

The snow fell obscenely between Merlane and the impenetrable shadow. It would reach the heavens. Chest-high slopes ran up trees. The dark was like a sea carrying him to death, the cold now hot in his bones.

He dug into the snowdrift building up at the nearest tree. As he dug, he could see a red light glowing in the thinning snow. He broke through into a little chamber filled with sky-blue bodies. Dead or dying men curling anonymously against the hem of the igloo they'd half-formed with ragged cloaks around the base of the tree.

Amber was sitting against a root, his ice-encrusted legs before him. Mouse and Griffin were squatting listlessly by his side. Tiny droplets colored like flesh and blood were seeping through the seat of Mouse's trousers. Their uniforms were growing wet against their bodies, but with no source of heat in the cloak shelter, they'd be killed by it.

"Just take my boots off," said Amber, "I just want to see my feet."

"You'll never get em back on again," said Griffin.

"Doesn't matter. Just let me see em. Let me feel em.

Fine. Mouse, you ready?

Sure.

Griffin took his bayonet and started to peel up bootlaces. Mouse took the heel of his hand and beat on the laces till the ice on them started to crack.

One, two, three.

They yanked. Amber grimaced but there was no action.

Pull, man, there's ice.

They dug their heels in and pulled.

Each fell back, the flesh suddenly giving way. Long, bloody strips of skinless body were revealed on Griffin's ankles. Only three toes remained on his feet, purple and black, and most of his soles went too, revealing curling white fat beneath.

Eeeeyyaaahhhhhh!!!

Griffin and Mouse gaped at the remnants of Griffin's feet, unnaturally reduced in dimension.

"Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit. Griff, Griff, you gotta do me, man! I can't take this anymore! I can't take it anymore! Griff. Put that thing through my eye, man. Do it fast!

Griffin nodded, not looking at Amber. He knelt past the ice-caked trousers, raised his bayonet above Amber's heaving chest, level with his face. Amber's fingers raked through the snow. He clenched his eyes shut, waiting. Griffin rammed it forward, but his freezing body slipped and fell heavily on his side. Amber screamed to curdle Mouse and Merlane's blood, his eye half cut-out and falling out of its socket, a stripe cut across the outside of his face. Blood trickled down his face in rivulets.

Aaaahhhhh!! Fuck!!!

Mouse scrambled for the blade, told Amber it was okay, and put it through his carotid artery as he thrashed around. Blood torrented down his chest and he relaxed almost instantly. Blood melted through the snow beneath him, and his body shifted outward as if utterly relaxed. Griffin got up, looked at Amber, looked down, and moaned.

Merlane was so cold he felt like he was on fire. One of death's many doorsteps. He looked through the stark light at the dead men curled up around them, at Amber's thoroughly maimed body.

"Man, fuck this. I'd rather die under the sky.

Mouse: You wanna go out there? That's the end.

It's the end in here. They're never gonna rally this. We're dead.

Griffin: I can't do it. I'm gonna stay here.

With this?

[silence]

Mouse, let's go find the commander.

Mouse winced.

"I never want to see him again."

"...Don't tell me.

"I gave him the pox. I'm fucking sure."

Is that why he's crazy?

No, there wouldn't be time. But he's fucked up cause of me.

Merlane shrugged.

Let's go to his tent.

Okay.

They pushed up into the hell of snow. Fat flakes daggered across their cheeks and lips. Like dead silent devouring insects. Their clothes stiffened, their wasted bodies shrinking against the board-hard fabric. They pushed into the dark trees until they came to a half-buried tent. No guard, no sounds. Empty inside except for a bedroll and a huge silver rakia samovar.

Think he got cold-crazy? Said Mouse.

Probably.

Merlane walked around the tent. Tracks led down the hill. He staggered through the tracks, trying not to fall in case he couldn't get up. He was burning up, delirious.

I hear a motorcar.

Let's go see.

They staggered down the hill on legs like wooden stilts. The utter dark of the valley was like a shade-realm beneath the earth.

There was an armored car on the road, its side door open, the lights cut off.

The commander was leaning down, talking to men inside.

That's an Elderian truck.

Yeah.

They saw the commander's adjutant in the shadows, bending forward and standing up, turning this way and that, desperately trying to keep the blood flowing in his body. He went and leaned against the armored car, moving this way and that until he found a patch of warmth near the engine block.

What's he doing talking?

Dunno. Surrendering?

They didn't just run into each other.

The commander climbed in and sat amongst the Elderian troops inside. The adjutant bent to get in but the men inside stuck knives into him. He staggered back, reeling. Several Elderians came out, holding up their arms against the snow, approached the adjutant where he was scooting backwards, and stuck their knives into him again and again. He raised his arms up in slow motion as the blades quickly went in and out. The Elderians got back in the armored car as someone passed the commander a bottle of brandy. The armored car advanced slowly through the snow.

Merlane and Mouse went to the adjutant and first warmed their hands against his bloody chest, neck, and face, cooing in ecstasy. They rubbed warm blood all over the inside of their coats, against their chests and necks, their faces, helping each other.

That's so good, said Mouse.

Yeah.

They dug through the adjutant's clothes, scraping their knuckles on frozen cloth. Merlane tore away his silver necklace and stuffed it in his cargo pocket after several tries. Mouse found some chewing tobacco and handed it to Merlane. They checked his boots for cargo but there were only maps of the last place they'd known where they were, several days ago. Merlane took them but didn't look at them.

Well, we got a little warm, said Mouse.

Let's follow that truck.

Might as well.

They staggered through the valley, icy wind cutting mercilessly through their dry mouths.

How'd you get so fucked up, Mouse?

The Duke.

What?

They walked on for awhile.

The Duke put something in my guts. That's where my pox is from. I thought he loved me. He must have had some gutter doxy. Or three or four. He gave me some rot in my guts. That's why I'm fucked up.

Tough racket. You get anything out of it?

A lot of horseback riding. Nice meals. And he can fuck.

Not worth it though.

Little extra pain. Like I'm boiling in my kidney or something. Not worth anything now.

How could the Duke have done that to you?

They both jumped out of their skins as a massive explosion erupted on the hill above. They gasped, the snow stinging their eyes and lips and burning their teeth. An epic flash and then a tidal wave of soil turned up into the sky.

Aaaahhhh.... Said Mouse.

Another epic blast, making them wince with the flash and shockwave, and another wall of snow and soil arose. Rock and tree began to fall around them.

They turned and staggered off. Rocks began to strike Merlane's body and he fell, soil beginning to cover him and bind him in the snow. He got his arms beneath him and staggered on, unable to breathe from the unearthed dust. Another enormous detonation. He staggered forward, woozy and almost numb to the incredible unreality of what was happening.

He reached the road, huge man-killing stones landing here and there around him, half a tree collapsing on the gravel like a giant paintbrush. He glanced back. Mouse was nowhere to be found, but with the snow and the dust and the darkness Merlane couldn't see the trees behind him.

Mouse!

Nothing.

He staggered along the road, slipping here and there where the ice had given it surface.

The bivouac site had been bracketed by super heavy artillery. The commander was the only one who'd actually known where they were, it seemed. He must have sold the Elderians their coordinates.

He saw lights in the distance. He went straight towards them, dust and sand working their way down his blood-begrimed body. He had his arms inside his summer night jacket and he wound his way through the trees bound to himself like an unearthed mummy.

He saw a vacation manor by the roadside, a stately three-story hunting lodge and private spa retreat. There were lights in the blue, diamond-lattice windows. He staggered forward, laboriously weaving himself through a fence, and approached, heart hammering. He glanced around. The armored car was nowhere to be seen. He gazed through the window. The brigade commander was sitting inside with his staff, all heaped with furs. There was an enormous fire in a 10' hearth, and the men were draped across armchairs, settees, and chaise longues. They were smoking long pipes and regimental servants in white jackets were walking around between them, serving slices of piping hot ham and snifters of warm cognac. The men were laughing. Merlane recognized the Count of Harmon and the Duke of Terliac, pox standing out above his beetle brow. The men coughed and spat on the rug, most of them sick, but rosy. Merlane saw a regimental headquarters guard leaning at the inside of the front door, gazing at the fireside scene in sick envy. He had a bayonet affixed to his bolt-action rifle and would stick Merlane for approaching the headquarters without invitation.

Merlane staggered around the building. On the other side, there was a motorcar corral with a trio of luxurious staff cars, waxed and lacquered but heaped with snow. There was a touring car with no canopy, filled with snow as if it were an icebox, but two covered convertibles. Merlane

heaved the snow off of one's canopy, wheelwells, windows, and hood, then got in and started it. He immediately turned the air to full blast even though it hadn't heated up yet, ignoring it scouring his blasted lips, and he put the pedal to the floor. As he trundled past the manor door the guard opened it, went bug-eyed, and leveled the rifle. Merlane ducked and a palpable whip passed over him, shattering both passenger windows. He sat up, feeling bits of glass around his collar, and continued onto the road. Another gunshot rang out and there was a metallic smack from the back of the car. Then there was nothing but the bustling snow in the headlights.

Boy, I ate so much bark I can't even describe it. I didn't think you could eat that much bark and live. But they say that it's good for swelling.

The 22nd had men eating each other. They came back crying. Meanwhile their officers had pheasants. That's what they'd been using the dragoons for, instead of scouting. So the Elderling's tribal allies came up on the pickets and raped em, skinned em. Overran their machine guns. The Seventh Prince was with that staff so he and his boys took the dragoons' horses. Good luck to ya. Well, they were never heard from again.

Yeah. Think our O sold us out to the Elders. I left the camp and they hit it with 24-inchers.

There came whistling.

Yeah, it was good for the guys who were left, though. Nice clean ending. 'Cept for my buddy, though. Think he got buried alive.

Someone patted him on the back.

Merlane glugged down his beer, putting the stein on the table.

I'll have another.

She filled him up. He took half of it in swallows and put it down.

What's your O's name? said an ex-Marvegrave Ownsman.

Helper. Should I gut that guy if I fucking catch him? Man, I don't know what really happened.

Fuck him. He must have given you a reason to think that.

Yeah, well, I saw him drinking with the Elders.

What, you kidding me? Gut his fucking ass.

Another guy speaks: Man, who gives a fuck about Elders, or this country, or anything. Man, that cocksucker and everyone like him is a bigger threat to us than the Elders ever were.

Fuck this country? I'm bout to put this glass through your eyes, bitch.

Man what'd it do for you?

He began to walk back from the man who was brandishing the glass at him, moving towards the door. The guy with the glass followed him.

Fuck this country? After what we went through for it?

For what? Leave me the fuck alone, dude.

The man with the glass darted in at the departee to smash it across his face, but the departee slipped his hand out of his pocket with a knife and quickly poked four or five holes in the stein-wielder's gut. The stabber put his hand back in his pocket and slipped out the door and up the street. The stabbed man stepped back and felt his gut with his hand, blood and a distinct scent of beer present before him. He tried to sit down on a chair by the coat tree but staggered back and fell against the wall with one leg over the chair, which he slowly let fall to the ground. He was breathing tightly, head back in despair, wet eyes gazing at the ceiling.

The bartender cooled his brow and Merlane held his wet, clammy hand until some construction men came with a wide board to take him into the woods near a refuse pit where he could die without his screams disturbing anyone. The level of development in Cartaga was almost medieval, all wealth siphoned for the estates, so there would be no morphine and no surgery. A bit of liquor from the barkeep was his only kindness.

Merlane spent another interminable day pushing a millstone. It was said there were electric machines that functioned similarly to a car engine and could do this automatically, but there was no such thing here.

He received his silver and his sack of flour and went to the river, mixing in dark water for a gruel and eating it cold. He went and lay down on the rawhide in his shack. Another day like this would follow.

He left that night after laying there with his heart racing from alcohol, cold, the hard floor, and memories. He wandered the night path down towards Mulemusth township, the Duke's excise seat. He passed an impaled corpse brimming with flies, the man in his rotten flesh and rotten tunic like a great fig on a stick in the darkness. Merlane didn't look at the little wooden ingot that would indicate his crime. He'd seen plenty. Thief. Insubordinate. Bestializer. Insubordinate. Murderer. Insubordinate. Rapist. Insubordinate. Adulteress. Insubordinate. Sodomite. Insubordinate.

He'd thought war wasn't so much more dangerous than life in this Duchy until the winter fragmentation and retreat. It had saved its wind for those frozen days and nights, its grand crescendo.

Corrupt motherfuckers. Bunch of pricks who've got you strangled. Why put up with the shit? Could you live worse as a bandit? We see a lot of motherfuckers take that path. You know, by the road. Freedom-loving spitroast. Well, you know what their problem is. Organization. Coordination. They're completely fucking retarded. The foresters just play whack-a-mole. Bippity boopity. Another dipshit on a stick. You need someone to coordinate efforts. Then you can peel yourself whatever your take is, even if it's just pressure off your back, and get away too. Fuck all that walk into the excise castle guns blazing and go out in a blaze of glory thing. Get yours.

A man slipped out of the back of the boozing ken.

I'm with it, said a farmer, But who's gonna coordinate? You?

Eh. (The man shrugged) You know... it depends on what you're working with. You got a favorite tool? You know what I mean. Something you really trust? Something you take care of? Then you can do something. But if your shit's so fucked up cause you're getting fucked up the ass on the daily then your shit might just break when you try and use it. Then you can't do much.

Why, what's the point? said Merlane. Why not just leave? Play refugee? I bet the whole world's not like this. Some places, the people decide what the country does.

Yeah, you're damn right about that. City of Leagues. Tourmaline Gorge. There are no nobles. No hereditary leadership. No political families. Just little crews. You and your boys, and whoever you elect to go point-to-point with everybody else. That's how... the earliest tribes lived. That's how man's supposed to live. Nobody fucks with anybody. If your elected guy comes down on you you're shoulder to shoulder with your crew.

That's a thing of beauty.... I would love that. But you could never get it started here. Everyone's like that broken fucking tool.

Oh, I don't know. Might just need some time to work...

The back door creaked open. The man who left had gotten the bailiff, and he was backed by a squad of the Duke's armsmen.

Sorret was up and had a pistol in each hand and one of them ripped time and space in half, Merlane staggering away from the infernal jackhammer, falling over a wet, rotten armchair. He heard a light tinkling through clanging ears. Machine pistol; he looked past his legs and the chair's legs and saw men kicking back from the doorway, one so utterly soaked in blood Merlane thought he had red pants.

Sorret backed towards the stairs. The front door opened and a man poked a rifle in and Sorret fired his other pistol and the man fell onto the wood and his brains spilled against Merlane's thigh, blood pooling around his ass cheek.

Sorret disappeared upstairs. Someone threw a grenade into the boozing room and Merlane smashed the window with his elbows and rolled out, glass ripping open his thighs. He clawed

and staggered against the cold, hard night ground as the grenade ripped up the ken hall and the three drinkers who'd been rooted to their spots. Merlane looked back. Gunfire from within, from the second story. The badgemen pressing in with rifles and shotguns. Suddenly, flames leaking from the roof. Glowing thatch, smoke from the awnings. He saw Sorret hurl himself from a window and land on the adjoining roof. He made his way out of sight. Merlane followed him as the badgemen coughed and sputtered within the ken. The bailiff lay shrieking for his men to carry him away, shot in the nuts and who knew where else, three of his men lined up stiff or stirring in the snow.

Merlane wandered, following the awnings, bent and consternated, bleeding, body on fire.

You're persistent.

He looked up. Sorret in a dark window on the second story of a dark street.

What else could I be right now.

Sssss, got nicked, did you. Huh... I'ma be right down.

Merlane looked up and down the street, mouth dry as ancient blood, thanking the Fates he was drunk.

Sorret took him in. Up to a bathroom that he'd lined with corkboard. A blacksite for torture and medication. Tonight it was the same thing. A few sharpeners from a bottle of pine sugar liquor and then glass out with the forceps, skin hauled together on thread like unruly kites. Rubbing alcohol fire. Bright light and blood on porcelain. Medical teal tiles smeared and spattered.

He lay back panting and drained as if he'd had sex with a hideous, soul-sucking demon.

Took that like a champ, ace.

Been through it before.

Oh, you army or more of a street cat?

Yeah. Eldarian war.

Which one was that, two or three wars ago?

Two.

They just round you up?

Yep.

You wanna be part of a different world?

What world?

That world I told you about. Where everyone's a brother. Where everyone's on a crew and if the guy you choose to handle your business fucks you around you pull him back like that. *He snapped*. That's my world.

Why are you here?

To overthrow the fucking Duke. I see the scars on you. The Elderians didn't put those there. That fucking cocksucker did and he fucked you out of everything you could ever have.

...You're not lying...

Help me. Work with me. I'll make you a part of my world. Not under me, but one of us.

You guys are what. Some exiles from somewhere?

No. I'm from a land far away but I'm here to help bring this place, the people here their freedom.

Why? What are you going to do with the people here?

Nothing. The people here can do what they want. But I know a lot of them are going to want to work with us. The international revolution don't stop, baby.

You can't... you're not gonna make it happen with the people here...

I don't need to. I'm just greasing the skids, partner.

So what do you want me to do?

I feed you. I give you new clothes. Warm ones. I give you what you need for whatever enterprise you're engaged in to prosper. You help me strike back at the fucking Duke. You need to think it over, you can stay here...

I don't need to think it over. I'm in.

Right you are.

They clasped hands.

Listen. You don't ever need to toady up to me. You do what I say, it's cause that's what'll help make you free. But we treat each other like men. Speaking of which, let's have a drink. Cocksuckers blew the fucking mood, don't you think?

A little bit of digging. Burying a package in the gravel road. A wire up into the foliage. Familiar work to the rural peasant. Merlane sat, gazing through the stupid sun at the wagging shadows and the relentless gzzzzz of crickets.

Words from the road. Continent laughing, contained witticism. A man in anachronistic green hosen and black tunic. Feathers trailing from the hem of his marten shortcloak, sweat beneath his shapeless black hat. Tax collector. Ducal armymen, black and green triangular stripes up and down their frilled arms and legs. Submachine guns and greatswords.

Merlane gulped wildly. Drenched in sweat. Itching like stabs from cacti infections. This had to work. This had to work. He thought of the screams from the Ducal fortresses. Skins stripped off, men boiled, slow-crushed. A giant elevator stone, lowered inch by inch, day by day, on those in the bottom of the shaft. Crushed inch by inch, day by day, until the brains pushed past the eyes. This had to work. It had to work.

He pushed the button when they came abreast of the buried bomb.

He was too close. Sand embedded in his skin like a splash of hard acid, he went tumbling, tumbling uphill, forced across root and branch. He lay in the foliage, head spinning like he were cascading into an abyss. Ears gonging to the outermost suns, skin coiling and afire. Bleeding from dozens of tiny wounds, clothes ruined.

He staggered to his feet, falling sidelong after a moment. He got up and staggered, legs bouncing.

Silver coins began to rain from the heavens. All around him they fell, glistening, hard rain, cheery shine. Limbs, flaps of skin and fabric, an eye and cheek and teeth. Into the trees, he looked up, clotted forms in the trees, a neat hand and hanging ichory guts, orange and mottled purple. He staggered down towards the road. Corpses spewed across it, a deep dark hole. Purple-painted sand, scorched gravel, flattened grass. A man shrieking, shrieking, his legs reduced to dun flags. Balls blown away, fingers, a flap ripped in his gut. No sign of the taxman. Merrily clinking coinage, raining from the abundant skies.

He caught up a black slack hat and staggered this way and that, filling it with silver. When he could fill it no more he staggered away, holding it with his skinned hands and his teeth. Into the bushes, away, away, away.

He lurched across rivers to throw off the dogs. He lay in the dark, insects marching up his arms and legs, assailing his lips and eyes like a legion of apologetic lovers. Always back in, always back in. He buried his face in the cool silver, hiding from the onslaught. They played in his ears, whee-ing, whee-ing.

Don't get seen with that silver, boy. Just disappear. Money ain't gonna mean shit someday, nor will guns or bombs, but we fuckin use em now. Get outta town. Cook up a story. Come back once you don't look like holy hammered dogshit.

When he got out of the religious hospice, after relentlessly ogling the nuns when their fastidiously-clad backsides were turned, he lay in a warm pool of women in a gigantic bed in the back of a brothel, sliding over their scarred and tattooed bodies, gripping breasts here, thighs there, running his fingers over cheeks and throats and shoulders. He settled into a girl whose breasts spread across her biceps, her nails glissandoing his pocked chest, and as he gaped at her, girls running their fingers across his ass and shoulders, he came before he could even think of switching to someone new.

He strode past hostile men in the waiting room, though he hadn't monopolized the place for long.

Each night he drank bottles of wine until he spewed them back up like an ejaculatory fountain, sheets of red blistering the air for split seconds before him, a wave of rejected tannin piquancy and foodrot rising in the corners of his rented room. So delicious going down, so horrific coming up. He ate steak and pies and pickles, hashed liver and sauced couscous, oceanic congee and yogurt cornmeal. When his strength returned from his drinking binges he returned to the brothel, fucking himself into heaven on tables and floors.

He lay with a squad of makeshift guerrillas in a treeline above a road, bolt-action rifle in hand. Familiar territory.

They didn't know each other's names. Better that way. All they knew was their rally point. It was on them to melt away afterwards.

Trucks lumbered by down below. A guy who was laying on an 8' automatic rifle grimly racked it.

The leader, a guy in a red beret with a black badge on it and a burlap sack with eyeholes over his head, raised a revolver, its red cord terminating in a pocketwatch in his other hand. He closed the pocketwatch, stowed it, stood up, and fired the revolver at the convoy.

He missed the cab of a truck but the automatic rifle started firing and sent thumps through everyone's chests where they were laying. The canvas coverings of the trucks' beds began to flap and gray dust and red mist began to billow in the sunrays. Everyone fired their rifles save those who'd loaded them improperly, which was about half. Merlane shot a driver in the head, turning his window into a brainy spiderweb.

Levies wearing ducal armbands poured out of the trucks. Conscripted peons pressed into service. A few of them were able to get their guns working and fired at the hillside. There was screaming, men kicking themselves behind trucks that rocked with deflating tires.

There was a draconic roaring behind the convoy. A mottled, forest-green armored car trundled through the foliage on the far side of the road. Ducal Foresters. They'd let the peons take it in the face, and now they were coming to clean up the mess.

A side gun fired and actually hit the guerrilla leader where he was standing. An earsplitting shockwave broke over Merlane, bursting one ear into filmy liquid, and he was misted with blood and dusted with soil, chunks of the officer collapsing through the branches behind the guerrilla line. The armored car wove towards them, shifting so it could fire its other shoulder gun. This hit the automatic rifleman, whose weapon could perhaps pierce its skin; the bent weapon fell through the storm of soil, bashing Merlane hard across the calf. He got up and collapsed, his calfbone cracked. He fell back, gasping through the dust. Foresters dismounted, crack rangers, their scopes shimmering like a new constellation heralding the end of the earth. Pap, pap, pap, pap pap. Men screamed; one staggered towards Merlane, his weapon shattered by a bullet, little poles of metal sticking out of his hands, arm, neck, and cheek. A bullet cut through his hips and he collapsed, screaming. A rifle grenade hit him on the far side and dirty bowels poured over Merlane in a wave of wet earth. Merlane was choked on soiled gore and rolled over, curling around his leg and laying flat. The foresters swept up the hillside.

Got one!

A hand grabbed Merlane's collar and rolled him over.

Aaaaaugh!

What's the matter?

My- my leg-

The forester stamped on it. It cracked. Merlane screamed.

Ohh, you got a lot more of that coming, boy!

They hauled him down to the trucks. Pools of blood, bits of flesh, human shit. Screaming peasants. They threw him in the bed of a truck; a quarter-inch of blood sloshing this way and that as it started and rolled, shards of bone and rubbery tissue.

Into the castle, into the garage. Strappado, cutting his arms off, threatening cripplehood. Dropped to his knees, an almighty jar, his leg a crack of fire from a primeval plane of bloodthirsty energy. Up again, body ripped in two about his shoulders, arms going numb. Down, broken on the stones.

Into the dungeon. Pliers in the flesh, tiny destructions made vast, oceanic, acute ruinations that would haunt him if he lived. Little boiling splashes, like gigantic stabs cutting far across his back.

He hid nothing. He shrieked. He told them every name, every detail, instantly. They laughed and snarled; a pack of heartless wolves tearing him to pieces.

They left him in the freezing dark. Shivering with wounds, trying to breathe through a constricted throat.

Better tell, they said, the Duke himself is coming.

Please, please, I've told you everything, just... kill me. There's nothing more!

Lying's only going to hurt you more, you pathetic fucking swine...

The Duke came. Black and gold scales on his tunic, broad blue cloak, living white saggy red-poxed face, mane of wild white hair.

My Lord, I've told them everything! he shrieked.

The Duke put his hands on Merlane's naked back and put all his weight on Merlane's body. Merlane screamed as flesh made into thin bubbling waste by boiling water ripped open in places, a jagged red camouflage spreading like he'd been scored with a steel flail. Merlane screamed, pleading to die. He could feel the Duke's cock at his ass crack. Merlane sobbed, whispering no, no, no. The Duke forced his way in and Merlane screamed. Jagged, dry, in and out. Agony, stabbing into his guts. The Duke pulled Merlane's hair out at the roots in tufts. Then he came, deep inside, and withdrew.

Ahhhhhhhhhh.... Heal up, peasant. There's more where that came from.

They threw him in an oubliette, leaking from his back and his asshole. He had to piss there on the stones, laying in it. He couldn't raise his hands, couldn't spread his legs. His whole body itched and burned so badly that he just began shaking, rattling himself off the stones, screeching.

He dissociated, going into his mental darkness, pretending the pain was nothing, a meaningless sensation, passing color and shadow. He kept on flashing in and out of its true reality, like being smashed by a cosmic force that went back and forth in the universe. He would hold himself out of it for as long as he could, and then it would rush back and he would scream, hyperventilating.

He became a living mummy, driving thoughts from his mind, waiting, mouth an impacted gluescape. He coiled away from the stone, balancing maximally on un-ruined flesh. His unbroken leg bouncing with strain. He propped it beneath his broken leg, levering himself up.

Gunfire. Explosions shaking the stone. Dust falling on him. He opened his eyes so wide they reached the breadth of the universe, a place of absolute lightlessness. And yet, shaking and explosions. The sweetest sound there could possibly be. But he was betrayed. They were just running tests, that was all. Tests of bombs to defeat the guerrillas, to stamp out the dream. There would be no brotherhood. Only mutual massacres between the peonry until the lords came to steal their everything.

But the blasts kept coming. He heard desperate cries of coordination from the Duke's men. What could be coming? Static tak tak tak. Automatic gunfire. He began to weep.

Please, please, please. He was blubbing his last snot. If this was not what he hoped, he thought he would go insane. If it was a battle and the attackers lost, he would go insane, or bite his tongue in half and drown in blood. He took it in his teeth to steel himself.

A blast. Guttural screaming. Gunshots. Triumphant laughter, easy banter. Heavy boots falling, clinking of gear in the prison proper.

He tore his mouth open with his tongue.

I'm in here, he wheezed. He could barely speak. He had to speak.

In here! In here! In here! He rasped. They couldn't hear him. He was mute with thirst. He rasped. Nothing.

Then a grill opened over him and torchlight poured in, the sweetest amber hue, the birth of the most beautiful legend. A man crouched. Merlane could smell his oiled leather boots.

"Ooh, got one down here. Goddamn. You okay?

Merlane's jaws worked.

Shit. Nod if you're sane.

Merlane nodded vigorously.

Good enough for me.

The man, a big, burly man with a long submachine gun across his thighs, reached down and got his big, broad, calloused hands under Merlane's skin-loosened armpits. He hauled Merlane up. Merlane gritted his teeth with the universal agony; he would bear anything now.

The man set Merlane on his rear, leaning Merlane against the man's upright leg like a corpse or a puppet. A big, burly, black-bearded man, leather necklace with a shining fist carrying a chisel. He smiled.

Want some water?

Merlane nodded viciously.

The man uncorked a waterskin.

Yeah, I know. Been there, done that. Here you go.

He poured it into Merlane's mouth. It worked its way through the caked blockage, melting it, sweet oceanic honey, ambrosia fields, pools of naiad bliss warm with gentle strawberry sunshine. He swallowed it, eyes closed in bliss like a baby's first feeding, nurtured into love of life from the hellish senseless abyss. The water was a pouring rain giving life to hungry fields, sacred waterfall grotto refreshing his mind, bringing his sweet memories pouring back into their proper places. A sacred timeless tide.

There you go. Easy now. Hey, I gotta roll. Gonna leave you here. Dude's'll be down to debrief you.

He nodded. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Heh. Hey, this is the best part of my job.

Form up, said one of the commandos.

The bearded man picked him up like an empty sack and laid him sidelong on a torture table. Merlane hated to be back here. The man turned off the infernal white floodlight and darted off, the squad dashing up the stairs.

Merlane shivered in the blistering heat. Grass tickled his arms. Flies buzzed all around. He looked left. Dead prisoner, rescued too late. He was alive when they carried him up but something inside him went into overdrive and he shook himself to death.

Merlane looked right. A young guy pulled from the oubliette. Thin pigeon chest pale, tickled by the shadows of hard leaves.

Trucks and armored cars were lumbering past. Black and red. Men in coats. Foreign accents. All kinds of foreign accents.

A thin doctor in a gray shortsleeved safari suit. Curling black hair. Sexy medical orderly with a clipboard behind him, bodacious hips in camouflage, long black curly hair under a black beret. Short black leather jacket, oilstained olive tank top. Sad eyes, eyes that had never known full contentment. She looked at Merlane sadly, clicking her pen. The doctor knelt beside him.

"Good, you're up. How you feelin?

".....Better.

Great. What's your name?

Carrol Merlane.

Got that? Okay, here's your prognosis. Laceration, sixty percent surface area. Water burns, forty percent surface area, some concurrence. Fractured right fibula. Watch my pen. Recent

concussion. And I had a look at you while you were out. Anal fissure in the back, primary syphilis in the front.

The bottom fell out of Merlane's stomach. His heart began racing, feeling like it was encased in a ball of energy.

Oh god, Merlane said, putting his palms over his face, I thought I was out. But I'm fucking dead.

No, no... said the doctor.

After all this... he began crying, I'm fucking toast.

Heh. Well. You are. In a manner of speaking.

What? What are you saying to me?

I'm ordering pyrotherapy. Mister Merlane, you're leaving this place. I'm going to have you sent to the tropics. We've got brothers down south who'll take you in and apply the latest scientific method to your case.

What, bathe me in lead and mercury and shit? Till my fucking teeth fall out?

No no. You'll see. Just bear with us.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry for getting mad. Please don't... please don't miss anything because I did.

Hmm hmm hmm. The doctor smiled genuinely. Don't worry, mister Merlane, I know you've been through a lot. Just hang tight. It's all over now.

The orderly was still frowning at Merlane, though any tenderness had fled with his penile diagnosis.

When the medical team moved on, Merlane raised his head.

Trucks, troops. The castle had half been blown down, towers collapsed by direct fire artillery. A heap of rubble, bodies bent and protruding from stone-heaps and splintered wood. One tower still stood, none of its loopholes nor crenellations facing the approach. A mass grave in the motte, corpses in the Duke's dark castle-guard livery. Someone trying to push his way up from beneath half a dozen comrades.

Gunfire and explosions deeper into the Duke's hunting forests. Towards the rest of the realm.

Merlane looked at the young man next to him.

Were you on that fucking raid, man?

Yeah, said the boy.

Shit. Merlane let his head fall back.

They were silent for a long while.

Suddenly the boy looked right at him. He was choked and could barely speak.

Did... the Duke...

Fuck me in the ass? Yeah...

The boy nodded, blubbing. Me too.

He broke into a strangled mask of pain, weeping, splitting sobs wracking his body. Merlane took a deep breath, shaking his head slowly.

The boy stood up and staggered towards the castle.

Where the fuck are you going? Merlane called halfheartedly.

The boy disappeared into the tower, sidling past fighters sitting on the rough stone steps. Merlane watched for him. He could only make out the boy's foot as he fell from the far side of the tower.

Rubbing alcohol, balm, sutures. Hell in the sunlight, again and again and again. Food, filling up the slop bucket, begging for fresh cheesecloth against the flies.

Sorret came to him.

You pulled through.

Fucking foresters, man. Son of a bitch.

Yeah, well, for what it's worth I don't think many of those guys made it through this, and their fucking regime is on borrowed time, now. We already wasted the Duke's whole fucking family so they're gonna have to start from square one if they want this place back. Had em all in a fucking hunting lodge. All the kids, all the fucking bitches...

He shook his head.

Plastered the little freaks.

He had a blank expression.

Well. Got the fucking dickrot. I thought I was saved but I'm not.

No, they got plans for you. Gonna send you to some islands we're working on down south. They got a treatment for your shit. Don't you worry.

Load of good that fucking silver did me.

Well, you just choose how to spend it a little better, huh? Or maybe give some dick to our Syndicalist sisters once your pecker heals instead of capitalist fucking bitches of the night, not that I ain't been there.

Our what sisters?

Syndicalist. Listen, it's not my job to tell you about that. Just rest assured, that society I told you about has come. I did not lie to you.

Well... guess I'm the only one who gets to enjoy it. You know. Out of our flying column.

That's the game sometimes. If you think I haven't done shit like that you're dead wrong. And it's not over, either. Once you're healed up you're gonna help out with the uprising in those islands. You might have only been in a few scrapes but you're an old fucking man compared to most people in the Union. Cool under fire, you know, all that shit.

Oh, I'll be brave, alright. Cause I'm never getting captured again. I don't care what kind of promised land is on the other side.

That's the spirit. Believe me, I know. But you're in the promised land, my friend. The Anarcho-Syndicalist International is gonna give you your fucking pecker back.