



Richard Harding - Outrider 1, Premier Volume Copyright 1984 by Robert Tine AFTER THE APOCALYPSE Hard to believe, but once the burn victims were gone and those who were going to go crazy had lost their minds, the ones that remained, the hardest survivors, began to rebuild. Slowly, life had been reborn. Men stopped living in their caves and burrows and they began to adapt,

to fit their lives to their new world. They built shelters, they planted what crops they could, but they still lacked the courage to walk over the hill, to trail down the road to see what lay just over the horizon. Bonner had been the first. The first to get an old Dodge motor running well enough to venture out into the world. He had traveled, cautiously at first, through the continent finding groups of survivors-not many but enough to convince him that his work was worth doing. Slowly he began linking the bands together, building a network, trading information for supplies. Others had joined him. Leather came riding out of the dawn one morning and said he had been all the way to New York. Gradually people had come to trust the Outriders, they were the closest thing to heroes the new world had. Bonner began to coax the survivors out of their little enclaves- they were like nervous puppies-trying to get the bands to join together, to unite, to rebuild. It wouldn't be the old America, but it would have been a land that might have been free of fear and that would have been a good enough start for Bonner. THE OUTRIDER; Volume One: Premier Volume by Richard Harding Bonner's eyes opened and he lay still, staring into the darkness, giving himself a moment to accustom himself to the night. Gently, he slipped off the weight of the woman who lay in the crook of his shoulder, her long hair trailing across his chest. She did not stir. He swung out of the bed and pulled on a pair of pants and quickly laced his holster to his hip. In the faint light, the handles of the three knives he carried gleamed dully. Noiselessly, he crossed the room and stood by the door. On the other side of the door he heard the tentative step of a man, walking so slowly and placing his feet so carefully, that it was plain that he was approaching Bonner's lair stealthily. Bonner wondered who was being so stupid. Outside the man paused. A second later, the door-frame shattered and Bonner caught a quick glimpse of a man, a big man, plunging into the room. Bonner was on him in a flash, throwing his weight at the intruder, scything his legs out from under him. The man fell heavily, and wheezed as the full strength of Bonner's foot slammed into the space between his shoulder blades. The wind was knocked from his lungs and he gasped for breath, his head spinning. He was not so disoriented, though, that he did not feel one of Bonner's knives lying with menacing weight at the nape of his neck, where the spine met the skull. The girl was sitting up in bed, spotlighted by the light shining through the door. Her dark hair fell down her shoulders and curled around her breasts. Her eyes were wide with surprise, her mouth open, but she emitted no sound. "Fuck, Bonner, Christ..." gasped the man. "Who are you?" "It's me, man, Hatchet." "Hatchet?" Bonner should have known. Only someone like Hatchet would have been so dumb... "Yeah man, Christ, will you get that fucking blade out of my neck." Bonner put a touch more pressure on the knife. "What are you doing here?" "Leather sent me. I got a message from Leather..." Hatchet was the kind of person who lied even when telling the truth would have served him better. Bonner didn't believe him for a second. He also knew that Hatchet was no coward, he wasn't smart enough to figure out fear. "Leather? What does he want with me?" "Shit, man, let me up and I'll tell you." "Tell me now." "Come on, Bonner..." Bonner dug the tip of the blade into Hatchet's neck. A tiny spot of blood appeared in the ripple of the skin. "Okay, okay, shit... Dara's alive." "You're lying to me. Hatchet." Bonner's jaw had tightened and he had raised his voice for the first time since Hatchet ploughed through the door. Hatchet couldn't see Bonner's face, but he could feel his fury through the shaft of the blade. "No, its for real. Honest." "Prove it." "I can prove it, but I have to get up." "Where's your gun?" "I lost it when you jumped me." "Where's your spare?" "Ain't got one." The knife dug a tiny bit more into Hatchet's thick neck. "It's in my belt. I.'m lying on it for Chrissake." "Get it, slowly..." That was just what Hatchet wanted to hear. If he was fast enough he might be able to roll away from Bonner and get off a shot. Maybe two. Before Hatchet made his move, Bonner spoke. "Hatchet?" "Yeah?" "Before you do anything stupid, I want you to take a look at the bed." Slowly, Hatchet raised his eyes. The woman still knelt on the bed, still naked, but she looked back at him along the twin barrels of a

shotgun, the stock pressed into the firm flesh of her shoulder, her finger resting lightly on the two triggers. "Very pretty, Bonner. Really nice." "Now get your gun." He pulled the gun from his belt and laid it on the floor next to him. The girl sprang from the bed and picked up the gun, allowing Hatchet a quick sideways glimpse at her smooth lithe legs and tight buttocks. "All the comforts of home," said Hatchet. "Get up, slowly," ordered Bonner. The girl returned to bed, watching as Hatchet crept to his knees, then gradually straightened himself. He held his arms away from his sides. "Good. In there." Bonner gestured toward a doorway on the far side of the room. To the woman he said: "Go back to bed." Without taking his eyes off Hatchet, Bonner lit the kerosene lamp that sat on the table between them. As the golden light filled the room. Hatchet could see that they were in a large space almost empty of furniture. A big room always favored a man with a gun. And Hatchet had a gun, tucked up under his left armpit, hidden by his leather jacket. Hatchet settled himself in a rickety wooden chair. Maybe Bonner wasn't as smart as they said, or he had gotten soft since his outriding days. Back then he didn't have to depend on a naked broad with a shotgun. If it hadn't been for her, Bonner would be dead now. Hatchet looked around the room. "Christ, Bonner, I heard you were making a fortune smuggling. This place is pig-shit. You ought to see how we live in the Capital. Leather runs the whole thing, we got slaves and women... You ought to come join us..." Bonner ignored him. "So, where's the proof?" Hatchet did not have any proof. The way he figured it, he didn't need any. "Okay," he said, "I'm going to reach inside my jacket and I'm going to pull out a letter. It's from her..." "I'm going to pull out a forty-five and blow your fucking head off, he thought. Then take out the pussy in the next room-maybe have a little fun first-then head home to Leather and the ten thousand gold ones, the price Leather had put on Bonner's head. Hatchet thrust his hand into his jacket, grasped the handle of his revolver and whipped it from its nest. As he did so, four inches of blade, thrown like lightning, slammed into his thick breast bone. Bonner was on his feet. Hatchet had slumped to the floor, a fine trickle of blood running from his mouth. His breathing was short and labored. Bonner stood over him. "Hatchet, listen to me..." Hatchet's eyes swiv-elled in their sockets. "Is Dara alive? Nod if she is." Through a blaze of pain and shock. Hatchet had more than enough life left in him to hate Bonner. Fuck you, he tried to say. "Hatchet, the way it is now you are going to live for a while, maybe three hours, maybe four... maybe till this time tomorrow. You tell me what I want to know and I'll finish it quick and easy, right now. If not, I'll walk, and you'll end up drowning in your own blood." Bonner looked at Hatchet a long minute. Just how dumb can one man be, he wondered. "Now, is she alive?" Hatchet nodded: yes. "Is she with Leather?" Hatchet nodded again: yes. "At the Capital?" Another nod: yes. "Nice going. Hatchet," said Bonner almost tenderly, "maybe you're not so dumb after all." Bonner leaned heavily on the black handle of the knife and felt the blade slip sideways, puncturing the cardiac sac and slicing deep into the left ventricle of Hatchet's heart. As the black wave of death washed over him. Hatchet thought his last thought: I hope Leather cuts your balls off. He gave a spastic kick and died. Unceremoniously, Bonner placed his foot on Hatchet's stomach and yanked the deeply embedded knife from the man's body. He snatched off Hatchet's bandana, cleaned the blade, then slid it back into the holster resting on his hip. Two other knives rested there and the three black bone handles gleamed, as if smiling at the job done and waiting alertly for another chance to strike. The force behind Bonner's throw had been born of pure hate and, inwardly, he cursed himself for it. He could not afford to get worked up, not where Leatherman was concerned. He had to trust his instincts but keep anger out of things. Anger made you sloppy. Leather wanted Bonner and he knew that there was only one piece of bait that would bring Bonner running into the Slavestates-Dara. In the Slavestates, Leatherman was the law. Bonner could not believe Dara was alive-that was the answer to his wildest dreams. That she was in Leather's hands was the darkest of his nightmares. Maybe it was a trap,

maybe Dara was dead. But maybe not, maybe she was rotting in that shell of a city that used to be Washington that Leather now called his capital. The thought raised Bonner's anger again and reminded him that there were old scores too long unsettled. Like a hungry mad shark Bonner swept out of the depths to snatch at the bait. He was headed East. Chapter 2 The girl was asleep when Bonner hefted Hatchet's dead weight onto his back and started for the door. Along with the corpse, Bonner carried his three knives and the cut-down stockless, Winchester pump that was pre-bomb if it was a day. It was reliable and it could saturate an area with shot like a hailstorm. The gun was slung over his back too, resting in a worn leather holster. Slowly he made his way down the stairs and dumped Hatchet's body in the street and hoped that he wouldn't be there when he got back. Parked in front of the old building that Bonner called home, was a car, a Toyota, pre-bomb by a good ten years. Bonner knew every piece of machinery that remained in the ruins of Chicago and he didn't know that one. It must be Hatchet's. He paused to examine it and approved. It had been modified by inelegant but skillful hands. They had stripped away anything that reduced the vehicle's speed—all the fancy stuff that Mr. USA wanted in a car back in the days when everybody had one. Bonner peered into the gas tank and laughed to himself. Leather hadn't given Hatchet enough gas to make it back—because he knew that Hatchet wasn't coming back so why waste the gas? Sometimes Leather had a funny sense of humor. The streets were dark and littered with the refuse that nobody ever bothered to pick up. There was no law in Chicago and that was fine with the residents. Bonner picked his way through the streets, ready at any moment to pull the Winchester from his back. There were always a couple of street-men around looking to steal whatever you had and they didn't care a hell of a lot if you got hurt. You carried a gun. It was a fact of life. The shotgun the girl held on Hatchet was hers; it would have been like carrying a purse or a wallet in the old days. Bonner knew his way through the dark streets, but even if he had not, he would have been able to reach his destination by sound alone. There was a bar in Chicago, called Dorca's—Dorca being a bear-sized old smuggler who decided to settled down—and that was where you went for a drink, a girl, information. It never closed and it was always just this side of a riot. Dorca made sure though that things never got too much out of hand. But he was tolerant. "Hell," he would say, "these boys deserve a little relaxation." "These boys" were Chicago's elite citizens. Chicago was still the center of the country—only no one called it a country anymore—now it was known as the continent. Where the United States of America—the place forever eradicated by the bomb—had been there were now four or five little kingdoms and all of them were bad places ruled by worse men. Leather called himself the President of the Slavestates, and he was about as bad as you can get. The survivors that lived there stayed because they were too scared to get out. They figured that it was safer to put up with the troubles where they were—even if that meant enslavement to thugs like Leather and Hatchet—than to risk crossing the wastelands to get away. But, if you had the guts to go, you headed for Chicago. Chicago was an open city and the men that lived there were the only daredevils or free spirits or whatever you want to call them that still lived on the continent. In the old days you would have called them criminals. But hell, thought Bonner, everybody these days was a criminal, or a corpse or a coward. It was in Chicago—or what was left of it—that you found the smugglers and the border raiders and the road guides and the runaways. If you made it to Chicago you were pretty safe from the enemies you might have left behind. If the Lightning Squad from the Snowstates or the storm-troopers from Leather's Slavestates came looking for you, they would have to face every gun in Chicago. Over the years the stormers and the squadsmen and the Devils from down in the Hotstates, realized that if they didn't get you before you crossed the city line they weren't going to get you at all. The permanent residents, the regulars at Dorca's, figured that if you had made it that far, you deserved to stay. Staying alive once you got there, well, that was a different story. If you were smart and tough and had strong nerves and didn't

have too many qualms about taking somebody else's property or life you might make a smuggler. All you had to know was where stuff had been hidden before the bomb-and it might be deep in the Slavestates or in the middle of the desert in the Hotstates-go get it, and blast your way back to Chicago. If you came back with liquor, meat, ammunition or, best of all, gasoline, you could sell it in the city and make a fortune. You got your money up front in gold or silver only, but then you had to worry about keeping it. There were smugglers who had fought storm-troopers or squadsmen for a thousand miles only to lose their haul to some joker with an ancient Smith & Wesson they happened to meet on the streets of Chicago. If you were dumb and liked to fight you could settle for being a raider. All you had to do was get a bunch of boys together, make sure they had enough ammunition and then wander into one of the States and have a look around to see what was worth stealing. Smugglers knew what they were going after and they had a fair idea of where it was; raiders didn't care, they would bring back anything they thought might be worth something, even people. Sometimes they brought back women and settled down to make serious money just pimping. Bonner was a smuggler and he was the best. Back when he was an Outrider-when there had been Outriders-he had covered every inch of the continent. He knew which roads could still be travelled, where bridges still stood, where people still lived. There weren't many people left and there were probably fewer now so all the stuff that had been stockpiled before the big war was still there, all you had to know was where. If anyone knew, it was Bonner. He missed the old Outriding days, but they were gone for good now. Today, it was kill or be killed. Steal or be stolen from. Leather had been an Outrider too and the first one to realize that he had the power to take a piece of the whole continent for himself. Leather had been the first to kill; the first to steal... As Bonner pushed open the door of Dorca's he saw a dozen faces he recognized and didn't trust. "Hey, Bonner," a wiry man with lank black hair called out. "Evening, Comer," said Bonner, making for the bar. Dorca's was crowded and the air was thick with smoke, bad tobacco that had been going around ever since Lawson and his raiders had brought in a ton of the stuff from down south somewhere. "Bonner," shouted Comer again, "there was a guy in here looking for you. Guess who it was?" Bonner looked at Comer with contempt. Comer was a street-worker who had made raider and finally set himself up as pimp. He was rich because his prices were low. "It was Hatchet! Fucking Hatchet!" screamed Comer. "He said he'd be coming back here when he had found you." "He'll be along," said Bonner. Dorca sat at his usual place at the end of the bar, keeping an eye on things. Resting against his knees was an old mahogany table leg, once the comer of some proud Chicagoan's pool table. The table leg, when used with Dorca's own brand of finesse, usually managed to keep order. "You're up late, Bonner." "Going on a job, Dorca." Dorca's great wide face split in a happy grin. Bonner was Dorca's best supplier. Always quality stuff and the price was high but fair. "What you going after?" "A little of this, a little of that." Bonner smiled. "Sure, Bonner, sure. You know my standing order..." "Yeah." Bonner smiled. Dorca would take any amount of liquor or food that Bonner could bring in. But more than anything, Dorca wanted sugar: honey, candy, raw cane, it didn't matter. Once Bonner had found chocolate, a whole half pound, and had given it to Dorca as a gift. The big man had looked as if he was going to cry when Bonner gave it to him. He had taken the bar in his hand as if it had been gold or a holy relic. "Hershey's..." He had said that word as if it had been a prayer. There wasn't anything Dorca didn't know about the different kinds of candy that had existed before the bomb, he was a confec- tionery historian. The wrappers were all over the bar, in frames, like works of art. Once Bonner gave him that candy bar, Dorca was his friend for life. It had been a good investment, Bonner thought, because Dorca knew everything and everyone in Chicago. Where they were going, what they were going for... But he never asked Bonner and Bonner never told him. "What can I do for you?" "Dorca, any idea where Seth is?" "Headed south a couple of days ago... Bad candy country the south. It all melted years ago." "Too bad," said Bonner. "Besides, that fucking

contraption he rides around in gets so hot if he found any candy it would melt on the way back." "Shit," said Bonner, "I wanted to talk to him too..." Dorca looked suspicious. "Where you going, Bonner?" "A long way in, Dorca..." "You usually travel alone. You wanted Seth to ride you some place in that thing..." "Locomotive." "Yeah... the thing. Where you going?" Bonner whispered: "If Seth comes in, tell him I'm headed east." "How far east?" "All the way..." "You fucking crazy? Bonner, not even you can go right into the Slavestates. Fool around on the edges, maybe. But Leather has that place wrapped tight... Wait a minute, that guy that came in here tonight, he's with Leather, isn't he?" "He was," said Bonner. "I knew he looked no good. Bonner, where you going? Boston? Philadelphia? Don't say New York..." "Washington, the Capital." "You've lost it, man... You're dead already. What's so fucking valuable in the Cap? What are you going after?" "Dorca, I'm going after Leather." "Then say goodbye now, Mr. Bonner," said Dorca solemnly. "Bye, Dorca," said Bonner with a smile. "I'll bring you back a whadyacallit, a Charleston Chew." After Bonner left, Dorca slammed the table leg on the bar-there was already a sizable dent there, witness to many previous outbursts-bottles and patrons jumped at the sound and wondered what the hell was biting Dorca's ass tonight.

Chapter 3

Bonner left Dorca's as the pale purple light of dawn began to brighten the broken streets. He had a four- or five-block walk and he moved quickly, his stride filled with purpose. A few of the street workers scuttled into the shadows as he passed-Bonner was known to them and each of them knew that there was little point in trying to take him. The night seemed as if it had been unnaturally long and Bonner felt as if it had been days, not hours, since he had taken Hatchet down. He rubbed the back of his neck, as if to wipe away the tension and fatigue that lodged there. He had not had much sleep, and he couldn't be sure when he would sleep again. But he knew that he had to start now, leave town immediately. Hatchet's message haunted him. Bonner entered the old bus station on Wabash Avenue. The crumbling building, a few acres of cracked concrete and splintered glass was littered with reminders of a shattered past: Welcome to Chicago, The City That Works, proclaimed a sign. Not anymore, thought Bonner. Now the sign should read: Welcome to Chicago, the city that kills and steals, but survives... Bonner stopped in the gloom. "Lucky!" he shouted. His voice caromed off the walls and then, almost immediately, was swallowed up in the vast space of the waiting room. Bonner climbed a rusty escalator to the second floor, the heavy tread of his boots sounding metallic and menacing in the silence. Here, there was more evidence of the dead time, that time that no one remembered. "No strollers," said a sign next to the escalator, "Children must be carried." Bonner had stopped wondering why years ago. Whatever a stroller had been, nobody remembered now and there were hardly any kids these days, not in Chicago, not anywhere. It was a dying world. A tattered poster with a picture of the old pre-bomb buses and a family looking on in rapt admiration, was still pasted to the walls: "GO GREYHOUND AND LEAVE THE DRIVING TO US." There was a very proud looking driver wearing a peaked cap and bow tie sat behind the wheel. Bonner had seen the rusting carcasses of these buses scattered about the landscape like dinosaurs. He always wondered what kind of power they had put out. "Lucky!" This time he got a reply. "What? What you doing up so early, boss?" Lucky appeared from behind an old ticket counter. He carried an old Colt Peacemaker. "I heard you walking around, scared the shit out of me." Lucky was a little man, hardly reaching Bonner's shoulder. His blond hair was so light as to be almost white. His blue eyes so pale that it was hard to tell where the irises ended and the whites began. His left leg had been smashed below the knee and it stuck out askew from his body giving him an awkward, sideways gait. "I'm headed out. The car set up?" "Always ready, boss. Cleaned the carbs and the points. Tuned her a little. New oil too-wherever you're going you want to see if you can find me some more? Don't care what grade." Bonner nodded. "Will do." "You are going to need a radiator one of these fine days. But I think I know where I can lay my hands on one." "How are the electrics?" "Good. That battery'll hold you. Watch

your brakes, they're getting crotchety in their old age." "Seen Seth?" "Lousy nigger. He owes me for some pipe. Walked off with a wrench too. I don't know how he keeps that old fire-eater alive... Where you going this time, boss?" "East." "No shit? How far?" "What if I said all the way?" "Then I would say good luck and watch your axle because you ain't gonna get anything to fit that chassis in the east. It's the biggest fucking nightmare, having to replace them axles one day. Or maybe a half-shaft. Where we going to get bruisers like that?" "Lucky, you worry too much." Lucky shrugged. "You the boss." Bonner's car was all engine. Between the front axle and the steering wheel was a long, black hunk of metal, an eight-cylinder Lycoming marine engine. Lucky, the best mechanic going, had found it somewhere and had modified it to fit the all pipe chassis that he had designed and double welded together himself. The tires were fat old white walls that he had taken off a pimpish-looking Caddy he had found in Evanston. Only a whisper of tread remained on them. Light canvas fenders were suspended above each wheel, they didn't afford much protection, but they didn't add much weight either. A single spotlight was posted on the prow. It could shoot out a blast of white light, lighting a corridor a hundred yards ahead as bright as midday. Lucky had bargained it away from the guy that ran the slave auctions at the old Capitol Theatre. There was no bodywork to speak of. A single leather seat was placed over the rear axle, positioned perfectly in relation to the steering wheel to comfortably accommodate Bonner's six foot plus frame. The wheel was black and large and on its hub was an elaborate filligree design that spelled out a word: De Soto. "Whatever the fuck that was," Lucky had said. There were no instruments, no dashboard, just the firewall separating the driver from the engine. On the steering column there was a switch for the light and a button that acted as the starter. "Keep things simple," said Lucky. A roll bar arched over the driver's seat like a halo. Attached to it, running lengthwise were an axe and a shovel. Clipped to the top of the bar, shrouded in canvas, its barrel pointed toward the ground was a 50 calibre machinegun. "I don't want that thing there," Bonner had said. "If people start shooting, I want to draw fire away from the car, not toward it." "It always helps to have a little hardware," Lucky had said. The gun had gotten Bonner out of more than one scrape over the years, so it stayed. A few belts of ammunition lay curled around a pair of heavy gauntlets in the well where the passenger seat would have been. Behind the bar was a fifty-gallon fuel tank, and keeping it filled was the hardest task Lucky had to perform. For all his modification the big Lycoming sucked up gas-"like a baby at a tit," he said-and on the road, to run out of gas was to take a giant step toward death. At the very stern of the car, swept up behind, were two wide-mouthed exhaust pipes. They very nearly deafened the driver when he hit speed, but Bonner had grown used to the roar over his shoulder and he hardly heard it now. Lucky looked down at his creation proudly. He wiped away an imaginary smudge on the steering wheel. "Nothing else on four wheels like her, boss. You're a lucky man," he said, as if he was a best man at a wedding. Bonner slid behind the wheel and hit the starter. The engine exploded into life, filling the cavernous bus ramp with a healthy, throaty roar. Lucky smiled happily, showing a row of uneven teeth like a broken fence. He swore he could feel the detonation of each cylinder through the soles of his feet. He waved to Bonner and shouted over the noise: "Have yourself a good trip, boss." Bonner smiled and slammed the machine into gear roaring off down the ramp. The engine sounded eager for the road. Lucky listened to the engine for some time, following its rumble through the streets, wincing every time he heard the brakes squeal. "That man got no respect for machinery," he said to the empty room. Bonner drove along Lakeshore, hardly glancing up at the bombed-out glass towers that lined the broad avenue. Dorca, who knew about such things, said that the street had once been Chi's best neighborhood, and that the tall building that dominated Chicago's skyline had once been the tallest building in the world-until the bomb came along and blew off the top twenty-five stories. The gleaming, jagged upper edge glinted in the morning

sun. Abruptly, Bonner pulled off the drive and onto the ramp that led onto the dry lake bed. Stretching off as far as the horizon was the drab brownness of the dead lake. Bonner narrowed his eyes and looked about him. As the story went, the lake had boiled away, leaving this great brown saucer. People said that if you got to the very middle of it there was still some water, but Bonner hadn't been there so he couldn't say if they were telling the truth. It must have been quite a sight once, he thought, all that water... Now it made a great natural highway and it was a perfect approach to the city. No force of any size could come across it without being spotted. Bonner hit the gas and the car shot out onto the road that had been beaten into the earth by thousands of tires. A set of wheel marks branched off the main track, gracefully curving off toward the north and Canada; they vanished into the horizon. He passed that turning by and pointed the nose of his car to the east. He planned his route in his mind: across the lake to the far shore, then across the peninsula to Detroit. From there he'd get onto the bed of Lake Erie and follow that into Pennsylvania, just north of the Firelands. That was the point generally acknowledged to be the beginning of the Slavestates. The car raced along the lakebed, throwing up a long cloud of dust behind. An hour into his drive Bonner spotted another column of dust a ways ahead of him. It was coming toward him. He stared over the heat shimmer thrown off by the engine, trying to see if he was driving toward a friend or an enemy. He tensed slightly behind the wheel. Rule of the road number one: everybody was a foe until you found out otherwise. Another mile passed and Bonner relaxed a little. He saw now that the party headed toward him was a raider column lead by Coldchip. Coldchip wasn't that bad, for a raider anyway. Last Bonner had heard of him he had been headed for the Snowstates, but he was obviously returning from the wrong direction. Something must have gone wrong. Coldchip and his men came face to face with Bonner on the track a few minutes later. Bonner cut his engine to an idle and remained behind the wheel. Coldchip was in the lead on the big old motorcycle-sidecar combination he always rode. The sidecar was piled high with boxes marked Campbell's Soup. Behind him were the members of the raiding party, also mounted on bikes. Bonner knew them all by name. The air was filled with the sound of throbbing engines. "Well, hey there Bonner," shouted Coldchip. "Morning, Chippie. Where you coming from?" "Never fucking should have left home, man. Headed out for the Snows-got blasted. Said fuck it. Headed over to the Slaves-got blasted again. We took some slaves-they got kilt. Lost two of my men when we ran into a Stormer patrol-blasted again. Used sixty gals of gas, got six crates of soup. Man, it's getting so a man can't make a living. Shit." "Where'd you run into Stormers?" "Scranton. You going Slavestatin'?" Bonner nodded. "Hey Bonner," shouted one of the raiders. "We heard that Leather's put some numbers on your skin." "That's right, Daniel." "Ten thousand gold?" "That's what I hear." "Mind if I try to collect?" "Per Chrissake, Danny boy," shouted Coldchip, "don't be a king size jerk-ass. I already got two men dead." "Hey, Coldchip, who are you? My mother?" "If I was your mother I would have put your head in a bucket when you were born." "Come on, Danny," said Bonner, "let it ride..." "Yeah, next time, Bonner." "Right, next time." Bonner pushed the car into gear and maneuvered around the raiders. Coldchip watched him go a long time, the other raiders revved their engines. "Hold it," shouted Coldchip. "Danny, did you say ten thousand?" Danny grinned. "Gold, boss." Coldchip rubbed the stubble on his chin. "I dunno." "Fuck it, man," shouted one of the other raiders. "We got six lousy crates of soup. Yeah, Bonner's good, sure, but there are five of us. He can't beat the odds... Not all the time, anyhow..." Coldchip considered a moment longer. He narrowed his eyes and watched Bonner get smaller and smaller on the horizon. "Okay, let's take him down." He turned his big machine around. "Let's go." The raiders gunned their engines and howled as they chased after Bonner. Far ahead they saw Bonner's car drop into a depression in the lakebed. The pounding sound of the five engines did not penetrate into the brains of the raiders. They all had one thought on their minds: ten thousand gold. Each was already planning

how to get rid of the other four as if Bonner was already dead. In the basin of the depression Bonner stopped, cut his engine and listened. There they were, the sound of the raiders' bikes, getting louder. He figured he had a minute or two before the first of them came over the rise. Quickly, he stripped the canvas cover from the machinegun, clipped in a belt of ammunition and waited. The engines grew louder with every second. Danny was the first over the rise. Bonner let loose a short rip of bullets and shot Danny out of the sky like a bird. The bullets pounded into his chest, the whole front of his dirty shirt spilling open like an obscene, bloody flower. Three more riders flew over the rise. They had seen Danny fall but were travelling too fast to stop. They rode straight into Bonner's murderous fire. With shell casings spurting around him, as if he stood in the middle of a brass fountain, Bonner chopped the raiders down. Their bodies hit the ground with sickening thuds, the bikes crashing to the ground, spokes snapping, engines racing hot and screaming. Coldchip slammed on his brakes just before the rise and stopped. Hot bolts of fear pounded through him and he swore under his breath. How had he got involved with Bonner? He went his way, you went yours. He wouldn't mess with you, if you didn't bother him. Those who tried to take him died. It was that simple. Bonner always found some way to rip you apart, always coming at you. The man was marked, he had something that the rest of them couldn't find. Coldchip swore again and hoped to God that Bonner had blown Danny boy away because he was one dumb fuck who deserved it. Coldchip could feel Bonner, just over the edge, waiting. Coldchip considered turning around and running hell for leather for Chi. But Bonner would come back some day... Better get it over with. Maybe Coldchip would get a break, maybe he would win... He doubted it. He slipped off his bike and rooted around in his saddle bag for a plate bomb. It was a simple device. Two metal dishes-someone had found thousands of them at the old prison in Joliet-held together with stiff metal bands. Packed inside, around the explosive charge, were nuts and bolts and jagged pieces of metal, which scattered when the powder was detonated. The idea was that the force of the bomb hitting the ground would trip the spring inside which would set the whole damn thing off. That was the theory, anyway... Sometimes a bump in the road would trigger it and kill the rider and anyone else in the neighborhood. A lot of guys wouldn't travel with men carrying plates. Coldchip hefted the weight of the bomb in his hands. He only had one, so it had to count. He took a deep breath and curved his arm around it like a discus thrower. Summoning up all his strength, he reared back and let fly. Bonner hit the gas and roared up the side of the ridge, passing the plate bomb in midair. He left the depression in the lake just as the plate bomb claimed it. It exploded, a blinding blast perforating the already torn bodies that Bonner had left behind him. It seemed to Coldchip that Bonner applied the brakes to his car while he was still airborne. The car hit ground and skidded to a halt. Coldchip looked at Bonner, sitting there behind the wheel, his Winchester pointed right at him. Coldchip cowered behind his crates of soup. "Bonner, fer Chrissake... Please!" Bonner pumped two shells into the cases, sending gouts of soup skyward. Coldchip grunted and sagged to the ground, falling into a sticky pool of soup, his blood swirling into it. Coldchip died almost instantly. "You were right, man," said Bonner, "you should have stayed home." Bonner put the car in gear and drove off. The sooner he found Leather, killed him, and got this damned price off his head the less trouble he would have. He hit speed again and watched the horizon, the old eastern lakeshore becoming more distinct as he ate up the miles. Chapter 4 Night had fallen but Bonner drove on, the single beam of his headlight darting out to split the darkness before him. He was out of the lake now, cutting across Michigan. He was making slow time-old Highway 94 had been crushed and pounded into an uneven surface of holes and rusty gaps where the old metal supports still showed. Great slabs of broken overpass lay on the roadbed, littering it like concrete icebergs. The sound of his engine could be heard deep in the night-but there was no one there to hear it. To his left were the old cities, Kalamazoo, Battle Creek, Lansing, jagged against the

night sky. Back in the Outriding days there had been people living there. First they had cowered in the rubble, like animals, living on what they could scavenge from in and amongst the ruins. There were still burn victims around then—they died. Gradually, some of the survivors went crazy from fear of attack or fear of starvation or fear of the hell of a radiation storm. Those terrible silent clouds were gone now, blown by the winds to some other part of the earth. People went crazy then because they didn't know what further horrors the new world held for them. It was fear of the unknown, fear of what was out there that killed most of them. Hard to believe, but once the burn victims were gone and those who were going to go crazy had lost their minds, the ones that remained, the hardest survivors, began to rebuild. Slowly, life had been reborn. Men stopped living in their caves and burrows and they began to adapt, to fit their lives to their new world. They built shelters, they planted what crops they could, but they still lacked the courage to walk over the hill, to trail down the road to see what lay just over the horizon. That was when the Outriders had been born. Bonner muscled his car off the road and killed the engine and the light. The sudden black silence enshrouded him. He sat behind the wheel and listened to the tick and creak of the cooling engine. Slowly, he got out from behind the wheel and stretched. He built a fire and started to heat a can of stew he had brought with him. He ate it quickly, out of the can, then rolled himself in the old blanket he kept under the seat. When Bonner closed his eyes he could see the shaft of light from his headlamp and the gray ribbon of road before him as if the image had been burnt with a fine wire into the inside of his eyelids. The Outriders. Leather had been one. So had Seth. And Carey, Glover, Pershing... What did Carey call himself now? The Prince. Prince of the Snowstates... Bonner had been the first. The first to get an old Dodge motor running well enough to venture out into the world. He had travelled, cautiously at first, through the continent, finding groups of survivors—not many but enough to convince him that his work was worth doing. Slowly he began linking the bands together, building a network, trading information for supplies. Others had joined him. Leather came riding out of the dawn one morning and said he had been all the way to New York. Gradually people had come to trust the Outriders, they were the closest thing to heroes the new world had. Bonner began to coax the survivors out of their little enclaves—they were like nervous puppies—trying to get the bands to join together, to unite, to rebuild. It wouldn't be the old America, but it would have been a land that might have been free of fear and that would have been a good enough start for Bonner. Leather changed all that. He liked being an Outrider. He liked the praise, he liked that look in people's eyes when he rolled into town, he liked the power. Bring the country together, fix it so anyone could set out on the road if they wanted to, and he would lose all that. He couldn't afford to sacrifice his position to an idea. It was Leather who first figured out that information was power and he could use it to his own ends. He began building a gang. Every town had its bad element, just the way it had always been. Maybe there were more now, after the bomb, Bonner couldn't say. Leather recruited the bullies and rowdies, the swaggerers and the mean minded... He bribed them with the liquor and gas and food he found and with dreams, telling them that he would make them powerful men in this new land. They would build a new country with Leather as leader and them as the first citizens. They bought it—a few of them are still alive, but most are dead, sacrificed to Leather's ambition or killed when they challenged his power. They had been brutal, right from the start. Bonner would never forget the time he rode into some no-account town in Delaware where there had once been a band of survivors. They had been a prosperous little group, raising enough to eat, more than enough in fact. They sold the surplus for gasoline and farming implements they couldn't make themselves. They had neat little houses, each one had a garden—it was almost normal life. When Bonner passed through every man, woman and child was dead. Leather and his gang were sure they had money or liquor and ammunition and they didn't care whom they had to kill to find it. There wasn't anything there, of course, but they killed

everyone anyway. Everyone, that is, except Dara. When he got there he found her practicing to kill Leather. Dara had found a shotgun and a case of shells and she was teaching herself to use it. She was standing in a parking lot-Bonner could still see the green grass growing up between the cracks in the asphalt-crying hot tears of hate. She slammed two shells into the breech, chose her target through her tears and blasted away. She had damn near blown Bonner's head off... Her first words to him after he had convinced her that he wasn't part of Leather's pack were: "I'm going to find him and I'm going to kill him..." Dara had become the last Outrider. There were times over the next few months when Bonner would sneak a sideways glance at Dara as they bucketed along the sketchy highways and he would always see the same look in her cool blue eyes. She never stopped hating for a moment, not even when she fell in love with him. Hate drove her, hate sustained her, it was food and drink, air and water, the element she lived in. Her disease had become Bonner's compulsion. He travelled with her and he would see to it that she got her wish. He had to go along, because more than dealing death to Leather he wanted to make sure that Dara lived. He had failed-or so he thought-on both counts. They found Leather in New York. He and his gang had taken over one of the old luxury hotels-the building must have been two hundred years old-that overlooked the wild tangle of vegetation that once had been a gigantic park. They had found themselves a whole cellar full of wine and they were going to drink it all. Other men, better men, would have had a little for themselves and kept the rest to barter. But Leather didn't believe in barter. If you were Leather you took what you needed. Bonner knifed the two drunks that were supposed to be guarding the entrance to the wine cellar. They were so stupefied with wine that they never felt the blades slice into their hearts. Leather had been slumped over a table. He was sitting in a cracked gold chair-it looked like a throne-that he had dragged down from one of the old cobwebbed ballrooms. He had just stared dumbly at Dara when she raised her shotgun. Something stopped her before she pulled the trigger. For one tense second Bonner was afraid she had lost her nerve. But she hadn't. She lowered the gun, handed it to Bonner and strode up to Leatherman. His drunken, bloodshot eyes followed her across the dank cellar. She grabbed a bottled and smashed it then raised it high above her head, paused a second to marshal her strength and then slashed his face, whipping the jagged green glass along his cheek. His eye popped like a fried egg. His screams tore through the room, rousing his drunk soldiers. Bullets started flying, spitting into the row upon row of glass bottles. Glass ricocheted. Bonner scooped up Dara and ran with her. Hours later she said: "I had him, and I lost him..." She worked her hands into tight fists and Bonner knew that her quest was not finished. They had headed for Chicago. Halfway there, not far from where Bonner was now, he awoke to find her gone. She had headed back. Her work was not done. Carey defected about that time and founded the Snows. Berger grabbed the Hots, both of them welding together organizations like those Leather had in the area he was now calling the Slavestates. Almost at once, a war between all three had broken out, trapping the innocent in a whirling vortex of fire and blood. But no side was stronger than the other; there had been stalemate after a few hot months of fighting... The greatest casualty was Bonner's dream. And Dara. Bonner heard she had been killed and he had grieved. He sighed. It was all a history of a time no one would ever write, that no one would ever read. Bonner closed his eyes, slept for an hour or two then hit the road again. He turned south to look for an oasis and he passed the spot where he had last seen her. He could never pass it by without falling prey to suffocating memories. They haunted him through the rest of the lonely day. Chapter 5 It was not far past dawn, but the heat of the morning was already cutting into Bonner's shoulders. Absently, he ran a hand through his hair. It felt hot and brittle, dirty with sweat and the sun. Somewhere he would have to find himself some water and wash. He imagined dousing his body with cool water in a stream somewhere, cleansing himself of heat and fatigue, the way crazy old Preacher said he could do the same thing to sin. The bomb had blown away everything. Even sin.

Nothing was a sin anymore-unless you counted getting yourself taken down or robbed of something you had killed to own yourself. That was always Dara's problem, Bonner thought, she lived in a new bad world but she carried the baggage of the old bad world with her. She wanted to kill Leather because she thought him evil. She had decided that he didn't deserve to live-as if being robbed of life in this time was some terrible forfeit-he had to be punished. As far as she was concerned he was like the rad that ruined the water and turned the soil and air into gray death, useless, evil... Bonner wanted Leather dead because he was an enemy. For a couple of hundred miles, two days of hard travelling, Bonner had listened to his engine and held one thought in his mind: nothing personal, Leather, nothing personal... He saw himself standing behind the chattering fifty calibre, cutting Leather's big body into pieces with a long, hot spray of shells: nothing personal... He saw all three of his blades scything hilt deep into Leather's paunch: nothing personal... He heard the contemptuous snort of the Winchester and saw the shells slamming into Leather's scarred face, stripping away the flesh, laying bare the bone: nothing personal... He could feel his hands closing around Leather's muscled throat, feel the collapse of the delicate traceries of bone and cartilage under his fingertips: nothing personal... Bonner was staring out over the hood, his grip on the wheel growing stronger until, with a start, he brought himself back to the hot morning. He was about forty miles from Detroit, or rather, what had once been Detroit, and was running out of gas. A ways up the highway he would get to the oasis. He wondered if anyone had found his cache. Why not? he wondered. It was there, all you had to do was look for it. If someone took what he needed and moved on, that was fine by him. If they got any ideas that the vast underground pool of fuel belonged to them, then they were buying trouble. Deep in the back of Bonner's brain there came a feeling that he had known before: he was sick of killing-he chased the thought from his mind. To stop killing was to die. What was wrong with that? a voice asked. Bonner couldn't answer that one. By the time the sun reached its zenith, Bonner was driving through the broken streets of the town that held the fuel reserve. He had never paused long enough in the rains to find out the name of the place. To Bonner and Seth and a few of the others who knew the secrets of the town it was just called the oasis. It was one of the many strung out along the roads. Bonner stopped in front of an expanse of gray paving that fronted the street. The few foundation stones of the old office and the place where the pumps had been could still be seen. A metal plug about a foot across was set into the concrete. Bonner levered it up and peered within. The heady smell of gasoline rushed up to his nostrils. A faint shimmer dappled the liquid below him and he could see that there was plenty left. Quickly, he began lowering the bucket that lay by the plug into the gloom. Within the hour he had filled his tank and was ready to head on. Before starting the engine, though, he paused, his head cocked into the wind like an animal listening for danger. On the edge of a breeze, Bonner could hear an approaching engine. It was the high whine of a tough little motor plainly working its guts out. Bon-ner smiled. He knew the sound and was a good friend of the driver. A few minutes later, Starling, mounted on that crazy looking tricycle of his, hove into view. The two big fat tires that capped the rear axle made the vehicle look like it could climb a cliff face. Starling bounced down the street looking like a fanner on a tractor. He grinned out from between the two huge tires. "Well, damn me," he yelled over the howl of his engine, "Mr. Bonner himself." "Hey, Starling," Bonner called back, "what brings you here?" "You know me, always looking. Always looking for love." He shut down the engine and slid from the saddle. He grasped Bonner's hand. "Sure am glad to see you. I ain't had a friendly word with no one in many a day. Penn's crawling with Stormers. They shot at my ass for about a hundred miles." "I saw Coldchip. He said the same thing." Starling's face split in a wide grin. "Coldchip. No shit. How's he doing?" "Not so good." "Oh," said Starling, "did you... ?" "Yes," said Bonner, " 'fraid so." Starling set about busying himself with his car. He was a tall, wiry man, his face burnt

dark brown by the sun. He was as strong as a bull and as fast as a whip. He carried a gun, of course, but his preferred weapon was a bow and arrow. He made his own steel shafts with tips that packed an ounce or so of explosive powder. Bonner hated the sound of one of those little terrors hitting a man's body. Their effect was devastating. "Damn," said Starling. "I would have thought that Coldchip had more sense than that." "I think it was a spur of the moment decision. He didn't think about what he was doing." "Don't feel bad, Bonner. Ain't your fault." Bonner shrugged. Starling was filling the big tank of his cycle. The morning air was thick with gas fumes. "One of these days all this shit is going to run out." "It'll all be gone some day." "Us too. Even you, Bonner." "Even me." "So which way you headed?" "I'm inbound." "You know what I heard?" "Yeah," said Bonner, "you heard that Leather has put a price on my head. Ten thousand gold slates, right?" "That's right. How did you know?" Bonner smiled grimly. "How did I know. Remember Hatchet?" "Yeah," said Starling, "I remember Hatchet. What a second rate piece of shit he was." "Well," said Bonner, "Leather sent Hatchet to tell me." "Leather sent Hatchet? He sent Hatchet to bring you down? And Hatchet went? Jeez, what a fool." "And I guess that Hatchet told every raider, smuggler and street-worker between the cap and here that Leather wanted me dead. Coldchip and his men tried to collect and I always thought he was a friend of mine too." "Well, if it sets your mind at rest, Bonner, I ain't going to try to collect. I mean you got to be pretty stupid if you think that for hauling you in Leather is going to say: 'Good job. Here's your cash.' Besides which, I don't want to try and take you. I like you alive." "I'm relieved to hear it." "Let me guess," said Starling, "you are inbound to see your old friend Leather and see if you can't work out this stuff about having a price on your uhead." Bonner nodded. "Let me come with you." "I thought you just said you got your ass blasted for a hundred miles." "Yeah, so what?" "And you're outbound for Chi, so why do you want to go and get yourself shot at again?" "I'm bored." "That's all?" "And I love to travel. I have a hunch that you are going all the way to the Cap and that when you get there you are going to need some help. Besides, I haven't seen Leather since I don't know when. It'll be a nice Outrider reunion." Bonner hesitated a moment. "Come on, Bonner, don't tell me that you can make it all the way in and all the way out and think you're going to do it yourself. I don't have to tell you that I'm a pretty tough bring-down myself." "Beats me why you would do this if you didn't have to." "Why do you have to, Bonner? So Leather's put a price on your head? Big fucking deal..." "I heard he's got Dara." Starling looked somber all of a sudden. "Oh shit, this is going to be a hot one, isn't it?" Bonner nodded. "If you want out..." "No, I'll go. You know me, I'll do anything to be liked." They rode for a good twelve hours before stopping for the night. Before falling asleep Starling said: "I met a guy who said that a Starling was a kind of bird. What I wanted to know was what the fuck was a bird. He said they were little things that flew around and just, you know, hung out in trees. Can you imagine that? What a fucking world it used to be." Bonner was asleep already.

Chapter 6 You could always tell where the Slavestates began. If you were coming in due west, like Bonner and Starling, you detoured way to the north into the cut that Pennsylvania made into Ohio because it was only at that point could you skirt the Firelands. From just south of there stretched a barrier of flame and smoke five hundred miles long. They said that the bomb had set fire to the old coal belt that ran from Pennsylvania to Tennessee. The land there burnt hot and burrowed deep into the ground like a fiery serpent. In some areas, where the coal was high quality, the flames shot into the air. In the poorer veins the fire crackled beneath the surface turning the earth into a hot swamp of smokeholes and firepits eating out the ground until it was a red hot honeycomb. Some said there were safe trails through the Firelands, but they were impossible to find. Others said that once you were in, you weren't coming out. Where Bonner and Starling crossed the border they could look to the south and see a continuous column of smoke, like the high pillars of steam thrown up into the

air by a vast waterfall. The Firelands made a perfect shield for the Slave-states as the point at which Bonner and Starling now stood was the virtually the only safe way in. It was there that Leather concentrated the greatest number of his stormtrooper patrols. Although they were a good forty miles north of the beginning of the firebelt the air that Starling and Bonner breathed was thick with smoke and heavy with the gritty, dirty taste of coal. When passing through the gap Highway 6 a man had to be careful. Some of the Stormer's easiest bring downs were made there. They would sometimes stretch a wire across the road and slice a man's neck like a cheesecutter. Other times they would wait outside the smoke and start blasting as the riders came out of the fog. Starling wasn't worried. "I'll bet I'm the last rider on this road. I came through a day or two ago. There were a couple of wire traps, but I took 'em down. I don't think the Stormers have had time to put 'em back." The land in the first few miles of Slavestate territory was black with the grime of the smoke carried by the wind. The sky was always dark and threatening as if promising a ferocious thunderstorm that would never come. Vegetation was dark and grotesque-ly stunted, black reminders of violent times passed. Bonner and Starling were picking their way through a part of the road that riders called Trash Alley. The last fifty miles of highway before you hit where Pittsburgh used to be was jammed with the rusting hulks of old automobiles, a rotting museum of pre-bomb hardware. There were family sedans, pickups, huge eighteen-wheel tractor trailers, sports cars, station wagons. All six lanes of the highway were clogged, all the cars were facing in the same direction: away. Year after year of riders heading east had carved down the center of the rusty canyon a narrow central path. It was a tight pass, like those dangerous paths through mile-high mountains and it was a favorite spot for Stormers on the border to wait for raiders and riders. Starling and Bonner couldn't ride two abreast. They entered the alley single file, Bonner leading. As he slowly negotiated the passage the same thought ran through Bonner's mind. He couldn't ride the alley without thinking the same thing, every time. In his mind he could imagine the whole scenario, the whole terrible drama that had brought all those cars to the highway, all those people doing the same thing: fleeing. There they all were one day, Bonner thought, those people, doing the jobs that people did in Pittsburgh before the war. Living their lives, just as they always had... Then reports start to come in. A war. The information whips through the city like the wind from a hurricane. People snatch a few seconds to rush to their homes, gather their wives and children and head for the road, the taste of panic harsh and metallic in their mouths. Where were they going, Bonner wondered, what place had they heard of? What shred of hope drove them out onto that crowded highway? Then a car breaks down, or runs out of gas, or collides with another scared citizen. The whole long river of cars grinds to a halt. All they know now is that behind them, the east, has been pounded into ruins, that flames now lap at the very edge of their world. They get out of their cars-the kids are crying, the men are bellowing empty threats at angry strangers. Fear had taken root in that doomed column and like a choking vine it hobbled them, bringing them all down. They died. Caught in a sweeping tide of death-fate, history, the past and the future fusing in one terrible moment to exterminate them. In the old Outriding days Bonner had seen bones scattered around the alley. Who had killed them, Bonner wondered, and what goal, what ideal, had their miserable deaths served? Was the world a better place for it? In that long rusting corridor Bonner could see the design of a failure so immense it sickened him. Who were those men, the ones who so arrogantly led the country to suicide and mired the whole world in a swamp of death? Bonner looked around him, his lips set in a tight line. His world just might be a better place... Sure, bullets flew and death was dealt casually and men like Leather kept slaves and held terrible sway over a whole kingdom of fear, but no one, not Leather, not Bonner, nobody could sweep away a whole nation with the flick of a wrist. Leather could kill, but not even he could destroy on such a scale. That talent had died with the civilized world. Bonner had cut his speed way down and the sound of the big Lycoming

caromed dully off the rusting walls of the big semis he was passing between. Up ahead stretched a narrow valley of steel. He stared down it, but he didn't really see it, so lost was he in the thought of the foolish past. A millisecond before the first blast of gunfire, Bonner's brain kicked back to the present and a single thought seared his brain: if it's going to happen, it's going to happen here. Bullets splattered around him like hot heavy pellets of summer rain and Bonner and Starling reacted in precisely the same manner. Both slammed on their brakes and before they stopped moving, both dove for cover, abandoning their machines to the murderous raking fire that suddenly filled the tight channel like water shooting through a millrace. Bonner and Starling squatted under the eaves of the big trailer of the old truck. Starling inched forward. "Goddamn it to hell," he whispered, as if the Stormers didn't know where they were, "where was your fucking brain, Bonner? We sailed right into that one. We are in deep shit." The firing stopped. "Sorry, Star," said Bonner. "Did you get a look at any of 'em? Who's working this sector?" "I didn't see shit. Drexy is supposed to be out here and someone said that Sallow is out here too..." "Any Radleps?" "Naww..." "Okay, then," said Bonner, "no problem." In spite of the danger they were in. Starling couldn't help smiling. "No problem?" He laughed. "No problem? Are you fucking crazy? It doesn't matter who the Stormer leader is. We're caught. Sure Drexy's a pussy and Sallow is stupid, but they have been alive a mighty long time..." "It'll go like this," said Bonner. "Five or six of them will come down the main alley. A couple more will be on the outside traffic lanes..." "Which way do we go?" "Up," said Bonner. Starling and Bonner crawled flat on their bellies under the truck. Starling was in the lead and Bonner kept his eyes fixed on the long leather quiver on Starling's back. It was stuffed tight with those murderously effective steel arrows. Bonner hated the things but Starling was a master in their use and they would probably be the dominant factor in the firelight that was just minutes into the future. Hooked over the quiver was Starling's bow. They snaked their way forward until they lay directly under the truck's engine. They climbed out from under and swung themselves up over the radiator and hunched down on the hood, just in front of the old cracked windshield. Bonner noticed that the radiator was capped by a tough looking metal bulldog. Starling peered cautiously down the alleyway. In the split-second look he got he saw the hunters. They were dressed, like all the Stormers, in a fuck-you tough uniform. Tight black pants, leather jackets worn without shirts. They were dirty and mean looking. They enjoyed their work. Starling figured, but how smart could they be if they worked for Leather? Starling caught Bonner's eye and held up seven fingers. Bonner nodded: seven coming down the middle. How many on the outside? He looked quickly to his right, out over the rusty outrigger mirror of the driver's side of the cab. Two Stormers crept up holding their rifles in front of them, as if the barrels were sensitive snouts that could sniff out the whereabouts of their prey. Starling motioned to his left and then pointed at his arrows. I'll take the main force, he was saying, you get the other two. Bonner nodded. Noiselessly, Starling unslung the short steel bow from his shoulder and slowly dragged an arrow from his quiver. The head of the shaft was three fingers in length and razor sharp. When it slammed into a man's body the pin in the head touched off the explosive charge set behind the point. It packed enough power to blow a man clean in half. No, thought Bonner, clean was the wrong word. There was nothing clean about getting hit by one of Starling's arrows. Almost as if he was controlled by strong sprung steel coils. Starling snapped into action. He stood up—he seemed to Bonner to be eight feet tall—and brought his bow up in front of him. Bonner watched the muscles in Starling's arm flex as he pulled the bow back as far as the string would go. Silently the arrow flew. The shaft slapped into the chest of a Stormer and detonated. The blast threw his companions to the ground and they lay there as pieces of the dead man's body rained down around them. It seemed to Bonner as if the smoky morning had turned a bloody, hazy red. He had whipped his Winchester from its holster and pumped two shells into the

Stormers that stalked him on the right. As the bullets smashed into their chests their expiring faces took on a peculiar, astonished look-as if surprised by the ease and haste of their own deaths. A second, a third arrow whipped through the air and exploded and the screams of the living Stormers were harsh and hot and scared. One-Bonner could see him clearly-had reacted well. He had dived for cover and was returning fire. He was carrying an old M-16, a mark of great prestige in the Stormer army. It was Drexy, one of Leather's colonels. Drexy was returning fire like a pro. Short rips from his automatic tore into the rusty sides of the truck cab. Starling scrambled up onto the roof of the trailer and Drexy's sights followed him. Bonner's hand slipped to his thigh and with a throw that carried all of his strength behind it, whipped one of his knives deep into Drexy's wide, white forehead. The Stormer's tongue shot out of his mouth, as if he had been strangled and his face quickly became a mask of blood. Suddenly, all was quiet. Starling was crouched on the trailer roof like a cat. He was looking about him, ready to strike again. "Bonner!" he yelled. "Yeah?" "How many'd you bring down?" "I make it three." "Me too. It was Drexy." "I know. Bonner." "What." "We're missing one." The remaining Stormer had crawled under the truck on which Bonner and Starling were standing. Very quietly, with a whisper of a wimper, he wet his pants. He closed his eyes and wished himself dead. When he opened his eyes he realized that there was a chance-just-that he might be able to save himself. Above his head was a dark gaping hole leading directly into the trailer of the truck. If he could just climb into it, perhaps, just perhaps they wouldn't find him... Carefully, slowly he climbed up into the blackness leaving a dark damp spot on the cracked old roadbed. Once inside the trailer he wrapped his arms around his knees and cowered there in the dark. "There's one more," said Starling. "You sure?" "Yes, I'm sure." "How can you tell? With those damn arrows there looks like there are pieces of twenty bodies here." "Well fuck it then," said Starling, "if he got away then he's lucky." The Stormer sat shivering in the darkness for hours, long after he heard the two powerful engines burst into life and drive off. Slowly he uncurled himself and crept from his hiding place. The sky was darkening and he felt alone and scared. The night would be heavy with menace. Through his fear, though, he suddenly realized something. Bonner. He knew the name. Bonner was inbound. Leather would want to know that. Chapter 7

Cooker heard the sounds of the firefight and twisted against the ropes that bound his wrists and ankles. He rolled around on the ground, kicked his legs and shook his shoulders in an effort to free himself. His exertions he accompanied with loud, strident curses. He was lying prone on the ground in the middle of a circle formed by the vehicles that the Stormers had left in the broken forecourt of an old motel. A smashed neon sign stood out on the old pitched roof of the office. Shady Rest Motel-Cooker could just make out the faded lettering, and he cursed that too, just for the hell of it. The Stormers had left him there with their vehicles when they went on foot into the traffic alley to set up the routine ambush. Cooker listened to the gunfire and he knew exactly what was going on. The Stormers were probably getting pasted-although Drexy was generally held to be no easy bring down-and if they got sliced, they wouldn't be coming back. And that left Cooker trussed up on the dirty cement in the middle of the motel's parking lot. He lay there and scared himself. Who knew what the hell came out at night? And besides, if he didn't get free he could starve to death or die of thirst or 'something equally nasty. A horrible thought hit him and he shuddered: rats. There were always rats in ruins. How long after dark would they pick up his scent then come sniffing around? Sure, Cooker had spent nights on the road before, plenty of them, but sleeping in your truck with your thrower at your side, well that had a way of making you feel secure... But now, tied up-he was a sitting duck. Abruptly the shooting stopped. Cooker lay still. He didn't know what to hope for. Had a raiding party taken down the Stormers? Maybe. That was good, but that was bad too. At least he wasn't a prisoner anymore. If the Stormers won then they would come back and at least he wouldn't get eaten

alive out here in the border lands. But they would take him to the Cap and that meant Leather and Leather meant trouble. But, Cooker reassured himself, they were a good six days from the Cap and anything could happen in six days. He decided to hope that his captors had brought down the raiders. That was what Leather paid the fucks to do anyway. "I never thought I'd see the day I'd be rooting for a bunch of scaly fuckin' Stormers," Cooker bellowed at the silent ruin of the Shady Rest Motel. In a funny kind of way, Cooker wanted to go to the Cap. There was something there he always wanted to see, he had heard about it, but he couldn't quite believe it actually existed. Maybe he would go all the way with these Stormers... Once he got to the Cap he could square Leather. Leather could be reasonable, right? Cooker shook his head in answer to his own question. No, Leather could never be reasonable. Cooker thought about this a moment and then figured he was probably losing his mind. Forget the Cap. If he went before Leather there would be no deal-making. Sure, Cooker had information that Leather wanted, but if Leather wanted it he would just torture it out of him. Cooker had heard that sometimes Leather made his prisoners eat their own... forget it. Cooker thought. He cursed again when, far off, he heard two engines burst into life. Those goddamn fucking Stormers! Taken down. He listened to the sounds of the engines in the still air. Taken down and a couple of raiders or smugglers or some other pieces of shit were heading on in search of slaver women or ammunition or food or gas. But they would never find what Cooker had found... Cooker cursed even louder when, just about dusk, it started to rain. Water poured from the sky in great sheets as if the clouds were dumping rain onto the dirty land in a desperate effort to cleanse it. Cooker was soaked instantly and with the water pouring onto his face he screamed and yelled and damned everyone from the Fates to the Stormers for bringing him to this sorry state. He rolled over onto his belly and started to crawl toward the minimal cover of one of the Stonner cars. As he made his way across the wet asphalt he suddenly found himself caught in the powerful beam of Bonner's light. In that second Cooker had two thoughts: I'm saved...I'm done for. Cooker twisted his head and looked over his shoulder. Through the pounding rain he could see the white shaft of light making the area around him as bright as day. "Hey! Who the fuck are you?" Bonner and Starling killed their engines. The light died a slow death. The only sound now was the thrumming of the rain on the concrete and the odd metallic ping it made when it hit the steel bodies of the dead Stormer's vehicles. Cooker was aware, even in that darkness, of the eyes of the drivers. He stared into the dark till his eyes hurt. He half expected each rumble of thunder to bring with it the crackle of gunfire. "Why don't you fucking say something?" "Well I'll be damned if it ain't the gas-man." Starling's laconic drawl sounded faintly amused. "Who's that? Who?" "You know," said Bonner, "I think it is the gas-man." "Who?" Then Cooker realized. "Bonner? Bonner? Is that you?" From the darkness came a chuckle. "You bet, gasman, it's me." There is a fucking God! thought Cooker. And joyful tears began to mix with the rain on his face. "Hey, Bonner. Untie me. Who are you with? Did you bring down that fuck Drexy? Son of a bitch!" Bonner spoke, as if he was meeting Cooker at a table at Dorca's instead of in that smoky and wet patch of borderlands. "Hey, Cooker, you seen Seth?" "Seth? Seth! Are you out of your fucking mind? Untie me, then we'll talk about that crazy nigger." "That's the gas-man all right," said Starling. "Who is that?" bellowed Cooker. "Starling," said Starling. "Starling? You fuck. You owe me." "So maybe I'll untie you." They untied Cooker and while he danced and capered, trying to get circulation back into his stiff limbs, Bonner and Starling methodically went through the Stormer's cars. Starling pocketed a huge old .45 automatic and was pleased when he located two spare clips of ammunition. Stowed in one vehicle was the patrol's rations and Starling and Cooker started a fire in the ruins of the motel and started preparing a meal. Bonner backed his own and Starling's vehicles over next to the Stormers' and started to drain their fuel tanks. That done, he joined his companions. "Look," said Starling, his mouth full. "Bread." Bonner accepted a piece of the gray, clayish substance and took a

bite. "Great," he said disgustedly. "Come on, Bonner," said Cooker, "when was the last time you had a piece of bread?" "You know he doesn't give a shit about food." "Where's your tanker. Cooker?" Bonner asked. "Down the road a ways. Other side of the big ruins." "So what happened." Cooker slurped some of the rations into his face. It was some kind of meat and it tasted great to him "Man," he said, "I seen the promised land..." Starling stopped eating. "What's that supposed to mean?" In the firelight. Cooker's mean, dirty face seemed to soften, as if he was suddenly thinking about a beautiful girl, clean sheets and a secure place. "Man, I found it. I found what I been looking for all these years." "Don't tell me you found the tanks?" "Fucked if I didn't." Cooker had been talking about this for years. Somewhere, he was sure there was a huge, undiscovered stockpile of gas. A reservoir so vast that he could sell and sell until he was the richest man on the continent. Cooker, by profession, was a tanker, a gas-man, a gas-hound-there were a lot of names for his type although there weren't too many men that followed his particular calling. Sure, raiders and smugglers were always on the look out for the stuff but they didn't seek it out the way guys like Cooker did. The tankers worked with the single-mindedness of the old prospectors looking for gold. There was something about being a gas-hound that made you crazy, thought Bonner as he looked into Cooker's lunatic eyes. It was probably because if you were a gas-man you drove around by yourself with a big tank mounted on the frame of your car, a huge drum that carried maybe three hundred, perhaps four hundred gallons. You were a sitting duck pushing that big rig all over the continent. You could be spotted from miles away, you had no speed with all that weight and everybody, but everybody, wanted what you were carrying. They always worked alone, the gas-men, and they trusted no one. They were always sure that they were a target-and that was usually true. "So?" said Starling, "where is it?" Cooker sat back on his heels and turned his face toward the dripping ceiling, opened his mouth and laughed, braying like a donkey. He laughed so hard he fell sideways and kicked his feet and squirmed and pounded the floor with his fists. After the fit passed he wiped his eyes. "That was a good one, Starling... Where is it," he said, as if to himself, and laughed a little again. "You think I'm going to tell you? You must be fucking crazy." "Just asking," said Starling. "Don't forget you owe for a tank. I gave it to you on credit..." "The hell you did." "Hey, Cooker, how come you're still alive," Bonner asked suddenly. "What do you mean?" "I mean that Stormers aren't famous for taking prisoners." Cooker scowled. "Yeah, I know. When they caught me I told 'em. I told 'em I had found the tanks... Man I am glad you took 'em down..." "You told them where they were?" "Nawww, I just told them I had found out where they were and I'd only tell Leather. If they killed me, they would never find out." Bonner's face darkened. "But you were going to tell Leather." "Don't be an asshole, Bonner. I was stalling. I figure I had a few days before I had to worry about Leather, but right at that moment I just didn't want those Stormers to slice my ass. You know that Drexly... He likes entertainment of a certain variety." "Very smart. Cooker," growled Starling. "If we hadn't come along and taken those guys down the whole fucking Stormer battalion would have been out looking for your find." "And don't think I'm not obliged to you gents," said Cooker. "Tomorrow we go to my truck and I'll give you a free fill up." "Then what are you going to do?" Cooker laughed. "I'm outbound for Chi. I'm going back and I'm going to have your friend Lucky make me the biggest tank the continent has seen since the bomb. Then I'm inbound for the promised land. And I'm going to keep going back until... until..." Cooker's eyes glazed over. "Shit, you should see it, Bonner. Hundreds of 'em, tanks as big as... fuck I don't know.. , big. Worth a fortune, and all mine..." Bonner and Starling exchanged glances. "How long till some raider follows you. Cooker?" asked Starling. Cooker suddenly looked very mean. "Some fucking raider follows me and I'll fry the skin off his bones. I'll bum him so bad he'll wish he hadn't left home. No one is going to take this away from me. Not a raider, not Leather and not you either..." Cooker's eyes glowed and he looked as if he was sure that Starling and Bonner

were just about to jump him. "Settle down. Cooker. It's your stash. All we want to be is customers." "Maybe," said Cooker. "Some fucking thanks," said Starling, a note of disgust in his voice. Chapter 8 The rain in the night had made the smoky air damp and it seemed to stick to their clothes like mud. Bonner awoke in the ruins of the motel, smelled the dirty air and told himself he would be glad to get out of the borderlands. The farther he advanced into the Slavestates, the more danger he would face, but it would be better than hanging around in the smoky hell of the borderlands. He eased himself to his feet, feeling the cold of a long, wet night in his bones and in a dozen old wounds. He stood in the gray morning light looking east wondering for a moment if it was worth going on. Ahead of him lay miles of firefights, pain and death. And that was before he made the Cap. Turn back now, he thought, go back to Chi. But a single fact chased his longings from his mind: Dara. Cooker sidled up to him. "Starling tells me you're going to the Cap." "That's right." "Ever been there?" "Years ago." "Tell me about the Cap, Bonner." "Lots of big buildings, ruins. Lots of big ruins. There's a river. A lot of broken roads, broken statues... Cooker, the Cap isn't any different from any other bombed-out city, except the ruins are prettier." "Tell me," said Cooker eagerly, "is there one big mother of a ruin, they say it's fucking huge." "They're all huge. Cooker." "Yeah, I know, but this one is huge. I mean really fucking enormous and it's got a big round whatdyacallit on the roof." "A dome." "Yeah, a dome. Is there one like that?" "Yeah, Cooker, there's one like that." "Damn," said Cooker as if he couldn't believe it. "Damn." "Yo, Bonner, Cooker, let's get moving." Starling was swinging up into the seat of his rig. "Can I ride with you, Bonner?" Cooker asked like a child begging for another bedtime story. "Yeah, sure." The going was still pretty tough in the alley. Bonner's car led, bumping along the narrow track while Cooker stood where the passenger's seat would have been, his back braced against the crossbar on which the machinegun was mounted. The roar of the powerful engines bounced off the steel walls making it seem as if the two vehicles were trapped in a sealed box of noise. "Hey, Bonner," Cooker shouted, "you got any idea how bad the gas situation is inside the Slavestates?" "Yeah," shouted Bonner, "bad." "Fucking right it's bad. Leather has every drop. Every lick of gas north and south of the Cap for two-three hundred miles." Bonner nodded. This wasn't news to him. "If they need gas in New York or some other garrison, they have to ask him and he sends it. They have tanks too, they travel in convoys." Bonner nodded again. He had been known to bring down a convoy now and then. Never in the Slavestates though, they were too big. He would hit convoys in the Snows or the Hots. They were smaller and two smugglers could handle them if they planned the right ambush at the right place. "So how do you plan to get in and out with your machine here? When you're outbound again, heading for Chi you're gonna be having your ass chased by every Stormer and Radlep on the coast. You won't have time to go sniffing around for no oasis. You're gonna have to point your nose west and haul ass. Run out of gas and you're a dead man." This wasn't new either. "So..." Cooker scratched the stubble on his chin. "So, I been thinking." Bonner silently wished that Cooker wouldn't think. It wasn't that he wasn't good at it, but somehow his plans always seemed to come out wrong. "You wanna know what I been thinking, Bonner?" "Sure." "I been thinking that you could use a tanker alongside." "What are you talking about. Cooker." "I'm talking about going with you to the Cap." "Cooker, what do you want to go to the Cap for?" "Got my reasons." Man, he thought, do I have my reasons. He was going to do his own little piece of damage to that shit Leather. It would be quite a sight. And it would make him richer, richer than the great tank field he found would do. Yes, Cooker thought, he had been doing some pretty smart reasoning. Bonner was smart, but Cooker thought he was smarter. Cooker told himself that he could have been an Outrider, if he had wanted. "What reasons?" "They're mine, Bonner. All I want you to do is get me into the Cap. You do that and you got me and my tank, no charge-" it was hard for Cooker to say the last two words-"all the way in and all the way out.

What do you say?" Bonner always knew the gas-hounds were crazy. "Cooker," he began. "Cut the shit, Bonner. Its a fair deal. You're going to need a hundred, maybe hundred-fifty gals. My tank has five hundred, full..." Cooker ran an experienced eye over the fuel tank he was standing on. "What you got here, a fifty?" "Right." "And you got a thirsty machine. Think, you fuck. No fuel problems all the way into the Cap and all the way back to sweet Chi-town. And don't forget, I got my thrower. I'll help out in a firelight." He giggled. "I'll make it a real firefight." Bonner drove in silence for a minute. He didn't need any fuel problems. And he didn't need the crazy little tanker man around either. It was a question of which was the bigger hassle... Finally he said: "Deal, Cooker." Cooker smiled and laughed his crazy little giggle. "You won't regret it... We're coming up on my tank. Just up the ways a piece." Cooker's tanker was pulled up on the side of the road exactly where the little gas-man had left it. When he saw it. Cooker's eyes lit up, like a proud father. "Ain't she a honey, Bonner?" He jumped down from Bonner's car and scampered over to his old truck and climbed onto it with the agility of a chimp. Starling pulled up next to Bonner and shut down his engine. "That damn tank is the ugliest thing I have ever seen on two wheels, three wheels, four wheels or six." "Who drives six wheels?" "No one yet, but someone will. And when they do it'll still be prettier than that thing." The tanker was about as simple as a vehicle could be. A huge drum, a mean-looking welding job of rough iron plates joined together like a patchwork quilt sat squarely on a huge cast iron chassis. At the fore end was a big old engine looted from some long dead semi, completely exposed. Protruding from beneath the engine was a shaft over which a heavy gear chain hooked. This ran from the front of the truck to the sprocketed wheel on the rear axle, giving the behemoth a single gear, chain drive like a bicycle. The contraption was steered, by brute force, from atop the tank itself. Up there. Cooker had built himself a little perch, like the box on a stagecoach, with the steering wheel flat in front of him attached to the front axle by a long L-shaped steering column. Behind him, incongruously, was a big umbrella, like the one that people used to take to the beach, which he opened when he needed shelter from the rain or shade to fight the hot sun. Cooker climbed up to his box seat and slipped into the harness that held the weapon that was his trademark. A bright red cannister hung on his back like an old scuba tank and a long rubber hose snaked through the harness, around Cooker's waist into his hands. At the end of the hose was a big brass nozzle. Cooker reached over his shoulder and grasped a small pump handle that protruded from atop the tank. He worked it in and out once or twice and opened the nozzle on the hose a touch. Bonner and Starling could see a fine shimmer of gas dancing in the air. Cooker lit the shimmering cloud with an old Zippo lighter then opened the nozzle wide. A roaring jet of flame spewed out of the hose and leapt onto some stunted vegetation. It vanished as if in a firestorm. Involuntarily, Starling and Bonner winced. They could feel the searing heat of the blast thirty feet away. Cooker giggled and ran across the back of the tank and let another bolt of flame shoot from his thrower. The fireball burnt itself out in the morning air, leaving a heavy orb of black smoke. The air was heavy with the smell of burnt gasoline. "How many gals do you s'pose he's dancing around on?" asked Starling. "He told me five hundred." "For tuck's sake. Cooker," shouted Starling. "Would you stop jumping around on that tank with all that fire. You want to kill us all?" "What's the matter. Starling? Make you nervous?" "Damn right it does. It's what I call taking an unnecessay risk." "Awwww, now don't you go worrying about a thing. This old gasoline ain't going to hurt her daddy." "I think that fuck's crazy," said Starling. Cooker let fly with another blast of flame. It consumed the few pieces of upholstery still clinging to the frame of an old convertible that lay rusting next to the tank. The flames danced over the metalwork, blistering the few remaining chips of paint. Cooker watched with feverish eyes, delighted by his own capacity for destruction. "And that, boys and girls, is why they call me Cooker! Do you know they used these things to put out fires?" He cackled. "Can you beat that? They called 'em fire

'stinguishers. What a fucked up place the old world was." "I know the fuck's crazy," said Starling. "Get used to him," said Bonner, "he's riding with us." "Now I think you're crazy." "Come on. Cooker. Stop playing. We got to go." "Yessir, Mr. Bonner. Onwards to the Cap." Cooker slipped into the seat and started up his engine. The noise was deafening. He grabbed the lever that slipped the truck into gear and yanked it and the engine started working hard, driving that big chain. The noise doubled in intensity. "Only we're not going to the Cap," Bonner shouted, "not yet. We're going to make a stop first." "We are," bellowed Starling. "Where?" "New York." "What for?" "Seems to me we could use two things before we visit Leather." "Yeah. Ammo's one, right?" "Yes. And the other's Harvey." "Harvey's in New York? What's he doing there?" "He's in jail." "Great," said Starling, disgustedly. "And we have to get him out, right." "Right." "He's not on the island is he?" "I can't imagine them putting him anywhere else." "Going to the Cap isn't enough for you? You want to hit the island too? Why did they have to put him there?" "Well, at least we know where to find him." Cooker watched the conversation pass between the two men and smiled. He couldn't hear a thing, but he was happy. He figured he had made a pretty shrewd move. He had hired the two best former Outriders to escort him into the Cap. Well, Starling was one of the best. Leather was better than Starling, but in a fair fight Bonner was better than Leather. But, he wondered, who fought fair anymore? Chapter 9 The lone survivor of the massacre of Drexly and his patrol crawled out of his hiding place the morning after the firelight, miserable, yet glad to be alive. He had sat awake the whole night listening to the thrumming of the rain on the leaky roof of his rusting metal shelter. He emerged hungry, tired, cold and with the pale yellowish look of a man who has spent a long time afraid. During the night though, he had managed to focus his thoughts enough to construct some sort of plan in his mind. First he would head toward the camp that he and his fellow Stormers had established at the head of the alley. Once he got back to the camp he was going to grab his bike and head south before turning sharply east for the Cap. Perhaps if he brought Leather news of Bonner's coming. Leather wouldn't freak out, lose it completely and put him away. As he started down the highway he remembered that they had taken that gas-hound prisoner. That seemed like days ago. The Stormer hoped the guy had escaped-otherwise he was going to have to grease him. Alone, he couldn't handle a prisoner. Suddenly, the idea of having someone to take down, someone to work out his frustrations on, cheered him. It would be some consolation for having been scared into wetting his pants. There in the smoky sunlight, the Stormer, whose name was Bart, thought a little about the possibility of revenging himself on Bonner. Telling Leather would be a start but what he would really like to do is get the big smuggler in the sights of his carbine. Then Bart remembered the vicious fire that Bonner had laid down with that Winchester pump and the eerie accuracy with which he directed those huge blades... Bart decided that he would content himself with telling Leather that Bonner was on his way. I might be a fuck up, he thought, "but I'm not stupid." Bart knew when he was outclassed. He reached the camp and was disappointed to find Cooker gone. His disappointment turned to anger and frustration when he discovered that Bonner had drained all the gas tanks of the seven bikes and had eaten or stolen all the supplies. Bart slumped onto the seat of what had once been Drexly's machine and wondered when he was going to get a break. He sat dejected for a minute or two then began wearily trudging down the road. He remembered they had passed a village when they had been headed for the border but he couldn't quite figure out how far back it had been. He hoped it wasn't far. It was. He walked all day, getting more tired, hotter and hungrier with every step. He was crazy with anger when along about dusk Bart began seeing signs of civilization or at least what passed for civilization in the Slavestates. The road had been cleared a little and the barren fields that lay next to it appeared to be under some sort of primitive form of cultivation. Another slow mile passed before he saw, standing in the stony fields, a small group of men, three of them, all leaning on hoes. They

watched him. "Slave farmers," thought Bart. He stopped on the road. "Hey, c'mere," he shouted. The men slowly shuffled from their spot and approached him warily. Bart could feel their eyes on his carbine. Good, he thought, he could use some respect. He had no doubt that if he didn't have that piece they might approach him with something less than diffidence. Lone Stomers cut off from their units had been known to die under mysterious circumstances. The slave farmers sidled up to him cautiously, like puppies unsure whether they were going to get a pet or a kick. "Come on, granpa," said Bart to the oldest, an elderly man with a long white beard, "nobody's gonna hurt you." The three men stood before him and tugged at their dirty, matted forelocks. They averted their eyes, yet kept a sharp look on the carbine. "Where's your village?" demanded Bart. "Down the road a ways," said the oldest man. "How far?" "Not far." "You got a tax man?" "Yessir, yessir, we do." "Got two," said one of the men. "That's right, sir, we got two." "Where are they?" "In the village." "Down the road." "Nice men," put in the third, as if Bart was a friend of the tax men and wanted to curry favor. Bart smiled. Nice taxers? No such thing. If people thought the Stonners were bloodthirsty crazies, they were considered gentlemen next to the tax men. In fact, of all of Leather subjects the most feared were the tax men, except for maybe the Radleps, but there weren't many of them anymore and one day they would all be gone. "What are their names?" "Uh... we just call 'em master, sir." "Good enough," said Bart. "Go back to your shit there." Dismissed, the slave farmers shuffled away and watched as he disappeared down the road. Bart could feel their eyes on his back. Pathetic pieces of shit, he thought. If he was in their position he would have lit out for Chi a long time ago. Another mile passed and Bart came into a typical rubble village. There had been a town here once, a real town, with neat little all-American houses and little stores and a garage and a post office. Now there was nothing but ruins into which the slave fanners had burrowed until they felt safe from the cold and wind of the long post-bomb night. A scraggly-looking bunch of children watched as Bart picked his way down the main street, a pig snuffled in the garbage that lay strewn around and some scrawny chickens pecked here and there. A gray-looking woman, a baby clinging to a flat breast, stared at him as he passed. She was standing in front of the dark, cave-like entrance of her burrow. The few inhabitants all wore shredded homespuns that hung limply on their thin bodies. Bart, in a genuine pre-bomb leather jacket and well-made denim pants ("genuine leevies," the quartermaster had said when they were issued to him), looked to them like a monarch on a triumphal progress. Bart had no problem figuring out which building housed the tax men. In the center of town. there remained one structure that was not a complete ruin. It had stout white pillars in front and wide glass-less windows that were protected by thick iron bars. FIRST NATIONAL BANK OF MIDDLEB---, the rest of the sign had been blown off. A dirty curtain flapped in front of the space where the door had once been. Bart swept it aside and peered into the gloom. It was dark inside, but he could make out a broad space that fronted some broken counters that looked as if they had been decked about with the bars of a cage. The wall was lined with miniature prisons, or so it seemed to Bart. A broken sign-"payroll checks only"-lay on the floor. The big room smelled of sweat and the smoke of a wood stove and the rancid bitter odor of meat cooked long ago. "Anyone here?" he called into the cavernous space. He took a tentative step into the room. "Hey?" he shouted. Very slowly, someone spoke. "Who the fuck is that?" "Where are you?" said Bart. The voice sounded mean. But what could you expect from a tax man? "If you are a slave and you've come in here, you are dead meat." "I'm no fucking slave," said Bart indignantly. "I'm a Stormer." "What outfit?" "Drexy's," said Bart. "No shit," said the voice. "Over here." Bart walked in the direction of the voice, skirting the caged-in counter. He held the carbine at the ready. These tax men could get crazy sometimes-it only figured, them being out here in the wilds year in year out. Bart was surprised to see that the tax man was not behind the counter. "Where are you?" "Here," said the voice. Bart turned

toward an open doorway. The door was a huge hunk of metal that had rusted open on its hinges. A faint light flickered from within. Bart stepped into the doorway and peered in. The room was a narrow one and its only piece of furniture was a dirty bed. Reclining there was a full-bearded man, bare-chested. A dirty sheet covered him from the waist down. Two young women, as thin and as pale as the woman Bart had seen on the street, lay next to him. A kerosene lamp burnt smok-ily next to the bed. "Well, a big brave, tough Stormer," said the man nastily. He showed a couple of rows of big yellow teeth when he spoke. "You the tax man for this district?" "One of 'em." "Where's the other one?" "Working." "You the night man?" He nodded. The tax men were Leather's pro-consuls. They had been sent out from the Cap to oversee the conquered territories. It was up to them to extract the most in the way of food and fuel from the bands of slaves that worked endlessly to support the few citizens of the Slavestates that had any kind of prominence. The Stormers, Leather and his hangers on, the jailers and gas men in places like New York and Boston, all of them lived off the labor of the slaves. The tax men were the law in their districts. Their own income was based on a percentage of the produce they could extract from the district. Naturally, the job made men hard-minded. You couldn't be soft and be a tax man of any importance or wealth. In some of the more remote areas, such as the one Bart was in, tax men worked in pairs. A tax man was not beloved of his charges and they had been murdered in their sleep. So labor was divided between the day man and the night man-though it was not uncommon for one to kill the other and double his profit. Leather didn't care who killed whom as long as the food, the gas, the women flowed into the Cap. "Where's the Drex?" asked the tax man taking his hands from under the sheet and stretching. In one hand he held a pistol. "Dead." "No shit." "We got jumped by a bunch of raiders..." said Bart, acutely aware of how lame his voice sounded. "Awww, that's too bad." There was no love lost between tax men and the Stormers. The tax men were responsible for outfitting the Stormer patrols when they were on the road and that cut into profits. "Look, man," said Bart suddenly angry, "I gotta get back to the Cap." "Well get on your bike and ride, man... wait a minute. I didn't hear no bike..." "I told you, man, we got jumped. Sliced. All of 'em, except me." "Oh yeah and where the fuck were you?" "I got lucky." "The fuck you did. You hightailed it, more like." "Listen," said Bart through his teeth, "if you don't help me get back to the Cap then there's going to be a shit storm around here. I got information for Leather." "For Leatherman himself? Wow, I'm impressed." One of the women stretched. She had an angry red bruise on her breast. What skags these tax men were, thought Bart. "There's something you should know, man..." "Yeah. what?" "You got troubles in this district and the sooner I get back to the Cap and let them know about it the sooner you are going to be able to sleep peaceful with these little puppies here." "Trouble, what trouble?" "Bonner took us down, man. Bonner and one big fucking party of raiders. Bonner's inside your district and believe me, if he comes looking for you, you are dead." The tax man appeared to have paled slightly. "Bonner? Are you sure?" "I saw him grease seven guys, man." "Bonner doesn't work the Slaves, man," he protested. "And he don't work with raiders." "He does now, you fuck, he does now." "Goddam. Why don't he go raid the Snows? Or the Hots? I'm having trouble meeting my quota as it is. Shit." "Leather wants Bonner. You get me to the Cap and this district will be crawling with Stormers, all of them protecting your ass." "And eating my profit," growled the tax man. "No profits for a dead man." The tax man thought a moment. "I can get you over to Scranton. From there you can pick up some patrol or maybe a convoy to the Cap. Suit you?" "Just fine, just fine." "Bonner, shit." "Yeah man, and you should see that dude work a blade." "I don't want to see that, man." The tax man was quite scared. He had never seen Bonner, but he certainly had heard of him. The man was trouble. "You got anything to eat?" "Eat? You ain't got time to eat. You're getting your ass over to Scranton. Tonight." The two girls read the note of fear in the tax man's voice and smiled at one another. They risked a whipping

if he caught them, but it was worth it, for they liked to hear him scared and hoped he would die at the hands of this man Bonner. They hated their master greatly. Chapter 10 They hit the big river that bordered New York after dark. A few days' hard travelling had brought them to that point, but trouble with Starling's engine slowed them down in the last few miles. They reached the river late at night, with a pale sliver of moon throwing a thin light on the desolate landscape. Bonner had heard that men used to measure time by the moon at night as they used the sun during the day. Back then time meant something. Now it was just light and dark, day and night. Most preferred the light to the dark, they figured they were safe then, that if they could see who was gunning for them they could get there first. Bonner preferred the darkness. He could move through it, use it, strike from it. Darkness was his fortress. Bonner's little party perched on the steep bluff overlooking the river. It had been a wide ribbon of water once, over a mile across, but now it was just a shallow stream a hundred yards wide, maybe, and never more than waist deep. The bluff on the Jersey side was littered with bombed-out buildings rising up on the cliffs like rows of broken teeth. Starling, Bonner and Cooker looked out on the dark welt that was the old Manhattan island. It was spread over with the faint outline of jagged buildings, thousands of them, their ruined walls straining up out of the rubble like a stunted, twisted forest. Upriver a ways they could see the collapsed bulk of a huge bridge. The two girder-iron towers lay against one another, forming a tall arch over the lazy river, like great trees stopped in mid-air as they fell. The roadway that the towers had supported once had toppled into the river and the water washed over it. They could see, in the darkness, the white foam as the river broke over the old shattered concrete and the bent, rusting metal. "We leave the cars here," said Bonner. He knew the city would be as silent as a tomb. To bring three screaming engines down those cavernous streets would alert every Stormer on the island. "How are we going to get across the fucking river?" demanded Cooker. "We walk," said Bonner. "Could be hot," said Cooker. "It's cool." "I'll get my tanks wet." "Damn Cooker," hissed Starling, "are you in this thing or not? 'Cause if you're out, then just get the hell out of here." Cooker thought of the vision, the sweet and tanta-lizing vision that had haunted him since he had decided to throw in his lot with Bonner. "Yeah, I'm in." They slithered down the side of the valley, following, as far as they could the old roads that ran down to the docks that had once lined the river. The piers stood high and dry, far from any water. The air was heavy with the stink of wood that had been rotting for decades. An old tugboat, looking like some huge toy, lay on its side, the black mud of the riverbed oozing over it. Eventually it would claim the vast bulk of the vessel. "Psst, Bonner-" Starling's voice in the darkness. "You figure any patrols?" "No." That was good enough for Starling, but not for Cooker. "Why not?" "Because we are too far away." "Too far away from what?" Bonner waded a few yards further on the black mud flats before replying. "Tell me, Cooker, you ever been here before?" "What's that got to do with anything?" "Everything." "No, I aint never been here before," Cooker admitted. "Okay now, listen. We are walking toward an island," Bonner began, as if he was explaining a complicated fact to a child. "Yeah, I know," Cooker interrupted. "You told me, we're going to the island. The one you said your friend was on..." "No," said Bonner, shaking his head in the dark, "that's a different island." "Okay." Cooker stopped just as they reached the sluggish waters of the river. "How many fucking islands are there?" "Two," said Starling. "And where's your buddy?" "On the other one," said Starling. "You guys, you don't make any sense." "We're going onto the main island first," said Bonner patiently. "They call it New York island. They used to call it Manhattan." "I don't give a shit what they used to call it," said Cooker grumpily. "Cooker," said Starling, "you are more trouble than you're worth." "You know. Starling, you are begging to get fried." "Try it gas-hound," Bonner heard Starling slip the safety on the big.45 on his hip. "Oakly, cut it," Bonner commanded, "both of you." "He started it," said

Cooker petulantly. "We are going onto New York island. Then we are going to head south. That's that way." Bonner gestured in the darkness. "Which way? Can't see." "To your right. At the tip of the island there's a Stormer camp. We're going to take them and get some ammunition. Me and Starling are running low and we're going to need it." Cooker snorted. "Guns! What a waste of time." They were in the middle of the river now, wading against the current, the slow black water swirled against them like syrup. "Hate getting wet," said Cooker. "We know. We got noses." "Bonner! Tell your man here to leave me be!" Bonner smiled to himself. Once Starling started to needle there was no way to stop him. "Cooker, I think you can take care of yourself." "He's making fun of me. Ranking me, all the time, never lets up. Shit." "Best way to handle Starling is to make fun of him back." "Or kill him," said Cooker savagely. Starling laughed. "Save your flame, tanker-man. Mr. Bonner ain't told you the good part yet." "There's another island. Cooker." "Yeah, I know. You said." "That's where it's going to get hot," said Starling soberly. "I like it hot." "They call it prison island. It's out in the middle of the bay." "The what?" "The bay. This river joins up with a bigger piece of water. Out in the middle of it is the prison island. That's where Harvey is." "And what did they use to call that?" asked Cooker sarcastically. "Ellis," said Bonner, "Ellis Island." "And you didn't think he would know, did you, tanker-man?" They slogged along in silence for a few more minutes. "Hey, Bonner," said Cooker breaking the silence, "how come you know all this shit." "Books," said Bonner. "Books? I don't think I know him." Cooker was genuinely mystified. Bonner sighed. Starling laughed. "Forget it, Cooker." They waded ashore, crossed the broken skeleton of an old highway and took cover in a wide swath of vegetation that sprawled in a vast tangle alongside the road. Bonner pushed into the jungle and they hacked their way into the undergrowth not stopping until they came to a square clearing with a cracked concrete floor. The rotten tatters of a net divided the square into two equal parts. Bonner sat down on the smooth surface and wiped his brow. Starling and Cooker slumped down next to him. "I'm beat," said Starling. "Me too," said Cooker. "And I'm wet and tired and hungry." Bonner looked at the night sky. He could just make out a patch of it through the riot of vegetation that was arrayed over his head. Daylight soon. "We resting up here, Bonner?" asked Starling. "What do you think?" "No one'll find us." "No, probably not. But it means we're going to have to wait all through tomorrow before we make our next move." "That's right." "I think we should get underground. We'll head down the tunnel tomorrow and take them after dark." "Underground?" said Cooker, his voice full of alarm. "Underground?" "This whole island has tunnels underneath. Miles and miles of them. They run north-south mostly. Some east-west. But no one knows where all of them go." "Tunnels? What for?" "They used to run trains on them." "Trains? You mean like that old hunk of iron Seth has? They got tunnels big enough for that?" "Yep." "Well, that will be a sight to see." Bonner led them out of the underbrush to a broad avenue that ran alongside the ruins of the old park. The huge old buildings looked down on them, their silhouettes plain against the lightening sky. The smashed windows looked like sightless eyes. The street seemed to be ankle deep in broken glass and it crackled and crunched under their boots like fresh snow. At the convergence of several broad avenues they saw the walls of a smaller shelter and Bonner walked confidently toward it, with the air of a man who knew where he was going. It stood in the middle of the convergent streets and Starling could see that once waves of traffic must have broken over the little island. A cracked mosaic on the wall of the ruin read: 72nd Street. Bonner darted inside and stopped at the top of a flight of steps. They led down into a darkness so impenetrable that they could only see the first few steps before the rest vanished completely. "Down there?" said Cooker. "Afraid?" asked Starling. "No. You go first." Bonner disappeared into the gloom followed by Starling then Cooker. Every step they took rang in the silence. At the base of the steps there was a broad platform. Bonner stopped for a moment then started

kicking the debris that lay scattered about into a pile. "Bonner, what the fuck are you doing?" "Looking for stuff to make a fire." Cooker supplied the light and soon they had a smoky fire going. The flames halfheartedly consumed the paint flecked wood of the old bench they had broken up. The thin, weak light cast long shadows. Bonner sat down leaning against a worn old pillar and looked around him. He picked out a sign but he couldn't read it. It was in a language he did not recognize. It mystified him. He always thought that New York was part of America. He stared at the words: "La via del tren subterraneo es peligrosa..." Next to it, there was a message in English, intended, Bonner supposed for American visitors: "The subway tracks are dangerous..." Bonner looked down the tunnel. You could say that again, he thought. "Starling, I'll take first watch." "Fine." "Cooker, you're third." "Watch? I thought you said we didn't have to worry about no Stormers?" "It's not Stormers I'm worried about." "What then?" "Ha," laughed Starling, "Stormers are the least of your troubles down here." "What are you talking about?" a little note of panic had crept into Cooker's voice. "Rats," said Bonner matter of factly. "When it's your watch make sure you keep that fire going. And stay close to it." Cooker shivered. For the first time he looked down the tunnel and saw the faint light reflected in a million yellow eyes. "If one rat, so much as one little fucker comes near me, so help me I'll fry 'em all." "Not enough gas in the world for that," said Bonner. The bomb had killed millions upon millions of people but it seemed to have spawned a billion rats. They would never die. When all the men and women and children were dead, when the firelands burnt themselves out, when the hardy vegetation reclaimed every square inch of the tortured stone world that man had built and then destroyed, when the past would not even be a memory because there was no one left to remember it, there would still be the rats. Fat, sleek killers waiting to claim the world. "This whole fucking thing was a mistake," said Cooker to no one in particular. Bonner settled himself on the subway platform and watched the fire, listening while Cooker grumbled about the damp, the rats, the stink... Then the gas-hound fell asleep, though it seemed to Bonner that he would awake from time to time to do a little more hitching, just in case Bonner had forgotten that the Cooker-man had some very definite opinions about being dragged down into the black heart of New York. Once Cooker woke up Starling and a brief shouting match erupted between the two riders. "I been everywhere," said Cooker disgustedly, "and this is the worse place I ever been..." "If you don't shut your fucking mouth, little man," said Starling sleepily, "I am going to cut your balls off and make you eat 'em." "Like to see you try you... you..." "Big tough man, a real hard case," taunted Starling. "You know, Starling, I never liked you. All big talk, but you are just one dump pitiful piece of shit. You can hardly do enough raiding to keep that old shit wagon of yours running." "Shout a little louder," said Bonner, "I think we'd all want to have a visit from some Stormers tonight, wouldn't we." "You said there are no patrols," whined Cooker. "Cooker we can be heard for miles down these tunnels. All it takes is for one Stormer to be awake and bored." "You sound scared, Bonner." Starling hooted with laughter in the darkness. "What a prick you are. Cooker." "Bonner, make him leave me be!" "Cool it. Star..." "You know Cooker, I wouldn't go to sleep if I was you. I just might take a stroll down the tunnel and find me a nice fat rat and stick it down your pants." "There ain't no one down there but relatives of yours. Starling." "Shuttup," ordered Bonner, "both of you. There might not be any patrols but there are sure to be Rat People down here." "The who?" asked Cooker. "Rat People. Sometime they call 'em tunnel-scum." "Now who the fuck are they?" "They are some very strange little guys. Cooker. They live down here, they are probably the only people who know their way through all of the tunnels. There aren't as many as there once were. Sometimes the Stormers catch them and keep them like pets. But they don't live for long in the light." "The Stormers don't kill the little fucks?" "Nawww. They don't hurt anyone, besides sometimes the Stormers use them for guides down here." "They live down here?" "They eat the rats." "Ick," said Cooker, rearranging himself

on the dirty platform. He lay his head down. "Ick," he said again. Silence fell and Bonner went back to leaning against the rusty steel pillar that supported the vaulted concrete roof. The place was once alive with people, he thought, people who came down into this damp tomb every day, never thinking twice about it. He thought, for the thousandth time, what an odd place the old world must have been. The fire started to bum low and the rats rustled as if the dying flames were a signal to become bold, to sniff a little closer to the strange invaders to their underworld lair. Bonner kicked the charred wood and some lethargic flames flared up. He tossed some more wood onto the pile and it smoked. He needed some more gasoline. No matter how gently he tried he knew he would wake up Cooker if he attempted to get the little gas-hound's flame thrower away from him and that would definitely set up an hour or so of wailing and hollering. Better just to wake him up. He shook Cooker's shoulder and the man awoke instantly. "What? What? What's going on?" "Nothing," said Bonner, "I just need a little flame for the fire." Cooker didn't even get out of his tangle of blankets. He hiked himself up on one elbow, grasped the nozzle of his death dealer and spat some gas right onto the flames. The fire raced up to the ceiling and in the moment of bright light Bonner saw three men- tiny, hunched, filthy men-standing on the track bed, a hoard of rats swirling round them like a strong gray current. "Damn," said Bonner. The three Rat People knew they had been seen and scuttled down the tracks. Bonner raced after them, leaping down from the platform onto the tracks. "Where in the name of every fucking dick-brained raider are you going?" screamed Cooker. "Stay there," yelled Bonner, "and don't let that fire go out." "The man is a lunatic," said Cooker. Bonner pounded down the dark track, following the retreating footsteps of the three tunnel scum. Rats squeaked and scattered before him although a couple of the bolder animals tried to bite him as he passed. Bonner knew he had to catch up with the Rat People before they carried him too far into the tunnels-they knew every inch of them and he did not. They could lead him for hours and then leave him, lost in the damp, dirty world. A man could wander for days and never find his way out. And when Bonner caught these strange little men, he was going to have to kill them. He had no doubt that they would barter away the information that there were three raiders in the tunnels to the Stormers for some scraps of food. Bonner tripped and fell, falling into the slime pool that always seems to run down the middle of the trail tracks. The oozy water wasn't more than a few inches deep but the scum seemed to cover him like oil. He managed to hold his head out of it; he thought of a single drop of the stuff touching his lips and shuddered. He picked himself up and ran again. He dashed into the next station and then stopped. In the darkness he could no longer hear the patter of the retreating tunnel scum. Either they had outdis-tanced him or they were hiding somewhere in the darkness. Bonner stopped and felt the rush of rats around his feet like tall grass. He jumped involuntarily. Out of the blackness came a giggle. "He's scared," yelled a voice. Bonner moved like an animal. The first of his knives flew out of his holster, into his hand and split the darkness aimed for the site of the sound. There was a sudden strangled cry that seemed to echo through the tunnels and the sound of a body thrashing against the wall of the station. There was the terrible rushing sound of a human body letting go, failing to control its bowels. Then the man fell. Bonner felt the instinctive early warning, a creep of the flesh on the back of his head that told him that someone was behind him, poised to strike with a heavy object. He darted to his right and felt the wind caused by the onrushing club breeze by his face. An elbow shot out and caught the chin bone of the Rat; through his shirt Bonner could feel the skin on the chin split as the force of the blow pulled it taut. Blood poured. A second knife was in Bonner's hand and as the man fell Bonner locked his arm around the neck of the tunnel scum and drove the wide blade deep into the man's back, driving up from waist level, slicing a kidney in two neat portions. The close contact with the filthy body made Bonner gag. A dead, soiled smell of filth and darkness assailed his nose and as the man fell Bonner could feel that his thin body was decked out with the usual tunnel scum

jewelry: rats' teeth and rats' jaws and rats' tails, festooning the man's hair and shoulders. Bonner pushed the corpse away with a feeling of deep revulsion. "Don't kill me, mister," gibbered a voice in the dark, "please, please, please," he whined. The third knife sung through the air and gnawed its way into the heart of the little man. He died instantly, but all through the long, dark dirty walk back to the welcoming fire that Starling and Cooker had kept going Bonner heard that pleading whine: please, please, please... Bonner couldn't explain to the creature why he had done it. Dammit, he couldn't explain it to himself. Chapter 11 It was a long, dank walk through the old subway tunnels. The inky blackness got on Cooker's nerves almost as soon as they began their trek downtown. He tripped and cursed and finally begged Bonner for the luxury of some light. "Look, I'll keep the pressure low on my thrower. I'll just bum off a little mixture. It'll work, you'll see." "Fine," said Bonner, "but if I say put it out, it goes out." "Okay," said Cooker. He pumped up his cylinders until a lazy cloud of aerated gasoline hazed from his throw pipe. He lit it with a loud puff. Bonner had to admit that with the flame guiding the way they made better time. The tunnels were damp and the only sounds, except for the heavy clump of three sets of boots, were the scuttling of rats and the constant drip of the surface water from the ceiling. "Fucking raining in here," observed Starling. Years of the water had sodden the thick old wooden railway ties until they had rotted and felt like a mushy old carpet underfoot. They passed through old stations like the one they had spent the night in. The flame in Cooker's light reflected off the dull tiles. Fifty-Ninth Street, Forty-Second Street, Sheridan Square, Chambers Street... They had been walking for two hours when they saw up ahead that their path was blocked by some huge, indefinite black bulk. It sat squarely athwart the subway tracks. "Whassat?" demanded Cooker, sounding jumpy. "Relax," said Bonner, "it's just an old train. We can go around it." "Damn," said Cooker, "I thought it was one of them little waddyacallits. Rat shits." As they passed alongside the old vehicle. Starling stared up at it, gawking like a kid at a freakshow. "Can you imagine riding in that thing? Underground yet?" Cooker stared also, his eyes roaming over the great beast. Its sides were painted with faded letters and numbers several feet high. "Sure had a funny way of writing back then. I can't make out any of that." He held his torch closer to the sides in an effort to see better. "Me neither," said Starling. They passed the next six cars of the train in silence. Bonner imagined the train crammed full of people while the huge bulk of the thing rushed through the tunnel. No one would have looked out the window, no one would have thought twice about travelling at great speed underground. Today that was incomprehensible, in those old dead days it was commonplace. They had been impatient, Bonner thought, to get to their stop, their homes, their jobs. Ordinary people... It was said that people lived down here, in the sunless subway, for years after the attack—they must be the ancestors of the tunnel-scum. In a few of the stations the gray walls were dark with the smoke of cooking fires. Bonner looked around him and wondered why they had bothered to try and survive. What joy could living have brought them down here in this black hell? Sometimes the will to survive was just too strong, better to let go, to sink into the release of a death you deserved more than life. They passed through another station: Wall Street. "We're almost there," said Bonner quietly. "None too soon," said Starling, relieved. They emerged from the subway via an old emergency exit. They stood for a moment in the late afternoon sunlight, blinking away the subterranean gloom that seemed to linger in their eyes. "The Stormers have a supply house down here, on the river. An old place that sticks out over the river a ways. They never have more than two or three men guarding it. One on the door, maybe two more inside. I want them brought down quiet. There's probably another forty or fifty Stormers on the island and I'd just as soon not let them know we're coming." "Amen," said Starling. "Why the guard so light?" asked Cooker suspiciously. "They never expect any trouble in New York." "Yeah," said Cooker sarcastically, "who'd be that crazy?" They waited an hour or so for

night to fall. Slowly the darkness rolled in like a sluggish tide, erasing the desolate scene around them. The end of the island looked like a giant scythe had cut through the tall buildings clustered there. Hundreds of tall buildings had been sliced off just above street level, the streets having been turned into ravines of rubble. Bonner judged that it was dark enough to make their move. The Stormer on the front door couldn't have made it easier. He sat in front of the rickety old building-it had a funny little tower at one end-tending a fire. They could see the outline of the man clearly and his giant shadow cast behind him by the flickering flames. "Starling," whispered Bonner, "can you take him?" "No problem." Starling slipped the explosive charge out of one of his arrows, inserted the shaft into the bowstring and pulled it taut. The Stormer suddenly stood upright holding his hands out over the flames of the fire to absorb the heat into the palms of his hands. Starling let the arrow fly. The shaft pierced the man's chest. From where they stood they could hear the heavy thud as the arrow pinned the stormer to the wooden door behind him. He hung against it, his arms and legs hanging awkwardly like a broken doll. They headed for the door and as they entered Starling yanked the arrow from the man's chest and wiped it on the Stonner's pants. He couldn't afford to waste a single shaft. Carefully he slipped the charge back into its resting place behind the point. Bonner slipped two of his knives from his holster and took a single tentative step into the building. The floor creaked slightly. Off somewhere ahead of him he could hear the murmur of voices. Bonner pushed on, stopping every few seconds to listen, guiding himself by the sound of the voices. A faint light showed under the door ahead of him. He moved close, until he could hear the conversation of the men within clearly: "Well, if he said that, he's full of shit." "Maybe, but you tell him." "I will too," said the Stormer vehemently. Bonner pushed open the door. Two Stormers sat at a table eating from rough earthen bowls. One was just putting a spoon into his mouth when he saw Bonner. The other man was hunched over his chow like a dog. He froze, the spoon at his lips. His companion, his back to Bonner, kept eating and talking. "I'm not afraid of him. Hell, no." Just then he glanced up at his partner in time to see one of Bonner's wide flat knives pierce his dinner companion's throat. The man fell from his chair, a fine spray of blood, like dew, pumped out over the meager food on the table. The remaining Stormer wheeled, jumping for the old Marlin.22 bolt action rifle he had been careless enough to lean against the wall beyond easy reach. It wouldn't have done him any good though. He was as good as dead. A second of Bonner's blades flashed through the air like a flying fish. It sliced into the man's heart stopping it mid-pump. Starling and Cooker were already rummaging amongst the Stormers' enormous stores. In a series of small rooms beyond the guard room they found the supplies of the entire New York garrison. The first room held firearms. Housed in old gym lockers the three men found row upon row of guns. Starling drew one out. "Hey, Bonner, you know this weapon?" "Yeah. H&R rimfire." "Any good?" "Not bad. This is better." He pulled down a sleek Browning automatic.22 Magnum pump rifle. "Mine," said Starling. "Take it. But we're going to need something with a little high rate of fire. Automatic, semi-automatic but keep it simple. We can't afford anything that jams." "Guns," snorted Cooker and loped off to another room. "Figure they're totin' M-16's on the island?" "Or something pretty close." Bonner began methodically searching the room. Guns and ammunition spilled out of every locker. Pistols, rifles, shotguns, even air-guns-everything from worn-out old pieces that the poorest street worker would carry to sophisticated, finely made shotguns with delicate engraving on the matchplates, the kind of gun a rich man would have carried for a genteel weekend's shooting. Bonner broke the lock on the metal trunk and found what he was looking for. Lying there were ten of the ugliest little guns he had ever seen. They were mean looking stunted semi-automatics, the kind of gun a man braced against taut stomach muscles and let fly. If you got in the way the bullets would skitter across your body carving you into a bloody mess. The guns had ugly green plastic

stocks supporting a long narrow barrel, so needle-fine, the whole gun looked like some weird little sea creature. A small grip protruded from below the barrel and a plastic clip jutted down, just below the trigger. "Starling." Bonner held up the gun. It was light, maybe six or seven pounds. Starling whistled low. "What is that thing?" "Steyr AUG." Bonner read from a plate on the stock. "Ever heard of it?" "Nope, but I think I'm going to take a couple along." "You can see right through the clip. It's transparent." "You'll always know how many shots you have left." With sure fingers, Bonner broke the little gun down. Stripped, it amounted to six simple pieces. It was just the gun he was looking for, simple, reliable and fast. A man could get killed if he relied on the fancy stuff, the temperamental equipment that people in the old world thought they needed. Keep it simple and you stay alive. "How many rounds?" asked Starling. "Looks like forty." "Grab me one." Bonner picked up two of the weapons and found a dusty old suitcase and quickly emptied all of the ammunition into it. He couldn't tell how much he had. A lot, though, two, maybe three thousand rounds. It should see them through the island and beyond. If they made it. Cooker had found a room stuffed with food. They found him there scooping cherry jelly out of a dusty jar. With two dirty fingers he shovelled the dark red slime into his mouth, staining his lips with the sweet red juice. "This stuff is great," he said, slobbering slightly. "Pig," said Starling. "Hey," said Bonner, "found any candy in here?" "Got a sweet tooth, Bonner?" Bonner located a couple of jars of honey and grabbed himself some jam from Cooker's haul. "Hey," said the gas-hound indignantly. "Plenty for everybody," said Bonner, stowing away his loot. It would please Dorca. Assuming he ever saw Dorca again. Starling appeared in the doorway. He held up both hands, each held a bundle. He grinned. "Dynamite," he said happily.

Chapter 12

Some water still surrounded the old island that sat far out in the New York harbor. Tethered out on the mud flats they found a boat which Starling rowed slowly toward the dark bulk of the island. The faint light of the moon allowed the marauders to see something of their objective. The island was overgrown with vegetation, a product of a century of neglect. Thrusting up from the tangle of trees and underbrush were the silhouettes of a number of buildings. A pinnacle, a decorative reminder of a time when men built buildings for the love of creation, probably housed a lockout. Probably a half asleep lockout, thought Bonner. Laziness had made them slow and fat. Most of the raiders and smugglers stayed out of the island city. They were scared of the hundreds of square miles of shattered buildings and they had heard that the New York garrison was tough and ruthless. That was true once the shooting started but up till then they could be fooled... And if you fooled them, they were as good as brought down already. The boat rocked slightly in the shallow water and Bonner wondered, for one happy moment, if the Stormers weren't so greedy and reckless that maybe one day they would wipe each other out. It would save everyone so much trouble... They rowed in close to the island and Bonner gestured to Starling to haul in the oars. They coasted a few yards in silence. Bonner slipped over the side. The water was waist deep. He grabbed a line in the bow and hauled the boat to a splintered jetty that thrust out into the bay. "Let's move it," hissed Bonner. "Let's hit the tower first," said Starling. Bonner could just make out Starling's outline. The tall man looked as if he was wearing a neckless of sausages around his neck. Starling had a special love of dynamite the way some men loved whisky. "Go," said Bonner quietly. As soon as Starling had released one arrow, he had another fitted into the bow. The two blasts came within a second of one another, shattering the night. The echoes of the explosions rolled across the bay, through the empty night like thunder. If there had been a man on guard up there, he was dead now. The three men darted from the water and scrambled up onto the island proper. They followed Bonner's lead. He skirted one wing and made a bee line for the main entrance. The Winchester was snug in the holster on his back, the AUG held lightly in front of him. From inside the cavernous buildings came confused and sleepy shouts. The first Stormer came out of the

huge main door and down the steps. He was shooting wildly in the darkness. Bonner picked up the muzzle flash and stitched a line of bullets across the man's chest. The Stormer behind him collected a short burst in the same place. Seeing their comrades fall the Stormers following backed up and slammed the great gate shut. The thud of the door closing echoed throughout the building. "Pussies," snapped Starling. They could hear more Stormers scrambling across the steep pitched roof. "They can't see us," whispered Bonner. "Cooker, don't use that thing until we're inside." "Gotcha." "Take the door. Star." Starling hefted the weight of a dynamite bundle in his hand and lit the fuse. The snap of the flame drew a burst of automatic fire from the roof. Starling rolled left and threw the dynamite toward the door. The sound of the detonation echoed out over the water, the door disappeared, and released the screams of the men cowering behind it into the cold night air. Bonner was off at a sprint, firing into the black hole where the door had stood. He crashed through the smoking splinters and darted behind a long counter where a Stormer would have sat when on duty. Starling and Cooker were right behind him. Bonner could hear the tank man frantically pumping to get the pressure up in his cylinders. "How many?" "Fifty. Maybe more." The stairs and the corridors that ran off the long hallway were lit with the feeble light of kerosene lamps. The whole building seemed to ring with footsteps. On the iron stairs above them, they could hear the heavy boots of the Stormers as they raced around trying to locate the interlopers. The stairs rang—they were coming down. Above the bellowed orders, Bonner could hear the beginnings of a low chant. It came from the upper stories: "Breakout! Breakout! Breakout!" The prisoners were roaring. Gunfire meant that salvation was near. Their voices were throaty with fear and exultation. "Bonner, we got to get ourselves lost in this damn building. They know where we are." "But we'll meet 'em on the stairs," said Cooker. "So fry them," said Bonner coldly. They made their move, running for the staircase. With close quarters fighting coming up, Bonner had drawn the Winchester from its nest. He held the light AUG in his left hand. Together the two guns would lay down a carpet of lead in front of him. But Bonner put his best weapon forward. "Okay, Cooker, you're on." "My pleasure," cackled the gas-man. He scurried up the first set of stairs. On the first turn he came face to face with two Stormers. He opened the nozzle wide and the two victims were hit with a wall of fire. Instantly, the stairwell filled with the stinging smell of burnt gas, followed by the sweet, frying smell of burnt meat. With agonized screams the Stormers danced the bizarre and pain-wracked dance of men burning to death. They held their burning hands before them and watched as their skin blistered and charred, dripping from bone like wax from a candle. Bonner raced by the flaming corpses, registering their screams as he passed. He hardly heard them. But they would come back to him some night, some bad night, when he couldn't sleep, when his mind would be tortured by the thought of the endless killing. But that was in the future. Right now those burning corpses were just Stormers, Stormers who had once been in his way. No longer. They reached the second floor. Three Stormers reared up from behind an old desk like cobras. They loosed their rounds tearing holes in the plaster of the stairwell. From over Bonner's shoulder came one of Starling's arrows. It slapped into the desk and blew away the three Stormers in a shower of splinters. Two were killed instantly, the third writhed in silent pain, his face a mass of wooden needles. "You owe me," shouted Starling, his voice echoing in the stairwell. Bonner paused, listening for the chanting. "Third floor," screamed a voice, "third floor." One of the prisoners had brains enough to show the way. "One more up," said Bonner and he started taking the steps two at a time. His brain was working feverishly. The Stormers would know by now that they had not been attacked by a large force. This meant that they would be coming down off the roof and searching the building systematically. Also, they would know that whoever attacked the place was there to stage a breakout. Bonner knew they could expect a hot reception when his small force made it to the cell level. Just before the top of the stairs, Bonner brought up

Starling. "Okay," he panted, "top of the stairs to the left is the big room. Cells line the walls. Can you get the dynamite in there and clean up the Stormers? They gotta be waiting for us." "No problem," came the customary reply. Starling caged a light off Cooker's thrower. "We go in right behind the blast. Keep looking up, a balcony runs around the top of the room, just below roof level." "Check." Starling threw the deadly bundle in a graceful arc. It bounced into the room and exploded with a roar so intense that for a single terrible moment Bonner thought the whole ancient building was going to come down around them. A smoking crater took up most of the middle of the vast room. Bonner darted left and pressed himself flat against the first cell door. From the little barred window in the cell door came a voice. "Hey man, lemme out. Gimme gun. I can fight." Bonner trained the snout of the AUG along the roof line watching for the dust to clear. "Come on, man," whined the prisoner. He was going to give away Bonner's position. "Shuttup," he ordered. "Aw, man..." "Shut your mouth," hissed Bonner. The whole building had gone quiet. It was as if the blast had temporarily numbed every Stormer in the place. The smoke was dissipating and Bonner could make out a Stormer kneeling on the balcony peering into the mist. The Steyr AUG let rip and the man toppled. Bonner was coming to love his little gun. It was as if Bonner's fire was a general signal for the fight to start again. From every corner of the room came the sounds of gunfire. Bullets sprayed wildly, chopping across the walls in neat rows. Illuminating it all were the short spews of fire that Cooker spat at the gallery. Men ignited like balls of paper held over a flame. The screams of the burning Stormers mixed with the wild cries of the prisoners. "Let us out." "Don't bum me." "Let us at the fucks." "Let's go, man, let's go." Somewhere off to the right, Bonner heard the chattering of Starling's automatic. He was doing his job, like always. "Starling!" shouted Bonner. "Yah?" "Start letting 'em out." "' Awwwright,'" screamed a prisoner, "' awwwright!'" "Starling! Starling!" yelled a voice, "it's me. Harvey! Over here! Starling!" "Starling," yelled Bonner, "find him." Cooker was dancing around the room firing great balls of flame into the room. Sometimes they connected with a Stormer, sometimes not. Bonner couldn't be sure but he thought that they were no longer drawing fire from within the room. He started sliding the bolts off the metal doors. They flew open and a crowd of prisoners flew out, like animals released from a cage. One dashed into the middle of the room and fell through the jagged hole made by the bomb. On the far side of the room Bonner could hear Harvey's happy hysterical screams. "Starling! Un-fucking-believable!" "Cooker," yelled Bonner. "What?" "Cut the flame, you're setting the place on fire." The old floorboards and the piles of debris turned up by the blast were burning brightly. "Starling?" "Yah?" "Got him?" "You bet!" "Then let's get the hell out of here." "Right behind you, boss." The halls were clogged with prisoners, all of them running blindly for the stairs. Suddenly, the adrenaline pumping through him like sweet, powerful high octane fuel, made him feel like he was flying. The deafening noise of the prisoners, the vicious gunfire, the crackling of the flames all blended into one symphonic, seamless belt of noise. He had ceased to think, his brain, the command center that told him to be scared or wary or worried had shut down, he was an animal of pure instinct. Acting, reacting, fighting on the strength of his nerves. He seemed to be able to see everywhere, anticipate every move of his enemies; it was as if he controlled them and could make them dance to his tune. The killing got easier and easier, until it was effortless. This was the Bonner men feared most. Standing in the midst of the firefight, his senses heightened, sharp, taut. The men who opposed him saw that look, the set jaw, the blazing eyes and knew they were going to die. Back there, a thousand miles away Coldchip had felt it: the man was marked, he had something deep in his soul that the rest couldn't find or didn't have. They were just men with guns. Bonner was an avenging force meting out justice and death at will. A crowd of prisoners had started down the stairs and were caught there by some Stormers working their way up. They fell in a hail of bullets. Smoke from the dozens of small fires

that Cooker had started began to creep through the building. "I know another way out," screamed Harvey. "Go," shouted Bonner. Harvey headed for a wide main corridor yawning down the middle of the building. A score of doors opened onto it. "There's another set of stairs here. One of these doors." The four men started kicking in the thin wooden doors. Just as Bonner smashed one in Cooker called out: "Found it!" But Bonner could not move. He stood framed in the doorway, transfixed. "Bonner," screamed Starling, "let's go!" Bonner took a step into the room. Hanging from the ceiling, head toward the floor, was a man-at least what had once been a man. The floor was slick with his blood. His blood and that of a thousand others. The skin had been carefully lifted off his chest and it hung around his shoulders and head like a dirty, bloody curtain. Cowering in a corner, his hands covering his head, was another man. He squirmed as if trying to make himself smaller, in the forlorn hope that Bonner would not see him. "Bonner!" screamed Starling. Bonner advanced. The man wore the red shirt and black stripe of Leather's torture squad. They were specialists in pain. There was nothing they didn't know about inflicting it until men begged for death. Begged, that is, if the squadsmen had left their victim a tongue and a voicebox. Bonner looked at the dead man. He couldn't save him but he could exact his revenge. Bonner stood over the squadsmen. The man raised a tear-stained face, pleading, beseeching. Inarticulate sounds came from his throat. Bonner didn't know the man that had been tortured. He didn't care if he was a thief, he didn't care if he was a murderer, it didn't matter. No man deserved that. He pumped a whole fast clip into the torturer's head, the force of the close range shots bouncing the man's head on the floor like a rubber ball. "Jesus, Bonner." Starling had grabbed him by the shoulder. "There are a whole lot more than fifty. This place is becoming plenty hot. Let's go..." Bonner left the room behind Starling, calmly reloading as he went.

Chapter 13

The land was still rich. That was Bart's conclusion after travelling for six uncomfortable days in a truck that was part of one of Leather's tax collecting convoys. Eleven trucks were now entering the Cap, each crammed with the remaining spoils of the old world. Every few miles the convoy had stopped and the tax men had handed over the loot: food, liquor, gas, ammunition. A single truck carried twenty or so women. The best looking would go to Leather and the deputies, the others would be given to the Radleps and the rest would make their way down to the Stonners and beyond. Leather was squeezing the last drops of richness from the land. He took for himself and gave nothing back. One day it would all be gone and the little order that Leather's will imposed on the land would break down. Bart hoped he wouldn't be alive to see that day. Only a small piece of the city was occupied now, just the center where the old seat of government had been, when the continent had been called the United States of America. It must have been quite a town once. There was a tangled overgrown strip of grass right down the inhabited area. It stretched from the huge domed ruin at one end to the broken white stone needle at the other that everyone called The Tower. It had been taller once, but it had been broken off jaggedly about two thirds of the way up. Leather had a big fire built in The Tower and it burned day and night, the flames from the bonfire leaping twenty-five feet into the air. The Cap was just the center of town. Surrounding it were the acres and acres of the remains of the old city. Now they were nothing more than silent ruins. Everything centered on that green strip and the decaying government buildings that clustered around it. The officials of the Slavestates lived in those huge old marble tombs, each of them laying up as much plunder as they could and intriguing against another colonel of Stormtroopers or a tax-general who was taking too much for himself. No one was safe-except Leather. His power was absolute because he was ruthless. His subjects lived and died at his pleasure alone. Seth left the convoy and decided to check out the bazaar that was always going on in the avenue that skirted the green space. Here you could buy the spoils left over after the ruling powers had taken their share. There were rusty firearms, homemade ammunition, canned food from the old world that might be edible-you never knew until after you bought it- and odd pieces of

bric-a-brac from the dead time: tattered umbrellas, a worn pair of shoes, old clothes, eyeglasses, a book or two (very hard to sell), a few sticks of furniture.... Bart made his way through the crowded bazaar. Stormer officers swaggered by, evil-looking torture squadsmen, harried-looking tax-generals always worried that their sectors wouldn't make their quotas, slave overseers with their savage whips dangling over their shoulders like dozing snakes; the crowd shrunk away opening up a path for a single crazy-eyed Radlep. He stalked through the crowd, the pain of his wounds showing plainly on his face, begging for trouble. But no one ever bothered a Radlep... Bart paused to watch a slave auction. A few tired women, coarse-boned slaves from the back of beyond, stood listlessly on a platform while a slave broker tried to whip the crowd up a little. "Come on, come on, these fine young ladies are the best stock you seen in plenty long time..." He grabbed one of the gray women and tugged at her dirty dress. A breast flopped out like a dead fish. "Now how do you like that? Choice!" he bellowed. The crowd, the woman, were unmoved. Bart turned on his heel. It was time to see Leather. He grabbed a passing Stormer. "Leather at the big house or is he in the throne room?" "He's going to be at the throne tonight. Right now' I figure he's at the house." Bart made his way to the big house. In the old days the head of the whole continent had lived there. Now it was Leather's main dwelling. The walls, once a bright white, had been tinged a dirty gray and they were stained everywhere with the red rust of broken plumbing and with the green of Spanish moss. The elegant gardens that had surrounded it were wild tangles now, although once in a while a pink rose popped up, as if gasping for air and light, just the way every so often a pretty face would be put up for auction at the slave market. The entrance to the big house was guarded by two Radleps. The closer you got to Leather the more Radleps you saw. They gave Bart the creeps, they gave everyone the creeps, but they were devoted to Leather and would happily die for him. The halls of the house were crowded with people, Leather's government, all waiting to see the man, waiting to see how they could curry favor with him and use it to destroy a rival and advance themselves. They whispered together in doorways and their maneuverings were observed by the cracked, grave-looking portraits of statesmen that looked down from the walls. No one remembered who they were and no one cared. Someone had gone around poking out the eyes of a lot of them, someone else had drawn obscene additions to the thin elegant forms. Bart got lucky. As he entered the house he bumped into Jojo. He was Leather's right-hand man. Leather's schemer, some said Leather's brains. It was Jojo who controlled access to Leather. If Jojo didn't want you to see the man, you didn't. "Hey, Jojo," called Bart. Jojo, a fat, dirty little man with a self-important air, stopped. "Yeah? Do I know you?" "Bart. I'm a Stormer in Drexys outfit." "So what are you doing here? Drexys is s'posed to be up on patrol in the gap." "We ran into some trouble... Listen, I gotta tell Leather something." Jojo crossed his arms across his chest, supporting his fat little tits, like a woman. "So tell me." Bart took a deep breath. "Drexys dead. The whole outfit got sliced... By Bonner.'" Jojo nodded. "Fer Chrissake, keep your voice down. Jesus, where did you see him last?" "Up near the Pittsburgh ruins." "Was he inbound?" "Figure so," "You better see Leatherman." Jojo steered Bart past the elite that waited patiently for an audience and into the private wing of the big house. Here was Leather's lair. He kept his women and his slaves there, a Radlep was posted every few yards in the long corridor. Colley, the general commanding the Stormtroopers, was about to be shown into Leather's office when Jojo stopped him. "Take a seat, Colley. We gotta go in. This is important." "For fuck's sake, Jojo, I been waiting two hours to see the man." "Too bad." "Wait. That's one of my boys you got there. What's your name?" Bart was about to answer when Jojo cut him short. "None of your fucking business, Colley." "Yeah, I know him, he's with Drexys. You a deserter?" Colley had grabbed Bart by the shirt front. Jojo stepped between them. "Colley, sit your ass down and don't bother me." He pushed the Stormer commander back toward a delicate-looking little chair. Like a chastened dog

Colley sat down and silently swore that there would come a day when Jojo wasn't going to be quite as powerful. They would have some accounts to reckon then. Jojo pushed Bart into Leather's office. Bart had never been in there before and he could hardly take it all in. It was a circular room, bare except for a big wooden desk, its top littered with three or four different handguns. There was no chair in front of it. No one sat in Leather's presence. "Leather," said Jojo timidly, for even he was afraid of him, "this guy has something you should hear." Leather swung around in his big swivel chair and placed his feet on the desk. Every time Bart saw Leatherman it was a shock. He was a big man with shaggy dirty hair that hung down to his shoulders. His chest was as broad as a barrel and it was scarcely contained by the tight leather shirt he wore. It was tucked into leather pants that Bart could see were made of leather that was soft and supple, like the skin of a young girl. He was unshaven. A dark stubble spread across his face then thickened into a bushy moustache that drooped on either side of his thick, cruel lips. His blue eyes were wide-set and stared with an intensity that seemed to pass right through you. But the most noticeable feature was the jagged scar on his face. It began up underneath the black eyepatch and ran like a claw down the side of his face to his powerful chin. Leather fixed his one good eye on Bart. "What?" "I came to tell you, sir, that me and my patrol were jumped up in the gap and wiped out." "Whose patrol?" Leather spoke very softly, his voice was deep and gravelly. "Drexy's. He's dead." Leather raised a bushy eyebrow. "No shit?" He sounded completely uninterested. "Tell him who sliced you," prompted Jojo. "His name was Bonner." A very slow smile spread over Leather's chopped-up face. "Bonner, huh?" "Yessir." "He took you all?" Bart knew he had to lie. "No way, sir. He was leading a big band of raiders." "Don't lie to me, asshole. Bonner doesn't work with raiders." Bart paled. "He had one guy with him." "One fucking guy. Against how many Stormers?" "Seven." Bart knew he was a dead man. His throat had gone very dry. Just then Bart realized there was another person in the room. Behind, next to the fireplace, Marx, the captain of the Radleps, sat on the floor cleaning a gun. Marxie was allowed to sit when Leather was there. "What do you think of that, Marxie? Seven to two." Marx shrugged. He was the worst burn victim Bart had seen. The skin on his face was mottled and blistered. A piece of his cheek was missing and Bart could see the broken yellow teeth in his jaw. The Radlep drooled a little. Bart turned away in disgust. Marx shrugged again. "Bad," he said, through his cracked lips. "How long ago was this?" "Six days." "He coming this way?" "Dunno, sir." "He is," said Leather matter of factly. "Thanks for the information, it's nice to know where the man is." Bart heaved a sigh of relief. It looked like he was going to make it out of there alive. All he wanted to do was get back out into the air. He was never, ever, going to get himself in a mess like this. "Wait," said Leather, "what's your name?" "Bart," said Bart. "Bye, Bart." "Thank you, sir." Bart made for the door. Leather looked at the guns on his desk, like a kid trying to decide which candy to choose. He picked up a Ruger Redhawk Double Action revolver and levelled it at Bart's head. "Bye, Bart," he said, and pulled the trigger. The report of the shot filled the room. Marx didn't look up, Jojo winced at the sound and out in the hall, people glanced idly at Leather's door. No big deal. It happened all the time. Chapter 14 Bonner, Starling, Cooker and Harvey made it back to their hidden vehicles just as a pale, watery sun rose over the broken Jersey landscape. Harvey was still hopped up, acting as if the rescue had pumped him full of speed. The exhilaration of the raid and the escape made him even more voluble than usual. "Oh man, it was great, I mean fan-fucking-tastic. Man, when I heard the first blow I could tell things were going to-get fuckin', I mean fuckin' hot. Unbelievable, unbelievable, un-fuckin'-believable..." "It was fun," said Starling. "I'll bet. When I saw Bonner there with that grease gun. Bam-bam-bam-bam-bam, you know, them scummy Stormers never knew what hit 'em." "How many prisoners you figure got away?" asked Bonner quietly. "Not many," said Starling, "and most that went will be rounded up again. This

neighborhood is going to get hot." "Not as hot as it is now," giggled Cooker. Over his shoulder a faint glow could be seen as the island, torched singlehanded by the little gas-hound, burned furiously. "How much farther?" asked Starling. "Not far," said Bonner. The cars were as they had left them, hidden in the heavy underbrush and Bonner could see at a glance that they were undisturbed. Cooker peered anxiously into the well of his tanker to see if any gas was missing. Harvey settled himself under the gun in Bonner's car. "So, where we going?" "The Cap." "Fantastic!" That was it. He wasn't interested in why. He didn't care. Bonner slid into his seat, smiling to himself. Harvey was about as strange as you could get in this new strange world. He was pretty strange-looking too. Numerous explosive devices gone wrong had robbed him of several fingers, one hand was half blown away. It looked like a flipper. His face was scarred and pitted with black powder that peppered his skin. The line of his jaw was marked with a livid pink burn mark where he had managed to set himself on fire. He wore his hair shoulder-length and he kept his greasy tresses in some kind of order with an old bandana. He always wore a three-piece suit, shiny with age, but he never wore a shirt. His thin little body was lost in the gray folds of the suit, but someone had told him that it was the old uniform of the movers and shakers in the dead world, so he adopted it. He thought it gave him class. The picture was completed by a pair of split old wing tip shoes worn without socks. Harvey's ankles were gray with grime. He looked, overall, ridiculous. He wriggled down next to Bonner's gas tank and began to sing: "I don't want to set the world on fire I'd much rather start A flame in your heart..." "What the hell is that?" asked Starling. "A song," said Harvey. "The Stormers on the island had a crank Victrola. This was one of the songs it played." He continued singing. "In this world I have but one desire..." "Pretty strange," said Starling. "I do," said Cooker. "You do what?" "I want to set the world on fire." "That's even stranger," said Bonner. Just as he was about to lead his little party out of the hiding place, Bonner slammed on the brakes, killed his engine and picked up the Steyr. He remained behind the wheel, his eyes focused on a thicket of bushes that still lay in the morning shadows. The others killed their engines and the sudden silence seemed to close over them. "Bonner," hissed Starling, "what is it?" Bonner stared fixedly at the bushes, like a pointer. After a moment, the branches began to rustle slightly and the gun twitched in Bonner's hands. Starling too covered the thicket with his little semi-automatic. "Whoever it is," said Harvey laconically, "waste 'em. And let's get going." Just then the bushes parted and into the clearing stepped the two largest men Bonner had ever seen. They were close to seven feet and as broad as tree trunks. They wore only shorts and rough leather sandals; the rest of their bodies were covered with reddish brown hair as thick and as matted as fur. Muscles snaked around their wide chests, making their torsos look as if they were held together with strong iron bands. Each man was identical, a perfect copy of the other. The effect of the sudden appearance of these grave-looking giants was at once frightening and funny. Bonner stared. They stared back. Harvey spoke: "Hey! Look at that! It's the Mean Brothers. How ya doin', Meanies? These are the guys what sprung you from the island." The two men looked interestedly at Bonner, Starling and Cooker. Then they smiled at Harvey. They loped over to their friend and embraced him. "Yeah," said Harvey, "thanks. Lemme go." The Mean Brothers stood back, as if waiting for instructions. "Harvey," asked Bonner, "who are these guys?" "Well, no one knows their names, on account they can't speak. So I just call them the Mean Brothers. And believe me, they are mean. I saw this one, no, it was that one, no, maybe it was that one... anyway, it was one of 'em, tore a fucking Stormer apart. I mean literally tore him apart with his bare hands, like he was tearing up a piece of paper... Bonner, man, these guys are mean and I ain't kidding." The two men smiled happily at Harvey's introduction. "I got to be friendly with them in stir," Harvey continued; "they ain't bad guys, really, but they don't like Stormers." "Then they aren't all bad," observed Starling. "Hey," said Harvey, "you Mean Brothers want to come with us? We're going for a little ride

to see Leather. Wouldn't you like to meet the famous Leatherman?" The two giants exchanged glances, as if communicating telepathically. They nodded vigorously, smiling. "They want to come," said Harvey. "I can see that," said Bonner. "They won't let you down in a fight." "I can see that too." "Say hello to Mr. Bonner. If it wasn't for him your gigantic asses would still be in prison." The first Mean Brother crushed Bonner in a bear hug, released him and turned him over to his brother, who did the same. Bonner was not a weak man, but as the massive arms slid around his ribcage he could tell that he could pound these two behemoths with a hammer and they wouldn't notice. "Nice to meet you," he mumbled. The Mean Brothers nodded and smiled. "That there's Starling," said Bonner. "How do?" said Starling. "And that's Cooker." "Man," said Cooker, "these guys are enormous." "What kind of weapons do you use?" asked Bonner. As one, the two Mean Brothers held out their vast hands. "They don't have much need for weapons, Bonner," said Harvey. "No," said Bonner slowly, "I guess not." Slowly, one of the Mean Brothers raised his huge arm and pointed at Bonner's car. "What's he saying?" said Harvey. The Mean Brother continued to point. Bonner followed the line of his gaze. "Oh, I get it. They've chosen their weapons." Bonner reached up and undipped the axe from the roll bar. "Here," he said, "take it." The giant accepted the gift as if he was receiving some kind of blessing. "You want the shovel?" asked Bonner. The other man nodded vigorously. Bonner took it down and handed it to him. He received it with gratitude. "Well," said Harvey, "I can see we're all going to get along fine." "You coming with us?" asked Bonner. The Mean Brothers nodded again. "Okay. You can ride up on Cooker's tank. Is that okay with you?" The Mean Brothers nodded again and climbed up behind Cooker's perch. They towered over the little gas hound, casting him in the long shadows caused by the early morning sun. "Let's go," said Bonner and hit his starter. Harvey sang over the roar of the engine: "Just a gigolo, everywhere I go, people know the part I'm playing..." What a freak show, thought Bonner, as he led his little party into the breaking dawn.

Chapter 15

If you wanted to live a long life in the Slavestates you followed one rule to the letter: don't mess with a Radlep. When the tax convoys went out they looked for the usual stuff-gas, girls and guns-but the convoy leader always carried a special commission, that of Radlep recruiter. No one knows who first called them radleps-"radiation lepers"-but the name was a good one and it stuck. It wasn't that unusual for the convoys to come upon, out in the hinterlands, some kid who had strayed too close to "hot" water or had been caught in a radiation storm or had eaten contaminated meat. Eventually, the boy would die, slowly, painfully, of radiation sickness. It was a terrible decline to watch: their hair fell out, their skin flaked, the creeping heat of the disease ate out their voice boxes. But they could walk and they could fight. If the convoy commander spotted a likely candidate he made the kid an offer: come to the Cap and join the Radleps. It was a tempting prospect. In return for absolute loyalty and complete fearlessness Leather would give them anything they wanted, for life. All the guns, food, alcohol, girls, gas, ammo, -anything-they could consume was theirs for the asking. The catch was that they had to be prepared to die. Most accepted the offer. After all, they were dying anyway, why not make the most of it? They were Leather's praetorian guard, his SS. Leather's enemies were their enemies. They killed those he told them to kill. When he told his Radleps to die, they died. The Stormers, even the best of them, could never be as effective as the Radleps because no matter how courageous or stupid one of them might be, deep in every Stormer heart was planted the simple desire to stay alive, to keep his head down, to cover his ass. Radleps didn't give a damn one way or another. They waded into heavy fire the way kids played in a stream. Where a normal man would avoid a fight, a Radlep sought it out. They killed, they got killed, but as one fell another jumped to take his place. There were raiders and smugglers hard as nails and tough as sharks, mean as hungry wolves that would run like jack rabbits if they heard there were Radleps ahead on the road. More than just being

prepared to die the Radleps had another quality that drove them. Every single one of them burned with a white hot hate of every normal man, woman and child on the continent. The Radleps hated because they had been dealt the dirtiest hand in a dirty world. Leather could give them everything, but he couldn't give them life. Their future, no matter how you cut it, was death. People said that the only good thing about Radleps was that they all died eventually. Marxie had been Radlep captain for about a year- the longest a commanding captain had ever lived- but he could feel his time drawing near. The disease was weakening him, he couldn't get out of bed in the morning without leaving behind a sheet of matted skin on the covers. But it didn't bother him that much-he had long ago accepted his fate. He had gotten used to the looks of revulsion when he passed, the shivers of disgust in the cool, white, perfect bodies of the women Leather gave him-but he did have pride. He wanted to go out in style. He wanted to get Bonner. He wanted to get him alive. Marxie left the big house and wandered nonchalantly to the Radlep headquarters, an old ornate building that looked like a castle. It sat right on the green slash that cut through the center of the Cap. Here his force of maniacs ate and drank, took their women and generally lazed around when they weren't on patrol or on duty. When Marxie entered a few of the Radleps straightened up and tossed off something that passed for a salute. Discipline was a little tighter in the Radleps than in the Stormers. "Okay," rasped Marxie, "I want fifty men now." "We going on a job?" "Yeah. A big one." There were few sights to be seen in the Slavestates or anywhere else in the continent that were quite as frightening as a battalion of Radleps on the move. Leather saw to it that his elite troops had, along with the best in firearms, the finest in transport. Radleps rode motorcycles exclusively and they weren't the homemade hybrids that virtually everyone rode-these were the real thing. There were genuine unmodified Harleys, as shiny and as powerful as the day they left the showroom floor. Those big engines throbbed in unison with the other big bikes: Hondas and BMWs, Kawasakis, Yamahas, Nortons, Moto Guzzi, Suzuki, their engines whining in a loud, ear-splitting chorus. Marxie alone rode in a four-wheeled vehicle, but his was the real thing too: a shiny Jeep C-J circa 1990 with its tough roll bar and a specially fitted eight-cylinder engine that would outrun almost everything on the road. The beauty of the machines they rode underscored the grotesqueness of their riders. The Radleps sat athwart their mounts looking as ugly and evil as sin itself. Almost all the Radlep soldiers had the crusty mottled skin of the burn victim, hands were scaly and cracked with deep fissures, faces were blistered, tongues swollen and thrust through cracked lips; the radiation had played havoc with cell growth and some of the Radleps were marked with odd tufts of hair, partially grown teeth and eyes and weird twisted extra limbs that flapped ineffectually at their sides like the thin white wings of birds unable to achieve flight. The Radleps were festooned with weapons. Not one of them had fewer than three. Every chest was crisscrossed with bandoleers of ammunition for every type of weapon. Their status allowed them the finest in firearms. They carried efficient little 9mm automatics, Ingrams, Uzis, .45 M-3Als, weighty Dan Wesson revolvers, Browning automatic shotguns... These men weren't overequipped; just dying of radiation sickness wasn't enough to make you a Radlep. Before you could call yourself one, Marxie, or someone like him, made sure that you could handle each weapon like an expert. Marxie, mounted in the passenger seat of his jeep, looked over his squad and smiled his hideous smile of pride. Bonner was brought down already. With a flick of a gloved hand Marxie gave the signal: move out. Like a steel symphony, the engines of his soldiers' bikes answered his order. Fifty bikes roared into the late afternoon sun. People watched them roar down Constitution and shook their heads. Some poor bastards were going to catch it-and it would be hot. Chapter 16 There was no Stormer outpost in Philadelphia-in fact there was no one there at all. Bonner figured it was the perfect place to stop off before he and his crew made their descent on Washington. They coasted down Locust Street, looking down the deserted cavernous streets that intersected

with it. Philadelphia had once been the place where those things known as the United States of America had been born. Bonner had done a fair amount of exploration in the city and he found, here and there, fine monuments dedicated to ideals that had been dead for decades. Chiselled everywhere were words that were as dead as the dead world: liberty, justice, freedom, peace, brotherhood. A foreign language, thought Bonner sadly. They had made good time from New York. That was one thing you could say for Leather. He had had some of the main roads cleared of the trash—at least one lane—because the man was no fool. He knew that to keep his empire together he had to be able to move his men quickly to wherever they might be needed to keep things in order. They had to move fast. At the corner of Locust and Broad they stopped. "So," said Starling, "where you want to lay up?" "The stadium, I think," said Bonner. "Fine." Bonner led them along Broad Street past the same gaunt buildings they had all seen in a dozen cities. He brought them to a halt before the great, gray bulk of a giant, ancient stadium. "There's an entrance over here," he said; "we can drive right in..." The three vehicles roared into an echoing tunnel and out onto the faded green carpet that looked like a dark green island in the center of the huge, silent stadium. The field was marked with fading lines and dotted about with small square canvas bags. At the very center of the triangle formed by the lines was a slightly raised mound. "What the fuck was that for?" asked Harvey in bewilderment. He looked into the sea of seats. "They used to play games here," said Bonner. "People would sit up there and watch." "They would just sit there and watch?" "That's right." "How fucking boring can you get. Could they shoot at the guys down here?" "No." Bonner's force pulled their rigs up next to a deep dugout in the ground, right at the base of the seats. Inside the depression there was a bench that ran the length of it with a couple of old black telephones on the wall. "What the fuck you s'pose this was for?" "Special seats of some kind, I guess," said Bonner. "And these things?" said Cooker pointing at the phones. "Cooker," said Bonner, "I'm not even going to try to tell you." "And you'd never get... what was that shit you told me about, Bonner?" Starling laughed, as if enjoying a huge joke on Bonner. "Radio and television," said Bonner sheepishly. "Yeah, Cooker, buy this. Bonner tole me once coupla years ago that before the bomb—" Starling started to laugh as if the joke was just too funny to contemplate—"Bonner tole me that before the bomb they used to be able to send words and pictures through the air. Just through the air. Like from here to fucking Chi-town. I mean, can you believe it?" "What do you mean through the air?" "Beats the shit out of me..." Cooker throught about this a moment, then screamed with laughter. "Through the air! Through the fucking air!" Bonner shook his head slowly. He didn't quite understand it either. He busied himself with setting up the camp at the base of the seats. He didn't want to be exposed far out in the middle of the field. Bonner was checking over the engine of his car while this conversation went on. He had pounded a lot of miles into the frame and engine in the past few days and he was worried that his trusty old warhorse would fail now when the journey really required power and speed. He couldn't help smiling to himself, though, when he heard the note of disbelief in Harvey's voice. "They," he thought. They watched a game, they didn't get to shoot at the players, they were boring, they must have been crazy... They. They were the people of the old days. To Harvey and Starling and even to Bonner they were a weird species, an extinct genus of man that the new man—the Starlings and the Bonners, even the Leathers—could never understand. Even in this shattered world Bonner constantly came upon reminders of how strange the old world had been, how unknowable the long dead had been. When Bonner was brought down, when his day came, he knew he would go to his death still unable to understand a bunch of people who could sit and watch a game forty thousand strong and then make it rain fire and death on a world they lived in. "So why didn't the grass grow?" asked Cooker. Starling squatted down and ran his hand over the covering of the field. "You know, it ain't grass," he said in amazement. "Phony grass?" "Yep." Bonner laughed. That proved it. A whole

race of people could create phony grass and then kill themselves. The old times must have been peculiar times indeed. They ate some of the supplies looted from the Stormers. Bonner opened, with some difficulty, a jar that had almost rusted shut. "What's that stuff?" asked Starling. Bonner read the torn label. "Peter Pan Extra Super Crunchy Peanut Butter." "Who was this guy Pan?" asked Cooker suspiciously. With great difficulty Bonner opened the jar. "Looks like shit," said Starling. "It does too, doesn't it," said Bonner. Daintily, Starling dipped a finger into the mixture. "Tastes like it too." "Maybe the Mean Brothers want it," said Bonner. The mountainous men squatted on the fringe of the group, sitting on their haunches like grizzlies. Their weapons were laid across their knees as if the Mean Brothers were afraid that the shovel and the axe would try and sneak away when their owners weren't looking. "Here," said Bonner, "take it." One of the brothers grabbed the jar, sniffed at the rim and then plunged one huge fist into the brown paste. He licked it off his hand, smiled and nodded vigorously at his brother. "They like it," observed Bonner. "Let's give them all of it. They look like they take quite a heap of filling." "I can't look at them and eat at the same time," said Cooker. "You," said Starling, "you make a Radlep look good." "Bonner," whined Cooker, "tell him not to start." Night fell and gradually talk dried up. Harvey sang quietly: "By a waterfall, I'm calling yooooooooo We could share it all beneath a ceiling of bloooooo." "Shut your fuckin' mouth," said Starling sleepily... Bonner was awakened by the touch of one of the Mean Brothers. Bonner's eyes snapped open. It was still dark, but he could see the Mean's big face looming above his own like a full moon. "What is it?" whispered Bonner, instantly awake. The Mean Brother seemed to be transmitting directly into his own brain. He could feel the giant's sensing of the danger that seemed about to drop over them like an all-encompassing web. The Mean pointed up into the shadowy stands. Bonner's eyes strained against the dark. At first he saw nothing, then, as his eyes focused he became aware of a number of dark shapes moving silently down the rows of seats, darting from cover to cover, getting closer. Bonner nodded grimly. If the Mean Brothers hadn't been awake then Bonner and his crew would have very few minutes of life left to them. He had made a mistake, he had gotten careless. It wouldn't happen again. "Okay," whispered Bonner, "wake the others. You done good, Meany..." The white teeth of the colossus shone in the darkness. He squeezed Bonner's shoulder affectionately. Bonner returned to the moving shadows. There were a lot of them. His eyes darted to the .50 calibre at rest on its mounting. He resisted the urge to snatch off the canvas cover and start blasting. It would be better to wait. A figure loomed up out of the dark and Bonner went for his knife but before he could strike he recognized one of the Mean Brothers. Bonner relaxed. With a thud, the brother dropped something at Bonner's feet, like a retriever dog. Bonner bent down and peered. Lying there, blood oozing from a jagged slice, was the bloody, tattered head of the Radlep. He had been decapitated with one, vicious chop of the Mean Brother's shovel. The Mean had been on a scouting mission. He pointed into the stands and screwed his face up in a terrible grimace. Bonner understood at once. They were being stalked by a Radlep force and a big one. "Bonner?" It was Starling. "What's up?" "Radleps." "Shit." That was Harvey. All at once the peaceful night exploded. Marxie shot a blood-red flare into the sky and it burned bright and hot, casting a great wave of crimson light over the baseball field. Bonner glanced into the seats. There seemed to be a hundred Radleps, the muzzles of their weapons bright with blue flame. Bullets tore up the carpet. A Starling arrow answered the salvo, exploding in a forest of seats. Pieces of Radleps catapulted into the sky. As if it was a part of him, the tiny Steyr began chattering in Bonner's hands, spitting bullets into the darkness. A stream of fire poured back at him, clattering around the scanty protection of his automobile. Harvey cowered at his side. "Harvey," ordered Bonner, "get up on that gun." Harvey's eyes, wide and white with fear, swivelled up, staring at the gun. "Bonner, man..." Bonner nudged him hard with the hot barrel of the Steyr. "Get up

there," he ordered through clenched teeth. Like a diver summoning up his courage before the cold plunge, Harvey took a deep breath, then leapt for the gun. He slammed a belt of ammunition into the chamber and began firing. Bonner could see the big bullets chopping a furrow through the bodies of Radleps who were standing up in the seats like statues. Starling's arrows were exploding in the stadium like roman candles. The sound rolled around the giant space like thunder, caroming off the great arched walls. Cooker gibbered and capered like a monkey, fire gushing in short spurts from his thrower like water from a burning fountain. The little gas-hound kept his wits about him. After each burst from his terrible weapon he rolled, darted, scampered, left, right, forward, backward never allowing a Radlep to pick up his flash and bring him down. He danced like a dervish, the heavy tanks rocking back and forth on his back. He paused, panting, pumped up the pressure frantically, then slashed into the seats again with a blast of liquid death. The place he stood a moment before was shredded by bullets. A Radlep tumbled down onto the field and made straight for Bonner. From the man's throat came the tortured scream of a man blazing with hate and lust for the kill. He held an M-16 before him, the long and heavy barrel spitting hot lead into the dark. Bonner took him down with a burst of fire that sliced into the big mutant's chest. He fell heavily on his gun. Radleps were advancing on the little band. Bonner and his men were laying down fire like a heavy rug but they kept coming. Bonner, Starling, Cooker and Harvey were falling back now, making the most of the little protection they had. Bullets thudded into the body work, shredding the smooth worn tires. Bonner caught two Radleps in a single spray of gunfire. They were close when they died-Bonner could see the flesh shredding off them-and their comrades were getting closer. Harvey slipped down off Bonner's car. He fell down next to Bonner. "You take 'em. If they come any closer I'll get my ass sliced off." Bonner whipped out the Winchester and its double barrel burst whipped into a Radlep who had made it within fifteen feet of their defenses. The shot slashed across the man's face, instantly turning his deformed features into a soggy mass of bone and meat. "Bonner," yelled Starling, "throw me some ammo." Bonner grabbed a handful of clips from the well of his car and flung them at Starling who crouched behind his own vehicle. In that moment, fire let up enough for a Radlep to jump up on the seat of Bonner's car. Bonner looked down the barrel of an M-16. Bonner spun to his right, scrabbling for a knife. A rip of bullets tore up the turf. The Radlep advanced. He was smiling. Bonner whipped the knife at the man's neck. The blade and a burst of gunfire hit the man at the same time. Bonner flung himself back into position grabbing for the Steyr. Radleps don't retreat, it was a hard and fast rule. But they could be slowed down. Radleps were stopping all over the field, kneeling down in the open, returning the fire that Bonner and company sent their way. Radleps were falling. But more were dying than Bonner could account for. Then he saw that from up in the stands were the flares of a half a dozen muzzle flashes. The Radleps were caught in a crossfire, a windstorm of bullets that meant death for all of them. With renewed vigor Bonner poured fire into the Radlep ranks. He wondered who his sudden, unexpected and absolutely welcome allies were. As suddenly as the battle began, it stopped. A moment of silence, followed by a sudden, final burst of fire from a Radlep. Like a set of precision machines, every gun on the field turned on him. Bullets cut him to shreds. Then came cool silence. Bonner stood up slowly. He looked up at the stands. "Who's hit?" he yelled. "I'm not," said Starling. "Me neither," said Harvey. "Those Radleps ain't so tough," said Cooker. "Where are the Means?" asked Bonner. "They're around here someplace," said Harvey, "or else they're dead." "Nobody hurt?" asked Bonner incredulously. A voice echoed out of the stands. "Who are you?" The voice was female and Bonner recognized it immediately. Bonner smiled in the darkness. "Sister Clara," Bonner yelled, "if you see two men the size of bears up there leave 'em alone. They're with us." There was a long silence. "Who knows my name?" "It's me, Bonner!" "No shit!" A half dozen voices, all women, shouted greetings. "Hey, Bonner," called Starling, "did the Sisters

save our ass?" "Sounds like." "Hey, Sisters," shouted Starling, "you still ugly old dykes?" "Starling, I'll come down there, cut your tongue off and stuff it up your ass." "She would too," said Starling. Just then the Mean Brothers came loping back onto the field. They carried a half dozen Radlep heads in each hand. They looked as if they had just returned from a day of gathering flowers in a meadow someplace. Chapter 17 The six women who made up the Sisters weren't sisters at all, but they had ridden together and fought together for so long that no one ever thought of calling them anything else. They were led by Sister Clara, a strapping six-foot-plus Amazon who could take on any man—fight him, outdrink him, and always, so far, emerge from a fire-fight victorious. The other five women backed her up perfectly. Clara's big face frowned when Bonner told her about Leather and Dara. "I never knew what she saw in you, Bonner," Clara growled, "and I shouldn't lift a finger to help you enslave her... But I'll be damned if I'll sit here and let Leather have her..." She slapped the butt of her heavy Colt Sauer Short Action rifle. "The sisters want to ride with you." Bonner didn't hesitate. "You're on." "You got any idea where they have her?" The sister that spoke was called Jamie. She was tall and dark and she carried her elegant little Iver Johnson Super Enforcer with confidence. She rested it nonchalantly on her hip. Bonner shook his head. "No." "You got a plan?" asked Sister Lynn. "Sort of... I figure when we get there we'll look around, see what we can find out..." "And then start blasting at anything that moves, right?" Clara shook her head in disgust. "Give us a break, Clara," protested Starling, "what do you think we are, stupid?" "You're all men, ain't you?" "That's right," said Harvey, "you should try one. Clara looked at the dirty and bedraggled little man. Her distaste for his appearance showed plainly on her big features. The Sisters always took care over their clothes, a peculiar mixture of old jungle fatigues and the bits of high fashion paraphernalia they had been able to loot from the old world. All six of them wore knee-high black boots. Bonner had to admit they looked as tough as their reputation. "Who's that little prick?" she asked cordially. "Harvey," said Bonner, "say hello to the sisters." "It ain't no accident our running into Radleps," said Bonner thoughtfully. "Come on," scoffed Cooker, "I thought they were all over the place in this sector." "Not these," said Clara. "How d'ya know?" "This was Marxie's battalion." Starling whistled softly. "You're kidding me." "Nope." Clara pointed to one of the severed heads that lay strewn about the field. A lake of blood pooled around it. "Recognize that cute mug? That's Marxie. Taken down by a freak with a shovel." "They knew you were coming, Bonner," said Sister Kay. Bonner shrugged. "So, we've taken down their best." "And won," said Clara smiling broadly, "with help from the Sisters." Bonner stole two tires off Marxie's C-J to replace the ones that had been shredded in the fire-fight. Starling decided to finally trade in his old rig for one of the fine Harleys that the Radleps wouldn't be needing anymore. The Mean Brothers preferred to ride with Cooker—an axe and a shovel were about as complicated as they wanted to get. By dawn they were on the road. By noon they were lying low just on the outskirts of Washington. "We split up," Bonner said, "see what we can find out. We meet back here tonight." The crew nodded. "Hey, what do we do with the Means?" asked Harvey. "What we gonna do with you, more like it?" said Starling. "You can't shoot so good and we haven't gotten you anything to blow up." "Yeah," said Harvey, "what are you going to do about that?" "Hit the bazaar," said Bonner. "You go in, Harvey, and see what you need. Get it if you can. If not, and you see one of us, let us know and we'll try and get it." "Some fucking plan," said Clara. "How do you plan not being recognized?" "Luck," said Bonner.. "Is there a curfew?" asked Sister Jamie. "There's gotta be..." "So be off the streets by nightfall. Back here by then. Got it?" Bonner looked from face to face. "No acting on your own..." As soon as each of them hit the streets they began disobeying Bonner's rules. Harvey began shoplifting his way through the bazaar. He managed to get some black powder and some blasting caps as well as some plastic that looked as if it was about a hundred years old. He was a blatant thief but no one was looking at him. The

Mean Brothers that trailed behind him attracted the gaze of the crowd. When they reached the slave auction block he briefly considered putting them up for sale—he would have if he could have thought of a way of letting the brothers know that he wasn't doing it for real, that he would auction them, then they could make their escape once they had suckered someone into paying for them. Cooker headed straight for the domed ruin and stood in front of it as an acolyte before a shrine. Here was stored all the gas in the Slavestates. Inside those ruined marble halls were acres and acres of gasoline. "Hi Test," he whispered, "premium, regular..." He said the words as if they were part of a prayer. A couple of Stormers on duty in front of the building walked up to him suspiciously. "What are you staring at, shrimp." "Nothing," said Cooker. The Stonner pushed him roughly. "Then beat it..." "Didn't mean no harm," mumbled Cooker. He looked over his shoulder at the building. He was planning on returning and blowing the whole thing up. Cooker didn't give a damn about this women that seemed to get everyone so het up. Cooker only cared about gas—his gas. If he blew the entire Slavestate supply Cooker's own gas would be worth more than ever. He would get to be a big man, he would have power, money... Hell, he might even hire Bonner to do his fighting for him. Bonner was most flagrant in the disregarding of his own rules. He looked at the huge ruins that surrounded the torch and decided that he would never find her by just wandering around looking for a likely Stormer that he could force to tell him Dara's whereabouts. The fact that she was somewhere in the city, needing him, in danger, burned through him. Every Stormer, Radlep, tax-general, that passed him never knew how close they came to death. Bonner could feel the emotion he had fought for a thousand miles pumping through him: anger. He could feel blind fury seizing him, taking hold of his brain, making him let go of the cool and dispassionate calm that had kept him alive for so long. He walked the crowded streets in a haze of hate. It was then that he found himself standing in front of the Big House. He looked at the two bored Radleps that lounged in front and at the cluster of favor seekers crowding around the entrance. Take him now, Bonner thought. It looked so easy. Bonner sidled passed the scarred Radleps. They just glanced up and let him pass. They assumed he was some kind of Stormer. The wide halls of the Big House were jammed with the usual hangers-on, each so involved in his own interest that they never even noticed Bonner pass. He strode down the hall, looking as if he knew where he was going, all the while not quite able to believe that he was actually there, that he was only feet from Leather. A voice in his brain told him he was being stupid, that he was making a mistake, that he was letting his feelings guide his hand. Come back when you have a plan, when you know what you're doing—Bonner, don't be a fool... But he kept walking. He was going to settle this thing now. And forever. The outer offices, the ones that adjoined Leather's lair, were a little less crowded and there Bonner was noticed. "You can't go in there," said a tax-general. Bonner pushed him aside as if he was a troublesome child. Bonner crashed through the next door; the Radlep on duty in front of the door leading to Leather's office jumped to his feet. He never saw Bonner go for his knives, but he felt the hot pain of the blade as it slid into his chest. He fell silently, staring dumbly at the handle of the knife as it quivered slightly in his breast. Winchester in hand, Bonner threw open the door that separated him from his prey. Bonner hardly saw the Radlep that sat by the fireplace and it was in an almost offhand way that he launched the second knife. As the Radlep died, Bonner levelled the Winchester at the man behind the desk. "Hello, Leatherman," said Bonner quietly. Leather sat back in his chair, as if stretching before starting some sort of strenuous exercise. "Well, my old buddy Bonner. Have you any idea how much it cost to feed, train and equip the Radlep you just knocked off?" "Where's Dara?" "Dara." Leather chewed the word. "Dara. That bitch." Leather's already ugly features twisted unpleasantly and he absently touched the angry pink scar on his cheek. "I wanted her to die. I'da killed her long ago until I realized that she was the only thing that would bring you running. Come to rescue her, right? Still the knight in white armor? Now I can kill you both.

Slowly." "Shining armor," said Bonner. "Whatever." Bonner spoke through clenched teeth. "Where is she?" Leather rocked in his chair. "She's safe. I got my people taking care of her. I got a lot of my people taking care of her..." Leather laughed deeply, as if enjoying a private joke. "You see, I put your precious Dara into the Radlep harem. I thought she ought to earn her keep and get my boys hot until..." A dark cloud of suffocating hate swept over Bonner. Without thinking he yanked the pump and both barrels of the Winchester laced the leather back of the chair where Leather sat. But Leather was gone. In that single moment. Leather had thrown himself sideways, missing Bonner's fire by a hair. He rolled on the floor screaming. "Help! Help me!" The door crashed open and Bonner was jumped by half a dozen Radleps. He snatched Leather's Ruger Redhawk from the desk and pumped three bullets into the wailing Leatherman. The weight of the Radleps brought him down. Suddenly, the animal in Bonner seized hold of him. With the strength of a half dozen men he kicked and punched and scratched at his attackers. He struck out blindly, feeling the pure pleasure of the beast when his fist connected with the tortured flesh of another human being. He felt skin tear and bone splinter under his blows and deep within him his crazed mind savored the gnawing pain he was causing-this time he didn't want the killing to stop. This time he wanted to start killing and go on killing until they were all dead. His fingers, as strong as taut steel cables, closed over the neck of a Radlep and he could feel the bone and muscle of the throat collapsing under his grasp. The Radlep's hideous face was inches from Bonner's own and he could smell the stink of the man's breath. Blood started from the Radlep's eyes and Bonner knew that he had squeezed the life from this terrible creature. He was absorbing blows now, a dozen fists were slamming into Bonner's body, but still he fought. He was aflame with hate. He had to kill. He had to kill all of them. Men were screaming. Bonner heard Leather's voice, as if from far away: "I want him alive. Take the fucker alive! Alive!" A heavy boot pounded into Bonner's temple and suddenly all was darkness and silence. Chapter 18

"So where is he?" asked Cooker testily, "'cause if he ain't coming, I'm out of here." "He's coming," said Starling confidently. He spoke with an assurance he did not feel. "Well he better," said Cooker. On the edge of a cool breeze he was sure he could smell the tantalizing whiff of gasoline from the vast dump in the Cap. "Sure would be a shame if he didn't," said Harvey. In a pool of light thrown by the fire he worked diligently at assembling some nasty little bombs out of the ingredients he had snatched that day. "Why would it be a shame?" "Because I want to see if these little babies work." He had packed black powder and blasting caps into heavy glass bottles. He had found a clearing strewn with the containers and he was making the most of the materials at hand. Harvey sniffed deeply at the neck of an empty bottle. A faint scent lingered there. "Hey, Starling," Harvey asked, "can you read?" "Yeah." "Read me what is written here." He passed him the bottle and Starling squinted at the faded label. "Martell Cognac," he read slowly, "fondée 1715." "Well, Martell Cog-nac smells like a fine drink to me..." "1715. Jeez," said Starling, "how long ago do you s'pose that was?" "A while back," said Clara vaguely. "What's this one say?" demanded Harvey. Starling held it close to the fire. "Leroux Blackberry Brandy." "Smells good too." "So what are we going to do?" said Sister Jamie suddenly. "Yeah, are we going to sit here all night?" Sister Lynn surveyed the group. "I think Bonner's got himself caught and that means he got himself killed," said Sister Kay matter-of-factly. "Do you really think he's dead?" asked Sister Brenda. "If he's caught, he's dead." "Leather can't kill Bonner," said Starling vehemently. Abruptly, the two Mean Brothers who had been following the conversation, got up, shouldered their weapons and headed into the darkness. "Where the fuck are they going?" demanded Cooker. "I think they're going to get Bonner," said Jamie, "and I think we should tag along." "Yeah," said Clara, "Sisters, let's move it." "Starting," said Cooker, "you and Harvey going?" "Yep." "You assholes," said Cooker, "he's dead already." "If he's dead, I have a score to settle with Leather," Starling's voice floated

back from the dark. There was a note of determination in Starling's voice. The tall smuggler meant what he said. "Well," said Cooker standing up, "I come this far..." Bonner blinked his eyes to clear his head and immediately wished they had not taken him alive. His hands were bound firmly behind his back and a Stormer stood on either side of him. He looked around the room. It was a vision out of hell. He was standing in a huge marble room, fronted by columns that looked out onto a huge rectangular pool of water that dimly reflected the flames of Leather's eternal flame. The room itself was lit by a dozen burning braziers that threw off a smoky light etching long dark shadows on the smooth walls. The room was filled with the first citizens of the Slavestates: all the tax-generals, the ranking Radleps and Stormers, the torture squad, and all had brought a dozen hangers-on. Jojo stood to one side. Every eye was on Leather. He sat in his throne which dominated the room. The throne was a huge statue of a man, seated in an enormous marble chair and it took up the central part of the chamber. Reclining on a dozen cushions in the marble man's lap, lay Leather. Three members of his harem, young women, naked to the waist, sat on either side of him ready to cater to his every need. Leather stretched luxuriously and beamed down at his court. Above him, in the shadows, the sage face of the great marble statesman looked down sadly, as if the evil and depravity he was forced to witness was an affront to his wise stone eyes. "Well, Bonner," said Leather, "you're going out in style." Leather's deep voice boomed through the great space. "I shot you," said Bonner. "Bullets don't kill the Leatherman," shouted a courtier. "You know, Bonner," said Leather, "he's right." "You're flesh and blood," said Bonner. "Maybe... maybe... But those wise old ancestors of ours came up with some pretty fantastic inventions." Bulletproof vest, thought Bonner. He had heard of them, but he had never seen one. He doubted that they existed-until now. It contravened the rules of nature, the rules by which the world now lived: nothing was bulletproof. It was just like Leather to get hold of one and then exploit the cult of his own immortality. "You been causing a lot of trouble, Bonner. I heard about Drexley. I heard about New York, the island... You are a pain in the ass... Now I hear that Marxie and fifty Radleps are missing. Did you have anything to do with that?" "Marxie's dead." "Oh, you're going to wish you hadn't said that," said Leather as if he was scolding a little child. "My Radleps are going to put on a bigger show than even they planned, right, boys?" From around the hall, the rasping coarse voices of the Radleps were raised in a chorus of menacing assent. "Who you travelling with, Bonner? And where are they? Sure you're pretty good, but not even you could mess with Marxie and fifty of my boys and get away with it. Who is crewing with you?" "You don't really think I'm going to tell you, do you?" "Not right away, no. But we'll get it out of you." Leather clapped his hands and a woman came forward carrying with her Bonner's Winchester and the holster with his three blades. Leather examined them expertly. "Nice stuff. They'll look good in my collection... How many men you figure you've killed with these things, Bonner." "Not enough." "Whoa, that's pretty tough talk. Scares the shit out of me." Leather laughed and the courtiers laughed with him. "You know, in a few minutes when I start to kill you-start, I said-because the finish is quite a ways off-I'm going to do it with these." He held up Bonner's equipment. "We're going to carve you up a little, then I'm going to blow your fucking head off. Then it's game over, I win." Bonner wasn't afraid to die. But he was damned if he was going to die at Leather's hands. He would rather be brought down by the lowliest street worker back in Chicago than go out in a grand and painful ceremony in the center of Leather's throne room. "So, you're the big, tough president of the Slave-states. The meanest, baddest man on the whole continent," sneered Bonner. "Sure, it's real easy for you to kill here and now with all your pieces of shit body guards around. Big brave man. Come on, Leather, how about a fair fight? You and me. No Radleps, no Stormers, no bulletproof vests... just the two of us..." Leather laughed. The courtiers laughed. "That was always the trouble with you, Bonner. You're stuck in the old world. Or what you thought was the old world. A fair fight... 'Fair and

square' I think they used to say. That world is gone and if you had realized it-you and that cunt of yours-you wouldn't be here now. You were dead in the Outriding days, Bonner. You wanted to build the old world. What you never knew was that the old world never existed. Sure, they had rules and codes and regulations-laws. But those people were the same ones who bombed the shit out of each other. But you couldn't see that, could you, Bonner? No, I'm not going to give you a fair fight, Bonner, because there's no such thing, a fair fight is the one you win and it doesn't matter how you do it. Winners and losers, that's what it comes down to. I'm the winner, you're the loser..." Leather looked at Bonner. "They can understand this-" he gestured toward the crowd "-how come you can't? Bonner, you and me could have had the whole continent. There would be no Hotstates, no Snowstates... All of it could have been ours. But you had to... I don't know, fuck it up, I guess. Now you've got to die. But first, a little entertainment." He clapped his hands. Two Radleps entered the chamber dragging Dara between them. She was limp, her long dark hair falling down in front of her face. She was clad only in a light shift, that rode up to mid thigh as the Radleps pulled her to the center of the chamber. As she was brought in the crowd started hooting and whistling, their catcalls filling the air. Bonner felt every muscle strain at his bonds. His eyes blazed with hate, his stomach churned as if he had been kicked. "Show her," ordered Leather. The Radleps dragged Dara before Bonner. Her chin rested on her chest, so one of her captors yanked on her hair, snapping her head back. Her eyes were closed so the Radlep slapped her, tearing the delicate skin of her lip. Her eyelids fluttered open. For a second she didn't recognize him. Then their eyes locked together and Bonner could feel her gaze on him. She stared, her blue eyes filled with pain, with fear and with hope... "Save me," she whispered, as the Radleps pulled her away. Bonner felt tears well into his eyes. Dara was dragged to the platform that stood at the base of the throne. Leather stood. "I'm first, Bonner." He climbed down from his throne, loosening his pants as he went, "then every body will get a turn." Bonner looked away as Leather whipped away Dara's scant covering. Her long, white, muscled leg' seem to gleam gold in the light cast by the crackling braziers. A Stonner grabbed him by the jaw and forced his gaze back onto the rape. "He gonna fuck her," he said. "You gonna watch." But Dara had not given up. As Leather advanced on her, she scissored her legs, brought her knee back to her chest and then, with every ounce of strength she could summon she kicked at his exposed crotch. Her heel slammed into Leather, crushing the softness of him against the hard ridge of his pubic bone. Leather yelled and fell backwards, holding himself in both hands, screaming in his pain: "Okay. That's it. Take her, beat the rucking bitch to death. Cut her, kill her..." Instantly, a dozen people were on her, Radleps, tax-men, anybody, pounding her, torturing her defenseless body. In a matter of seconds her pretty, fragile face was a mass of blood. "Bonner!" she screamed. He closed his eyes as a torture squadsman approached with a blade. Dara's attackers stepped back as if deferring to the master. She dragged out the last syllable of his name, her voice arching into a long, tortured, inarticulate cry that begged, pleaded, beseeched him for salvation. Her scream filled his head with the searing intensity of hot oil and every fiber of his being flared up in a crescendo of unalloyed pain and anguish. The two Stormers on duty outside the fuel dump never saw the Mean Brothers. They died with the sound of the crack of their own bones filling their ears. Bonner's force sprinted up the long wide flight of steps into the domed ruin and found themselves in a huge round room. It was crammed with oil drums. In corridors running off the rotunda they could see rows of gasoline cans, orderly as a rank of soldiers, running down the long hallways for what seemed like miles. Harvey crashed into a few rooms off the corridor: more drums. "Holy shit!" "Can you blow it?" demanded Starling. "Can I blow-it? A fucking dog could blow it. The question is can we get clear?" Cooker looked like a man who had been allowed a glimpse of heaven. He stood staring about him like a man in a trance. He sniffed deeply. The sweet fumes smelled as good to him as home cooking. He tried to say

something but found his words caught in his throat. "You and the sisters take as many barrels as you can and roll them down the steps. I want them steps soaked in gas." They jumped to his command. Harvey started kicking over fuel drums until the round room was awash in gasoline. The bluish green fluid belched out onto the smooth marble. The fumes rose, choking. "Means. Go down the hall; open as many drums as you can." The Mean Brothers nodded and lumbered down the long corridors. They swept open two giant doors and found themselves in a vast room ringed around with heavy mahogany desks. A balcony overlooked the huge space. Every inch of the room, including the massive raised lectern that stood against one wall, was covered in gasoline drums. They raced to the platform and began knocking open the containers, starting a waterfall of gasoline, coursing down over the woodwork. Harvey appeared at the door. "Okay, Meanies, out!" The Mean Brothers paused to kick open a few more cans, then followed Harvey to the exit. Back in the rotunda, Harvey made sure everybody was there. "Okay, out, everybody out." The sisters and the rest sloshed through the gasoline lake and out onto the slick, wet steps. "Move it," screamed Harvey, coughing and choking on the dizzying gasoline. The crew sprinted down the stairs and into the park that fronted the gas dump. "Keep going, keep going," Harvey urged. He followed but stopped in the cracked street before the huge domed building. He withdrew one of his little glass bombs. He leaned back as far as he could, then whipped the bottle as far as he could up the steps. Before it landed he was off and running, through the tangled green strip trying to put as much ground between him and the dome before it went. With a sound like a wind from a hurricane the gas on the outside stairs went up: "Whup." Harvey felt the heat of the flames wash over him, singeing the hair on his head, the green slash suddenly illuminated by a huge black and orange fireball. Just then, the dump went. It sounded like the end of the world. Harvey skidded in the grass and stopped. He had to watch. This was the biggest explosion since the bomb and he had caused it. A blast of flame like a tidal wave washed over him and he burned in a flash as bright as day.

Chapter 19

The first blast of the gas dome swept into the throne room and the crowd, until that moment hypnotized by each savage refinement as practised on Dara's helpless naked form, froze. All eyes turned toward the elegant columned facade and saw reflected in the long pool before the throne room, a blinding sheet of flame. The ground rocked, the air was filled with the bellowing roar of explosions, one on another, followed with the buffeting of shock waves. There was a hot, suffocating smell of burning gasoline. Dara was unaware of the cataclysm. She lay on her bier, blood flowing from her chest like a river. Bon-ner hardly heard the explosion. His eyes were fixed on Dara, trying to transmit life to her, pumping his thoughts into her brain like a blood transfusion. Starling bounced up the stairs into the throne room, the Sisters and Cooker fanning out behind him. The dome continued to explode, boom following boom, like a thunderstorm in hell. "Evening, folks!" screamed Starling and the Steyr started spitting bullets into the packed crowd. Courtiers began falling like scythed wheat. The Sisters set up a gutslamming field of fire, chopping down a phalanx of Radleps before they could bring their weapons to bear. Bonner's force took the element of surprise and used it for all it was worth. They fired so rapidly and their coming was so unexpected that having surprise on their side was as valuable as having another ten men with guns. The Mean Brothers ran into the crowd, their crude weapons harvesting skeins of flesh with an even more savage sweep. The ten fighters in Bonner's force fought like a hundred. In seconds courtiers were dying as if they were the victims of a strong and virulent plague. People screamed, clutching at their wounds, their cries floating up to the roof of the marble chamber. Their anguished yells, mixed with the constant and bone-rocking detonations that rolled over them from the gas house made the throne room resound with a bestial concerto that seemed to have been composed by the devil himself. Bloodlust seized the attackers. Starling, the Sisters, Cooker, even the Mean Brothers felt that driving sense of hate pulse through their bodies like a murderous, hot liquor, intoxicating, satisfying... It drove them on,

making them mad for blood, thirsty and anxious for more. "Burn," screamed Cooker, "burn you fuckers, bum!" The thrower hit the living with sickening accuracy. The air was filled suddenly with the sweet smell of burning meat. The Mean Brothers slashed back and forth with their iron weapons as if they were cutting their way through dense underbrush. Blood ran down the shafts of their axe and shovel, staining their arms, flecking across their furry chests, splattering into their lips. They tasted the gore of their enemies and felt rejuvenated, and they were egged on to a fury of destruction and vigorous death-dealing that their immense strength surged to fulfill. The heads of the axe and shovel became embedded in the bodies of their victims and the one with the shovel simply yanked the blade from the body of the Radlep he had impaled. The one with the axe rocked the shaft back and forth unable to free it. He pulled his victim to the ground and jammed his foot into the man's stomach to give him the leverage required to remove the heavy axe head. A Stormer dropped to his knees before one of them, his voice unable to form the plea for mercy that the features on his face plainly telegraphed. The Mean Brother, the heavy muscles on his back flexing, swept his axe into the man's neck, severing his head through the thin bridge of flesh and bone in a single blow. Blood slicked across the floor a quarter inch deep. Those still alive slipped and fell, wailing. Starling and the Sisters stitched bullets across the writhing mass, chopping a dozen bodies into a hundred pieces. The two Stormers that were guarding Bonner flopped to the floor and lay there in blood, firing wildly at the point at which they thought Starling and the Sisters stood. The shifting, screaming crowd blocked their view and some of their bullets cut down some of their own. They fired crazily, terrified and only concerned with their own survival. Suddenly the Mean Brothers stood over them. Veins pulsed in the giants' faces and they whipped their weapons in a vicious downswing sweeping into the Stormers' soft bodies as if they were clay men. The Mean Brother who carried a shovel freed Bonner of his constraints. The Mean Brother with the axe held it out to Bonner, urging him to take it. "No," said Bonner, "you need it." The Mean held out his hands. These are the only weapon I need, he seemed to say, and, as if to illustrate his point he grabbed a Stormer who cowered nearby and, picking the man up as if he was a doll, slammed him to the ground. He took hold of the man's jaw, forcing his teeth apart until the man's fleshy cheeks split. The Mean rocked the hapless Stormer's jaw back and forth like a barn door on its hinge-then, with a special burst of effort he tore the jawbone from its socket. The Stormer screamed a scream that was choked with blood and his pink tongue slathered about like a fat eel suddenly roused from its hiding place. The Mean shrugged at Bonner. It's easy, he was saying, you take the axe. Bonner took the axe and felt the stickiness of blood on his hands, the shaft ran red with the blood of scores of people. He strode through the crowd oblivious to the bullets and knelt at Dara's side. Her eyes were open but her mind was miles away, lost beyond the forest of pain and humiliation that she had travelled through that long night. Her breath was shallow and forced, her chest a mass of blood and tattered skin. Bonner gently laid his forehead against hers. "Dara... Dara... Dara, do you hear me?" Her lips were frozen in a rictus of death but she hissed something through her ripped lips. Bonner leaned closer to catch her words. She whispered again. Bonner strained to hear over the screams and the explosions. He wrapped his strong arms around her and felt her frail body strain with the attempt at speech. "Kill me," she hissed. He looked down at his Dara, the woman he loved, the woman he would willingly have died for, the woman that gave his violent life meaning. She was a bloody wreck, her body so fragile housing a mind so tough, so singleminded, she had become the delicate battlefield upon which hate had played its final, deadly chord. "Kill me." Bonner's hands closed like steel bands around his beloved's throat. He squeezed and a tiny smile, the smile of release floated across her scarred features. Slowly, he felt the life flow from her. Dara released herself to his grip, confident that he would see her through the torment of this foul world that she had tried to change. As the last of her

young life drained out of her she Suddenly the Mean threw down his shovel and gestured at the Radlep. He pointed at his massive chest. Take your best shot, he was saying. The Radlep saw his chance and lunged. The hard, hairy arm of the Mean Brother clotheslined him, crook of his arm settling like a vise around the Radlep's scaly neck. Instinctively, the Mean Brother slammed the Radlep's head down onto his upraised knee, exulting in the soft give of the man's face. The little bones in the Radlep's neck snapped and cracked like firecrackers. The gas dome continued to explode, blowing into the throne room a sheet of noise so loud the detonations of Starling's arrows were drowned out. Leather was screaming, staring at his severed hand as it lay on the red, wet floor. Bonner swung again and Leather threw up his arms to protect himself, his chopped wrist spraying blood. He whimpered and rolled and screamed when the axe tore through his good hand, scattering his fingers. Radleps were pouring from their headquarters like maddened bees from their hive. They made for the throne room, guns blazing. Starling reached for another arrow and found that he had only three left. Starling had no intention of dying in that bloody pit. He decided it was time to pull the crew out. Cooker was coming to the same conclusion. He pumped up his tanks and tried to shoot a bolt of flame but only a dribble of fire tumbled from his thrower. He was out of gas. He paused a moment and listened to the screams and to the constant explosion of the gas dump. This was the happiest night of his life. Clara's gun chattered and stopped. She was out of bullets. The bodies of four of her sisters lay at her feet. "Time to split," she yelled at Starling. She stooped and scooped up Jamie's Iver Johnson, pushing her body roughly to one side. There would be time to grieve later. "Right, Sister," said Starling, grabbing an M-16, once the proud possession of a Radlep. A Radlep had tried to get between Bonner's axe and Leather. In the moment that Bonner turned to defend himself, dispatching the Radlep as if he was a sapling that had to be cut down. Leather made his escape. He burrowed into a mountain of torn, bloody dead flesh and lay still hoping to escape Bonner and his blade. Crazy with hate, Bonner's eyes darted about the room. "Where- are you?" he yelled. "Where are you?" Bonner swung around, the axe raised when he felt a hand on his shoulder. But it was a Mean Brother. "Don't mess with me, man," said Bonner. "I got to find him." "Bonner," shouted Starling, "everybody out." "I'm not leaving," said Bonner, his blazing eyes still surveying the carnage of the room. Starling shrugged and signalled to the Mean Brother. The Mean reared back and Bonner felt the man's fist, as weighty as a load of bricks slam into his head. Bonner slumped, the Mean catching him before he hit the ground. He shouldered Bonner's compact body as if it were that of a child, and gently took the axe away from him. Chapter 20 The night air coursed cool over Bonner's hot skin as if it was water from a refreshing clean mountain stream. His eyes flickered open and he looked into the worried faces of Starling, Clara and Cooker. "Phew," said Starling, "I was afraid the Mean man had hit you too hard." Bonner struggled to his feet, rubbing his throbbing head. He had taken a lot of punishment in the last twenty-four hours and his body felt bruised from head to toe. "Who didn't make it?" "Five of the Sisters," said Starling, "and Harvey." Clara's big face ran with fat tears. "Sorry, Sister Clara," said Bonner softly. "Not your fault. Brother Bonner. The Sisters knew what they were getting into..." "We have the same enemies now," said Bonner. Clara raised a clenched fist. "Damn right, Bonner. I'm going to hit Leather again and I'm going to keep hitting him." "I'll help you," said Bonner. "Me too," said Starling. "Hey, fuck that," said Cooker, "we gotta get out of here." Bonner looked around the clearing. "Do we have any idea where they are?" "I got the Mean Brothers posted so they can't sneak up on us. But it's a cinch that the Stormers and leps are sure to have cut off the city to the north and the south. We can head east but we'll just run into the sea... We might be able to swing north but the roads are going to be jammed with Leather's men. We could try it on foot, but we need the speed. Leather's probably screaming for blood because we hurt him bad... He's not going to let us get away easily." "West," said Bonner. "West!" said

Starling. "Bonner, due west of here is the firelands." "Yeah, I know." "Bonner," said Clara, "you know there's no way through the firelands..." "There's no easy way," said Bonner, "but there's a way." Starling leaned forward, his eyes narrowed in suspicion. "You done it? You done this path through the firelands?" "Yep. Me and Seth." "Jeez, Bonner," said Clara, "the firelands? I dunno..." Bonner squared his shoulders trying to throw off a yoke of pain and fatigue that seemed to weigh heavily on his shoulders. "You got a better plan?" Leather writhed in pain, bucking off the bed as a few of his harem girls tried to attend to his terrible wounds. He was spread out on a huge bed in the big house, the bandages on his arms growing more sodden with blood as the moments passed. Colley, the general in chief of the Stormers, stood over the bed, big blobs of sweat sliding off his grimy red face. Jojo stood by, a worried look in his eyes. "Five!" screamed Leather, "we got five! We got five of those fucks? Five!" The gas dome exploded again like summer thunder. "How many did we lose?" "Leather, come on, they caught us with our pants flappin'. They surprised us..." Leather rocked from side to side. "Goddammit, I hurt like fucking crazy." He chewed on his lips. "It hurts so bad." Colley considered taking out his revolver and blowing Leather's brains out. Shoot him and take over... But he had a feeling that the two Radleps that stood guard in Leather's bedroom wouldn't let him get out of there alive. "How many, Colley?" screamed Leather. "Ninety or so," he mumbled. "Ninety! Ninety! Ninety! Ninety! And we got five? Goddammit, Colley..." Leather pointed his bandaged stump at his general. Leather saw his mutilated arm and screamed again. "Goddammit that fuck cut off both my hands." Leather wept tears of hate, pain, frustration. "Colley, you get him. You get him by morning or you are grease. You are dead meat, do you hear me?" "Leather..." "Don't fucking argue with me, man. I don't want no excuses. Goddam, it hurts so much..." "Leather..." "Shut up and listen. We got Beck, right?" "Yeah." "You and Jojo go to Beck. You tell him that he's got whatever he wants if he gets me Bonner. Freedom, slates, gas, anything..." Another explosion roared across the Cap. Colley's eyes flickered toward the broken windows. He wasn't sure how much gas the Slavestates had left. "Leather, Beck is a fucking maniac. If you give him a weapon there's no telling who he's going to turn it on." "Goddammit, Colley, I am going to blow your fucking brains out..." Leather reached for the Smith and Wesson he always kept on the night table and realized he couldn't pick it up. He bellowed in frustration. "You want me to do it," rasped a Radlep. Leather's chest heaved and he screamed at Colley. "You get me Beck and you make sure he gets Bonner. No arguments. Do it." "Leather," said Jojo, "Beck and Bonner were pretty tight once." "Yeah, I know. So was me and Bonner. Beck will go to the highest bidder. Colley, you go with him. If Beck makes one false move, grease him. And you-" Leather gestured toward the Radleps "-you go with Colley. If he lets Bonner get away, you bring me Colley's head." The Radleps grinned. "Okay." Shooting a Stormer general would be a pleasant diversion. "Now get moving." "Okay," sighed Colley, "it's your country, man." They didn't come any bigger than Beck. He was a huge granite boulder of a man, standing a good foot taller and a hundred pounds heavier than the Mean Brothers. Six stormers, M-16s at the ready, stood constant guard on him, day and night. The giant was bound with a double length of chain that ran across his wide chest. A long black beard cascaded down off his chin. Beck smiled constantly as if he was pleased by the neverending fear he inspired. Leather was fascinated by him. He would often go to the prison house that was the old Interstate Commerce Commission building and stare at Beck, watching with close attention as the huge man roared at the Stormers guarding him and strained at his heavy chains. Apart from his unbelievable strength. Beck's greatest skill was in tracking. He could track anything or anybody, anywhere. It was almost as if buried in his brain was a sensor, a tight bundle of nerves that seemed to lock onto the intentions of another man and follow them as closely as radar. Colley and Jojo stood back from the man giant and looked nervously at their captive. "So, Colley," roared Beck, "seems to me you had a hot little party tonight. I hope

you and Leather got your mangy little asses sliced to shit." "It was hot," said Colley. "What happened?" "We had some unexpected visitors," said Jojo as the gas dome vomited up another explosion. "Yeah, who?" "Bonner, the Sisters, Starling and some crazy little fuck with a flame thrower." "Bonner! Haw haw haw," Beck showed a couple of rows of teeth the size of tombstones. "Fucking Bonner! Starling! The Sisters! They took you on? Haw haw haw." The room seemed to rock with the giant's laughter. "Did you take them down?" "Some of them?" "Some! Haw haw haw..." Beck's barrel chest strained against the chains he was laughing so hard. "Look, Beck," said Jojo, "Leather has a deal for you." Beck listened in silence, thought it over for a moment, then laid down his conditions. "I want 100,000 slates, gold. I want it now. And I want a machinegun, a good one. And I want fifty men. And when I get back I want five, no ten, of the best-looking women you got in this town." Jojo shook his head. "You got it all but the money. How do we know you'll come back?" "How do I know you won't grease me when I get back?" "Hey," said Colley, "we could have done that a long time ago." "But you knew you'd need me some day." "And we'll need you again," said Jojo diplomatically. "Good, then give me twenty thousand slates now." Jojo wavered and Colley spoke for him. "Fine. Twenty thousand now, eighty when you get back with Bonner and the rest of them." "Awwww, I'm just an old softy," said Beck. "So what's your first move?" demanded Jojo. "Jeez, I'da thought a smart man like you woulda been able to figure that one out, Jojo." "What?" "Which way is Bonner headed?" "I'd say south," said Colley, "there's plenty of country he can get lost in down there." "You dumb fuck," said Beck. "This is Bonner we're talking about. Not some pissant Stormer or raggy Radlep. Think, you dick." "Uh..." "West, man, the firelands..." said Beck impatiently. "Come on," said Jojo. "It's Bonner. The man ain't scared of nothing. The firelands don't bother Bonner." "He ain't so tough," said Jojo. "He sliced your ass to ribbons, didn't he?" "You mean you're taking fifty men into the firelands?" asked Colley. "Yeah." Beck smiled. "Hey Jojo, you wanna come?" He spoke pleasantly, as if he had suggested a day at the beach. They followed the highway out of Washington, passing through the overgrown suburbs that had once housed a few hundred thousand government workers, back in the time when there was a government. Beck was not yet on the job when they made their move so the Stormers never figured that guarding the roads into the firelands was necessary. Bonner and his gang headed west unopposed for the first few miles. So far so good, thought Bonner. But he knew that there weren't too many miles between them and the smoky hell of the firelands. He sniffed at the cool air of the early morning and looked admiringly at the rosy-fingered dawn rising behind them. Make the most of it, he told himself, because it isn't going to last. They tore down the open road ever widening the distance between themselves and the Stormers that were sure to be looking for them. They crested a ridge and Bonner muscled his car to a halt. Below them, perhaps a mile or two away lay the first smoky ridges of the firelands. As they looked down the odd bit of gaseous blue flame bubbled up out of the ground like a little volcano. "Not the prettiest country," said Starling laconically. "Where to?" asked Clara. "We follow the road into the fire a ways then we cut down onto a dry river bed. That acts as a natural fire break. That should take us far enough in..." "Far enough in for what?" "To get rid of them," said Bonner looking over his shoulder. Far behind them on the road were a pack of riders. From that far-off distance they looked like a cloud of furious gnats. "They picked us up damn fast," said Starling. "That's because they have someone good leading them," said Bonner coolly. "Cooker, you are going to have to leave your tank here." Cooker looked astonished. "The hell I will. I got maybe three fifty gats left in this baby." Bonner sighed in exasperation. "Cooker, you can't tank a load of gas that big into the firelands. The first time you hit hot ground you're going to go up like a match. We're taking a big enough risk as it is driving in." "Well, I ain't leaving it." "Goddammit", Cooker," yelled Clara, "you'll kill us all." Starling was watching the riders in hot pursuit. "There's a whole lot of 'em,

Bonner, and this time we don't have surprise on our side." "Cooker," ordered Bonner, "get off the tank." "No fucking way." "Means," said Bonner gesturing toward Cooker. The Mean Brothers grabbed the little gas-hound and carried him wriggling and swearing to Bonnets car. Bonner climbed up onto Cooker's tank and wrestled with the heavy steering, gunning the engine until the ungainly, elephantine vehicle was athwart the road. "Starling," he called, "you got any arrows left?" "Not a one." "Too bad. You take Clara and Cooker and the Means down the road a ways. I'll catch up." "What are you going to do?" "I'm going to shorten the odds a little. Make things a little more fair." Cooker wailed. "You're going to blow my tank, aren't you? Aren't you? Bonner, you fuck!" Cooker started to get out of the driver's seat of Bonner's car but the beefy hand of one of the Mean Brothers restrained him. "You staying with me, Cooker, or are you going with Starling?" asked Bonner. "I'm not going to stand here and watch you destroy my property." "Good, you go. Mean Brothers, you too." The Mean Brothers shook their heads. They wanted to stay behind. "Fine with me," said Bonner. "Bonner," said Starling, "we'll all stay." "What for? Now go." Starling and Cooker, riding in the pillion, roared off followed by Clara on her big bike. Bonner sprinted to his own vehicle and started the engine. The Mean Brothers squatted on either side of the roll bar and watched as he stripped off the canvas cover and slapped a belt of ammunition into the breech. The air slowly filled with the thrumming of cycles. The Storm-ers were getting closer. They slowed when they approached Cooker's tank, the fifty big engines dropping down to idle. They couldn't see Bonner, the big truck stood between him and his pursuers. He wondered for a second if he hadn't parked a little too close to the tanker. Well, he thought, too late now... "Don't go near it," ordered Beck, "it could be booby trapped." Beck, thought Bonner, and half hoped that the big man would live through the inferno that was about to erupt. Bonner cocked the big.50 calibre and let fly. The first big bullets slapped into the rusty tanker tearing great holes in its side. The gasoline within seemed to hesitate a second, then it went up, a great sheet of flame that seemed brighter than the morning sun. Bonner was behind the wheel of his car in second, jamming his foot down on the gas and eating up the road. The big twin exhaust pipes snorted behind him. The Means were hanging on for dear life. Bonner rushed past Clara and Starling where they had pulled over and they fell in behind him. At an incredible rate of speed they broke through the first clouds of smoke that marked the opening of the firelands. The smoke poured into their lungs and clogged their eyes and Bonner prayed that they could keep up enough speed to avoid suffocation. He didn't know the firelands well, but he knew them well enough to know that the fire burned in waves, in parallel lines, along the old coal seams. If you could get through one you would have a little respite, a little almost fresh air before you got to the next. Behind them the ruin of Cooker's tank burned furiously, but every one of them knew that it wouldn't hold them up for long. It was just the opening shot, the first blood of the second, and Bonner hoped, last round-this time, at least. Beck laughed to himself as the tank went up. Just like Bonner to slap you around when you least expected it. Bonner was acting like it was he who had the fifty rifles, he that had the entire power of the Slavestates behind him. Beck floored the gas pedal of the jeep he had been assigned and shot through the flames. Draped around his neck were leather saddlebags that held the twenty thousand slates he had been issued not an hour before. He laughed his big brawny laugh again and felt the engine of the jeep surge under him. This, he thought, was the life. Bonner directed his crew off the road and they tumbled down the steep bank that separated the road from the dry river bed. Once on it they found that the air was a little easier to breathe although on both sides of the dead stream flame rocketed out of the ground. The bed was uneven and strewn with steaming boulders so they had to slow down to a crawl. That worried Bonner, although the path behind them seemed to be lost in a haze of grayish smoke. But he knew he couldn't fool Beck. He would be right behind them on the river bed. Beck pushed his jeep over the edge of the road at a reckless speed and expected the Stormers following him to do

just the same. Colley followed, his heart in his mouth as did the two Radleps. They thought nothing of it at all, he noticed, but there again Radleps didn't give a shit about living or dying one way or the other. A couple of Stormers were thrown from their bikes as if their road horses had tripped and they fell onto the flaming fissures, first their clothes and then their skin igniting on the liquid rock. The Stormer force bounced down on to the river bed, the engines of their bikes screaming in protest. The heat was unbearable and Bonner could feel rivers of sweat pour from him. His clothes were soaked, then dried by the lick of flames, then soaked again. He prayed silently that he would recognize the point that Seth and he had discovered that would lead them on a clear path out of the thick of the firelands and home. Behind him came the ominous roar of the Stormers. Through the thick haze came the first zing of bullets. Bonner knew they were firing blind but the Stormers knew that their prey was somewhere ahead of them and even a wild bullet could hit its mark. Keeping one hand on the top of the wheel Beck vaulted his huge body up in the seat of his bucketing vehicle. With one hand he steadied his big rifle on the windshield and fired into the clouds ahead of him. Bonner heard the thunderous report of the gun, even over the growl of his engine. They were getting close. He gestured at the Mean Brother sitting next to him. "Can you take the wheel?" he yelled. The Mean Brother touched his chest. "Me?" he was asking. Bonner nodded vigorously. A look of sublime pride spread over the Mean Brother's gargantuan features and he nodded. Bonner held the wheel, keeping the speeding vehicle more or less on course while the Mean Brother lumbered into his place. The giant grasped the thick steering wheel in both hands and hunched forward as if cutting a path through the mist with his eyes. Bonner grabbed for the roll bar to hold on and took up the .50 calibre. If the Stormers were going to fire blind, then he would too. The big gun started chugging bullets into the smoke. Bonner hoped they hit something. The first spray did not, but the second did. Two Stormers slid from their cycles as if hit by a low branch. "That's my Bonner," screamed Beck into the smoke. Another short line of tracers slid through the smoke and tore up the hot sand before Beck's tires. "Haw haw," laughed Beck and yanked the trigger on his powerful weapon. The shot knocked Cooker from the back of Starling's bike. The little gas-hound danced on the hot sand feeling the searing pain of a bullet in his flesh. Starling, unaware of Cooker's sudden departure, rode on. Suddenly it seemed to Cooker as if things were very quiet. Bonner, Starling and Clara roared off into the mist, and Beck and his force was not yet upon him. Cooker lay sprawled on the hot river bed, caught in a miasma of smoke and pain. Tears rolled down his cheeks. "No promised land," he said slowly, sadly. He struggled to his feet, tottering slightly under the weight of the pain and sorrow he felt. This was the end. Cooker was no fool, he had tried to make it happen and had come damn close... Too bad. He pumped up his tanks for the last time. "Well," he shouted, "I ain't going alone." The first Stormer broke through the mist and Cooker fried him. The bike and rider went up in a blinding sheet of flame as if they were a single unit. Cooker hit another, before he staggered and fell. He felt his blood pumping from him into the thirsty sands. The heat hit the tanks and he heard an ominous bubbling right behind his ears. "Uh-oh," he said and the gas on his back blew. He was dead in a split second and a charred pile of ash a second beyond that. He last thought flashed through his brain: "So this is what it's like..." Chapter 21 Bonner saw it. A tiny open path ran up the side of the river bank. In the mists above him he could see the tattered ends of railroad that had fallen into the river bed. Bonner wrested the wheel from the Mean Brother and trod heavily on the accelerator pulling ahead of the bikes of his companions. He wrenched the wheel sharply to his left and Bonner's car strained to pull its weight up the steep river bank. At the top of the rise Bonner's wheels spun in loose, hot gravel. Down on the river bed Beck slammed on his brakes. A sudden clearing in the smoke revealed Bonner, Starling and Clara jammed together at the top of the rise. A long, heavy bazooka lay on the back seat of the jeep. Beck picked it up and laid it on his brawny right shoulder, scooped up one of

the shells and was about to slide it into the barrel... One shot and he could take them all.... "Naawww," he said aloud and threw the metal tube back on the seat. Bonner gunned his engine and the car whipped over the crest of the scarp. Starling and Clara scabbled up after him like dirt bike riders. The three of them made a sharp turn onto the railroad tracks and started bombing along the rotten, charred ties. Beck pushed his jeep up the rise with his Stonner force close behind him. They too slid onto the railway, closing the gap between them and their foes with the passing of every second. The jagged, bouncing ride made the Stormers' fire erratic, bullets flew crazily in a hundred directions. The roadbed curved away gracefully ahead of them. Smoke wafted over it and belches of flame darted up between the red hot rails. Beck was almost on them, his Stormers just a short fifty yards behind. Bonner peered into the smoke. They were coming up on a long railway bridge that spanned a deep gorge filled with fire. There, parked on the trestle was the sweetest sight Bonner had ever seen. It was Seth's locomotive and a flatcar. A regular burst of smoke popped from the tall smokestack every few seconds. The man had a head of steam up and he was ready to go. "Seth," yelled Bonner. The slim dark figure stood on the flatcar behind the engine and waved. A machinegun was slung over his shoulder. As Bonner approached Seth shot a rip of bullets over Bonner's head at the Stormers, then vaulted over the coal hod onto the footplate and yanked on the whistle chain. The ghostly sound echoed out through the burning valley. Bonner gunned his engine and ran up the ramp that led to the flatcar, Clara and Starling right behind him. Seth leaned on the throttle and the big locomotive slowly eased itself along the rails. Beck was almost on them and Starling raised his Browning automatic shotgun: he had a clear shot at the big man. Carefully, Starling sighted the powerful weapon, peering along the barrel. Just before squeezing the trigger Beck slammed on his brakes and pulled the jeep around in a full ninety-degree turn. Now he was facing back toward the onrushing Stormers and they were advancing on the wide open mouth of the big man's bazooka. Before they could react to his treachery. Beck had blasted one shell into the Stormers' midst, scattering men and bikes over the side of the trestle and into the inferno below. With a second and third shell he blew a wide gap in the rotten timbers of the railway bridge. Then Beck threw down the gun and ran like hell for the train, the heavy saddle bags packed with money flapping against his massive body. Bonner leaned over the edge of the flatcar and grabbed for Beck's outstretched hand. The weight of the man almost pulled Bonner off his perch; Clara grabbed Bonner around the belt and with Starling assisting they hauled Beck in. Colley stood at the breach in the bridge watching as the train vanished into the mists. "He sold us out," said the big Stonner general; "he sold us out." The Radleps raised their singed eyebrows. "Yeah," rasped one, "ain't that a shame." They levelled their weapons at Colley's chest and pulled the trigger. A short tear of bullets cut him down. They took his head. His body they left where it fell. Seth looked down the rails, peering into the smoke, Bonner at his side. "What do you think?" asked Bonner. "Well," said Seth softly, he almost always spoke just above a whisper, "it'll be hot for a few miles, but the rails are open all the way down the line. We've got ourselves four hours of smoke or so, then we're clear... Hey, don't forget, the firelands aren't as scary as you think. I come here all the time." "You do?" said Starling. "What for?" Seth jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Coal." "How did you know where to find us?" asked Clara. "Dorca told me. Hey, Starling, take the throttle for a while." Seth and Bonner walked back, over the hod to the flatcar, where the two Mean Brothers sat with their legs dangling over the side of the car. They seemed to be enjoying themselves. "So," said Seth, "pretty hot time, I gather." "That's right." "No Dara?" Bonner took a deep breath. "She's dead." "Leather is scum," said Seth, "he'll kill anybody for no reason." "I killed her," said Bonner. Seth shrugged. "There's a long story attached to that piece of information and I'm not sure I want to hear it." Beck stood up on the coal pile. "Hey, Bonner, you know I had you. I could have taken you at any time. You were mine." Bonner nodded. "Yeah, I know." "But I figured I

wasn't going to head back to the Cap. No fun there." "I appreciate it. Beck." "No problem," said the giant happily, "I'm a rich man." "Good for you," said Bonner and he sat down next to one of the Mean Brothers and together, in silence, they watched the burning miles of firelands roll away behind them. Epilogue Leather lay on his bed and stared out the window watching the gas dome burn. The explosions had died down but a bright orange ball of flame dominated the night sky. The air was heavy with black smoke. The Cap that night was an evil place. Stormers stood in little bands at street corners and in the bazaar talking in low tones. The Radleps were out in force, maintaining order. They stood between Leather and mutiny. Jojo entered Leather's room. "So," he asked, "should I give orders to disarm the Stormers?" Leather, calmer now, knew that whatever he did in the next few hours would either save or destroy his empire. "No, leave 'em alone. Take away their guns and we'll just stir them up. Put some extra leps on the liquor warehouse. I don't want anyone getting drunk and starting a firelight. They are pretty mad about Colley, aren't they?" "Yeah. And they feel like shit because they were beaten by Bonner." "Yeah. Bonner." Leather turned back toward the window. It all came back to Bonner. Always Bonner... Leather had played his top card, his ace- Dara-and Bonner had beaten him. Tears started into Leather's eyes. He was a fucking cripple and his empire had been slammed-all the work of Bonner. Leather turned to Jojo. "I still want him dead. Now more than ever." "Leather, please, let it ride." Leatherman twisted his face into a grimace of hate. "No way, man. No way." , The dark streets of Chicago were silent, save for the roar of Bonner's engine. It was missing on six cylinders and he was running on rims; he couldn't be sure but it sounded as if he had broken a piston ring. If he didn't put the car down soon the engine would seize. He pushed the last ounce of power out of the tired engine, making for the bus station and the soothing ministrations of Lucky. He steered the car up the long, curving ramp and found the mechanic waiting in the bay, holding a kerosene lantern and his old Colt. "Heard you coming," said the little man. "Fucked the old girl again, I see." He sighed heavily. "Boss..." "Yeah," said Bonner, as he took a few things out of the car, "I know. I don't have any respect for machinery." He started down the ramp. "Well, you don't," shouted Lucky. "Yeah, yeah," said Bonner. "Did you get any oil, like I asked you?" "Nope. Sorry." "You'll be sorrier when you need it," shouted Lucky, his voice echoing in the dark space. "Take your time," said Bonner, "I'm not going to be riding for a while." Bonner walked through the dead streets. He told himself that he should go thank Dorca for getting Seth out to meet them. He remembered that he had a present for the big barkeep someplace... The hell with it, he thought, I'll do it tomorrow. He climbed the dusty stairs to his rooms. The woman was still there. She smiled tentatively at him as he entered. She put her arms around him and laid her body lightly against his. "I'm glad you're back," she said. He stroked her hair absentmindedly and smiled, then gently disengaged himself. She understood and vanished into the kitchen. He sat on the edge of the bed and rested his head in his hands... Deep in the night tortured dreams of Dara and Leather and vicious firefights awakened him. He opened his eyes in the darkness, the woman slept by his side. In the streets he could hear the coarse-voiced singing of a drunk. He thought of Dara. He thought of Leather. In his bones he felt the dull ache of failure. In his heart he felt the hot need for revenge. The war was just beginning. The End

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