

Ken Janowitz

A novella

1

When Ken Janowitz came to, his face was pressed into the ooze at the base of a paddy dike. For a few seconds, he lay in the tepid water, his lower body half submerged. Then the recollection of the North Vietnamese ambush turned him instantly taut. He wondered where the rest of the squad was, and realized there was no firing. He eased his head up the side of the dike until his eyes had a clear view of the battle area. The helicopter still lay on its side, but there was no movement anywhere. For a second, he thought he heard the distant sound of choppers.

Had they wiped out the whole squad? But the other gunships should still be on station unless they had to rearm or refuel. And where's the company? As soon as they heard the firing they should have started for the ambush site. And how long had he been unconscious? He looked at his watch and found that the face had been smashed in by something. Then he remembered the explosion right under his feet. His legs felt okay, but then he became aware of an ache on the right side of his forehead. When he reached up and touched the gash, a surge of pain confirmed the wound. Where had his helmet ended up?

And where was his rifle! The sudden realization of its absence left him feeling naked, and at once brought on a new concern—where were the NVA? Again, he raised up slowly till he could see across the paddies to the opposite tree line where the NVA fire had come from. There was no movement there, either. He could see irregular patches of

open area with gashes of freshly exposed earth inside what was left of the line of trees and the shattered remnants of nipa palm. The artillery had savaged the grove.

He turned and checked behind him, where his patrol had come through the tree line to rendezvous with the slick. There was no movement. Then he saw his M16 against the paddy dike behind him. The stock lay along the side of the dike, while the muzzle jutted well into the water. He had no idea what the tactical situation was, but he had to act as if the NVA could put fire on him. He low-crawled through the water, wishing he had his helmet to cover his neon-white head.

The muzzle was packed with paddy muck. He'd fired the piece wet on several occasions. But if he shot it with the muzzle stopped up like this, the expanding gases from the bullet would have no place to go. The resulting explosion would destroy the weapon and likely draw some blood from him. He'd have to field strip it and clean it.

He flattened himself against the side of the dike and rolled over it into the next paddy. He low-crawled a short way, full length in the water, with his rifle cradled in his arms. That way, if anybody was watching for him over the barrel of an AK47, he wouldn't pop up at the same place he disappeared. Ten feet from the dike, he raised up and started a crouching run for the next paddy, scanning the tree line ahead of him and wishing he had somebody behind him to cover his back.

He didn't even pause at the next dike, going up and over it in a single swift motion, then hunkering back down into his crouching run. He did it again at the next dike, knowing that anybody within a quarter of a mile could hear him lumbering through the water. He went prone against the dike of the last paddy, breathing hard. He scanned the tree line again. For two minutes, nothing moved. He began to relax a little.

He hugged the top of the last dike, pulled himself out of the water and low-crawled 30 feet into the nipa, head swiveling from side to side, searching for any movement. No AP mines that he could see. They couldn't booby-trap everything. He rose cautiously to his feet, maintaining a crouch, and moved deeper inside the nipa grove till he found one of the newly dug foxholes.

He eased himself down into it, laid his rifle at its rim and dug his cleaning kit out of a side pocket of his pack. In seconds, he had broken his rifle down and was running the cleaning rod through the barrel. It took some doing to clear out the main wedge of muck, then he slid several cloth patches through, finishing with one dampened with oil. He felt distinctly better about life, quietly chambering a round.

And then he saw them—a pair of NVA soldiers with AKs at the ready, moving slowly across his front through the nipa 20 meters away, heading toward the rice paddies. His pulse lurched into rapid staccato and his mouth tensed grimly. He leaned his elbows on the rim of the foxhole and took careful aim at the farther one. He was about to squeeze off his first round when the touch of an AK muzzle on the back of his neck froze him in place.

“Hands up and don't move, please,” a voice behind him said softly. Janowitz did as he was told. The muzzle of the AK stayed in place, while another soldier came into his field of vision and picked up his M16. The man behind him gave a low whistle, and the two soldiers Janowitz had just had in his sights alerted and came over to join them.

“Out of the hole, please.”

Janowitz obeyed. For the first time, he saw the man behind him. He looked to be in his late 20's and older than the other three. They looked like they'd been drafted right

out of school. The older man wore no insignia, but carried an air of authority. He was probably an NCO.

The sergeant – if that’s what he was – spoke in Vietnamese to the two men Janowitz almost fired on, pointing first at the foxhole and then at the M16 the third soldier held. One of the potential victims turned pale and frightened, but the face of the other surged with anger. He uttered some kind of expletive and drove the butt of his AK into Janowitz’s stomach.

Janowitz gave a cry of pain and sank to his knees, clutching his belly. The NCO put his foot in the center of Janowitz’s back and shoved him onto his face in the dirt. He fully expected a bullet in the back, but the NCO uttered a brief command. Janowitz, still helpless from the blow, felt his hands being pulled behind his back and tightly tied. Just as quickly, a wrap of cloth went across his mouth. He was lifted roughly to his feet.

The NCO wasn’t done yet. He reached into the pack of the soldier carrying Janowitz’s M16 and pulled out a length of strong, flexible wire, each end anchored to the middle of a stick of wood three or four inches long. A garrote.

The NCO tossed the garrote to the soldier who had hit Janowitz and gave an order. The soldier strode over to Janowitz. In a swift, practiced motion, he threw the wire around Janowitz’s neck and wrapped the ends into a single overhand knot, drawing the wire up till it was snug against his throat. He rotated the wire so the handles hung down Janowitz’s back, and grabbed him by the shirt. He spat out something in Vietnamese. There was no need translating. He looked forward to the time when he could use the garrote.

The sergeant called the three soldiers together and spoke briefly. Janowitz could

guess the format—friendly situation, enemy situation, actions to be taken. The engineer platoon had been discovered and badly cut up by artillery. Captain Bonner and the company had to be inbound and due to arrive any second. *But where are the gunships?* Janowitz decided if it was him he'd head back the way they'd come, north and west into the comparative safety of the Ho Chi Minh trail.

A few more words and Sarge moved them out. One soldier took point, then came Janowitz, within easy reach of the Strangler. Next was the NCO and the last soldier took rear security. They headed northwest.

They'd been on the march less than five minutes when the point man halted them, gesturing to his right front. It took Janowitz a moment and then he spotted the company off their right flank, almost half a kilometer away, moving past them toward the scene of the earlier battle. The Old Man had two platoons up and one back—expecting enemy contact. Janowitz gave grudging respect to the man on point. Although he'd been looking for his company, the NVA soldier saw them first.

Sarge whispered a single sharp command. At once, the others went prone while the Strangler threw the bound and gagged Janowitz abruptly down on his back, put his right knee in his chest and grabbed the handles of the garrote behind his head. He jammed his left boot into the side of Janowitz's face for leverage and pulled on the handles with all his might. A circle of pain bit sharply into his throat and he felt his windpipe choking off. He was dimly aware of his legs thrashing in the undergrowth, then Sarge was grabbing the soldier by the arm and urgently whispering. The pressure eased, but the hands kept tight hold of the garrote. Sarge stuck his finger in Janowitz's face. "No noise, please," he said. Janowitz nodded understanding.

As he headed back to his position he uttered one more order and the Strangler flopped down full-length next to his prisoner, still gripping the garrote firmly with both hands. An inch from Janowitz's face, his own throbbed ugly red, showing more than enough hate to fuel a killing. Then the Strangler looked toward the company and strands of fear marbled the anger.

Seconds dragged by and Janowitz gradually became aware of his dry mouth and racing pulse. He lay on the jungle floor, the heavy smells of damp earth and the rot of vegetation reinforcing his fear. *This can't be happening.* But it was, and his desperate desire to live changed nothing.

As the seconds gathered into minutes, he began to hope he might survive. And in those minutes, he decided that if he got through this, he would reach the other side of his captivity, come what may. And if he could, he'd escape. His jaw tightened and his teeth clamped hard against each other. Looking into the face beside him, he promised himself that he would endure. He swore to himself he'd lock away all he saw and heard, and bring it back with him. He would bring back knowledge of the enemy and it would kill more surely and more numerous than this intense but simple-minded hatred inches from his face. And while he was making good his escape, he would kill this man lying against him, this man keeping taut a slender wire around his throat. His lips hardened into a rigid line of resolve. He would match this hatred, push beyond it with his own. *Figured it out yet, Strangler?* His captor was staring intently into the paddies beyond Janowitz. *No...but you will.*

The splashing of half a dozen Americans broke through to his consciousness. *Flank security.* The nearest platoon had pushed a squad farther toward the nipa palm

where he and his captors lay concealed. The Strangler's head slowly swiveled, so he could look out through the undergrowth, his hands tightening the wire's tension a few degrees. The sound began to recede, and at last faded altogether. When they had heard nothing for some time, Sarge rose up slightly to check the paddy for any rear security elements. He stood and indicated with hand signals that they should move out. The Strangler grabbed his prisoner by the fatigue shirt and stood him up.

Their need for silence on the march tempered their speed, while at the same time they tried to avoid any open stretches of paddy. They were moving upstream in a watershed that emptied ultimately into the South China Sea, and the nipa clustered around the waterways flowing south and east, opposite to their direction of march. As they would reach the upper terminus of a stream, the cover of the trees thinned and then vanished, and the possibility of copter overflights was a real threat. Two or three times, Hueys flew over them while they were inside a cluster of nipa. Once, while they were in an open paddy, a chopper crossed left to right in front of them a mile or so away. Hope surged in Janowitz for a few seconds, but they simply froze in place and waited for the bird to pass them by. When it did, his heart sank.

To put as much distance as possible between them and the battle area, they stayed on the march almost three hours without a break. The four NVA soldiers drank from their canteens on the move, but Janowitz's hands were still tied. The sun punished his bare head and the gag across his mouth kept absorbing his saliva. He looked at the late afternoon sun and figured he hadn't had any water in over five hours, while pulling hard marching for three. He knew he couldn't last much longer.

Sarge called a halt. He put his three soldiers facing outward, then took center with

Janowitz and got out his own canteen. Janowitz made a couple of vocal noises and Sarge realized what he wanted. He took off the gag, and untied the rope around his wrists.

Janowitz reached for his canteen but couldn't make his fingers grasp the neck. This drew a slight smile from Sarge. Janowitz rubbed his wrists and wiggled his fingers to get the circulation back. He finally grasped the canteen and drank. As he took off his web gear, Sarge watched him pull a camouflage bandana out of his pack and knot it over his head.

Before he could put his web gear back on, Sarge grabbed it and began searching Janowitz's pack. Socks, foot powder, water purification tablets, matches kept dry in a condom—that amused him—extra M16 magazines, a bottle of Tabasco. Sarge left the cans of beef and apricots in the lone C-ration box, as well as the toilet paper and the instant coffee makings, but took the packet of four cigarettes and slid it into his shirt pocket with a smile. He'd obviously been into American C rations before. He unscrewed the Tabasco sauce and dabbed a few drops on his fingertip. First he sniffed. Then he licked. When the burn hit, he was clearly pleased. He flashed a thumbs up. With his boot, he shoved the web gear toward Janowitz and then took another fingertip hit of Tabasco.

As Janowitz slipped into the web gear, it tangled in the garrote. He paused a moment, then took off the length of wire, coiled it carefully and held it out to Sarge. The NCO looked at him a second, then consciously decided to take it. They both knew it could go back around his throat in seconds. Sarge tucked the Tabasco into his own pack and softly uttered a command. Janowitz decided it was Vietnamese for 'saddle up.' The others got ready to move out.

When the Strangler saw Janowitz was no longer trussed up, he rushed over to Sarge, talking fast. Sarge cut him off with a single spit-laden word. The Strangler shut up

in mid-sentence and Sarge took 30 seconds to verbally rip him into small pieces. In the nipa palm, Janowitz watched his aspiring killer come to attention under the lash of Sarge's tongue. Then it was over, and the NVA soldier looked confused and very, very young. Janowitz wondered if he'd even finished high school.

This time, the two other soldiers led out the column single file, followed by Janowitz, then the Strangler, then Sarge. As darkness came on, Sarge tied Janowitz's hands behind him again. They marched into the night, but now took regular breaks. Janowitz was acutely aware that the farther they got, the less likely he would be found and rescued. When he tried to slow their rate of march a little, Sarge would have none of it and pulled out the garrote. He left it coiled, but his meaning was clear. Try to slow us and we go on without you.

Some time after midnight, a lone Huey, flying with lights blacked out, touched down behind them and lifted off almost at once. Several minutes later, the noise of the bird indicated another quick landing and takeoff to their left. Then there was another in front of them and a bit to the right of their direction of march. Sarge seemed to be the only one the bird made uneasy. It excited Janowitz because this was the tactic used when a small patrol was being inserted. You used several touchdowns as false insertions—decoys so the enemy wouldn't know which location the patrol was really starting from.

Sarge called his three young soldiers together and undoubtedly told them what the threat was. Janowitz decided that if any shooting started, he would haul ass into the woods, tied hands and all. Escape would be worth the risk of taking a round. He even began wondering if these friendlies were looking specifically for him, since the company had to know by now that he was missing.

They moved out again with a sense of heightened danger. The darkness in the nipa palm forced them to close in on each other to maintain contact, even though that made them more vulnerable to American fire. Sarge deliberately slowed their rate of march to cut down on the noise of walking through vegetation. *But if the American patrol has a starlight scope, or some other night vision device, you're still dead meat.* And he hoped they did, so they could see the friendly in the middle of this little knot of NVA.

They moved in single file – two soldiers, Janowitz, Sarge, and the Strangler on rear security. After perhaps ten minutes, Sarge called a sudden halt. In the ensuing silence, they heard the sound of a twig snapping behind them and to their right. Then nothing. They were being followed.

Sarge made a quick decision. He whispered something to the strangler, who instantly stuffed a gag in Janowitz's mouth and tied it in place. He then spoke tersely to the other two, led them off the trail ten feet and put them in the prone position, their weapons pointing the way they had come. He was setting up a hasty ambush. Ballsy for such a small group, but the dark could make it work. He returned to Janowitz and the Strangler, spoke four or five words, and moved ten feet off the trail on the other side. The Strangler led Janowitz a dozen yards farther on, put him flat on the ground behind a small hillock and took cover there himself, sighting his AK47 back down the trail.

In the silence that followed, Janowitz gauged his chances for flight. With his hands tied behind his back, it would take him precious extra seconds to get to his feet, more than enough time for the Strangler to whirl and put fire on him. At a distance of ten feet, it was a fool's odds. But as he thought about it, he saw an outside chance that the Strangler would concentrate so much on his own firing that Janowitz might just be able to

carry it off. Spring up and run for it, and deal later with the rope around his hands. Not a run to the side but in the direction the Strangler's feet were pointing, so he'd have to turn completely around before he could put fire on Janowitz. If he could put a couple of trees between himself and the strangler... Beyond Sarge's position another twig snapped.

The Strangler grew taut. Janowitz looked behind them, searching for something solidier than vegetation to use for cover when he ran. Down toward Sarge's position, he heard a rustling of undergrowth, then whispers. He peered into the gloom down the trail and made out four or five forms, then more, Sarge's among them. Their trackers had been NVA. His hope for flight plummeted to despair. Rescue was becoming more and more remote.

Three of the figures detached themselves from the larger group and headed toward them – Sarge and his two soldiers. The stay-behinds took up firing positions on either side of the trail. Was this NVA patrol stalked, while they were trailing Sarge's group?

Sarge moved his people another 15 yards, then halted. The Strangler took Janowitz in tow, while the other two soldiers set themselves up in firing positions. Sarge waited about 60 seconds, then pulled a tree branch to the side as far as he could. When he released it and it sprang back into the foliage, its rustling noises sounded like a careless soldier on the march. Thirty seconds later he picked up a slender branch and deliberately snapped it in two. Bound and gagged, Janowitz watched Sarge bait a trap with trail noise.

Suddenly, half a dozen AKs opened up simultaneously. He could see green tracers ripping the undergrowth and heard someone cry out, then M16s kicked in. The firefight lasted a brisk half-minute, and then two or three American grenades went off almost

simultaneously. *They're breaking contact.* Fire suspended for a moment, then resumed randomly till a spoken command abruptly halted it.

A single NVA soldier came up the path to Sarge and spoke to him briefly. Sarge grinned and turned to Janowitz. "We ambush the Americans come to rescue you. Some are wounded. My people follow them now to..." He paused, searching for the right English word. "To finish. This one," he said, nodding toward the newcomer, "guides us to base camp." He smiled. "You are our prisoner."

Dawn was brightening when Janowitz woke. The long march had left him exhausted, but his sleep had still been restless. The Strangler sat dozing against a tree, his rifle across his lap, but when Janowitz stirred his head snapped up.

He made it clear to the Strangler that he needed to take a shit. He was shepherded to the latrine area, a patch of relatively open ground that already showed several small mounds of dirt, a foot across or less, indicating others had come here before him. The guard pointed to a liberated American entrenching tool, a shovel blade that could fold down against its short handle. Janowitz dug his cat hole with it about as deep and wide as the shovel blade, then shoved the entrenching tool in the ground and dropped his pants. As he hunkered down, the Strangler moved off several feet, evidently anticipating the smell.

His mind wanted to change the subject but he resisted, deliberately keeping his consciousness in these degrading circumstances. He was likely to be a prisoner for some time and he needed to coarsen himself, to roughen his psychological hide. He stared brazenly at the Strangler, as he used the toilet paper from his last C-ration box. *Next time,*

it'll be leaves. The strangler turned away.

Janowitz straightened, buckled up his pants and filled in the hole with the entrenching tool. As he stabbed it back into the earth, he suddenly realized the full potential of the shovel blade as a weapon. *Bring the edge of the metal down on the Strangler's neck. No cry, just the muffled blow and then the rustling grass from his fall. Take his AK47, and the web gear with extra ammo and water.* And the Strangler's garrote – he might need it. He took firm hold of the handle.

As he jerked the blade back out of the earth, the metal clinked against a small pebble. The Strangler turned at the sound, as Janowitz swung the entrenching tool at him. He instinctively parried the blow with his rifle, striking Janowitz's face a glancing blow. They struggled a second for leverage, then the Strangler drove his knee into Janowitz's groin. The breath rushed out of Janowitz and his hold on the shovel loosened. The Strangler slammed his rifle sharply against the entrenching tool, knocking it from Janowitz's hands, then brought the rifle butt down. It dragged across Janowitz's forehead and caught the bridge of his nose. Blood began pouring out of both nostrils and Janowitz, stunned, dropped to his knees. The Strangler kicked him hard in the groin again. Janowitz pitched forward, face in the dirt and hands at the pain. As he writhed, earth worked itself into the blood gathering at his mouth and chin and stuck there, a sticky red paste. The Strangler smashed the point of his boot into his ribs. His side instantly radiated with hurt.

Sarge's arrival halted the Strangler before he could do more damage. The Strangler spoke half a dozen words and pointed at the entrenching tool. Sarge grabbed Janowitz by the lapels, lifted him up and jammed him against a tree. Janowitz thought he was going to be beaten, but Sarge just looked a moment at his face, splotted with

bloody mud. “You are a stupid soldier,” he stated firmly. “I don’t think you’ll survive.”

“Let me look at that.” Janowitz turned toward the voice. It belonged to an American soldier, no rank insignia on his uniform. A bit over six feet, his black hair was cropped close in a typical GI cut, but the tight nappy curl was still obvious. He wore an OD baseball cap, its peak shading the dark eyes and dark brown face. He felt Janowitz’s nose with a tentative, gentle touch. The Strangler objected, but Sarge overruled him. Janowitz had a moment to decide that the skin on the long graceful fingers didn’t deserve their rough, callused finish, and then where they were touching the pain hit.

“Well, it’s broken,” he said. “No doubt about that.” Is that a Georgia twang? Some place south, for sure. He used his fingers to clamp down on the nose, high up on the bridge. “Not too bad medically, but you’ll probably look like an ex-boxer when it heals.” He was soft-spoken, almost casual. “What else?”

“Got kicked in my right side.”

“Here, pinch on your nose up here where my fingers are. It’ll help stop the bleeding.” He unbuttoned Janowitz’s shirt.

“Oh, yes, kicked for sure. Breathe in.” His sure touch reassured Janowitz and, surprising under the circumstances, woke some pleasant, low-level sensualities until one of the ribs objected to the touches with a sharp stab. “Well, that’s broken, too.” A thread of concern ran through the easy drawl.

“I’m kind of a mess.”

“You’ve been better, but you could be worse. Whatever you do, don’t get a leg broken. We’ve got a night’s march ahead of us to get to the camp. Usually a broken rib gets taped, but we’ll have to make do. Have you got an extra shirt or pants in your pack?”

“Yeah, a shirt. What camp?”

He looked up from Janowitz’s side with a slight smile. “POW camp. What did you think?” He turned to Sarge. “Broken rib,” he said. Sarge looked puzzled. Apparently, he’d slept through English class the day they went over the parts of the body. The tall, black medic told him in Vietnamese.

Janowitz was impressed. “Who are you?” he asked, as the other went into his pack and pulled out the shirt.

“Name’s Vergil Parrish,” he responded, his soft drawl at odds with their desperate situation. “Medic with an adviser outfit. We got overrun a few days ago.” His face hardened, as he wrapped the shirt around Janowitz’s middle and knotted the ends of the sleeves together. “Most of the South Vietnamese were killed.” His mouth tightened. “I’m the only American left.” He worked on for a moment, looking grim. Janowitz wondered who he was thinking about, as Paxton and Kessler came into his own mind—did they survive the firefight?

“They took all my medical supplies for themselves,” Vergil went on. He shrugged. “From what I could see, they needed them.” He began to tuck straggling pieces of shirt into the makeshift tie around Janowitz’s rib cage. “We’ll need to retie this again, as it works itself loose.” His soft drawl took on some urgency. “Now listen. These people don’t take a lot of enlisted men prisoners. I don’t know why we’re still around. Usually, they get some jollies carving initials on you and like that, and then they get tired of playing.”

“Where’d you learn Vietnamese?”

Vergil grinned. “Fort Bragg. Spent several months in an immersion course. The

first Vietnamese they taught us was, 'Help me, I'm bleeding.' Somebody had a warped sense of humor. There's an awful lot more of the language I wish I knew."

Sarge said something in Vietnamese and Vergil spoke a few deferential words, nodding agreement. "Whatever you do, don't piss them off. Maybe they're saving us to show inspectors from Geneva or something. But one of us, more or less, won't make much difference. Understand?"

Janowitz understood. He used the last of his purification tablets filling his canteens and did his best to sleep during the day, though he would inevitably roll over onto his broken rib and wake from the jolts of pain. The rib would make the night's march tricky. He ate the last of his C rations and started on one of the small balls of rice they provided. It wasn't as much as he'd have liked. As the sun went down and he laced up his boots, he realized he was still hungry. Vergil retied his shirt and then they were herded to the departure point.

Sarge was already there with the Strangler and his other two soldiers, along with another half dozen NVA troops. It was quite an escort. After the sun was well down, Sarge glumly led his little band out on their own, while Janowitz and Vergil waited with their guards. Evidently, Sarge and his troops were going to return to the war and they didn't seem too keen on the prospect. It occurred to Janowitz that he might survive all this, while Sarge and his people could be KIAs by next week. If they don't just change into civilian clothes. And the dice keep rolling.

With full dark, they started out. They had maintained security around their camp, though this far up the Ho Chi Minh trail they weren't really all that worried about American ground troops. Once on the move, they seemed deeply concerned about U.S.

surveillance—aircraft, helicopters with infrared equipment, ground sensors designed to pick up the vibrations of troops marching by. Darkness no longer guaranteed full security and detection could trigger bombing runs, or artillery if they were within the firing fan of an American battery. Standard defensive tactics included keeping the number of people in a unit low, so they wouldn't be a lucrative target. Also, staying on the move no matter what, with irregular and frequent changes of direction.

After two hours moving in pitch darkness, they took their first break. Janowitz was hurting. The constant motion of long brisk strides coaxed a slight ache in his side, which gradually grew in intensity. When they entered a small thicket of trees for their halt, Janowitz leaned against the trunk of a palm and eased himself gingerly down to a sitting position, keeping unnaturally stiff so his right side wouldn't bend. Vergil adjusted the tie around his rib cage and made sure he drank some water.

“Pace yourself,” Vergil said to him.

“Yeah, right.” Their captors prodded them back onto their feet. Vergil helped Janowitz up and they were back at it.

A few minutes later, the moon began to rise in the east. It was full and it marked the start of an additional march tactic – double-timing across open areas. They kept under the cover of trees whenever they could, but sooner or later they had to cross exposed patches of terrain and they'd run. Every step brought a sharp jolt to Janowitz's side, and hour by hour the intensity increased. He didn't know how much longer he could last.

On one of their infrequent breaks, while Vergil tended to the shirt around his middle, Janowitz said, “I don't think I'm going to make it.”

“Yes, you are,” he responded. “It's less than two hours to sunrise. We'll either be

where we're going, or we'll at least rest during daylight. You've done almost six hours. You can do a bit more."

"You'd better be right."

They resumed the march. His water was almost gone and he soon lost track of time. Lurking beneath the sharp pain in his side, he could feel the hunger that had been with him throughout the night. He knew his physical reserves were about exhausted.

Then they hit another open area and broke into a trot. He'd been trying most of the night to ignore the pain. Now it began to take control of his imagination. It actually became thick and viscous, wrapping itself snugly around his entire right side, constricting and twisting, seeping straight through the bone. He started counting – not when each foot struck the ground, but when each jolt of pain shot through his side. His boot caught in the crook of a root and he pitched down headlong.

He lay there, shaking with exhaustion. He knew if he didn't get up and move, they'd finish him there. A single shot, or just a bayonet, then they'd move on. Well, it would be a rest. A hand grabbed his shirt at the collar and lifted him to a kneeling position. It was Vergil.

"Hey," Vergil whispered urgently. "Hey!" When Janowitz looked up at him, he saw the moon glinting on his grin and caught the straight line of his nose from its shadow across his face. "You trying to leave us before you're supposed to?"

Janowitz had a second to smile weakly, and then a guard came up and jabbed Vergil viciously with the butt of his rifle. He threw Janowitz's arm over his shoulder, holding it with one hand, and grabbed his belt at the back with the other. He half dragged, half carried him to the next tree line. Inside the woods, they rested.

Vergil had saved his life.

After a bit, they followed a meandering stream bed, staying within the cover of the trees and lush growth that clung to its banks until first light brought a halt. They stayed there until almost noon, then resumed their march in daylight. Within an hour, they reached the POW camp.

The camp was no more than an open area under the triple canopy, raggedly cleared of undergrowth. On one side, the remains of an old foundation had long been struggling against the endless cycle of rain and jungle heat. Though small, the building was more substantial than a prosperous Vietnamese farmer's house. Maybe the French put it here before they folded and left.

Dense green was everywhere. Ken counted 17 or 18 South Vietnamese prisoners who made up the labor pool for the camp construction project, obviously still in progress. Despite their efforts, the jungle seemed perfectly capable of creeping thick and lush across the clearing overnight. It was more than a match for these feeble attempts to impose order. The NVA looked to be about 35 or 40 in number, maybe a platoon. Their ranks would be swollen by the guards who brought the two Americans.

The South Vietnamese sat clustered in a circle, surrounded by their captors. They all seemed to be munching on rice balls. Janowitz wondered how hard it would be to get meat or fish for protein. Or monkey or rat. Or grasshoppers. How long had their survival class in basic training lasted? An afternoon? And then that night they ran the Escape and Evasion course. Vergil began tightening up the shirt around Janowitz.

One of the South Vietnamese prisoners spotted the Americans and poked a neighbor. A ripple of motion spread across the group. From out of the jungle beyond them came an NVA wearing captain's rank, followed by a deferential corporal clutching a GI clipboard. As soon as the prisoners spotted the captain, they lapsed back into silence, chewing on their rice, heads bowed. They watched him furtively, as he walked unhurried

around the outside of the circle, his eyes on the Americans.

As the officer approached, Vergil stopped his work on the shirt around Janowitz's ribs. He came to something like attention, trying at the same time to stoop down so as to seem less tall, but he still loomed a good foot above the captain. The officer looked up into the black face for a moment and then said something in Vietnamese. "The camp commander says welcome. He says you will incorporate yourselves with the other prisoners on work detail." The corporal's accent was good, but his word choice was a bit odd and had an academic feel.

Vergil said, "Tell him we haven't had lunch yet."

The corporal spoke and the captain replied. "He says, food is recompense for work. First work, then rice."

"But we marched all night and haven't eaten since yesterday," Vergil persisted.

The corporal was about to translate when one of the guards who had brought them to the camp spoke a sentence or two. The commander looked from the guard to Vergil, his face growing ominous. The captain spoke a few words to Vergil, who answered in Vietnamese. So their guard had told him Vergil spoke the language.

The little captain uttered another brief sentence and Janowitz realized that although his voice was soft, he was deeply angry. Vergil gave him a deferential one-word response in Vietnamese and the officer spat out a command to the corporal. He must have told him to translate for Janowitz because, clearly tense, he began at once, omitting his usual 'he says.'

"So you speak our language?" the translator said, and immediately answered himself with "Yes, Sir." As Vergil and the commander talked, he continued this

simultaneous translation. “You tried to deceive me.”

Vergil spoke a word. “No, Sir,” came the translation.

The captain became enraged. “Do not lie! You tried to deceive me. I tell you now, hide nothing from me. Hide nothing.”

“Yes, Sir.”

The captain paused a moment, and then went on. “You will be punished.”

“Yes, Sir.”

He turned abruptly to Janowitz, grabbed the shirt tied around his ribs and yanked full strength on the two cuffs. The knot dug in and pain instantly shot through his side. He cried out and sank to his knees, bent over. The commander pushed a warning finger in his face and spoke. “No food unless you work,” his aide translated. “If you do not work...” He spun on his heels, and he and his aide continued on the way they had been going, soon vanishing into the jungle.

“Captain Stalag,” Vergil murmured, helping him up. Janowitz smiled, despite the lingering pain in his side.

The two Americans were pushed into the circle of South Vietnamese prisoners. Vergil said something to the Vietnamese next to him, who shook his head and said one or two terse words. Vergil nodded. “No talking,” he explained out of the side of his mouth to Janowitz. Without looking in his direction, the Vietnamese slipped half a ball of rice into Vergil’s hand. He murmured a word of thanks, halved it again and passed a wedge to Janowitz. It was the size of one good bite. “Eat it slow,” Vergil told him, “make it last.” While he was still chewing, Janowitz realized the Vietnamese prisoners were linked together in pairs, joined by a couple of feet of chain between their ankles. This simple

expedient kept any one prisoner from trying to slip into the jungle and making a run for it.

“Will they chain us?” he asked Vergil.

He smiled. “Count on it,” he said, and he was right. They were soon helping with the clearing.

A work party of some of the South Vietnamese POWs went off into the woods to gather bamboo and vines for building cages with elevated sleeping platforms for the prisoners. The lengths of bamboo would make perfect bars.

Above the multiple layers of jungle, the skies gradually darkened and it soon began to rain. They could hear the pattering on the foliage above them a good while before it worked its way down. Then it began slowly soaking them. It lasted a little over an hour and then stopped. For some time, though, water continued to make its way down through the network of trees, vines and fronds woven densely together above them.

Their own clearing efforts were interrupted by a scream and shouts from the bamboo grove. One of the South Vietnamese came back with a guard, carrying in his arms the man he was chained to. Vergil hurried to them, with Janowitz in tow. A pair of South Vietnamese prisoners, also chained together, came over as well. One of the South Vietnamese spoke briefly to Vergil and showed him the little finger of the man being carried. It was discolored and slightly swollen, but Janowitz couldn't tell why. The man's mouth hung slightly open and his eyes were rolled back in his head. His color was ghastly. The camp commandant came over to see what was going on. Vergil guided Janowitz a few paces out of the way.

The guard showed the captain a small green snake, considerably less than a foot

long, with its head crushed. Janowitz wanted to get a closer look, but Vergil restrained him.

“That’s a five-stepper,” he whispered. In response to Janowitz’s puzzled look, he added, “Once he bites you, you’ve got time to take maybe five steps.” Janowitz’s eyes widened, as he looked back at the small snake.

The captain and the surviving POW had a brief exchange, then the officer issued a terse order and left. A guard took the leg iron off the body. He spoke briefly to the surviving partner, who started out of the camp carrying the body. The guard followed with a shovel.

“Captain Stalag’s all heart,” Vergil said, watching the commandant walk away. “The dead guy’s partner told him they’re from the same village, been together from before school all the way through their army training. And the captain said ‘Then I’ll let you bury him.’”

Janowitz shook his head. “How’d he get like that?”

“The Vietnamese say he got this job to keep him alive,” Vergil replied. “He lost just about his whole company in a big firefight – kind of went berserk and had to be dragged away or he’d have bought the farm, too. They gave him this job because they were afraid he’d get himself and a lot of people killed if he stayed infantry.”

“No wonder he doesn’t like the South Vietnamese.”

“It was Americans that did in his company, so be advised.” He let that little piece of reality sink in a moment, then went on. “That prisoner I was talking to just now, before the commandant arrived, is some kind of Vietnamese medic. His name sounds sort of like Dan. That’s what I’m calling him. I need to pick his brain.”

The next morning, reality sank in even deeper when Janowitz was handed his breakfast—a ball of rice. He began to wonder about protein again, and fruits and vegetables. Did the South Vietnamese supplement their rations out in the jungle? He put the question to Vergil, who told him to watch the Vietnamese of both sides and see what they collected to eat during work detail. Then, more reality, as the last of his purified water ran out and he had to fill his two canteens from a crude cistern that collected runoff from the corrugated metal roof on Captain Stalag’s hooch. A few hours later, he was racked by violent dysentery.

At the latrine area, Vergil said, “Not good,” while staying as far from Janowitz as their chain would allow.

“Thanks for your expert medical opinion,” Janowitz responded, too miserable to be embarrassed. “Wait till your turn comes.” A thought struck him. “Wait a minute, you were out of purification tabs the day we met. Why don’t you have the shits?”

Vergil smiled and pulled a small handful of green leaves out of his pocket. They were narrow, a couple of inches long with saw-toothed edges, and were streaked with coarse, short hairs. “Wasn’t quite sure when you’d need this. Open your mouth,” he said.

“What the hell is that stuff?”

“Medicine,” Vergil answered, and shoved three or four leaves into Janowitz’s mouth. “Chew on these at least five minutes. Swallow all the juice and saliva. After five minutes, you can spit out the pulp, but first use your tongue to squeeze the liquid out. Swallow that, too.”

As Janowitz began chewing, his face twisted up and he gagged. “Jesus, what is this?”

“It’s a little bitter,” Vergil conceded.

“Do I have to take this stuff?” The taste was contorting his face.

“Nope, not at all. You can keep shitting like a fire hose.” Janowitz chewed.

The dysentery slowly got better, but still left Janowitz dangerously dehydrated. Even so, they stayed chained together and went out on work detail as usual. It rained again in the early afternoon, but they had no way to collect water.

Later, when they were on break in the jungle, Vergil spoke briefly with Dan, the South Vietnamese medic. He led them over to a curtain of vines hanging off the branches of a tall tree. He took one of the vines and tore it crosswise with his hands, then stuck the upper end into Janowitz’s mouth. He did it again for Vergil, and then for himself. Dan’s ankle buddy was already sucking on a vine of his own. When their guard came over to see what they were doing, Vergil spoke to him a moment. Grinning, the guard looked at Janowitz and said something with a laugh. Then he pulled out a knife, cut off a two-foot section of vine for himself, and began chewing and sucking on it as he walked away.

“I told him that you’re in bad shape with dysentery,” Vergil explained, “and that we can drink this without getting the shits.”

“Thought that was pretty funny, didn’t he?”

Vergil turned to Dan and said something that felt like thanks. After Dan replied, Vergil added, “He told me there are two or three more plants around that are good water sources, another vine and some roots. He’ll show us when he comes across them. And we don’t touch anything out here that we’re not personally sure of. Some of this stuff can be deadly.” He looked after Dan’s retreating back. “He knows these plants like I know pills.”

The dysentery continued to ease, then abated entirely. When he got the chance, Vergil showed Janowitz how to harvest the leaves that counteracted the illness. That night in their cage, Vergil discovered ringworm spotted around his waist where his belt held his pants snug. Janowitz noticed how baggy Vergil's pants had gotten, then checked his own waist and realized that he must have lost at least ten pounds since he was captured. When he was back running combat missions with the company, he hadn't been exactly pudgy to begin with. When he pulled his damp socks off, he found trench foot.

"About all we can do is try to keep dry," Vergil said. Janowitz watched him open his fly and roll his pants and boxers down, all around, right to the top of his pubic hair.

"I don't think my socks will ever dry all the way," Janowitz said.

"Keep your feet open to the air as much as you can."

"How much weight have we lost?" Vergil's mouth tightened. He just shook his head at the question.

Over the next couple of days, Dan located some of the other water-source plants and showed how to use them. Janowitz didn't like the low, thick vegetation they sometimes had to root through for their water and medicines. He couldn't shake the memory of the small green snake.

"Listen," Vergil told him. "He's real little. He can't get his mouth open wide enough to bite anything but your fingers and toes, or maybe an ear lobe or the tip of your nose. Or your dick, so watch where you piss." Vergil thought that was very funny. But Janowitz, dealing with a vivid mental image, was not amused.

Dan showed the two Americans how to find an edible tuber that tasted somewhere between a potato and a yam. "Lots of starch," Vergil said, as he sampled the root. Dan

took special pains to show them the difference between the tuber and a similar plant. He pointed at the other one and shook his head. “Don’t eat,” he said in his scant English, and pulled the edge of his hand across his throat. His meaning was clear. Janowitz thought about how dependent on the jungle they were for water, food and even medicines—yet how deadly it could be. It wasn’t like an enemy that came looking for you. It just *was*, and you had to learn something new about it every day—what it could give, how it could take. And you always had to stay alert or pay the consequences.

It was something of a relief when they finished constructing the three cells where they would sleep. They were in a straight row, fronting on the commandant’s hooch, with the guards’ barracks on the opposite side. The prisoners were six or seven to a cage. Bamboo bars made up the walls and ceiling, and gave no shelter from the weather. Still, the rain usually finished working its way through the canopy before they were tucked in, as Vergil put it. The tall black medic had to stay stooped when they were in the cage, but didn’t seem to mind. Being caged for the night meant the guards would take off their leg irons at the end of the day. That was just fine with both of them. That limited bit of freedom made Janowitz feel a kind of relief – a bit more whole, more himself, bamboo cage notwithstanding.

By their fourth week, they had settled into a daily routine. Their tasks focused as much on maintenance as building new infrastructure. If they were out in the jungle when the rain started – and if the commandant wasn’t in the area—they could usually sit down while their guards huddled in their ponchos. Sometimes Dan, the South Vietnamese medic, would come by and talk shop with Vergil. In just a few hours, he had settled the commandant’s stomach after two days of vomiting and gotten the reward of some limited

freedom of movement. He no longer had a leg-iron buddy, although his ankles were still chained together. It was easier now for him to search the surrounding jungle for medicines, with a guard, and occasionally he was able to take Vergil along with Ken in tow. He showed Vergil how to harvest the herbs that cured the commandant's stomach flu. Ken noted the source, too. To the commandant, Dan's greater freedom reflected enlightened self-interest. Dan treated the keepers as well as the captives. In the process, he learned as much about the guard community as he knew about the POWs.

Currently, the prisoners were digging a trench to serve as their bomb shelter in case the B52s came by. Airborne infrared devices could detect people operating below the triple canopy jungle, but there was no way of knowing whether those people were friendlies. Once the trench was the right size, they would roof it over to deflect shrapnel and then camouflage it. The guards' shelter was already done.

One morning, heading out to work past the French ruin, Vergil stepped over a length of rusty barbed wire sagging between two old fence posts, and snagged himself on the inside of his upper right thigh. He muttered a restrained *shit*, warned Janowitz to be careful and took a moment to check the scratch. He noted a small smear of blood beginning to soak through his uniform then promptly forgot it. He was more concerned about the pants. At sight of the slight tear in the cloth, he said, "I hope it doesn't start my pants to rotting. I'm kind of thin in the wardrobe department."

"You're kind of thin *in* your wardrobe," Janowitz replied, and they smiled at that.

By that evening the scratch had Vergil's undivided attention, and he wasn't smiling any more. It was infected.

Stooped inside their cage, he stood naked from the waist to where his pants hung below his knees and checked out the small wound. It was far from needing a stitch, but it already showed ugly red on the dark brown skin. Vergil was clearly concerned.

“Your tetanus shot is still good, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, but that only covers lockjaw. The other kinds of crud that could be on that barbed wire...” He shook his head. “And don’t forget, this cut is right up by the body’s sewer system.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why do you think they smear their punji stakes with shit? Stomp your butt good with all the bugs in that.” He paused, then looked at Janowitz. “This is the filthiest part of the body, Ken, and we haven’t had a hot soapy shower in weeks—or enough to eat so the body can even try to fight off this stuff.”

“What can we do?”

He shrugged and Janowitz saw a flicker of anxiety cross Vergil’s face. “Keep it as clean as we can.” Janowitz had never seen Vergil like this, with his optimism and self-confidence wavering. The side of him that seemed indestructible was only one part of him. It unnerved Janowitz and increased his own level of concern. He tried to think.

“Would Dan know something out there that might help?”

Vergil brightened a little. “We can sure ask him.”

At midmorning, Dan came by the work site. When Vergil dropped his pants a guard came over. Dan was immediately as concerned about the wound as Vergil, but the guard was interested in others things. He said something to Dan and laughed. “Well, I’m keeping the racial stereotype alive,” Vergil said to Ken. “He just called me water buffalo

dick.”

“Pretty accurate.” Janowitz smiled.

Dan gave Vergil half a dozen pieces of twig almost an inch long and told him to chew one for half an hour or so, wait an hour and then do the next one until they were all gone. He turned to Janowitz and spoke briefly. Vergil said, “He’s going to bring a powder from the dried leaves of some plant. We’ll make a paste out of it tonight after they lock us in. You’ll need to work it into the cut.”

Janowitz grew uneasy at the thought of working on Vergil. “Can’t you just do it yourself?”

“He said the stuff will sting like hell. And on top of that, the only way to do it right is to work it deep into the cut, really make it hurt. That’s why somebody else has to do it.”

That evening, as the guards were going through the process of taking off the leg shackles and settling the prisoners into their cages, Dan came by with the medicine. The Americans were already in their cage, so he handed the wax paper packet through the bamboo bars to Janowitz.

“It’ll smart when you work it into the wound,” Vergil said, while Janowitz carefully unfolded the paper. Vergil stuck his little finger into the powder and raised it to his mouth. Dan hissed a sharp warning, as he was about to taste the medicine. “External use only,” he told Janowitz, brushing the powder off his finger and back onto the paper.

Dan spoke a few words. “After you apply it, he wants you to bandage it with something so the paste won’t get rubbed off while I’m asleep.” Both Americans were at a loss about what to use. The contents of their packs had long since been taken.

“I could tear off the bottom of my tee shirt,” Janowitz reluctantly said. He didn’t want to start tearing up his scant clothing supply, if he could help it. The NVA were supposed to furnish POW uniforms, but this site was near the end of the Ho Chi Minh trail and they had much more critical supply shortages. Dan pointed to Janowitz’s camouflage bandana tied around his neck. His pale blond hair had grown back enough to protect his head from what sun got through the canopy. Now he wore it this way to catch his sweat. Janowitz was incredulous, as he untied it. “You’ve got to be kidding. This thing’s filthy.”

“No filthier than your tee shirt.” A guard spoke a few words to Dan and he hurried off to his own cell.

Vergil stretched out and began unfastening his pants. Twilight under the triple canopy was sliding quickly into dusk and the Vietnamese prisoners in the cage were settling down for the night. Janowitz uncapped his canteen and poured a few drops of water into the powder. He carried a twig stripped of its bark to use as a kind of chopstick to scrape food into his mouth. He used that now to mix the paste, as Vergil pushed his tattered pants and boxers down below his knees. Janowitz knelt, hunched over Vergil’s middle, still stirring the paste. Vergil rolled onto his right side to make the cut more accessible that way. With his left hand, he pulled his genitals up and out of the way.

“Good thing you’re not a faggot,” Vergil said. Janowitz looked tentatively at him, but Vergil, preoccupied with getting ready for the medicine to be applied, was oblivious. He’d simply been filling the silence.

Janowitz’s lips curved into the slightest of smiles. “Still think I’m straight, do you?” He scooped a dollop of paste onto the tip of his chopstick. “Here we go.” When he

smear the stuff onto the scabby cut, Vergil winced and exhaled audibly. “Sorry,” Janowitz said.

“You’re going to have to cause pain to do this right, so do it and get it over with.” Vergil gritted his teeth, as Janowitz used the end of his chopstick to tamp the paste down into the heart of the wound. The piece of wood was narrow, with a slightly jagged end that clearly hurt. Janowitz finally threw it down and began working the paste forcefully into the inflamed cut with his fingers. Vergil grunted and moaned softly in response. “I don’t know what kind of crud I’ve got on my fingers, but it’s in the cut now,” Janowitz said.

“Keep doing what you’re doing,” was the reply.

Then, as he was kneading the paste into Vergil’s thigh, the scab burst open and an ooze of pus, blood and serum spurted out and mingled with the medication. Janowitz was repulsed and began to feel queasy. Vergil seemed pleased.

“Squeeze that crap out now and push the medication down in there,” he told Janowitz. “Use it all. Dan will get us some more tomorrow.” Janowitz did, working hard to deliberately ignore the sounds of Vergil’s discomfort. He then folded the bandana till it was a strip about an inch wide and bound up the wound. Vergil did up his pants gingerly, so as not to disturb the wrapping, then settled into a shallow, pain-marred sleep. Janowitz kept wiping his hands on the bottom of his fatigue shirt long after the ooze and medication were gone. For a while, he gazed up into the jungle blackness overhead, wishing he could see the stars.

Vergil’s vocalizations lingered in his ears. He’d caused them by the hurt he’d had to inflict, but in his memory they began to assume a more agreeable, sensual tone. He

remembered how now and then someone making love to him would inadvertently push across the line from pleasure to pain. He wanted to reverse that now with Vergil and take him to a place where his sensations would become pleasurable. But he didn't want to do anything that would cost him this friendship, and that held him back. Reluctantly, he closed his eyes, letting the echoes of Vergil's suffering play out against a different fantasy. At last, as strands of pain and pleasure wove together in his imagination, he drifted into sleep.

The next morning, Vergil examined the cut and was impressed. "It's got a long way to go yet," he said, "but it's obviously better. That stuff must have some sort of antibiotic properties." They retied the bandana to give the wound some protection from the rubbing of Vergil's pants against it, and moved out of camp to the bomb shelter site. Their work party included half a dozen South Vietnamese prisoners. Vergil walked along in an awkward bowlegged fashion. "I feel like I've got a pantsful," he said. Janowitz grinned. The improvement in the wound was bringing back some of Vergil's buoyancy.

Well before lunch, Dan emerged from the jungle with a guard in tow and joined Vergil and Janowitz at the far end of the trench. He pulled out a small stash of dry leaves he'd harvested and began grinding them into a powder. He used an ancient looking mortar and pestle, well smoothed, and Janowitz wondered where and how he'd gotten them. Maybe he brought the set with him and the commandant let him keep it. Dan worked with vigor, but carefully and with precise strokes so as not to spill any of the powder. When it reached the fineness he wanted, he added water to the mortar and made the paste. He then scraped the medication out onto a large green leaf and handed the concoction to Janowitz. After Vergil lowered his pants, Dan carefully peeled the bandana

away and passed it to Janowitz. He gently probed at the skin around the wound for a moment, then allowed himself a taut little smile and an affirmative grunt. He looked up and spoke a few words and Vergil nodded. “We agree,” Vergil said. “I’ve got a much better prognosis than I did yesterday.”

Dan squeezed out a bit of blood and pus, as he worked the paste into the cut, but nothing like the amount from the night before. Janowitz sponged up the trickle of ooze with a corner of the bandana, watching Dan’s deft, sure movements. He applied the medication much more quickly than Janowitz, and with much less pain.

As Dan finished applying the medication, Janowitz refolded the bandana into its bandage width. A guard at the other end of the trench called out some kind of hushed warning. Dan snatched up the mortar and pestle, as his guard uttered a one-word expletive. They both clambered up and out of the trench, disappearing rapidly into the jungle.

Janowitz knelt down and began wrapping the camouflage cloth around Vergil’s upper thigh. At the same time, behind him, he heard a shout and then a string of Vietnamese spoken in high anger. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the commandant jumping down into the trench, followed by his corporal translator clutching the American clipboard.

“Shit! Captain Stalag.” Janowitz finished tying the bandage and stood, as Vergil pulled up his pants. The commandant strode rapidly toward them along the trench, shouldering his way past the other prisoners and spilling out a nonstop stream of Vietnamese. He was livid. Above him, the NCO in charge of the guards kept pace along the edge of the trench, looking distinctly unhappy.

He came to a halt barely a foot away from Vergil, his flushed face setting off cold agate eyes. He looked up at the NCO and let fly a couple of rapid-fire sentences. The NCO got out only a word or two of protest before the commandant cut him off, then spat out the word that Janowitz knew meant his corporal was to translate.

“I make a sudden visit to the digging and what do I find?” The corporal held his clipboard in front of his chest as if to ward off blows, while the captain verbally ripped up the NCO in charge of the work detail. “This prisoner standing with his pants around his ankles and this one kneeling before him laboring industriously. Do you masturbate while you watch?”

“Sir, I...”

“Silence!” The corporal was running it all together.

Vergil spoke and the corporal immediately translated. “I have an injury high up on my thigh, Captain, and this man here...”

“Don’t tell me lies about wounds! From my hooch last night, I saw the two of you in your cell. You, stretched out languidly, and this one kneeling over you. I heard you being pleased.”

Vergil tried to speak, but the commandant silenced him with a word. “I told you upon your arrival to hide nothing from me. Lies always reveal themselves—always.” His face darkened. When he continued, his voice had modulated into an ominous calm.

“When you tried to hide your knowledge of our language from me, I knew it at once and I promised I would punish you. Yes, linguist, punish you. And I will.” He turned to Janowitz. “And you as well, penis lover.” He smiled grimly. “I will punish you as well.”

They watched him spin on his heels and stalk back up the trench, followed by a

clearly frightened corporal translator. “There goes a tactical nuke,” Vergil said.

“No shit,” Janowitz replied, shaking his head. “Penis lover.”

“He saw what he wanted to see,” Vergil answered. “Last night and today. He thinks Americans are degenerates.”

“He needs a mercy fuck. Ease those tensions.”

“Oh, he gets that. His troops told Dan that he goes into the nearest village once or twice a week and gets it on with one of the local ladies. No, his problem with us is *us*.”

“Evil Americans?”

“Deeper than that. He used to be a school teacher and some of the men he lost when his company got wiped out were kids he’d taught since they first started school.” He shook his head. “They were kid brothers for him, and sons and soldiers all at the same time, and then we did them in.”

“And now he’s going to punish us. I wonder what he’s got up his sleeve?”

“I don’t know.” A thought crossed Vergil’s mind. “Man, I hope he doesn’t cut our rations. We’re not getting enough as it is.”

Late next afternoon, they finished work detail just as the clouds rolled in. In the pre-storm twilight, further darkened by the jungle canopy, a couple of guards came for Vergil and took him to Captain Stalag’s hooch.

Ten minutes later, they took Janowitz. As he approached the doorway, he squinted into the inner darkness of the commandant’s office. The captain stood just inside. Deeper in the room, he saw Vergil in dim profile, tied securely to a chair. It took another second or two of getting used to the dark, then he realized Vergil’s pants were

around his ankles, and some wires ran from a hand-crank telephone on the commandant's table down into the dark vee of Vergil's thighs. Janowitz barely got a word out before the captain backhanded him across the face—only the hand was a fist. At once, he tasted blood and his lip began to swell.

The captain spoke and the guards tied Janowitz to another chair, but no one touched his clothing. They left, and the three of them were alone.

The captain leaned casually against the edge of the table, making a tuneless little humming sound. He opened a bottle of warm beer and poured some into a glass, then spent a leisurely five minutes sipping and humming. No one spoke. Mostly, he looked out the window. Occasionally, he would glance at one or the other and his face would ease into a complacent little smile. At last, he drained the glass and set it down on the table. And it began.

Forty-five minutes later, they were put back in their cage. As soon as the guards left, one of the Vietnamese prisoners spoke to Vergil, who responded tersely. His questioner's face turned grim.

“What?” Janowitz asked.

“They heard me out here, wanted to know what happened.”

Janowitz thought a moment. “What *did* happen?” he asked. “He didn't want information. He never asked you anything.” The realization hit him. “He never talked at all, Vergil. None of us said a thing. What the hell was going on in there?”

“I don't know. Revenge maybe? Or boredom? Some amusement while he drinks a beer? Maybe I'm the happy hour entertainment at his officer's club.” Neither of them smiled. “He's sick,” Vergil added, almost to himself. “That's what really scares me—he's

sick.” They lapsed into silence.

Finally, Janowitz put words to what puzzled him most. “Why didn’t he do anything to me?” Vergil just shook his head and the silence resumed. In an almost inaudible murmur, he added, “I never want to go through that again.”

But a bit more than a week later, they were returned to the commandant’s hooch and the ritual was repeated; then again, five days later. No one ever spoke and Vergil was always the only one on the receiving end. The fourth time they were sent for, Janowitz noticed that the guards were avoiding looking them in the eye. Apparently, even his own people didn’t think much of Captain Stalag’s little game.

But it kept on, once a week on average, sometimes twice. The first few weeks they thought each time would be the last of it. Then, toward the end of the second month, Vergil started to leave bits of his rations uneaten. Janowitz was instantly alarmed. Vergil was a big man. Until then, he hadn’t just eaten everything provided, but scrounged for extra food when they were out in the jungle, watching the Vietnamese prisoners carefully to see what they scavenged and then imitating them. He’d learned what snakes were succulent and what frogs were never, under any circumstances, to be eaten. And now, he wasn’t even consuming his rice ball.

The voltage of Captain Stalag’s device wasn’t that intense. The painful part was not knowing exactly when it would happen again, yet knowing that inevitably it would. It slowly dawned on Janowitz that this was less an attack on Vergil’s physical self than on his will to survive. And through it all, Janowitz began accumulating an increasingly heavy burden of guilt for getting off scot-free.

One evening, just after the prisoners were bedded down, two NVA soldiers,

strangers moving with urgency, arrived at the camp and went directly to Captain Stalag's hooch. Two minutes later, the commandant was giving orders to his NCOs. The cages were opened and the prisoners chained together. Then, they were moved out along one of the jungle trails.

Still on the march a little over a half-hour later, they heard the approach of helicopters in the distance. They pushed off the trail into the jungle, as the sound grew louder. By the time the birds were setting down, the column was burrowed deep in the undergrowth. Janowitz and Vergil each had the muzzle of an AK47 at the back of their heads. Evidently, the captain wasn't going to let the Americans be plucked alive from their captivity.

But the friendly force at the campsite didn't pursue them into the jungle. The possibility of an NVA ambush or counterattack was too strong. Every passing moment only made an NVA response more imminent. After 15 minutes, they heard the sound of the helicopters returning to extract the rescue force and then they were gone. Looking over at Vergil, Janowitz saw the dim shape of his bowed head shaking slowly from side to side.

"Vergil. Don't let this..."

The eyes he turned to Janowitz were deep with despair. "We'll never get out of here alive," he whispered. "Haven't you figured that out yet?" And he turned away, staring at the jungle floor in front of him.

They never returned to the old camp. Instead, they pushed on that night for another two hours and continued most of the next day, closing in to a new campsite that evening. Another old French ruin marked their point of destination and the rot of sodden

vegetation hung in the heavy jungle air.

The next three weeks were devoted to erecting the usual camp buildings, and their forced visits to the commandant stopped.

Vergil gradually began to brighten and his appetite started to improve. After a month, he was almost jaunty, so that when the commandant resumed the sessions his plunge back into gloom was deeper than it had ever been. He'd begun to cultivate some tentative glimmerings of hope that the commandant now crushed.

The pace continued unhurried—once or twice a week, for less than an hour. The sequence never varied, and the commandant never tried to inflict pain in any other way. Vergil lost interest in food again and his pants grew even looser. Toward the end of the second month in the new location, it slowly began to dawn on Janowitz that the commandant's focus during the sessions was as much on him as it was on Vergil. Often, as the captain turned the crank, he wouldn't be watching Vergil but Janowitz. The captain's words came back to him, translated by the corporal into his stilted English the day he caught Janowitz tying the bandana high up on Vergil's thigh: "I promised I would punish you, linguist, and I will. And you, as well, penis lover. I will punish you as well."

It hurt Janowitz to watch Vergil's torture. An even deeper pain stemmed from never having touched Vergil despite intense desire. The deepest anguish of all, however, lay in the fact that the commandant was inflicting this physical and psychological pain on Vergil as a way to get at Janowitz.

Dan began coming by their cage in the evening with some kind of concoction in an old aluminum canteen cup. Vergil swallowed it down for a few nights, then simply declined to drink it. Dan shook his head. "His soul is black now, too," he said to Janowitz

in his accented English, and paused. “Despair,” he added. He thought a few seconds, hand on chin, as if mentally searching through the shelves holding his jungle medicines. He shook his head again. Through the bars, he laid his hand lightly on Vergil’s arm before he slowly walked away.

The next morning Vergil refused to leave their cage for breakfast and work detail. The other prisoners, waiting for the captain to deal with this problem, seemed subdued, expecting the worst, while the guards were trying to look like business as usual. Janowitz was sure the commandant would put Vergil in solitary, a narrow hole in the ground with a crisscross frame of bamboo bars lashed down over its mouth.

But when he came to their cage, he looked pleased, and issued his orders in an affable manner. He left Vergil locked in the cage for the day and ordered Janowitz chained to Dan. Before they left the camp, Janowitz filled Vergil’s canteen and set it beside him, telling him what he was doing. Vergil ignored him and simply stared up through the bars across the top of their cage.

All that day, he trailed along in a haze after Dan. They visited a patient or two on the work site and spent a good deal of time in the jungle gathering roots and vegetation, which Dan took to a makeshift little shed not far from the camp. Their guard was clearly bored, although shadowing Dan out of sight of the captain was considered good duty.

Late in the morning, Dan returned to the jungle and dug out some yam-like tubers, being careful to give the most succulent one to the guard.

“What are we going to do about Vergil?” Janowitz asked quietly, as they ate.

Dan shrugged. “Without his help?” He chewed thoughtfully for a moment. “When small I see such a thing. My...” He searched for the word. “My grandmother. She feels

her ending near. Vanishes one day—out into the jungle. Out to meet it. La mort, oui?” He lapsed into silence.

Janowitz shook his head. “No. We can’t just let him die.”

Dan turned and looked at him. “How can we make him live?”

Janowitz didn’t respond.

That evening, as they were being put into their cells for the night, the commandant appeared. His corporal translator was holding his clipboard like a tray. On it were two rice balls nestled in a large leaf. The captain spoke and as the corporal translated, he handed the food to Janowitz. “Here are your friend’s rations,” the corporal told him. “Perhaps you can persuade him to nourish himself?” The captain looked enormously pleased, as he walked away.

Janowitz grasped Captain Stalag’s little gambit at once. Getting Vergil to eat was an impossible task, designed to inflict more psychological pain on Janowitz. And he could feel it working, as Vergil ignored his repeated pleas to eat.

Next morning, although Vergil was drinking water, the food was uneaten. Vergil’s shirt lay open. As Janowitz sat down next to him, he noticed the gaunt frame once more. His facial skin looked like dark, brittle parchment drawn tight across the bones. His eyes were closed, his lips slightly parted.

“Vergil,” Janowitz said softly. There was no response. He laid his hand gently on his friend’s arm. “Vergil,” he repeated. The eyes fluttered open. “Water?” Vergil nodded. Janowitz got an arm under his head and raised him. Dan held the canteen cup as he drank. The effort clearly tired him. “You have to eat,” Janowitz whispered. The other turned his face slightly away. “Vergil, please don’t give up like this.” No response. “Please.”

Finally, he spoke. “Take the rice. Don’t waste it.”

The very idea shocked Janowitz. “I can’t do that.”

“I don’t need it any more. You do.”

“You *do* need it. Stop talking like that.”

He ignored Janowitz and spoke for a few seconds in Vietnamese to Dan. “He wants you to eat his rice,” Dan explained, “but if you don’t, he gives it to me—for myself and sick ones.” Reluctantly, Janowitz took one of the balls of rice and gave the other to Dan. Vergil spoke again in Vietnamese, Janowitz sensing that he was asking for something. Dan responded and they continued in conversation for a minute or so, then lapsed into silence. Finally, Dan said a few more brief words and Vergil, smiling weakly, reached out and grasped Dan’s arm for a second. Exhausted, he leaned back against Janowitz, who eased him down onto the floor of the cage. As they left, he seemed already to have fallen back to sleep.

They ate some of Vergil’s rice and then split the rest between two of Dan’s patients. They headed into the jungle to harvest medicinal plants. When their guard lagged behind to dig up some tubers, Dan spoke. “He asked me to make a specific medicine for him.”

Janowitz brightened. “A medicine?” If Vergil wanted medication, then he wanted to live. “What is it?”

“He learned of it from the tribesmen he helped before capture.” Dan explained he was looking for a certain specimen whose flowers at this time of year had gone well into seed. “We will gather the seeds, in which is oil. The oil is the medicine.”

“What does it do?”

“Much diluted, it is used for...” He groped for a word. “...for seizures.”

“But he’s not having seizures.”

“He wishes it not diluted.”

Janowitz walked in puzzled silence a moment until the full implication struck him. “Why?”

Dan stopped in the middle of the trail and looked Janowitz full in the face.

“Surely, you can guess.”

The realization of what Dan meant held him speechless for several seconds. Still incredulous, he said, “You can’t do this!”

“I must.”

“But it’s wrong.”

“For me, it would be wrong not to.”

“You know I won’t let you.”

“If you try to stop me, I will contrive with the guard to have us separated, and finish the work alone. And if you tell the captain, well—then you return your friend to *him*. To the captain’s tender care. Is that what you want?” Janowitz stood stark still in the trail, his lower lip trembling. Dan put his hands lightly on the other’s shoulders. “This way,” he said, “you can be with him. When he takes the medicine.”

Janowitz shrugged him off and slowly sat down in the middle of the trail, unable to think of any way out of this impasse. “There’s got to be something we can do...”

Dan squatted down beside him. “My friend,” he said, “he has chosen this himself. He has made a decision, as my grandmother did. I believe it is my duty to honor that and help him in it.” Dan paused, letting his words sink in. “I think,” he said, “when a few

years are gone, you will be glad you were with him—at his last.”

Janowitz passed the rest of the morning in a kind of suspended animation, as Dan collected the seeds he needed. Being chained to Dan as he worked was like being trapped inside the process.

Back at his hut, Dan pressed out the oil with an ancient device. It came copiously and must have been fully half the makeup of the seeds. He filled a small vial with it, close to an ounce in all.

“This afternoon the captain visits a woman in the village,” Dan told him, as he carefully cleaned the press. “When he is gone, we will take Vergil his medicine.”

Janowitz continued in a kind of trance. He ate distractedly at midday, then he and Dan worked where they could see the road to the village without calling attention to themselves. When the captain headed out, dogged obediently by his corporal, Dan spent another three or four minutes harvesting some plant or other. He drew the mouth of his collecting bag closed and spoke a sentence or two to their guard. Dan nodded silently to Janowitz and the three of them headed back to the camp.

After the guard locked Dan and Janowitz inside the cage with Vergil, he headed for the large hooch the guards shared. Again, they had to wake Vergil. And again, they rested his head and shoulders against Janowitz.

Dan spoke to him briefly and Vergil nodded affirmatively. He spoke again, a bit longer than before. Again, Vergil nodded.

“He’s making sure I still want to do this.” Vergil smiled weakly. “I do.” He paused and his face grew grave. “I do,” he said again. He turned his head toward Janowitz. “You’ll think about this a lot after you get home,” he said. “About how he got

to you through me.” He rested a moment.

He continued with as much intensity as his weakened condition would allow. “Don’t let him get to you back there. Back home. Don’t let him make you a casualty after the war’s over. This is *my* choice.” The effort to speak was exhausting him, but he added in a whisper, “Mine.” He sank back against Janowitz, a thread of sticky saliva connecting his parted lips. His breathing was quite shallow. He ran his tongue over his lips and said, “Water.” Dan held the canteen, while he drank a few swallows. Janowitz wiped off some spilled drops with his bandana.

He said two or three words in Vietnamese, and as Dan took the top off the vial, Vergil added, “Remember what I said, Ken.” Dan held the medicine to his lips. Vergil reached up and took Dan’s hand in both of his own and drank.

Vergil’s breathing continued its shallow rhythm for perhaps half a minute, then he began to go rigid. Janowitz realized that he was trying to pull in air, but failing. The medicine was paralyzing his breathing function. Janowitz held him gently, his arms around Vergil’s chest. His struggles grew rapidly weaker. In moments, his body ceased its fight for air and eased back into Janowitz’s embrace. The three of them sat like that a full minute or more until Dan stirred.

He reached up and closed Vergil’s eyes. “We must make him look like he is asleep,” Dan said, “so the captain will not know we helped him.”

When their guard came for them, Dan was just leaving half a rice ball on a leaf next to a seemingly dozing Vergil. As he unlocked the cage door, Dan put his fingers to his lips, requesting quiet from the guard.

Dan took them straight to the prisoner work party and they stayed in the group the

rest of the afternoon. The commandant was returning from his interlude in the village as they were marched back into the camp. Dan and Janowitz were first into the cage and tried to wake Vergil before their guard locked up the bamboo door. When Dan spoke a brief sentence to the guard, he paled and called out to his sergeant. The guard didn't want to tell Stalag the bad news.

Captain Stalag looked pleased when he arrived, as if he were expecting this eventuality and had planned for it. "So sorry your friend has died." He smiled. His corporal stared at the ground as he translated. "I am aware that he was a special friend," he added. "Therefore, I will permit you to bury him."

It was another transparent attempt to cause Janowitz pain and it succeeded. First, they had to leave Vergil alone in the cage, as they took supper at the usual time. After the meal, Dan was left in the cage and the freed-up leg iron was locked onto Janowitz's other ankle. Vergil's body was cold and stiff when he picked it up. His guard, carrying his rifle and a shovel, led him past the smiling commandant. The hatred radiating from Janowitz with the dead Vergil in his arms only seemed to please him more.

Twilight deepened rapidly under the triple canopy. After ten yards, the camp was completely lost to sight. Then the chain between his ankles tangled in the undergrowth, pitching Janowitz headlong. Vergil's body spilled heavily out of his arms. As he struggled to retrieve it, exhaustion and hatred began to shake his own body. Tears of impotent rage started rolling down, as he knelt trembling by Vergil. An image of the captain's smiling face hovered in his mind and stoked his anger. He wanted to kill, savagely—pound Stalag, smash him blood and bones.

He struggled to his feet, Vergil in his arms. It was full dark. They halted a

hundred yards from the camp, beside a ruin some French planter had long ago left to the jungle. Janowitz cleared the vegetation from a patch of ground and began digging. He knew he wouldn't have the strength to dig both Vergil's full length and the depth he needed to keep animals from scavenging the remains. He made it about four feet long.

When it was deep enough, he looked down at Vergil's body. Dan had insisted on saving the shirt and boots for the living, leaving Vergil clad only in his worn, ragged uniform pants, now much too big for him. In the last several hours, he seemed to have shrunk even more.

Janowitz wanted to pray, but the anger, ranging deeper and deeper, wouldn't let him. Uneasy, the guard prodded him with his rifle. Janowitz made one attempt to get the body, stiff with death, into the hole, and then started to gather some lengths of vine. He turned Vergil on his stomach and tied some vines around his ankles. He then bent Vergil's knees by main force, so that the soles of his feet were as close to his buttocks as possible. He tied them in place by wrapping the end of the vine around his waist and forced Vergil into the grave. He pushed him down, twisting him sideways to bend his hips and constrict his size a bit more. In the stiffness of death, the body continued to resist. Janowitz pushed on it to force it. The vines snapped and he had to re-bend Vergil's knees. His struggles brought him quickly to the limits of his strength and a straining, gasping cry escaped through his clenched teeth. He felt strangely disconnected from the sound and at the same time shocked by it. It seemed to come from some stranger in an extreme of emotion. It swelled into a groaning sob. His strength collapsed and his arms went limp. He sunk down against Vergil, shaking and utterly sapped. That was when they heard the helicopter.

For a second, Janowitz thought it must be another rescue attempt—now, with Vergil dead. Then he realized it was a single bird, not a formation. A recon mission? Maybe it was stuffed with electronics and infrared equipment, or maybe it was seeding the jungle with seismic detectors.

Panicky fear took over his guard. He pulled Janowitz up out of the grave and pushed him toward the shovel. His voice came out in anxious hisses and he prodded Janowitz sharply with his AK47. Janowitz grabbed the shovel and scraped dirt down onto Vergil, as the copter drifted high overhead in the blackness. He trampled the earth with his feet, then scooped more dirt into the hole and beat it down with his shovel.

The guard jabbed him sharply with his rifle butt to hurry him along. Janowitz wanted desperately to slow the whole process, to stop it altogether for a few seconds. To sit and remember, to grieve. He wanted to stay here, quietly, for as long as he could, until it felt right to walk away. But even before he had quite finished replacing the earth, his guard grabbed the shovel out of his hands and herded him back onto the path to the compound.

The commandant was waiting at the entrance to his hooch. The darkness was so complete that they were an arm's length from each other before faces clarified. The guard spoke three or four words and the captain grunted acknowledgment. Smiling, he looked at Janowitz. "Flights of angels guide him," he said. It was the first time Janowitz had ever heard him use English. His accent was heavy but the words were quite clear, and he inclined his head slightly in a mock bow. While Janowitz was recalling that the commandant had been a school teacher, he was thinking about the problem of how to kill him. He held the captain's eyes till the guard pulled him away toward his cell.

He was ready to attack the commandant with any weapon he could make or find, even though he knew what would happen. Over the next few days, he saw in his broodings that Captain Stalag might survive such an attack, while Janowitz surely would not. He gradually began to realize that this come-what-may revenge fell under Vergil's last instruction to him—"don't let him make you a combat casualty."

Deep in his ominous, tangled thinking, he broke through to a little clearing. He, Janowitz, was the only one who could tell Vergil's family about his last days and hours. He began picturing that scene with Vergil's parents. This he owed to Vergil, to the man who had saved his life that moonlit night as they headed for their first prison camp. That had to be part of his story to them. There were some parts he could never tell. The specific nature of the torture, and the final medication, prescribed by himself. But what he could tell, he would. He must.

It came to him that Vergil's body might never be recovered. The old seething anger surged briefly, to be swept away by a desperate helplessness at his inability to do even the slightest ritual gesture of farewell—except perhaps to pray.

Or not. He grasped in early adolescence that the world looked askance at what happened in his nightly fantasies; that comedians used people like him to get cheap laughs; that every religion seemed to hold out grim penalties for anyone who lived where his imagination took him. He was swept by shame at the accusations implicit in the laughter and explicit in the religious tracts. But he knew he hadn't chosen this. It had chosen him. And if God was the Lord of all creation, then wasn't this how He wanted Janowitz to be? That had to be good, didn't it? But then why did most of the world seem hell-bent on condemning, or worse? When he finally asked God to hush the comics and

change the churches, he actually expected it to happen. After he realized God was declining his invitation, he slid for a time into a deep depression—until he remembered how Jesus’ mother would get him to do what she wanted. During the wedding at Cana, she didn’t ask him to change the water. She just described the problem: “They have no wine.” That was all. So, he tried it: “What You made me, they don’t like.” None of the *theys* changed, but after a while he found he didn’t care as much. He realized that, although they weren’t changing, he was. He was accepting himself more deeply, just as he was, despite strong outside suggestions to the contrary. Eventually, he simply got on with his life.

So—pray, or not? Or maybe just describe the problem? “Vergil’s spirit is not at rest.” Janowitz had to admit he really didn’t know if that was true or not. “The spirit of Vergil I hold inside is not at rest.” *Me again. How do I have to change this time?* By growing more patient and cunning. By getting smart enough to kill without being killed.

Highly unlikely he’d ever get his hands on a rifle, bayonet or knife. A garrote? Sarge would be proud of him. How long since Sarge and his little band had captured him? No idea. Forever. Well, four or five months. Maybe more. With everything that’s happened could that be all?

The garrote’s a possibility. Keep it on the table. And then a thought struck him. *What would Vergil use?* His heart started to race when he realized that what killed Vergil would also do nicely for Captain Stalag.

But Dan would absolutely refuse to be a party to any kind of collection effort. Besides, how could Janowitz get the commandant to drink such a concoction?

Janowitz started working on other options. What about a handful of the seeds that

Vergil's poison had come from? Left on the commandant's table in his hooch, the threat would be obvious. And if it put him on tenterhooks, so much the better—suffer the way Vergil had with the clear threat always dangling over his head. But how to get them into the hooch? And anything to do with plants would point to Dan and ultimately to himself. It had to be something else.

It showed up that afternoon. He and Dan were in the forest, harvesting shiny, dark leaves from a thick vine wrapped around the trunk of a towering tree. He ran his hands lightly up the vine, his left hand flipping the leaves for a quick inspection, his right following after to pick them. He was looking for leaves without black spots and without any chunks taken out of the edges by the fearsome caterpillars that sometimes slided their way over the greenery. He was thinking idly that they looked a little like the bay leaves his mother cooked with when he spotted a particularly succulent-looking leaf and stopped his hand in mid-sweep to pull it off. Just as he did, a small green head, a bit bigger around than a pencil, darted out from the foliage and missed his finger by about the thickness of his nail.

It was a five-stepper. When he realized it could have gotten a solid grip on his finger, his pulse jumped and he stumbled back. Less than three feet away at the end of the leg chain, Dan hadn't even seen it.

“What?” Dan asked. In reply, Janowitz picked up a thickish twig a couple of feet long and began currying the vine. He soon exposed the snake and Dan audibly exhaled. Janowitz realized this was what he needed to start dealing with the captain. There were several prisoners with enough motivation to take out the commandant, and one or two among his own men. Anyone could find a snake in the jungle.

He pinned it against the tree trunk with the stick, then pulled a pointed tool from Dan's belt and pierced its head straight through.

"Don't!" Janowitz merely handed the tool back to Dan and put the snake, still writhing, into a small canvas bag he carried for harvesting.

"What are you doing?"

What he did was toss the dead snake through the window of Captain Stalag's hooch, as they passed by on the way to Dan's workroom shed. The guard was oblivious, Dan was appalled. The Captain's bed was directly under the window to catch any jungle breezes.

The next morning when the prisoners marched past the Captain's quarters, the snake was nailed to one of the porch uprights. The gauntlet had been thrown down, and taken up.

That night, he lay there, considering alternatives. But he had to come out alive at the other end. To do that, he was going to have to trust Dan, for the simple reason that he needed him. He was going to have to listen to Dan, whether he wanted to or not. Maybe that was good. Maybe that would keep him from doing something fatally stupid. Maybe...

Suddenly, giant spheres of harsh light burst everywhere and the deafening roar of massive explosions shattered thinking. Shrapnel sought out flesh in the camp and found it. Fire sucked oxygen from the air and the artificial wind carried the stench of explosives and burning bodies with it. The jungle floor was churning, erupting, huge masses of gouged-up earth were smashing cells and collapsing barracks. A tree crashed down across Janowitz's cage. He could barely hear prisoners ten feet away as they screamed from inside the roar. Just as suddenly, everything was still, the quiet as disorienting as the

B-52 attack itself. Within the silence he began to hear the crackle of things burning, and screams as shock gave way to pain. Did it last thirty seconds?

He struggled to get to his feet. His body seemed in one piece, but it was impossible to move for a moment. Then he realized a large limb lay across the small of his back. He wriggled his way out from under it, stood up and took a step. He half fell to his knees, as his right foot pushed through the shattered floor. He extricated himself, found that the falling tree had obliterated one entire wall of his cell and sprung its flooring, and vaulted free over the trunk.

“Help me!” It was Dan, also pinned in their cell. Janowitz ignored him and ran toward Captain Stalag’s hooch, watching as he went for any sentries still on their feet. When he found a dead NVA soldier, he scooped up the man’s AK47 and ran on. As he reached the steps of the hooch, the captain’s interpreter staggered out onto the porch. His eyes were dazed and unseeing. Janowitz put three rounds in his belly, through the clipboard he still clutched, and pushed past him as he fell.

Inside, the light was dimmer but still lurid. AK at the ready, Janowitz charged toward the bunk, but it was empty. He whirled around and there was Stalag sitting at the table. Shrapnel had torn a hole in the wall behind him and then in his back. In the flickering light, Janowitz could make out the dead Stalag’s exposed right kidney. Blood on his shirt marked half a dozen other wounds.

A massive cry of anger burst out of him and he struck Stalag’s seated body full in the head with the butt of the rifle. As the corpse sprawled onto the floor, Janowitz upended the table by main force, throwing it to one side, and began pounding the head and face with the AK, blow after blow. Guttural noises poured out as he raged at the

corpse for being dead. He hammered, knowing it would never be over for him now, couldn't be, that he would spend the rest of his life trapped between the crime and a punishment only he could administer, but that now would never happen.

A sharp blow caught him between the shoulder blades and the rifle flew out of his hands. Stunned, he lay across the commandant's legs for a second, face down, and then Dan turned him over.

"Lie here if you want. Keep trying to kill him, though he's dead. Soon they'll send troops to see what's left. I won't be here. You should go as well. If you can find..." He searched for the word. "Sanity." He turned and strode out of the hooch.

Janowitz rose unsteadily and retrieved his rifle. He looked at Stalag. The commandant no longer had a face. He seemed very small.

He strode out of the hooch, not seeing the body of the interpreter. On the way to the guards' barracks, he killed another NVA soldier wandering dazed through the camp. The inside of the barracks was a shambles. He located a pistol belt, extra magazines of ammunition for the AK, a machete, a knife and two canteens. He found a garrote and took that, too. As he headed for the jungle, he knew he could live off the land.

He traveled by night and slept by day, heading downstream toward the delta. Once, when he came upon a small hut, he reached for the garrote to use on an old farmer so he could steal his food. But the old man saw him, put his finger to his lips and waved him into the hut. He fed him, gave him rice balls to take along, and sent him on his way. The intensity of his desire to use the garrote startled Janowitz.

Just before noon on the fourth day, he was awakened by the sound of an approaching helicopter. He stood at the edge of the grove of nipa palm he was sheltering

in until he saw the chopper. He stepped away from the vegetation and began waving at the bird. It circled warily, as if the pilot suspected a trap. The AK47 didn't help. When it approached him for another pass, he pulled the camouflage bandana off his head and exposed an inch-long growth of blond hair.

That night, after a hot shower and a meal of fried chicken that he couldn't finish, he slept in his own room at a U.S. Army hospital.

During Ken's first full day in the hospital at Cam Ranh Bay, they diagnosed dehydration, malnutrition, trench foot and ringworm. They started intravenous fluids, salved the ringworm, powdered his feet and overfed him with a vengeance. They kicked off the morning with scrambled eggs, sausage, hash browns and toast. At noon, it was meat loaf with mashed potatoes and gravy, broccoli and Jell-O. For dinner, they brought an enormous steak with all the trimmings. Before he was half finished with the meals, he was stuffed. He'd have to work to stretch his stomach back to standard GI capacity.

Hospital staff constantly popped in and out. Doctors he never saw before would glance at his chart and say, "Feeling okay?" or "Welcome back," and then vanish.

"What's going on?" he asked a nurse. "Do they have to come through here to get to the latrine?"

She smiled. "You're a celebrity."

He thought about that a moment, shaking his head. "I just survived, that's all. Sometimes when I didn't want to." He was thinking about Vergil. She said nothing.

Later, the night nurse shook him awake. "You were talking to somebody," she said. "Were you dreaming?" But he didn't remember anything. "Take this." He swallowed the pill and slept the rest of the night.

On day two, a pair of field grade officers, intelligence types, spent almost four hours with him, gleaning as much information as they could about the NVA. When he talked about the ruins of the French plantation buildings, they brought out maps. They took careful notes about the details of Vergil's burial and told him they would pass the

information to Graves Registration.

The third day, an infantry captain showed up and said he was Ken's company commander.

Ken frowned. "Is Captain Bonner all right?"

"He finished his tour and went back to the states. You were a POW for five months, you know."

Could it only be that long?

Ken's mom and dad had already been notified, he told Janowitz, and he should be hearing from them soon. Janowitz didn't think so, given the reaction of his Polish Catholic parents when he told them about his sexual persuasion—particularly his father. When he left home a few days later, all three had been relieved. But although his parents quickly lost track of him, the draft board didn't.

The captain also informed him that he'd been retroactively promoted to buck sergeant as of the date of his capture. That would add a few bucks to the pot of money that accumulated for him during his captivity.

The captain also told Ken they'd be sending him back to the states—to Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington, initially. He could serve the last three months of his term of service anywhere he wanted, or even go for an early out.

"You're practically a civilian, if you don't re-up." He grinned.

Virtually everyone Janowitz asked about was gone. Most had finished their tours, but some had left by medivac or in body bags. The captain was nice enough but when he was gone, Janowitz felt disconnected somehow, more isolated than he'd felt even during his captivity. His unit had become a company of strangers.

On the fourth day when Chaplain McCurdy came by, he experienced a pleasurable jolt of recognition. “Why aren’t you back in the states like the rest of the world, Padre?” he asked, grinning.

“One night, the MACV chief of chaplains got me drunk. When I woke up I’d extended for six months.” Janowitz laughed. McCurdy filled him in as best he could on everyone Ken asked about—Bonner’s move to Fort Benning, and Chuck Paxton’s breakdown and medivac back home. After a moment’s thought, Ken asked if he happened to know anything about a helicopter pilot named Garrett Prue.

“He was shot down,” McCurdy answered. “I went along when the recovery team went in to get him.” He paused a moment. “They think he deliberately put himself in harm’s way.”

Ken was puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“He didn’t want to come back.”

The full implication sank in. “Oh, God,” he murmured.

“Did you two know each other?”

He nodded. “We went on R and R together.”

“I gave him the last rites.”

Ken looked relieved, then gave a little laugh. “He wasn’t Catholic.”

“That’s okay. It’s not a closed shop up there.”

Ken went melancholy for a few moments. “It’s more than Vergil got,” he said at last.

“Vergil?” McCurdy asked, inviting Janowitz to talk about it. He did.

The chaplain ended the silence that followed. “Let’s pray for Vergil, shall we?”

“And Garrett,” Janowitz added.

He took Ken’s hand in both of his. “Almighty God, vouchsafe to take the souls of Vergil and Garrett into thy bosom...” He went on like that for a bit, and then finished off with “may they rest in peace. Amen.” After a few more minutes, McCurdy left.

Janowitz thought about that prayer, about the stilted words you only hear when a padre is praying out loud. *It’s not enough.* Nothing would be enough until the remains were recovered. And Garrett Prue—how much was from the war and how much from Ken? That night the nurse gave him another pill.

The fifth day, they overfed him as usual at breakfast, then put him on a hospital bus with 15 other GIs in blue pajamas. They rode out to the airstrip and loaded onto an air medivac bound for Japan, where they stayed overnight in another military hospital. He departed next day, again by Air Force medivac. They refueled in Guam, and again on the west coast where they unloaded some of the passengers. They stopped again in Colorado and let off some orthopedic patients. At last, they touched down at Andrews Air Force Base and another bus began the ride through the city to Walter Reed. Two weeks earlier he’d been trying to figure out how to kill Stalag and get away with it. He looked through the bus windows at a strange planet.

He was an inpatient for three days. Much of his time they filled with a psychiatric evaluation—both written questions and personal interviews. He knew how to answer certain items. His orientation was an illness to the doctors and a crime to the army. One of the shrinks, mid to late 30’s, told Janowitz they’d be working together for several months during Ken’s “transition period.” *Swell. You’ll be a big help.*

He spent the afternoon of his second day in hospital with a civilian named Will

Biller. The man was unassuming in appearance, a model of the inconspicuous bureaucrat. He wasn't interested in tactics and the size of enemy units like the intel officers at the Cam Ranh Bay hospital. Instead, he asked after other Americans, but there was only Vergil. Biller explained that his job was to get every scrap of information he could about all Americans. He coaxed out of Ken everything Vergil had said about the other soldiers in his advisory group.

He wanted to know what had kept Janowitz going, what was crucial to his survival. Vergil had been his key not just to surviving the trek to their first camp, but also, at least at first, the imprisonment itself. Vergil's initial attitude toward their life in shackles had spilled over onto Janowitz and kept him going.

“And after he died?”

Revenge. Once Vergil was gone, wanting to live depended on his need to kill Stalag. He told Biller about the jungle medications and poisons, and the garrote. And his must-have—surviving the pleasure of killing Stalag in order to meet with Vergil's parents. He explained how that pleasure was stolen from him by the ruthless efficiency of the B-52s. Biller sat in silence a few moments, then told Janowitz he'd be notified when Vergil's remains were recovered.

No way was he going to reenlist. On the other hand, he declined the chance for an early out. His shrink agreed that he needed to buy a little time before he took on the world as a civilian. They sent him to Fort Myer, Virginia and assigned him to the Third Infantry Regiment, the unit in charge of the Arlington Cemetery burial detail and guarding the tomb of the Unknowns. But since he had so little army time left, they didn't train him for these tasks. Instead, he was assigned to the staff of the colonel in command,

fetching coffee and being office decor for visiting VIPs.

He decided he'd try college on the GI Bill when he got out. He'd accumulated almost a year's pay, although for a buck sergeant that wasn't much—even with hostile fire pay thrown in and not being able to spend a dime while he was a POW. What he had would help him buy time while he settled into the school routine and located a part-time job. He declared Business Administration as his major, a nice, broad-spectrum set of skills to have.

His duty day was 7:00 to 4:00. Nights and weekends were his own. He soon found a movie house that showed gay porn films. Once, as he was leaving, a young guy caught his eye. When Janowitz didn't look away, the other spoke. Over the next couple of weeks, Aaron showed Janowitz the city's gay bars, and where the right restaurants and bookstores were in the Dupont Circle area. They also went to his apartment, just off the Circle, with increasing frequency.

Aaron was endlessly inventive in bed, unhurried, focused on the details. He had an openness and a boyish enthusiasm that began to marshal Janowitz's mood and help him back into life.

He was a staffer for a third-term Republican congressman from the southwest—researching, answering phones, running copiers, occasionally helping with a speech. He was young, about Ken's age, but his bosses were finding out that he was also capable.

“Good God, Aaron, you're working for a conservative right-wing religious zealot,” Ken said, incredulous. “Are you comfortable with that?”

“Yes, indeedy,” he replied. “All except the religious part. I may be queer, but I'm a conservative queer.”

When they talked about it, they found that neither of them had any interest in going back to the porn movies. “Don’t need to,” Aaron said to him. “I’m directing my own.” Finally, he suggested that Janowitz move in. He would, he said, after he got out of the army.

When he arrived, his baggage included a farewell Bronze Star for service, unusual for a lowly grunt, and a hand-crank army field phone that he stole from one of the supply rooms. He told Aaron earlier about how Vergil saved his life, but nothing about Captain Stalag or his death. On that, he left him in the dark.

Aaron had sampled S and M, but it wasn’t his style. Still, he readily took the role Janowitz gave him. But he soon realized Ken didn’t want the pain to make the pleasure more piquant. He wanted it for its own sake. Another realization: these little scenes weren’t about them as a twosome, not one more facet of something shared. Their function was to help Janowitz turn inward on himself, take him to some dark psychic cave where it didn’t matter who was turning the crank.

If he left out the kink, Aaron liked this relationship and wanted it to continue, but he didn’t want to stay with someone who had serious hang-ups. That made him uneasy. Finally, he told Ken he was losing interest in these scenes. He then mentioned another gay bar called Excavations—dark lighting, very dark. You could rent lockers and wander from room to room through the murk. Patrons cruised till they found someone who shared the same interests, then negotiated the evening’s doings. Everything was possible, right on the premises. In fact, one of the rooms was specifically equipped for S and M scenes. “Kind of like the Mine Shaft in New York,” Aaron explained. He was hoping Ken could go there and take care of whatever it was that crouched in that cave of his,

then come home ready for a relationship.

Aaron bowed out of going with him on his first visit. He took a moment, however, to warn Ken to be careful about who he linked up with. “Every now and then, a dangerous top will show up on the scene. A bottom will disappear. Or if he’s lucky, he’ll make it back with a real horror story. The first time you leave with somebody new, tell the bartender who you’re going with. And make sure the guy sees the two of you talking.”

As he checked through the entrance, Ken wondered what he was getting into, but he was determined to find out. One of the security people at the door explained that Excavations occupied an old residence with three floors and a large basement. The top floor was for administration and closed to patrons. The second floor had three rooms, and the first floor had the reception area, the bar and some alcoves for different activities. The basement had two additional rooms with “different kinds of toys.” He was assigned a locker, but didn’t use it right away. He wanted to find out exactly what went on. At the bar, he bought a beer and let his eyes get used to the faint lighting.

Men wandered around, some clothed and some naked, seeing and being seen. In a far dark corner, someone knelt to someone standing. Deeper in the gloom, two men were in furious motion while two others, then a third, paused to watch. *Like getting a light on a street corner.* He was shocked by these transactions of strangers, and yet he was instantly and powerfully aroused, both from the sex and from the total lack of consequences. *No strings, none.* He sensed freedom in this disconnectedness. *Freedom from what?* He went to find his locker.

As he waited in the Atlanta airport for his connecting flight back to Washington, he tried to figure out why he didn't feel like a debt had been paid.

He'd come through Atlanta two days before, on his way to Huntsville and a rental car. Then he'd driven through Florence to Tuscumbia, where Vergil's parents lived. Telling the story of Vergil's final days had been a painful experience for all three of them, but when it was over, his mother and father had clearly been relieved of a heavy burden. But not Janowitz. The experience hadn't filled any part of the hole inside him.

He wanted to blame Excavations. The sexual hangover from his last session was still with him. His visit to Vergil's parents hadn't dissipated it. He'd never had a problem saying no to drugs, but it was increasingly difficult to stay away from Excavations for four or five days. Its aura subtly skewed everything he did and saw. But although Excavations helped maintain the emptiness inside, he knew the root cause went deeper, back to Captain Stalag. To thwarted revenge.

A blind man tapped past him with his white cane, hanging on to the harness of his guide dog. Even in the early evening the terminal was packed, and Janowitz wondered how blind people learned to cope in these situations. Then he spotted the woman following a few paces behind the blind man, unobtrusively observing him, and now and then jotting a brief word or two in a pocket notebook she held. *How the blind learn to see,* he thought, then reprimanded himself for his shallow cynicism. *How the blind learn to survive,* and he wondered if he himself would make it through. And then he wondered, *through what?*

All he knew was that he'd come away from the prison camp with some kind of... He groped. A reversal of...something. Something was upside down. Although he didn't

even know its name, he knew what it did. Before Captain Stalag, he wanted to find some *person*. Even with a lot of combat under his belt, that was still his goal—that's why Garrett was so important to him and why he'd fantasized about a life together when they got home. It was only after he was forced to watch Stalag spend months killing Vergil that he became ready to seek out some *body*. He factored in the field telephone and realized 'body' wasn't quite accurate. Pain was the objective, using the toys at Excavations and even the faceless sex to cause that pain. And then the memory of trying to persuade Vergil to eat intruded itself, and his refusals, and he knew 'pain' wasn't quite right either. *Try 'punishment.'*

It wasn't reasonable. He didn't save Vergil because he couldn't. He realized that his here-and-now task was to say yes to that agonizing limitation and get on with life. So why couldn't he just move on? *An eye for an eye, a life for a life. I owed him, his life for mine. And I failed.* And this justifies the field telephone? The anonymous fucking? Even as he said yes, he knew Vergil would be appalled.

I need help. He thought of his military shrink and a bitter little smile worked its way across his face. He'd dub Janowitz a criminal and a psycho. Some help that would be. Policy, you know—nothing personal. He'd be very clinical and dispassionate in his white lab coat, but there it was.

So, heal thyself. Not likely, and that left the field telephone and the no-name nights. Or maybe something more definitive, something quicker.

Later, after he left Washington National Airport, he made a late-night stop at Excavations.

Three weeks later, Aaron came home from a late-night session at the office to find that Ken had brought someone to the apartment. Next day, he asked Ken to move out. The half-hearted argument started with Aaron implying there was an agreement about temporary monogamy. Ken countered that Aaron was the one who told him about Excavations in the first place. Aaron conceded that was true, then dropped the pretense of a lovers' quarrel. "You're over the line," he told Ken.

"What?"

"Your pain game."

"There's nothing wrong with that."

"For a lot of people, no. For you, yes. Big-time yes. I don't know where your head takes you when you're tripping, but it's not normal, not healthy."

"Fuck you." Ken began putting together an overnight bag.

"I've done this kind of stuff with guys who get into it for the sport. It's not a sport for you. It's dead serious and I don't know why. You've never told me."

"I'll move out tomorrow and leave the key in the mailbox." He was at the apartment door.

"Ken, get help. Please."

His laugh was bitter. "Where?"

He closed the door behind him and leaned against it. *What am I doing?* Aaron could have been that other he was looking for. Losing Garrett and Vergil was out of his hands, but Aaron was his own fault. They both knew it.

Ken could hear the bell somewhere deep inside, then the door swung open. "Come in,

come in,” the old priest said affably. An aproned woman in her mid-30’s came into the hall from the kitchen. Ample but in no sense heavy, she’d brought her dark good looks with her from Latin America. “I’ve got it, Gabriela. We’ve got an appointment.”

“I’ll bring your breakfast right up.” She headed back to the kitchen.

He labored his way up a broad flight of steps, wheezing loudly. Ken followed, noticing the stiffness of his left leg. There were half a dozen closed doors on the second floor hall. He opened one and went in.

“Shut it.” Ken did. “Sit down, while I get comfortable.” He lit a cigarette as he crossed to the window with its broad sill and slid the sash up, then unfastened the neck of his cassock. His cincture rode below his ample paunch like size 36 pants under a size 40 belly. He took off his Roman collar and tossed it on the desk between a stack of file folders and three or four books, all of them open and piled one on top of the other. A legal pad was jammed against the folders, with half a dozen scribbled pages turned over and the next sheet partly filled. A huge ashtray was much too small for the pile of butts spilling out of it.

He noticed Ken eyeing the load on the desk. “I’m defender of the bond,” he said. “Kind of a church lawyer. When somebody tries to get a marriage annulled, I’m supposed to keep it from happening. I’m the spoiler,” he said cheerfully.

A small bed and an open bathroom door were opposite the desk, while another wall was occupied floor to ceiling with severely overloaded bookcases. Ken ran his fingers over the spines—besides English there were works in German, French, Italian, Latin and something he thought must be Greek.

“The matching set is Aquinas, the *Summa Theologica*. The Greek stuff is the

Fathers on this and that. On just about everything, actually. Boy, they ran on. Except that red one there, that's Kazantzakis—*Zorba the Greek*, you know.” He ran his hand through the wild shock of white hair that made him look deranged. “Coffee, coffee,” he muttered. There was a knock on the door. “Yo!” the priest shouted.

Gabriela came in carrying a tray with a full plate of food, a large pot of coffee and a couple of cups and saucers. “I brought coffee for both of you,” she said and put the tray down on the broad windowsill. She turned to Ken. “You can't talk business without caffeine in your bloodstream. Hey, you're cute. Marry me and take me away from this crazy place.”

“Gabriela...”

“I only talk sassy like this around Father Rukkila here. All the rest in here are old sobersides and I have to behave. Chew your food *slow*,” she told the priest. “You'll get an ulcer.” Then she was gone.

“That woman...but she's a great cook.” The cigarette dangling from his mouth sent smoke rising straight into his squinting eyes. He emptied the ashtray into the waste can, ignoring several butts that missed the target. He took a long last drag, stubbed out the cigarette and broke into a fit of coughing—a phlegm-clogged smoker's cough.

“Damn cigarettes'll kill me. I'll die of emphysema.”

Or something else, Ken thought as he looked at the buttered toast, two eggs, three sausage patties and the grease oozing out from under a large pile of hash browns. But the coffee was good.

The older man crossed to the tray on the window sill and slouched against the wall, ignoring Gabriela's warning to eat slowly. He wolfed down large forkfuls of food as

he talked.

“I’m about your soul,” he said. “So are you, or you wouldn’t have come into my confessional. Or come here to the rectory when I asked you to. Now, you only gave me the executive summary, but based on that I’d say we’re going to have to go through your mind to get to your soul. Does this all sound right so far?”

“I wouldn’t have come to the confessional, if I wasn’t afraid a psychiatrist would put me in a nut ward.”

“Fair enough. Commendable candor, by the way. That will help us move quickly in the right direction. Now, here’s some skinny you obviously don’t know yet. The American Psychiatric Association’s been working behind the scenes for several years to delete homosexuality from its list of syndromes. Yeah, that’s right,” he responded to the candid disbelief on Ken’s face. “It’ll no longer be a disease at all. But—it’ll still be a crime in a potload of jurisdictions and you can still get your security clearance pulled, if you work for the government.”

“Or a court martial if you’re in the army.”

“Are you in?”

“Just got out.”

“Do Nam?” Ken nodded. “Good,” the priest said. “At least you don’t have *that* hanging over your head.”

“I also did five months in a prisoner of war camp, while I was there.”

The priest looked at him for a moment. “Yup. Our road runs through your mind.” He paused, looking at Ken abstractedly, then went on. “Now, it may take the APA a few more years before they can make the change formal. Politics and all that. But, there are a

lot of shrinks out there who treat the issue, and the patient, as if it was already off the list. I'm going to recommend one for you to go to."

"He's not...I mean he isn't..."

"What? A religious nut?" Ken shrugged. "He's definitely not a Catholic, if that's what you mean. Although he *is* deeply spiritual—I mean for an agnostic. I think he's going to be just what you need."

The first time he went home with Owl, he checked out with Sandy behind the bar. Owl had his own soundproof, windowless playroom above his garage. The only decoration in the entire place was a large framed photograph of a white owl in a snowy landscape, its wings spread wide and its talons deep in the back of a still-living snowshoe rabbit. Owl looked up at it on the wall, smiling. "That's me," he said. He put Ken on a section of cyclone fence that was lying on the floor, his hands cuffed over his head and his feet tied wide apart with a couple of short, narrow belts that looked like they used to be retaining straps on an old piece of luggage. Owl followed all of Ken's requests to the letter.

The second time he went with Owl, they were stopped at the door by a pair of plainclothes cops who asked them what they knew about a dangerous top who'd begun circulating. Two missing persons reports could fit in the general pattern of this top and there were some "forensic findings" in several other cases that were "congruent."

The third time was on a Saturday night. Excavations was crowded and nobody noticed their departure. Once Ken was locked down on the cyclone fence, Owl announced that they'd be following his own scenarios this time. He left the room briefly and returned with a cartful of tools. Owl's scenes were intense, sustained and dangerous.

Ken passed out twice. Each time he woke, Owl was sitting next to him on a stool, waiting patiently. Each time he smiled and said, “Ah, you’re back,” and started again. When he finally called a halt and opened the door to the room, Ken caught a glimpse of sunlight angling from an unseen window. “I’m going to grab some sleep,” Owl said. “When I come back, I’ll show you what the cops meant by forensic findings.” The threat hung there between them a second. Then he shut the door and locked it from his side. A moment later the lights went out.

He had only hours at most. Isn’t this what I’ve really wanted? Isn’t this what Excavations has always been about? Fail Vergil, pay the consequences. Like Vergil, he’d set up his own final scene, but what a difference.

He thought back to the afternoon he and Dan crushed the seeds and took the oil to Vergil. They’d had to wake him. And then he heard Vergil’s voice: “You’ll think about this a lot when you get home, about how he got to you through me.” He’d paused to rest a moment before he continued. “But don’t let Stalag get to you back there—back home. Don’t let him make you a casualty after the war’s over. This is *my* choice. Mine.”

He was at a crossroads of his own now, lying there in the dark. Fight, or roll over and die. *Don’t let him make you a casualty.* Ken wondered if it was too late.

The heavy-gauge wires of the cyclone fence were tightly braided together, but their ends, he remembered, weren’t anchored to any crosspiece along the edge of the fence. The chain of his handcuffs ran under three of the wires. The only chance he had was to unbraid those wires, a little bit at a time. They extended about a foot above his hands. He had no idea how long it would take, but he started. He could only move the first wire fractions of an inch at a time, while both his fingers and wrists were being badly

savaged. It took him a little over two hours to unbraid the first strand of wire, an hour and a half for the second and almost 45 minutes for the third. When he finally got free of the fence, his bloody hands were still cuffed together, but at least they were in front of him.

The door was locked from the outside and the room was in total darkness. Owl had removed the cart of tools and there was no way to break off the stiff wire strands and shape them into a weapon. But what else did he have? He sat against a wall and tried to remember the details of the room before Owl shut the door, turned the key and switched off the light. He couldn't have much more time.

Fifteen minutes later, he heard the key sliding into the lock. In the moment after Owl switched on the light and entered the room, he had to know Janowitz wasn't on the fence. He may even have noticed that the picture of the owl and its prey no longer hung on the wall, that it had been taken apart and segments of the frame the width of a man's hand were broken off, that the 30-inch length of wire from the back of the picture wasn't part of the debris scattered on the floor. But by then, Ken had thrust the tips of his rigid fingers into Owl's eyes and the garrote was around his throat. Ken slammed his head into the wall, wrestled the wire over the top of the door, and pulled down from behind with his whole weight. In front, Owl's feet were lifting off the floor and his arms jerking and groping desperately about, banging against the jamb. Ken could see the top part of his head and hear his feet pounding against the door, as his arms kept flailing around. But there was nothing for him to grab and he gradually grew still. Ken held him there off the floor for a minute, then two, his own arms beginning to shake with the effort. Then, he let him fall.

He stood naked over him, panting and gasping. His hands were bleeding in a

dozen different places. “Fuck you, Stalag,” he said and kicked the body in the face. “Fuck you.”

The day before he would be celibate for a year, a condition it had taken him more than 18 months to achieve, Ken Janowitz drove west out of the city.

Owl's death marked the start of that 18 months. Once he'd left Owl's place that day, he headed straight for Father Rukkila. FC—for Father Confessor, his nickname for the priest—FC called Ken's therapist and then began tending his hands. Together, the two of them decided on the attorney they knew Ken would need. Once he heard the story, the lawyer insisted that Ken strip. And once he saw the marks left on him by Owl, he sent for a photographer to record the extent and nature of the wounds.

They were prudent steps, but unnecessary. After a thorough search of Owl's house, the police told Ken and his lawyer they'd found—that phrase again—some “congruent forensic evidence” that in effect solved two open cases for them. They accepted Ken's story of self-defense.

He studied the scars on the hands holding the steering wheel. He didn't have a shred of remorse over killing Owl. But what still scared him, even now, was calling owl by Stalag's name. He knew that somewhere down inside, he was still a prisoner of his past. Though not as completely—with Owl/Stalag dead, he left the hand-crank phone and its variations behind him. It wasn't the result of some superhuman effort of will. The desire had simply left him. But although he never returned to Excavations, he still cruised his other old haunts for casual partners. He was still going for a body rather than a person. He, FC and his therapist were all in agreement about calling a halt to this anonymous, faceless sex—FC on moral grounds, his therapist because it was a

destructive denial of his need for a real partner, and Ken because of the increasingly heavy load of guilt and shame afterward. Making the faceless sex even more painful was his growing realization of all he'd lost when he walked out on Aaron. And all these feelings were compounded by the responsibility he embraced for the death of both Vergil and Garrett Prue. His therapist tried to argue him out of that, but Ken would have none of it. His complicity in those deaths wasn't accessible to logic.

After driving two hours from Washington, he passed through Appleton and turned up a side road to the monastery. Father Girard greeted him in the muggy late afternoon with a "Welcome. I hope this week will be good for you." He guessed the priest was 60 or more, though it was difficult to tell because baldness had relieved canonical tonsure of responsibility for his scalp. And then, too, there was the ruddy spareness of his face, product no doubt of the monastic regimens of diet and work. Besides his age, what kept the face from a rugged good looks label was an air of habitual meditative preoccupation.

He took him to the guesthouse. "The washbowl in your room has hot and cold water, and the toilet and shower are down the hall. I'll show you the chapel and refectory. Feel free to join us or not for prayer and food. And there's a nice little pizza shop on the main street in town." In response to the raised eyebrows, he added, "Some people prefer the blandishments of pepperoni to our beans and cheese. And finally, if you want to talk, I'm available."

"As a matter of fact, I do."

"Well, why don't you start then, while I show you the grounds."

And he did, for nearly two hours, hesitant at first and then heedless. Father Girard led them past a quiet lake—"still waters," he smiled—and they sat for a time in the

comparative cool of tall oaks. He then moved them to where they could see the monks crossing a symmetrical garden into the chapel. Scarcely a dozen, their song began drifting distantly, full but airy, and mingled with the evening dialogues of the birds.

His story came at last to a fitful halt, dogged by straggling reminiscences. He added thoughts at wider and wider intervals. When he hadn't said anything for several minutes, Father Girard finally spoke. "A lot of partners."

"More than I'd care to count."

"Of all kinds and degrees, too. Garrett Prue, Aaron, the Owl."

"And a lot whose names I didn't even know. Didn't want to know."

"Did you love any of them?"

His surprise was total. After a long second, he asked incredulously, "Love?"

"A new word to you then. Do you know what it means?"

His look was mischievous rather than sarcastic, and Ken laughed, actually blushing. He'd just spent two hours describing the most sordid sex in precise, clinical detail without a thought of holding back, considering himself in this regard as 'fearless.' But the mere mention of the word *love* had made him feel—not embarrassed exactly. More shy. Sweaty copulation in a room full of watchers had inhibited him not at all, but to speak of love—some things are too personal for public display. With regard to love, what things? He realized he had no idea.

"No, I don't know."

"Ken, what's love for you?"

No mischief now. A serious inquiry. *What's love for you?* Fleeting he wished he'd read more, so he could at least appear experienced rather than deprived. One of

those admired novels where between passages of abundant passion come reflections on what the protagonist had wanted, but gotten instead. A meditation on his brief personal fullness, and how the emptiness where The Other had been was already filling with insight and the beginnings of wisdom. *What's love for you?* He wished he'd read the book of himself more now, too, for much the same reason—to at least appear self-aware and not fumbling in an unlit place. Sex, no problem. But love? Even now, if he had to tack one single identifier on himself, it would be libido. Have dick, will travel. I fuck, therefore I am. *What's love for you?* Except he hadn't fucked lately, almost a year to the day. He felt that he was beginning to slide radically out of balance in the face of this physical denial. Shriveling. It was as if some process of metaphysical annihilation was already well underway in his very core. As if TO BE could only restore and maintain itself by repeated and headlong sexual congress, with its chronic inner agony and self-loathing as inevitable accompaniments. Which he knew he would have to end sooner or later, by whatever means necessary, because it was ultimately unendurable.

What's love for you?

“I don't know.”

He sat some distance from the monks and a bit off to the side as they sang in the pre-dawn dimness, able to make out the faces of the five across from him. There was an old one between two youngish ones, then two bookends in middle age.

Why is that one old and his neighbors youngish? And why hadn't he just said young? Maybe they're not quite at cruising speed in middle age, or maybe they're in a gradual shift to a less perfect mode. But youth isn't a state of perfection, only a condition

of naiveté—innocence that's worn out its welcome.

But the monk between the no-longer-naive twins—why had he called him old? Well, of course the physical stuff; the brief wattle of skin dangling from the underside of his chin, the deep crow's feet and the permanently hooded eyes. Maybe it was the apparent pudginess that one didn't usually associate with the asceticism of a monk. Or was it even physical, observable at all? What was going on inside this man that made *old* the right word? But that won't scan. It has to be seeable. Maybe it's the droop of his right eye lower than his left. Evidently a heavy reader over the years. But then what was his work in the monastery? Ken vaguely imagined that they all contributed somehow to the production of the monastery's cheese, by milking or baling or some such. At the same time, he knew that such a thought was—no, not naive, just uninformed. *Does he churn for his keep or does he have to read a lot? And what's his emotional take on this life of his?*

He studied the face in the hood. No doubt about it, the eyes glowed. *How many years has he been doing this and he isn't bogged in a rut yet?* His mouth was relaxed, not like the mouth on the face Ken shaved every morning—already taut at that early hour, grim with the expectation of the day, rictus of a white-knuckle life. *The old guy likes where he's at,* Ken thought, *likes what he's doing.* Old Father Joyboy, he dubbed him, conscious of his jealousy.

When he pulled back his focus to take them all in at once, their specificity of age began to blur. *They put the hood on and they're homogenized,* he thought. *And unencumbered by sex,* but he knew, even as he thought it, that it was a forlorn hope and not a conviction. When it comes to sex, no matter where you go, there you are. He looked

closely again at Father Joyboy's face and noted irritably that it was still happy.

"Let's talk about Vergil."

At once, his stomach roiled and he wanted to flee the abbot. He paused. "It's very painful for me."

"And very important, I think." They were still a moment.

"I dream about him sometimes."

"Sexually?"

"No, never." Reluctantly, he summoned Vergil's disembodied face as it now often came to him; a sickly white, edged in gray and black, the corners of his slightly gapped mouth still pinched with pain. "It's his face only. He's always just died—after all the torture and everything. His eyes are rolled back and his hair is still wet. He sweat a lot and his hair's still plastered to his forehead."

"What happens?"

"In the dream?"

"Yes."

"Nothing. I told you, he's dead." He stared off for a long minute, seeing only the face. "It accuses."

"Vergil does?"

"No, not him. He never talks. He's dead." The vividness increased, like intensifying illumination. His fingers wove and unwove themselves. "That's what accuses, him being dead. The sweat's still on him. His teeth are still clenched from the pain." The hurt in Ken's eyes was palpable. "But that's not how it really happened. He

didn't die while he was being tortured. There wasn't any sweat or anything."

The abbot sat in silence a good 30 seconds, pondering, then said, "Why should his death accuse you?"

How could this priest be so dense in the face of the obvious? His voice rose. "I should have been able to stop it and get him to eat."

"So he could live to be tortured some more?"

That seemed to confuse him, but he persisted stubbornly. "I should have been able to save him." His lower lip was quivering and he was aware of a vague shame, but he didn't care. He knew it was irrational. For him it didn't need to pass some litmus of reasonableness. He felt it as one of those first principles, rooted out of time in a place so deep that it was beyond naming.

But then Father Girard named it. "You loved him, didn't you?"

His face instantly contorted, twisted by the cry of pain bursting out, and by release. For a time, uncontrolled sobbing convulsed him. Father Girard took a tissue for himself and pushed the box toward Ken. He gazed sadly out the window, preoccupied, letting the other's grief run its course. At last he spoke. "Would you have lived with him if you could?"

"Yes. Oh, yes."

"No strings?"

"No strings."

"What if Vergil couldn't have found it in him to live with you?"

Ken considered the proposition. "I think I could have accepted that. It would have been hard. I'd have had to work at it, but I think it would've been okay."

“You really did love him.”

Ken nodded agreement with slow conviction.

“When I’d just joined the monastery, we had an old priest, Father Francis, mid-80’s, who had a massive stroke. He couldn’t talk, was barely able to move one hand, had to be fed, bathed, everything. Couldn’t do anything for himself. One day, after living like that for a number of months, he refused to take any food by mouth. Your story made me think about him again. They had put me in charge of the infirmary. I’m a doctor.”

Ken looked up at him, impressed by this new bit of knowledge.

“I was to do the feeding. He could hardly lift a hand, but when he clenched his jaw tight shut, I couldn’t budge it. I pleaded with him. He understood, but refused. I called the abbot and announced we’d have to start intravenous feeding. He simply asked Father Francis if he wanted us to feed him any more. No. Or feed him intravenously. No. And the abbot turned to me and said, ‘No extraordinary means.’ As I was explaining that intravenous feeding wasn’t very extraordinary, he cut me off and said rather sharply, ‘No.’ And then he called the whole community around the bed—there were quite a few of us back then—and he anointed Father Francis, and led the prayers for the dying. I was right next to him at the head of the bed and saw everything Father Francis saw—everyone in the community, everyone he cared about and loved, all around him. Praying—for him and with him—wishing him well, sending him off with love. When the abbot finished the prayers, he leaned down to his ear—I could barely hear him—and he whispered, ‘God understands.’ Well, I wasn’t looking forward to that week. It would take days for Father Francis to starve himself to death. But next morning, just as the sun was coming up, while the chant of morning prayers was drifting over from the chapel, he died

the most peaceful death I've ever seen.”

They sat in silence for a time, then Father Girard went on. “We weren't quite to the point back then where technology had multiplied ethical issues, but it still took me a while to conclude that the abbot had been right and I was wrong. Now, I understand that there's no need to make a painful death last longer than necessary; that, in fact, under some circumstances it can even be sinful—as for example when the physician lets his ego get in the way. But I eventually came around.”

He turned to Ken. “Now, as for you, you're going to have to take it on faith for a while that you're not really guilty of anything; that Vergil, like Father Francis, chose to go because it was his time. If you cling to that long enough by faith, you'll eventually come to hold it for truth.” The other looked dubious. “Ken, you were denied the use of all extraordinary means. And that's okay—God understands.” He let that sink in for a moment. “Believe that. Make it an article of faith.”

“It doesn't make sense to me.”

“I don't think it ever will intellectually. You'll never reason that dead face away.”

He couldn't see the face, but Ken's insides were permeated by the feeling it always brought. “I'll never be able to shake it.”

Father Girard paused again. “Was there ever a time when Vergil was closer to you than I am now? When he looked you right in the eye and gave you a big grin?”

Ken searched back to the night march that took them to their first permanent prison camp. They stuck to the stands of trees and nipa palm when they could, but when the moon rose they had to double-time across unavoidable open spaces. Half starved and with a broken rib, it was hard, desperate work that left him weak and shaking. When

Janowitz finally stumbled and fell exhausted to the ground, Vergil picked him up by his shirt collar. Ken still vividly remembered looking up at him—seeing the moon glinting on the straight line of his nose and especially on that grin of his.

“I can see there was,” Father Girard said, smiling. “Lock it inside. Make it Vergil’s face of life. Whenever the dead face comes up, counter it with this one. Whenever that one makes you feel guilty, use this one to feel love. Can you do that?”

“I’ll try.” He didn’t look very confident.

“Don’t misunderstand. This is no cure-all, but it will help get you through some tough times. And there’s more. Train yourself to know the difference between grief, which is the pain of loss and an inevitable part of life, and guilt, which is the pain of failed responsibility. In your case, it’s a responsibility you assigned yourself after the fact. You’ve got a love so strong that you want to believe you could have saved him, and that generates this fraudulent responsibility.”

“I like that face, that new face.”

“Feeling a twinge of hope, are we?”

Ken was dubious, but made the admission. “Maybe a twinge.” He paused a moment. “Father, why did some of us make it back when so many others...” His voice trailed off.

The abbot shook his head. “And the voice of the lord came unto Ezekiel, saying, ‘Son of man put me forth a riddle’.”

As usual, he sat diagonally across from the five again in what he was coming to think of as his place. The chapel was a sanctuary of coolness from the high noon assaults of a very

humid day, and he found himself perking up. He focused idly on Father Joyboy—really Father Hubert, he'd found out—who was still transparently happy with his life, but somehow less annoying.

Being in the presence of prayer soothed him and he began leisurely to replace sections of Father Hubert's face with Vergil's new one: eyes and nose first, then with a flourish the chin wattle vanished. Finally came Vergil's grin and all that otherworldly joy was replaced by a here and now, more-mustard-please feeling of fun.

Then the grin vanished and Vergil began to look distressed. He eased back in the pew, half sitting, half kneeling, and lowered his head as if he were dizzy. His shoulders jerked spasmodically, as he struggled to fill his lungs. When Ken heard him across the chapel audibly gasping for air, the cosmetic Vergil vanished and he realized Father Hubert was in serious trouble.

Ken was across the small chapel in a few seconds, but Father Girard was there first. After he sat Father Hubert back on the pew bench, Father Girard pressed down on the tip of the sick priest's left index finger and watched it closely for a second. He went down on his knees and jabbed his finger into the priest's swollen ankles, the dimples he made lingering. He took gentle hold of Father Hubert's jaw and noted the flecks of pink foam beginning to form at his mouth.

"Call 911," he said to one of the monks. "Tell them it's urgent, congestive heart failure. And call Doctor Rankin." He told another to fetch the oxygen from the infirmary and to a third he said, "Bring the chrism and the Ritual." The others knelt where they stood. By the time the monk returned with the holy oil and the book, Father Hubert was unconscious. Before Father Girard finished anointing him the ambulance and EMTs had

arrived. When Doctor Rankin hurried in, Father Hubert was dead.

“We had just started prayers,” Father Girard explained. “He slumped down into a sitting position, had audible difficulty breathing. His nail remained white after pressure and his mouth had a frothy pink sputum. I found pitted edema in both ankles.”

Doctor Rankin seemed unperturbed. “I thought the diuretic and the increased digitalis might buy a bit more time. Textbook case.”

“No surprises,” Father Girard agreed.

“Thank you, Doctor,” Rankin said, getting ready to leave.

Father Girard smiled slightly at the other man. “Thank *you*, Doctor,” he replied. An elaborate little dance of professional acknowledgment, notwithstanding the patient had died.

The body of Father Hubert was dressed in the vestments of his calling, his head toward the altar in acknowledgment of his priesthood. “*Sacerdos et pontifex et virtutum opifex,*” they sang, saluting his spirit as priest, builder of bridges, crafter of virtues. They sanctified his dead body with holy water and incense, and bore it slowly through the morning, sunny but still cool, toward the monastery graveyard.

Ken was saturated with emotion. Part of him was trapped in the nightmare darkness of the past—hurriedly burying Vergil in a shallow pit, only the ragged fatigue pants loosely covering the shrunken body, no lingering ceremony for fear that friendly aircraft would sense the presence of the living and send down fire on them. But another part of him tried to unite Vergil with this dead priest, to bring him peace at last in these unhurried and hopeful rites; to give him, finally, the stillness he’d earned at such cost.

And he knew it was a prayer for himself as well as Vergil.

Not until they were actually lowering the still exposed body into the grave did he realize that Father Hubert, like Vergil, would be buried without a coffin. He was dimly aware of Father Girard chanting *In Paradiso* while his mind decided in detachment that no coffin must be their normal procedure. But his feelings were at full, and as shovelfuls of earth slowly obliterated the priest, tears rolled in jerky little rushes down his face. He mourned this monk he'd never known, and Vergil, and himself, too. He grieved for all who find themselves a part of the mortal condition, making a life always shadowed by death, but who mysteriously, in the very finality of it all, can find a companionship, an intimacy with those who share the same fate, if only they pause to look.

Father Girard walked him to his car. "Father, you're an MD."

The priest nodded. "For a while, that meant Medical Divinity, as with old Father Francis. Then I was just a Medical Doctor, and now I'm a Monk Descending. Into old age." Ken could hear the capital letters rolling out past the tart smile.

"I had an awful lot of anonymous sex, Father, most of it unprotected."

"Are you HIV positive?"

"I don't know." He realized he'd said that a lot this past week.

"Why haven't you gotten tested?"

"Scared of what I'd find out, I guess."

"Get tested. You'll live the next few years in radically different ways depending on the results. Give yourself the gift of enlightened choice."

"So I can feel good till somebody whispers, 'God understands'?"

“Sooner or later, we all hear that whisper. I’m probably next.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m 68, the oldest member of the community now that Father Hubert’s gone. The next one after me is still in his mid-50’s, young.”

Ken winced at the involuntary image of a spadeful of dirt falling across Father Girard’s face. “You’ve got a lot of miles left on you, Father.”

“I think so, too,” he said cheerfully. “I’m not planning to check out for a good long while yet.”

“You take care of yourself.” It was an instruction, not a courtesy.

“And you get tested. Call me either way. I want to know.”

“Okay.”

“And Ken, if it’s positive, that’s not God punishing you for your evil life. That’s your body complaining about your sloppy prophylaxis.”

His face colored around a sheepish grin. He held out his hand and the priest took it firmly. “Thanks, Father. You’ve really helped me.”

“I’ll be remembering you in my mass. Call me as soon as you know.”

“I will.”

As he waited for the lab tech, his mind drifted back to Aaron. For a long time, he held onto the essence of him without being able to give it its proper name. At first, he thought of it as boyish innocence, but that wasn’t quite right. Although Aaron was indeed an innocent, despite avid participation in startling sexual repertoires, that wasn’t his real core. It was his guilelessness, his utter willingness to do and be done to, without any trace

of demand or reservation, that defined Aaron's core.

And he was still amazed that he could dwell at such length on Aaron and the details of his sexual attractiveness without being assaulted by feral urgency or self-loathing. Why his pulse didn't flaunt itself, or his face flare with the old raw desire he didn't know, but he was grateful for the physical calm. It was only quite recently that he could feel reasonably confident in the morning that he'd reach the end of the day intact, without 'acting out,' as FC liked to put it. The first wet dream of his celibate year concluded a slow succession of endless days in which his whole body had hurt from the need for release—not from any focused lust, but from an intense, generalized aching to be voided; emptied for a time of this dense, pressing sexualness. Now, after eight days of quiet observance of a year without sex, he felt the faint gleam of possibility; that just maybe the drive would obey him instead of him obeying it. Without diminishing the continuing struggle in the least, he felt himself beginning to believe it was possible.

The door opened. "Sorry to keep you waiting." Wallpaper smile. "Would you straighten your arm, please, and make a fist? Oh, those are such *nice* veins." She pulled on her latex gloves.

After a pause that seemed interminable, Father Girard came on the line.

"Father? It's negative. I'm clean."

"You sound happy." Ken could hear the grin at the other end.

"I am." After a moment, he admitted with some surprise, "I guess I must like being around."

"Come back for a visit and we'll celebrate. I'll break out the good cheese."

He laughed. “Such a deal. I will. And thanks again.” He looked out the window then for a long while, the smile lingering. Once or twice, a grinning Vergil drifted through his consciousness as Ken thought about choices.

Then the smile slowly faded as he reminded himself again that the outcome of what he was about to do was out of his hands. As his therapist had told him, “Party of the first part proposes, but party of the second part disposes.”

Finally, he picked up the phone and dialed another number.

“Hello?”

“Aaron?”

For a few seconds, there was silence, which the voice at the other end finally broke. “What do you want?”

“Could we have coffee?”