning endlessly, pointlessly, as Snake brooded on the images. And what had his last words to the listening world been? What high-minded, noble phrase? "The name's Plissken." A banal epitaph, surely, for the death of Civilization. All for nothing.

Sleep was out of the question in his present mood. Snake got to his feet, stretching chilled muscles, and walked slowly a few paces out beyond firelight into the moon-washed stillness. He stood for a long moment staring out over the empty desert. There was no sign man had ever been here; he had vanished without a trace, as if he had never existed. Snake could almost believe, in this desolate place, that he and Rain were the last living humans in the world.

Uneasy, he glanced back in the direction of Rain's sleeping form and froze. The moonlight, still bright and full, outlined the sinuous form of a huge diamondback rattlesnake moving toward Rain's sleeping bag. Rattlesnakes were pit vipers, with delicate heat-sensing organs in their jaws, and this one was probably seeking a warm shelter from the cool desert night. Snake felt his backbone crawl. A sudden movement might startle the serpent into striking. He had to wake Rain slowly. Snake keyed his voice to a low whisper, hoping his gas-damaged vocal cords would not betray him.

Rain stirred as Snake fought to keep his voice low and steady, *Rain, don't move; Rain, don't move; stay perfectly still, Rain....."* The rattler was inching closer to where Rain lay on his left side, no more than a yard now from the edge of Rain's sleeping bag. Snake's soft rasp continued, more urgently, *Rain, wake up. Do you hear me? Rattler. Don't move."*

"Uh-huh," Rain breathed out through motionless lips.

"I'm going to shoot the fucker. Don't move. Close your eyes." Snake sized up the target on the other side of Rain's body. The man's back was to him. He would have to chance a low shot over Rain's head and hope that a rock under the sand didn't ricochet the slug into his skull. Snake moved a hand to the heavy butt of his Magnum. Rain didn't move at the slow whisper of the gun coming free of the holster, the click of the safety coming off. Orange fire exploded over Rain's head and a second later dirt, chips of rock, and blood spattered his face.

Snake's hand closed on the other man's collar and yanked him backward, half out of the sleeping bag, lifting Rain nearly all the way off the ground. Rain slammed into him and the Magnum flew sideways as the two of them fell backward. Snake's breath was knocked out of him in a *whuf* as he made solid contact with a large boulder behind them. He hit the ground with his left arm locked around Rain and his right extended to break

their fall. Sharp pain flared. He ignored it. His body was slick with adrenaline-sweat, his heart beating heavy and fast with reaction. He felt Rain warm and solid against him, felt the younger man's quick breath shaking Rain's body, felt Rain's long, dark hair flowing over his hand as Rain turned his face up toward Snake's. Enclosed within the shadow of Snake's body, hidden from the searching moonlight, Rain was safe. Snake felt the contact at the center of himself. His "You O.K.?" was a rough near-whisper.

"Yeah," Rain breathed out raggedly. "What happened?"

Snake pushed Rain into a sitting position and sat up himself. His bruised ribs protested as he moved, and he grunted softly. "Couldn't sleep." He looked toward the shattered body of the diamondback and added, "Good thing you didn't panic. One twitch and you'd have been wearing that fucker as a nose ring." He felt, rather than saw, Rain smile at his rare compliment.

The two men climbed to their feet and went over to examine the body. After a moment Rain said, almost wistfully, "Beautiful snake."

"Yeah."

"Too bad you had to shoot it." Rain glanced over toward Snake, and the moonlight showed Rain's expression as he added hastily, "I mean....".

"Yeah. Too bad," Snake repeated, and saw Rain's face clear. This bond of understanding they shared. Deliberately, he added, "Him or you."

"I hate choices like that, Snake." Rain paused. "But thanks."

Snake smiled slightly. From somewhere he heard a distant echo in his mind: *Welcome to the human race, Rain*. He studied the dead rattler, reluctant to let the moment pass, wanting somehow to capture it in something tangible. On impulse, he crossed over to his pack and pulled out his knife, then returned. He picked up the diamondback's tail and, in a few quick motions, scored, skinned and detached the long string of eleven rattles. "Big son of a bitch," he said quietly. Rain would have been plenty dead if this fucker had nailed him in the face. He looked back at Rain. For once, Snake had saved someone, instead of seeing him fall dead in front of him; for once he had given human life instead of taken it. For once, he had shared an understanding with someone, instead of blank incomprehension. That had to count for something.

Not since Taylor.... Snake stopped. *No. There would never be anyone like Taylor again, but....* Snake stared at the rattles in his hand, fumbling with unfamiliar thoughts, at a loss to communicate to Rain what he, himself, only half understood, and could not articulate. Finally, he went back to his pack and took out the envelope of thin black cord he used to customize his eyepatches. He cut a length, pierced the rattles with his knife, strung them on the cord, and knotted it securely. He held the necklace out, dangling from his hard, callused hand. "Here," he said simply. He fixed Rain with an intense stare. *C'mon, asshole, see it!*

Rain started to shake his head, started to answer, then stopped, his eyes focused on Snake's face. His glance flicked to the knife in Snake's other hand, and Snake's look followed his. It was the knife Rain had given Snake on his Year Ending visit. Their glances locked together again, and Rain slowly reached out and took the necklace of rattles. A smile spread over his face. Snake held on to the cord for a second, the two men's hands connected by it, tentatively, then he released it and watched as Rain slid the cord over his head and settled the string of rattles under his shirt against his chest.

"Thanks, Snake. Thanks."

Silently, Snake walked over, picked up Rain's sleeping bag from the place they had left it next to the boulder, and brought it back to where his own lay on the sand near the ashes of the campfire. He reached down and zipped the two bags together into one larger one. Rain came over and helped Snake shake out the joined bags and lay them flat. Snake took a few minutes to retrieve his Magnum from the place it had landed on the ground and set it on his trailer, to be cleaned in the morning, then made a quick survey of the campsite. Not likely they would be bothered by any other wandering diamondbacks tonight, Snake thought; rattlers are territorial. He unbuckled his gunbelt and shed his clothes, then glanced sideways at Rain.

He slid into the sleeping bag, and Rain joined him as soon as he, too, could slip off the clothes he had been sleeping in. Snake pulled Rain to him, and Rain molded himself against Snake as they began an unhurried exploration of each other's bodies, welcoming the warmth and the feel of each other. *This one is mine*, Snake thought; *This one won't run out on me. I need him*. He took his time, letting the energy build between them, savoring that strange new certainty.

In the darkness of the single sleeping-bag, Snake claimed Rain's body with his. His fingers found the small scar on Rain's arm, souvenir of a childhood injury, and traced it lightly. He ran his strong hands over Rain's ass and thighs, memorizing the sleek skin and wiry shape, as Rain returned his touch. Rain's long, thick hair was silk over suede as Snake stroked down the other man's back. At the feel of it, Snake was hard, and every contact seemed electric. He rolled the smaller man firmly over onto his side.

Rain complied, moving back against Snake's chest and belly, offering himself. Snake hesitated a moment, then reached around Rain's hip, taking Rain's firm cock in his hand. He felt the other man twitch and gasp at his touch as he gently kneaded Rain with his fingers. Pre-cum slicked the tip of Rain's erect shaft and Snake gathered it onto his fingers, urging more. He mingled it with some of his own, tasted the salt-and-bitter flavor of their joined maleness as he added a bit of his saliva, and slid his fingers gently into Rain's ass. Rain pushed himself eagerly back onto Snake's hand, gasping with each movement. At last, his own cock ready and hard, Snake slid slowly into Rain.

Wordlessly united, connected at a level too deep for thought or speech, he paused, poised, savoring the moment of anticipation, feeling it grow toward climax. Then need swept him forward, and Snake thrust hard into Rain. His hands closed on the curve of Rain's hips, pulling him closer. He leaned forward, and, driven by some primordial animal urge, nipped at Rain's shoulder, then caught the other man's flesh between his teeth, holding him in a primitive, intensely erotic grip. The feel, the taste, the smell of Rain was everywhere. If Rain felt pain, he never showed it, moving into Snake's fierce grip, onto Snake's cock, and moaning with each forward thrust. With an inarticulate growl, Snake came deep in Rain's body. As he started to withdraw, he heard Rain gasp, "No, please... s stay..." He could feel the slight shaking of Rain's body as Rain worked to bring himself off, and seconds later Rain's hot cum spattered Snake's leg. Together, they rested side by side in the warmth of the sleeping bag, satisfied, neither wanting to break the contact, until, without another word exchanged, they drifted off to sleep.

Over the next few days, they settled into a new routine. By unspoken mutual consent, Snake and Rain zipped their sleeping bags together each night, sharing a bed and each other's bodies. Snake knew that soon he would have to make a decision: north or east into canyon country. They stopped for a day in a fold of hills where a little stream widened into a pool of water under a sandstone overhang. They spread their bedding in the shade of a cottonwood tree, and spent the day splashing in the shallow water, bathing, washing their clothes, and refilling their water bottles.

Midmorning the next day, they were cycling along at a fairly good pace up the rising highway, when Rain pointed out something along the side of the road. Snake followed the gesture, and they wheeled up to two gray suitcases, one on its side in the roadway,

one on the sandy shoulder. There was a small hole in one where some local animal had gnawed a way in, but no sign of any other disturbance. Snake walked over to the other one and gave it a firm kick. No angry buzz alerted them to a shade-seeking rattler, and Snake bent down to flick the latches up and let the case fall open onto the ground.

Clothing, a few pieces of silverware and jewelry, and several photographs lay exposed. The two men exchanged glances, then Snake turned to the other case, flicked up the locks, and pushed it open with a quick gesture. Whatever had gnawed the hole had vacated the makeshift burrow, leaving behind more clothes, a couple of half-empty medicine bottles, toiletries, and a pair of high-top athletic shoes. Bits of shredded plastic suggested the suitcase had once contained something edible, which had attracted the visiting animal.

Nothing worth taking with them, Snake decided. He shrugged and stood up, and the two men returned to their bikes and pedaled onward. A quarter-mile later, they found a corpse, not long dead, lying in the middle of the road. The body was already decomposing in the hot spring sun, covered with ants and sending up a thick stench of decay. A sports water-bottle lay nearby, along with tooth-marked remains of a backpack filled with scraps of foil, plastic, and slick paper. Snake sat on his bike, studying the scene. Finally, he said, "This one didn't starve." He fingered the butt of his Magnums, and, almost unconsciously, swept a glance around the surrounding ponderosas.

Rain nodded. They pedaled on more cautiously. Half an hour later, they came up on several more gnawed and decomposing bodies. Five or six were huddled close together. The rest, some ten in all, were spread out along the highway at intervals. There was no sign of vehicles - cars or bikes - or any organization. The group looked to Snake's practiced eye as if they had been straggling along haphazardly on foot, heading westward. Why? he wondered uneasily as he studied the lifeless forms.

Rain apparently had the same thought. Silently, the younger man unwrapped his crossbow and arrows and slung the weapon over his shoulder, at the ready. "Hph," Snake snorted approvingly as he watched Rain arm himself. Snake's good eye narrowed as he took in the long, silver thread of highway stretching onward. "Flagstaff up ahead, maybe ten miles." He looked back at Rain and read his own question in his companion's eyes: *what were these people running from?* Evidently not thirst or starvation, to judge by the food-scraps in the dead people's luggage and the full water-bottles on most of the corpses. What then? Snake felt the familiar adrenaline-rush of battle-readiness thrumming along his nerves as he pedaled slowly forward, alert for any sign of danger. The high-desert forest landscape rolled by, blandly unthreatening and uninformative.

They began to pass scattered buildings, the outskirts of Flagstaff. Many of them had the look of places abandoned for years, left behind as the shrunken city, driven by war, economic collapse, and ecological pressure, contracted toward its center. Houses, set back from the highway, were sun-faded and crumbling, open to the pine-scented air, the broken windows empty and staring. At last they came to a big road sign announcing: FLAGSTAFF City Limits. The official green-and-white lettering had a huge X slashed across it in yellow spray-paint. Below it, dripping yellow letters warned: Plague... Keep Out....

Snake gestured sharply to Rain, and they halted the bikes. Snake stared for a moment, tensing. "...shit, SHIT!" he snarled, voice rising in intensity as he slammed a hand onto the handlebars of the bicycle.

"What do you suppose it is?" Rain said.

Snake shrugged. "Could be anything." *Anthrax, bubonic, something left over from the*

War, Snake thought. His mind moved back to the ruined cities of the Russian campaign where public sanitation had broken down: typhus, cholera, typhoid. Hell, with the hospitals knocked out, anything contagious would spread like wildfire. Dr. Spencer had been right. The two men sat on their bikes, staring silently toward the center of the city, where, for the first time, Snake noticed a thin smudge of oily black smoke darkening the air over several areas. Something in Flagstaff had been burning. Large amounts of something. "Looks like we go north," Snake said. He consulted the map. They found the turnoff and headed toward Route 89, avoiding the doomed city of Flagstaff.

Several days' travel took them into canyon country. Snake thought he remembered passing Navajo trading posts along this road on a family visit to the Grand Canyon, and wondered if there were any left where they might be able to get water and provisions for the final journey into the heart of the canyons. He scanned the road ahead, looking for signs of human habitation, weighing his dwindling supplies against the danger of trigger-happy locals defending their homesteads.

The next settlement they came to had been a thriving metropolis of four shabby mobile homes, a few shacks with boarded-up windows and junked cars rusting in their yards, and a combined gas station and trading post, its windows covered with fly-specked signs advertising Indian jewelry, ice, cold beer, and Lay's Potato Chips. To one side of the trading post was a yard with a high chain-link fence topped with razor-wire. Inside the fenced area stood a shed, a ramada with a hay-manger, and a tall, weathered windmill, its vanes turning slowly with a rhythmic creak in the minimal morning breeze. At the windmill's base was a galvanized stock-watering tank half filled with greenish water. A few chickens, scratching and pecking at the dusty ground, shared the yard with several sheep and goats. A sign on the fence proclaimed, in broad spray-painted letters: "WATER: Ten Bullets a Gallon or trade. No money." A thin yellow dog on a chain rose to its feet and began barking loudly at their approach.

"Hold it!" came a harsh voice from the flat roof of the trading post. Rain and Snake halted their bikes and stood still, holding their hands away from their sides, open. They looked upward to see a large man in a faded denim shirt and jeans covering them with a hunting rifle. "You from Flagstaff?" he growled, "If you are, keep movin'."

"Came down 64," Snake said. "We're here to trade. What about Flagstaff?"

The man ignored Snake's question. He stood looking them over for a minute and finally, evidently, allowed greed to overcome suspicion. "Weapons in the lockers," he barked, tilting his head.

Snake and Rain followed the gesture to see a set of old metal storage lockers standing a bit beyond the end of the building's portal, keys dangling from rusting locks. Snake reluctantly unbuckled his gun belt, shoved the Magnums into the nearest compartment, and locked it. Rain followed suit, placing his knives on one shelf and taking the key to the unit. "Hey!" the man on the roof prompted sharply. A gesture of his rifle at the bicycles told them that Rain's crossbow, lashed to the trailer, had not gone unnoticed. It, too, was stashed in one of the metal compartments, along with Snake's boot knife.

Finally, the two disarmed men were allowed to enter the post. Snake's bootheels were loud on the uneven plank flooring as he ducked to clear the rough wooden doorframe set in stuccoed adobe. The inside of the building was dark, cluttered, and marginally cooler than the outside, smelling of dust and old wood. Walls were hung with camping supplies, desert gear, ropes, and bicycle tires. The store's original collection of Navajo rugs, moccasins, Stetson hats, Indian pottery, kachina dolls, fancy belt-buckles, pion incense-burners, Hillerman novels, and tourist guides to Colorful Arizona had been piled along two walls, and the shelves they had formerly stocked held a sparse collection of improvised containers filled with a variety of food and household goods. Several old

locking jewelry-display cases near the front of the store now held strips of dried meat.

Behind them stood a chunky woman in a shapeless print dress, her dark hair wound into straggly braids. "You wan dried meat," she greeted them in a flat voice, " we got pronghorn, deer, five bullets a poun', dog, some beef, twenny bullets a poun', fresh eggs, five bullets each; chickens no' for sale." She moved to one side of the case and stood, stolidly planted, watching them warily. A gunbelt rode her wide hips, carrying a brace of holstered revolvers. "We got a little milk, fresh *cabrito*. What you got to trade? Canned stuff, candy, cigarettes, booze, aspirin, anythin' like that?"

"You got smokes?" Snake tried to keep the craving that flared along his nerve-endings out of his voice.

"No," the woman answered. "All gone."

Shit, Snake thought. Mentally, he weighed the value of their remaining ammunition against the dried meat. Rain waited silently for Snake to negotiate the trade, studying a bicycle tire-patch kit on the shelves behind the counter, keeping one eye on Snake and the woman as he did so. Snake selected several pounds of dried, jerked pronghorn meat, a couple of hard-boiled eggs, and some of the beef. Rain added a string of chilis, some spring greens, several onions, and a recycled spaghetti-sauce jar full of dried pinto beans. At the woman's order, a dark-eyed little girl brought each of them a mug of warm milk, fresh from the goats outside, and waited, along with the woman, as Snake and Rain drank it on the spot. Snake could hardly remember when anything had tasted so good. Under the watchful attention of the armed man, they returned to their bike-trailers, where Snake dug out a box of ammunition and two of the four bottles of scotch he had liberated from the abandoned winery outside San Francisco. The woman eyed the Chivas Regal, checked the seal on the bottle, and then grudgingly added a few more items to Snake's pile.

"Trade goods," Rain said blandly, poker-faced, and Snake turned a glower in his direction before turning back to the negotiation.

"How far to the back canyon country?" Snake asked the woman.

"Couple days cycling, you got good bikes." she responded. "You gonna need water 'n salt, too. You Snake Plissken?"

"I heard he was dead," Snake said evenly, his face impassive. "We'll take five gallons and half a pound." The woman's eyes narrowed slightly, but she gave no other sign of reaction to his words.

"You got somethin' to put it in?" The man from the roof was standing in the doorway, still holding the rifle cradled in his arms at the ready, but no longer pointed directly at them.

Out of the corner of his eye, Snake saw Rain moving to separate from him into a defensive position. "On the bikes," the younger man said in an equally toneless voice. The air was thick in the building, stifling, and heavy with mutual distrust.

Rain went outside with the man to fill the containers with water from the stock tank, while Snake stayed with the woman as she counted out bullets, examining each one as she laid it on the countertop. He tried haggling over the numbers, but the leathery woman ignored him. Exchange completed, Snake gathered up his and Rain's trade items and turned to go. A stray slant of sunlight through the front window bounced off the contents of one of the locked cases, still full of silver and turquoise jewelry, standing on the counter. Some of the heavy squash blossom necklaces and bow-guards had the look of real Navajo work, old pawn. Useless junk now, Snake thought. Headache flared

with the brightness. Snake blinked hard, his good eye watering, and pulled his hat farther down over his eyes as he stepped out into the sun. He felt depressed for some reason; depressed, tired, sweaty, and a little dizzy. *The whole world's turned into New York Max*, he thought. He had lost the outlaw's advantage. Rain was standing next to their bikes, along with the containers of water, and the man had returned to the building's roof to cover them with his rifle as they packed up their supplies and reclaimed their weapons from the lockers. Snake and Rain left the keys in the locks and rode on.

After long minutes of silence, Rain ventured, "We're almost to the Reservation. What do we do? Do we have to talk to somebody or something before we can go on to their land?"

"We'll get off the road before we hit the checkpoint, go around." Snake made a wavy gesture with one hand lifted from his handlebars. "Slide right in. They'll never know we're here." Rain gave a half-glance back over his shoulder in the direction of the armed and suspicious couple behind them at the trading post. It sounded too easy. He opened his mouth to protest. Snake silenced him with an uncompromising glare Rain had learned meant the older man would not discuss the subject any further. He closed his mouth again, shrugged slightly, and pedaled on.

It was not much farther down the road that a wisp of sound caught their attention: a hoarse voice raised in a distant, droning chant. Around a bend in the red sandstone rocks along the side of the road, a thin trail of smoke drifted up into the blank blue sky.

As they pedaled forward, the monotonous rise and fall of singing, muffled behind the intervening rocks, grew gradually louder. Finally, Snake braked, and Rain followed suit even before the other man raised his hand in a silent signal to halt. Snake cocked his head, listening intently. The two of them exchanged glances that agreed: whoever it was couldn't be all that dangerous if he was making so much noise. Snake dismounted from his bike and pushed it cautiously forward toward the curve in the rocks to see what was ahead of them. Rain paralleled him.

"Navajo singing," Rain whispered, remembering all the reverent documentaries he had watched at Rivendell about the proud heritage of the tribes of the First People.

"No," Snake muttered absently, as if to himself. He seemed to be concentrating. "Not Navajo." He paused. "What the hell....?"

Rain looked at him in awed amazement. "You know Navajo?"

Snake made a disgusted sound deep in his throat that neither admitted nor denied it. "I spent every fucking summer out here."

"With the Navajos?" Rain, still whispering, ended in something close to a squeak.

"No." There was scorn in Snake's tone. As if driven, reluctantly, to make a point, he added, "My grandparents lived... on the edge of the Reservation." They were both silent for a long minute, listening, as the relentless chanting continued on the other side of the rocks. "Every summer," Snake growled at last. "Goddamn Navajos." A beat. "Singing." His mouth snapped shut as if that explained everything.

Rain was staring in the direction of the chanting with a strange expression on his face, somewhere between embarrassment and longing, combined with an almost religious reverence. "Gaia's First People. They were always talking about them at Rivendell, how we should try to be like them. How the Earth is sacred to them. I always wished...." His voice trailed off as Snake scowled and snorted.

“Losers.” A murky anger drove Snake into what was almost volubility for him. “The First People. Hpf; The first people the fucking government screwed over. They lost the war. Now they don't have shit. One drop of Dineh blood, and they try to drag you down with 'em.” Snake loosened his Magnums slightly in their holsters and started off down the road in the direction of the chanting, pushing his bicycle with one hand while the other hovered over his gun.

Rain followed. The rigid set of Snake's shoulders telegraphed that it would be unwise to say anything further. As the road took them nearer the singing, the wind shifted, carrying a gust of smoke with a sick-sweet undertone to it in their direction. Snake coughed once and swore under his breath. He knew that smell. He secured his bike, slowed to a stealthy pace, and edged around the large red sandstone boulder blocking his view of the road in front of them. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Rain was following his lead.

Ahead, in a cleared area off the side of the road among the spiky tufts of harsh grass and spring-blooming yellow rabbitbrush, a pile of wood and brush burned in the afternoon heat. Thick smoke rose into the oppressive air from a dark bundle of rags on top of the pile, and a human arm dangling out of the concealing mass of cloth into the flames confirmed the smell Snake remembered from the burning ruins of Novosibirsk. Beneath the smoldering corpse were papers, blankets, an ancient notebook computer, a backpack, camping goods, and bedding. Snake swept a quick glance around. Not far away stood the crumbling remains of a long-abandoned hogan slowly melting back into the earth, and a ramada that was now no more than a few thin wooden slats on a couple of upright poles.

Beside the burning mound stood a tall man in a blue chambray shirt and jeans. He wore cowboy boots that must have been expensive once, but were now scuffed and worn. His dark face was a road-map of weathered wrinkles, framed in long salt-and-pepper hair that was tied into many small cloth-wrapped strands and gathered at the nape of his neck to fall half-way down his broad back. He chanted in a steady, droning singsong, now and then pausing briefly as if to remember a line or compose one. As Snake and Rain rounded the boulder, he flicked a glance in their direction that barely broke the flow of sound, and then, when they made no move to attack, ignored them and continued his chant.

Rain whispered to Snake, “What tribe is he?”

Snake shrugged. “Don't know. Hair's wrong for Navajo.” That in itself was a small point in the old man's favor, Snake thought sourly. He eyed the singer for a moment, then made one of his quick decisions. Whoever he was, he didn't look particularly threatening. It had been a long time since Snake had been in canyon country; he needed information. Snake resigned himself to waiting: he wouldn't get anything out of the man if he interrupted a sing.

Rain, seemingly entranced by the sight of a real, live Indian, showed no sign of wanting to leave either. They pulled their bikes and trailers into a thin slash of shade at the base of the jumble of sandstone boulders, and Snake claimed a spot under a scrawny juniper struggling up out of a cleft in the rock. He and Rain sat silently watching as the day crept onward and shadows shifted. Sun blazed down on the man next to the fire and sweat rolled down his face as he periodically added more gray slabs of old wood to the fire, but he seemed oblivious to the heat. The smoky smell of burning human flesh was joined by the smell of burning rubber, plastic, and cloth, their own sweat, and the all-pervasive desert dust that was gritty in Snake's mouth and nose. The rock under him threw back the heat of the sun that had warmed it earlier, and seemed to suck all the moisture out of him. He took a swallow of tepid water from his canteen, and passed it to

Rain, who did likewise.

Still they waited as the old man's voice droned onward. Finally the song tapered to an end, as he raised his arms in a gesture of closing. Westering light glinted off a heavy thunderbird pendant strung on a turquoise necklace and a wide silver bracelet, as the man turned to face Snake and Rain. "That's it." he said, simply, and moved toward the remains of the ramada, where he sat down with his back against one of the upright poles. He nodded toward his audience, raising his voice to carry over the short distance between them. "Come sit. It's too hot to travel. Besides, I'm going to need somebody to help me bury all that."

Snake shook his head fractionally, but, under the old man's steady gaze, moved to join him in the meager shade. He leaned against one of the shaky uprights at the opposite end of the structure and stood silently, his face impassive.

Rain followed to stand next to Snake. "I'm sorry," he offered diffidently. "I'll be glad to help." He settled slowly to the ground at the other end of the ramada from the old man, next to where Snake's dusty black boots were planted.

The man ignored Rain's comment. "I am Joseph Looks-Away. Welcome to the center of the world." His eye caught Snake's. "Everyone figured you'd show up, Snake. Eventually."

Snake felt pushed off-balance by the old man's self-possessed certainty. He stayed on his feet, keeping the advantage of height, and shifted his hands suggestively toward the butts of his Magnums. He glared down at Joseph.

Mild amusement flickered across Joseph's weathered face. "Sit down," he repeated. His tone was indifferent. "The sun is too hot to be showing teeth and claws in. You have no quarrel with me." He took a long pull from a water bottle next to him and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. Taking a bandanna from around the bottle, he wiped his face. "Stand, then," he finished. He cocked a sardonic eyebrow at Snake as he raised the water-bottle in his direction. After a moment, he lowered it again when Snake made no move to take it. He held the bottle out next in Rain's direction. The younger man accepted it, took a sip, and handed it back. Joseph gave him a half-smile and turned his attention back to Snake.

Snake felt faintly ridiculous under the steady, unthreatening gaze. He eased himself down next to one of the rickety uprights. "Why were you expecting me?"

"Snake Plissken?" The old man shrugged, as if the answer ought to be obvious. "We knew you'd be coming home. We're both coming home, Snake. Only place to be now that all the craziness is over." He wrinkled his nose, turning his head toward the pyre as its sweetish stench came to them on the fitfully shifting breeze. "

Snake swept a look from the man with the wrapped strands of hair to the burning funeral pyre and back again, letting the challenge grow in his expression. "You're not from..." He tilted his chin in the direction of the reservation in an unconscious gesture rising from some buried reflex of his childhood.

Surprise, and a hint of satisfaction, crossed Joseph's face and disappeared. "No, I'm Mojave. From California, near Needles." He met the suspicion and distrust glittering in Snake's one good eye, in his hard face, without flinching, but finally turned back to the pyre. The lumpy pile of ashes was still sending up a few wispy trails of smoke, but the fire was almost out. "He wasn't a relative, but he was Mojave. Friend of mine I met in the AIM. We decided to come back here when you turned out the lights. Way to go, Snake!" A quick grin came and went instantly.

“Plague?” Snake cut abruptly across Joseph's words, trying to take command of the conversation.

Rain sounded almost apologetic as he put in, “We had to detour around a city that had been hit hard, from what we could see. That's why we're concerned.”

“Shit.” Irritation edged Snake's voice. The last thing he needed here was Rain's ignorant “help.” Conversations with Indians, no matter what tribe, always had two texts, the spoken and the subtext. Snake had never really mastered the technique, and it annoyed him.

“We were attacked by raiders a few days ago,” Joseph continued, ignoring the interruption. “They jumped us from behind, hit him, then took off. Yesterday, he was... getting pretty bad, so I brought him off Dineh land. Navajos got no need of Mojave ghosts on the Rez. This morning....” He gave Snake a measuring look, as if trying to pry a particular reaction out of the other man, and continued, when Snake evidently did not provide it, with, **“I'll bury him when I get my wind back.”** He paused. **“Relax, Snake; he's burned.”**

Joseph was needling him, Snake saw, suggesting, ironically, that he shared the traditional Navajo attitude toward the dead. *Typical Indian bullshit*, he thought.

“Doesn't mean shit to me,” he said evenly, deliberately. *I may get the hang of this subtext shit yet.*

“Of course not,” Joseph said, his voice elaborately calm, and Snake had the irritating feeling he had been subtly outmaneuvered. “Then you can help me bury him. Dead don't mean anything to a white man.”

“Hpf,” Snake's snorted, refusing to rise to the bait. On Navajo land, he was white and nothing else. He leaned back against the ramada upright and fixed Joseph with an obstinate glare. Joseph answered him with a half-smile that somehow made Snake feel uncomfortably like a sulky little boy having a temper tantrum. Snake made an effort to preserve his dignity by not noticing visibly.

Rain rose to his feet. “I'll help.”

Joseph nodded an acknowledgement that was not quite thanks, his face neutral, and rose silently as well. He picked up a shovel lying by his side of the ramada, and walked over to the shallow grave he had dug in the dry, sandy soil next to the heap of charred ashes, to start the slow task of moving the remains of the pyre into the pit and piling dirt over the top. As he worked, Joseph took up his chant again, repeating phrases Snake thought he remembered from the earlier sing. Rain pulled an entrenching tool from his trailer, and joined the old man in his task. Snake paused long enough to make it clear he was acting on his own, for his own reasons, then climbed slowly to his feet as well. Joseph still had something Snake needed badly: information. Snake took out his own shovel from the camping supplies, and went over to join in the burial. The men worked together in silence, except for Joseph's chanting, until all that was left of the pyre was a mound of tan dirt and a few dark flecks of ash.

The hot afternoon was almost half over by the time the three finished and returned to the lengthening line of shade created by the ramada, to catch their breath and rest.

Joseph sat down with a heavy sigh, wiped his face again, and took a long drink from his canteen. Snake and Rain drank from their own water bottles and settled down beside the old man. Snake and Joseph eyed each other, while Rain sat with a carefully blank expression beside the two. Joseph reached over to a denim jacket hung over a projection in the ramada's wood support, into an inside pocket, and pulled out a small

pouch and a flat packet of papers. He removed a single leaf and, with grave concentration, poured a line of brown flakes from the pouch down the center of it, licked, and sealed it. The sharp smell of tobacco clawed at Snake.

Joseph stuck the finished cigarette into one corner of his mouth and extended the pouch and packet in Snake's direction. "Smoke?"

Snake reached out, took them, and nodded, unsmiling, in Joseph's direction. He rolled a cigarette for himself and lit it from the pack of matches Joseph passed over to him, ignoring the almost imperceptible twinkle of amusement in the old man's dark eyes as Snake passed everything back again. Rain shook his head as Joseph offered him the tobacco in turn. The two men sat smoking for a long, quiet moment. Snake half-closed his eyes as the sweet chemical fire flowed along his nerves, stilling his constant background craving. This was good shit, the real thing, not ten-per-cent American crap.

Rain glanced uncertainly from Snake to Joseph, fidgeting slightly in the face of the other two men's stolid silence. At last, he went over to his trailer and dug through the contents until he found a can of V-8 taken from the overturned truck. He brought it back, and held it out toward Joseph as he sat down again in the shade. "Would you like some juice?"

Joseph's face crinkled into a smile as he accepted the can. He popped the tab and took a long swallow, offered it back to Rain, who shook his head, then Snake, and then finished the little can in one long gulp. He licked his lips and wiped his mouth with a hand. "That's good. Thank you." A beat. "You are?"

"Rain."

"Rain." The twinkle in Joseph's eyes deepened, and Rain flushed slightly and dropped his eyes in evident embarrassment.

"Hippie parents," Snake deadpanned. "Not his fault."

Joseph's eyes acknowledged the joke, but that was all. "You going onto the Rez?" he asked.

"I'm thinkin' about it." Snake answered.

"If you do, you'll need someone to speak for you." Joseph paused, significantly.

Snake finished the last of his cigarette and ground out the butt in the sandy soil beside his boots. "Navajos aren't exactly fond of Mojave," he said, obliquely. "Aren't you a long way from home?"

Joseph shook his head. "You're out of touch, Snake. Government took the Mojave land for some hush-hush military project; ran everybody off the Rez." His eyes accused Snake. "The Russians dropped a major bomb on it, right after the war started. Nothing left now but a crater."

Rain broke in. "I heard about the government relocating First People from other tribes on Navajo land. I heard..." " he stumbled "...nobody was very happy about it."

"It was either that or L.A.," Joseph said. He took a last puff on his own cigarette and pinched it out between callused fingertips, then reclaimed the last few flakes of tobacco and shook them back into his pouch before replacing the entire collection of objects in the pocket of his jacket. Snake waited, careful to betray no impatience or concern, until Joseph turned back to him. "The Rez is patrolled and the Dineh are shooting

trespassers on sight," he said. "No non-Indians allowed on Dinetah, not any more. You don't want a run-in with a bullet, you'd better talk to the people at the Center. You related to someone?"

Snake stared out across the bare red-brown land, flecked with sparse green, toward the distant mauve and purple line of the mountains outlined against deep blue sky. The sun behind them cast long shadows eastward. It would be cooling down soon. "Yeah," Snake said. "Barely." He rose to his feet, shook out his hair, and ran his hands through it in a gesture of anger and frustration. "C'mon; let's go." He strode over to his bike.

Rain gathered up his entrenching tool and water bottle and went over to repack them in his trailer, then stood waiting for the other two men to move out.

Joseph evidently decided to leave it at that for the moment. He climbed slowly upright, stretched, then walked around behind the earth-and-wood mound of the old hogan.

Several minutes later, he reappeared leading two horses. He vaulted easily into the saddle on one of them, took the lead rope of the pack pony, gestured to Snake and Rain to follow him, and swung back onto the road. The horses' hooves clattered on the hard surface as the other two men pushed off and rode on, following him.

The road led toward a line of hills, funneling the riders gradually into a gap between red sandstone cliffs as a canyon rose around them. After a bit of hard pedaling, Snake and Rain reached the top of a rise where Joseph drew rein and they all halted. Just in front of them was a checkpoint with a small guardhouse and a big white wooden sign stenciled in large black-and-red letters: "HALT! DINETAH. NO TRESPASSING," and below, in smaller letters: "Navajo Land. Restricted." The message was reinforced by tall chainlink fencing stretched from one sandstone cliff to the other on both sides of the roadway, blocking access. Two grim-faced men armed with rifles stood between them and the gate in the fence. Snake took a second to admire the tactical ability of the person who had chosen this highly-defensible spot. "You got business on Dinetah?" one of the armed guards growled at them over the sights of his weapon.

Snake dismounted, kicked the stand down, and stepped away from his bike, eyeing the two men. Odds looked good. He moved into a gunfighter's stance, his hands ready over his twin Magnums as he calculated the chances of taking the Indians down. Two sharp clicks sounded, and the trio of travelers looked up. From the sandstone cliffs, on either side, two more Navajos sighted down the barrels of rifles at them. Snake recalculated the odds and froze. "Like I said," the man in front of them said in a dead level voice, threatening in its very flatness, "You got business on Dinetah?"

"I am Joseph Looks-Away. I live here." Joseph produced a Reservation pass and handed it to the man. "This is Snake Plissken and Rain. They're with me. I'm taking them to the Registry Office." He accepted the card back from the hard-eyed Navajo after the man gave it a thorough examination.

The guard called something with "Snake Plissken" in it up to the men on the cliffs. They lowered their guns, and he returned his attention to the trio in front of him. He added something in Navajo, and Joseph nodded and answered slowly. The other man nodded in turn, unlocked the gate, and pulled it open. "You stay together until you get to the Office," he said curtly. To Joseph: "You're responsible for them on Dinetah until then. Split up, and somebody's going to get shot."

As the tall gate swung shut behind them and the three men moved on, Rain turned to Joseph. "Are we on the Reservation now?"

There was a glint of satisfaction in the old man's eyes as he answered. "Not yet. The Council set up this checkpoint after Snake, here, shut down the power. We're taking back our land, moving the borders outward as fast as we get enough people to defend

them. Nothing the whites can do to stop us."

Rain actually grinned, his eyes sparkling. Joseph's expression turned faintly disapproving before it blanked into neutrality again. Snake watched the by-play, disgust and irritation clenching his belly. *Shit. Plissken the hero. It's the hippies all over again. Fucking Indian assholes.*

They rode on for an hour or so through the rust-and-tan landscape, dotted with the sparse green of late spring, until a cluster of low buildings became visible. When they reached them, the main one turned out to be a modern, eight-sided stucco-and-glass structure which made a graceful nod in the direction of traditional hogan design. In front of it, on the other side of a blacktopped parking lot, was a decorative rock-garden and a flagpole with the buff-colored flag of the Navajo Nation fluttering in the light late-afternoon breeze. Several horses were tethered to a railing and one stood, harnessed to a wagon, to one side. An identifying sign in front had been painted over, and now bore bright-red stenciled letters with a message in some language Snake assumed was Navajo. A scattering of dark-skinned men with rifles slung over their shoulders or guns at their hips eyed the three newcomers suspiciously as Joseph rode up, dismounted, and tied the horses to the bike rack at the edge of the sidewalk. Snake and Rain drew up beside him and climbed stiffly off their bicycles.

Snake returned the stares. "Stay here and keep an eye on our shit," he said to Rain in a low tone. Rain nodded agreement and stayed with the bikes as Snake and Joseph went inside. Beyond the glass doors was a sweep of lobby and a blond wood counter with the unmistakable look of a visitors center. Gone were the rack of brochures advertising local tourist attractions, the signs announcing hours and the schedule of dance performances, and directions to the restaurant serving genuine Native American cuisine. In their place was another stern stenciled plaque, this one forbidding entry to Dinetah without authorization, in English and several other languages. Snake felt a prickly sense of *deja-vu* creeping over him. *New place, same old shit. Fucking bureaucrats; there's no end to them,* he thought. He had to fight his first impulse to turn on his heel and walk back the way he had come, tell them to shove it, and head out for someplace else. Where? This was his last, best bolt-hole, for all the reasons he and Rain had come up with back in that abandoned house in California. After a sharp inner struggle, Snake stepped forward with Joseph toward the long-haired young man, in faded jeans and businesslike gunbelt, standing next to the counter.

"Joseph." The young man nodded a greeting, then turned his attention to Joseph's companion. "Who's this?"

"Hello, Bill," Joseph answered. "I'm bringing this one and his friend with me on to Dinetah. I need to speak with Elena. Is she in?"

Bill looked Snake up and down, then answered, "O.K.; go on in." Snake followed Joseph through a door and down a short hallway to a large office. Through the open door he could see filing cabinets lining the walls and a middle-aged woman bent over a pile of paperwork on a cluttered desk. The forgotten sound of a manual typewriter clattered in the hot, dusty air as she leaned forward to read something on the sheet beside her in the fading light from the office window. She straightened as Snake and Joseph entered, her heavy necklaces settling back against the emerald-green velveteen of her blouse. "Yes?"

Snake took the initiative, refusing to let Joseph speak for him. "I'm coming on to the Land," he said, making it a statement rather than a request.

"Are you on the rolls?" The answer was firm and equally uncompromising.

"The name's Plissken. It's probably not there." Snake considered briefly. "Look for Walter Begay."

The woman nodded, on familiar ground. "What are your clans?"

Snake hesitated, searching for ancient, long-buried data far in the back of his mind. His grandmother had tried to teach him something about that once... something about being born for, or to, or... but he had listened with half an ear, and had promptly forgotten most of it. He had a flash of memory: a small boy fidgeting impatiently above the bright flower-patterns on the plastic kitchen tablecloth, kicking at the dinette table's thin metal legs as he listened to his grandmother drone on, and staring out the open back door to the bare dirt yard and the tantalizing blue line of mountains far beyond.

The breathless heat and blinding white light of those Arizona summers, filled with the pervasive smell of dust and softening asphalt, came back to him. Snake shook his head silently.

With an air of patient persistence, the woman continued, following the form, "What was your mother's clan, and name?"

Snake finally pulled up a distant reference. "Maria Begay Plissken... something about bad water." He paused, then added deliberately, "My father's not there."

"Bitter Water?" the woman continued. At Snake's nod, she flipped open a large book to a tabbed section. "What was your grandmother's name?" she asked, her finger on one of the pages. Reading upside down, Snake made out the printed heading at the top: To'dich'ii'nii. Gibberish. Information came slowly out of Snake like rusted nails pulled from a long-sealed coffin. "Dorothy... uh... Gorman."

"And your grandfather? I don't suppose you know his clan?" The woman looked up briefly, then, at Snake's silence, returned to studying the large volume in front of her, flipping pages. After a few minutes of searching, she asked, "Was he the brother of Lawrence?"

"Hell if I know," Snake muttered. "They lived out of Window Rock." He delved further into childhood memory. "Maybe. There was an Uncle Larry... Lawrence, I guess. I don't know anything about him."

"Here you are," the woman said finally, with satisfaction in her voice. "Steven D. Plissken, son of Maria, Bitter Water Clan, grandson of Walter, Towering House Clan and Dorothy, Bitter Water Clan. Your father's not listed. Non-Dineh. Your grandmother put your name down. You're Bitter Water Clan. Children follow the mother." She looked up and smiled at him. "Welcome home, Snake."

Snake gave her his voiceless snort and a look which he hoped was sufficiently cryptic.

Her smile widened slightly. "I had to confirm your background for chapter records. Snake Plissken has a name here. We've followed your war against the white government. We share enemies."

"He has a partner with him, Elena," Joseph broke in. "They're together. He's not on the rolls, but we'll both speak for him."

She paused a moment, as if considering, then said, "Very well, if they're together. What's his name?"

"Rain," Snake said.

Elena arched a sardonic eyebrow, and Snake thought to himself that Rain was going to have a hard time here unless he came up with a new name. "Last name?"

Snake thought for a minute, finally remembered hearing it at Rivendell. "Haven."

"Rain Haven," Elena said in a weary tone. She reached into a lower drawer of her desk and took out a form. "Have him fill this out and bring it back. I'll add him." She turned her attention to Snake's companion. "You know how crowded we are right now, Joseph...." She let the sentence trail away politely.

"They'll be going with me into the back country, up in the canyon."

"Ah." She seemed to remember something, and her expression shifted into sympathetic sorrow. "And?"

"This morning. I took care of everything. His spirit walks free, off Dinetah."

Elena nodded. "I share your sorrow." She busied herself for a few minutes filling out paperwork, and at last handed two cards over the desktop to Snake. "Here's an ID for each of you if you're stopped by the Guard."

"The Guard?"

"Things have changed, Snake," Joseph said.

He and Elena shared a look, and she continued. "You may carry weapons," she nodded in the direction of Snake's twin Magnums, "but not concealed. Joseph will show you the areas that are off-limits. They're plainly marked. Joseph...."

"I know." Joseph smiled wryly. "I'm responsible for them."

Elena's cheeks turned a slightly darker shade. "Until they learn their way on Dinetah." Snake almost imagined he could hear a capital letter on the word Way.

He and Joseph nodded a farewell to the woman and returned to where Rain was standing guard over the bicycles. In a few words, Snake explained what had happened, and handed Rain his ID. *Responsible for me, eh*, Snake thought, eyeing Joseph as the old man untied the reins and swung up into the saddle of his horse, *Fuck that*. For a second time, he almost turned and rode away, then he gave a mental shrug. He didn't have any better plan right at the moment. He'd have to think about it.

Snake hoped there might be a motel or guesthouse where they could spend the night, but if there was, nobody mentioned it or offered them a room. The armed Navajo guard in the front seemed no more friendly on the way out than he had on their way in, watching them in silence as Joseph led the way back to the parking lot. The few locals who had been hanging around when they rode up had disappeared into the gathering dusk along with the horses and wagon, and the buildings around the former Visitors' Center were tight shut, unlabeled, evidently private. Sandy-eyed and weary, his head throbbing more than usual, Snake resigned himself to another night camping along the road, and swung his leg over the seat of his bicycle. It seemed heavier than usual as he pushed off, pedaling to keep up with Joseph. Rain followed uncomplainingly, silent and seemingly lost in thought. They headed on eastward, along the road, into the Reservation.

After a while, Joseph broke the silence. "I live in the back country, a couple of canyons over, but we can stay on the road a little longer before turning off. Easier for the bikes."

Snake felt his temper fraying under the influence of his headache, and was unenthusiastic about having to deal with any more people. "You live by yourself?"

"Don't worry, Snake; you're welcome on Dinetah. As Elena said, you have a name here."

"Bullshit!" Snake broke in, remembering the gauntlet of hard-eyed guards the trio had passed since they entered Indian-controlled land.

"Terrible name. You should have stayed with Snake," Joseph said, his voice dead even. Snake turned to glare at him angrily. That was evidently the reaction Joseph was hoping for: his eyes crinkled with amusement and he chuckled softly. Snake snorted, remembering how much he hated Indian humor.

"Look!" Rain was pointing toward a mound of dirt and timbers not far off the road: the remains of an old hogan. He pulled up to a stop and turned to Joseph. "Raiders?"

Joseph shook his head. "No. Just somebody's old house."

Snake gave a disgusted growl deep in his throat and pushed off again, coming down hard on the downstroke. Rain pedaled after him. The questioning look on the younger man's face fueled Snake's irritation, and he rubbed a sleeve across his sweating forehead.

"Wood's a major pain in the ass to get around here, and when somebody dies, fucking Indians break a hole in the wall and let it rot." His gaze raked Joseph. "Scared of the dead."

"It is not the first time a white man mistook respect for fear," Joseph replied evenly.

Rain looked from one to the other, confusion on his face. "But, the funeral fire I thought....".

"From the remada." Joseph tapped his mount into a faster pace. The set of his shoulders suggested the subject was closed. He rode easily in the saddle, his large frame graceful and relaxed. "There's a wash with a spring not far from here. We'll make camp there. It's getting late." He turned his horse off the blacktop as they came to a narrow unpaved road, not much more than a rutted track, that led downward into a deepening slot between two dry hills. Snake and Rain followed, bumping over occasional rocks the sure-footed horses avoided. As he rode along, Snake mulled over the disturbing new atmosphere on the reservation. If there was a chance of being jumped by a gang of homicidal crazies, of one kind or another, three men would be safer than two on the road. He'd split up with Joseph when he found a more defensible spot to settle.

They came out into a little hollow carpeted in silvery stipa-grass and dotted with stubby trees. A dark line down one of the rock walls framing the desert meadow showed where a thin seep of water tricked down into a depression in the rock below to form a small natural pool. Joseph drew rein and dismounted, and his two companions gratefully stopped pedaling and did the same. Stars were glinting in the dark sky when the three men finished setting up camp and sat down to a meal of food pooled from their mutual supplies. Sun-warmed water from a shallow spill-over pool below the main one had even allowed a sketchy wash before the sharp cold of the desert night descended and Snake, chilled, pulled on his jacket. The pain in his head was worse than usual, and the vision in his good eye seemed to be blurring slightly, which disturbed him more than he wanted to admit to himself. Silently, he sank down next to the fire, wondering if lighting it had been a good idea. He shrugged: even if there were raiders in the area, the hills cupping this hollow would probably hide the light unless they were right on top of the

camp. The warmth felt good in the cold blackness. Snake stretched out his boots toward the flames, and spooned hot pinto beans into his mouth.

Rain finished his own helping and set down the metal plate from his mess-kit. He seemed to be chewing on something besides beans. "Uh, Snake," the younger man began, "if your grandparents were Navajo, that makes you one-half...."

Snake's almost-peaceful mood shattered. "Fuck that!" he growled. Murky resentment and anger rose in him, seeking a target, finding nothing concrete. In exasperation, he slammed down his plate and stood up. "I'll take first watch," he bit off. He walked a short distance away and stood looking out over the little valley, running his hands through his long hair. He could almost feel Joseph behind him elaborately pretending not to hear. That was even more irritating. *Never give an Indian an opening*, he thought. Rain's voice, from his place beside the fire, carried to Snake in the vast silence of the desert night. *Fucking asshole kid....*

"Joseph?" Rain's tone was hesitant, almost apologetic.

"That question under your hair finally trying to get loose?" Joseph said. "Well, what is it?" Snake heard the scrape of a match and the sharp scent of tobacco drifted to him as the old man took the first puff of an after-dinner cigarette. Snake gritted his teeth and refused to turn around.

"Snake says his grandparents were Navajo... H How much...?"

"How much 'Indian' turns a white man red?" Joseph's voice was calm. Any mockery was well concealed.

"Um... well...." The embarrassment in Rain's voice deepened, and Snake smiled sardonically to himself.

"Everyone's so concerned about percentages. The US government even gave us CDIB cards: 'Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood,' as if souls can be measured out, divided up like a spoonful of beans. Snake's blood is Dineh, but his heart...." Snake could hear the slight change in Joseph's tone as he shifted position. "A man is what he thinks he is, to himself. Snake is a white man. For now." Snake risked a look at the two figures outlined in shifting light and shadow by the fire. Abruptly, Joseph pulled his sleeping bag up around himself and lay down with his back to Rain. "I'll take next watch. Sleep, now." Rain made an inconclusive gesture in the old man's direction, and drew in a breath as if to continue the conversation. Without turning, Joseph added over his shoulder, "Rain, some advice: never piss into the wind. Never keep Joseph Looks-Away awake when he wants to sleep. Both will get you into very much trouble. Now, goodnight."

Within minutes, the sound of steady breathing from the old man's bundle of cloth indicated he was fast asleep. Rain sat watching him for a few minutes, turned a quick look in Snake's direction, and then rolled over, curled up in his own sleeping bag, and lay down next to the fire. Somewhere, in a locked place within him, Snake felt a stirring of something like bitter satisfaction. Rain had learned to read him well enough, and keep his distance at the right time.

He turned and looked back out over the silvery shimmer of long stipa in the moonlight, bending and rippling in the night-wind. *Wasted motion*, Snake thought, *going nowhere. The grass goes where the wind pushes it, and when the wind stops pushing, it ends up back where it started. Like me.* Joseph's hobbled horses were large, bulky shadows, moving slowly over the dappled surface. The steady tearing sound of their grazing came to Snake over the soft drip of the water-seep into its rocky pool. He could smell the tang

of the mineral-rich water on damp stone. He moved a little distance away, found a rock, and sat down on it, facing the fire. The hills were a jagged dark wall around him, against a slightly grayer sky. In spite of himself, he felt a sense of returning. His dead grandmother's face came back to him: her elaborate jewelry, the way she wore her hair, her patient voice, her hands always busy with something. "Everything is a circle," she had told him once; "The faster you run in one direction, the faster you get back to where you started."

Snake watched the red glow of the slow-dying fire. He had run for thirty years from this land: run to the Army, into war, out of that war into revenge and a different kind of war; run through Kansas City, New York Max, Cleveland, New Vegas, Los Angeles, and here he was, at the end of everything, back where he had started. *All for nothing....*

Under his weariness, a half-forgotten anger stirred: not the familiar anger at the USPF and the Feds, but an older anger against mother and his father, the stern and unbending Col. Robert Plissken. Almost every year, S.D. "Steve" Plissken -- Snake -- had ended up here when his parents fought, or made up, or he screwed up. Arizona had been a threat realized each year in summer exile, and yet a refuge where he could disappear for days into the mountains and be free of people. Snake startled as a log fell inward on the fire, with a soft rustling crash, and sparks danced upward. The bright streaks against the black night sky reminded him of something. He tried to pin it down, but the image faded before he could grasp it. Snake pulled his mind back to his watch, pushing his memories down into the hidden place inside him where they were kept locked away.

His head hurt, and his good eye watered in the chill air. He rose, stamped the feeling back into his booted feet, shrugged up his jacket-collar, and walked farther away from the two men sleeping by the fire, out into the cold white-and-black landscape. It was so quiet he could hear his own blood moving in his ears. As he watched, a mule deer doe stepped out into the open from behind the black shadow of a bush. Ears twitching, nostrils flared, she moved slowly to the edge of the rock pool, paused, then lowered her muzzle to the water and drank. She raised her head and stood watching Snake's still form intently. Perhaps the wind shifted and she caught his scent, for a second later she turned, and, with a final flick of her tail, was gone again into the brush. Snake smiled to himself, thinking of fresh venison.

Snake lapsed into almost-total silence during the next few days, as the three men worked their way into the maze of washes and canyons. Signs of game increased: deer, an occasional family of elk, a lone bighorn, and, along with them, the quick brown-gray flash of a loping coyote or a tassel-eared Albert squirrel. Once, they found the dried track of a mountain lion near another pool. Another time they came over a ridge to see a little herd of eight shaggy, white-faced Herefords grazing in a grassy hollow, guarded by a busy cattle dog and an unfriendly man with a rifle who eyed Snake's Magnums and the crossbow slung over Rain's shoulder with suspicion. *Illegal beef*, Snake thought, wondering if it had been someone like this who had provided Ormsby with his contraband streak.

Snake noticed Rain watching him, and tried to ignore it. Bright sun stabbed pain through him, and Snake started wearing his sunglasses most of the time. He pedaled steadily along, wasting no effort, fighting the slowly growing dizziness and nausea, trying not to cough as dry desert air rasped his lungs. At night, he ate little and collapsed heavily into his bedroll after his stint on watch, to wake reluctantly the next morning, feeling no better. He hung on grimly, looking for a good place to stop moving and settle.

At last, one late afternoon, Rain fell back to pedal along at Snake's side. Stored heat reflecting up from the potholed blacktop had joined his fever, and Snake's flushed face was glazed with sweat. The sunglasses were a black horizontal slash echoed by a thinner slash of mouth below, framed in dark beard. Damp strands of hair curled on his

shoulders. Rain stared at Snake, concern written on his face.

"Snake, are you feeling all right?"

Snake struggled with himself for a moment, with his purely animal desire not to show vulnerability, then gave way to a racking cough and admitted, "I feel like shit."

"Plague," Rain said, his tone flat, frightened.

"No, it's not the fucking plague," Snake snarled, his voice edged with annoyance. "It's that goddamned Plutoxin-7." He trailed off into another bout of coughing.

"What if it isn't, Snake? What about those bodies outside of Flagstaff? What if....".

"It's not plague," Snake repeated, biting off each word, trying to put conviction into his voice. All he needed right now was for Rain and the old man to panic and run out on him, before he found a place to hole up until he stopped hacking his lungs out. All the same, he wondered uneasily if this was the first symptoms of whatever it was that had wiped out most of Flagstaff. *And who knew how many other people*, his mind added, unbidden. A sinking feeling grew in his belly.

"Listen!" Joseph's voice cut across Snake's thoughts. The trio froze, and, in the sudden silence, Snake heard a hissing sound, mixed with mechanical clattering, heading in their direction from further down the dirt road. "Sounds like the raiders who jumped... my friend and me." Joseph said. "Get off the road. Go!"

A wriggling dot appeared in the heat shimmer where the road touched the horizon, followed a second later by the glint of sunlight on metal. Snake cursed under his breath. If he could see them, those approaching had probably seen him as well. They'd have to fight their way out of this one. A surge of adrenaline overrode his body's malaise, and practiced reflexes kicked in as Snake looked around quickly for a defensible position. Not far off the roadbed he saw a promising sandstone outcropping rising up out of the flat sandy ground, shielded by a tangle of spiky gray-green bushes. Rain and Joseph were already moving in the same direction. Joseph swung down off his mount, led the horses behind the rock, and whipped both sets of reins around one of the thicker branches of a bush. Snake and Rain pulled their bicycles and trailers as far behind the rock barrier as they could. They waited tensely behind the rock, weapons trained on the oncoming menace.

The wriggling dot gradually became visible as a battered old pickup truck converted to steam power. Snake counted six passengers, all armed, as the makeshift assault vehicle, its boiler hissing violently, shuddered up the incline toward their hiding place. Snake snapped the Heckler and Koch out of its handlebar mount and raked the vehicle with gunfire. One of the passengers slumped over the side panel, and the others scrambled to take cover behind the truck as it ground to a halt on the road opposite the large rock outcrop. The unpaved shoulder sloped down slightly into a patch of the same spiky grayish plants, forming a backdrop for the wheezing vehicle.

"That's them," Joseph's voice came from behind Snake, and Snake nodded once, shortly. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Rain shift his cocked crossbow to a better firing position, braced in a notch of sandstone at the opposite end of the outcrop.

"Hey, you -- get out here!" The speaker, a scar-faced man in filthy Levis and a torn denim jacket open over his bare chest, stepped out from behind the truck. His dark hair was long and wild, bandannaed like a movie Apache's, and a shriveled human hand hung, theatrically, on a leather thong around his neck. He swung up the huge scattergun in his hands and fired. Snake and Rain ducked their heads below the edge of

the outcrop as rock chips peppered them. "You don't come out, we come in an' get you," the man shouted. "You die quick, or slow and painful. Your choice."

A second figure popped up from behind the truck, waving his arms in the air. One fist held a pistol, the other was a dented and rusting prosthetic with a bayonet crudely attached in place of a hand. "Get 'em, Jack!" the raider's rat-faced cheering section cried. There was a grunt and a thud as the figure disappeared again from sight, pulled down by someone behind the truck. Snake fired, sending a heavy slug past Jack's head. He corrected for heat shimmer rising off the blacktop and fired again, but by then the leader of the raiders had retreated behind his pickup.

Snake set down the rifle and started working his way crabwise toward a better vantage point farther up the back of the outcropping, using finger-and toe-holds. He crouched in a shallow sandy depression, wedged between two sandstone boulders and a twisted juniper's trunk, and drew his Magnums. The HK was more accurate, but at this range he preferred his own guns, trusted and familiar in his hand. Below him, to one side, Snake could see Rain poised behind the sights of his crossbow, waiting for a chance to get off a good shot. Joseph seemed to have melted into the landscape. Snake spared him no more than a half-second's thought, wondering just whose side the cowardly old bastard was really on, before turning back to the battle. He tried a shot over the back of the truck, and ducked as several bullets in response nearly took his hat off. Rain loosed a crossbow bolt as one of the raiders raised his head over the side of the truck to return Snake's fire. His target dropped, shot through the face, drawing an answering fusillade from his comrades. Snake began a heavy barrage, attacking the pickup, and both tires on the side toward him exploded, as return fire peppered the rocks around him and Rain. *Standoff*, Snake thought.

The rat-faced raider bounced up again from behind the truck with something in his good hand. An instant later, Snake recognized it as an old-fashioned grenade, as the raider yanked the firing pin with his teeth and threw it in his direction. *Obsolete and surplus*, Snake thought; *Another souvenir of the government's damned War*. He watched the thing sailing toward him, and almost smiled. *But this asshole's no soldier*. He had plenty of time; Rat-face hadn't waited the count before sending the little present Snake's way. The grenade bounced on the ground behind him and rolled to a stop against a rock. Calmly, Snake scooped it up, stood, and with a sharp snap of his arm, lobbed the ball overhand, back the way it had come, into the center of the enemy group. He heard a *whuf* of expelled breath from Rain's position, and flicked a glance in his direction just in time to see the look of semi-panic on Rain's face, as the grenade arced down between them, become something like awe at what Rain thought, Snake suspected, was Snake's amazing bravery. Snake flashed amusement and irritation: *fucking kid's still trying to turn me into his little tin hero*, but it was no more than half-hearted reflex. For the first time since Taylor's death, he realized, he had confidence in the man who was fighting beside him.

A gratifying chorus of yelps and screams erupted from behind the truck as Snake yelled, "Down!" in Rain's direction and dropped, waiting for the explosion. Silence. *Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen... shit!* The grenade was a dud. Or a fake. Cursing inwardly, Snake pulled himself up to the top of his hiding place to see the ragtag men, who had scattered when the grenade landed, scuttling back behind the barrier of their truck. The last one to arrive kicked the unexploded grenade out of his way with a curse and a derisive yell, "Yaaa!! Didn't go off!" He fired a shot as he dove for safety.

"It's *your* fucking piece of shit!" Rain had an almost gleeful grin on his face, as the snap of his crossbow answered, and a quarrel clattered against the spot the man had been an instant before. Snake found himself grinning too. *Score one, kid*.

Snake studied the truck, his mind moving into high gear, and memories of New York Max surfaced. While Rain kept the raiders occupied, snapping a crossbow bolt every time a head surfaced, Snake scrambled down the slope, back to his bike-trailer, loaded the heavy Barrett armor-piercing gun, and carried it back to his perch. A bullet sang through his hair, taking his hat with it, as he sighted and fired, bracing against the recoil. The truck wobbled on its deflated tires, door crumpling. Ears ringing from the blast, Snake corrected, aimed for the boiler, and fired. *Just like New York.* Steam and boiling water fountained, sending the scalded raiders scattering again with a chorus of screams and curses. From behind the sandstone outcropping, Snake and Rain picked them off one by one with Magnums, throwing knife, and crossbow, ducking return fire from the leader, who was still hidden behind the junked truck, yelling uselessly at his men to stay under cover.

With a high-pitched scream, Joseph Looks-Away materialized out of the tangle of mesquite behind the truck, and Jack died in a spray of blood as Joseph's knife slashed across his throat. The last of the raiders, terror on his face, scabbled away toward the sheltering brush, dragging a mass of pulped flesh that had been his leg before Snake's bullets smashed into it. "When you join him, tell your leader I killed him for Johnny Grey Owl," Joseph said. He bent down and stabbed the man once, a clean blow like a hunter dispatching a wounded deer. The man choked and died. Joseph straightened, pulling his knife free from the dead raider's chest, wiped the blade, and sheathed it at his waist. He walked over to the sandstone outcropping as Snake and Rain worked their way down the steep slope to meet him.

There was irony buried in Joseph's dark eyes as he greeted them with: "You two tired of playing Cowboys and Indians?" Rain jumped down from the rock to land next to him. Joseph's glance swept the young man's lean body from tan nylon-and-rubber hiking boots, over dusty khaki pants and shirt, to long, brown hair caught up with a band into a ponytail. The wrinkles at the corners of the old man's mouth deepened. "Where you grew up, it was 'Animal Oppressors and Native Americans,' and the good guys had the bows and arrows, right?"

"First People," Rain answered, grinning as he caught the joke. He sounded a bit out of breath.

"Right," Joseph repeated, dryly. "And the Indians always came out on top, didn't they?" An uncomfortable look replaced the grin on Rain's face, as if he were trying to understand what he was supposed to be embarrassed about.

Sturdy leather boots landed beside Rain's, as Snake finished his slower climb down the rock-face, hampered by the heavy Barrett. He shifted the gun off his shoulder and replaced it in his trailer. "In my day, the cowboys kicked Indian butt," he said deliberately, and looked over at Rain, adding, "You can't win with them."

Joseph favored Snake with a sardonic smile. He seemed amused by both of the others. "No," he agreed; "Not in the long run."

Snake almost doubled over as he gave way to a racking bout of coughing. Now that the adrenaline-rush of battle was over, he realized again just how bad he felt. Sweat ran down his face as he straightened up, jamming his wide-brimmed hat back down on his head with an irritated gesture. He glared in Joseph's direction. "I want to find this canyon of yours and hole up 'til this is over." *Hard-hitting case of the flu, my ass.*

Fuckers. He noticed, and ignored, the look of concern Rain turned in his direction as Snake pushed his bike and trailer back up onto the paved road.

"Let's move out," Joseph agreed. He unwrapped his horses' reins from the spiky

gray-green bushes, and the hollow clop of their hooves sounded on the blacktop as he led them up onto the road. He paused beside the steaming wreck of the truck to tighten the pack horse's girth. Rain followed with his own bike.

Snake, looking back at them, nodded in the direction of Jack's stiffening corpse and said sourly, "Stupid risk."

Joseph smiled at him, refusing to rise to the bait. "From what I've seen on the Police Channel, you're not the one to talk, Snake." He shrugged and finished tightening the strap. "Had to be done. The gun I had was my friend's. It burned with him." He started to swing up onto his lead horse, then stopped, evidently caught by the look on Snake's face.

"Wait." Snake dismounted and rummaged in the contents of his bike-trailer to come up with the flat black case holding the Walther P-38 and its accessories. He held it out in Joseph's direction. "Here. Don't burn this one."

Joseph took the case, opened it, and withdrew the expensive pistol. It gleamed black in his hand. He whistled. "You giving this to me?" He touched the shoulder stock, clips and shoulder holster, then took the sight and stared through it before replacing it in the case.

"Don't need it," Snake said. His hands brushed the butts of his Magnums. "I've got my guns." He nodded toward the pistol in Joseph's hand. "That's a rich man's toy, but it's a Walther." He directed an ironic glance at Rain that included Joseph in the joke. "Better than bow and arrows."

Joseph slapped a clip home in the butt of the small gun and smiled again. "I've never shot an arrow in my life." He laid his right wrist across his left forearm, steadying the P-38, and sighted. "Watch out." He fired, and the grenade still lying on the road some distance away detonated violently, cratering the blacktop and sending a wind laden with dust into Snake's face. The horses snorted and shied, and the three men spat out grit and wiped their eyes as Joseph brought the animals back under control. "First Air Cav," he said, eyeing Snake, "Vietnam." He fastened the holster in place, shoved the P-38 into it, and swung up onto his lead horse. "O.K. Let's go." The three of them headed out, riding parallel, taking up the width of the road.

In Snake's feverish state, it was a long trip into the canyons. He memorized landmarks with a pilot's eye, as blacktop gave way to gravel, then parallel ruts, and finally became packed-down caliche and rock, with pockets of sand. The horses picked their way carefully over loose stones, as the two bicyclists got off and pushed their heavily-loaded machines over the hard ground. At last they came around a sharp bend in the high sandstone walls to find a steep slope leading down into a narrow slot in the rocks. A shallow stream glittered at the bottom, clear water over rock. "Here," Joseph said.

Snake eyed the descent and exchanged dubious glances with Rain. Joseph dismounted and, with considerable encouragement, led the protesting horses down, their hooves slipping and skidding on the rocks as they followed the narrow trail to the bottom. They stood hock-deep in water, pawing occasionally at the mossy streambed, as Joseph looked up at Snake and Rain impatiently. "Come on," he called up to them.

"I'll pass the bikes down to you," Snake said. Rain nodded, and worked his way down to a more secure rock about half-way to the bottom, where he braced himself. Snake dug his boots in and, one by one, leaned over to lower his bike, then Rain's, then each of the trailers, down the slope, steadying them with an attached length of rope snugged around a rock at the canyon's rim. Rain passed them on down to Joseph, then climbed the rest of the way down himself. Snake half-climbed, half-slid down, hit a patch of loose

scree, and ended up with an undignified skid and splash into the cold water at the foot of the cliff. He picked himself up without comment and went to help Rain reattach the trailers to the bikes.

The trio splashed along, ankle-deep in water, down the streambed, through the high, narrow slot in the sandstone walls, for perhaps an hour by Snake's reckoning before the canyon widened out enough to give them room to pull their bikes up onto a dry bank. Snake checked to make sure the waterproof tarp had kept his cargo reasonably dry, then stood looking around while Rain finished a similar inspection. In the deep afternoon shadow of the cliffs, the air was hot and still, full of the trickling sound of shallow water and the smell of damp sandstone. Partway up the wall, a hanging garden of maidenhair fern and dropseed, sprinkled with clusters of white-flowered columbine, followed the line of a seep adding moisture to the little stream below. As Snake watched, a gray lizard crept out from a cleft in the rocks, stood poised for an instant like a tiny dinosaur in a prehistoric landscape, then flickered and was gone into the vegetation. Snake reached a hand down into a small pool in the rock-face which had been hollowed out by the dribble of water, and raised a questioning eyebrow at Joseph.

The old man nodded. "It's safe."

Snake filled his cupped hands several times, drinking thirstily, then splashed his sweating face. The water was cool, sharp with the taste and smell of dissolved minerals, a flavor from Snake's Arizona childhood. He straightened, wiping his chin with the back of his hand. "Nice place," he said softly, "Get many visitors?"

"The front door's about thirty miles downstream. Eighty by the road, if you can call it that. Coming in this way cuts at lot of time off the trip."

Rain also took a deep drink from the pool, then Joseph drank and watered his horses. The sun was westering when the three men moved out along the jumble of rocks and gravel, dotted with occasional twisted trees and brush, that marked the high-water line of the wash. It was hard going for the heavy bicycles on the uneven ground, and Snake's malaise deepened as he pushed his machine along. He felt the bone-deep ache in his tired muscles, the throbbing pain in his head spiked with flashes from behind his damaged eye. His vision blurred, sweat dripping down his face into his good eye, soaking his body, as he trudged on numbly. Two more hours brought them to a spot where the canyon broadened out to create a wide grassy area above a fringe of cottonwoods along the bank of the wash. The vegetation was thick and green in the wake of the spring run-off, greener than Snake could remember from his childhood explorations.

Rain evidently noticed too. He was looking around, a big smile on his face. "Look at all the grass. It's beautiful!"

"Climate's getting wetter, so they say," Joseph said as he drew rein. His horse blew and tossed his head, then ripped up a tuft of grass and began chewing. "More water, more grass, more game. Fewer cows; that may be the only good thing we ever got from the damned U.S. government." He ran a hand along his horse's neck, ruffling the long mane. "Some people think it's going back to the way it was when they lived here." He jerked his chin in the direction of the opposite canyon wall. The other two men followed the line of his gesture. About a third of the way up the sandstone cliff was a deep overhang, and in the late-afternoon shadow beneath it, Snake caught an indistinct glimpse of masonry, intersecting geometric shapes rising out of a jumble of fallen blocks.

"What's the name of the ruin?" Rain asked.

Joseph shrugged. "No name, not even a number on the University's antiquities registry. Just one of the thousands of unexplored ruins hidden away in the canyons. I don't think anyone's even been up there since the people who built it moved out. If they have, I've never heard about it."

As Snake watched, the sun had shifted. Now, in the last moments before sunset, slanting light struck the southwest-facing cliff in front of them, turning the upper section a flame-bright red-orange, the lower section the deep blood-red of glowing embers. In the alcove below, the Anasazi ruin was the gray-and-black of burned ash. Square doorways of the old houses were darker black-on-black, mysterious openings into some other place. For a second, Snake thought he saw some reflected dazzle in the blackness, like faint streaks of light in the night sky. He blinked and it was gone. He made a decision. "I'm camping here," he said, and turned to unpack his sleeping bag from his trailer. Joseph and Rain exchanged glances, but there was such conviction in Snake's voice that they didn't argue.

After dinner, the three lay wrapped in their sleeping bags, watching the fire die down inside its circle of stones and earth, not quite ready to fall asleep. Above them the last streaks of sunset had faded, and stars blazed in a clear black sky. The steady ripping sound of the horses grazing nearby mingled with the soft gurgling of the stream. Snake was grateful for the cool air on his feverish face as the night chill deepened. He took a deep breath flavored with woodsmoke. From somewhere down the river came a sharp yipping cry, followed by another, answering wail.

"Coyotes," Rain said. Snake could hear the smile in his voice.

Cupping his hands to his mouth, Joseph gave a high warbling cry in return, and when the two voices answered him, Snake saw the white of his teeth flash in the dying firelight. "I really shouldn't do that," Joseph said, laughing a little. "It confuses them. I'm not of their nation."

"They're animals," Snake said. "How could you be in their pack?"

Joseph's tone turned somber. "I'm not; not here, not now. When I was a child, at home, in the Mojave... before I went to the city to become white....". The sentence trailed away into a shrug.

"Ah," Rain said, a sound indicating agreement and understanding. Snake could see the younger man nodding, and for some reason he found that irritated him.

Joseph's face was planes of dark bronze in the last of the firelight. "I should have come back before. I was wrong. I wanted to be something I wasn't. Now I'm returning."

"Is that why you're called Looks-Away?" Rain asked. "Because you abandoned your people's heritage?"

Joseph sighed. "No. I was called Roberts in the Service. I took Looks-Away when I left the Army. I was sick of white names."

"What did you do in the Army?" Snake interjected.

"I was a medical corpsman." Joseph smiled faintly. "The Army didn't accept being an Indian activist as a legitimate reason for a CO exemption, and I wasn't about to go overseas to kill people for defending their land, in the name of a government that had done the same to my people."

Snake's snort of disgust was eloquent. He turned and looked out over the grassy area

beyond their campfire toward the Anasazi ruin and the black wall of the sandstone cliff. He didn't have to see Rain to know that the boy was nodding again, agreeing with the old Indian, regurgitating political bullshit that had been history before Rain was born. *Bullshit then; bullshit now.* Snake felt a familiar restless irritation rising in him.

Joseph seemed to sense Snake's mood and deliberately turn the conversation in a less dangerous direction. Snake heard his voice shift as he faced the younger man: "Speaking of names, why are you called Rain?"

"My parents named me Rain to honor the earth. Kind of like, uh... Native American names."

Joseph's tone took on an edge. "What is Turtle Island? Do you know?"

"Turtle Island is what the First People call the continent of America." Rain sounded a bit smug. "It was brought up by Turtle, an earth diver."

"Your name's Haven; that's English. Who were Audhumla and Ymir?"

Rain was silent. Finally, he said hesitantly, "I... I don't know."

"Why study Indian beliefs?" Joseph said. "Don't your people have any of their own? You steal our names, our history, our legends, our identity....".

"I'm sorry..." Rain said softly, sounding flustered.

"...And think because you've trapped something inside a book, you understand it," Joseph finished.

The irritation that had been building in Snake flared, and he turned back to the conversation. "Hey, hey, hey.... You want to guilt trip the white man, go after somebody who's really fucked you over! At least the kid's trying." Snake raised himself on one elbow and ran his hand through his hair in a gesture of annoyed frustration. "Hell, the only difference between Indians and trailer trash is Indians have less money. What did your stories ever get you?"

"Nothing you would find valuable maybe, Snake." Joseph said, wearily. "I'm not angry at either of you. Just sad. Rain, you need to study your own past. There is honor there, a heritage of your own. Your names mean things, just like ours. What was your grandmother's name?"

"Carol," Rain said. "And my grandfather was Mark."

"There," Joseph said. "Your grandmother's name means 'a song'. And your grandfather was 'a warrior.' Fine names. You don't need to look outside your own family, your own heritage." He turned to Snake. "You weren't always 'Snake.' What did your parents name you?."

Snake gave an almost-silent growl of disgust, pulled the sleeping bag up around his shoulders, and turned over, away from the guttering embers of the fire, to face the dark wall of the cliff.

There was silence for a few minutes. Then Joseph said gently, "You have no birth-name? No family? No past? Then you are even poorer than the Indians you despise." He stirred the fire with a stick, scattering the ashes and mixing them with sandy dirt, then lay back down and pulled up his own sleeping bag. "Go to sleep, both of you. Good dreams."

Sun-dazzle sparked off the rock under the young boy's climbing feet. He squinted up the canyon wall into the merciless Arizona sky, the color of his eyes. The sun had begun its summer task of burning him brown and turning his hair, not yet darkened into its adult auburn, to flaming red. He stopped to breathe and look back the way he had come, back toward his grandmother's little square stucco house in its patch of bare, hard earth. He had escaped again, avoiding the boring chores she intended for him, to run free in the twisting labyrinth of canyons and mesas. The heat was a palpable weight on his back, the dry air burning in his lungs, the ground under him almost white in the midday glare. He shifted a sweat-soaked backpack-strap, scratched under it with fingernails bitten to the quick, and climbed on toward the mesa. Something up there was calling him.

Part-way up the cliff was an old Indian ruin. The doorways were black squares in sun-bleached walls, promising refuge from the sun. He ducked under the low lintel into the darkness beyond. For a minute he could see nothing, then his eyes adjusted, and he took a few steps, through a second low door, into the heart of the ruin. A flickering light glowed up ahead, drawing him toward it. As he stepped through the door, he saw the room was an old kiva. He felt the power swirling in it. At the center of the round space, a small fire was burning, filling the air with heat and the smell of smoke. In the dim light, he could see a man, dressed all in form-fitting black, sitting beside the campfire. The man raised his head and stared at him. The boy looked back into the man's face, a harsh, scarred, lined face, thick with dark stubble. One eye was covered by a black patch, the other glinted savage blue in the firelight. "Welcome," the man said; "Come in, Steven." The dark voice boomed, echoed, filled the kiva. Steven Plissken raised his hands to cover his ears, staring into the black man's open mouth. Horrified, yet somehow not surprised, he saw the mouth was full of fire. The man in front of him was burning inside. Steven turned to flee, but the burning man stretched out his finger, touched it to the floor in front of him, and a thin line of fire, like a rattlesnake's trail in desert dust, stretched out, circled around, across the doorway behind Steven, and back to the burning man's other hand, sealing the exit.

The figure spoke again, his voice roaring flame: "This is your place. You belong here. COME... TO... ME..... . COME.....!" He stretched out his flaming hand. Steven reached out across the narrow space and took it. Fire flamed between them, joining them. There was an instant of searing pain, and then they/he were pure light, pure energy, pure white-hot flame. He spread out his bright arms, and fire fell from his blazing fingers and roared up all around him. The kiva disappeared, consumed in fire, and he stood, burning, on the edge of the mesa, on the edge of the world, against a night sky. Flames spread out from him to cover the world, and it was all his in its moment of destruction. He laughed, shouting out his pure joy as he burned, and the world burned with him.

Snake woke abruptly, his dream scattering like sparks on the wind. The air was cold, the deep chill of desert pre-dawn, and the cliff in front of him was a black mass against a slightly lighter gray; morning was close, but the sun would not rise over the rim of the canyon for some time yet. As he sat up and unzipped his sleeping bag, he heard the shrill cry of a saw-whet owl higher up in the cliffs. Moments later, from somewhere further off, came a long, wavering howl. Joseph's horses snorted and stamped at the sound, tossing their heads. Snake frowned. Even to his inexperienced ear, the howl was too deep and powerful. That was no coyote; that was a wolf, one of the descendants of the Mexican lobos reintroduced into Arizona in the 'nineties. Snake looked around, expecting Rain

or Joseph to wake, but both lay unmoving, fast asleep. Snake untangled himself from his bedroll and got to his feet. Absently, he buckled on his guns, grabbed the chemlamp, and picked up his eyepatch. Without thinking, he shoved the scrap of black cloth into a jacket pocket. Still without conscious decision, moved by some vague inner urge, he began to climb up the edge of the canyon wall, heading toward the Anasazi ruins.

Sometime after the ruins were deserted, a rockslide had brought down part of the cliff wall, creating an easy slope up to the level of the buildings. Fifteen minutes of climbing brought Snake to the edge of the packed earth plaza, where he paused to look around. Part of the ruin's walls had broken and crumbled away, but most of the long bank of red sandstone blocks and rubble mortar was intact. Except for a layer of buff-color dust everywhere, the old village looked as if its inhabitants had moved out no more than days before. As he stood there in the chill pre-dawn gloom, Snake felt a sense of presence seeping into him. The very air here was thick with time and phantom echoes of the past. If he'd been a Navajo, Snake thought, it would have been easy to feel the place was full of *chindi*, ghosts of the Ancient Enemies, but he felt no sense of unease or foreboding, rather of completion, almost of coming home. *...here... some* inner certainty said: *... here is the place you are searching for....* Snake headed for the low door-window of the building in front of him, not surprised to see that it looked exactly as it had in his dream. Air currents from within brushed across his face and his eyes watered slightly at the brief flurry of dust in the air. For a moment, he thought he could smell smoke, but the scent faded almost before he noticed it.

Snake ducked under the low lintel and stepped into the space beyond, turning the chemlamp to a dim green glow. As he moved through the ruin's interconnected rooms, something always just beyond the light seemed to retreat from him into deeper darkness, luring him inward. His rational mind warned of rattlesnakes, poisonous spiders, crumbling masonry and sudden drop-offs, but something stronger said here was safety and haven. The restless urge that had driven him since he left Rivendell quieted. He took a deep breath. The air around him was comfortably cool, smelling of dust and age. He felt it drawing the fever-heat from his body to warm the room he stood in: an exchange of energies, it seemed to him; a part of himself for a part of this place.

Light from outside strengthened around him, and Snake turned to look out the door-window of the room he was examining. Salmon pink and lemon-yellow showed above the cliff-wall, heralding true dawn. The light stabbed his bad eye. Snake fumbled his eyepatch from his pocket and slid it into place as he stepped out again into the plaza and snapped off the chemlamp. He turned and looked back at the masonry walls, but the ruins had resumed their silent, impersonal sleep. He touched his fingers to the dark cloth covering his blinded eye, adjusted the patch, and began his scrambling descent back to camp.

He was met by the welcome smell of coffee drifting up into the cool air. Rain stopped rummaging in the bike-trailer he was repacking as Snake strode in, and Joseph looked up from the pot of cornmeal mush he was stirring over the low flames. "You've been gone a while," the old man said. He jerked his chin toward the empty spot where the bedrolls had been the night before. "We're packed. Ready to head out after breakfast."

Snake handed the chemlamp to Rain, whose face brightened as he repacked it in the trailer he had been searching. "I'm staying here," Snake said flatly. He ignored the surprise on Rain's face and the consternation he saw in Joseph's expression. "Up there." He waved a hand in the direction of the ruins above.

"You can't stay there," Joseph said. "You can stay at my place, or in the pueblo down by the mouth of the canyon, either one. Not there."

"There," Snake repeated in Lieutenant Plissken's voice. Out of the corner of his good eye, he saw Rain stiffen.

The Mojave rose to his feet. He was bulkier than Snake, taller and heavier, but his glance slid away from eye contact in the way Snake remembered from his childhood among his grandmother's people. "No," Joseph said, "That is a place of the dead."

Snake's face set like cold iron. "I'm dead," he growled. Joseph flinched and drew away from him, and, in the background, he heard Rain inhale sharply. "I'm staying."

"If you do, you're a fool." Joseph returned to the bubbling mush, and ladled it out onto their mess-tin plates with abrupt snaps of his wrist. The three men ate a slightly burned and lumpy breakfast in silence, then Joseph threw his pack on one of his horses and saddled the other. He hesitated, holding the reins in one hand, ready to mount, looking from one to the other of the two men.

Rain broke the silence. "Ah... you're sure this is a good idea, Snake?" Snake fixed him with the same gunmetal stare he had used on Joseph, and, after a moment, Rain shrugged. "O.K., Snake; I guess we stay here."

Sun flamed over the rim of the canyon. In the slanting light, the ruins in the alcove above them glowed the color of red gold. Joseph swung into the saddle and picked up the reins. Still, he hesitated, then, almost in a rush, he said, "Use sage, lots of it. There's sweetgrass, down by the river. I have some red thread, if..."."

"Indian bullshit," Snake snarled.

"For the scorpions, then, and the spiders."

Snake's answering snort, growled deep in his throat, was more eloquent than any words. Rain looked from his partner to the old Indian and bit his lip. Hesitantly, he said, "Sage? For smudging? I can do that. I know the purification ritual we used back home in Rivendell. It was Lakota, though. Would that work?"

Rain recoiled from the nearly identical expressions of rage and disgust that Snake and Joseph turned on him, and fell silent. An impatient jerk on the reins made the horse toss its head in protest. "You're even more of a fool than he is, *white man!*" Joseph spat in Rain's direction. He kicked his horse into motion and trotted away down the canyon floor. He did not look back.

Joseph's anger lasted the hour and a half it took him to ride home, and simmered while he checked out the condition of his homestead after his absence. His drooping garden would revive with a good watering, but stocks of dried meat, cornmeal, and beans were getting low. He ducked under the doorway into the interior of his hogan, and stopped short. In the center of his table, weighted down with his heavy ceramic coffee cup, was a note scrawled in black magic marker on lined yellow notebook paper, dated two days ago. 'Billy J. cut his leg' it read, 'Starting to look bad. Come when you can.' It was signed by one of the men from the pueblo at the mouth of the canyon, and Joseph remembered that the man had a nine-year-old son named Billy. He checked his locked cabinet of over-the-counter and prescription medicines, scavenged on expeditions to Flagstaff and points south, and shook his head. There was so little that was still useful, without real doctors and real hospitals, without labs and refrigeration and machinery. A lot of the time, there was nothing he could do except give the sick person pain killers and first aid. *Back to antiseptics, sulfa, and aspirin*, he thought. Well, he could handle

those, and they worked. Sometimes.

As he packed up his medical kit, Joseph's thoughts kept returning to Snake Plissken and the boy. It was a bad situation all the way around, this Navajo who didn't want to be one, and the white kid with the "Indian" name, the culture thief. He remembered the outlaw's hard face and the fierce glitter in his blue eye, and felt a twinge of unease: restless ghosts were drawn to anger, and they were strong in the abandoned homes of the Old Ones. He picked up a dark plastic bottle of Betadine, and laughed ruefully to himself as he put it in his backpack. *Here you are, Joseph Looks-Away, worrying about old ghosts and collecting modern antiseptics; who's the culture thief, I wonder?*

He was still wondering as he rode slowly home from the pueblo the next afternoon. The emergency had turned out to be a minor one. He cleaned out the wound, and left Billy's worried father with a supply of sulfa tablets, sterile packaged bandages, and antiseptics, in return for the dried pintos and corn meal he needed. He was no longer angry, and was beginning to feel a bit ashamed of himself. Young Rain meant well; he was not arrogant, like so many of the whites who thought they knew Indian ways better than the Indians who tried to teach them. He could learn. And Snake... Snake was one of the People, whether he acknowledged it or not, and he bore on his body and his soul the mark of the Messenger, the go-between between the upper and the lower worlds. He had started a work, but not finished it. Joseph felt a chill, wondering if it was more than chance that had drawn Snake to the old ruins. He seemed so certain. What would the two of them do out there? Joseph wondered. He owed them both a life-debt. A part of Joseph's mind nagged at him that Plissken had been sick when he left, and might need his help.

Send me a sign. Joseph drew rein at the top of a little rise and stared out over the canyon. It was so hard to tell. His people's Powers didn't speak in the loud and flashy ways of the Whites' theatrical god; they spoke in the subtle voices of the natural world, and his ears and eyes were dulled by years of city living. Joseph noticed a twisted juniper with the distinctive black slash of a lightning strike running down its side into a narrow fork near the base. Surely, he thought, he should have noticed such a distinctive tree along the path he traveled several times a month, but he could not recall seeing it before. The slash was shiny, almost wet-looking, although it hadn't rained in months. Joseph dismounted, and went over for a closer look. Something thin and mottled was caught in the bottom of the tree-fork, and, with a prickle along his spine, Joseph saw that it was the shed skin of a diamond-back rattlesnake. *Is this it? Is this the sign? What does it mean?* Instinctively, Joseph raised his head toward the deep blue Arizona sky. There was a flash of black across his vision, followed by a loud cry. A crow landed on a bush close to him and perched there, turning its head, fixing him with its bright black eye. Caw, it said; caw, caw! The bird took wing, circled him once, and flew away toward the top of the canyon, disappearing into the sun. Shaken, Joseph watched it out of sight. It was time, he thought, to Dream. When he had Dreamed, he would go back to visit Rain and the one who carried the mark of the snake.

After Joseph's abrupt departure, Snake and Rain moved their supplies up the slope to the old pueblo and started settling into the rooms Snake had chosen during his earlier survey of the ruins. The wooden roof and earthen floor were still intact, the thick masonry walls solid except for the door and the two small square windows high in the outer wall. Old soot on one wall indicated the smoke-hole for the original inhabitants' hearth. A trip back down to the river provided feathery lengths of grass which they tied into improvised brooms, and several hours' vigorous effort finished the job of clearing three small rooms of dirt, cobwebs, and the accumulated debris of centuries. One of the front rooms yielded a tall ladder which had been used to climb to the roof of the next

story. Snake tested it by bouncing lightly on rungs, and found it still perfectly serviceable. As the long, bright day wore on, Snake noticed that the inner rooms of the pueblo, sheltered from the direct glare of the spring sun, were considerably cooler than the heat in the open. *Good design*, he thought to himself, feeling increasingly sure that he had made the right choice. It should be even better in the full heat of the Arizona summer. In the late afternoon, he and Rain took a break and went down to the river for a quick splash to cool off and wash the dust away, then refilled their water containers to carry back up to their new home. Snake studied the ruins from the foot of the cliff, and was pleased to see that there was no sign he and Rain had moved in. He planned to keep it that way.

As they worked, Snake became more and more convinced that Joseph was right: this ruin had never been ransacked by grave-robbers. In one room, they found a scrap of yucca-leaf sandal, and a fragment of feather-cloth that might once have been a blanket. If there were any of the old Indian's ghosts here, Snake thought ironically, they probably hadn't been disturbed since they were left behind with the trash when the original owners of the apartment moved out. He snorted and put the thought out of his mind.

Rain returned from cleaning out the farthest room carrying a pottery bowl, its sides painted in an intricate geometric design. "Look," he said, disappointment in his voice, "It's broken." He held up the pot and turned it over to show Snake the neatly chiseled hole in the bottom.

"No," Snake said. A hazy memory from childhood rose. "It's cut, not broken. Means the owner died. Any bones with it?"

"No," Rain said. He sounded puzzled. "You mean it was a burial?"

Snake felt a prickling at the back of his neck that was gone almost before he acknowledged it. He shrugged. "I'll take it." Rain handed him the bowl without protest, and Snake carried it out to the open plaza at the front of the pueblo. He lifted his hand to toss the bit of old clay down the hillside, then stopped as a stronger prickle of unease washed over him. No, he told himself, fresh potsherds would alert anyone passing by that someone has moved in here. It seemed an unsatisfactory thought, but with that as a reason, he carried the pot to an undisturbed room further along the row and set it down there, intact.

Snake and Rain finished unpacking their trailers, spreading out the contents on the floor to take inventory of their remaining supplies. At the bottom of his pack, Snake's fingers closed on the last, forgotten item, a hard lump wrapped in cloth. He pulled out the rutilated quartz pyramid in its bright silk covering, unwrapped it, and held it in his hand, thinking for the thousandth time that he should just throw the fucking thing away and be done with it. As he moved his hand, a stray sunbeam through the doorway caught on the pyramid and flashed light into his good eye. He blinked. As the dazzle faded, his eye caught a shadow he had not noticed before on the wall next to him. It was a small niche, perhaps six inches high, four inches wide, and about the same depth, set into the wall. Without hesitation, Snake reached over and set the crystal pyramid in the space; it fit as if the niche had been waiting for it. Snake felt a fleeting twinge of satisfaction he did not try to explain to himself, as he turned away to continue organizing his supplies and moving in.

The next day, Snake spent several hours exploring the ruin in daylight. It seemed strange, after so long, to stop moving and settle down. He was nagged by a restless feeling that he was still camping out in temporary shelter, that he needed to make some gesture to prove to himself that he had finally reached his goal. At last, with Rain's help, he set about constructing platform beds for the two of them, using solid lengths of

wood from several of the old ladders lying around and vegas from a fallen ceiling in one of the rooms for a frame, filling in with a tightly-woven webbing of rope for flexible support, and several layers of folded tarp and tent fabric as an improvised mattress.

Rain took advantage of the time to soak some of the dried beans, and produced a reasonably tasty meatless chili after several hours of slow simmering over a campfire.

Snake thought about how much better it would taste with meat in it, and decided to check out the game in the area as soon as possible. He watched a spectacular desert sunset flame red and gold over the canyon wall, to be replaced by blazing-bright stars in a clear night sky scented with woodsmoke, and lay down to sleep on his surprisingly comfortable new bed, filled with an immense and unfamiliar sense of content. Even the Plutoxin flare-up was gone, leaving him with nothing more than the ever-present background pain from his ruined eye. He listened to Rain settling down in the room next door, and was asleep almost before he finished hanging his eyepatch on a bit of projecting bed-frame next to his head.

The light bothered his eyes.

Snake blinked in the dazzle. He shook his head, squinting, and saw that the white light came from the crystal pyramid set into its niche in the wall. Gold threads, like a nest of fiery snakes, curled and writhed in the clear shape. They grew, swirling out from the pyramid into the shape of a being who was burning darkness. "Thank you, Snake, 'the being's voice crackled and whined like wood burning, "It is good to be home."

Snake sat up in his new bed. He felt drawn to the figure's hearthfire warmth in the chill of the desert night. It seemed familiar, though he could not remember ever seeing it before.

"You live here? Are you chindi?"

The being laughed like water hissing on hot stone. "I said it was good to be home; I didn't say I lived here. He reached out a hand. "Here I can touch you and speak to you. There is Power here. I have watched you for a long time. You will complete me. I will complete you, as it should be. Join with me, Snake."

"Who are you?" Snake said. The light blazed white around him like a signal-flare, but there was no pain in his uncovered damaged eye. The being wavered as both Snake's eyes tried to bring it into focus.

"I am your purpose, Snake; the thing that drives you. You are my bridge." The being's fire-gold hair curled in the light breeze of its own burning. "You opened yourself to me when I found you, the one I had been searching for, in Novosibirsk." The dark figure wavered again, like heat-shimmer, and became a small, ragged peasant girl bundled in snowy rags. "Amerikanski! Amerikanski!" she piped in a high, desperate voice. A shock of surprise hit Snake, as the girl's voice deepened. "Remember. Remember the feel of the gun. You took her with your bullets, there, and I found my home in your... soul. Remember how it felt."

Snake remembered: the shuddering thrill of his weapon on full auto, the roar in his ears, the smell of hot metal. He remembered the flash, the girl's convulsive arc as his bullets filled her; remembered her cries as she lay dying on the ground. He remembered, too, the sudden orgasmic rush that flamed in him as she fell; remembered and remembered forgetting. "That never happened!" Snake snarled.

The being reclaimed its original shape. "Don't lie to yourself, Snake; not here, not in your own heart. Everything else is bullshit; this is the center. That was the night you took Taylor for the first time, and he made love to you. You killed her, Snake - your first dead innocent -- and you enjoyed it."

"She was a partisan," Snake growled.

"No."

Snake stared into the burning eyes, responding on levels he had denied for decades. "Who are you," he repeated. "What are you?"

"Call me... Snake." The being's hissing laugh came again. "Give me any name you wish. I am whatever you want, but not human, for I am the destruction of humanity. While you remain human, you will always fail. When you are ready, I will free you of your humanity, and give you your revenge. Together, we shall destroy your enemies utterly, and burn the whole world clean again." The being's mouth opened wide and a tongue of fire, like a forked serpent's tongue, flicked outward. There was a deeper hiss, a sharp smell of burning gunpowder, and the being drifted forward, into Snake, fitting perfectly inside his skin, filling the cold places. Sudden fire flared in Snake's groin....

Snake woke, gasping. His body was rigid, slick with sweat, his cock hard and erect, almost painful. He could feel his heart beating. The sensation was familiar. For a moment, the narrow bed was familiar, too, and the dark room was the Helsinki BOQ. Taylor.... No, his mind corrected, Rain. Snake stripped off his black briefs in one quick motion, threw back the blanket, got to his feet, and padded into the next room through the open connecting door. Clean-swept, packed-earth floor was smooth and hard under his bare feet. Night was cool against his hot skin, with a faint flavor of old dust and new smoke, the still air heavy with a listening silence, but the former sense of presence was lost in Snake's urgency. "Rain." Snake's low rasp was rough with desire. "Rain," he repeated, louder, more harshly.

Rain stirred, and Snake heard the sound of the young man's voice shift in the blackness as Rain turned toward him. "What is it, Snake?" A second, as Snake strode toward the him, and dim green glow from a chemlamp outlined the figure on the bed in faint light and deep shadow. Rain's blanket slid down as he sat up, revealing the smooth planes of the slim figure's bare chest and belly. Snake dropped to his knee next to the bed and wrapped his fingers in Rain's long, dark hair. His other hand closed roughly on Rain's shoulder as he began, wordlessly, to push him into position for entry.

Rain leaned forward and his arms slid around Snake's back as Snake shoved him down on the bed. For a moment they were a tangle of warm flesh, and Snake felt the young man's body full against his. He grabbed Rain's hips and pulled him toward him, up onto Snake's thighs. Rain wrenched his shoulders sideways. "Snake... the lube...." he gasped. Impatiently, Snake loosened his grip just enough to let Rain fumble one-handed in a clutter of items next to his bed, locate the familiar little tube by touch, and hand it over. A second later Snake was working strong greased fingers into the welcoming ass under him with hard, abrupt strokes. He felt it opening, surrendering to him, and with a fierce rush of lust, Snake clamped his arm around Rain's body and rammed his cock deep into the satiny hole. The younger man bucked under him. Snake came explosively in Rain's ass, and, with a rush of breath, pulled out and rolled over on his side, breathing hard. He lay there for a moment as his breathing slowed, drifting in his own non-thoughts, savoring his body's sensations.

Just as Snake was about to get up and go back to his own bed, Rain rolled over to face him. For a second, the younger man hesitated, as if trying to come to a decision, then he bent his head and sucked Snake's nipple gently into his mouth. As his tongue swooped and curled around the hard little knob, Rain slid a slow, skillful hand under Snake's thigh to cup his heavy balls, moving upward with feather-light, teasing strokes to the base of Snake's cock. Rain transferred his mouth to Snake's other nipple, and as he

moved, the silky waterfall of his long hair swirled down over Snake's chest, trailing across the suddenly cool, damp nub of the other, sensitized nipple Rain had just released. Little electric shocks of pleasure stabbed through Snake's body and concentrated in his groin. With a low growl, Snake reached up to grab a handful of Rain's hair, tangling his rough fingers in the mass of it, pulling it to his face. Two colors, dark-auburn beard and umber strands, mingled as Snake drank in the scent of woodsmoke and clean sweat in Rain's hair. The younger man turned his head to smile up through the dark curtain in the dim glow of the chemlamp, into Snake's face, then pulled free to begin sweeping his long, thick hair back-and-forth across Snake's whole body. One hand, slick now with lube, curled around Snake's cock and began the lightest of strokes up and down the still-sensitive shaft, urging it toward renewed hardness. Snake's belly clenched as he felt himself stiffening again. He moaned harshly and reached for Rain, trying to turn the younger man onto his side.

To Snake's surprise, he felt Rain resist. Impatient, half-angry, Snake increased the pressure. "Snake," Rain's voice came, then, more urgently, "Snake!" A quick, still-painful memory from Rivendell flickered at the back of Snake's mind and he checked himself momentarily. He was no rapist. "Snake," Rain's voice softened, floating out of the semi-darkness, "Take it easy. Slow down." Then, in a tone Snake had not heard in nearly twenty years, "Snake, I want to make it last. I want to... make love to you."

Something like panic flared in Snake; something broken and crippled inside of him cringed and poised on the edge of flight, caught in an old pattern. He drew in a sharp breath and started to sit up. Rain lay motionless beside him on the narrow bed, waiting. Snake felt the tension in the other man's body. Beyond it, somehow outside and inside him at the same time, he had a sense of presences in the darkness swirling like gathering storm-winds, tugging at him. Snake struggled briefly, resisting, then a barrier crumbled within him.

Slowly, Snake reached out his other hand and ran the silk of Rain's hair through his fingers, feeling the heavy weight of it. Rain turned to him, and began running his hands down Snake's back as Snake pulled the younger man to him. The body in Snake's arms was familiar now: slender, wiry torso, sleek flesh, hard, callused hands moving skillfully over him, that mass of dark hair gliding across him as Rain laid his head against Snake's chest. It echoed an older, deeper familiarity, a body memory that went all the way down into Snake's center. He was half-surprised not to smell the sharp scent of tobacco in Rain's hair, as he always had in Taylor's. Snake closed his eyes as his defenses melted and flowed away. It was Taylor... or damn like Taylor... or enough like Taylor that it no longer made any difference.

Rain slipped down Snake's body, licking down his chest and across his belly until he reached the thick shaft jutting up out of Snake's heavy tangle of dark-copper pubic hair. Rain's mouth slid down on it, and his tongue began a slow, tantalizing exploration, sweeping from base to tip, swirling around the head, following the inked line of the cobra's tail, teasing open the slit, coaxing Snake erect and hard again. Eyes still closed, Snake savored Rain's expert attentions, need growing in him as his whole world contracted to the feel of that warm, wet mouth moving on his cock. On the edge of orgasm, he groaned and twisted. Rain paused, waited, continued, bringing his partner to the edge again, the hot lust in Snake more intense, more demanding each time, until it reached the point of explosion. Snake growled, low in his throat, and opened his eyes.

Now, his body demanded. "Rain..." His rasping whisper was rough with a new urgency, insistent, and determined. He reached for Rain and pulled him roughly forward. With a last flick of his tongue, Rain's mouth slipped off Snake's cock, and Snake saw him grin as he obeyed, following Snake's lead eagerly. The dim glow of the chemlamp sparkled in his wide, dark eyes as he swung one leg over Snake's body, kneeling over him, and lowered himself onto Snake's rigid erection. Snake's hands clenched like iron on Rain's ass-cheeks as he thrust fiercely upward into him. With a

hoarse cry, Snake came hard, spurting deep in Rain's ass. Seconds later, Snake felt the hot drops of Rain's own cum falling on his chest as the younger man rode him, bringing himself off on Snake's orgasm. Snake was swept by a fierce, all-consuming satisfaction as the two men joined, united in a way he had not known since Taylor's death. He slid his arms up Rain's sweat-slick body, pulling the other man down onto him, holding him in a ferocious embrace, pumping the last of his load into him. For a long moment they lay still, gasping for breath, and Snake felt the heavy beating of Rain's heart as he held the slim body against him. Rain started to roll off. Snake tightened his grip again, pinning him like prey in a cobra's coils, and Rain quieted, lying motionless in Snake's grip until the older man's erection waned and slipped free of Rain's ass, and his hold loosened. Rain slid sideways, molding himself to Snake's spent body. Still Snake held him.

"Snake...?" Rain's eyes were bright with one last question as he looked into Snake's face from inches away.

Snake studied Rain's face. He recognized the expression; he had seen it before, on the blond girl in NY Max, on the handful of women who had touched him, briefly, over the years. An unspoken request hung between the two men, for a final, unequivocal gesture. Snake made no move toward Rain, or away from him, but allowed himself a faint half-smile: *You want it, come get it....*. Rain hesitated, then leaned forward and touched his mouth to Snake's in a lover's kiss. A second. Two. Snake's hard hand came up and gripped the back of Rain's neck. He firmed the kiss into something fiercer and more primitive, something that claimed and mastered Rain, even as it gave the young man what he wanted. *I'm in charge here, and don't you forget it....*. Snake felt Rain surrender to his touch, and broke the contact, pushing Rain gently away. The curve of Snake's mouth, the glitter in his good eye, were a silent laugh. Rain grinned back. Plainly, he was content with things exactly as they were. Snake released a leisurely sigh, then untangled himself and rose to go back to his own bed. "Night, Rain."

"Night, Snake," followed him through the ancient masonry doorway. "Sleep well." *Maybe tonight I will*, Snake thought as he slipped back under his own blanket. The door to the outside was a pale oblong of moonlight in the dark wall. Snake's mind slid sideways into practical details. He'd have to see about hanging a solid door before winter.

When Snake woke again, moonlight had become the gray of approaching dawn. He rose and dressed noiselessly, taking care not to wake Rain. After last night, he needed space and solitude. He grabbed a food-stick and a cup of water, and went out to sit on a section of retaining wall at the edge of the ruins. Morning air was cool and sweet around him, and the silence almost a solid thing. Beneath him, as his boots dangled over emptiness, the brush-covered rockslide sloped away into darker gray, down toward the stream below. Across the gap, the opposite canyon wall was outlined against the lightening sky. The first ray of morning sun struck the top of the mesa as he watched and ran like a line of bright fire along the edge of the red cliff, reflecting off the rock. The flare of light sparked an echo of his dream the night before. His dreams were becoming clearer and more vivid in his waking mind, and he was beginning to remember more of them. It was not anything he welcomed. There were things he wanted to keep locked in the place within him, where they fed the burning core of rage that was his survival. He reached down, trying to find that place, and found it disconcertingly, almost alarmingly, elusive. He threw his head back, ran a hand through his hair, and slammed the hand down on the ancient stone wall. He studied the hand, trying to see beneath the flesh, remembering the strange fire-being in his dream that had shaped itself to his interior and spoken to him. As the morning sun slid down the cliff wall, bright on the rock, Snake finally faced the whole memory of Novosibirsk.

Yes, he had killed the girl, and it had been... good. Better than good, Snake admitted to

himself, with harsh, unflinching honesty. No excuses. It had been exhilarating, intoxicating, a rush deeper and more satisfying than good sex, more intense than the slam of stims kicking in. Everything else was washed out and pastel beside it.

Lieutenant Plissken had felt and denied that lust for death, felt and denied it all through the war. He had used it, the way Snake had used the sweet poison of amphetamines to get himself through New York Max. And Lieutenant Plissken had been properly horrified... afterward.

Snake took a deep breath and let it out. God, how he wanted a cigarette! He had discarded the guilt, along with the illusions and the medals, when he came back from Leningrad. The rest he had taken with him, but it was colder. There were no innocents in gunfighting-for-profit. Snake felt sharp craving for nicotine crawl along his nerves; he could almost feel the crisp paper cylinder of one of Ormsby's cigarettes between his fingers and taste tobacco-smoke. Now, since 666, guilt had risen like vengeful chindi to curse him again. Sun had moved half-way down the canyon wall while he sat there, and was turning the tops of the cottonwoods by the river-bank to bright-green fragments of stained glass. Leaves glittered as they fluttered in the light morning breeze. Snake shook off memories of last night's dream; it was time for him to get moving. He stood up and headed back toward the ruins to get his Magnums, thinking about the satisfactions of the kill and venison roasted over an open campfire.

There were still no sounds of activity from Rain's room as Snake collected his guns; the young man was evidently sleeping in this morning. Snake paid no particular attention, except to smile slightly to himself with a touch of smugness. *Wore you out, eh?* He headed downslope, out into the bright crystal morning.

Snake followed the course of the stream as it bubbled along the floor of the canyon.

Some of it was underground, detectable only by the lines of denser vegetation where roots reached down for subsurface moisture. Here and there water spread out into a rocky depression to form a pool. Low thickets alternated with more widely-spaced brush and small stands of trees, as the sandstone walls turned and twisted in a meandering course, narrowing to steep, tall slabs of rock, then opening to wider flat areas with sloping margins. This was good deer country, offering browse and concealment, refuge from the endless wind that muffled hearing and scent on the mesa above, and the open water that meant the difference between life and death in the desert. Predator country, too, Snake thought: where there were deer, there would be cougars and, now, wolves as well. He felt a tingle of heightened awareness, but no fear.

Along the edge of one of the deeper pools, he found signs of trampled vegetation and the dried print of a two-toed hoof. Snake tested the wind-direction and settled down, hidden in a thick patch of brush, to wait. The sun climbed slowly toward noon, growing brighter and brighter, bleaching the landscape to scorched pastels except where the dark slash of shadows crept forward across the ground, shifting as the sun moved.

There was no sound in the still air. A beetle wandered across an outcropping of bare rock near Snake's boot, attracting his attention, but nothing else moved in the midmorning heat. At last Snake gave up for the time being. No animal much larger than the beetle would be coming down for water until evening. He took a deep drink from the pool, splashed his sweating face with the clear, sweet water, and set off for a more complete reconnaissance of the surrounding area.

Snake found himself angling upward, where he could, along the more gradual slopes, drawn out of the canyon's narrow slot toward the mesa above by an ingrained desire for distance and open space. As he climbed, his thoughts returned to the young man he had left behind in the old ruins, and what had happened between them the night before. The kiss meant something, he knew, to both of them. He could not, or would not, define it; whatever it was flowed away shapelessly from his grasp like water through his open fingers. But he knew, too, that Rain wouldn't settle forever for the nameless,

unacknowledged understanding whose boundaries Taylor had respected and shared.

An old conversation echoed in his mind: "I'm gay. Does that bother you, Snake?" "Doesn't mean shit to me. Long as you remember I'm not." Rain didn't think like Taylor. He would try to put a name on it, one Snake was unwilling to accept. A rock under Snake's boot shifted and went rattling down the slope. He grabbed for a firmer hold and barely saved himself from sliding after it. Rain had learned to give him room and keep his mouth shut at the right time. It would be all right. Snake climbed on, upward.

At last he reached the surface of the mesa and stood at the edge of the drop-off. Behind him, the canyon was a corridor of red sandstone, tan earth, and multicolored vegetation: grass-green, fir-color, chartreuse, russet. On the other side of the narrow strip of higher land, dun desert stretched away in a wide plain, scored by the twisted knife-cuts of canyons and washes, punctuated by isolated upthrust mesas, to a gray-blue line of mountains in the distance. Looking out over the vast, bare expanse below calmed and centered him, filling him with almost the same sense of peaceful joy he had felt aloft in his Gulffire. For Snake, safety had always been horizontal: open space around him, unobstructed line-of-fire, clear sky and a far horizon. The paved trenches and tall buildings of cities like New York Max meant danger. For a moment, Snake wondered what had happened to that city of the damned after 666, when the food drops no longer arrived. He put the thought aside as distant motion caught his eye: a hawk riding the updrafts, a black dot against the blue of cloudless sky so clear it seemed to have no depth at all. Snake felt an aching stab of envy as he watched its soaring flight. The sky belonged to the birds alone now; man was leaden and earthbound once again. He watched the hawk for a long time, as it circled outward on the thermals, and finally lost it in the sun's brightness.

Snake looked back down along the path of the canyon, and a flash of light made him blink. He located the source: sunlight reflected off the metal roof of an old-fashioned house-trailer. Downstream, at the mouth of the canyon, was a little group of trailers, houses, and storage buildings -- maybe ten or twelve in all -- scattered among green patches of cultivated plants and fenced areas. A few corrals held tiny dots: animals of some kind. A dusty track which had once been a road stretched away toward someplace where it would join up with paved highway. That must be Joseph's "pueblo," Snake thought. He turned away. He might have to trade there for supplies, but he wanted no more contact with the place than absolutely necessary.

As the sun started to slide down the sky into the west, Snake headed back toward the canyon floor. The scramble down was slower going than the climb up, and it was several hours before he was back in his hiding place in the brush near the watering hole where he had seen deer tracks. He settled into a comfortable position downwind from the pool, and willed himself into a meditative state of alert stillness.

He remained all but motionless for some time, perhaps an hour or two, as the sun dipped below the rock wall, shadows grew longer, and the small noises of the canyon coming to life stirred in the growing coolness. He heard a faint sound and slid his eye sideways to see a pair of mule deer does, one with a fawn at her heels, stepping daintily along the trampled path down to the water. As they stepped out into the open, they paused, testing the air, ears twitching back and forth, dark eyes alert in their narrow faces.

Snake waited until they lowered their heads to drink, then slowly shifted his Magnum to brace it on a larger branch. The yearling raised her head, muzzle dripping, and froze. Snake wondered if she was close enough to his concealing tangle of brush to hear his breathing. He held his breath and sighted; the second doe lifted her head and stamped nervously. A second later, the crash of Snake's gun sent the mother and fawn bounding back up the trail as the yearling doe crumpled with a clean shot to the head. She

shuddered once and lay still.

Snake gave his kill a thorough examination as he gutted and cleaned the carcass with the knife Rain had given him at Year Ending, noting that the doe appeared healthy and well fed, fat on spring browse. Snake was gratified; he could survive here. The work was familiar, and he remembered the peace he had found, temporarily, in the solitude of Rivendell's woods. But here he was no longer completely alone; he had another presence to keep him human. He washed himself and his blade in the pool, slung the game over his shoulders, and headed back toward the place he had made his.

The first stars were appearing in the deep blue-gray sky overhead as Snake arrived back at the Anasazi cliffhouse. He climbed over the retaining wall, put down the deer's carcass, and straightened up with a grunt of relief. He stopped to study the dark and silent square shapes in front of him with slowly growing unease: there was no light, no sign of a fire. He considered calling Rain's name, decided against it, and, after a moment, moved forward cat-footed into the ruin. He paused outside the room Rain had picked for his own, his back against the masonry wall, Magnum drawn and ready, listening. From inside came the faint sound of labored breathing and an almost-inaudible groan. Snake stepped through the doorway and the cold tingle of battle-readiness died abruptly.

In the last of the fading light, Snake saw Rain, lying on his bed. The younger man didn't seem to know he was there. Snake scooped up the chemlamp sitting beside the door, turned it on, and crossed the few steps to the bed. The rattlesnake-rattles necklace he had given Rain, on its black cord, was a dark mass in the hollow of the younger man's throat. Snake reached down to shake Rain's bare shoulder. He felt the heat radiating from Rain's body; the figure on the bed was burning with fever. At his touch, Rain groaned and shifted, opening glassy eyes that refused to focus. "Snake... sick...." he wheezed.

"No shit," Snake said. He straightened up.

"...Thirsty....".

Snake poured water from the storage jug into the metal cup from Rain's messkit and brought it over. He pulled Rain into a semi-sitting position, braced against his shoulder, and held the cup to Rain's mouth as Rain tried to swallow. A trickle of water ran down the side of Rain's chin into the tangled hair on his shoulders, and he coughed as a bit of the liquid caught in his throat. This was worse than Snake's bout with Plutoxin in L.A. Had the disease mutated? A lot of designer viruses from the war had a built-in instability factor. Or was it just hitting Rain harder? "Shit," Snake rasped. He lowered Rain to the surface of the bed and stood up.

Snake went back to where he had left the deer's carcass. The night was cool enough to keep the meat fresh until he could rig a smokehouse tomorrow. He wrapped the cold carcass in a tarp and carried it into an interior storage room behind their bedrooms, where it would be safe from predators, then built a fire on the packed earth of the plaza, and, by the light of the chemlamp, cooked a piece of meat from his kill and ate it. All the while, his mind was on Rain. He had seen the same look in the faces of men stricken by enemy bioweapons during the war. Rain was dying.

...running out on me.... Anger flared in him toward the sick man, and Snake tried to hold on to it as a shield against the fear that was sharp and desperate in his gut in a way it had not been since Taylor died. In memory, Snake heard the sound of USPF gunfire, saw Taylor stumble and lurch forward onto the platform of the hummer station, saw the slowly spreading blood. The image, the sound of Taylor's voice, ("Go on, Lieutenant!") was vivid, untouched by time. Self-preservation urged him to run, but he couldn't force

himself to leave Sarge behind, to die alone. Snake clenched his teeth so hard the muscles in his jaw ached. Taylor was the last person he had been able to count on; the last thing, except his revenge, he had to hold on to.

Until now. Snake smashed the side of his fist into the masonry wall next to him, and a small shower of adobe mortar slid down the surface. He got up and went back into Rain's room. The younger man was lying with his eyes closed, his head thrown back, his mouth open. Each breath was a sandpaper gasp that ended in a liquid gurgle or a thick cough. Snake shoved a bundle of clothes behind Rain's shoulders to raise him into a semi-sitting position and ease his breathing slightly, then poured some of their drinking water onto one of Rain's old shirts and sponged the younger man's hot face. Rain muttered something without opening his eyes and sank back into silence, except for his labored breathing. Snake settled down beside Rain's bed to wait. He pushed the fear down into the secret place within him, building a patient battlefield calm around himself, brick by brick, like a wall. That night, he slept in snatches, waking every time the rhythm of Rain's breathing changed.

He waited through the next day, dividing his time between Rain's room and the process of constructing a smokehouse in one of the pueblo's enclosed interior rooms, where he wove together a drying rack of green wood from the trees along the riverbank and built a smoky, smoldering fire of mixed green and dry wood over which he hung the meat from the butchered deer to cure. Each time Snake put a cup to the sick man's mouth, Rain drank a little. Otherwise, he hardly responded to Snake's presence, tossing feverishly somewhere between sleep and waking. Snake crushed some of the antibiotic tablets he had taken from the winery in California and added them to the water, wondering if the pills would actually do any good. He remembered, vaguely, reading that viruses weren't supposed to respond to antibiotics. He added them anyway.

Hoofbeats alerted Snake to Joseph's return. He watched from above as the Indian unhurriedly hobbled his horse and turned it out to graze by the stream, then slung his heavy pack over his shoulders and climbed up the slope to the ruins. He nodded to Snake as he came even with him. "You're O.K.," he said, his voice neutral.

"Rain's got it," Snake said without preamble.

Joseph brushed past him into the room where Rain lay, and Snake, following, saw how Joseph's nose wrinkled at the sickroom smell of the close little space. He laid a hand against Rain's cheek, then reached down to the young man's wrist to feel his pulse. Rain shifted slightly at the touch, but didn't open his eyes. Joseph raised his head to face Snake. "Plutoxin?"

"Yeah." Snake paused, then added reluctantly, "I think."

Joseph gave him a searching look that just avoided being an accusation, and Snake felt himself bristling. He flashed back to his conversation with Rain just after his rescue from the bounty hunter: "Everybody who follows me dies. Everyone. You come with me, you end up fucking dead." Anger flared. *Your choice, asshole.* He turned a glare on Joseph. *Yours too.*

Joseph returned the look. "Doesn't matter. All we can do is treat the symptoms." He glanced around the room, then back to Snake. "I'll camp down by the river."

Snake opened his mouth, angrily, to protest. Rain shifted on the bed between the two other men, and exhaled on a painful sound. Snake looked in Rain's direction and swallowed the words he had been about to say. Silently, reluctantly, he nodded.

The two men circled warily around the central point of Rain for the next few days,

avoiding each other, all but silent. Snake changed Rain's bedding, sponged him down with cool water from the creek, offered him water, with stoic, impersonal efficiency, but allowed himself no outward sign of concern. He walled himself away, snapping all his practiced barriers against the outside world, and his inner fears, back into place. Rain lay deadly still, or tossed and moaned restlessly, but hardly seemed aware of their presence. Occasionally, Snake heard Rain muttering his name, but when he answered, there was no recognition in the glassy stare Rain's turned his way.

Rain drifted in and out of fever-dreams. His cramped room seemed full of presences, crowding him, shouting and gibbering around his bed, pulling at him. There was something he had to do before they would let him go. He opened blurry eyes. Snake was an indistinct figure half-hidden in a shimmering haze of colors. "Snake... have to tell you...."

"What?" Snake's face and voice were expressionless.

The room seemed full of heat-lightning. "Love you, Snake... dying... have to tell you."

Neither voice nor face changed. "Bullshit."

The figure above him faded into invisibility and Rain sighed, exhausted. *I told him, he said to the room; I can go now.* He slid downward, flowing toward freedom.

The sea was cool and clear beneath sun-flecked billows. Rain swam weightlessly, dancing in the dappled water with dolphins and whales. He sang to them as they swirled around him, and they sang to him. A sleek dolphin circled him playfully, smiling its secret smile. It nudged him gently, shot away toward the surface, breached, then curved back in a stream of bright silver bubbles to the place where Rain waited.

Rain started to swim after it, but something held him where he was, pulling him back toward the land. Rain kicked his way upward. The surface, as he breached, was boiling hot, scalding. Through the veil of steam on the water, he saw that the whole shore was burning. In the center of the flames was a black figure that burned with its own lightless fire. Its features flickered, one moment Snake's, the next something inhuman. It spread vast dark wings that seemed to cover the sky and lifted a clawed hand full of netted strands of fire, flinging it out toward him. Rain dove, fleeing back into the cool water. It would be so good to dissolve and become one with the sea, he thought longingly. The sea was peace and freedom, and an end to suffering. The dolphin was beside him again. "Let me follow you," Rain said as he stroked its smooth side; "Let me join you. Let me become your ocean."

<<No>> came the answer. There was sorrow in the animal's dark eye. <<I am not the fire-being whose fate is bound with yours. He would die here, and you would die without him. It is not yet finished. You must return.>>

Fire-strands hissed through the water and dropped over Rain, dragging him back toward the burning shore, toward the painful heat and heaviness of the land. He surfaced, struggling in the net. Standing at the edge of the water was the form of Snake. The flames died around it as Rain watched, and Rain surrendered to the pull of the net toward the shore. I will give up the sea, he thought, for I cannot teach him to swim. Perhaps he will teach me to fly.

Rain swam back to consciousness to feel cold water on his forehead. Snake was silently sponging his face. The burning fever had broken, and he felt worn out and weak, but

clear-headed. He vaguely remembered telling Snake something of great significance, something he had not intended to mention, and wondered what it had been. "Did I... say anything, Snake? While I was out?"

Snake's rough hands never hesitated. "Nothing important," he said, his voice indifferent. Satisfied, Rain slid down again into sleep.

Snake met Joseph as the Indian climbed back up the slope carrying plastic jugs full of river water. "Fever's broken," he rasped. He waited until Joseph returned, smiling, from a quick look in on the sleeping Rain.

"Now we can do something," Joseph said. "He'll be hungry when he wakes up. I'll make some soup." Joseph heated water on the cook-fire and threw in a package of supermarket dried soup mix. As a warm, rich smell began rising from the simmering pot, Joseph dug into his pack again and retrieved a tupperware container.

Snake eyed it suspiciously. "What is that shit?"

"Mystic Indian herbs," Joseph said, deadpan, "from my medicine bag." He sprinkled half a handful from one baggie into the pot, as Snake snorted in disgust and glared at the Indian. Joseph added a smaller quantity of leaves from another baggie, and a pinch from a third, to the bubbling mix, then looked up at the other man. "Seriously, Snake, these herbs give strength, build up the blood. They'll help Rain recover. Plus..." Joseph wiped the last crumbs of green from his fingers onto his jeans, and sat back on his heels with a quick grin "...they make it taste better." The Indian turned his full attention back to his task. His expression became serious as he began an almost-inaudible rhythmic sound that could have been, to Snake's ignorant ear, anything from a prayer-chant to absent-minded humming.

Snake turned and looked out over the gap of the canyon. The sun was nearly overhead, and spring air was warm on his shoulders, filled with the chalky smell of red dust and a sharp hint of juniper from the slope below him. The smell of cooking soup reminded Snake that he hadn't eaten since dawn. He wrestled with himself briefly, then, coming to a decision, he walked down to the smoke-house and returned a few minutes later with a chunk of venison on a metal plate from his mess-tin. He held it out to Joseph. "Put this in."

Joseph looked up at him, surprise on his face. "If I do that, I'll have to take Rain's share out."

"Put it in." Snake's voice had a hard edge. "Rain needs it." ...*more than those fucking herbs...* his mind added silently. He could feel an inarticulate, unfocused anger building in him as he eyed the interloping Indian and the simmering pot of soup.

Joseph put a lid on the soup-pot and rose slowly to his feet. "Rain doesn't eat meat. He told me it's against his ethics."

"Fuck the vegetarian bullshit. He won't know what's in it."

"I will." Joseph's expression was suddenly cold and utterly focused. "And I would tell him."

Snake stared at him for a moment, then opened his hand to let the plate fall. The metal circle with its chunk of venison landed on the ground with a thud, sending up a tiny puff of pale dust. Snake silently turned on his heel, his face set like stone, and headed down

the slope toward the canyon floor.

Snake chose the quickest way to the mesa. He blanked his mind, riding on familiar anger, and concentrated on the trickle of sweat down his face, the push and pull of muscle, the rasp of air in his lungs, the gritty texture of sandstone under his hands and feet as he climbed. He reached the top, and stood in the thin desert wind looking out over open space on the other side. There was no escape in distance. The harsh simplicity of the barren land warred with the complex jumble within him and lost. Rain was going to be all right, but he'd need taking-care-of for a while. Snake tried to resent that, and failed, felt the resentment shift toward Joseph. He wished the damned Indian would go home and get out of his way, quit catering to Rain's vegetarian bullshit. Quit fucking with his, Snake's, partner. Rain needed meat, whether he wanted it or not. An officer was responsible for his men's lives.

But not for their consciences a ghostly thought countered. Snake tried to ignore it, but it refused to go away. All he wanted to worry about were the practical details of survival, but Rain's damned scruples and feelings kept getting in the way. He didn't know how to care about shit like that, not any more. He couldn't afford to care. Taylor had never given him grief about it. If Taylor had had any fancy ideas about ecology or philosophy or crap like that, he'd kept his mouth shut about them. Having Rain as his partner was a fucking pain in the ass... but.... Snake remembered his anger at the Leningrad Ruse, at the dishonor and sense of violation he felt when his choices were taken away from him by a lie, and he clenched his teeth on unwilling guilt. He had almost done the same thing to Rain. *Shit, shit, SHIT!* Snake snarled internally, filled with frustrated, shapeless rage. He tried not to be grateful to the Indian for stopping him.

He stood looking out at the dun and gray landscape stretching away to the far mountains, and anger faded. A thought from what seemed like a lifetime ago surfaced: *can't depend on anybody; it cuts off your options. Run alone and you're free.* That cuts both ways, Snake thought grimly: having someone depend on you ties you down even worse. The thought seemed hollow. Since he'd left the Service, his whole life had been about staying free, free of anything, or anyone, who tried to capture him. He wondered, suddenly: free to do what? Rob banks? Blow up armored cars? Sabotage USPF installations? That world didn't exist any more. In all the months since his escape from L.A., he had never considered where he would fit in this new world for which he had been the thoughtless catalyst. Even Snake Plissken, The Force's Most Wanted Man, didn't exist any more; he was officially dead. He had disappeared, found a bolt-hole and pulled the door shut behind him. *Now what?* he wondered. His mind caught on something practical. Rain was going to need taking-care-of for a while. He'd think about all this other shit later. He stood looking out over the desert for a while, then turned and headed back the way he had come.

Rain woke a second time to find himself alone in his small sickroom. The square of light in the wall across from him told him it was daytime. Which day? he wondered. As he struggled into a sitting position, a silhouette appeared in the doorway. "Snake?" he said. The sound was a weak croak in his own ears.

"It's Joseph," the Indian's voice answered him, and a moment later the chemlamp's dim green light filled the room. "How are you feeling? Up to a little soup? It's vegetarian."

"Where's Snake?" Rain said, feeling the beginnings of panic.

"He went for a walk in the canyon. He'll be back. I think he needed a little distance, now that he knows you're going to make it. He hasn't been out of your room for more than a few minutes at a time since you came down with... this thing."

Rain smiled in relief. "That's Snake. He hardly said two words to me, I think, since I got sick. It's like he was annoyed with me for catching it. And yet, every time I woke up enough to notice, he was there. Did he get any sleep?"

"Not much," Joseph said.

Rain chuckled. "And, now I'm better, he takes off. I don't think he wants me to know he was worried about me." He turned serious, searching Joseph's face in the low light. "But he was, wasn't he?"

Joseph nodded. "Yes, very worried. He was really afraid, Rain, but a man like Snake, I think, he doesn't want to let anybody know he's given hostages to fortune. I could see it in his face when he was watching you."

Rain's heart lifted, and he noticed that he was ravenously hungry. The bowl in Joseph's hands was sending up waves of delicious steam that made his mouth water. "That smells wonderful," he said. Smiling, Joseph handed him the bowl, and Rain starting spooning the thick, hot soup into his mouth, slowly at first and then faster. It was delicious.

"Thanks," Rain said as he finished. He lowered the empty dish and sat staring down into it, avoiding Joseph's eyes. He felt he had to ask, had to hear the answer, but he was afraid of Joseph's reaction.

Joseph sat down on the end of Rain's bed, letting the silence lengthen, waiting, without any sign of impatience, until Rain was ready to speak.

"Joseph..." Rain began. He glanced up quickly and back down. "Was it because we moved in here? Was that why I got sick? Was it...." His gesture took in the whole of the ruins around them. He felt acutely embarrassed and uneasy, hoping Joseph wouldn't think Rain was mocking him, humoring him, or somehow insulting the Indian's touchy pride in his heritage by bringing up the subject. At the same time, Rain felt a cold prickling at the back of his neck. Respect and awe for the First People and their beliefs had been ingrained in him since childhood. Without Snake's presence, a lot of things seemed more possible.

"Ghost-sickness?"

Rain nodded. Joseph seemed to be taking him seriously. He couldn't detect any hint of anger or contempt in the Indian's attitude, and the ironic undertone that had been in his voice since he first met Rain was gone.

"No," Joseph said. "I thought it might be, at first. You, or Snake, either one. You remember, I tried to talk him out of staying here. I think, now, I was wrong. I think you and Snake are here for a reason, and so am I. If I am correct, this is all for a reason. Snake is the Messenger, or marked by the Messenger... t the serpent. The snake is his animal." Joseph studied Rain thoughtfully. "And I have made a very large mistake, I think. I discounted you in this. If Snake's purpose is so vital, there is a reason you are with him. I spoke in anger to you, and ignored your words. That was wrong of me. And racist. I labeled you, and accused you of labeling me. I'm sorry." Joseph reached out a hand and took the empty bowl out of Rain's loose grip, then set it down on the floor by the side of the bed.

Rain stared at him in amazement. "That's... that's O.K., Joseph. I'm not mad at you. Just as long as you're not mad at me." Joseph shook his head. Rain drew courage from the Indian's new affability to add, "But... what kind of special reason could I have for being here? I just came with Snake."

"I don't know yet." Joseph fell silent. Rain's eyes followed his to the earth floor beside

the bed, where the print of Snake's boot was clearly outlined in the dust. He smiled to himself, remembering the boot-prints he had seen beside the table at Year End at Rivendell. Finally, Joseph spoke again. "So, the snake is Plissken's guiding animal. That's clear. The hawk is mine." The Indian's fingertips brushed the copper Thunderbird pendant he always wore strung on a strand of rough turquoise chunks around his neck.

"...Vision, the gift of seeing..." " Rain murmured to himself, remembering something he had read.

"Yes." Joseph's face lit up in a genuine smile. "And you, Rain - do you have a guiding spirit among the animals? One who you feel leads you?"

Rain hesitated. "Well, there were a lot of animals at home. We had chickens and cats, goats, dogs and horses... I really like horses... and then there were the wild ones: coyotes and crows and deer and so on, and the mountain lion. I didn't see her very often, usually just her tracks. I guess there really wasn't any one in particular, though, when I was a kid."

"What about the time you were traveling with Snake? Anything special?"

"I rode a horse part of the way. I guess the horse would be... n no wait..." " Rain remembered. "Wait a minute! The buffalo!"

Joseph sat bolt upright, staring at Rain intently. "A buffalo? Where? What did it look like? What happened? Tell me everything."

"It wasn't a white calf or anything, just an ordinary buffalo." Rain ran both hands through his long hair, pulling it back from his face, then closed his eyes to concentrate on remembering details. "We landed at Ocean Beach, and went through Golden Gate Park. There was this buffalo, from the paddock in the Park, I guess; a big, old bull. He'd been wounded, probably by the crazies in the Park trying to hunt him for food. I felt so sorry for him. He walked in front of us, and stopped and shook his head and snorted at us. Snake was going to shoot him, but I told him: leave the buffalo alone, and he'll go away. There wasn't any need to kill him. The buffalo just stood looking at us for a couple of minutes, and then walked away into the bushes." Rain opened his eyes and shrugged. "That's it. Do you think it means something?"

"Yes, I'm sure of it," Joseph said. "It fits. The buffalo represents... life, right spiritual relationship with the earth, right action. He is the intercessor between the human and the spirit world. Anyone who helps a buffalo receives his blessing and his help. He gives sustenance and renewal. You say he was wounded?" Rain nodded, and Joseph continued, "That's clear enough, I'd say." Rain nodded again. Joseph was silent for a minute, rubbing his thumb absently across his chin, his vision focused inward. At last, he said, "Rain is another intercessor, connecting earth and sky. That's you. And you are Two-Spirit -- gay -- aren't you?" At Rain's third, confirming, nod, Joseph continued, "Two-Spirit people, what the Navajo call nagleeh -- are 'in-betweens' and 'go-betweens' and mediators, sometimes, between the physical and the spiritual realms."

Rain nodded again, and put in, "I read about that."

Joseph went on, as if thinking out loud. "I wasn't seeing, myself, what I was shown. I should know better than to think things happen by chance. Yes. Two-spirit...male rain and female rain...the buffalo, the snake, and the hawk... darkness and fire... this place....". He focused on Rain again. "The Sixth World is coming."

Rain bit at a knuckle, trying to absorb what Joseph was saying. "What is male rain and

female rain?"

"Female rain is gentle. She nourishes and replenishes. She is like the buffalo. Male rain is the thunder, the lightening: fire from the sky."

"Snake's a pilot," Rain said. "And snakes are connected with lightning too, aren't they?"

Joseph nodded. "Yes."

"So it all fits together - all of us. We're supposed to be here together." The cold prickling at the back of Rain's neck grew stronger.

"Yes," Joseph repeated. "Snake knows it too. When you were so sick, he stayed with you the whole time and gave me hell when I tried to get him to rest. He insisted on staying here, in... this place." Joseph's gesture took in the ruin. "But he won't admit he knows it. He fights everything. Himself, you, me, the spirits, the world...."

Rain nodded ruefully. "I can just see him 'accepting his destiny' gracefully. He wouldn't listen to any of this. He'd call it all bullshit." *And maybe he'd be right* a skeptical part of Rain's mind added silently.

Joseph sighed, tugging absently on one of his many thin cloth-wrapped braids. "It doesn't matter. One way or the other, things are moving. Moving toward resolution."

"Renewal," Rain said, "Healing. That's what my people thought: Snake shut down the Machine and gave Gaia a new chance. He got rid of the old world they were always bitching about and gave them what they wanted. And they treated him like shit and kicked him out," he finished bitterly.

"No." Joseph emphasized the monosyllable with a flat slap of his leathery hand on the blanket next to him. "That was only a sign. The Sixth World is coming.."

"What does that mean?"

"Nobody knows exactly." Joseph turned his gaze out the square window in the room's ancient wall, looking into distance. "I read about a lost ceremonial called the Sunway and the Calling Back Chant. It was supposed to be the ceremonial that Changing Woman and the Talking God taught the people to use when the Fifth World ends, but evidently no one knows it any longer. Some of the Hopis believe it will come when the Blue Star Kachina removes his mask when he dances in the square. They say that there will be a great holocaust which will burn away everything, even the remnants, leaving only the people of good spirit... coincidentally, the Hopi...." Joseph flashed a grin that faded almost at once. "None of it has happened yet. The Kachina hasn't removed his mask, and the Fifth World is still here. Snake, I think, still has a lot left to do." *Perhaps, Snake is meant to die and take the world with him,* Joseph thought. He looked at the young man opposite him, and kept the thought to himself.

Rain eyed him dubiously. "What is it Snake's supposed to do? When is all this stuff supposed to happen?"

Joseph shrugged. "I don't have an answer. I have to think about all this. There is a lot that's becoming clearer to me, but I need to become open, myself, to receive it. There is a convergence of many beliefs going on in this: Lakota, Hopi, Navajo, Mojave. Maybe others. Damn, if ever an Indian needed a telephone and the Internet! I wish I had my books. I wish I could talk to my teachers and my elders. Let me get back to you on this, Rain. I need to pray and ask. I need to dream."

“What should I do?” Rain asked.

Joseph chewed on his bottom lip for a moment, then evidently came to some kind of a decision. “Wait. Just wait. That’s all we can do for now.” Joseph got to his feet and picked up the soup bowl.

Rain pulled back the blanket and tried to stand up. His legs threatened to buckle under him, and Joseph put an arm around him to keep him from falling. “I’d like to go outside,” Rain said. “Sit in the sun for a while.” *And wait for Snake to get back.* He felt that he had to get out into the open, where he could keep watch down the canyon. Joseph helped him to a sheltered corner where he could lean against a wall and wrapped him in a blanket.

Rain soaked in the afternoon warmth and dozed off and on. Sometime later, he woke to see Snake returning up the canyon through the cottonwood trees. He took a few minutes to study, unobserved, the compact figure with its predator’s walk. Dappled sunlight flowed over the sleek, powerful body in its close-fitting sleeveless shirt and pants, bringing out flaming red highlights in thick auburn hair and beard. *My man,* he thought. “Snake’s coming,” he called to Joseph.

“It would probably be better if I’m gone when he gets here,” Joseph said. “I’ll be back. There are things I have to do.” The Indian made his way down the slope in the opposite direction, and a few minutes later was trotting away homeward on his horse.

Snake climbed up the slope and swung over the low wall at the edge of the pueblo. He stopped short when he saw Rain, and the younger man saw Snake’s face change: an unguarded expression of relief that smoothed itself into deliberate neutrality a moment later. Rain smiled greeting. Snake walked over to the cookfire, where Joseph’s pot was still sitting in the warm banked ashes. “How’s the soup?” he asked, without preamble.

“Good.”

Snake grunted a noncommittal acknowledgement and scooped out a bowl full, then sat down next to the fire and began eating. Rain watched him, smiling to himself, and was content.

Joseph returned a few days later with a pack-horse-load of extra supplies. Without comment, he disappeared with them into one of the empty rooms. When he came out again, empty-handed, Snake and Rain were waiting for him. He ducked under the low door and straightened up to face them, wiping red sandstone-dust from his hands onto his jeans. “I brought you a few things you’re going to need to settle in here,” he said.

“Why?” Snake’s tone was flat.

“Call me eccentric,” Joseph said, “but I tend to feel concerned about men I’ve shared a battle with. Just something I picked up in ‘Nam... Lieutenant.” Snake glared at the Indian over an awkward silence, a suspicious glint in his good eye. Plainly, he didn’t believe Joseph’s explanation, but he had no better one of his own. Joseph returned the look blandly.

“Thanks, Joseph, we appreciate it,” Rain said. “What did you bring us?”

“Sage and red thread,” Snake drawled.

“Just take the damn stuff, Snake!” Rain exploded.

Snake looked from Rain to Joseph and back again. *Whatever it is, you two are in on it*

together his expression said. *You both want something.* After a minute, he turned and walked away silently.

Rain and Joseph watched him go. "I don't think I convinced him," Joseph said dryly. Rain shook his head. "We both know Snake isn't going to go for the idea that he's destined to bring the Sixth World into being. I'm going to have to come up with something else."

"You said wait," Rain said. "How long?"

"I don't know. Until it happens. A season, maybe. Maybe more."

"We'll have to plant a crop. I'm not going to live off of Snake's hunting."

"You're a farmer?" Joseph sounded surprised. The wiry, dark-haired young man with his skilled hand on the bow hardly seemed the type.

"Not really, but I grew up around it. If I want to eat, I'm going to have to learn, I guess. Will you help me?"

"Yes," Joseph said. "I'll help you." *While I keep an eye on Snake.*

The three men cleared rough squares of land in sunny areas beside the stream and on the mesa above, as the ancients had, and Rain planted a crop with seed Joseph supplied. The drenching late-spring rains arrived on schedule soon after, and when they were over, Joseph and Rain moved into the timeless patterns of agriculture familiar to both of them from their childhood. Snake helped sometimes, but he was no farmer. He spent long, solitary hours roaming the canyon, on foot or on Joseph's borrowed horse, reacquainting himself with the landscape and gathering the edible plants he remembered from long-ago wilderness camping trips and survival training in the area. He fished the stream where it widened into deeper pools near the head of the canyon, snared rabbits and small game, and grudgingly doled out an occasional bullet from his hoarded supply to bring down a deer. Now and then, he thought about moving on, but something held him here in this place he had chosen, or that had chosen him. There never seemed to be a good time, or a good reason, to leave. Habit drew the three men into its orbit as the months flowed on like the stream's water, effortlessly, one blending into the next.

By summer, Snake was familiar with weeding, though he was sure he would never enjoy it. Early sun lay across Snake's bent back as he worked his way with a steady rhythm down a row of plants, his sharp eye noting differences in leaf-shape and color that indicated alien invaders among the young corn stalks. Snake loosened the sandy soil, pulled, tossed a weed on the growing pile at the edge of the field. Several rows over, Joseph and Rain were busy at the same task. The three men worked in companionable silence until morning warmth became the scorching hammer-blow of mid-day sun, and they broke off to seek shade and water. After lunch, Rain went off for a splash downstream, while Joseph and Snake settled down to share a cigarette. Two thin trails of smoke drifted up into the leaves of the cottonwood over them as Snake and Joseph leaned back against the rough wood, studying, with some satisfaction, the field and the small pile of uprooted weeds withering beside it.

Joseph broke the silence. "So, Snake, is this it?" Snake gave him a suspicious look and remained silent, as the old Indian took a long pull on his cigarette and blew out a plume of smoke. "What's next? What're you going to do?"

"Plissken! What are you going to do?" Images of a sheet of red flame and the black silhouette of a wrecked helicopter came back to him, and the memory of Malloy's harsh,

desperate voice. Snake breathed out, the corners of his mouth curving upward in an ironic half-smile. The answer he had given then was still good, and he repeated it in a flat rasp. "Disappear."

"Disappear," Joseph said. "Sounds good." There was another silence. Joseph reached down and tugged on a little bunch of wild grass by his feet, pulling it loose from the dry soil. He slapped it lightly against his jeans-clad leg, knocking dirt off the roots. Apparently addressing the grass, he said, "What a man has no use for, he calls weeds. Pull 'em up, trample 'em down, let 'em dry out and die in the summer heat." Dropping the tuft of grass to the ground, he turned toward Snake. "You thought about what's going to happen when those boots of yours wear out? When you run out of salt, or your knife-blade breaks?"

Snake glared at him for a moment. He pulled off his hat and shook out his long hair. "I'll think of something."

"You need to trade." Joseph stubbed out his cigarette decisively.

"With who?"

Joseph gave him an exasperated look. "With the Dineh, Snake." He jerked his chin down the canyon. "Out there."

Snake snorted softly. "With what?" A gesture of his hand took in the field and the walled slot of the canyon. "What've I got the Indians don't have more of?" *Gunfighting and smoke-legging, and a talent for getting past bank security monitors -- not much of a market for that on the Rez.*

"Knowledge." Joseph smiled briefly at Snake's uncomprehending expression, then went on in a serious tone. "I watched the news reports. You've a talent for making trouble, Snake -- for the Feds, for the USPF. - but you didn't hit civilian targets. In Des Moines, you released that bank president unharmed." At the look on Snake's face, Joseph backed away from that angle of attack. "The IRS agent - you killed him, they said."

"Yeah," Snake said.

Joseph paused, raising inquisitive eyebrows in Snake's direction, but Snake didn't elaborate. None of the news stories had mentioned that the dead IRS agent had been found with a file folder on his shattered chest, a folder detailing the seizure by the IRS of all of the assets of the late Colonel Robert Plissken and his wife. All the public heard was that Snake Plissken had murdered an IRS agent in cold blood. The Mojave waited a polite amount of time, evidently decided no explanation would be forthcoming, shrugged. "You and the People have the same enemies, Snake. When you pushed the button and shut down the Feds' technology, you evened the odds a little and gave us back a fighting chance. We're taking back our land."

"You need me to teach Indians how to fight the Cavalry." Snake's voice was completely flat. *So now I know. Beats a repeat visit to The Max.*

"Exactly." Joseph's dark eyes sparkled briefly with mischief, then turned hard again. "There are a lot of veterans on the Rez, but you're the only one we know of with Special Forces combat experience in gliders. Having an air arm would give us a tremendous tactical advantage, and gliders and balloons are what we've got."

"I don't give a fuck about your war." It was a weary echo, spoken by rote.

"Give us what we need, and we'll fight our war ourselves. This is a business deal,

Snake." Joseph spread his hands in a storyteller's gesture. "Down in Sedona, there was a big place renting balloon rides and gliders to the New Age tourists. The Dineh sent a raiding party. They got four hot-air balloons and about twenty-five gliders, built or in parts. Bombers and fighters, Snake; dynamite and gasoline still burn. We've got young men who can fly them. What we don't have is an officer with combat experience in military glider tactics, who can teach those young men." There was a deliberate pause, then Joseph added, "You could fly again, Snake."

"Shit," Snake spat. He started to climb to his feet.

"Snake," Joseph said, "It's not over. You know it's not over."

Snake settled back slowly against the cottonwood's trunk with stiff, rigid motions that telegraphed his wariness and underlying anger. *It's not over; I told Rain that a long time ago. It will never be over as long as I'm alive to remember.* He was not surprised at Joseph's words. The old Indian was a veteran of different wars, fought for different reasons, but they shared a warrior's cynicism about peace and final endings, and Joseph's people, too, had long memories and old hatreds. Snake realized that, without conscious choice on his part, a decision had happened. "Who's involved in this?" he asked.

"The Tribal Council asked me to talk to you."

Angry suspicion flared in Snake again, and he said harshly, "What did you tell them?"

"That I'd talk to you." Joseph chuckled. "Relax, Snake. I'm the only person besides Rain who knows exactly where you are out here in the canyons, and the Council has agreed to leave it at that. They'll contact you through me. You don't have to join up, or play officer, or commit yourself to anything except coming in to the Cultural Center a couple of times a month and talking to some people about glider tactics."

"What do I get for talking?"

Joseph shrugged. "Sugar, coffee, salt, tools, cigarettes... pretty much whatever you need out here."

"How many?"

"Cigarettes? Well, I don't know exactly, but...."

Snake made a disgusted noise deep in his throat. "How many men am I teaching this shit to?"

"Maybe ten or fifteen. They'll take what you teach them and pass it on to everybody else."

Snake uncoiled and climbed to his feet, settling his hat back on his head. He stood looking out into the flat, hot blue of the Arizona summer sky, feeling the pain of an old wound waking. "I'll do it."

"I'll tell them," Joseph said.

As the year wore on, Joseph visited regularly, bringing news from the rest of the Reservation, and whatever scraps of information and rumors from the world outside filtered into Dinetah. Once a month or so, Snake made the trek, with Joseph and Rain, back to the Cultural Center to train pilots and pick up supplies. With the breakdown of the U.S. government and local authority following Six-sixty-six, the Navajo Nation was becoming an independent power in more than name, moving to reclaim land on the

edges of the Reservation. The Cultural Center was crowded with hard-eyed, long-haired men bristling with weapons and an old attitude. Snake's progress was followed by stories about his former hit-and-run raids on USPF installations and his dogged defiance of the U.S. government, and there were whispers comparing him to Geronimo. Snake kept it on an informal basis, promising nothing from one visit to the next. As soon as he had traded for the supplies he needed, he disappeared back into the maze of canyons and the isolation of his secret home. Silently, he watched Rain as his partner slowly lost his awed shyness around the young warriors and started trading stories about fighting raiders. Across the barrier of culture and history, each side felt a growing kinship. The Navajos' bantering camaraderie and sense of purpose filled a space in Rain that had been empty since he left Rivendell, and his rides back to the Anasazi ruins were filled with his own silence.

Without any formal invitation or definition, Joseph became a regular part of Snake and Rain's life in the Anasazi ruin. The old Indian came and went on his own schedule, disappearing for days at a time, turning up unasked at the right moment to help with the heavy work of cultivation on their little fields. Snake was, grudgingly, glad of the extra pair of hands. Though he did not ask for the help, a sense of obligation remained, annoying Snake into giving Joseph the only thing the Indian seemed to want in return: conversation.

The quartz pyramid occasionally turned up unexpectedly at the bottom of one of his pockets, and Snake would find himself running a thumb absent-mindedly across one of its flat planes. One afternoon, he and Joseph were sitting in the shade watching sunlight glint on a line of water creeping down their newly-dug irrigation channel toward a stand of thirsty corn plants when Snake felt a sharp stab of pain in his palm.

He pulled his hand out of his pocket, along with the pyramid he had not realized was there. A smudge of blood smeared the pointed apex. "Shit," Snake muttered. He rubbed his injured hand on his pants and started to put the pyramid away, then paused.

He held it out into the sun beyond the scrap of shade he shared with the old Indian.

Golden threads flared and glittered in the clear stone as Snake turned it over, following the fine, interwoven tracteries that seemed to shift and move like lines of fire in the pyramid's heart.

Joseph's voice broke Snake's concentration. "May I see?" Snake shrugged and handed the stone over. He thought he felt something like a tingle of static electricity as the stone passed from his hand to Joseph's, and decided it was his imagination.

Joseph turned it in his hands. "Beautiful. Lightning against the sky."

How did he know that? Snake thought, startled. A second later, his mind added, *How did I know that?* He flicked a sharp, suspicious glance in Joseph's direction, then turned back to the stone in the Indian's grasp.

Joseph seemed not to notice. He lifted the crystal and looked through it at the sky.

"When I was a boy, I had a stone like this, an onyx pyramid. The pyramid was called the benben stone by the ancient Egyptians... the place where the bennu bird stood when it burst into flame. The bennu bird was the original of the Greek phoenix." His eyes twinkled. "Yes... I'm a city Indian. I spent a long time reading about other people's Roots before I went looking for my own. Thunderbird is much like the phoenix, and both are connected with fire." He looked at Snake. "Don't bring this to the roof in a storm. You will attract lightning."

Snake snorted. "It's a rock."

"More than that, I think. You are here, in this place, for some reason, and the lightning stone as well. It is a part of you."

“Bullshit,” Snake said, but there was an edge in his voice. Dawn had said the same thing, the exact words. *Where do they get this shit?* He could not resist asking, “What part of me?”

Joseph seemed to be considering. In silence, he reached into his shirt pocket and drew out a battered clay pipe, then pulled a sack of loose tobacco from his belt-pouch.

Apparently ignoring Snake, he concentrated on the task of filling the pipe, tamping down the tobacco, lighting it. He turned his head, slowly taking in the whole circle of the canyon around him. Four times he paused, as if in thought, and took the pipe out of his mouth, gazing into the distance as smoke drifted up into the still, hot air. Then he faced Snake again and shrugged. “The part of you that wants to be free.”

“I am free.” Snake reached for the pipe.

“Then it doesn't matter.” Joseph moved the pipe out of Snake's reach and set it down. He pulled a pack of rolling papers out of a different shirt pocket and handed them to Snake, along with the tobacco.

Snake rolled a cigarette for himself and lit it with the matches Joseph handed him. They smoked together for a while, as Snake tried to ignore the irritation rising in him. He remembered that smug, stubborn Indian silence, and how much it had always annoyed him. He wondered if Joseph knew more than he was saying, if there was anything more to know, or if it was all bullshit. He'd be damned if he was going to ask. He felt shoved off-balance. Out of the corner of his good eye, he studied the prosaic figure in faded work shirt, jeans, and worn boots. The only unusual thing about him was the many small braids wrapped in cloth and tied together in back in an incongruously Rastafarian style. “Why do you wear your hair like that?” Snake asked, seemingly out of nowhere.

Joseph puffed on the pipe. “I am a man of consequence. I wear my hair braided in forty strands, wrapped like a man's hair should be wrapped. Only a woman lets her hair fly around her head to catch bad thoughts.” The ironic cock to his eyebrow and the canted smile told Snake he was quoting something. “If I were to wrap your hair, Snake, maybe you wouldn't be so *cohiva michiva*... s so unsettled inside.”

Snake snorted. “Man of consequence.”

Joseph's smile widened briefly, acknowledging Snake's deadpan sarcasm, then faded.

“Yes. I'm an Indian, and descended from the Mojaves.” His free hand rested lightly on the strand of metal and stone around his neck. “I wear the thunderbird to honor the Plains Tribes, the Lakota, the Cherokee; the turquoise to honor the Pueblo Nations. I wear my hair as my grandfathers wore it. I taught myself to braid it properly. I only cut it off twice... i in the city and in the Army.”

Snake stared at him for a moment, realization dawning. “Then you don't know. You got it all out of a book, just like Rain.”

“None of us knows, really,” Joseph said bleakly. “So much has been lost or destroyed.”

The silence lengthened and finally Snake broke it. “Why?”

“Because to be empty inside, to be nothing, is to invite what the Gas brings,” Joseph said. “I can either be Indian, or mad. I do not wish to be mad.”

“You were Army.” *Why did you leave?*

“I was a medic. Then I came home. A man needs to fight for his own land and his own people.” Joseph sighed and looked down at the ground. “I told you: the government

took the Mojave reservation lands for a military installation. The Russians slagged it. There's nothing there, any more."

Snake felt a cold shock of understanding and recognition slash through him. *Makes two of us, doesn't it, old man?* He breathed out on an angry growl.

Joseph's dark eyes held sorrow and resignation, and a deep anger that matched Snake's own, as he raised his head. "The whole Earth is wounded and septic, Snake. It cannot be healed. Soon the Destroyer will come and finish dismantling the web we have torn apart in our struggles to be gods."

The tentative bond Snake had felt developing between himself and Joseph snapped like an overstretched rubber band. He took a deep drag on the last of the homemade cigarette and ground the spark out in the soil by his boot-toe. "What the fuck is the Destroyer?"

"The Thunderbird..." Joseph said, as if to himself. He was again looking into the heart of the pyramid in his hands. "...the Phoenix." He shook himself and turned back to Snake, holding out the stone to him. When Snake took it, Joseph got to his feet.

"Bullshit out of a book," Snake said. His tone was indifferent.

"I used to think so also, when I lived in the city," Joseph replied slowly. "My white man's mind was sure of it. Nothing but myth and superstition. Now, out here..." he spread his weathered hands slowly, "I'm not so sure. Not so sure at all, Snake." He turned and began walking back toward the place he had left his horse. Snake snorted, a soft, disgusted sound, and pocketed the stone pyramid.

The year moved on toward harvest, and beyond into winter, as Joseph and Snake continued their prickly dance of words. Their little crop was gathered and put up in the storage area left behind by the original inhabitants at the far end of the ruins, along with Snake's store of smoked meat and the goods he had traded from the Cultural Center. Damp chill settled into the ruins, and Snake's headaches flared, along with his temper. The cold air and bright winter sunlight stabbed through Snake's damaged eye, and, at last, as the first light snow of the season dusted the mesa-top, Snake and Rain moved down into one of the covered kivas in the center of the ruin, where the ventilation system allowed them to light a good fire and heat the enclosed space. They shared sex and body heat through the long nights, lying together under one of Joseph's old quilts and the warm Sky Rattlesnake blanket. In the close, smoky darkness, Snake's pain and his dreams grew stronger as he and Rain waited for spring.

Joseph offered Snake what he had for pain, using one thing and then another, and Snake tried them one by one, with a sort of grim, dubious, and ill-tempered resignation. One mid-winter morning, Snake and Rain heard Joseph halooing them as he climbed the slope up to their home. They met him in a curve of knee-high parapet at the edge of the ruins; Joseph drew the line at entering the kivas. It was one of those piercingly bright desert winter days, cold air in their lungs contrasting with the sun-warmed red sandstone of the wall in the sheltered spot, each individual sound and scent and sight sharply distinct in the crystalline air. Snake squinted behind his dark glasses, trying to ignore the pounding in his head as the chill hit the back of his throat and stabbed upward.

"Tobacco," Joseph said as he sat down. The two other men stared at him. He started again: "I want to try treating Snake's headaches with tobacco."

"What?" Snake said.

“What can you do with tobacco?” Rain added at the same time.

“Tobacco was originally sacred.” At Snake's “hpf,” Joseph smiled. A sideways glance drew Rain into his amusement. “Before the whites turned it into a carcinogenic recreational drug, it was a healing herb, a medicine that eased pain and opened pathways. It still is, when it's used the right way.”

“What's the 'right way'?” Rain asked.

“Some bullshit Indian 'ceremony.’” Snake's voice was toneless, but the look on his face was eloquent

“Think of the sweat lodge as a sauna with feathers,” Joseph said dryly. “Heat and moisture, opening up blood vessels and lungs. Sweating out toxins. Relaxation techniques to ease tight muscles. And real tobacco, a hundred per cent tobacco, not this cut and processed stuff.’ He bounced his tobacco pouch on the palm of his hand, caught it, and put it back in his pocket. His eyes teased Snake. “We can leave the feathers out of it....”.

Snake glared silently at Joseph and Rain. He could see by Rain's expression that the kid thought it was a great idea. It was the same gullible, wide-eyed look he always got on his face when the old Indian came out with one of these things. Snake snorted to himself. Still... real tobacco.... . The familiar craving clawed its way along his nerve-endings, reminding him of the sweet buzz Ormsby's smokes had given him. Tobacco had always soothed his frayed nerves, sharpened his reflexes, eased the pain without dulling his edge. The pure stuff would be... awesome. A sharp stab behind his bandaged eye decided him. Snake rose to his feet and stood silently waiting with his face a deliberate blank. Joseph nodded, unsmiling, and stood up also, with a quick “stay put” gesture in Rain's direction. Rain settled back to wait as the other two men walked away.

By tacit agreement, Snake ignored Joseph's ritual preparations, but he stripped and sponged off before going into the sweat lodge. Just like the Finnish sauna: there was no point in getting his clothes soaked with sweat. He sat down on a log near the pile of hot stones, feeling rough wood pressing into his bare flesh, as Joseph pulled the heavy tarp over the single opening, shutting out the light from outside. The scent of desert pine filled the space, then the hiss of something wet falling on the heated rock, followed by the spicy smell of sage. Snake's eyes watered in the thick, smoky steam, and he coughed “You must be completely naked,” Joseph's voice came out of the darkness. “Remove your last covering. Take the smoke into your body, into the place where your anger and pain are kept.”

Snake remained mystified for a few seconds until he realized Joseph's meaning. The eyepatch. “No.”

“There's no light here. Only heat and healing.”

Snake's hand slid under his hair to find the thin band around his head. He was thick and heavy in the warmth, feeling the itch of sweat already trickling down his overheated face, down his naked back, down through the damp hair of his chest. His fingers traced the length of the cord for several moments, then slipped it off and closed the patch inside his fist. Smoke stung his damaged eye, reviving terrible memories of the gas. It had been cold, freezing cold, in Leningrad. Stifling heat around him in the blackness disoriented Snake. It should be cold. He coughed again and pain lanced through his head as he raised his left hand to guard his injured face from the fumes.

As Snake's vision adjusted, Joseph became a deeper black silhouette against charcoal

gray. The old man picked up a handful of broad leaves from a basket beside his feet, whispered something into their surface, broke them between his hands, and scattered them over the burning-hot rocks, adding a sprinkle of water from a gourd hung by the opening of the lodge. A familiar smoky odor choked the air, almost solid in Snake's lungs as he inhaled deeply. "Breathe the smoke. Call it into you," Joseph said. There was what sounded to Snake like a deliberate edge to the other man's voice as he added, "The Lakota call tobacco smoke the breath of Wakan Tanka."

Snake snorted. "You believe that shit?"

"I am not Lakota," Joseph said evenly. Snake felt a ghost of old irritation beneath the euphoria rising on the nicotine buzz. Why couldn't the old Indian give a simple answer to a simple question?

"Each man walks in the path that's laid for him. What is your path?" Joseph said into the eddying smoke.

"Why bother asking," Snake growled, "You sound like you've already got the answer." *Your answer, not mine, old man.*

"I don't," Joseph said calmly. "You do. You need to find it. What is your path, 'man-who-is-called-Snake'? Who are you?"

Snake inhaled deeply, riding on the buzz. He felt lightheaded, needle-sharp focused and at the same time diffuse and distant, fuzzy from the heat and the fumes. His pain was easing, floating away with the smoke. He inhaled again, and let his breath out in a puff of air. He moved his hands over his arms and chest, rubbing the beads of sweat that filmed his body into his skin. He felt better than he had in a long time.

"Who are you?" Joseph prompted again, barely audible.

Snake relaxed, snorting a soft laugh. "Stupid fucking question. Everybody's already answered it." He took a deep breath. "American... Soldier... War hero... Call me Snake... Bank robber... Psychopath... The Force's Most Wanted man... Asshole....". He laughed again, soundlessly. "Outlaw... Threat to Society... Gangsta... Savior of Mother Gaia... Rapist... The New Geronimo... thought you were dead... Ought to be taller... the name's Plissken....".

"That's who they see. Who do you see?"

Snake's headache was gone, reduced to the dull pressure behind his damaged eye that was always with him. He felt lighter, free of the boxes and barriers that hemmed him in, free of the chains that bound him to the past and the world. "Fuck if I know."

"Look."

Snake shifted on the log. His mind was a blank darkness. Far below the surface, indistinct things moved, glittering and sparking like fiery cracks in the blackness of a spreading lava flow. Images flickered, pictures from his past. He considered and discarded them. They were bits of what he had been; not who he was. Another something stirred, deep in the blackness, man-shaped but not human; something hungry. With it came images of fire and destruction, and a seductive attraction that pulled Snake toward its hotdark center. Snake shied away, slamming his mind shut. Then there was nothing but the meaningless fragments of his past flickering on the darkness like black-and-white pictures on a television screen. Joseph was a shape among them. "There's nothing there," Snake told the Joseph-shape.

"Nothing," Joseph said in a low tone, as if examining the word. "Hidden, or opened?"

Snake was silent. "Is it the nothing of an empty place or the nothing of a closed door?" Joseph elaborated. He seemed to be taking Snake seriously.

"Fuck this bullshit!" Snake suddenly grated, pulling the eyepatch back into place. His headache was gone. "I'm going."

"You haven't told yourself the answer to the question," Joseph said. "What is the nothing?"

Snake pushed the flap away and stepped into air that was suddenly cold on his sweating, naked body. He squinted against the light of bright desert sky. Joseph was emerging from the dark opening of the sweat lodge as Snake looked back behind him. Snake growled a curse in the old Indian's direction, then turned to walk down to the stream to wash off. The shock of cold water poured over him cleared the fumes from his head, leaving him clear and sharp, and, for the moment, almost free of pain. He came up, sputtering, out of the water to see Joseph still standing there, watching him with a sort of relentless patience. Snake brushed past him without answering, and went to put on his clothes.

Snake stood at the rim of the mesa, watching his first class take off for a practice flight. A steady wind out of a cloudless lapis-lazuli sky tugged at his snug-fitting nylon pants and jacket and whipped his long hair around his face. Perfect weather for gliders. His pilots launched themselves one by one, fanning out above the bare brown desert below, keeping careful distance apart as the hang-gliders wobbled and tipped under inexperienced control. Beside him, waiting for Snake's signal, Rain fiddled with the straps of his harness, checking them again, careful, as always, of his equipment. Snake smiled to himself behind his impassive expression as he caught the motion out of the corner of his good eye. He signaled the next man for lift-off. Russell Tso's mahogany face was intent as he positioned himself on the edge of the mesa. At Snake's downward gesture, he leaned into the wind, and Snake watched him float away, following his fellow warriors. They were his students, Snake thought, but not his men; not yet, not ever. Not like Black Light. This was not his fight. He was shut inside a glass box, walled away from these intense young men by invisible barriers of culture and commitment and polite silence. He had not been asked to go along on the series of raids that reclaimed Winslow and Holbrook for the Navajo Nation, and sealed off I-40 to unauthorized through traffic. Rain had gone along, without him. Rain moved into position and was waiting, last in line, to take off. He flashed a grin at Snake, his eyes sparkling. With his skin burned bronze by months of work in the Arizona sun, his long, dark hair held back from his face by a headband, his high-laced boots, and the strand of rough turquoise wound around his neck, Rain looked no different from any of the others. *Gone native*, Snake thought.

Rain was still waiting for his signal. Snake nodded, and Rain launched his hang-glider. A gust of wind pushed him off-balance and Rain righted himself after a short struggle. *Not as easy as it looks*, Snake thought, unsure whether he was referring to the Navajos, or Rain, or maybe both. There were vague rumors filtering into Dinetah, third and fourth and fifth-hand rumors that included no names, no details, nothing definite, but hinted at gathering reaction against the Indians' campaign. Snake distrusted good luck. He studied the group of figures floating away from him, making mental notes.

Now Snake was alone at the edge of the mesa. The wind still pulled at the fabric of his glider like impatient hands dragging him forward. To the Navajos who had journeyed outward on that wind before him, Snake thought, it would be no figure of speech, but a reality. It was easy to understand, here on this high place, how they could view the wind as a holy thing, a Power. "I have... put out my hand and touched the face of God..."

quoted itself on Snake's inner ear. He snorted softly... *Get a grip, Plissken.* He threw himself off the rock and into the air; the hang-glider swooped, steadied, rode upward on the wind. As the earth slipped out from under his feet, Snake felt an inner barrier of old scar tissue and cynicism dissolving into an unfamiliar, almost forgotten, emotion. It was more a memory of joy than the thing itself, a memory of soaring exultation and a young Special Forces pilot-candidate on his first solo flight so long ago, before the world turned to shit. Even the memory was startling, vivid, and overwhelming. Snake surrendered to it, riding on the power in the wind. The deep electric blue of the sky surrounded him, calling him onward. Sun glittered and flashed as he angled into it, turning the edges of his vision behind the lenses of his goggles to bright crystal sparks, as if the very air itself was on fire. Ahead of him was a red sandstone butte, and Snake trimmed for the updraft it created. Rising free, he slid over the invisible curve of air and soared, following a hawk rising on open wings on a thermal. He found the air current, leaned into it, let it carry him in a sweeping upward spiral. The glider felt like a live thing, on a living wind, under his hands and feet. Far below, the jumbled landscape was a pattern of tans and reds and grays with patches of multicolor green. A sudden flash of light caught Snake's eye: far off on the horizon he saw the bright, thin line of old railroad tracks shining in the sun. Dazzled, he blinked and turned back to observing his class landing on the second mesa-top he had chosen as their objective. He circled until he had seen all of them touch down, then landed.

The years turned and turned again, and Snake felt himself growing into this place in the canyon, in the old ruins. Summers, he and Rain lived on the upper level in the rooms Snake had chosen. Winters, they retreated to the warmer shelter and more vivid dreams Snake found within the ancient kiva. The well-watered soil along the river produced a good crop which Snake supplemented with the fish and game he caught. The dry earth seemed to be growing slowly greener in the empty land. The Navajo Nation pushed its borders outward to reclaim the area between the four sacred mountains, and Joseph was always there, patiently waiting for something to happen.

Some mornings, especially after one of his recurring dreams of the burning man, Snake would wake early and go out by himself, while Rain still slept, to the edge of the ruin to watch the sun rise. This blue-gray fall morning, the air was sharp in his lungs, stabbing through his head. He cupped his hands around his mug of Navajo tea and swallowed the scalding-hot liquid, ignoring its burned-licorice herbal flavor. Real coffee was only a wistful memory. Snake rolled a cigarette and lit it, watching the gray-on-gray line of smoke floating upward join the thin trail of smoke from the cook-fire: tasting, smelling, seeing, the tangible echo of the fire and smoke that filled his dreams. He sucked in a deep breath, and felt the healing rush of tobacco through his bloodstream, damping the pain behind his injured eye to a level he could ignore. The bright line of sunrise touched the top of the opposite mesa, and a tall bank of massed cloud beyond turned brilliant white as the rising sun hit it. *Rain soon*, Snake thought. The fall monsoons that heralded the beginning of the winter season were almost upon them.

In the silence, he heard the faint rasp of leather boot-soles on stone, and turned quickly to see Joseph climbing the last few feet to the edge of the cliff overhang. The old Indian swung first one leg and then the other over the low stone guard-wall and straightened up with a soft grunt of effort. "Long way up here."

"I like my privacy."

Joseph nodded, ignoring the well-worn exchange. He slipped the strap of his saddle-bag

over his head, set the leather pouch down next to his feet, and settled himself on the wall beside Snake to watch with him for a while as the cliff-face opposite them changed from charcoal to pale gray to salmon-rose, to dull-red sandstone in morning sun. Finally he spoke again. "Things are moving, Snake."

"What things? Moving where?" Snake said.

"I'm not sure. There are rumors, signs; nothing certain. But it will be soon."

Snake gave him a look out of the side of his good eye. "That's useful." His voice was completely expressionless.

"Snake, when it comes, you will need to be able to see where you are going with both eyes. You need to find the vision in your other eye, the one you keep covered."

Snake snorted. "Hpf. Nothing there."

"Yes, there is. Come with me," Joseph said. Snake remained stubbornly motionless.

Joseph squatted down on his heels next to Snake. "Snake, you have to learn how to see through your other eye, instead of trying to see with it. What is to be seen isn't in front of you, but behind you." He paused. "I've made another mistake, I think. We've both been looking in the darkness, in the earth...the sweat lodge, your winter dreams down there." Joseph gestured toward the entrance of the kiva, and Snake was sure his face betrayed his startled alarm. How did Joseph know about his dreams? A second later, he snorted in disgust at his own stupidity. Of course, Rain had shot off his mouth to Joseph. He could never trust that kid around Indians. His flash of anger made him miss Joseph's next few words. He came back to the calm voice saying, "...air and fire. You will find your vision there. Come with me." The old Indian stood up again. Snake gave him a glare and stayed where he was. Joseph stood looking down toward where Snake sat with his boots propped against the red sandstone of the ancient wall. "Humor me, Snake," he said. "I'm right about this. There's something you need to see. Come with me."

Snake rose to his feet. A practical part of his mind told him the only way he was going to get the old Indian to shut up was, indeed, to humor him. Deeper inside him, in the place of darkness and fire and smoke where the burning man spoke to him in his dreams, he felt an echo of Joseph's certainty, and responded without consciously acknowledging it. He brushed the gritty red sandstone dust off his pants, ducked back inside his room to pick up his gunbelt, nodded once, silently, and followed. Joseph led him along the steep and winding trail the original inhabitants had made from the edge of the cliffhouse to the mesa above. In places, it was covered by drifted sand and rockslide, in places it was no more than rough steps pecked into the rockface. The two men came to a ledge that widened out to several yards across, and deadended at a vertical slot in the cliff. Snake looked back the way they had come, down the rocky slope, to the silvery line of the stream far below, and took a firmer grip on the sun-warmed sandstone under his fingers. "I've been up here," Snake said; "It doesn't go anywhere."

"Look again," Joseph said.

Snake studied the narrow space between the two sections of rock. What before had looked like no more than random projections in the vertical rock walls he saw, now, was actually hand-and-foot holds carved into the soft sandstone to form a rough ladder. At its base, motionless, coiled a huge diamondback rattler, its brown-and-gray-patterned shape almost invisible against the mottled earth. The serpent's black, unblinking eyes met Snake's. Its long forked tongue flickered once. Joseph started toward the animal, and Snake's hand went to the gun at his side. "Watch it! Rattler!"

Joseph held up a warning hand. "Don't shoot. A bullet wouldn't kill him, anyway. He watches this place." He turned toward the rattler. "I greet you, Grandfather. I have brought him. Let us pass." The snake remained motionless, except for its flickering tongue, its rattles silent, as the old Indian walked around its thick, looped coils, and put his foot on the first step of the rock ladder. He looked back at Snake. "He knows his own people," Joseph said. "Come on up."

Warily, Snake detoured around the rattler's body, as the reptile eyed him with apparent indifference, and began to climb after Joseph. The ascent was slow. The ancient sandstone steps were worn with wind and rain and time, and in places the two men had to brace themselves with hands and feet against the sides of the rock slot to keep from falling. Fragments of stone crumbled under Snake's boots and bounced almost soundlessly downward. At last he came to the top, levered himself out onto the surface of the mesa where Joseph was waiting for him, and stood up to take a look around.

Except for the wind, and the sound of his own breathing, it was completely quiet. Snake could feel the bright, clear air sucking the moisture from his body, his sweat drying almost instantly. He ran his tongue across his upper lip and tasted salt. Silently, Joseph held out his canteen in Snake's direction, and, silently, Snake took it and drank, then handed it back. The summit they stood on was a small, irregular space, perhaps an acre wide, weathered into a jumble of lumps and meandering hollows, a miniature version of the red canyon landscape below. Here and there, a scattering of blackbrush clung to life on the barren ground. In the lee of the tallest point, in a sheltered depression in the rock, where a little pocket of soil had collected over the centuries, stood a stunted and gnarled pinon. Snake walked over to it, put his hand on the rough bark of the tree, and looked out over the edge. The mesa ran like a wall in both directions. Beyond it, across the deep gashes between, Snake could see in the distance on all sides, dozens of other mesa tops, like a series of upthrust defensive towers scattered at random across the landscape. Above him was nothing except an endless blue sky and the bright clouds. He let out the breath he had been unconsciously holding in a brief, explosive puff.

Joseph came up to his side. His face was unsmiling and solemn. "Look," he said, pointing down over the edge of the cliff. Below the spot where the pinon's roots clung to the stone, Snake saw another set of steps carved into the rock face, leading down to the desert below. "This is another way into and out of the canyon. The Navajo, and the Anasazi before them, used it as a lookout and an escape route," Joseph said. "It is a place of many kinds of vision."

"No shit," Snake said. From this vantage point, he could see for miles in every direction.

"This is the place where your covered eye can be opened, if you will let it happen." Snake turned his head to look at Joseph, his jaw set in angry disbelief, but the old Mojave ignored the other man's warning expression. He held up a hand. "Wait, Snake; listen to me."

Snake snorted. "Looks like I'm a captive audience." He turned to look back down the way he and Joseph had come. "Long climb back down without a breather." He sat down at the base of the pinon and settled himself in an attitude of deliberate indifference rather like that of the rattler they had seen at the base of the rock-cleft.

Joseph settled himself on the ground beside Snake. "It's not just something my people believe, Snake," he said. "Odin, Horus, Mog Ruith: there are many stories of those with one eye and two visions. A man with one blind eye sees hidden things, they say, if he's willing to look. If not," he shrugged, "he's just a man with one eye." Joseph reached into the pocket of sandy soil at the base of the pinon tree, picked up a handful, and let it trickle slowly through his wrinkled brown fingers. "I told you, Snake, things are

moving. There is a great change coming, and you are at the center of it, but you have to see your path and follow it. You are a catalyst."

"Get somebody else." Snake rubbed one callused palm across the back of his other wrist. *No handcuffs this time; no explosives, no Plutoxin. You're shit out of luck, old man: I'm not volunteering.*

Joseph sighed. "Always the contrary. When someone says, 'yes,' you are already thinking 'no.'" He fell silent. He seemed to be drawing into himself, listening to some inner voice. Snake was about to get up and head back down the rock ladder when the old Indian finally spoke again. His voice was stronger now. "Long ago, you saw a path laid down. You knew it was another's, and not yours. You obeyed when you should have refused, and led many men who should have lived into morning fire and death. You were given your covered eye for that. At that point, you turned Contrary, never to follow another's path again. You learned one lesson well."

Snake thought of Kansas City, New York Max, Cleveland, Los Angeles. He threw back his head, ran a hand through his hair, then clenched the hand into a hard fist against his thigh. "Then why do I get dragged into shit?"

Joseph smiled wryly. "Perhaps because you have not learned anything since."

"What the fuck does that mean?" Snake said.

Joseph started to open his mouth, then paused and closed it again. He hesitated for a long moment, as if listening for that inner voice he had found earlier, and Snake thought he saw confusion behind the dark eyes opposite him. At last, Joseph spread his hands. "I don't know."

"What?!" Snake demanded, anger rising in his voice. "You drag me up here, dump your mystical crap on me, and then say you 'don't know?'"

"All I have are guesses, Snake. I see events moving toward some great thing, and I see you at the center of it, but I don't know what it is you need to learn, to do what you are supposed to do." Joseph lowered his head, and his wide-brimmed hat cast a shadow across his face.

The other man looked older, stooped and shrunken. *Yeah, Snake thought, I was almost taken in by it; just like the kid.* He made a disgusted sound deep in his throat. "So the Indian Medicine Man routine's for shit, too." Snake said flatly. "Like I said, it's all bullshit."

"No, Snake." Joseph's voice was calm. "This *is* a place of visions. Sometimes that involves recognizing how little one sees. I can't show you anything, because I can't see through your eyes. I can only bring you here to show you where to look for your own vision."

Snake rose from his seat under the pinon and stood looking out over the wide sweep of the desert. To his surprise, a sort of frustrated disappointment churned in him, and he felt humiliated by it. *Suckered again, Plissken. What did you expect -- that the crazy old Indian really had any answers? That you'd find something up here? You should know better.* Automatic defenses, damped by the months of solitude, flickered into life from the smoldering core of anger inside him. The magnificent view seemed to mock him. *'Place of visions' Maybe you can get the New Age tourists to buy it, old man. Not me.*

Without another word, Snake turned away and started to descend the rock ladder to the Anasazi ruin. He could tell by the rattle of rock fragments trickling down on him as he

went that Joseph was following him back the way they had come, but Snake ignored him. When he reached the bottom of the rock-cleft, the big rattlesnake was gone. Snake paused for a moment to catch his breath, looking out over the green slash of the canyon below. As he watched, fat cloud shadows flitted over the surface of the ground, and Snake looked up to see that a bank of darker cloud was building up over the western horizon. Heat-lightning crackled briefly in the mass. The long dry season was ending.

Rain was waiting when they arrived back at the ruin. The expression on his face shifted as the other two men came around the corner of the sandstone wall. "What happened? Where were you?"

Snake jerked a thumb in the direction he had come. "Up there." A beat. "Nice view," he added dryly.

Rain looked from Snake to Joseph and back. "Is something wrong?"

Snake remained silent. Joseph studied him for a moment, and then seemed to come to a decision. He picked up his saddle-bag and slung it over his shoulder. "I'm leaving. Goodbye, One-Eyed Serpent; goodbye Rain." He turned and walked away.

Rain followed by himself, and caught up to Joseph just as the old Indian reached the top of the path the three men had worn from the ruin to the canyon floor. "You're leaving? For good?" Joseph nodded. "Why?"

"There's nothing more I can do here," Joseph said. "I will go and sing World Ending."

"World Ending...." Rain echoed, almost in a whisper. "Is it...is it...now? How do you know?"

"Sometimes, to Sing a thing properly is to make it happen. Maybe if I do what I am supposed to do, you and Snake will do what you are supposed to do. Maybe not." Joseph reached into his saddlebag, pulled out a wide slab of folded paper, and held it out in Rain's direction. Rain took it without looking at it, his eyes still focused on Joseph's face. "Here. I picked this up at the Cultural Center; they're all over the Rez. Maybe it will give you some answers. Or some questions. And Rain," Joseph paused for emphasis, "Remember what we talked about when you were so sick. You have to stay with Snake. Promise me."

"I... I will, Joseph," Rain said. "I promise."

"Good. Goodbye, then." Joseph climbed down the slope to the grassy spot below where he had left his horse tied. He mounted, turned to wave a final farewell to Rain, and rode off down the canyon.

When Joseph had gone, Rain unfolded the square of paper the Indian had given him and examined it. It was thick and a little rough, with a grayish undertone -- it looked handmade - and covered with neatly-printed characters in familiar blocks of headlines and text. Rain raised his head and his dark eyes met Snake's cold blue one. "It's a newspaper. How would they..." he stopped in mid-sentence. "...Oh...."

"Right. Hand presses." Snake took the paper from Rain and scanned it. A banner headline on the front page caught his attention: BERRIGAN TO COMMAND NEW WORLD ORDER FORCES. Shock and rage flared in him as he read on:

CHICAGO - In his first move to implement the New World Order agreement signed here last week by representatives of the United Governments Organization, President Mercer

appointed former USPF Director-General, John Berrigan, as America's World Police Force National Commander. The international conference, the first since the catastrophic destruction of technology by the world-criminal S.D. "Snake" Plissken, agreed to cooperate fully with the newly formed W.P.F. in restoring order throughout the Western world.

Canada, Mexico, the United Kingdom, Russia, the European Commonwealth, and the Israeli Block have agreed to contribute troops to the new military force. The conference also authorized an international commission to develop alternative technologies not hampered by the continuing Sword of Damocles Pulse, including steam, wind, and solar power, and lighter-than-air flight."

"In an interview following the ceremony, National Commander Berrigan (see sidebar) said...."Snake's eyes flicked to the sidebar: "John Berrigan," he read, "Former Director-General of the United States Police Force, and commander-in-chief during the Summer Wars, first distinguished himself as commander of Operation Wolfhound during the Russian War. His daring decision to sacrifice two gas-disabled former units of the U.S. Special Forces in a diversionary feint against Leningrad is generally considered to be responsible for the success of the Moscow Campaign...."

Snake's vision wavered as he studied the photo at the head of the newspaper column. He had seen the man in the picture before, in grainy press photos, and video news soundbites, and pre-flight briefings: Berrigan, the man who had ordered the Leningrad Ruse, and sent Snake's men to die for a lie in the fire and ice of the Russian winter.

Rain took the paper from Snake's numb fingers and flipped through the pages, making sounds which became angrier and more disgusted with each page. He shoved a section of newsprint back in Snake's direction, and Snake followed Rain's pointing finger to a headline on the lower half of the page. **US TO RECLAIM FOUR CORNERS AREA** it said. He read on:

Acting against insurgent factions on the Navajo Reservation, a WPF expeditionary force under command of the newly appointed National Commander, John Berrigan, is moving to recapture American territory that has fallen into Indian hands. Claiming the area as "part of Dinetah" and "sacred," terrorists have seized land along the borders of the Reservation, killing Americans and cutting off vital rail access across Arizona.

At his press conference today, Police General Berrigan said, "Before we can take on our role as leader of the New World Order, we have to clean up our own backyard. As National Commander, I will make the campaign against these heathen terrorists my first priority. We will no longer tolerate enclaves which claim to be independent of American authority on American soil. The reservation system must, and will, be completely eradicated, and all so-called Indians made subjects of the American government. Any opposition will be ruthlessly exterminated. Our redskin enemy is hereby given notice that the New Moral America intends to use any means necessary to achieve complete victory."

Snake and Rain raised their heads from the printed page and their eyes met again. How the hell did this happen? hung silently in the air between them.

Chicago: Ten Months Previously:

After the capitol was slagged during the brief Third-World Invasion, the crumbling remnants of the U.S. government fled westward and regrouped in the more defensible heartland. The President was dead, a suicide (or so Malloy claimed), and the vice-president a casualty in the fighting during the retreat from Lynchburg. Most of

Congress was scattered or killed. The military took control, and declared the old city of Chicago the new capitol of the United States. Once again, trade and communication moved by water, horseback, and a gradually expanding network of steam railroads, and, once again, Chicago was a natural center.

The new national headquarters of the WPF was one of the few highrise buildings along Lakeshore Drive that had escaped major damage during the war and the Crazy Riots.

In his corner office there, overlooking the lake, Police Colonel Henry Carlton was studying sets of fingerprints from various police files on S.D. Plissken. One, from the files of New York Maximum Security Penitentiary, was a perfect match for the set from Kansas City in '93. A small scar crossing the tip of the left index finger was identical in each. He picked up the folder with the set taken from Plissken before he had been sent into Los Angeles. The scar was fainter, but still clearly visible. Frowning, he turned again to the fourth set of prints, the ones taken from the corpse of "Plissken" turned in by the bounty hunter in San Francisco. No, they definitely did not match the other three; there was no scar on the left index finger at all. The frustrating, time-consuming process of locating paper copies of old USPF file records, and collecting them for comparison at headquarters, had proved worth the effort. Carlton swore under his breath and tapped the mismatched prints with his magnifying glass. "He's alive." He pushed the folder across his desk, toward his assistant. "Or at least he was then."

Officer Dunleavy fielded the folder, but didn't open it. He knew every thumb-print and typo already. "The body matched Plissken's description. The tattoo was the same. Old, too; not like somebody added it later."

"Damage to the face was fresh, though, like the head had been kicked in. Maybe revenge, more likely to hide the fact that the eye didn't match Plissken's. The tattoo's a problem, but," Carlton shrugged, "nothing strange about two men having a cobra tattoo. Plissken probably went looking until he found somebody with one, and killed him in cold blood. What I'd expect from that gassed bastard." Carlton reached across the desk to tap the folder again. "No, that body was a ringer. He's still out there, somewhere."

"You think it was Plissken, then? Not the bounty hunter trying to cash in on the reward?"

"It was Plissken," Carlton said. "Fits his standard pattern. Everyone thought he'd been killed in Kansas City, and again in Reno, back before he went into the Max to rescue President Harker. Then after the kidnapping in '02, he disappeared and everyone thought he was dead until Cleveland. Slippery son of a bitch. This time, though, he screwed up. We have a description of his accomplice, the man who brought the body in. If we can identify him, we may have a lead." Carlton leaned back in his blue swivel-chair. "San Francisco. Plissken was still in California. The question is: where is he now?"

"Canada?" Dunleavy offered.

"I don't think so." Carlton said. "He's wanted worldwide this time. By now, he knows it. No point in going outside." He steepled his fingers and tapped them thoughtfully against his chin. "I have a theory. Look at Plissken's targets: they're all political. He's hit banks - all federal. Police installations. Tax processing centers. Internal Security facilities. Armories and weapons depots. I think that twisted crazy sees himself as some kind of American patriot. Now that the power's out, he'll be figuring we can't track him. He'll be overconfident."

"Like he was in Cleveland," Dunleavy broke in.

"And New Vegas. Yes," Carlton nodded. "I've requested his records from the old Central Office. When they get here, we'll have everything the USPF had on him, as well as the Army files. And then...." he paused for effect.

"Sir?"

"And then, Martin, we get Plissken to come to us." Carlton leaned forward again and slapped his palm against the desk. "Offer him something he won't be able to refuse: a chance to finish what he started at Firebase Seven."

"Sir?" Dunleavy repeated on a slightly higher note that suggested alarm.

"A trap, Martin; a trap. Lure Plissken out of hiding, and grab him... alive, preferably... when he shows himself. What I need is the right bait." Carlton waved a hand in the direction of the stack of folders on his desk. "It's somewhere in the paperwork; all we have to do is find it."

"Yes, Sir," said Dunleavy.

"I'll start on what I've got. You," Carlton said, "will start in San Francisco. Get packing. The mail train leaves in three days."

A few tattered seagulls soared and wheeled over San Francisco, borne on an updraft of warm air. Below, black-uniformed WPF troops had cordoned off the Old Mint and fired it to drive out the criminals who had barricaded themselves inside and refused to surrender. Dunleavy kept a close eye on his men. His orders were clear: take the prisoners alive for questioning. He could tell from the sulky expressions around him that his troops would rather use them for target practice. He imagined bodies dancing under the thud of high-impact bullets, and felt a brief warmth in the pit of his own stomach. He enjoyed that, the blood and the shattered bone, and, sometimes, the screaming, but that would have to come later, after they found out if the captives knew anything about Plissken. The raid had netted six, maybe seven, prisoners. One thin, sickly-looking fellow in a plaid shirt was learning on a cane and gesturing, trying to talk his way out of the arrest as one of the guards manhandled him into the back of a horse-drawn paddy wagon. Next in line was the fat man with the dark curly hair and beard, the one who had taken out several of Dunleavy's men and then tried to shoot himself when they broke down the door. He was cradling his arm, the one that had been shattered when the WPF sniper's bullet hit him. That one seemed to be some kind of a leader among this rabble. Dunleavy's glance moved on, rested on the big black buck standing between two of his men, his arms cuffed behind him, his legs shackled. Pride and anger burned in the man's eyes, and a bone-deep hatred. Dunleavy felt a stirring of anticipation. Yes, there might be some sport in this after all; that one looked like he could take quite a lot of punishment before he died.

Carlton pored over Plissken's file as documents trickled in, and a picture of his quarry began to form in his mind. "Why'd you do it?" was a question many people besides Malloy had asked the one-eyed outlaw, but nobody had been very successful at finding an answer. There were guesses, speculations, transcripts of inconclusive interrogations, including one under drugs by someone named Anderson, just before Plissken went into Los Angeles, but nothing conclusive. Plissken, it seemed, had been remarkably good at keeping his mouth shut. Criminal, sociopath, the Force's Most Wanted, America's Most Immoral... Special Forces, war hero, patriot, the best we had.... Somewhere, there was a

link, a connection. A turning point. A motive. Carlton searched backward down the years, looking for the place where Plissken had shifted from one identity to the other, and finally, he thought, found it. His hunch was confirmed. Plissken's command, Black Light Squadron, had been wiped out in a diversionary raid on Leningrad, where Plissken himself had lost his eye. At the top of Plissken's Army file was a yellowed letter of protest, requesting a formal investigation of the incident, denied for reasons of national security. Plissken's resignation from the Service was dated the day following his release from an Army hospital in Helsinki, two months after Leningrad. As he searched, Carlton came across the same name again and again: a man named Berrigan, who had ordered the raid and the cover-up, and had Plissken's resignation reclassified as a dishonorable discharge for cowardice under fire. Ah, Carlton thought: I think I have my bait. Now I only have to figure out where to set the trap.

Carlton sifted through reports coming in from the field. The California operation had managed to identify the "bounty hunter" who had brought in the body of the fake Plissken: Rain Haven. Haven, it turned out, belonged to a commune growing illegal drugs in Napa, which had links to the nest of violent subversives Dunleavy had smoked out (Carlton smiled to himself at the pun) in San Francisco. Dunleavy reported that his men had cleaned out the commune and captured several members of the group, who confirmed that Plissken had lived there for a while, then left with Haven. The WPF tracked the two southward, following Haven's drug-running connections, then lost them for a while. They picked up the trail again in Needles. According to one of the surviving locals, Plissken had shot up the town, killed several people, then fled eastward by bicycle on I-40, along with a man fitting the description of Haven. Carlton promptly dispatched more men to track the old network of highways. A second sighting was confirmed north of Flagstaff. There were rumors that the outlaw had gone to ground on the Reservation. After several frustrating months, an undercover operative in Gallup reported a positive ID of Plissken and a possible on Haven during surveillance of the Indian hostiles' military training with hang gliders. After that, the reports came thick and fast: Plissken was definitely on the Reservation. Carlton prepared to spring his trap.

Snake tapped the paper lightly with a finger. "Too neat," he said in a flat voice.

Rain looked up at Snake's expressionless face. "What's too neat?"

"This." The paper in Snake's hand rustled as he folded it against the desert wind.

"Looks like a setup." He went on, thinking out loud, as he sat down on the edge of the retaining wall. "They're making these on hand presses; print run maybe in the low hundreds, local... but look at the datelines: Chicago, St. Louis, Europe. All within a few days of each other, and way too recent. It'd take weeks, or months, for the news to travel out here to the ass end of nowhere. Then this..." he indicated the lead article "...says they're going to hit the Indian uprising. Not even a blowhard USPF general's stupid enough to give the target that much lead time unless he had a reason, and the censor'd never pass it if he did. And this: Black Light; Berrigan. Everything in this paper is designed to get someone's attention. Mine."

."Come on, Snake," Rain said, as he sat down on the wall beside the older man, "You think they'd do all this to get you?"

"'World-criminal' Plissken.'" Snake gave his voiceless snort. "They'd get a lot of mileage out of a show trial."

"You're being paranoid, Snake."

"I've been running from the blackbellies longer than you have. They must have compared my prints with Farris's."

"How would they know where you went?"

"Tracked us. Somebody talked." Snake gave Rain a somber look. "Sooner or later, everybody talks if the Blackbellies want him to." *Or if he's a gassed Indian*, Snake thought. Deep anger flared, familiar, oddly comforting. A strangeness made sense again: *Joseph. Shit. Fucking asshole turned me in to the blackbellies to "make me do what I'm supposed to do" according to his crazy religious crap. Ran out on me and left me here for them, just like Harold and Carjack. The more things change, the more they fucking stay the same.* Snake watched his words sink in, watched the gut-punched expression forming on Rain's face, and felt old. He looked down at the headlines again, and laughed softly. "Must be somebody new in charge; they're getting smarter. Taking me out, here in the canyons, would be a real bitch; they know that. They want me to come to them."

"And you're just going to go?" The savage glitter in Snake's blue eye and the set of Snake's hard mouth gave Rain his answer. "*Why, Snake?*"

"Berrigan. If there's a chance it's really him, I want him."

Rain stared at him, his mouth open slightly, for a minute before he said, "Snake, it would take them forever to find you here in canyon country. Even if they knew more or less where you were, there's a hundred defensible places in these canyons where we could hide out and fight them if we had to, just like the People did. They're using this Berrigan guy as bait - you said so yourself. If you go after him, you're doing exactly what they want you to do. Getting yourself killed won't bring your men back, Snake. Let go of it. They're dead!"

"Yeah," Snake said, and the depth of bitterness in that one syllable stopped Rain's flow of words. *So am I*, Snake thought. "*I thought you were dead/I am*" came an echo from his past. *Chindi* the desert wind whispered as it stirred the ancient dust beside Snake's boot; *you are chindi, a vengeful ghost*. It was the burning black core of rage, seeking vengeance, that gave him the illusion of life, that let him feel anything at all in the bleak darkness inside him. Without it, the deaths of his men at Leningrad, all the deaths since, the destruction he had created when he shut down the earth, were all meaningless; as meaningless as his own death. That rage had almost burned out once before in Napa, and then here in Arizona; he had almost lost it: the thing that made him real, that made him Snake. Now he felt it uncoil hot again within him, providing familiar purpose and meaning, and he grabbed hold of it without giving himself time to think. "Yes," he repeated, "They're coming to put down the Indian uprising: that has to be true. They can't afford not to. If they're stupid enough to telegraph their plans, it's worth a shot to kill Berrigan."

"Then I'm coming with you."

"It's not your fight." This was his, Snake thought, something that had been his from before Rain was born, and Rain had no part in it. He didn't want Rain to have any part in it; that seemed almost a betrayal. This was between Snake and Berrigan.

"It is my fight, because it's your fight. I'm your partner."

Taylor was my partner. Taylor's dead, Snake thought.

Rain continued, "I can't go back, Snake; there's nothing for me to go back to. There's

no place I want to go, except here. I promised you - back in California, I promised you - I'd never run out on you. You remember?"

"I remember."

"Do you believe me?"

"Yes," Snake said. He scowled, his mouth twisting in a bitter parody of a smile. "You remember what I said: you come with me, you end up dead."

"Maybe." Rain gave him a young man's grin. "Maybe not. There's a lot of Navajos between here and Chicago." The grin trickled away.

Fuck the Navajos. Snake studied the young man, with his long, dark hair braided in Indian fashion, silver and turquoise, gifts from the Navajo comrades he had fought with, glinting at wrist and throat. Below the blue-green choker Rain wore hung the rattlesnake-rattles Snake had cut and strung for him, but to Snake they looked pale and shriveled against Rain's sun-browned skin. *Yes -- promises remain when everything else wears out,* Snake thought. *But who else did you give promises to? Who comes first?* With Taylor, it had never been a question. Deliberately, painfully, Snake brought up a mental image of the wiry, dark-haired man bleeding to death on the floor of the hummer station. *Sarge?* Snake wasn't entirely sure what he was asking the memory, or why, but somehow the question was necessary and important. The memory played itself out against his inner vision. *"Go on, Lieutenant!" "Right, Sarge; this time I'll listen to you. "O.K., Rain; you're with me."*

Rain nodded. "What are you - we -- going to do?"

Snake slid off the retaining wall and went to sit down in the patch of shade that was gradually spreading outward along the base of the ruins' walls as the sun shifted westward. Rain joined him, watching him silently and intently as he waited for Snake to provide an answer. Snake unfolded the newspaper, laid it out flat on the ground, and read through the articles again. It had been years since ex-Lieutenant Plissken had thought about tactics for anything more elaborate than a small-scale grab-and-run guerrilla raid. The phrase "vital rail access" jumped out at him, and he stabbed it with a callused and dusty fingertip. "They'll be coming by train," he said. Rail was once again the fastest way to move troops and materiel overland, and would bring the WPF directly to their main military objective.

"Where would the Blackbellies get trains?" Rain asked. The only trains he had ever seen were hummers and the electric-powered cars of the crumbling Bay Area Rapid Transit system.

"Steam trains." Snake said. "There are railroad museums all over back east - Illinois, Kansas, places like that. They'd have tons of rolling stock to rebuild from."

"How did you know that?" Rain asked.

"Paper I did in college."

"But... but," Rain said, "Would the old trains run on the rails around here? Weren't there different kinds of tracks? Narrow-gage, like that tourist thing in Colorado?"

"No. Most of them, when they switched over from steam to diesel, used the same cars and the same tracks. Wasn't economical to rebuild the whole system. They just switched engines." By the time he finished the last sentence, an impatient Snake was already half-way through the doorway to his room. He rummaged in a collection of

items that had remained untouched since he and Rain had settled down in the old ruins, and emerged a while later with the map they had used on their bicycle trip. He unfolded it next to the newspaper and studied it, frowning in concentration. "Trains are no problem. The problem is, trains go where the track is. If we hit the track, they're fucked." He paused. "We can't do it alone."

"Joseph said these things," Rain indicated the newspaper, "are all over the Rez. The Dine will be waiting for the Blackbellies when they show up."

Snake's nod of agreement was short and impatient. "I'm going in by air, one way or another," Snake said, as much to himself as to Rain. He turned his attention back to the map in front of him. "If they've done the recon this looks like, the Blackbellies will be expecting gliders. They know we..." Snake stopped and corrected himself. "They know the Indians will try to blow the track, so they'll have to hit the Blackbellies farther east than they expect. If there's the right kind of rock formation along the track, with a good updraft, it should be possible to derail the train just ahead of or behind it, then pincer the Blackbellies from three directions with a coordinated ground and air attack."

"Where's the right rock formation?"

"Fuck if I know." Snake refolded the map and the newspaper, picked them up, and got to his feet. "I'll talk to Yazzi." Snake had developed a grudging respect for Jim Yazzi, Army veteran and commander of the Navajo raiding parties, in the time he had spent on the reservation.

Miles away, at the Galesburg Train Museum in Galesburg, Illinois, Police Colonel Carlton and WPF General Berrigan were consulting similar maps of Arizona and the Navajo Reservation. Sounds from outside filtered through the brick walls of the old station building: the bark of orders, the stamp of feet, WPF troops boarding, the train crew shouting back and forth to each other, the refitted engine chuffing like a nervous dragon as it built up a head of steam, preparing to move out.

"Plissken will be with the redskins when they attack the train," Carlton was saying.

"If he's still on the reservation. If that psych profile of yours is accurate. If he even saw the newspaper. A lot of ifs."

"He'll be there, General."

General Berrigan raised a skeptical eyebrow. He had been chasing the slippery outlaw for a long time. "If he's there, I'll hunt him down."

"Yes, Sir," Carlton said. "Plissken's trial and conviction will give the New Moral America the psychological leverage we need to reestablish our moral leadership of the world."

"Screw moral leadership of the world," Berrigan said wearily. "Plissken's been a royal pain in the Army's ass ever since Leningrad. I don't like loose ends. I want the SOB debriefed and dead." *I want it over*, the General thought. Plissken, the slippery bastard, was the last one unaccounted for, the last deep-conditioned sleeper from the Russian War who hadn't been terminated. The sleepers had been the final suicide weapon, to be activated only as a last, desperate resort if everything else had failed, as human triggers to set off the Doomsday Device. Snake Plissken, War Hero, had been intended to die at Leningrad, impersonated by the expendable and unwitting fuck-up, Ferris. Plissken was then to go into deep cover as the hapless Ferris until he was

needed. The plan had been bungled, the real Snake had gone on the mission instead, and being Plissken, had made it back alive. The deaths of his men had driven him over the edge, and he'd left the Service before his conditioning could be properly failsafed.

He should have been terminated then, when he resigned, but the sleepers were top-secret; nobody outside Berrigan's section knew they even existed. As long as Plissken remained alive, he was a weapon primed to set off the programmed nuclear exchange which would slag the planet into a ball of molten glass. But the Army had done its job too well. The same unconscious conditioning that made him a trigger gave Plissken the overwhelming will to survive at all costs that had kept him alive through the War, New York Max, Cleveland, and L.A. Berrigan had been chasing him since Leningrad. *"The Force's Most Wanted Man,"* Berrigan thought ironically; *you don't know the half of it.*

There was a discreet tap on the door. At the General's "come," it opened to admit Berrigan's aide, who saluted and said, "Everything's on board, Sir. We're ready to go." Berrigan stood fractionally straighter and exchanged salutes with Carlton, then turned on his heel and walked out of the stationhouse, bootheels thudding on the old plank floor.

The police colonel stood by the window to watch them depart. It was out of his hands now; Berrigan had claimed this one for himself. Carlton wasn't sure the General was much saner than the criminal he was being sent to capture. They'd both taken a lot of gas in the war, in a lot of the same campaigns. *Not that we all haven't,* Carlton thought; *Maybe we just look sane to each other because we're all equally fucked up.* The general and his aide walked across the platform and stepped up into the last of the old train's passenger cars.

Carlton watched the train's engineer swing out of his cab, holding on to the handgrip, and make a final inspection of the tender-car, piled high with firewood, behind the engine. There was a wide grin in the middle of the leathery middle-aged man's salt-and-pepper beard. That non-regulation beard, which clashed badly with the crisp new USPF uniform the man wore, was an on-going annoyance to Carlton. The Service had been able to commandeer the antique train, but he had been forced to bend a few rules to requisition the man who could drive it. The old railroad fanatic had been practically ecstatic: not even the prospect of being shot at by hostile redskins could dampen his enthusiasm for taking his beloved engine cross-country. *Better him than me,* Carlton thought sourly, contemplating the danger and discomfort of a days-long journey in a nineteenth-century wood-burning train. For bitter years as curator of the poverty-stricken Galesburg museum, an unappreciated Jake Stevens had devoted his life to these old engines, driving them around the museum's little circle of track for the entertainment of a few tourists with cameras and their ice-cream-dripping, upholstery-ripping, graffiti-scribbling kids, for whom the engine was only an afternoon's half-hearted curiosity. Six-sixty-six had changed all that, and made Stevens's steam-engines vitally important again.

Carlton opened the door and stepped out onto the station platform. The engine loomed above him like a dark metal wall. The day was muggy and overcast, filled with the smell of smoke and hot metal, a fine rain of gritty ash from the firebox, and the hiss of steam as pressure rose in the boiler and tanks. Two short whistle-blasts shrieked. In the engineer's cab, pressure gages twitched fractionally in response. A second signal followed -- full steam -- and Carlton watched as Jake Stevens nudged his iron horse backward down a length of track into the watery sunlight, and along the siding track

toward the hump where the assembled train waited. Engine and tender clashed into the opened coupling of the cars behind them, couplings closed, and the brakeman moved in to drop the coupling pin in place. "Board!" came the cry from the rear. The flag swung up and back in the traditional highball, and the engine moved out with a shock and rattle, then a steady pull forward. Behind it clattered a full load of cars: eight passenger coaches of USPF troops, two boxcars full of materiel, two covered flatcars, and the caboose. Those two tarp-covered platforms were Carlton's ace, and he felt a sense of satisfaction as he watched them slide down the track after the engine, heading toward their distant rendezvous with the world-criminal who had tried to destroy the USPF and the New Moral America. Plissken and his redskin allies, Carlton thought, would get more than they'd bargained for when the train arrived.

Navajo scouts sighted the WPF train some eighty miles before it reached the de-facto boundary of Indian territory, and passed the information back to the main body of troops. Yazzi went on the assumption that his men had been seen as well. A few miles closer, and the train stopped to allow Berrigan to send out his own outriders. The train chugged slowly forward by starts and stops in a cat-and-mouse game of mutual feint and reconnaissance, each side picking off the other's scouts when they could.

What are they waiting for? Snake wondered, as he rode the thermals rising over the mesa's steep red wall, circling for height on the updraft. He squinted eastward into a dazzle of early sun reflected off white cloud-bank along the horizon. *Storm coming in* part of his mind registered, calculating potential tactics for rain and wind. An almost-invisible smudge darkened bright desert air beyond a rock outcropping where the track curved around the foot of the mesa, and he trained his binoculars on it. Smoke. Not Navajo signal. Snake gestured, saw, out of the corner of his good eye, Rain respond, and circled down to rejoin his glider squadron on the mesa-top. Rain circled down behind him, and the two landed almost together.

"Train's coming," Snake said. There was a brief flurry as the little group of pilots ran final checks on buckles, lines, grenades and guns, and then a tense waiting stillness. To the east, a long, quavering coyote-howl rolled on the air. Another voice echoed it, and then both fell silent. The moment stretched. Pre-battle adrenaline-rush ran along Snake's nerves, making everything around him unnaturally vivid: red rock under his boots, smell of dust in the air, glitter of sun, whisper of cold morning wind, thrum of his own blood in his ears. Snake raised his canteen and took a swallow of cool, metal-flavored water to wet his suddenly-dry throat, then clipped it securely back onto the glider-frame. He checked his weapons, settled the comforting weight of his gunbelt, with its twin Magnums, securely on his hips. As he ran his hand down the side of his pants, he felt something small, hard, and sharp-sided in the cargo-pocket. A quick exploration of the shape with his fingers identified it as the rutilated quartz pyramid he thought he had left behind in his room in the Anasazi ruins. *How the hell did that get there?* Snake wondered distractedly. Two sharp coyote-barks sounded in the distance, and he forgot the question. He turned to the men. "Ten minutes. I'll take point. You launch when you hear the blast, and follow me." Snake shifted, preparing to launch himself into the great emptiness below his boot-toes.

"I'll cover you, Snake."

Snake sensed, rather than saw, movement on his left, and turned his head to see Rain stepping up beside him, crossbow at the ready. He traded looks with the slender young man. Wind off the mesa plucked at Rain's khaki-colored pants and sleeveless shirt, and teased fine tendrils of dark hair loose from Rain's long braids. Dark eyes were calm and determined in Rain's sun-browned face. Snake nodded, and caught the beginning of Rain's answering nod as they launched their gliders off the edge of the mesa. It felt

good, Snake thought, to have a wingman he could trust on his blind side.

Whump! Air shivered with the sound of explosives detonating and the rumble of falling rock. Seconds later, Snake and Rain felt the shockwave hit them, lifting their gliders momentarily higher as they fought controls in the buffeting wind. The flight of hang gliders rose into the air behind them as Snake and Rain cleared the mesa and caught sight of the WPF steam train and the wave of attacking Navajo ground troops, a surreal montage of Wild West and Roadwarrior. Metal shrieked on metal and sparks scattered as the train's brakes locked. Smoke and ashes belched from the smokestack and fanned out over the attackers as they swept down from behind the rocks on each side. On foot and horseback, with guns, rifles, and highpower bows, men in a motley variety of jeans, desert cammo, traditional headbands, and kevlar surged in a screaming mass toward the train. The engine shuddered and squealed as its cowcatcher snub-nosed with a crash and a cloud of steam into an avalanche of sand and dynamited mesa. As Snake watched, three of the forward cars slid sideways in slow motion and derailed onto their sides. Flames flickered as sparks from the engine's firebox caught on the broken wooden boards of the first car, and faint screams reached him from inside, mixed with the cheers of the Indians.

Doors slid back on the remaining cars and blackbellies boiled out, returning fire. One of the boxcars went up in a bright orange ball as a glider-pilot's grenade set off the ammunition inside. A scatter of skyward rifle-fire showed some of the WPF had noticed the air assault. Snake's glider-squadron responded with a barrage, covering the advancing Navajo troops and picking off the blackbellies who had climbed to the top of the railcars for a better angle of fire. A bullet sang past Snake's ear. He fired back in the same moment one of Rain's crossbow bolts flew past him, saw the blackbelly fall without ever knowing who had hit him, swung outward into a thermal and circled upward, out of the smoke, for another pass, looking for Berrigan.

As he turned back, searching for height, Snake saw a detachment of WPF run along the side of the train and swing up over the edges of the covered flatcars. On each one, a crew ducked under their comrades' covering fire to yank thick bolts loose, pull side-panels away, and uncover heavy field guns emplaced on the cars. Snake heard Rain shouting something behind him, couldn't catch the words, as he focused on the crew loading the pieces, ranging. Ground and air shuddered with the deep roar as the guns fired, and both sides checked, reacting to the first artillery salvo. Antipersonnel rounds smashed into the Navajo ranks, smearing blood and fragmented bodies across the rocky ground. The attack faltered, scattered. Snake saw Yazzi waving a sweeping gesture for his men to retreat and regroup. Snake's glider squadron followed, heading for the nearer mesa-top opposite to their launch site, from which they could launch another sortie.

"Come on, Snake!" Rain's voice came from behind him. The younger man swerved, came abreast of him, gestured toward the retreating Indian pilots. Snake ignored him as he banked, rising on the heated air of the shellfire, trying to get a clear view through the thinning clouds of smoke. There: the knot of blackbellies near the artillery guns.

One of the black-uniformed figures...something familiar in the walk, the look, the arrogant attitude...something from the core of molten fire that spoke to him in his dreams...and Snake *knew*. *Berrigan*.

Air currents, shifting with the explosions of the big guns and the hot air rising from the burning cars beneath him, buffeted Snake as he swooped. He felt muscles clench hard as he struggled with the glider controls one-handed, firing his Magnum with the other, adjusting for the recoil. He saw men below look up, shout, and return fire missed him by inches as he swerved away, upward. He fought the urge to drop, land, and take the fight to hand-to-hand. That was suicide. Snake slammed the Magnum back into its holster and grabbed a grenade from his web belt as the glider yawed wildly in the turn.

He yanked the fuse pin with his teeth, calculated, threw, and seconds later the grenade detonated where the group of blackbellies had been, as they scattered, running. A volley of rifle-fire rose from below, and Snake swerved away again, dodging and weaving evasive patterns in the air. He couldn't tell if he had hit his target.

The second wave of Navajo troops surged down out of the rocks, and the glider-squadron swooped down from the high mesa to give it air support. Someone, Snake couldn't tell who, had taken command and was coordinating the air attack. The flight of gliders reached Snake, swept him up in it. Rain was still pacing him as his wingman, covering him, guarding his blind side. He saw Rain get off a bowshot, saw it hit its mark, and caught motion out of the corner of his good eye. In the time it took him to focus on it, he saw the shell rising in an arc toward them. The flash blanked the sky with brightness for an instant. Then, through the thinning haze, Snake saw the flutter of Rain's falling glider, the crash, and the sudden stillness.

Snake soared, totally focused, for a frozen moment outside time. The broken body under the wreckage of Rain's glider was motionless, and the same certainty that had identified Berrigan told Snake that Rain was dead. The next instant, a blast of air from below whipped at the fabric of his hang-glider and pushed Snake upward as his body reacted automatically to regain control. He heard fabric tear, felt the glider shudder, and knew he was going down. He braced for the plunge, felt the wings catch and hold instead, felt the controls responding sluggishly as he banked again and circled back over the train. Most of the cars were burning now in a raging bonfire, and his damaged glider rose on the hot air. Snake circled, straining for altitude as bullets sang past him, until he was high enough to catch the updraft off the mesa's face. He cleared its top, barely, but as he maneuvered to make his landing, a sudden rush of colder air caught him from behind and the wind shear tossed him violently upward. Snake risked a quick look over his shoulder as he wrestled with his machine's controls. The sky behind him was dark with clouds; the storm-front was coming in fast behind him, pushing him ahead of it, giving him powerful lift that forced him higher. In moments he was swept over the mesa he had launched from, and it was behind him.

The storm-front drove Snake on westward, as he fought full-strength to avoid being slammed into the side of a cliff or dropped to the ground by a sudden wind-shift. He could feel the frame loosening in his hands, the controls becoming less responsive as the tear in the fabric spread and the glider was shaken savagely back and forth. All he could do was hold on. At last there was another mesa-top in front of him, not too far below, and, with a tremendous effort, he managed to angle down and stall into a landing.

He struggled to free himself from the glider's rigging as wind pushed at him and he skidded toward the drop-off on the opposite side. There was a gnarled and stunted pinon tree at the edge of the cliff-face, and Snake grabbed for it, almost dislocating his shoulder as his grip connected. He slid across the ground, smashed into the tree-trunk, and stopped, bruised and gasping with the force of his impact, but, finally, stationary.

He shed the last of the glider-harness, and watched the fragments of his machine disappear on the storm-wind as he lay there catching his breath.

Snake slowly pulled himself to his knees, using the little tree for support. He waited for a sharper stab of pain that would tell him he had broken something, and was relieved when it didn't come. The pinon and the mesa looked familiar. He could swear it was the same scraggly tree, and the same damned mesa, where Joseph had taken him to "find his vision." *Bullshit, Snake*, he thought; *it's your imagination*. But there was something familiar about the place. He looked around, searching for definite landmarks. Sky overhead was almost night-black with roiling clouds, and he could smell the coming storm on the fierce wind. To the east, along the horizon, there was a veil of black silhouetted against a band of lighter sky, but whether it was smoke rising from the burning railcars or rain falling in the distance, he could not tell.

Is Berrigan dead? he wondered. He didn't know; the inner certainty had deserted him. For the first time since Leningrad, he found he didn't care. He felt a wave of complete despair wash over him. The whole thing, his whole quixotic campaign against the USPF, had been no more than a useless gesture. *Either way, he thought, there's no victory; there will never be any victory, or any vengeance for my dead.* Nothing he could do made any difference. He stared at the veil of rain on the horizon. *No, not rain... Rain was dead... not rain, only water....* Snake shook his head, trying to clear it. That was stupid. "Shit," he muttered.

A net of lightning flickered across the dark cloud-face above him, and a bolt crashed to earth in the distance. Snake started to back away from the pinon tree. *Got to get down from here, get away. The tree's the tallest thing.* The crystal in his pocket was a burning-hot point of pain where it touched his leg. He felt a crawling prickle flash up his body, lifting the hair on his head; looked down at his bare hands and saw the faintest glow on the surface of his skin. The next instant, the world detonated around him, blowing fragments of wood across the mesa-top. Snake collapsed, deafened and stunned, his body convulsing uncontrollably in the lightning strike's field.

Some time later, he opened his eyes and raised himself slowly to hands and knees, his ears ringing. The pinon tree was a shattered stump. There were bruises and bloody scratches where flying splinters had grazed him, but, miraculously, no serious wounds. He smelled burned hair, and realized it was his own. He struggled to his feet, trying to get his bearings, and looked down over the edge of the mesa-top. Under the cloud-blackened sky, the shadowed desert landscape below him was a dark and indistinct rocky plain. He had seen it before, like this; he knew this place...it was....

Time folded into itself, and he remembered his dreams, all of them. The dark plain below was full of his dead: the men of Black Light...the men of his Navajo glider-squadron...Cabbie, Maggie, Brain, Fresno Bob, Taslima, Carjack Malone...the victims of the Damocles satellites, all of the millions of them, frozen, starved, killed, dead of plague, dead in so many other ways, all his dead...Taylor, dead on the floor of the San Francisco hummer station. In the murky light, an image from his dreams seemed to move, visible: the one-eyed outlaw stumbling across a charnel-house world, dragging behind him Taylor's blackened corpse. The vision shifted, the corpse became Rain, and they were both the same, bound to him by the same chains. His dead were what bound him here in this valley of death, trapped on an endless wheel, helplessly playing out the same pattern of killing and suffering, again and again. Each time the cycle turned with greater violence and wider influence, and he ended up back where he had started. *I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds,* he murmured. Where had he read that?

A drop of water hit him on the forehead, ran a thin track down into his eye. He blinked to clear his vision. Another drop struck, and he raised his face to the dark sky. Rain pattered down, soft and scattered at first, but gaining strength. Lightning flickered again. He looked up, no longer afraid, at the bright golden threads across the sky, as he had seen them in his dreams and in the crystal pyramid. He felt his pocket. There was nothing there but charred cloth; the pyramid was gone. He didn't need it any longer. He raised his arms to the fire-laced darkness as lightning-bolts streaked from sky to earth around him. He saw them like the trails of missiles re-entering atmosphere in a nuclear strike. Memories that had been kept over the years, stored for this moment, opened. Snake stood in the downpour roaring around him and remembered the briefing room with its scattering of grim-faced soldiers, and Berrigan:

Mutual Assured Destruction, gentlemen; the Doomsday Device. It's completely self-contained -- power source, guidance and tracking, launch control, all internal and independent -- and shielded against all countermeasures. Nothing can touch it, not

conventional, not nuclear, not EMF. That's the beauty of the system: once it goes up, nothing our side or the enemy can throw at it will take it down. It's designed so that in an emergency, one man can by-pass the failsafes and set it off. Gentlemen, any one of you may be called upon to be that one man. In the event that this deep conditioning for which you have volunteered is ever activated, the situation will be desperate. One man may well be the only thing standing between our country and total defeat. You're the best we've got, and we're depending on you to carry out your mission: under all circumstances, your personal survival must be paramount."

What had been Snake Plissken stood in the middle of the lighting storm. The core of fire within him blazed up, filling him as it had in his dreams, burning away the mask of his humanity. There would be no justice for Black Light within the human world. He was outside that now. For the Destroyer, there could be no justice or injustice, no innocent or guilty, no cruelty or mercy; only death and survival. All that was human must be burned away so that the world might begin anew, purified, on the ashes of destruction. He heard in his mind the echo of a girl's small, amazed voice: "He shut down the Earth." *Not yet; but this time, I will.* He knew now what his mission was. He turned, and began searching for the way down into the canyon below, heading for Nevada and the Doomsday Device installation still buried deep and shielded in Area 51. The pain in his head was gone completely.

On the mesa top behind him, rain spattered on stone. In the sandy hollow under the shattered pinyon, the storm plucked at a black scrap of stiffened cloth, its thin strap burned through. The eyepatch fluttered briefly in the wind, then, heavy with water, sank back onto the ground again, forgotten.

END

[Back](#)