

New Eden

THE JOINING TRILOGY

Book 1

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PART ONE:

CRIMES & PUNISHMENTS

PROLOGUE

ROBERT WIPED his bloody nose on his sleeve and staggered to his feet, lifting the bookbag that had fallen to the ground.

"I tolds yuh tuh stays down!" bellowed the older boy. He let fly with a kick to Robert's backside that sent him sprawling face-first onto the rocky ground. A hoot of laughter erupted from the group of youths surrounding them. Benji squatted beside his victim, a malicious grin twisting his mouth. Taking painful hold of Robert's ears, he ground the younger boy's face into the gravel. With a final cuff to his head, Benji strode off; the others following close behind, their laughter ringing wildly.

Robert watched them cross the school courtyard and enter the dormitory. Then he was on his feet, running for the church. Once at the door, he moved inside with caution, listening for the sounds of priests. Voices could be heard coming from one of the anterooms behind the altar. He stopped, ready to bolt, but the voices continued to drone on, mixing with the sound of metal on plates. They were having lunch.

Robert crept through the gloomy interior until he was against the east wall. With increased stealth he advanced past the worn pews to the front of the church. He paused for only a moment before climbing onto the dais and crossing the few feet to the ancient wooden altar. There stood a silver cross with metallic flames twisted to encircle its top half, the golden flames affixed to each end of the horizontal bar. Grabbing the weighty firecross, he stuffed it into the bookbag before making his silent escape.

Once outside, he checked for signs of his tormentors, but they were not in sight. With quick steps, he crossed the courtyard, as though heading towards the dorm entrance, veering to the right at the last moment to hide behind the tall prickly bush at the side of the building. Hunkering down, he peered through the thick branches, waiting.

It started to rain, hard and cold, but he was not distracted from his purpose. A short time later, the bullies charged out of the building, heading towards the gaming field. He waited until they were engrossed in their sword practice before dashing up the steps and into the dormitory.

Despite the weight of the firecross, Robert ran lightly up the interior staircase, but not so fast as to draw attention to himself, an art he'd perfected during his eight years of life. When he reached Benji's dorm room he slowed to a casual walk, entering with an air of innocence, ready to act confused, as if he'd accidentally entered the wrong room. But no one was there.

He'd been in this dorm room before, forced inside and tortured by those same boys. Benji, the eldest and the biggest, always in the lead.

Robert made straight for Benji's bed, pulling back a corner of the thin mattress to reveal the wooden planks beneath. He laid the firecross on the hard surface, snug against the wall, and replaced the mattress, making certain the bed was not perfectly tidy. With one last check of his handiwork, he quickly exited the dormitory. Mingling with the other students, he crossed the quad, arriving at the education facility as the lunch break ended.

Father Carmichael had barely started the history lesson when the church bell began to ring excitedly, announcing a general alarm. The boys leapt to their feet, grabbing their bookbags as they headed for the door. Already the hallway was crammed with students rushing for the stairway. Robert let himself be carried along by the press of bodies, down two flights of stairs and into the puddle-filled courtyard, the staff of clerics hurrying after them. When the entire school was assembled, the bell fell silent and Bishop Chang charged out of the administration building.

His bowl-cut hair flapping untidily in the breeze, the bishop crossed the fifteen feet to the stone statue of Pope Honorius Vecker II, the school's founder. With some difficulty, the middle-aged principal maneuvered his unwieldy bulk onto its base, which was wet and slippery from weeks of winter weather.

There was absolute silence, broken only by the patter of light rain.

Pensive and wary, every face turned towards the bishop, fear the one commonality, for there were no distinctive racial types but a blending of many. Skin color varied from deep brown to copper to dark olive. Hair was walnut brown to obsidian black, from straight to kinky, though this was not much in evidence as it was cropped close to the scalp, as befitted a gaming male.

"A heinous crime has been committed!" Bishop Chang announced sternly. "A holy firecross has been stolen from the church, and I want it returned *immediately*," he barked out, and every boy jumped in fright.

The bishop stood poised, waiting for a confession. When no one stepped forward, he continued in a voice that shook with rage, "You will stand here until that firecross has been found and the guilty party punished!" He glared at the assembly for several moments before stepping carefully off the slippery surface.

Quickly he organized the younger clerics into a search party, and they hurried off to do his bidding. His expression darkening further, he strode into the administration building, slamming the door.

Dressed in rough spun tunics and short pants, the students stood shivering in the drizzle while the priests carelessly rummaged through their bags, dropping books and class work onto the muddy gravel. The boys retrieved them hastily, knowing they'd be punished for any damage done to school property. The search was halfway completed when a very young priest rushed from the dormitory, hurrying across the courtyard to the administration building. Moments later the bishop emerged once more; his face was stern, but the rage had now subsided.

"Benjamin Hardcastle, come forward!"

Heads swiveled in Benji's direction.

"It weren't me!" he shouted.

"Come forward!" the bishop roared, and every boy quaked in fear.

Reluctantly, Benji pushed his way through the students to stand before the bishop.

"What do you have to say for yourself?" the bishop demanded.

"I never done it!"

A shocked gasp broke from the student body at this audacity. It would go harder for him now. The bishop said nothing but motioned sharply to the two discipline priests standing off to the side. The priests turned a stern gaze on the boy, their black hoods folded back to partially reveal eye sockets indelibly darkened, making their cold stare all the more terrifying. With calculated steps, they strode towards Benji, as his chestnut complexion drained to a sickly green.

Grabbing the boy, they dragged him to the discipline post, with Benji loudly claiming his innocence.

Rough hands removed his shirt from resistant limbs before tying him to the post, his bare back facing the assembly. The priests stepped away, one of them drawing out a whip from the deep recesses of his cloak.

With a solemn nod, the bishop gave the signal to begin. A moment later, the whip was raised, its tongue hissing through the air in a long arch before landing with a hard snap across Benji's back.

A howl of pain erupted out of the boy, but it was abruptly cut off by the next swipe of the lash. His howl grew louder, freezing the onlookers rigid. They were not accustomed to the sight of a whipping, caning being the usual punishment. The lash was used only for the most serious of crimes, and stealing from the Church was a serious crime indeed. Now Benji would live under a heavy threat. Any further offence would find him spending the balance of his school years inside an adult prison. Few boys would risk that fate.

Two more strokes crossed the boy's back before the bishop raised an arm.

"Do you repent?" Bishop Chang demanded.

"I never done it," Benji stubbornly repeated, his voice shaking with fear and anger.

"Do you accuse another?"

There was a long hesitation before he shook his head, "No."

Again, the bishop nodded to the discipline priest, and the whip hissed out two more times. Blood trickled in rivulets down Benji's back; his screams hung in the air.

"Do you repent?" the bishop asked once more.

The entire school held its breath, waiting for the answer.

In a small voice that all strained to hear, Benji finally repented his crime.

There was a sigh of relief from every student in the yard, but nowhere was it expressed with such feeling as it was in Robert Bountiful.

"Willie!"

The young prince started guiltily, expecting to see a soldier guardian, but it was his two older brothers who stood looming over him. They were grinning widely. William smiled back, nervous but hopeful.

He'd dared to sneak from the palace kinderhall to play in his father's study — a brave act for such a timid soul. He'd not considered running into his brothers, oblivious of their scrutiny as he made his careful way to the blessed isolation of the bookroom, which is how he always thought of it.

"Come on, there's something we gotta show you," Thomas said, lifting William to his feet by the scruff of his tunic.

"Let's go," Henry urged.

The older boys bolted from the room, dragging their little brother with them. Thomas was twelve, Henry ten, William just six. There was little in their faces to reveal their shared paternity. Thomas had high cheekbones and a small, flat nose, his skin a russet red. Henry's complexion was sepia brown, with a strong chin, broad nose and full lips. William's dark olive face bore signs of growing into an aquiline profile with thin lips and a receding chin. He was also slight of build in comparison to his brothers' burly strength.

Together, the boys raced up the stairs to the top floor where they stood panting over the banister, gazing down into the stairwell at the three floors below. William drew back quickly; heights made him nervous. But coupled with this fear was what lay beyond the door behind them.

Looking at the illicit entrance, only a few yards away, William stammered out fearfully, "We, we, we aren't supposed to be up here — it's forbidden."

"Scared you'll be stoned for your sins?" Thomas asked in a mocking tone as he moved beside William, looking over his head to nod at Henry. Instantly, the boys pounced on their younger brother, pinning him to the floor. Thomas pulled a rope from under his shirt, binding William's arms to his sides, tossing the other end to Henry, who tied it to the banister.

"No!" William begged.

"Say: please no, Your Lordship," Thomas directed in almost a friendly tone.

"Please no, Your Lordship," William parroted desperately.

"Say: I am a piece of shit."

William repeated the words, close to shaming tears.

"What the hell's this piece of shit doing in the palace!" Thomas exclaimed in mock shock. "Henry, dispose of it!"

"No!" William shrieked as Henry lifted him onto the banister.

"Say: the Holy Fathers are pig swill," Thomas ordered.

William gasped in shock, "I can't say that!"

"Push him over."

"No! Wait!" William squawked.

"Say it," Thomas hissed.

"The Holy Fathers are pig swill," William whispered.

"Louder!"

William bleated the foul words out a little louder.

"Have you ever heard such talk, Henry? This calls for severe punishment."

"NO...!" William screamed as Henry pushed him over the banister. His cry filled the stairwell before it was cut off by the painful jerking of the rope as it brought his fall to an abrupt end, punching the air from his lungs. There was a short pause while William caught his breath, then he opened his mouth to let loose a high-pitched scream. He didn't notice his brothers running from the scene, doubled over with laughter.

Guards came rushing to the stairwell on the floors below. They looked up at the screaming, struggling prince, and each face split into a wide grin.

Like all who lived on New Eden, their multiracial ancestry was clearly apparent.

"They got him uh good one this time," the youngest amongst them remarked, and there were several snickers of agreement.

"Better brings him up," their sergeant ordered. "That screechin's enough tuh drives uh desert demon back tuh hell." He pointed at two guards, "Fetch 'im."

They bounded up the wide stairway, once a two-way escalator, now enclosed with wooden planks to hide the ancient tech. Their thickset bodies rippling with muscle, they easily scaled the two floors. A few moments later they reached the rope and began hauling up the prince.

The boy did not relent in his cries of terror.

The soldiers in the stairwell watched the operation with amusement. Sensing movement, their heads turned and all humor left them as a priest stormed past, climbing towards young William. The soldiers glowered after him.

"It's his doin' the prince be such uh weaklin'," the sergeant muttered.

There was a chorus of grunts supporting this view. They turned their attention back to the dangling prince, who was by now close to the banister. One more pull brought him over the side, where he was plopped carelessly onto the floor. But still he continued to scream, his eyes clenched shut. One of the guards bent to cut away the ropes binding the boy, and then stood back, at a loss.

"Should we gets uh guardian?" he asked his companion over the din.

"That won't be necessary," Father Gideon's cold voice interrupted as he pushed past him to bend over the prince. Frowning, the soldiers moved away from the crouching priest. "William, it's me, Father Gideon," the young priest stated firmly. "You're safe now." He had to repeat this three times before the words reached the terrified boy.

William stopped screaming and opened his eyes. "Father," he gasped, his body shaking violently in reaction.

The priest picked up the boy and quickly descended the stairway. The soldiers followed after, their faces scowling disapproval. On the second floor, Father Gideon strode down a wide corridor to the kinderhall. He did not glance at the soldier guardians inside but went directly to William's bedchamber. He laid the boy on the

bed, covering his shivering body with roughly spun blankets.

"Father, I was so sc-sc-scared," he hiccupped.

"Yes, my son," the priest said. "You are safe now, I am here."

"Thank you, Father," he said, and the relief caused tears to spring to the boy's eyes, which he struggled to keep inside without success.

The priest leaned forward to pat William's back; his words sympathetic but the eyes were cold. When the boy finally cried himself to sleep, Father Gideon sat back with a satisfied smile. Once again William's brothers had pushed their sensitive young sibling into the waiting arms of the Church.

The priest nodded approvingly at William: he would grow to be the Church's tool, completely and utterly.

CHAPTER ONE

THEY WERE next in line.

Eric tried not to let his fear show as he followed his father up to the registration booth. The wrinkled face of the old priest scowled as he extended a hand for the documents his father placed there. He studied the papers, demanding, "You are Andre Wong?"

His father answered quickly, subdued. The tone deepened Eric's fear, for his father always spoke with harsh authority.

The priest continued, "This is your son, Eric Wong?"

Again, that quick reply from his father.

The old cleric entered the information from the birth and marriage certificates into the great ledger before him. Then, dunking the pen inside an inkwell, he turned the book to Andre. "Sign here."

Laboriously, Andre scratched his name onto the page. The priest handed back the documents and gestured to the exit on their left. "He goes through there," he said, his attention already turned upon the next applicant.

Andre pushed his son towards the door and shoved it open, letting Eric pass inside. A ragged leather duffel bag was dropped at the boy's feet. "Mind duh Fawders," Andre growled before shutting the door between them. Eric blinked at the sudden barrier; he was on his own.

Nervously, he looked around. It was not reassuring.

The school was an old one. Scarred and weathered buildings frowned down upon a wide courtyard of monotonous, graveled flatness devoid of all greenery but for a single prickle bush tucked against the dormitory.

At one end of the quad was a small gaming field where a group of students were practicing their sword skills while others wrestled on the muddy ground. At the other end was a Church, the most preserved building in the school, but still in need of repair. "The Holy Church of New Eden" was etched high across its wooden face, the once shiny paint, peeled away to nothing, making the words barely noticeable. In contrast, the discipline post loomed before the church doors, tall and threatening and very much in evidence.

Not far from Eric, clustered around the base of a large stone statue, was a group of newbies. Their long hair hung in tangled knots about their faces, their few possessions stuffed into worn leather bags. Struggling with his own shabby duffel bag, Eric made his way towards them.

Without warning, his feet were kicked out from under him and the bag wrenched from his hands. There was laughter as he landed hard, skinning his tawny brown face and knees on the gravel. He looked up to see his satchel being tossed between four older boys.

"Gimme it!" he demanded, leaping to his feet.

The biggest of the boys caught the bag. "Yuh wannit? Takes it," Benji said, ramming it hard into Eric's chest, knocking him down again.

Eric jumped up, grabbing for the bag, though the boy held it high, laughing at his puny efforts.

"Give it to him," a voice ordered. Eric turned, expecting to see a priest, but it was only another student, older than Eric, yet still no match against these bullies.

"He yurr bro or what," Benji snarled, tossing the bag into the dirt.

Robert's terracotta skin had flushed a livid red, and he stared fiercely at the bigger boy. Without looking from Benji, Robert ordered Eric to join the other newbies.

Eric rushed to obey, dragging the duffel bag after him. Panting, he waited expectantly for the fight to break out. But he was disappointed. His defender turned away, striding off towards the gaming area.

One of the older boys yelled after him, "Fawder Tyler be sharpnin' duh cutters!"

The others laughed jeeringly and jogged into the dormitory. Yet the taunt seemed to go unnoticed by the younger boy, who didn't pause or turn around.

What's he saying with such talk? Eric wondered. The words made no sense to him.

He watched after the lone boy.

Who is he? Why'd those older boys obey him?

His thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of a priest, a man no longer in his prime. He looked over the group critically. "Pick up your things and come with me," he ordered sternly.

Eric stole a last glance towards the sword players before hoisting his bag once more to follow the priest into the dormitory.

From her position at a third-floor window, Theresa secretly watched the exchange. This was not the first time she'd witnessed that boy's interference in the tormenting of a younger student. She stared after him as he crossed the courtyard to the gaming area. He fascinated her: the only male to inspire something other than fear. Until this boy, she'd not known it was possible for a male to be anything but cold or cruel.

Someone was coming.

Quickly Theresa returned to cleaning the classroom but relaxed slightly when she recognized the rapid, shuffling steps. It was only another eve.

A girl of twelve entered and began speaking swiftly in sign language: "Be quick! Father Tommy's grouchy as a blue boar!"

"Nearly done," Theresa answered silently in return.

Conversation between eves was narrowly limited to passing information about duties. Any further discussion brought punishment. Most found it safer to use the subtle hand language learned at their mother's knee. Every quick grasp or pinch of cloth was rich with meaning: the bend of a finger, the amount of material, and even the speed blended to articulate their silent language. But still it needed to be used with care; discovery would bring repercussions beyond considering.

Theresa shuffled through the room, finishing her chores. Only nine years old, yet already her shoulders were stooped and rounded. Her head hung low in a cowed,

beaten attitude, her face hidden by a heavy black veil that began above the eyebrows and ended well below the collarbone. The black scarf covering her shaved scalp was tied securely at the back of the head, its long ends brought forward and knotted in the front.

A high collar and long sleeves highlighted the loose-fitting gray tunic that covered much of her bulky gray skirt. Below the hem, baggy trousers made of heavy black material were briefly revealed before disappearing inside ankle-high leather boots. A large black overvest completed the outfit, disguising the outlines of her body, creating a boxy, unshapely appearance. Only her hands, a slash of forehead and part of her eyes were exposed.

She hurried from the classroom. There was still much to do, though little would involve study. Reading, writing, math and history were for boys alone. Religious instruction was the only commonality, for every child must learn what God demanded of them: strict obedience to the Laws of the Church.

As a female, this meant complete Obedience and Submission to Man. Only then could she achieve forgiveness for being born an eve, instrument of Satan, condemned to eternal hellfire but for the intervention of the Holy Church.

The Church was relentless and thorough. There was not a female in all of New Eden who didn't believe in her own wickedness. Every aspect of her life was designed to contain the evil she embodied, and to atone for it.

To prevent contamination of male students, eves were completely segregated. They were even allotted their own stairwells and corridors, which ran like a maze throughout each building within the boys' schools, making females almost invisible as a functioning part of these institutes. Yet it was the labor of young eves that kept the schools in operation. They were the cooks, cleaners, gardeners and seamstresses, crossing over from the girls' schools every sunrise to perform their vital duties. Returning at night to be locked within their high stone walls, walls that were heavily embedded on both sides with shards of glass and razor-sharp metal. The boys grew up seeing eves as distant drudges, to be detested, contained — and feared.

Theresa made her way quickly to the ground floor, though it was difficult to see inside the narrow stairwell. Within this dark and isolated space, there was always an element of risk, for it was here that the girls were most often assaulted by the priests.

It was not only the act itself that was terrifying to consider, but also its harsher consequences. If the crime was discovered or the priest confessed, she would be accused of enticement and a lengthy punishment carried out upon her person.

So far, Theresa had avoided being compromised. She hoped to be quick enough to remain so.

Reaching the ground floor, she moved through the stone corridor that connected the two schools. Strong doors stood open, one at each end. At night the doors were locked and bolted with a priest on guard before each one. The Church was well aware of a boy's curiosity with the forbidden.

Theresa passed through the second doorway and entered the eve school.

She made straight for a latrine. Once inside, she immediately lifted the heavy veil

from her face, revealing the beauty of her oval shaped eyes and copper complexion.

The veil was comprised of two layers of coarse material. The bottom layer was punctuated with two small openings for the nostrils and a larger opening for the mouth to allow food and drink to be consumed without baring the face. Veil removal was allowed only in the darkness of the dorm room or while bathing, or sometimes during a discipline session. But the thing was hot and stifling, making breathing and seeing difficult. She detested it with a depth of feeling that would not be shaken by years of use. She removed it at every opportunity.

With sudden urgency, she covered her face and hurried to the garden, afraid her tardiness would attract Father Tommy's attention. But he was not outside when she picked up her hoe to join the other girls. They took no notice of her arrival but weeded in silence, heads down, faces carefully averted from their neighbors.

A noise at the barn door made them all turn. It was little Ruth, one of the new arrivals, scared and wanting her mother. The girls returned to their weeding; there was nothing they could do.

But Ruth was not to be ignored.

Pushing her way through the goats in the yard, Ruth bolted over the garden fence. She paused to rip off her newly acquired scarf and veil, exposing her freshly shaved scalp, before flinging herself at Sarah, the most senior girl in the school.

Fearfully, Sarah motioned her to be silent and tried to push the little girl away. But Ruth pushed back, her cries becoming louder, her golden-brown face streaked with tears.

The disturbance brought Father Tommy into the yard.

Tears were forbidden. In males it was a sign of weakness; in females, manipulation. That the child was new to both the school and the veil would not be a consideration.

Furious, he ordered the two girls apart, but Ruth only tightened her grip. The priest lifted the short whip hanging from his belt and struck her solidly across the back. She clung on harder. He began to whip the child, commanding her to let go with every stroke. At last she weakened and dropped to the ground.

Her back torn and bloody, Ruth was dragged from the garden. She would be taken before the school principal for judgment and further discipline.

The eyes quickly bent back to their work. It would be unwise to show any reaction to the ugly scene.

Theresa attacked the ground with violent jabs of her hoe, sickened and angry.

I hate them! God forgive me, but I hate them! she silently raged.

Although Theresa understood that she was evil and that it was only through the intervention of the Church that she was saved from an eternity of damnation, she could not feel grateful. She had many bad thoughts about priests — thoughts she did not confess.

Theresa sighed deeply: I shall never find my way to Salvation.

It was cold and damp inside the dormitory, the rain falling in a solid sheet outside the shuttered window. Far past curfew, the room was dark and silent, no sound but the even breathing of children. Eric shivered and wrapped the blanket more tightly around himself, easing it over his recently shaved head. Plagued by homesickness, he couldn't sleep. He hated it here. You had to ask permission for everything and were ordered about all day long.

He was not used to this constant presence of priests. At home he saw them at Sunday service and Wednesday catechism only. But here, they seemed to hover over every moment. To think of being stuck in this place until his fifteenth year made his chest tight and swollen. He bit his lip, trying hard to keep in the forbidden tears.

Eric's reaction was typical of boys who came from the poorer families. With no house priest to report on their every infraction, they lived free of the Church's close scrutiny. The Church believed rebellion came only from the privileged and the wealthy; while the business of staying alive occupied the attention of the lower classes — and Eric's family was certainly low. His father was a miner and, like all miners, was descended from criminal stock.

Eight hundred years after establishing itself as the sole receiver of wisdom and Divine Law on the planet, the Holy Church of New Eden decreed that only those eves unfit for breeding could be used inside the mines.

In one quick stroke, the labor pool was cut to half its previous size, leaving the rich mine owners frantic to fill the gap.

Responding to their demands, the Church made a radical but necessary decision. It legitimized the use of prison labor — *male* labor — inside the mines. To any prisoner facing a life sentence, the Church approved the offer of a small wage, a company house, and the return of one wife, in exchange for a lifetime contract to work the mines.

Some did not sign, cruel as prison life was, for to do so would mean signing away the status of their sons and all the generations to follow.

On New Eden, boys inherited the occupation of their father, be it high or low, with few avenues of escape. Mining was eave work, the lowest of the low, putting the family forever in a position of poverty and ignominy. But there were many who gratefully signed away their future generations, eager to escape the hellish cells. One of these men was Eric's ancestor.

Like all mining families, each generation of males grew up, married and raised their children in the same house they were born in, creating overcrowded and oppressive conditions in the small company dwellings.

As was usual in New Eden families, girls left for school at age five and were never thought of again. Boys followed a year later for their own type of education, though ultimately the objective was the same: blind obedience to the Church.

In the more affluent families, boys spent their first six years in the highly controlled environment of a male operated nursery under a cleric's watchful eye. For these boys, their entry into a Church residential school, while indeed wrenching, was somewhat

familiar.

But the poorer boys, having only brief and distant contact with the Holy Ones, were ill prepared to be thrust so completely into the strict care of the Church. This severely regimented program was met with varying degrees of shock after the undisciplined freedom of their first six years. They would all suffer a painful period of adjustment, but for Eric that adjustment would have added difficulties.

Eric's grandfather and his two brothers had died young, leaving only three sons between them, two of which were killed in a mining accident before they'd had time to save the bride price.

The cost of a wife had risen steadily over the centuries, severely curbing the number of wives a man could own. In the poorer classes, it now took a combined family effort to buy a young man a wife. Eric's father, without family to help with the bride-price, was forced to wait many years before acquiring a wife of advanced age with few breeding years remaining. It was a great disappointment to him that she delivered only one son before drying up altogether. The four daughters she bore did not count for anything.

Andre Wong worked hard in the mines, spending most of his evenings in the pub showing off his strong head for alcohol or in the gaming arena trying to win the respect denied him elsewhere. There was little time or interest for his son.

Eric was left in the care of females — common practice amongst the poor, usually until the baby reached toddler age. But with no grandfather or other available males in the household, his dame and eve siblings were forced to continue as his caretakers. He also spent these years playing and even talking with them.

His older eve siblings had already learned their lessons and would not be engaged by his baby demands, but the young twins, still babies themselves, naturally responded to his overtures for play. The three became close.

As Eric grew out of toddler age, they were separated.

When his dame caught them at play, she would silently remove his young siblings. And though Eric never heard her speak or strike the little eves, they would cry for a long time afterwards, when already they knew tears were forbidden.

His father never spoke to his daughters and rarely to his wife, except to give orders, though there was little to make commands over in their small house. For the most part she tried to remove herself from his presence, as a good wife should, remaining with her daughters inside the eve sleeping room whenever her husband was at home.

The only time Eric saw his dame and his father deliberately share the same space was when his father pulled sharply on the bell above the door of the "spare-room," as Andre called it. From wherever she was in the house, his wife would come shuffling quickly to enter that room. His father would follow, closing the door and sliding the bolt hard into place. A few moments later, animal-like sounds would be heard and the squeaking of the bench. Eric knew it was a bench, although a strange one, because he once snuck a peek inside. For that, his father had boxed his ears and thrashed his backside til it bled. The same punishment he'd received after climbing onto a chair to ring the bell, and when he'd removed the red cord that sometimes hung there.

When Eric moved past toddler age, he began spending time away from the house to play with other boys in the camptown or to watch the men in the gaming arena. He also began his catechism and learned the evils of eves. But he did not equate these wicked creatures with the siblings he played with daily.

Eric was developing two parts to himself.

There was his at-home self, which was often content to remain silent and let the games become sedate and domestic. While his outside-self grew as the other boys grew: loud and aggressive, proud, determined to win at any cost. When he tried to bring this part of himself into the house, it left a hollow, disturbing feeling.

Eric also learned that males were master over any eve. Regardless of age or family status, she could not disobey.

He no longer allowed his dame to remove the little eves when she caught them at play. Only once did she ignore his command. With muttered words that begged forgiveness, she grabbed up the twins from the back courtyard and shuffled quickly into the house. Eric followed after, determined to have his way, but when he entered the main room of the house that childish command stuck in his throat — a priest was standing inside the front doorway.

Instinctively Eric shrank back into the kitchen, but a moment later he peered around the doorjamb to watch in dumb dismay as his dame placed the little eves before the priest. Taking them by the hand, he turned and, without a word, left the house. The sisters looked back at their mother in silent alarm, but she only clutched at her clothing convulsively. Their fear deepened, and they looked at the feet of the man with eyes round and staring. They turned for one last look at their mother before passing through the courtyard gates to the world outside.

Stunned, Eric stood behind his dame, gazing unblinking into the empty yard.

The two remained frozen in a long moment of shared grief.

Then Eric ran to the back of the house. Flinging the door open, he dashed to the coal shed to bury his head amongst the black cubes as tears spilled out uncontrollably.

The loss of his sisters was traumatic, though he'd known it was coming — someday, as it had to his other siblings. But he was barely five, with little thought for tomorrow.

For a time, he no longer found pleasure in playing with the boys of the camp. Yet he hated how the house felt so empty, and he was often seen roaming the camptown long after the other boys had been ordered inside for the night. His own father seldom home to notice.

Soon, however, he recovered his interest in games and stopped his late-night roaming. Though now he began ordering his mother around in the same manner as his father, taking out his anger on her for the loss of his sisters.

Without other males to challenge or interfere with his position in the household, he grew accustomed to wielding power, answering to no one but his father, whose presence in the house, though loud and gruff and sometimes violent, was also brief. For most of the day, the house was Eric's to command.

But all that was changed now. Here, he had no voice.

Eric held his breath suddenly, listening. What was that? Crooking a finger, he

moved the blanket from his eyes. Nothing stirred. He was about to relax when a shadow blocked the light from the corridor. Tensing, he waited. The door opened only narrowly, but it was enough to reveal the culprit.

There was a second's hesitation before Eric drew on his short pants and imitated the other's silent movements. He slipped from the room in time to see the figure descending the staircase at the end of the dimly lit hallway. He tiptoed after.

The boys' dormitory was on three levels. Each level contained two large rooms which slept thirty boys of varying ages and four smaller rooms for senior students. There was also a sleeping room for the dorm priests. This stood between him and the staircase.

Cautiously, he approached the open door and peeked inside. Two beds stood empty, while a third held old Father Michael, snoring heavily. Eric made a dash for the stairs, praying the two missing priests would stay that way.

His bare feet were silent on the stone steps. At the bottom he paused, afraid he'd lost his quarry, but there he was, heading down the corridor towards the dining hall. Eric remained at a safe distance as he trotted after him, entering the hall to crouch between the long tables, watching as the boy exited into the kitchen beyond. Eric dashed forward to peer through the swinging doors before entering warily, but there was no one inside. He noticed a small door standing open beside the cook stove and tiptoed through the narrow opening.

Eric found himself inside a storage room used for dried goods and fuel. Bewildered, he looked about: it was empty. Then he spied the fuel chute flapping open. Without hesitation, he ducked through to the outside.

Wood and coal surrounded him, though he could barely make them out in the darkness. A low overhang jutted out from the building, making a crude shelter against the elements. Eric took a step and tripped over a shovel that crashed noisily against the coal bin. Lying rigid where he'd fallen, he waited, afraid he'd given himself away, but the roar of the rain had muffled the sound.

Shivering in the cold, Eric got to his feet and hugged his bare chest, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dark. It was difficult to see through the deluge.

A tool shed stood a few feet away. Beyond that was the gaming field. There was no sign of the boy, but a moment later he saw a hint of movement near the equipment room before it disappeared altogether.

Leaving the relative protection of the overhang, Eric felt his way cautiously through the dark, the force of the rain stinging his naked torso. At last he made it safely to the door of the equipment room, pushing it open with care. A dim light glowed from deep in the back. He crept towards it.

His defender from the other day was doing push-ups, hard and fast, his breath gasping out with each effort. They'd not spoken since the incident in the courtyard, but Eric had learned his name.

Hiding behind a rack of gaming equipment, Eric watched in amazement: Why sneak out to do what they were forced to do every day?

Robert jumped to his feet and grabbed a blunted broad sword, the type used by

students. He jabbed at the air a few times before abruptly leaping forward, kicking over the tool rack and sending Eric flying backwards onto the floor. Before he could move, the tip of the sword was at his throat.

"What are you doing here?" Robert growled.

"I-I follows yuh," Eric managed to stutter out.

"I can see that. Why?"

"Tuh sees where's yuh goin'."

Robert studied him a moment, then removed the sword, hauling Eric to his feet. "It's not smart to follow people — you could get hurt." He turned away and began to clean up the mess of equipment, but abruptly paused. "No one saw you? No, of course not, or we'd both be at the whipping post." Eric's eyes grew big with fear. Robert smiled thinly. "Don't worry; you're not caught — this time. Just don't do it again." He returned to tidying up the mess of swords and knives, their edges rounded and dulled to prevent accidental injury.

Eric looked on, knowing any other older student would have forced *him* to pick up the mess. It gave Eric the confidence to ask, "How comes yuh doin' extra gamin'?"

Without pausing in his labors, Robert said, "Cadet Trials are in three months. This is my last chance to qualify." He was twelve.

"Yuh really wants tuh be uh soldier, huh."

"Yeah, I guess so," he shrugged. And by way of explanation, he added, "I'm illegit."

Eric digested this silently. That would mean Robert had lived at the school all his life. It also meant that if he didn't become a soldier, he must become either a priest or an overseer. "Ain't yuh gonna be uh priest? Yuh talks like 'em." His speech pattern was usual in boys raised from babyhood amongst the clergy.

Robert just snorted with disgust. Eric stared, surprised by this response: the priesthood was revered — and feared. But he found Robert's attitude reassuring. "Don't yuh wanna be uh overseer?"

Robert snorted again, "They're not making me into any eunuch."

Eric frowned in thought. He'd heard the word eunuch many times. Boys often insulted each other with it. He knew it meant something bad, but he didn't know what. He plucked up his courage and asked, "What's uh ewnik?"

Robert stated bluntly, "A guy with no penis and no balls — they've been cut off."

A look of horror crossed Eric's face, and his hands moved protectively to his crotch. He remembered the jeering call of the bully. Is that what Father Tyler did? he thought in shocked amazement. He managed to croak out, "Why they does that?"

"So he's protected from the wives he's overseeing."

"How come duh overseers needs tuh be protected?"

"So the eves can't corrupt him and lure him into sin."

"What yuh means?" he asked in confusion.

"If he gets corrupted, he'll want to go mating with the wives he's overseeing. You do know what mating is?"

"It's how we gets babes born." Robert nodded. "Why duh overseers wanna do that tuh duh wives?"

"They just do, that's all." Robert put the last of the equipment away and retrieved his sword from the floor. "What's your name?" he asked, returning to his imaginary opponent.

"Eric Wong."

"Mine's Robert. I don't have a real last name. The Bishop named me Bountiful cuzz they found me at harvest time — it was a good year."

Eric watched Robert practice for several minutes before getting the courage to ask, "Why'd that boy listens tuh yuh when he's so big?"

"Old Benj?" Robert shrugged, "Cuzz he knows he'd pay if he didn't."

"Would yuh tells duh Holy Fawders?"

"A lot they'd care."

"How yuh does it then?"

"Oh . . . different ways." A grim look appeared on Robert's face as he remembered Benji's whipping. Nobody ever guessed who really took that firecross. Only Benji guessed the truth, but he'd dared not seek revenge by his usual blunt methods. He couldn't risk being framed again. Prison was to be avoided at all costs. Instead, he'd sought to retaliate in kind. But he was never quick enough or smart enough, and neither were his cronies. Tiring of the game, Robert had written out a prison number and had left it on Benji's bed. That had stopped him — permanently.

But all Robert said to Eric was, "I know this school better than anyone. I can get in and out of any place without getting caught." The younger boy gazed at him with shining eyes.

Robert returned to his practice while Eric curled up on some sacks, watching. He woke to Robert shaking his shoulder, "Come on, we gotta get back."

Outside, they peered through the relentless rain, scouting for danger. Eric looked nervously up at the windows.

"Do yuh thinks we'll catch it?"

"We'll be okay."

"Fawder Sal and Fawder Don weren't in their bunks. What if they sees us?"

"Don't worry about them," Robert mumbled, "they're off buggering some place."

"What?"

Robert looked at him, reconsidering. "They always go off when Father Michael's on duty. They'll be back by now, don't worry."

"Yuh does this lots?"

"All my life. Now stay quiet."

"Can I comes with yuh again sometimes?"

Robert hesitated, but after a moment nodded shortly.

Safely back in bed, Eric was feeling much better.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad here after all.

CHAPTER TWO

ROBERT COULD assume only two facts about his parentage: his father was likely a soldier, and his mother certainly a whore. The property of her husband, she would have been forced with his other designated wives into a life of prostitution. This would be the family business, passed down through the generations from father to sons, growing and expanding into a long chain of Houses.

Officially, prostitution was forbidden by Holy Order, but the Church was forced to turn a blind eye to this necessary evil. The Army, sworn to remain unwed, was in dire need of a heterosexual outlet. It was prudent not to oppose them on this small matter.

Out of this decision a tradition was born. The Houses kept a low profile and high prices, the soldiers kept their visits discreet, and the Church kept its eyes averted while receiving generous donations. But tradition was not the only birth. Babies were also born: illegitimate babies whose paternity was impossible to determine, babies who might grow to be mated with a close relative, who were perhaps even sired by one. The Church could not allow such abominations to threaten the purity of the breeding pool. Illegitimates must be denied the mating rite.

From the pulpit, the Church railed against the evils of debauchery. Profane couplings desecrating the Sacred Seed of Adam, their progeny growing to make unholy alliance. Such abominations would bring God's Wrath upon Humanity once again.

The Pope proclaimed every illegitimate baby a ward of the Church. Let the unconsecrated fruit come to God, for He shall save them from profanity. Obey the Commands of thy Lord God, for His Judgment can be Swift and Terrible.

Heeding the threat, the House owners laid their illegitimate children at the Church's door, always anonymously, always at night, a special bell now installed to alert the priests. And then later, when all young children were removed from their families to be educated by the Church, the illegit babes were placed at the door of the local residential school.

From the time of weaning at six months of age, the illegit babe became Church property. Female illegits would grow to labor in the vast farmlands of the Church or married off as non-breeders to work in the fields or industries of their husband, a tattoo on the forehead declaring their non-breeding status. Male illegits would be brought up to enter the clergy, if the Church had a use for them, or, if they'd skill and guts enough, trained to join the Army.

The remainder would be used for another purpose.

During the early part of New Eden's history, any man owning more than twelve wives was required to have a priest in residence to oversee the women, to ensure that wives were not infecting the household with any rebellious influences and to monitor the frequency of sexual relations.

But the confessions of these overseer priests were becoming more and more alarming. If steps weren't taken, it would only be a matter of time before a priest was caught in an indecent act with a wife in his care — and the Church would lose

credibility forever.

There seemed only one solution. But to castrate priests would be a sign of weakness, leading to questions and doubts, for they were supposedly beyond such temptations.

The Church looked upon the bastards housed within its gates and came to a decision.

No, it can't happen! Robert thought frantically. He let the arrow fly, but it went wide of the mark. Swearing, he stalked past the target to collect the wayward weapon, suddenly fearful that, despite all his efforts, he wouldn't be chosen today — that he was doomed to become a eunuch.

"Damn them all to hell," he cursed again.

Dropping to one knee, he stabbed the arrowhead viciously into the ground.

Why did I have to be me? he demanded of himself. It was an often-asked question.

With all his heart he wished he was like other boys. But he never enjoyed rough play or found pleasure in the tormenting of others. Self-contained and independent, he preferred the calm of solitude; intelligence and curiosity had pushed him to wander. Such a reserved child was easily overlooked by the harried nursery and dorm priests. It was this lack of attention that gave him the opportunity to explore — and to make discoveries.

Why did I have to find out? he railed inwardly.

He hadn't always been opposed to becoming an overseer or even a priest. In fact, he believed for a long time that he would grow to become either of these. He'd given no thought to the military, hating brutality of any kind. The passive life of an overseer seemed ideal to him, even at the cost of castration. He accepted the necessity of it, for the safety of his own soul and the protection of all Mankind.

But gradually this unquestioned acceptance was chipped away as his explorations within the school became more daring, the discoveries more shocking, until the reasoned explanations for the mutilation of his flesh no longer satisfied.

Why should I be butchered while priests violate the young eves? he demanded silently, appalled by what he'd witnessed. They forbid touching between males, yet how many times have I seen them make abomination upon each other?

And there were other discoveries.

A shaved head was a symbol of masculinity: it proclaimed a secular male's virility and strength, his endurance and courage. It declared his right to enter the gaming ring and his worthiness to be part of the community.

To see the eves with their shaved heads was outrageous.

But the most shocking discovery had come later. And Robert paused to let the memory overtake him

He was ten years old and on a late-night adventure inside the school church.

A sudden noise sent him flying into the confessional where he stood in rigid silence. Footsteps were approaching from the side entrance.

Robert cautiously peeked through the narrow slats of the door.

It was Bishop Chang, the school principal, with one of the nursery priests, young Father Hal, whose curly hair had sprung up in unruly tufts around his head, in resistance to the straight, bowl-cut style worn by the clergy. It often took time for a newly frocked priest to master the techniques used for controlling his hair's natural inclinations.

The priest held a small bundle that wriggled and gurgled. Robert tried to get a look at the new arrival.

"We can't keep him," the bishop stated without emotion.

"Should I send him over to Saint Donald's?"

The bishop shook his head. "No, the decree came down last week. Until further notice, we are to give illegal males into the care of the Vatican."

"For what purpose?"

The bishop hesitated before saying curtly, "I did not question the Pontiff's order." The priest dropped his eyes at the tone but raised them again as the older man continued in a slightly milder voice, "I only know I am to give the Blessing immediately and then deliver him to the Vatican."

Surprised, Father Hal opened his mouth to question these instructions but wisely thought better of it, keeping his silence with difficulty. The bishop took the baby from his arms, ordering, "Prepare the wagon, you will drive me." Bowing shortly, the priest departed.

Robert watched the blessing of the baby, as puzzled as the young priest.

The Blessing Ceremony was a highly celebrated event, with every schoolboy and staff member in attendance to witness the child's initiation into the Church. This lonely evening ritual was unheard of.

Robert smelled a secret.

The brief ceremony over, the bishop departed. Robert waited a few moments before he dashed outside, creeping through the shadows towards the tool shed. With practiced ease, he scaled up the side of the shed and ran surefooted across the roof, hoisting himself up onto the neighboring outbuilding, and then over the school wall, finding the little handholds and toeholds that time had carved out of the brick, making it an easy climb to the ground. Staying close to its concealing bulk, he sprinted towards the entranceway, stopping a few feet from the gates to wait in the shadows.

Several minutes passed. Finally, the gates opened to release an ancient pair of oxen pulling an equally ancient cart. Father Hal held the reins while Bishop Chang sat beside him with the baby.

Creaking and moaning with effort, the vehicle maneuvered slowly onto the road. Neither man noticed Robert slipping over the side of the cart and under the cloth sacks piled in the back.

Robert had made many forays outside the school grounds, but never before had he dared to ride upon a moving vehicle. Ordinary citizens of New Eden were not permitted to ride; only royalty, the clergy and military officers held this privilege. All others walked or were carried in litters, but this was considered weak, and only the very old or very sick succumbed.

They drove slowly through the deserted streets, Robert certain he could have walked faster. Still, they'd come farther up the mountain than he had ever ventured before, and he was sorry his view of the city was hampered by the high sides of the cart. He craned his neck painfully, trying to see without emerging from his hiding place. The cart turned a corner and Robert caught his breath in wonder as the night seemed to suddenly disappear.

Driven by curiosity, Robert strained forward dangerously to stare open mouthed at the largest building he had ever seen. Torches and lanterns burned along its battlements and walls, pushing back the darkness.

The Palace! Robert gasped.

The elaborate scrollwork and carvings that had once covered the building's outer face had long been removed or covered over, leaving it plain and unadorned, this stark grandeur far more imposing than the ornamented style of New Eden's ancient Ancestors.

Soldiers stood at attention on the parapets and on either side of the massive gates that marked the main entranceway.

Robert shrank back in fear, suddenly conscious of his unlawful position. Hiding amongst the cloth sackings, he remained motionless as the cart slowly creaked past the palace. Finally, it moved out of the torchlight, returning to the cover of night.

The land grew steeper, making it difficult to keep from sliding to the end of the cart, his arms aching from the effort. And then once again the night was lit up with torches.

Very carefully he peeked out from under the sacking, and the blood drained from his limbs.

The Vatican!

In the thrill of the chase he'd not stopped to consider the bishop's final destination. Barely breathing, he lay frozen as the cart came to a halt at the entrance to the Holy District. There was a short discussion with the Vatican guards before the gates were opened and they were allowed inside. The oxen, winded from the climb, had slowed their sluggish pace even further. It seemed to take forever to plod through the length of the brightly lit buildings of the Holy District. As the wagon wound its way across the mountain face, the light gradually grew dimmer, fading to almost nothing, giving Robert a greater sense of safety.

Abruptly they came to a stop.

With the baby in his arms, Bishop Chang climbed awkwardly from the wagon. His feet crossed the gravel briefly before raising a hand to give a solid thump on the door of a tall, narrow house. Moments later it was answered by a sleepy-eyed priest.

"I have one of God's children to deliver," the bishop announced coldly.

"Please enter, Your Grace. I will wake Bishop Shaffley."

The Principal crossed the threshold, and the door closed behind him.

Father Hal and Robert waited.

Feeling a little braver, Robert surveyed his surroundings. They were now far from the great residence that he assumed housed the Pontiff. The many smaller buildings that encircled its base fanned outward or upward in neat rows, gradually becoming

sparse out here near the private farmlands of the Vatican.

In the distance, he could make out the shape of a barn and a few other outbuildings. It dawned on him that if he'd been born an eve, his life might have been spent working this land. A sudden fleeting regret left him shocked and shaken. He'd just wished himself Satan's instrument! He stifled the impulse to spit the thought into the dirt and grind it under his heel, a custom amongst the populace to ward off evil.

His disturbing thoughts were broken by movement from above as the priest jumped from the cart and headed for the dimmer light of the fields.

Bet he's taking a piss, Robert thought.

An overwhelming urge took hold and before he could think, Robert was out of the wagon, peering through the window at Bishop Chang, who was still holding the baby. Another bishop also stood inside the room. Robert assumed this was Shaffley, who was saying sternly, "It can't be helped. We are over quota."

His face grave, Bishop Chang handed the baby to an old priest.

"It will be merciful," Bishop Shaffley stated in a milder voice, but the principal had already turned and, without any warning, marched out the door — leaving no time for Robert to get back to the cart.

Light flooded from the doorway, forcing Robert to move quickly across the front of the building and into the shadows.

Feet struck the ground, crunching a quick pace towards the cart. Abruptly they stopped, and the bishop swore violently before yelling for the young priest.

There were more sounds of rapid footsteps.

"Forgive me, Your Grace," Father Hal panted, jumping onto the vehicle. The older man followed more slowly. Looking towards the doorway, he gave a sharp nod in farewell.

Robert realized with horror that whoever stood at the entrance was going to watch the bishop drive away.

I can't get back to the cart!

Helplessly, he watched it move farther and farther into the distance. At last the door closed, but it was much too late. The cart was surrounded by the revealing light.

Stunned by this turn of events, Robert hurried around the corner of the building and down its side, moving deeper into the shadows where he could think in safety.

There was no chance of leaving by the main entrance. Instead, he must cut through the dark fields to the western border of the Holy District. There, he would find a way over or under the wall. He refused to think how heavily guarded and fortified it might be. He tried to cheer himself with the thought that he always found a way into — or out of — anywhere.

But, his mind harshly reminded him, this isn't the school where you know every nook and cranny and creak; this is the Vatican. Again he refused to consider any doubts. He had until morning. It would be enough.

About to start off, he arrested the motion. A cart was approaching.

The Bishop has returned! Robert thought in elation.

But with a bitter pang, he realized the sound was coming from the opposite

direction. The vehicle stopped at the back of Bishop Shaffley's residence, and a doorway was opened.

Robert recognized Shaffley's voice. "Take them to the forest," he ordered coldly.

"Yes, Your Grace," a younger, but no less frosty, voice replied.

When the bishop spoke again, the cold tone had become curt, the words clipped. Robert knew he was speaking to an eve. "Take the illegit north, as always."

At the mention of the baby, Robert was once more compelled to move into danger. He tiptoed forward in time to see Shaffley hand the baby to an eve sitting in the back of an enclosed wagon. Robert could hardly believe his eyes. No eve was permitted to ride. It was completely forbidden, a far greater offense than his own infraction.

Robert stared at her. The weathered skin exposed above the veil was wrinkled heavily, the red tattoo faded with time.

The bishop closed the door to the wagon, snapping Robert out of his distraction. He backed away carefully. At a safe distance he broke into a run, speeding around the building to its opposite side. Squatting low, he waited for the wagon to take the corner. There was plenty of time to crawl underneath and wedge above the axle housing.

The wagon turned onto a less-traveled road, bumpy and dimly lit by the lights of the few buildings nearby, until gradually their faint glow disappeared altogether. Only the pale light of New Eden's three moons remained to illuminate their way through the Church farmland, the oxen taking careful steps on the indistinct track that wound its way across the mountain to the western face.

As the side gates to the Holy District closed behind them, Robert breathed a heavy sigh of relief. The cart had entered one of the poorer agricultural areas of District One, and the dim lighting from the distant farmhouses was barely discernible.

He could safely get back to the school from here. If he cut across the dark fields to the royal hunting grounds, he could make his way through the trees to the southern slope and down the mountain to enter his neighborhood unnoticed — he might even make it back before the bishop's slow-moving cart.

But all thought of returning to school had fled from his mind.

He had to know where they were taking the baby.

Dark forested mountains loomed above them as the cart made its cautious way to the western valley floor. And even with his limited view from beneath the cart, he could see that the area was uninhabited, the night deeper.

They were getting close to the protective mountain barrier.

The priest turned the oxen northward to follow a narrow track that eventually led into a small meadow. Here they stopped, and the priest ordered the old eve out of the enclosure. She took a long time. When she picked up the baby, he started to cry.

"Get into the woods. Tend to it there."

Robert heard her shuffle off. When the wagon began to move again, he slid from the axle housing to lie flat on the ground as the vehicle rolled over him. He waited until the priest's shadowy form had disappeared from view before putting his attention onto the old woman, trying to locate her in the increased darkness against the trees. The baby cried once more, giving their position away. He crept into the forest.

Inside the thick canopy, he could see almost nothing. As he waited for his eyes to adjust to the sudden blackness, he followed by sound alone, which was not difficult, for her movements were loud and clumsy. Robert too found the going demanding, tripping and stumbling over bared tree roots while low hanging branches slapped at his head, scratching his face and nearly blinding him.

He expected the eve to react to the sounds of his presence, but she could hear nothing beyond her own noisy passage.

After a few minutes it became quiet, and Robert stopped to listen. There was still movement, but now much less distinct. Cautiously, he crept towards the sound, stepping onto a narrow footpath. He stopped in surprise to stare down at the well-worn track, unaware how few people knew of this path, even within the clergy. Wondering at this discovery, he continued his stealthy progress.

The eve stopped frequently to rest her ancient bones or tend to the baby while Robert sat motionless, trying not to nod off. He was very tired, and his arms ached from holding himself in position inside the cart. Sometimes he would hear her loud snores, and he would have to force himself into quiet activity before he too began to snore.

Hours dragged by with little ground covered to show for them. Dawn slowly encroached, blazing a deep red before giving way to the blue sky of day, clearly exposing the mountain pass through which they travelled. Robert stared up at the imposing, tree-covered edifice on either side of him. Vanguards against evil these mountains were believed to be, and looking every bit the part to his young eyes.

The old woman continued to rest her exhausted body for long intervals while Robert fought against sleep. He had lost all sense of time and the distance they had covered, only that it must be less than ten miles, for ten miles would mark the end of the protective barrier. She must certainly reach her destination before then.

It was early afternoon when the trees began to thin out, becoming increasingly sparse the farther north they walked, and when they emerged from the pass the forest disappeared altogether.

They both stopped dead, the old woman and the boy.

There was nothing but scrub grass and brush before them, the land running flat for thirty feet before angling downwards sharply for another forty, to lay itself at the border of an immense expanse of flat rock.

They shrank back into the cover of trees.

Robert could hardly breathe, he was in such terror. On the other side of that bit of scrub grass were the Unholy Lands, a wasteland of rock and dust and demons. The place he'd been warned about and threatened with his entire life. A demon-filled desert waiting to ensnare the unwary — the body tortured and defiled, the soul ripped out to suffer endless torment in the bowels of Hell.

What demons were lurking there even now?

Shuddering, he huddled further into the protective forest.

Why would a path lead to this terrible place?

There was movement from the eve.

Robert watched in horrified disbelief as she scuttled across the plateau for several feet to lay the baby within the limited protection of a small clump of brush. Then she shuffled back into the trees as fast as her old legs could carry her. Groaning in pain, she lowered her weary body to the forest floor. Soon he heard loud snores.

For a while Robert's fear kept him alert, but the long night finally took its toll: he slept.

He woke with a start.

Dismayed, he saw red streaks beginning to steal across the sky. In a few hours, darkness would be upon them. He looked around quickly, alarmed, but the old woman was still there. Rising, he moved forward slightly to stare at the baby. Something was wrong. Automatically he crept over to the bundle. The blankets lay messed in a pile, but the baby was gone.

Robert backed away fast, his head swiveling in every direction, arms outstretched behind him, feeling for the trees. His hand brushed bark and he sped up, still too frightened to turn his back on the desert. A moment later he stumbled over something, falling backwards onto the ground. He screamed, thrashing about in terror before realizing he'd tripped over the old eve. She lay very still. Robert poked her lightly on the hand. She was ice cold: dead.

He ran.

He ran as if the hounds of hell were snapping at his heels — tearing his way through the ten miles of woods until he was safely back inside the city.

Robert returned to school a changed boy, the depth of the Church's duplicity galling him to illness. But this is what saved him. His presence at school had eventually been missed. When he was discovered in the tool shed in a fevered delirium, it was assumed he'd been there the whole time. Instead of a beating, he was put inside the infirmary and treated with reasonable care.

For days he could only stare unresponsively at the priests who tended him. Each time he saw their robed figures, he heard the bishop ordering that baby into damnation. An innocent baby! he'd thought, appalled. Not an eve or a contaminated one, but a pure male. One of God's Chosen given over to Satan because of quotas!

It went against everything Robert was brought up to believe, everything the Church had taught him. How could they? And why? he demanded silently. They could have just killed the babe instead. But no, killing was forbidden — only those possessed by Satan killed.

He'd gone very still at that thought, an idea plucking around the edges of his mind, but he was still too young, too unready, to face that truth.

Yet he did understand that he was in real danger. No one must ever know the evil deed he'd witnessed, or guess his changed feelings towards the Church.

Survival instinct took over, and before long he was able to assume his old inconspicuous shell. His brief abnormality done with, he once more faded from the notice of priests. They did not look, so could not see that he was lost to them.

Robert soon realized that he needed to get as far from the Church as possible — as far as it was possible for anyone in New Eden to get — and that meant the Army.

But he was already ten and did not excel at the games, doing just enough not to draw attention to himself. He could do this no longer. He must overcome his dislike and work hard at perfecting his skills if he had any hope of becoming a cadet.

He'd not been accepted last year. There was only one chance left.

He must not fail.

Determination calmed him. He walked purposefully back to the line and sighted the arrow once more, his aim steady.

Bulls-eye. Without a pause, he let go two more.

"Hey, Rob," the boy from the next pit called out, pointing towards the administration building. "They're here."

Two men, hard as granite, marched crisply towards the gaming field, their dull green uniforms almost indistinguishable from the muddy dirt and gravel of the courtyard.

Well, it had come. Now he would know if there was any chance of escape. Noting his calm without surprise, he joined the other boys gathering to meet the soldiers.

The system of recruitment that was established by the Independent Space Agency's security force on Earth, almost two millennia ago, had not been altered much over the ages. Complete loyalty was still demanded and found in those with nowhere else to turn, those from the poorest families or, preferably, no family at all. But, unlike their ancestors' time, training began as early as nine years of age and no later than twelve. This was to undermine the effects of such close confinement within the Church.

Once entered into cadets, education took place in an Army training camp, but students were still required to spend their nights inside the school until coming of age at fifteen. Cadets were then placed in a military installation for intensive training and initiation into the Army proper before being posted to a permanent station.

Robert and the other thirty-four young hopefuls began the test. They wrestled in the muddy gravel — five matches each — before facing four different opponents with a sword and five more with a knife, using the dulled weapons designed for students. They shot thirty arrows to display their bow skills, and ran the obstacle course five times in succession.

The Army was looking for speed, strength and stamina, and of course, weapons skill. Later, dedication and loyalty would have to be confirmed. What was offered out of this day was probationary entrance into the cadet corps. In a year's time they would be re-evaluated, and every year after until facing their final test, as young adults.

When the trial was finally over, the exhausted boys formed a straggly line to await the outcome. Six names were cited.

Robert felt his body move forward on its own, for he was beyond all command, his calm completely dissolved. Shaking with reaction, he stood before the Recruitment Officer with the other chosen boys, barely comprehending the man's harsh announcement:

"The Lord Chairman's youngest son will begin training next week with the Cadet Corps. You recruits, and others in the district, will be his training partners." The boys

snuck excited glances at each other. "If any of you manage to make it to enlistment," he continued, his tone doubtful, "you could be assigned to the prince's personal guard."

He stepped back and handed them over to the sergeant.

"OK, yuh-sorry-assed-excuses-furr-humans, listen up! Tomorrow yuh reports tuh duh Duty Officer at O-seven-undrid 'ours. If yurr late, I'll kick yurr worthless asses tuh hell an' back. Dis'smissed!"

The soldiers did an about-face and marched crisply off the field. Robert watched them go, his emotions threatening to display themselves in tears of relief. He sucked in deep drafts of air, blowing them out in noisy bursts. Sucking and blowing, his mind chanted:

I'm going to be a soldier!

I'm going to be a soldier!

CHAPTER THREE

“COME, SIRE, It’s time.”

Trying to keep the disappointment from his face, William looked up at the priest. “Yes, Father, I’ll just finish this passage.”

Father Gideon nodded and prepared himself to wait. He watched the young prince’s determined expression as his eyes moved across the page of scripture, not at all displeased with William’s obvious dislike of gaming, for it would prevent him from forming close bonds with the Army. But, as he always had to remind himself, the child must overcome his aversion if he’s ever to ascend the throne. Without adequate arena skills, he would not be considered for a moment.

It was the ruling Lord Chairman who chose an heir from amongst his sons, guided in that decision by the Church — wittingly or otherwise. The Church must ensure a satisfactory outcome to the ascendancy to protect itself from any rebellious or radical ruler who might try to disturb the power balance and loosen the Church’s grip on the planet.

In its roles as religious instructor, nursery attendant and educator, the Church had years of intimate contact with the Royals. Candidates for the throne were identified well before their coming of age. The two eldest sons of the present Lord Chairman had proven completely unacceptable. Strong-willed and irreverent, they held the Church in neither fear nor awe, and deeply resented the power it held over their lives and their rule. Not an uncommon reaction within the Royal Family, and one the Church was continually alert to.

As the princes grew older and more devious, they tried to hide their feelings behind a mask of obedience. But the Church knew these adolescents better than they knew themselves. It was not fooled. Their father, however, was another matter.

Chairman Alexander was completely unaware that his eldest sons despised him, though their displays of devotion and respect reeked of pretense. They considered him weak, the Church’s tool, and only slightly less loathsome than their cowering younger sibling.

But the Chairman’s blindness was not without cause. The princes were blessed with great physical prowess; they were skilled gamers, expert horsemen, and daring hunters. They walked tall and spoke proudly. Already, Thomas, only sixteen, had bagged a blue boar single handedly. They were a credit to any man, even a king. The choice of heir was obvious, and the Church seemed powerless to alter that decision, for not even the Pope could veto a Royal Heir without evidence of just cause.

Their only hope lay in William, the youngest. He was all the Church could hope for: devout, respectful, and obedient. He was also possessed of a sensitive nature that suffered badly in this brutal world of New Eden.

The Church was quick to capitalize on such weakness.

Refined mannerisms and speech had always distinguished the Clergy from the rest of the populace, as did the small luxuries they permitted themselves — and denied to others, such as wearing soft robes of spider silk, playing musical instruments, and

indulging in artistic pursuits or other useless activities. They were also not required to prove their worth in displays of physical strength and courage, being beyond such testing, as they were beyond temptations of the flesh.

To the sheltered William, these outward appearances suggested a softness that was completely false. The Church encouraged this belief and handled him with the utmost care.

Unwittingly, the Church was aided in its efforts by William's brothers. Teased, tricked, and tortured, the already susceptible William was driven further into the only comfort available.

Having assured itself of a co-operative ruler, the Church now had to put him on the throne. But for that, much time and patience would be required. Their usual methods of obliterating opposition with a fatal "accident" or "illness" could not be used against the Royal Family. In fact, it was critical that the Church make every effort to ensure the safety of all royals — no matter who they grew into. To do otherwise could bring catastrophe upon the Church.

Instead, the priests tried to encourage William in his riding lessons and hunting skills, but horses terrified him and killing made him violently ill.

Anxiously, they watched over William's lack of progress and over the continued health of the Chairman, ever conscious of Alexander's deepening attachment to his elder sons. The Church remained alert, ready to capitalize on any opportunity to declare the princes unfit to rule. They also prayed.

Their prayers were about to be answered.

The young prince trudged unhappily into his dressing room, yanking off the heavy woolen tunic and knee-length trousers; his short gaming tunic already laid out for him.

A soldier, who was not much older than William, waited silently as he stuffed his body into the unwelcome garment. The servant was new, only assigned since the prince's move from the kinderhall a few weeks ago. William never spoke to him except to give an order. He resented his presence.

Royal sons were raised by both Church and Army. The Clergy had possession during the early years, closely watched by the Military. Later, the roles were reversed.

At the age of six, William was removed from the priest-run nursery and placed in the army kinderhall. The move was traumatic. He was completely unnerved by these loud, rough men who found humor in cruelty and pleasure in pain, and encouraged him to be likewise. For four hateful years he endured their care. His only interaction with his friends, the priests, was during lessons and catechism, or after some terrible trauma.

Now he had his own apartments, yet the Army was still forced upon him and would continue to be until the age of fifteen. Then he would finally have the right to choose his own servants from the civilian labor pool inside the palace, descendants of the original domestics transported from Earth.

Shivering in the brief attire, William rejoined Father Gideon. Together, they walked through the ancient corridors of the palace. A legacy from their Ancestors, and as strong and impressive as the day it was built: Colonial Headquarters for the

Independent Space Agency — before the End of the Earth, before The Cleansing.

They hurried downstairs and out to the area reserved for the prince's training. The cadets, already practicing since early morning, were sweating heavily in their brief tunic and undershorts, standard dress code for a military student. Now they waited at attention for the prince's arrival. But William took no notice. He saw only his father and two brothers as they emerged from the stables at the other end of the courtyard, having returned from a morning in the royal hunting grounds.

It was William's first glimpse of his father in weeks. The Chairman had no time for a son who couldn't act like a man. By William's age, Thomas and Henry were already joining in the hunt.

William knew that he could never take part.

The three Royals moved across the courtyard, deep in conversation. Probably talking about the Tour of the Realm, William thought wistfully, longing to be included in the event.

It was customary for the Chairman to visit a number of Districts within North and South Regions before the commencement of the Triennial Championship Games being held in six months' time.

In honor of their royal guest, each District would put on a grand display of local talent as a preview to the Championship Games. The custom, older even than the Games themselves, was created to help the sprawling populace feel connected to their king.

But when the population began to spread farther across New Eden, eventually creating West Region, the Tour of the Realm continued its route through the two original Regions, ignoring the third completely: the western landscape considered too mountainous and time consuming for the Chairman to cross.

Father Gideon cleared his throat noisily, reminding William of his duties. Reluctantly, the prince tore his eyes from his family and moved towards the instructor. The cadets bowed shortly at his approach.

"Sergeant Pallard," William commanded, pointing a finger at one of the boys, "he shall be my partner today."

"Right-yuh-be, young Sire." Surprised, the sergeant beckoned Robert forward.

The prince was never known to challenge himself, Pallard thought, and now he picks an older boy much bigger than himself. He's a strange one alright.

The company fell back into practice drills while the Prince and Robert received careful instruction from Sergeant Pallard. But William was not paying attention; he was studying Robert.

This boy had grabbed William's interest soon after he began training with the cadets, though he didn't understand why. Physically, the boy was unremarkable: average height, average build, medium skin color, facial features without distinction. Even his priest-like speech was not unusual; several of the cadets spoke that way. And though he was well skilled in the combat exercises, William's brothers were more impressive.

Sensing himself watched, Robert dared a glance towards William, who pulled a face

and rolled his eyes at the sergeant. Surprised, Robert grinned, and quickly returned to the lesson. The instructor, sensing he'd lost his pupil, admonished William roughly, "Yurr royal backside be booted round this field if yuh don'ts concentrates 'arder, Sire."

William nodded and tried to pretend interest, but he wished the whole business over with, frustrated at being forced into something he hated and knew he could never learn.

Royals were automatically given the honor of cadet training without the need for enlistment. It would be unwise to have a prince working his way up the ranks with an Army at his disposal — far too much temptation. The chairmanship possibly plucked from the rightful ruler's grasp and the world thrown into civil war.

Instead, the boys he trained with would become his personal guard. Growing up together would create a tight bond of loyalty.

At last the lesson ended.

Robert bowed and made to leave with the others, but William forestalled him. "You talk like a priest."

"Yes, Sire — as do you."

They grinned at each other.

"You're an illegal, aren't you?"

"Right, Sire."

"That means you don't have a father."

"I've got one, Your Highness, I just don't know who."

William thought on that for a moment, then said unexpectedly, "I never see my father either. He . . . he doesn't like me."

"Your Highness, how can you say that?"

"Because it's true."

"But why would you believe such a thing of your own father?" Robert asked, stunned.

The Prince hesitated. "Cuzz I'm a sissy." He lowered his voice, "I can't—" he stopped, unable to go on.

Now it was Robert's turn to hesitate, reluctant to speak up. But the cadets were already getting edgy, and the prince's secret would not be hidden for long. So far, only Robert had guessed the truth. When the others figured it out, respect for the prince would be gone forever. He steeled himself and said, "I don't like gaming either, Sire."

William looked at him in disbelief.

This boy was someone the prince envied, he seemed so at ease in the arena, yet here he was confessing to the same weakness.

"You swear?"

"I swear, Sire."

"Then why are you here? You could be a priest." He added wistfully, "I wish I could be a priest. The Holy Fathers say no, because I'm a prince. Why aren't you?" William demanded.

Robert answered cautiously, "I guess . . . I don't have the calling, Sire."

William nodded; he knew this expression, even if he didn't truly understand it.

"You could be an overseer."

"I wouldn't like that. This is better."

William now understood why this boy stood out from the rest. He could speak to him without getting strange looks or nervous shifting. "Yes," he agreed, "I'm glad you're here."

Encouraged by this intimacy, Robert said earnestly, "Sire, forgive me, but it's my duty to speak." William nodded, worried by his solemn expression. "Your Highness, if you're to keep the respect of your guard, you must pretend to like the gaming."

"I'm not you — I don't know how."

"I can show you."

William was suddenly hopeful. "You mean, you would teach me?"

Robert bowed low. "Willingly, Sire."

CHAPTER FOUR

"ROBERT BOUNTIFUL . . ." Bishop Chang considered thoughtfully, but could not recall the child he'd named fourteen years ago. He called for his assistant, "Bring the file on Robert Bountiful, and send for his dorm supervisor."

When the file was placed before him, he studied it closely. "Ah, yes, of course, Robert. Always an obedient lad, never any trouble, almost forgot he was here."

The smile he gave the visiting Cardinal melted in the coldness. Arrogant Vatican snobs, the bishop thought resentfully. They always meant trouble. He was already annoyed at having his dinner plans canceled by this unexpected visit. A meal at the Chandlers' was always a feast and not to be missed. But Lambert was Cardinal Vecker's lackey; he dared not ignore the demand for an interview.

There was a soft knock, and Father Don entered. The bishop motioned him forward. "Robert Bountiful is under your supervision?"

"Yes, Your Grace."

"Describe to His Eminence something about the lad," said the bishop.

"I don't want to know something," the visitor broke in sternly. "I want to know *everything*."

"Of course, Your Eminence," the priest quickly assured him. "But there's not much to report. He was left here at approximately six months of age, a healthy baby who grew into a healthy boy — only had the sickness once, if I remember correctly." He paused, considering. "Always been a quiet one . . . rather a loner . . . never in any serious trouble — actually, never in any trouble at all." He paused again, obviously struggling to remember something more. "Oh, yes, he seems to have some kind of knack: the older boys tease him but rarely interfere with him physically — which is actually quite remarkable." A sudden thought struck Father Don, "It's a shame we didn't snare him ourselves."

"You didn't snare him because you damn well didn't know he even existed!" the cardinal accused sternly. There was a short, defensive silence. "Continue," Lambert ordered wearily.

"Two years ago he was chosen for cadet training and placed in the young prince's unit. Has Robert got himself into trouble at the palace?"

He's got himself into trouble alright, the cardinal thought, only wheedled his way into the favor of the next Lord Chairman. But aloud he growled, "That does not concern you."

The priest bowed his head at the rebuke.

"What of his piety?" Lambert demanded. "Is he devout?"

Chang and the priest exchanged a quick glance before Father Don answered, "Yes — yes, I believe so."

"You do not sound convinced. I suggest you pay closer attention in future, and when you have come to a decision, inform me immediately." He rose to his feet, adding, "But I don't want you questioning the boy, not about his piety, nor anything else. Treat him as you've always done, with utter indifference." With that, he strode

imperiously from the principal's office.

The Bishop glared at Father Don, "Arrogant bastard! What does he know about running a school? Indifference, indeed!"

But the priest was not listening. He said musingly, "What do you suppose our young Robert's been up to?"

Chang's forehead wrinkled fiercely. "I don't know and I don't care. I could give him a good thrashing for bringing the Vatican down on us. Making me miss the first decent meal I've had in months! I'll tan his hide for sure!" At Father Don's look, he said impatiently, "I know, I know, nothing different. But if I—" he was cut off by a sudden crash overhead. "What in the name-of-all-saints!" he exclaimed as the pounding racket of running feet could be heard on the floorboards above them.

The two men focused on the air vent directly over the Bishop's chair.

"Those little devils!" the priest swore. He tore out of the room, hoping to catch the culprits at the base of the stairway. But when he emerged from the corridor he saw the outside door was already wide open, announcing a hasty retreat. Dimly, through the night and the driving rain, he could make out the dormitory door in the same condition. He set off in pursuit.

Robert and Eric were flying through the dorm in a wild panic.

Robert had recognized the cardinal as he passed through the schoolyard on his way to the Bishop's office. It was the same man he'd seen at the palace. The cardinal's eyes boring into Robert every time he thought himself unnoticed. And now he was here. Robert had to find out why, so he'd dared this little venture. Eric, as usual, tagging along.

The fugitives slid past the staircase, their wet boots slippery on the wooden floor as they sped down the deserted corridor. It was time for evening prayers, and there was not another soul around. They dashed inside the dining hall, cutting through with speed to burst into the kitchen where Robert finally pulled the younger boy to a stop.

"Does yuh think he's followin'?" Eric gasped.

Robert answered by pushing him inside a low cupboard. "Stay there."

Eric watched the older boy disappear into the fuel room, reappearing a few moments later to crawl in beside him.

"What yuh done?" Eric asked.

"Unlocked the fuel chute — now quiet," he hissed.

He was about to close the cupboard door when he saw two figures cowering in a corner. At the first sign of Robert sighting them, the girls dropped their eyes to the floor. Without a word, he pulled the door closed. Footsteps were approaching fast.

Through a wide gap across the top of the cupboard door, they saw the priest dash into the kitchen, his sodden shoes squelching noisily. He stopped abruptly at the sight of the young eyes. The taller one carried a large bowl and was walking towards the boys' hiding place.

"Did anyone come in here?" Father Don snapped.

She placed the bowl on the countertop, her bulky clothing blocking most of the gap in the cabinet door. Without looking at the priest, she pointed towards the fuel room.

He rushed inside, and they heard him swear, "Those little buggers!" before returning to the kitchen. "Did you see who it was?" he demanded of the older eve. She shook her head. "You?" he asked the younger.

"No," she said, looking at the floor.

He sped from the kitchen and back into the dining hall, commanding as he went, "Lock up that fuel chute!"

The four waited, listening as his footsteps disappeared into the distance.

Eric felt Robert give him a shove, "Quick, vespers are nearly over — we can mingle with the others."

The eve moved away from the cupboard to stand beside the younger girl as the boys emerged from hiding. Catching sight of the two eves, they stopped and stared. Neither had been this close to a female in a long time.

Except for the old woman in the forest, Robert had never experienced an unobstructed encounter. Always there was a door or a priest, or some other barrier between him and the eves.

Now he didn't know what to do. They were not to be trusted, yet both had shielded them from the priest. Being a secret witness to the punishment of eves, Robert knew the danger they'd put themselves in.

And eves were always cringing and plucking frantically at their clothes, even when no males were around; he'd seen that during his spying. It gave him a creepy feeling. But these two eves were not cowering, as if expecting to be struck at any moment. They stood motionless with bowed heads, eyes below knee level, as was proper.

Confused, his training reasserted itself; he sought to put distance between them.

But to Eric, their nearness stirred old memories of happier days. He found his voice, "Yuh dids yurr work." The only phrase of approval permitted to an eve.

Appropriately, the girls did not respond in any way.

"Come on, we've got to go," Robert said, tugging at him.

Eric continued to stare at the little eve as Robert dragged him from the kitchen.

Once they were gone, Theresa locked the chute and closed the fuel room door. The two girls looked at each other. "We are both stupid, evil eves," Theresa signed.

Not quite believing what they'd just done, they returned to preparing the bread dough for the morning.

"They were so quiet, they almost caught us barefaced," Ruth whispered in awe. "How do they move with such silent speed?"

Theresa only shrugged indifferently. She was furious with herself.

We shouldn't have hidden those boys. They could turn us in, make us to blame for whatever they did. But no, she thought, that boy would never put another child in danger.

Over the years, Theresa had watched him grow bigger and, with it, bolder in his defense of the weaker children. Gradually, whenever she witnessed this, an odd but pleasant feeling would come over her. But she'd no frame of reference, no conception or understanding of how to identify this sensation: it was the feeling of hope.

Again she reminded herself: We have nothing to fear— not from him.

She ceased her labors to stare down at fingers heavy with dough. Lying to a priest! she thought with dread. What have I done?

But Theresa knew, if given the opportunity, she would do the same again. She could not give that boy up to them — even if it meant lying to the Pope Himself.

As for Ruth, the scars on her back were still too fresh.

She would give no one up to them.

CHAPTER FIVE

ROBERT WAS not disliked, but neither was he sought after. How much this had to do with his position as William's confidant and friend, Robert didn't know. He was simply grateful to be left to himself, uncaring that he remained isolated from the camaraderie of his cadet unit.

It was Robert who encouraged William to take advantage of his princely right to dismiss those cadets he found unsuitable for his personal guard, and it was Robert who guided the young royal in these decisions.

Gradually, slowly, William was collecting around himself a group of cadets whose natural dispositions were less brutal and callous than the average New Eden male, boys who were more like Robert, boys he could feel comfortable with.

Robert was determined to deliver to the prince a Personal Guard that could feel true loyalty to his friend.

Of course he now realized that his friendship with William had been a mistake. He could feel the Church breathing down his neck, watching, waiting for him to put a foot wrong. But he pretended ignorance of their interest, and continued in his usual habits, altering only two things: he no longer allowed himself to appear distracted or bored during Mass, and he ceased his nocturnal excursions through the school.

He watched Eric sneak off alone, sorry to see him go.

Robert was worried about his friend. The younger boy had been acting strangely since coming across those eves in the kitchen. At first Robert would catch him staring up at the classroom windows when it was time for the eves to be cleaning. Soon he realized that Eric was sneaking inside while they were still working there. Then one evening Robert tracked him down inside the kitchen to find him actually *speaking* with the little eve — at least he guessed it was the same one, but how could you know with all that covering?

He'd dragged Eric outside and boxed his ears, hoping to snap some sense into him, and it seemed to have an effect, for the boy ceased his illicit activities.

When Eric gained entry into the cadet corps, Robert hoped his interest in the eve would fade completely, but instead it seemed to recharge his confidence, as if being a cadet put him beyond the power of the priests. He began skipping vespers a couple of times a week to sneak inside the kitchen, in the hope, Robert assumed, of finding the little eve.

All the teachings of the Church rushed at Robert: she was corrupting him, leading him into sin and the loss of his immortal soul. Despite knowledge of the abuse eves suffered at the hands of the priests, Robert could not shake his beliefs. The danger to his friend would not let him. Eric could lose everything.

Robert tried to warn him, remind him of his catechism, but Eric only laughed at his fears. Nothing was going to happen; he was just having an adventure.

"Want to go look at the ancestor junk?" Robert suggested.

"Nah," Eric answered in a bored tone. "I sees it enough." He threw a rock into the river, emphasizing his discontent.

It was Sunday afternoon and both boys were free until suppertime.

Robert was fifteen and would be taking his Rite of Manhood in six months' time, at the end of the semester with the other fifteen-year-olds in his school. As a senior, Robert was allowed the privilege of leaving the school unchaperoned for a few hours, every Sunday. He was also permitted to sign out a younger student.

Until their senior year, most students had little contact with the outside world, unless they were cadets or dared to scale the school walls. Robert's nighttime forays often brought him to the river during the dry season, to explore the ruins of the Ancients, or to play in the sparse forest that followed the river's path. After he met Eric, the younger boy would usually tag along.

Growing into a senior, Robert continued his visits to the river, even if it was now permitted — or almost permitted. They were much too close to the ruins of the power plant to be strictly proper. The power plant was technology, and technology was forbidden to everyone, which made it very quiet here, away from prying eyes.

Eric continued in the same bored manner, "There be nothin' new tuh sees."

"Guess not," Robert answered distractedly, focused on luring a big fish into taking the bait. He could just make out the pointy blue nose in the churning waters.

"There just be one place we ain't never beens — leasts I ain't."

Robert tensed, knowing what was coming.

"Duh eve school, that be somethin'."

Robert stood up, winding in his fishing line. Then he turned and walked away.

"Where's yuh goin'?" Eric chased after him, "What's duh matter?"

But Robert kept walking, ignoring the younger boy.

"Just cuzz yuh done turns chicken shits don't means I have tuh," Eric yelled after him.

There was no response.

"I be doin' it anyways."

Robert stopped.

Eric was beside him before he could draw breath. "Yuh beens there, ain't yuh?"

"They'll yank you out of cadets. You won't get another chance. You'll be a miner forever."

"I won't gets caught, I never does. Yuh knows that."

"This time it's different — you're under some kind of spell!"

"I ain't! Yuh don't knows nothin' about it. All yuh knows about is priests!"

Robert stopped short, for that was too true. Sighing in resignation, he said, "It's a long time since I've been there."

"Yuh *was* there!"

He gave one last try. "Don't go."

"Yuh does it," Eric said pointedly.

Robert gave up and sat on his haunches. Eric followed, waiting expectantly.

"Inside the church, behind the vestry," Robert explained shortly, "there's a small

room with a closet. The back of the closet slides open like a door. Behind it, is a way into the eve's church."

"How'd yuh finds it?" Eric asked in amazement.

"One time I almost got caught — I had to hide in the closet. The bishop came inside and opened the panel."

"Wow!" Eric said in awe. "And yous standin' right there."

Robert shrugged. "I was hidden in some robes."

Eric looked at Robert. "I didn't means tuh calls yuh chicken shits. I knows duh Fawders watchin' yuh. I knows yuh hates them same as me."

Robert shrugged again. "It doesn't matter." Suddenly he wanted to get away. He felt ashamed of Eric — and of himself. "I gotta go practice," he said, standing upright. "See yuh." And off he ran.

Eric watched after his friend. He was sorry Robert was mad, but he had to do this, though his nine-year-old mind couldn't have said why. The girl stirred up memories of home, and the sensation was pleasant. And he always got a thrill from outsmarting the priests — the bigger the risk, the better. And he missed Robert's company. Being with the eve would satisfy several needs at once.

Eric was very different from his friend.

Robert disliked cadet training, but was conscientious and loyal. Eric excelled in the art of combat, enjoying the rigorous training and the thrill of a hard win, and these days he won often. His body had grown tremendously this past year, and so had his strength. No boy his age could best him, and more than a few older students had suffered defeat by his hand. But he lacked the selfless devotion to duty the Army demanded. It was only the power in winning he sought, the thrill of defeating his opponent, not the honing of his soldiering skills to serve the Chairman with complete and utter dedication.

Three days later, he ordered Ruth to meet him outside the eve dorms; he would be there at midnight. She had no choice but to obey.

"Don't go," Theresa signed, her fingers adamant. "Yes, he could report you for disobedience and you'd be punished. But if you're caught outside with a male, the punishment would be extreme. Stay in bed."

She glanced around to see if anyone in the dorm had read her signing. There were thirty-four eves in the room, all making preparations for bed; no one was looking in her direction. Theresa removed her overvest and tunic, looking to Ruth for an answer.

"I can't," Ruth's hands flashed back before she bent to pull off her leather boots.

Theresa waited until she lifted her head again. "I know it goes against the teachings to disobey a male, but you must be strong," she signed.

Ruth only shook her head. She couldn't explain. Theresa would think her possessed, and she'd be right.

When that boy first came to the classroom to speak with her, she was frightened,

but she was also excited, knowing a priest might arrive at any moment — and hoping one would. Then she could hide the boy and pretend innocence, like that night they'd lied to save him and the other one. How often she relived that scene, playing it over and over, the first big thrill of her young life. She yearned to feel that sensation again. Going out with the boy tonight would be another trick on the priests, and the thought filled her with elation. But all she could sign was, "I must go."

Theresa pulled the rough spun nightgown over her head and leaned close to Ruth's ear. "We never should have lied to the priest," she pronounced in a low whisper. "This is your punishment." Silently, Theresa wondered what her own would be. "We must never repeat such wickedness."

But Ruth knew her wickedness had only just begun. She would not think of her ultimate punishment. Involuntarily, she shuddered.

Theresa's fingers flashed again, "God be with you."

The words reminded Ruth how far she truly was from Him.

Cramming herself into the nightgown, she picked up her boots and clothes to scurry with Theresa over to the wooden cubbyholes lining the wall at the end of the room. A few quick movements and they'd laid their worn belongings neatly inside the cubicles before dashing back to stand at the foot of their narrow beds. It was almost time for evening inspection.

The last few girls made it into position, just as the door opened and Father Tommy stepped inside. He looked them over critically, all in thin nightgowns and bare feet, scarf and veil in place, heads bowed and bodies rigid. No movement of any sort was permitted during inspection.

Most eves failed at this exercise when they first entered the school, and Ruth had been particularly slow to develop her self-control. Every night for an entire month, she was sent to the discipline priests before she could train her body into stillness. Ruth hated these inspections with all the passion of her young heart, though she knew it was wicked to do so.

Father Tommy began his walk down the aisle between two rows of closely spaced beds, though several of them were no longer in use. He stopped at each girl, inspecting her carefully from head to toe before moving on to the next.

Except for the priest's slow steps down the line, there was absolute silence in the room. Abruptly the stillness was shattered by the long tooting squeal of escaping gas. Father Tommy turned around sharply, and every girl in the room sucked in a silent breath of fear.

"Who did that!" he demanded, his voice shaking with rage.

There was a moment's pause before Theresa took a step forward. The priest covered the space between them, snatching the short whip from his belt and raising it high overhead, smashing it viciously across her shoulders. "You disgusting cow! If that's what you do with your supper, you don't deserve any!" he spat at her. "Get out of my sight!" As Theresa moved towards the door, he followed behind, slapping at her with the short whip until she was out of the room.

Her back smarting painfully, Theresa turned her steps towards the discipline room.

She knew her supper would be withheld for the next week, and her stomach gurgled quietly, as if in regret for its earlier loss of control. But her mind was not on food.

What punishment waits for me tonight? she thought fearfully.

She had travelled this nighttime path many times before, as had all the eves in the school. An inspection never passed that someone wasn't found worthy of punishment. The punishment always changing so they could never know what horror lay in wait for them.

Farther along the corridor she was joined by three more girls as they were ejected from their dorm rooms by an irate priest. They travelled down the stairwell together in silence. It was too dark for signing and no one dared risk speech. There was nothing to say in any case; they'd all been here before. Each focused on containing her own terror.

On the lower landing they were joined by four more eves before proceeding to the main floor. There they waited for several minutes to be certain no other girls had been chosen. Once they were confident, they walked to the back of the building, reaching a narrow, dimly lit passage.

The girls slowed their pace, feeling cautiously in the near dark for three small steps, and when these were safely negotiated they held out their hands, waiting for the feel of wood. On making contact, one of the girls tapped lightly on the door — it was flung open instantly.

Two cowed figures, large and looming, blocked the entranceway. After a moment's pause they moved aside, and the young eves could see the inside of the room, dark but for the huge glowing fire in the hearth. The ceiling was low and seemed to hover menacingly, covered in instruments of torture: finger screws, branding irons, eyelid clamps, flesh pinchers, head screws, and many other devices the girls couldn't yet identify. They glinted dully in the light of the fire, sending shivers through the children. Tables, benches and stools were scattered about the room, and each had the look of a threat to the terrified girls standing in the doorway.

"Enter," one of the figures commanded, and the girls scuttled inside as if stung. With quaking hearts they stood waiting while the two faceless men silently surveyed them. Several moments passed before a finger extended outwards and pointed directly at Theresa.

"Come," the voice ordered. A small whimper of fear escaped as she moved forward to follow the figure deeper into the room. She was led towards the hearth where a large tub filled with water stood a short distance away. Her arms were pulled behind her back and the wrists tied together.

"Kneel," the voice said coldly, removed from all feeling.

Visibly shaking, Theresa knelt before the tub. Without looking up, she knew the other children were standing directly in front of her across the room. It was always this way, so they could watch and know what was coming; it increased their terror.

The two robed figures stood behind the kneeling child. Abruptly, one of them ripped back her veil and grabbed her neck, shoving her head under the water. Instinctively she tried to struggle, but the hand was a vice, and her bonds prevented all but the most futile efforts. She could not even kick her legs, for her bare toes were

pinned painfully to the floor by the booted feet of the second priest.

Theresa tried not to inhale, but her body could not resist the need for oxygen. It overrode every consideration: she breathed in. A moment later she was jerked from the water and forced back to her knees.

Coughing and sputtering, she gulped in great draughts of air. The moment her coughing ceased, the priest repeated the process, grabbing her head and burying it under the water. Once more, she struggled uselessly against the hands that held her, before succumbing to the demands of the flesh. And once more she was yanked out and allowed to recover only briefly before being dunked back inside the tub.

Again and again, they replayed her torture until she was rendered half senseless. Finally, hands still tied, she was pushed back towards the other children and forced to watch while each young eve received the same cruel treatment. And with every child, her anger grew.

I hate them, she chanted over and over again, uncaring how wrong and evil this was, or even that it might lead to further punishment. The hatred helped: she could ignore the pain in her arms and her frigid exhaustion.

When the bonds were cut from her wrists at last, she could not move her arms; they were numb and useless. Shivering in their wet nightgowns, the traumatized girls made their way up the stairs, some still coughing from the water in their lungs. As the feeling returned to Theresa's arms, she had to bite her lip to keep from crying aloud.

Gradually, the girls slipped away to their own rooms without a word or a sign, leaving Theresa to finish the last part of the journey alone.

Murderous rage was competing with deep fatigue, causing her to stumble inside the darkened sleeping room. Theresa felt her way to her bed, removing the soggy head covering and damp nightgown, though it was forbidden to be without clothing. She laid the gown on the floor and crawled gratefully onto the hard, little plank she called her bed.

Pulling the thin blanket over her bare shoulders, she thought miserably, I will certainly live a very long life for my sins, and then I will burn in Hell forever.

But at that moment the thought was almost appealing, because in Hell there would be no priests.

Sighing heavily, she began sliding into sleep, but a moment later her eyes flew open and she sat upright. Cautiously, she leaned over to put a hand onto the bed beside her. It was empty.

Ruth!

The two children began to meet secretly twice a week. It was only a matter of time before they were caught.

At first their adventures were confined to the outbuildings in the girls' school, but they soon grew bored with this. Eric began leading Ruth into the boys' yard, and eventually over the wall and out to freedom, Ruth eager to follow.

Gender lines became blurred.

Ruth began the practice of removing her veil the moment she entered the shelter of night. Eric didn't comment, and after some initial surprise hardly noticed. He'd spent too much time with the bared faces of his treasured siblings. During their treks over the wall, they had to rely heavily on each other to keep ears and eyes sharp for danger, to help pull a hand or push a leg, or to touch in silent warning.

He even insisted on knowing her name, and she'd mumbled it low. When he demanded her last name, she bent her head beyond its customary hunch and pointed to her arm.

"What yuh means?" he asked, confused.

"No name," she said, stooping even further, making it difficult to hear. "Only a number."

"Uh number?" he repeated, perplexed. He pointed to her arm, "Yuh gots uh number there?" She nodded. "Let's sees."

She hesitated, then bravely undid her sleeve button and pushed the material up to her shoulder. It was a brazen act, exposing her arm, and even more so her number to a male who wasn't a priest.

"Uh tattoo!" he said, studying the ink in the moonlight. He'd never heard of such eve markings — very few males outside of the clergy had. "R775," he recited. "That's yurr last name?"

"Since school," she whispered to the floor.

"They takes yurr name and gives yuh uh number?" Eric said in awe. It gave him an uncomfortable feeling in his tummy to think about it, and he pushed it away. "Let's go sees stuff!"

Once over the wall they sought out the safest areas to explore. Sometimes they'd investigate one of the deserted houses that were springing up across New Eden, but more often they went to the river, the dry season still upon them. Here, in the sparse forest, they could run and climb and jump, as children should.

One night, as Ruth leapt down from a tree, her scarf became entangled in the branches, the material tightening around her neck while her feet kicked frantically inches above the ground. Eric rushed to pull the scarf from her head, revealing her shaved scalp. As she lay in the sparse grass recovering, he stared in amazement at her lack of hair.

"Yuh gots uh shaved head — as if yuh was male!" he hissed at her, confused and even shocked but not angry. He crouched down to study her scalp, giving it a little poke. She looked up at him, startled. "Why'd they shaves yurr head, and yous uh eve?" he insisted without rancor.

Ruth's eyes instantly shifted to the ground.

Although speaking to Eric was becoming easier, she still couldn't look at him as she did so. "So it doesn't lure Man into sin," she whispered.

"With yurr hairs?" he asked, disbelieving. How'd anybody be tempted into sin by hair? he wondered.

He laughed, and Ruth looked up at him in confusion.

“Can yuh sees Chang’s hairs bein’ uh lure tuh anybody?” He laughed again, and though she knew it was wrong, she couldn’t keep the smile from her face.

Ruth had no memory of feeling happy – she didn’t even possess the words to describe such feelings. Her mother had raised her as custom demanded, curbing her every natural impulse and reminding her daily that she was evil and a danger to all life in the Garden of Eden. But now, twice a week, the fun of their adventures made her body shake with silent laughter, laughter shared with a male.

Eric had easily fallen back into the role he played with his little siblings, though he knew that everything they did together, the touching, the talking and the fun, was supposed to be wrong and a sin. But he could not believe it. Instead, he wanted her to be more like a real friend. He tried to teach her gaming.

In the small barn at the eve school, Ruth listened with wide-eyed attention to Eric’s wrestling instructions, completely engrossed by this view into the sacred world of gaming. But she was too well trained. She could not fight back or even protect herself. Eric grew frustrated by this passivity. Trying to get a reaction, he tripped her onto her back, but she only lay there, eyes closed, waiting.

Disappointed, Eric ordered, “OK then, forgets it!”

Suddenly he was grabbed from behind and flung across the barn.

“What in the Name of the Holy Father is going on here!” a priest roared down at them. He pointed a finger at Ruth’s exposed face, “Devil’s whore! Detention room! Now!”

She disappeared from the barn.

He turned and grabbed Eric’s ear, dragging him outside. “You little son of a whore!” the priest swore, shaking Eric violently. He boxed both ears painfully before marching him to the Principal’s office.

It took until mid-morning for the news to circulate through the school, the biggest scandal to happen at that institute in some years. The boys all waited expectantly to see what would happen.

Eric was given ten lashes at the whipping post and made to perform eve duties at the busiest times of the day, so all could witness his humiliation and learn. When not cleaning, he was on his knees in prayer and penance.

Temporarily banned from the gaming exercises, his hair was left to grow, marking him as unfit to game or to be part of the school community. He was not permitted to talk or interact with the other boys, and could only speak to an adult when addressed. But the worst of the punishments was his removal from cadets. He would not be given a second chance.

The eve’s punishment was not publicized.

CHAPTER SIX

WILLIAM NOW had skill enough to join the family hunt, though he made no move to do so. He believed his presence an annoyance to his father, an embarrassing reminder of the weakling he had sired. Robert argued fiercely, but could not budge William out of his certainty.

Knowing that the brothers had planted and encouraged this belief in William, Robert swore vengeance on them both. He only feared the Chairman would die before he succeeded, for then a higher oath would interfere, forcing him to protect Thomas as the new Chairman.

Robert kept his plans to himself, for William had no grudge against his siblings, even while he feared them, but instead, looked upon them with reverence. The young prince thought himself completely inferior, and believed his weakness deserved whatever punishment his brothers inflicted upon him.

Each year the distance between William and his family grew wider. Often Chairman Alexander allowed his youngest son's existence to slip from his mind entirely, though occasionally the obligations of a father and a king would momentarily resurface. Only to be smothered under the snickering tide of derision Thomas and Henry directed towards their younger brother, causing the weak Chairman to further ignore his responsibility to William.

The Church could have forced the Chairman to fulfill this duty; it was well within their mandate. As a prince, William was entitled to the opportunity to prove his worthiness for the throne. As a son, he was owed the modeling of Manhood by his father. But the Vatican did not interfere. It continued to watch and wait, now with a lessening of tension brought on by William's new-found skills — although the source of that improvement was another matter.

For two years Bishop Stehr, the Pope's ambassador to the palace, delivered enthusiastic reports to the Vatican filled with William's ever-increasing abilities and growing confidence. The bishop, however, was unaware of the developing friendship between the prince and Robert.

Even William's confessor, Father Gideon, was kept in the dark. The priest's open disdain for the cadets and anything military had frightened William into silence, too afraid Father Gideon would order an end to the relationship. Robert was his first friend without robe and collar, and his first child friend. William was not about to lose him.

When the relationship was eventually discovered, it sent a small buzz of activity throughout the Vatican.

An immediate investigation was conducted into Robert's character. The examiners produced nothing — nothing to indicate what form his influence on the prince would take. All they knew for certain was that he was Army, or soon would be, and the Army had no love for Church Law but obeyed with grudging compliance.

The uneasy alliance formed during New Eden's early history was still in existence. The Chairman, through God's Decree, held sole ownership of New Eden. The Army

defended that right of ownership. The Church sanctified it.

It was vital that the soldier standing next to the Chairman understood this.

Robert was an unknown, and was therefore suspect.

They prayed he would fail at the cadet trials or at the Rite of Manhood, and briefly considered rigging the games against him — perhaps drugging the boy to make him too aggressive, thus causing a deadly mistake within the ring. But young Bishop Gervais had interceded.

“Without this boy, will the weak prince be capable of completing his own coming of age? Are you willing to take that risk?”

The Pontiff was forced to concede that he was not.

Perhaps William will lose interest, was the faint hope.

Months later, all such hope was gone.

Robert graduated easily into Manhood, and soon after into the Army. He departed the school to reside inside the grounds of the palace, where he was immediately assigned private rooms within the Royal Household, a privilege given only to the most trusted, and only at the request of a Royal. He was there to stay.

His move within the palace prompted the Church to re-examine his files, to once more cross-examine teachers and students, and even to question William himself. No one remained inscrutable to the Church.

After a lengthy investigation, they were finally forced to change tactics and use a frontal approach.

I’m getting old, thought Bishop Stehr. I care less and less for the business of politics.

The bishop had been in residence as the Vatican’s ambassador for nearly twenty years. It was a hard job pleasing both masters, usually caught between the two.

Stehr eyed his visitor with unease and shifted his thickening body more comfortably in the chair. “Do you think this course of action wise?”

“Due to your negligence, it is the only course left to us,” Cardinal Lambert snapped disdainfully.

The bishop let the insult pass; they both knew the Vatican had also failed.

Cardinal Lambert straightened his red robe into severe lines before folding his hands into its deep sleeves. “Bring in the boy.”

Stehr rang the bell on his desk, and a moment later Robert was ushered inside the office by the bishop’s assistant. The door closed behind the adolescent as he bent on one knee to kiss the cardinal’s ring. Then he rose to stand composed before them.

Bishop Stehr sat back, leaving the cardinal to conduct the interview.

“Do you know why you are here?”

“Yes, Your Eminence.”

“And why might that be?” the cardinal asked with interest. He had planned to insinuate knowledge of some offense to see where it led, but instead he was going to have a confession laid effortlessly before him.

“You have concerns about my friendship with the prince.”

The cardinal's face twitched slightly with surprise. "And what makes you think we would concern ourselves with any passing interest the prince might have for one such as you?" he demanded with a hard note of contempt.

But Robert didn't flinch. "Excuse me, Your Eminence, but you want to know if I am a loyal friend to the prince, and if I respect the Divine Laws of God."

Cardinal Lambert stared in disbelief.

Amused by his colleague's loss of composure, Bishop Stehr shifted forward and spoke for the first time. "And if we did want to know of such things, what would you reply?"

"Your Grace, I have no ambitions regarding the prince, except to serve him as a loyal soldier and a true friend. I have great faith in the Lord God and obey His Laws, as I do the Laws of the Lord Chairman."

"Why you? Why befriend *you*?" the cardinal demanded.

"He dislikes the gaming, as do I. I taught him how to overcome it."

"*You* don't enjoy gaming?" the bishop asked in surprise. "Then why did you join the Army?"

"I didn't want to be a priest."

The answer brought a smile to Stehr's lips.

The cardinal was studying Robert with sharpened interest.

So the lad didn't like gaming . . . not only William, but now his closest confidant . . . which meant Robert wasn't true Army, Lambert thought with satisfaction. And if the lad was after power, what of it? It could only work to our advantage. He will do nothing to inhibit William's chances to the throne. And if he proves too ambitious, that could be dealt with — later.

"You're a very bright young man."

Robert bent his head only slightly at the praise.

"You do understand our concern? The prince cannot be guarded too closely."

"I heartily agree, Your Eminence."

The cardinal studied him intently, but Robert's eyes did not waver. Damn those incompetent teachers. How could they let such a prize slip from our grasp? But all he said was, "You may go."

Robert bowed respectfully and departed.

The bishop slumped back in his chair. "Well, that was certainly a surprise."

The cardinal studied his ring. "He's an interesting lad." He looked at the other man sharply. "Keep a close eye on him."

Robert returned to his rooms, surprised by the Church's directness. Why did they care so much? It wasn't as if William was going to be Chair—

He stopped short in sudden realization, Of course! William was solidly theirs. Thomas and Henry paid lip service only.

It was now clear that the Church had plans for William. He wondered how they would make such a thing happen. It would take a lot to move Thomas out in favor of

William. But Robert was certain the Church would have its way.

Mulling over this discovery, Robert changed out of the formal uniform he'd worn for the interview. There were still a few hours before going on duty, time enough to walk down to the school for a visit with Eric. Robert tried to do so whenever possible. He blamed himself completely for Eric's corruption.

I didn't stop him; instead I *helped* him onto the path to damnation. Why did I do that? he kept asking himself.

Eric's punishment had been painful to watch, knowing that he was trapped in the hateful mine pits forever, all chance of escape gone.

Guilt weighed heavily on Robert.

Arriving at the school, he found Eric alone in the dorm room — as usual — though his ostracism had been lifted almost a year ago now.

The younger boy was changed since his punishment. So quiet and subdued, all enthusiasm gone from him. Even teasing couldn't make him explode into temper, and this worried Robert more than anything. Eric had always been so proud. It was as if all the fire had been shamed out of him.

Eric greeted his friend without interest, listening to Robert's halting conversation with only the barest response. He declined the offer of gaming, and was obviously relieved when his visitor had to go.

It was always the same, but Robert couldn't keep away; he felt too responsible. And he missed his friend and the time they'd spent together.

It's funny, Robert thought. Until this happened, I'd always thought of him as just tagging along. I wonder when it changed

CHAPTER SEVEN

ALL SONS of the Royal Family were trained for the position of Magistrate. The closer they stood to the throne, the higher the court they prevailed over. With the Chairman at its head, the Royal Family spread out and downward, blanketing every class and district of the populace.

Tutoring in Law began at the age of fifteen, usually by an aging relative. The exception to this was the heir to the throne, whose duties and responsibilities were unique to the position he would hold. His teacher would be the Supreme Magistrate, the Chairman himself, who declared his chosen successor by personally escorting him through the doors to the Supreme Court.

Having been selected for this honor, Thomas spent his days watching Chairman Alexander pass judgment in the highest secular court in New Eden, or studying the dusty law books in his father's private study. Or, more precisely, appearing to study the dusty law books, for this prince had no intention of being encumbered with such restrictions. On the day he became Chairman, Thomas would break free of the Church forever. And though some part of him shuddered at this risk to his immortal soul, a larger part shivered with anticipation of civil war.

The Church was quite aware of the prince's intent, and kept close watch over the health and safety of the Chairman while waiting for William to come into his own. It was decided he would be ready by the Rite of Manhood. And at last the time drew near. Preparations for the sacred ritual were well underway when William's confessor made an alarming discovery.

"But you *must* invite the Lord Chairman," Father Gideon said, keeping his voice calm with effort.

"No, I've asked enough people," the prince stated with quiet firmness. But it was a lie, for the prince had no friends outside of the clergy and Robert. The few hangers-on that clustered around him were there only at the express orders of the Church.

"But he's your father! All boys want their fathers to witness their Transformation."

"*Their fathers want to be there.*"

"You believe your father does not want to come?" the priest asked in amazement.

"I know he will not."

"My boy, of course he will come." He *must*, the priest thought in fear.

"No, Father," William said miserably, thinking of the taunts his brothers had subjected him to only the night before. "The Lord Chairman will not come."

"To exclude your father would be the highest insult. To exclude the Lord Chairman would be an act of treason," Father Gideon said sternly. "You must follow protocol."

Reluctantly, William wrote out the invitation.

As the priest had predicted, the Chairman did attend the ceremony, the two older princes and a large entourage in tow to witness the Transformation of the King's youngest son.

Informed of his father's presence in the stands, William was overcome with fear. His hands began to shake, his legs went weak, and the blood slowly drained from his

face.

Robert gave the prince a calculating look, and then jabbed him painfully between the shoulder blades. William turned on him. "What the hell was that for?"

Robert replied by ramming his thumb into William's solar plexus.

"You son-of-a-whore," William swore, jumping at him and knocking them both to the ground. They struggled in the dirt, William desperately trying to land a solid punch while Robert applied steady jabs to William's ribcage.

Father Gideon broke up the fight. "This is no time to be fooling around! Get up! The ceremony is about to begin!"

The prince jumped to his feet, grabbing the ceremonial sword from the priest's hand. Still seething, he took his place at the head of the procession. Robert moved directly behind him: the First Guard of Honor.

As a royal, William was attended by his personal guards clad in the dark brown uniform of the Ritual Honor Guard. But even a prince must take his first challenge dressed in the everyday clothes of childhood, a subtle reminder that the Church alone sanctioned every transformation into manhood, not the Army or the Chairman.

There was the sound of a horn, and the procession entered the arena. Marching to a brisk drumbeat, they crossed to the podium at the far end. The drums fell silent and all in attendance knelt in preparation for the Ritual Prayer.

Bishop Stehr stood on the platform before an altar, with two priests in attendance on either side of him. Several feet in front of them, standing on its end, was a large metal ring supported by metal struts. The ring was covered in rags soaked in seed oil from the common tree.

The Bishop raised his hands to heaven, imploring in a loud voice:

"Oh, Lord, in the name of Your servant,

William Simon Cartwright, we beseech You:

Imbue him with the courage to face the challenges before him.

Bless him with the strength and agility to meet muscle and blade.

Find him, oh, Lord, worthy to enter the Company of Men.

Amen."

The "Amen" was echoed by the spectators.

Bishop Stehr moved in front of the metal ring to sprinkle it with holy water before descending the short flight of stairs leading into the arena. He drew the sign of the cross over William, and after a short pause announced dramatically, "Let the Rite begin!"

The bishop retreated onto the podium as the honor guard rose to its feet. It moved quickly to form a large circle, and within its center stood William and his opponent for the trial. There was a murmur of surprise through the audience, for the prince was matched against a young man unmistakably his senior, with the strength and height of those extra years obvious to all.

Placing the flat of his sword against his brow, William gave his opponent the traditional salute, and Robert saluted in return. He could see that William was still angry, but only enough to put an edge to his fight.

The prince lunged and the game began.

There was an added tension to the games during the Rite of Manhood, for it was the first time a youth would use or face a proper sword, a sword with a highly sharpened edge that glinted in the sunlight. The challenge was to overcome the fear of that blade and give an aggressive, skillful fight — without getting killed. It was also considered a failure to kill or maim your opponent. Expulsion was the consequence.

The prince was putting on a good display, with the crowd well entertained. He seemed at ease facing the sharpened sword, as if he'd done this many times before — which in truth he had, sneaking into the night with Robert to practice amongst the trees of the royal hunting grounds, their thick foliage absorbing the clash of metal. Robert was no longer concerned if the Church was watching, he knew they'd not interfere.

When the sword was finally flung from William's hand, the crowd cheered appreciatively. There was no disgrace in losing to an overmatched opponent, not when he'd shown such skill and confidence.

Having survived the first test, they were now permitted to strip down to loincloths.

A loincloth was worn only by soldiers for training exercises or when they entered the gaming ring. The exception to this rule was during the Rite of Manhood.

If a boy was trained in cadet skills he had earned the right to take his second challenge draped in only one small piece of cloth. This increased his chance of injury, but, more importantly, it garnered him a greater degree of respect.

The two youths faced one another, each holding a knife in his right hand. Once again, William had to prove his skill and courage against a naked blade, and once again he did so with an unusual flair of self-confidence. When he was finally pinned to the ground, the blade at his throat, the crowd rose to its feet with a roar of approval.

William stood and shook Robert's hand, saying breathlessly, "I know what you did back there."

"Back where?" Robert asked innocently.

William just grinned and collected his discarded clothing. Sobering, he turned to face the bishop once more.

Robert returned to his position as head of the honor guard that was reforming behind the prince. When they were all assembled, the procession marched forward to stand several feet from the podium. Two priests moved down the steps carrying a large earthen urn. A third priest followed to lower a torch inside the container. Fire spewed from its wide mouth.

Piece by piece, the prince lowered the garments of his childhood into the blaze: short pants, a woolen tunic, a cloth belt and an ankle-high pair of leather boots. When the last article was deposited, William walked towards the podium.

The moment his foot touched the bottom step, flames erupted upon the platform, the great metal ring now a circle of fire. William, like any youth of New Eden, had been expecting this. He could just make out the form of a priest moving away from the flames, torch in hand.

Solemnly, but without hesitation, William approached the ring of fire, his naked

skin growing hotter with every step. "Keep going," he heard Robert's instructions in his mind. "Don't pause, don't slow down, it'll only get hotter. Just walk up the stairs and through the circle."

Feeling as if his body must burst into flames, William passed through the fire and into Manhood, the heat rapidly receding as he moved closer to the solemn face of Bishop Stehr, waiting at the altar.

There was nothing in the older man's expression to indicate the pleasure he felt at William's surprising display inside the arena.

And we owe it all to Robert, he thought. A debt we will never acknowledge.

William came to a stop a few feet in front of the bishop, and as he did so a priest moved forward to offer a new set of clothing: long pants, a rough cotton shirt, a leather belt, and a pair of shin-high leather boots. With great dignity, William donned the uniform of Manhood.

The bishop commanded the assembly: "Let us pray."

Again, every man and boy sank to his knees before the bishop proclaimed,

"We thank Thee, Oh Lord, for this gift of Manhood.

May he live out his life in strict accordance to Thy Laws,

That he may share with his brothers in the Kingdom of Heaven.

And through obedience and piety, keep Your Garden free from evil,

That Your Wrath may never again be visited upon Mankind.

Amen."

"Amen," the crowd echoed.

Bishop Stehr removed a large golden goblet from the altar and offered it to the prince. William gulped down the wine, draining the container. He raised the cup over his head, announcing loudly, "May I meet you all over a keg of beer!"

The spectators cheered noisily and the ceremony was over. The crowd would now retire to the reception area where beer would be handed round in plenty and William would be required to drink himself into a stupor.

Bishop Stehr sought out the proud Chairman.

"I didn't think he had it in him," Alexander confided to the bishop.

"You do not know your son, my Lord. You have neglected your duty as a father." Alexander could only nod in agreement. "Perhaps this can now be rectified," the bishop stated, his tone neutral.

But the Chairman knew it was not a request.

"Of course, Your Grace," Alexander agreed hurriedly.

"A private hunt, perhaps, just you and William."

"A hunt, yes, excellent." And the Chairman left immediately to give the command to his youngest son. The bishop watched him disappear into the crowd before noticing Thomas and Henry standing together in close discussion. Becoming aware of the bishop's attention, the princes turned and acknowledged him respectfully.

Stehr returned the gesture, bowing low, hiding his thoughts: Now we've got you, you nasty vipers.

The two youths stood motionless within the undergrowth of the hunting grounds: William's bow at the ready, Robert's sword drawn.

They'd been hunting together for years, working in secret to overcome William's severe aversion to the bloody violence of the hunt, finding ways to keep the blood flow controlled and the animal's death quick. But to ensure this, the young prince had to develop the skill of a master.

Long before he knew of the Church's intent to set William on the throne, Robert had encouraged the prince in this endeavor as the means of bringing the youngest royal into the family fold.

For the chance to gain his father's approval, William had committed his time and effort, though he'd never truly believed he could ever surmount his revulsion. But with Robert's constant faith and guidance, he persevered, succeeding at last. Yet even this triumph could not overcome his brothers' barrage of belittling insults, and he remained convinced of his unworthiness as a son.

Now William drew back the bowstring, blocking out all other considerations — as he'd been trained to do. He saw nothing but the stag standing in the limited space within the trees. He ignored Robert positioned by his side and the King with his guards watching from a distance.

The creature stopped eating and raised its majestic head to stare directly at the youths — then the arrow flew straight and true towards the eye, and the stag dropped to the ground instantly. Robert dashed forward, sword ready to open its jugular, but the arrow was buried deep inside the brain, causing the body to spasm a few times before lying motionless.

Turning his head, Robert could see that the prince had paled but was holding steady, while behind him the Chairman had let out a shout of surprise and praise.

Never had he seen such skill!

Again, Alexander felt a great pride in William, and once more acknowledged that he knew nothing of his youngest son — only what Thomas and Henry had poured into his ear.

Informed of a successful hunt, the Church waited for developments.

With a long history of such machinations, and a thorough knowledge of its Chairman, the Vatican was confident it would have its way, given time.

They did not have long to wait.

Deprived of his father's presence for most of his life, William was now in complete awe of the man. He hung on his every word, instantly and willingly obeyed his commands, and followed his every suggestion.

At first Alexander was unsettled by such open idolization, and confessed as much

to the bishop. But what ruler can resist the lure of genuine devotion? He grew accustomed to it. Alexander no longer needed a sense of duty to seek out William, but looked forward to the sight of his son's adoring face. The Chairman's time with William stretched out past the hunting grounds and into the castle proper.

Now the Church made an overt move. It endorsed William as a fit ruler for New Eden. The Chairman listened with interest.

On the day William accompanied his father through the doors of the Supreme Court, the Church breathed a collective sigh.

It had won.

CHAPTER EIGHT

BY CHURCH Decree, the Chairman was God's chosen ruler on New Eden, and, as such, owned all the habitable land within the planet. Entrusted to his care, it could not be sold or given away, but it could be borrowed through the purchase of a lease.

The Chairman alone issued these leases, but it was the Church who chose those fortunate men worthy of consideration. Only those who bore the signs of God's favor could be entrusted with the responsibility of lease holding. And though wealth was a certain indicator, it was not enough in itself. A candidate must also be endowed with the Qualities of Manliness: an aggressive nature, correct control of emotions and adequate abilities in the gaming arena were all essential. To be born with a large frame or great strength were further indications of favor. He must also be a productive citizen, show piety and obedience to the Law (both civil and canon), display loyalty to the Chairman and devotion to duty. However, the greatest of all the virtues was virility. To father many pure sons was the highest achievement for any civilian, though few men were endowed with this sacred blessing.

Every year, almost fifteen percent of Eden's adult males applied for the privilege of buying a lease. Many did so to obtain a home for a growing son, others to expand the family business, or increase their already rich holdings. Hundreds of clergy were employed in the task of screening applicants, but still they were heavily backlogged. It often took years to receive the letter of recommendation necessary to approach the Royal Department of Leases, where another lengthy wait was usual before being granted an interview with one of the Chairman's representatives — who could deny the application.

The only way to circumvent this queue was to win a lease, and there were just two ways of doing that. The first, and most common, was to emerge as a victor at the Triennial Championship Games, where the three champions were each awarded a small cash prize and an even smaller lease. The second option was to win the title of Great Father Bull, awarded for siring a record number of pure sons. It was the highest honor available to an ordinary citizen, and as lucrative as it was rare. The current record had stood for over one hundred years.

"Damn it, I said I'd have that prize, and I won't stop 'til I do!" Patrick Marchelie raged as he kicked open his front door, smashing it into the wall behind.

He charged into the entrance hall and down the corridor to the den, where he walked directly to the keg of beer sitting on a high table. Turning the wooden peg, he let the warm brew spill into a metal decanter.

"You'll do it, Father," his eldest son reassured him, following the older man inside and placing himself behind a large wooden chair at the opposite wall. He was thirty-six years old, but when his father was in a rage, he felt like a small child again.

"I was so close!" Patrick railed in frustration, and took a long pull of the liquid; it spilled down his chin with every noisy gulp. Turning to his son, he continued his rant: "But only three of those cows dropped humans last year, Goddamn them to hell! Even that prize heifer I bought was a waste of sperm! Cost me an arm and leg for her too,

damn her soul!"

"You have three years to prepare for the next Games. You'll do it then."

Traditionally, the title was presented at the Championship Games, to allow the maximum number of citizens to pay homage to this most blessed of men.

"I wanted it now!" the older man roared, smashing the decanter onto the table, spraying the dark ale halfway across the room.

"What's three more years?" Peter spoke quickly, trying to keep his voice level. "You're still strong and healthy," he continued, putting heavy emphasis on the words. "The record has stood for over a hundred years; no one else is in competition with you." He studied his father, trying to gauge his reaction. "Great Father Bull," he said musingly. "You'll wear the title well."

Puffing out his chest, Patrick strutted across the room in the fashion of the wealthy class. "And I'll wear those leases very well too, damn it all! Just think of the riches they'll generate. We'll crush our competition into dust!" But far more important to Patrick Marchelie was the prestige. The most honored civilian in all of New Eden. He'd pay anything — do anything — to gain that title.

Peter relaxed slightly. It was alright now; his father's mood had swung out of the danger zone where his rage could so easily turn to violence. Like most of Patrick's sons, Peter carried the scars of earlier eruptions. Though with the passing years, these were occurring less frequently, or had been until this fixation with the Great Father Bull award. Now the old man seemed more volatile and dangerous than ever, the pressure to attain that most coveted title mounting daily: to come close and fail would mean financial disaster for Patrick Marchelie — and his sons.

"Better get to business," Patrick leered, swaggering with exaggerated steps toward the door.

Peter watched him go, praying for a successful outcome to this night's mating. Winning that title was now the only way his inheritance could possibly be saved, for every year his father sired more sons to share in his legacy — a legacy that was being significantly dwindled by extravagant bidding for the best breeder wives, bought in his father's frantic attempt to sire an even greater number of sons. Peter had the uncomfortable suspicion that his father was borrowing money to do so, but he could not verify this, for no one but his father and the head bookkeeper saw the accounts. "Time enough when I'm gone," his father would say. But Peter knew that if he wasn't successful soon, there'd be no time.

With a leaden feeling, he realized that another bride auction would soon be upon them. How fast six months could go.

In the chilly predawn darkness, Father Tommy escorted six, fifteen-year-old girls through the streets to the District One auction hall. Eligible eves of every age would be herded there: young virgins to ancient crones, all to be put upon the marriage block

and sold to the highest bidder.

The enormous auction hall was connected by a breezeway to an unimpressive barn-like structure. It was to this building that the girls were led. The dimly lit barn was bare except for a large pile of straw in one of the dark corners and two long tables positioned against opposite walls near the entrance. At each of these tables sat three priests with various books, boxes and binders laid out before them. High on the wall behind them was a flag: a black flag on the right for widows, a white flag on the left for schoolgirls and unmarried illegits.

Father Tommy led the girls to this table.

There was no lineup as yet, the hour being too early for most, which was precisely why Father Tommy was standing there at that moment. He had no intention of being trapped inside this barn a moment longer than necessary. He had far too many rivals at seminary school, and the chance of bumping into one at the auction was very high indeed. He squirmed at the thought of being discovered representing a school that serviced illegals and miners and others of low stature, when he'd expected greater things for himself — and unwisely let it show, sealing his fate.

His superiors knew that such an ambitious priest would resent every moment spent inside an inferior institute that held no chance for advancement, and that he would take his frustrations out on the eves in his care.

"Which school?" the sleepy auction priest asked, not bothering to look up.

"Pope Honorius Vecker II," Father Tommy answered loftily, trying to maintain his dignity. He eyed the priest's bent head with a sneer while the man searched through one of the wooden file boxes that sat before him. The auction priest removed a thick leather case, passing it along the table to his colleague.

"Name?" the second priest demanded, opening the clasp on the case.

"E764: Esther," Tommy said, jerking the girl to stand before the priest. The man withdrew a slim leather-covered binder and passed this to the third priest at their table. Father Tommy pushed the girl towards him, immediately jolting Ruth forward to take her place.

"R775: Ruth," he clipped.

Another binder was removed and passed on. Father Tommy shoved Ruth after it. She stood quaking before the third priest while he rummaged through a box and removed a worn wooden plaque, which he placed on the table. There was a hole drilled at each end, with a thick cord knotted through them. Etched into the middle of the wood was her number: 775.

"Put it around your neck," the auction priest ordered. She did so. "Stand over there, in the white circle," he instructed, pointing deeper into the barn where Esther was hunched fearfully within a large circle painted on the floor.

There were several such circles on the rough wood: red ones and black ones, even some that were red and black, but there was only one white circle. Ruth scurried towards it before Father Tommy could give her any more encouragement.

She stood close to Esther, and soon the other maidens from her school joined them. Covertly, they watched the increased flow of eves entering the barn, and stared in

fascination at the young illegits: each with a firecross tattoo on her forehead. Only a few days old, the red ink stood out starkly in the gloom. Ruth followed their progress across the barn to one of the red circles nearby.

The white flag priests continued to process the young eves from the four schools in the District and the illegits raised on the Church farmlands, but there were not nearly enough fifteen-year-olds to fill the large white and red circles.

There were far more widows, who, upon the deaths of their husbands, reverted back to Church property to work the farmlands until the next bride auction.

Each widow was categorized by age and breeding status, then ordered to wait in her appropriate circle: brood widows in the black circles, non-breeders in the red and black circles.

The processing went on, the various circles swelling in size until hundreds of females stood at the bottom end of the barn, but still there was room for hundreds more.

Daylight was nearly upon them and sounds of street activity could be heard when the last eve was shuffled past the registration table. The six priests quickly gathered up their paraphernalia and disappeared from the building. They were immediately replaced by others, who laid food and drink on the tables. Then the eves were permitted to approach, group by group, to take their small share. When all were fed, they were allowed to use the primitive toilets at the rear of the barn and some water for washing, after which they were ordered to sit.

They waited.

It was fully daylight now, and outside the streets seemed to resound with the bark of male voices, made all the louder by the silence within.

"Are we to marry?" a girl from another school asked Ruth with her fingers.

"I think so," she signed back.

"I'm scared."

"I too," Ruth answered, and noticed an old woman signaling her from a group in a black and red circle a few feet away. There was no tattoo on her forehead, indicating that she was once a breeder wife. In the dimness of the barn, it was difficult to make out her words. "Repeat," she signed.

Her gnarled fingers moved stiffly: "Today is the auction. It's bad, but no pain."

"What happens—?"

But her question was interrupted by the movement of a priest coming towards them. He pointed to the twenty young maids within her circle and ordered them to follow. They were led through the covered breezeway and into the massive auction hall.

Ruth flinched as the noise and smell of the place hit her senses. The hall was filled to capacity, reeking with the stench of stale beer and unwashed bodies. Ruth felt as if she was suffocating under her veil. The noise was deafening, as these men swaggered and bragged and tried to intimidate each other with their show of money or muscle, or both. Ruth had never been near a man other than priests. To be thrust amongst so many like this was almost unbearable.

The eves climbed the steps to a long, raised platform. Each girl was made to stand at the front of the stage beside a priest seated at a small table. A book lay open in front of him. This contained her personal history and her bloodline.

When the eves were stationed satisfactorily, the Auction Bishop moved to the center of the platform. He raised his hand, and immediately the hall fell silent. Every eye was on the cleric. Not a glance was dared towards the eves until permission was granted. To do so could mean the loss of bidding privileges and eviction from the hall. No man would risk that.

The bishop waited until the room had attained perfect stillness before announcing quietly, "Viewing may now begin."

Though her head was bent towards the floor, Ruth knew the moment those six thousand pairs of eyes swung from the bishop to bore into the twenty young maidens exposed on the platform. The impact was staggering. The fear, anger and sexual tension of six thousand psyches struck with vicious force. The girls had no defense against it — nor even understood what it was — but had the priests not kept a painful grip on every girl's arm, they would have lost control completely and bolted from the platform.

It was the usual reaction.

The men began to move. Some approached the platform, forming straggly queues to speak with a priest seated at the table, but most held back, watching only: the price of a virgin beyond their reach.

A man approached Ruth's table. He gave his name and that of his father's, their occupation and address. The priest ran his finger over the pages of the book before he decreed, "The bloodlines are too close." Ruth watched the feet move away, knowing this was her kin and not caring. Another man stepped forward.

"Eric Wong," his voice announced loudly.

Ruth silently gasped and glanced toward the young man's face before she recovered and forced her eyes downward.

The priest passed a scornful look over Eric's clothes and the coal dust ground deep into his skin. "Don't waste my time, boy, move on."

The men waiting in line behind him laughed mockingly as Eric stalked away, but he turned his head back in time to catch Ruth covertly staring after him. For one intense moment they locked eyes, recognition and pleasure surfacing briefly before painful memories caught them up, reminding them of danger. They broke contact.

Ruth sagged slightly at the sudden feeling of loss — as if she'd been offered something, only to have it ripped away.

"You are permitted to bid," the priest was saying to another man as he rose from his seat and motioned Ruth forward. "The eve is very healthy. She has survived two winter contagions." There was an appreciative grunt from the man while Ruth sucked in her breath at this bold-faced lie.

The priest flipped up the first layer of veil and forced her jaws open to display teeth and gums, pulling her head downward so the man could look up into her mouth, but always careful not to disturb the veil still covering her face. Then she was released and

motioned back.

Ruth was shaking with reaction. They'd treated her like one of the barn animals!

She hung her head as low as possible, rounding her shoulders even further, trying to hide herself away. To add to her shame was the thought that Eric may have witnessed her treatment, and somehow that was worst of all. She did not raise her eyes again.

She went through the rest of the proceedings in a numbing daze. Men came and went, but she did not really hear them or feel the wrenching of her jaws. And at last she was led off the platform and back to the barn.

Ruth passed the waiting women sitting in their circles, without offering a glance or a sign. She strode to the back of the barn and flung herself into a corner to hide amongst the straw. She remained there while one group after another was led out for the viewing.

The old woman she'd spoken with that morning had to tap her shoulder several times before Ruth would look at her. "It's over, the priests have gone. Come eat," her stiff fingers signaled.

Ruth shook her head, hiding once more in the straw. But the woman would not leave; she bent her lips close to the youthful ear. "It was bad, yes?" she asked in a raspy whisper. Ruth nodded. "I remember my first time on the block," the crone continued. "All maidens feel this way. It's over now, and school days are over too."

Ruth lifted her head slightly, her eyes wide in realization. "No more priests?" she whispered.

The old woman nodded at her, saying, "For confession and Mass only. A good thought, yes?" She laid a hand on Ruth's shoulder a brief moment. "I am Mara," she said, before shuffling away.

Suddenly Ruth was very hungry. She stood up and joined the other women standing beside tables laden with food. Ruth stared in awe at the size and variety of dishes laid out for them. Never had she seen so much food allotted to eves. Her stomach growled and she obeyed, heaping her plate as high as she dared.

As was the custom during mealtimes, she lifted the top veil out of the way and tucked it under the rim of her scarf.

Like many others, she remained by one of the tables, adding more of the best dishes as she ate. A woman of thirty years and more, by the look of her hands, motioned towards the auction hall, fingers flying with information, "The bidding goes on now. Tomorrow you'll be taken to your intended's house and married there."

Another woman's fingers spoke, "This night is the Best Night, the time between widowhood and marriage. It's worth the auction for." She motioned to the old crone, "Mara, she's had four Best Nights."

The first woman added, "Maybe she'll have more, she's too old: no one will buy her. She'll be back in six months."

"All this food, it's like a miracle," Ruth signed back.

"It's more than food," the woman motioned.

"What else—?" Ruth started to ask, but realized they were completely unsupervised,

not one priest in attendance, and no duties had been assigned, although it was still afternoon. "You mean that for the rest of today and all the night, no work and no priests?"

The two women nodded. Ruth set her plate carefully onto the table and then reached up to remove her veil entirely. There were gasps of shock at her action — and at the sight of her face, for each cheek bore the deep brand of a firecross.

"No priests, no veil," she said simply with words.

There was a flurry of frightened fingers as others around the table began to notice her exposed face.

Mara frowned, motioning to the deep burn holes. "Didn't you learn anything?"

Ruth touched her scared face. "It was worth the penalty, as it is now."

One young woman spoke in a nervous whisper, "I have heard that long, long ago, during the Best Nights, eves always removed their veils and used only words to share."

"And God punished them for their indulgence, you can be certain," an older woman hissed at her. "The Law is clear on such things."

The younger eve bowed her head at the rebuke.

Someone approached Ruth and spoke quietly in her ear, "Still disobedient, I see."

Ruth whirled around, recognizing the voice. "Theresa!" she whispered in excitement, grabbing her hands and squeezing tight, "You're here!"

Theresa's eyes shone with pleasure.

"I thought I'd never see you again," Ruth continued in a low voice that shook with feeling.

"And I, you. Four years it's been."

Recovering from her initial surprise, Ruth took back her hands. "You are widowed."

"Yes," she said, a cloud coming over her face.

"What happened?" Ruth asked with a certain dread.

"In the gaming, his opponent died."

Ruth caught in her breath. Death was not permitted in the games.

In the early part of New Eden's history, two generations after Earth's destruction, young men — youths barely past boyhood — began moving the games outside the arena and into the backstreets, where they took on a more sinister aspect. It was no longer enough to simply best an opponent; one had to literally beat him until he begged for mercy. Many of these young men were flogged unconscious rather than show such weakness. Violence seeped into everyday life. Fights erupted without warning and knifings were common, many ending in death.

The Church, the Chairman, and the Army, in a rare moment of agreement, saw the beginnings of anarchy in this unrestrained behavior. Feeling control slipping through their fingers, they began a concerted effort against all violence outside the gaming arena. But the knifings only increased.

The Church had created gaming as a vent for the anger and frustration that was growing amongst its flock. The tight restrictions and controls instituted by the Church may have been acceptable to the refugees from Earth, when all energy was spent on

survival. But their Eden-born sons had energy in excess, and they chafed at the limitations placed upon them. The gaming ring allowed them freedom to express their pent-up feelings in the violence of the games.

The Church also realized that by honoring physical strength and aggression, and even brutality, dishonor would automatically fall on that which was not. It would help make the chasm between female ways and male ways unbridgeable. Machismo would become the way of men, skill in the arena further proof of Manhood. And if some should die in the games, what of it? It would only assist in keeping the female population in high ratio to males.

But a generation later their creation had a will of its own and would not be easily tamed.

The Church was forced to decree all violent death punishable by Expulsion. Destroying Man was Satan's business. To murder meant a man was possessed beyond all hope of salvation. Already lost to God, the murderer would be driven from the Garden and into the barren wasteland.

The Church invited the mob to help in the cleansing of their Garden through the ancient tradition of stoning, ensuring guilty silence from some, and from others, eagerness to lead the assault.

Women soon came to bear responsibility for this too. The crowd's anger must be focused away from the authorities who ordered the Expulsion, and back onto the cultural scapegoat.

The eve had allowed Satan to enter her body and take possession of her husband while he lay exposed and unprotected inside her. Public punishment was decreed for her as well, although nothing that would result in death. And if there was no wife to blame, the dame carried the responsibility.

"And did he mate before the game?" Ruth asked. Theresa nodded, her face grieved. Ruth took her hand, squeezing it hard. They were still a moment, each in silent prayer for the eve who had succumbed to the evil lurking inside her.

Theresa freed her fingers to sign, "How is it for you these past four years?"

"I've tried hard to obey the Law," she spoke, pointing to her discarded veil. "But I do not always succeed."

"You've not had possession again?"

Until today, she could have answered no, but one look at Eric and she knew it was no longer true. Ruth lowered her eyes, unable to lie to Theresa's face. "No," she said, touching her cheeks. "The Cleansing drove the demon from me forever."

Theresa gave thanks to God; her prayers had been answered.

"And you?" Ruth asked, staring deeply into her eyes. "There is a new pain on you."

"God has punished me for my disobedience." She paused, her hands motionless for several moments before she could continue: "I have birthed three sons."

"They were not pure?" Ruth guessed.

Theresa nodded, her pain shining more vividly. "I pray I will not be bought today."

Before Ruth could answer, old Mara interrupted, "Few eves birth three sons in four years. They will bid high for such a breeder."

"But they were all born corrupt," Ruth whispered near the ancient eve's ear.

"The priests will not disclose that information," The old woman whispered back. She shook her head sadly, signing, "Thank God, my breeding days are over. Maybe married days are over too. Could be God has finally forgiven me and will let me die soon."

"What will happen tomorrow?" Ruth asked.

"Priests come at first light: a house priest if husband's rich, an auction priest if poor. For you," she nodded to the young eves, "rich ones. But rich or poor, it makes no difference, you will suffer."

A shadow came over Ruth; there had been a small hope.

Without the veil, her expression was easy to read.

"Child, that is life. It will end soon enough," the crone's fingers admonished. The girl nodded and lowered her eyes away from the old woman. Mara snapped her fingers under Ruth's nose to get her attention before she continued to sign, "I'll tell you this: the marriage bench is painful, but after a time it does not happen often. And your body gets used to it. It's the inside you," she motioned to Ruth's chest, "that always bleeds a little — or a lot. Pray for God's mercy."

Ruth made no sign she'd heard. The old woman moved closer to whisper in her ear, "I tell you a secret, an ancient one told many years past by an old crone like me." She had Ruth's full attention now. "When you know the time for mating, prepare yourself, rub down there." She pointed to Ruth's groin. "Rub it nice, so it feels good, so it makes you wet. It won't hurt so much." Ruth looked at her, puzzled and disbelieving. But the woman nodded. "Maybe do it when the husband doesn't come, then it feels *very* good." Laughing silently she moved off to join the older women.

Ruth watched her go, confused and frightened once more. Theresa whispered in her ear, "The old ones often say strange things. Do not listen to her."

"Why do you think she lives so long?"

"She must have sinned greatly."

Turning her back on the old woman, Ruth grabbed hold of Theresa's hands. "Let's not waste this day worrying of tomorrow. I want to share with you until they come for us, and I will use only speech to do so."

Two eves who'd been watching Ruth from across the barn now approached with hesitation. "Your crime was great to merit such punishment," the taller one signed, indicating her scarred cheeks.

"It was," Ruth replied shortly.

The two eves exchanged a look before she continued, "But still you are brought to the marriage block."

"Yes," Ruth acknowledged, wondering at her meaning.

"I too was guilty of a great crime," she said, speaking with words. "My punishment should have been Expulsion, yet I am here."

The smaller woman spoke, "I's from the South Region, brought north for the Expulsion inside a wagon. I's put in the Vatican fields, and now to the auction."

It was Ruth and Theresa's turn to exchange a look. How could this be?

"I's too come from the South Region, riding in a covered wagon," whispered a maiden, stepping out of the cluster of eyes still standing near the food table. "The priest brings me here for the Expulsion, but instead I's sent to the marriage block."

"What does it mean?" Ruth asked.

"It means you should fall on your knees and thank God for his mercy," an agitated young woman announced in a loud whisper. "You are questioning the Church — the first sign of degeneration! Now speak no more of this before you spread corruption throughout the room!"

The small group of eyes stared after her as she turned a bent back and shuffled off fearfully.

"She is right," Theresa acknowledged with a sign. "We should not endanger others." The four women nodded in agreement, and the little gathering dispersed. Ruth and Theresa moved off together.

"We must collect hay for our bedding," Theresa's fingers explained. "The later we wait, the skimpier will be the bed." Ruth nodded, noticing several others were already doing so.

Together they gathered enough hay to make a comfortable resting place before they returned to the food table and collected their heavily loaded plates. Easing themselves onto the makeshift bed, they leaned back against the wall to look out across the barn.

"This truly is the Best Night," Ruth sighed, relaxing into the straw. "To sleep all night in a soft bed . . . heaven on earth."

Theresa looked at the scarred, rebellious face of her friend, and raised a hand to touch the discarded veil. "I haven't done that since my first child was born."

"It's been some time for me as well," Ruth admitted. She noticed frantic signing taking place amongst the eyes, and looked about for the cause. Five young women had dared to expose their faces, and even three of the older eyes, Mara among them. Ruth smiled. "Things look different this way. I'd forgotten."

Theresa spoke with sudden determination: "I too will use only speech until morning."

Ruth turned towards Theresa, and her smile deepened.

It was a night without sleep, not a wasted moment of freedom. But too soon dawn came creeping and relaxed attitudes disappeared. Veils were replaced and solemnity settled in. The eyes sat motionless, waiting for whatever fate this day would bring them. Priests came throughout the morning to collect the newly purchased eyes. And, as predicted, Ruth and Theresa were taken by a house priest, each to a home of great wealth.

Eric was still moving in a daze.

The moment he saw that number hanging from Ruth's neck, he'd given no thought to anything but her, even daring to approach the priest, to see if she'd react, to see if she remembered — a reckless act, for had the priest checked her file, Eric's name was

certain to be found there and that would have led to serious trouble. But it was worth the risk for that small moment of connection, to perceive the person behind the veil before sanity returned to move him deep into the crowd. But still he kept her clearly in sight.

This was not Eric's first auction. Like others who lacked the bride price, he came for the thrill of the forbidden and the dangerous. Unlike others, however, he understood that the danger came not from the eves but from his own needs and desires.

He'd seen number 775 hanging from an eve's neck at his first auction, but he knew instantly she wasn't Ruth, even through the heavy veils. Yet seeing that familiar number made him realize that one day it *would* be Ruth on that platform — and he would know it when she was.

And so he had.

Eric had witnessed the bride-viewing before without any compunction. But to see Ruth being treated so callously had suddenly sickened him to the whole process. He had to leave.

Yet when the bidding started later that day he was back to witness the sale of number 775.

Eric noted the buyer, and when the man left the auction, he followed after, trailing him to his home. Even after the man passed through the massive gates that led into the fenced courtyard, Eric remained standing outside the property.

To keep their eves contained, all households in New Eden had enclosed courtyards, but few were so tall or made with such perfect craftsmanship; it was an important family.

She be another man's wife for the rest of his life, he thought in sudden despair. And there ain't nothin' I can do.

Still, he waited through the night, and when the house priest emerged in the early dusk of morning, Eric followed him through the deserted streets to the auction hall. The priest disappeared inside, and Eric hurriedly backtracked, hiding within the shadows of an alleyway.

A little later, the priest returned with Ruth shuffling six paces behind, covered head to toe in a black, tent-like sheath worn by adult eves on the rare occasions they appeared in public. Circular metal bands at the top, middle and bottom of the tent held the rigid material away from any accidental contact with her body.

As the priest approached his hiding place, Eric sunk deeper into the gloom. But once the cleric passed, he quickly returned to the entrance, crouching low so he could claim the attention of her downcast eyes through the narrow gap in the sheath.

There she was.

He whispered her name so very softly, but still she heard. Ruth eyes lifted; catching sight of Eric's face they widened in surprise and pleasure. Her step faltered and she glanced towards the priest, confusion darkening her gaze before her feet continued their quick, shuffling walk. The priest hadn't noticed.

Eric followed after, dogging their trail all the way to her husband's property. When the gates swallowed her up, he finally turned his steps towards home, confused by his

actions and by the pain in his chest.

Ruth was led to the eve-cloister and put inside a small room that contained only a wide wooden bench bolted to the floor. Standing alone, Ruth could hear the low droning of the priest from the room next door, but it meant nothing to her. She was still recovering from the shock of seeing Eric on the street. For one brief moment she'd thought he was to be her husband, and all the fear had fled from her, only to come rushing back more vividly than ever, and with it the pain of disappointment — and some other pain she couldn't identify.

The voice next door stopped abruptly, and a moment later the priest entered to stand before her. "Kneel," he commanded. She did so, lowering her hands and face to the floor in the traditional pose of subservience, while the priest intoned:

"You will honor and obey your husband.
You will not entice him into sin or corruption,
You will forsake all evil thoughts and lures of the Devil.
You will bear him many pure sons,
Free of corruption in spirit and flesh.
Until death parts you from him,
You are now pronounced the wife and property of,
John Andrew Kininski."

There was a short, profound pause. "Rise," he ordered. And once she had done so he stated in a cold voice, "In this household you will be known as Number-Five, that is your room number. Is that clear?" Ruth nodded obediently. "Remove your trousers. When your master arrives, kneel upon the mating bench with your face to the wall." Abruptly, he left the room.

Ruth remained frozen to the spot. She'd never been so afraid. Then the door opened, and she caught only a brief glance of booted feet before removing her trousers and positioning herself upon the bench, her body shaking with terror.

The man approached quickly, pushing her forward until her head rested on the planks and her backside was poised towards him. Hard fingers grabbed her thighs as the other hand pushed up her long skirt. Something was shoved between her legs. She tensed. The next moment a stabbing pain shot through her. She reared upwards, crying out in agony before a strong hand forced her roughly back to the bench. She thought she was being beaten to death from the inside. It took every bit of training not to cry out for mercy.

He gave a final hard thrust before shuddering spastically and sagging over her. A moment later he had moved away from the bench. She heard him rearrange his clothing and leave the room.

Ruth curled into a ball, clutching her stomach, her body cramping painfully. She felt a deep sickness way down inside. There was blood smeared on her legs, and Ruth thought she was dying. She welcomed the thought.

CHAPTER NINE

IT WAS a large household, this new home of hers, and Ruth and the other eleven brood wives were responsible for its smooth functioning. This was what Ruth was trained for, and she fit easily into the routine.

After the harsh supervision of school priests, these domestic-overseers seemed mild in comparison. It was easy to stay out of trouble, as long as the work was done and one kept her indiscretions confined to the eve-cloister.

The house priest had little contact with the eves, appearing only for Saturday Mass and confession, Sunday Mass being for males.

Life here might have been bearable, except for that fifteen minutes every day when she was mated by her husband, the unknown assailant, for Ruth saw nothing beyond his booted foot. Not even a brief glance during the cleaning of the household, as all was regulated to ensure that no eve ever crossed paths with her husband, nor any male that was not a cleric or a eunuch.

As she'd done during her sessions with the discipline priests, Ruth managed to find a haven in her mind, a small corner to hide in while her body endured the agony of the Mating Rite. And just as the old crone had predicted, there grew a terrible aching deep within that consumed her. Nothing the priests had done could equal this daily punishment.

In her classification as a new bride, her husband was expected to mate her every day for three months. Only her bleeding time brought temporary release, as would a pregnancy. Sexual relations were not permitted during gestation: mating was for procreation only. Yet, every day, Ruth prayed she would not conceive. It was her only hope of a permanent end to this torture.

Brood wives who did not conceive within a two-year period were declared barren and removed from the breeding inventory and the household. Reclassified as worker wives, they were sent to labor in the fields or industries of their husband. But this practice was only for the wealthy and the middle class. In families too poor to replace a barren wife, she would remain to continue her vital role inside the household: to grow and cook the family's food, sew and clean their clothes, and keep the home free of dirt and vermin. Inside a royal household, however, where a wife had no other function but to produce an heir, she was given only a single year to conceive before the marriage was annulled and a new wife presented in her stead.

Three months after her marriage to John Kininski, Ruth was put on the Standard Mating Roster, taking up her position as wife number-five in the mating rotation; a replacement for the former number-five wife, whose sudden death had brought about Ruth's arrival into the household.

Mating would now be in numerical order, and with a dozen wives married to a middle-aged husband, Ruth would not be mated more than once a week — usually less. Yet still she prayed to be released. For whether it was once a day or once a year,

she could not bear the pain the mating act brought to her entire being.

And there was another compelling reason for craving release.

In all but the poorest homes, male children were taken from their dame at the moment of birth. She was not permitted to see him or touch him. The only connection was the milk she expressed for his feedings every day and night for six months. When it ended, she was once more available for the mating bench. If no milk was required, she knew the child had been declared corrupt and sent back to Satan.

She would have to live with the agonizing knowledge that it was she who wavered and allowed evil to enter her womb, that she alone was responsible for the corruption of her child. And male infants were found corrupt with dependable regularity, especially within the more affluent families.

Female infants were rarely sent back to Satan, as all females were born corrupt. Only newborns who displayed their corruption outwardly were pronounced unfit to reside in Eden, those who were physically deformed or sickly. But if whole and healthy, the eve babes were left in the care of their dame until school age — then they were taken, never to be seen again.

Ruth remembered the separation from her own mother — short and shockingly painful — and the unforgettable look in her mother's eyes as the priest took her away with barely a moment's warning. Suddenly he was there, and her mother was gone.

Now Ruth prayed every day for forgiveness and tried determinedly to follow the teachings of the Church in a way she'd never done before. Like Theresa, she no longer removed her veil or practiced unauthorized speech. She would give up anything to gain release from the mating bench.

And at last it happened. Her prayers were answered.

Though it would mean hard labor in her husband's fields, working dawn to dusk in heat or cold or pouring rain, under the constant threat of the foreman's lash, to Ruth this was a liberation: the Mating Rite was over.

CHAPTER TEN

ONCE MORE declared fit for the Mating Rite, Theresa waited for her husband. She did not feel fit.

Unconsciously, a hand strayed to her abdomen, where so short a time ago it had bulged heavily with child. Even now her stomach remained distended, not quite returned to its natural shape.

Realizing where her hand had strayed, Theresa removed it. I won't go there again, she thought bitterly.

There was a hard edge to her now, acquired since her arrival to this household.

As was customary with new brides, her husband had mated her every day, cold and silent, without regard or tenderness. But when months passed with still no conception, her husband broke silence, ordering her to exchange places with the other wives at their time for mating.

It had not been difficult. The two harem overseers were heavily addicted to the demon-drug, or neuter madness, as it was nicknamed, because it often caused sterility and eventually drove the user insane.

Covered as they were in bulky clothes and a heavy veil, it was a simple matter for Theresa to exchange rooms with another and wait to be brought out to the mating chamber by a distracted overseer.

To her great grief, Theresa finally did conceive, and for all the months she awaited the birth, she prayed the child would be born human. But it was not to be. The baby was pronounced corrupt, a Spawn of Satan.

She did not know how to bear this fresh pain. Silently she raged at herself, at the priests — at God.

Within six weeks she was back on the mating roster, and within another five, she was pregnant again. But this time she held out no hope. As her belly grew larger, her heart grew colder, and when the child was declared impure, her heart solidified completely. Now only her rage remained.

Theresa heard her husband's heavy tread coming down the corridor. Quickly, she peeled off her trousers and climbed onto the mating bench, assuming the position as Patrick Marchelie reached the mating room door.

She knew in an instant that things had altered since their last coupling.

The door was kicked open with tremendous force, smashing against the wall, and making her rigid with fright. It was closed with the same violence, and a moment later she was grabbed by the neck and wrenched off the bench, her face slammed onto the floor.

"You drop another demon between those legs," he hissed fiercely, snapping her head savagely from side to side, "and I'll cut you in such tiny pieces, even Satan won't recognize you."

He flung her against the wall, and ordered her back to the bench. She pushed herself up, legs weak with terror, and scrambled onto the mating bench. She was never so terrified in her life.

Again she was grabbed, cruel fingers digging into the tender flesh of her thighs as her legs were wrenched apart with brutal force. Then he mated her.

It was the most savage beating she'd ever experienced.

Patrick Marchelie was in a state of near panic. Not one son had been declared human in almost four years. He could feel the Great Prize slipping from his grasp, and he was powerless to stop it.

More powerless than he knew.

For he was trapped in an elaborate and long-awaited plan to bring down the entire House of Marchelie, an act of revenge conceived from a feud so ancient it was no longer part of his family's history.

During those first two decades on New Eden when the refugees from Earth struggled for survival and then for positioning, Toni Marchelie went into business with a man named Pascal Lambert. At a time when Lambert was short on cash from a second and unwise venture, Marchelie began pressuring his partner to expand their holdings. He then offered Lambert a loan at zero interest, assuring him that he needn't make payments until his second business was stabilized. The written contract was just a formality. Lambert took him at his word. But when the loan came due, Marchelie went directly to one of the Magistrates — commoners, happy to receive large cash donations — and in less than an hour, Marchelie became sole owner of the business.

A short time later, Lambert's second enterprise folded completely.

To feed his many wives and children, Lambert was forced to take on whatever jobs he could find: usually at the tannery or slaughterhouse during the day, and at night, in the beer houses or other less savory establishments.

Lambert tried hard to put the past behind him and focus on a brighter future for his sons. But by the time his sons were grown, any opportunity to become something greater than their father was forever closed to them — as it was to all New Eden's young men. It was this that turned the hurt and anger he felt at Marchelie's betrayal into bitterness and vengeance.

And so began a legacy of hatred, passed down from one generation to the next, for over nineteen hundred years, until, at last, one descendant stood in position to extract payment.

It was Cardinal Lambert who secretly ordered the birthing priests to declare every Marchelie son human, until Patrick became certain he would win the Father Bull title. Then, gradually and inexorably, the pure births began to fade away, leaving him just four births short of the prize.

Lambert had also taken measures to ensure that Marchelie was given every loan he applied for, at a high rate of interest, with no pressure to make payments.

The cost of a proven brood wife had become exorbitant as the eve mortality rate increased, yet Marchelie kept bidding on the best breeders, even using money from the family business to do so, desperate for those last four sons. And, as expected, he

eventually took out several large loans.

With so few births standing between him and the title, Marchelie knew he was certain to win it. He *must* win it.

At the next bride auction, Patrick spent heavily, increasing his already burgeoning debt.

He began neglecting the family business, spending his days trying to utilize the maximum number of mating rites permitted in a twenty-four-hour period — even using illegal substances in the attempt. And when he could no longer perform properly, he refused to stop trying. Taking his frustrations out on his wives, beating them unconscious, and sometimes this would excite him to an erection. But he was over fifty and feeling his age. He could not continue this way. He began forcing his eldest son to take his place at the late night matings.

At first the younger man had refused, appalled his father could even suggest such iniquity. But after several beatings with a horsewhip, and a reminder that his inheritance would be nothing without that title, Peter finally complied.

During the dark hours after midnight, disguised in a long cloak and hood, he would ring the bell outside the door to the eve-cloister belonging to his father. The drug-fogged overseer would notice nothing amiss as he escorted Peter to the anteroom beside the mating chamber to wait while he retrieved a wife.

But once she was delivered to the chamber, Peter could not bring himself to do such a disgusting act. It went against all that the Church had raised him to believe. Instead, he waited quietly, letting the time pass until the mating should have been completed.

The eve remained positioned on the bench, suspended in terror while she waited for whatever this new torture would be, and when it didn't come, she wondered

Did they even know it wasn't my father, with their faces to the wall and not a word spoken? Peter would speculate. Not that it would put him in any danger. Eves would never speak out against a man, not unless directly questioned. Still, he was curious.

The eves, of course, did realize it was not their husband during these late night non-matings, for he never missed an opportunity to inflict some form of abuse on them.

With four sons still between him and victory, Patrick continued to drive himself too hard, forcing his body into feats of virility a younger man would find a challenge. He could feel his dream crumbling, and with it his entire family's future.

Without that title, he could never hope to repay all the monies he'd borrowed. Already he'd been given several extensions. Soon they'd demand payment in full, and if he couldn't deliver, the business would be forfeited to the loan companies. He and his large family would be sentenced to debtors' prison, the younger sons made wards of the Church, no better than bastards.

The stress was taking its toll. He couldn't eat or sleep, and the slightest provocation would send him into an uncontrollable rage, lashing out at the nearest person to hand.

The whole household seemed to be holding its breath, waiting for something to give. And, at last, it did.

Theresa was married to Patrick Marchelie for almost three years when he suddenly collapsed and died during his fourth mating of the day. The unfortunate female was

held responsible for his death and sentenced to a public whipping.

Marchelie's entire extended family was arrested shortly afterwards: his forty-one adult sons, along with his brothers, uncles, cousins, second cousins, and all sons who'd reached their fifteenth year. Each would be sentenced to life in debtor's prison, their marriages annulled. His twenty-two younger sons, grandsons, and all other underage Marchelies, were made wards of the Church, their fates sealed.

Patrick's widows, and the now former-Marchelie wives, reverted back to Church property. There, Theresa waited in dread for her new marriage contract.

But the time for the bride auction came and went. The whole world was in mourning.

The Chairman was dead.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ERIC CROUCHED before the fire, a cup of strong tea and a piece of thick bread smeared with bacon fat his morning meal. It was a solitary one: his dame dead years ago, his father these seven months. He was left to live alone in the small, company house.

Eric heard the sound of hooves approaching, but he remained by the fire, listening as the rider dismounted and entered the miniscule courtyard. A moment later, an impatient knocking rattled his door. There was a long pause before a piece of paper was slipped beneath it. The visitor retreated, and soon the horse cantered noisily into the distance.

Eric picked up the note, throwing it into the fire. "Damn yuh, Robert. Lets me be."

He'd been avoiding Robert since his return to his birthplace deep in the forest. But Robert had staunchly refused to forsake his old friend.

I don't needs his pity or his charity, Eric thought with spite. Both were dirty words in New Eden. He was coming to hate the sight of Robert, whose rapid rise through the ranks made Eric sick with jealousy.

Captain of the Chairman's Personal Guard! Just brown nose uh prince an' things gets easy.

He almost wished he'd told the Vatican priests all about Robert when they first came snooping round the school.

Won't have changed nothin', he thought bitterly. He gots a horseshoe up his ass. Well, he sure be untouchable now with the old Chairman dead and William sittin' on the throne, Robert snug at his side. And me stuck in these stinkin' mine pits forever. No! Not forever — I won't lets it happen!

Breakfast soured in his stomach as he remembered the ruination of his plans. Those events which promoted Robert's rise to power were the very ones that had stopped his own ambitions cold, and that knowledge twisted his insides into an ugly knot of hate.

All the years of plannin' and trainin' for nothin'! he thought with bile.

After his disgraceful discharge from the cadet corps, Eric had spent two years drowning in self-pity before rousing his determination to find another way out of the mines. Only one way lay open to him now: winning a title at the Triennial Championship Games and the cash prize and small land lease that went with it.

But which event? Strength, speed, or weapons skill?

By the age of thirteen, he knew his only chance lay in his great strength. I'll win the Samson Trophy, Eric decided, and immediately began training towards that end.

After passing into manhood, he returned to Mining Camp-6 and his childhood home. He quickly realized this community contained none of the equipment needed for a serious trainer. But he was not deterred. Instead, he developed new ways to hone his skills, spending most evenings — after a hard day in the mines — lifting great sacks of rocks over his head, ripping young trees from the ground, and running hard up the mountainside through the dense forest undergrowth.

Some nights, he would show up at the camp's gaming arena to challenge the men

there to a wrestling match, three at a time. He always lost, but it took a little longer each time to defeat him.

Sunday afternoons found Eric in the city at one of the large public arenas, where he could match his skill against the strength of others in his field and use the official weights for the Pull & Lift category.

At nineteen, he was still too young for the Senior Arena, but he'd gained a strong reputation at the Intermediate level. And during the preliminary trials for the Championship Games, he'd moved easily into first place. He knew the competition would be much tougher at the Games themselves, when competitors from South and West Regions arrived, but he was still confident in his ability to win the Intermediate Title. And that laurel would gain him automatic entry into the Senior Arena at the next Championship Games in three years' time. And then he would win the Samson Trophy and the lease.

But now that wasn't going to happen.

Out of respect for his father's passing, the newly crowned Chairman had ordered the Championship Games canceled.

The cancellation brought disappointment to all in New Eden. It was an event the entire male citizenry looked forward to with great anticipation. For two weeks the Number One District of North Region would bulge and rock with the revelry and excitement of visitors from all over New Eden, some travelling hundreds or even thousands of miles to participate, or to watch and bet on the Games. It could take years to save the cost of the journey and months to travel on foot over challenging mountain terrain.

The cancellation of the Games had disrupted the plans of many, but nowhere was it felt with such misery as it was within Eric Wong.

When the Games resumed in three years' time, he'd be too old for the Intermediate Arena. And without that intermediate title, his lack of years would put him at the bottom of the standings in the Senior Division. He'd have to fight his way through the long ranks of well-seasoned competitors just to gain entry into the qualifying trials. He was not so very confident of doing that.

Realistically, he knew it would take him years to earn a top placement in the standings, where he need only beat a dozen men or so. Too many years trapped in the mines without family — or wife.

Wife

Eric let out a long sigh and tossed the last of his tea into the fire. Grabbing his lunch, he headed for work. It wasn't far, less than a quarter mile from the camptown. He walked it alone.

Upon his return to the mining camp, Eric made a critical mistake. Encountering his old nemesis, Benji, now a man of 23, it suddenly galled Eric to remember that he'd been under Robert's protection the last time they'd met, unable to defend himself against the big bully.

A small boy no longer, but a great, strapping youth with a bitter edge to him, Eric laid Benji out flat without a pause then leaned over him threateningly: "Yuh ever jerks

me around, I'll kills yuh."

Benj could see he meant it and that he'd the strength and the crazies to do it. He got to his feet and left without a word.

Eric had no way of knowing that Benj had become a citizen of high standing in this tiny community, and that he now used his bullying aggression to stop arguments that might threaten production, or to keep men from seriously wounding or even killing each other in drunken brawls — a highly dangerous thing to do. During cave-ins at the mines, it was Benj who took charge: shouting orders and getting everyone mobilized into action, but he'd be the first one in to rescue the trapped men. And when it was Benj caught underground, he'd refused to crawl to safety until he'd dug out every man in his crew. Once he finally reached the surface, his hands were shredded and bloodied from clawing through the rocks in search of his crewmen.

He'd earned the respect of the whole community.

To be ostracized by Benj was to be ostracized by all. He declared Eric crazy, not to be trusted, and the camp listened. Benj's opinion was strengthened by Eric's obsession with training and the forms that it took. The sight of Eric ripping small trees out of the ground, or disappearing for runs into the thick underbrush with a sack of rocks on his back, was cause for head shaking and knowing looks.

But they could not avoid all contact with Eric in this small community, and they were too afraid of his crazy strength to deny him access to the arena or the pub.

Only Eric's father and the camp priest understood his driving purpose.

Father Jim watched the shunning and did not intervene, though one word could have put an end to it. But the Church saw misery and pain as the lot of every man; the more he had to bear, the better for his soul.

Eric passed through the entrance to mineshaft No. 4 and stood on the lift with the rest of the crew. They were lowered jerkily into the darkness by pulley ropes attached to oxen on the surface.

When they reached the bottom of the deep shaft, they could see the eve laborers waiting as usual with their overseer-foreman. His long hair, pulled back in a tight bun, was dyed a bold yellow that proclaimed his status as a foreman eunuch and distinguished him from a domestic eunuch.

The foreman informed the crew boss that the eve gang was a new one: a common occurrence. Eves did not survive if they worked the mines too long. They were rotated often. But today their overseer-foreman had also been replaced, a less common situation. Where the other had gone, no one knew, and it was wise not to ask, though rumor had it that he was heavily into the demon drug, as so many eunuchs were, despite the high price they paid. The drug drove them all mad eventually, some much sooner than others.

Whatever the reason, his dismissal meant Eric's morning would be spent training the new eves and their foreman. This task was usually passed around a work crew, but here it had become Eric's permanent assignment, part of the camp's punishment. He was also assigned the unlucky task of rescuing eves trapped inside the cave-ins, because touching eves outside the mating chamber was extremely dangerous.

But Eric didn't care. It made him laugh to think how frightened they were of eves, and of him. He knew they thought him crazy. What did he care? He despised them all. Filthy miners with no hope of being anything else. He wasn't like them. He *wouldn't* be like them.

The rest of the crew hammered at the rock face while Eric instructed the foreman in his duties and showed the eves how to load the coal onto carts and pull them into the lift to be taken to the surface.

At the beginning of New Eden's history, it was the eves that dug out the coal and carried it to the surface on their backs. And then, later, after the lifts were installed to increase production, they continued to mine the ore, while women remained plentiful and cheap and didn't die so easily.

Eric grabbed a shovel from one of the eves to give instructions on how to use it correctly. When he handed it back, she snatched it from his hands and bent quickly to work, but not quick enough. He recognized her, or thought he did.

Eric started work on the rock face, disturbed and disbelieving. Could it really be her? And what if it was? Nothing had changed: she was still married to another.

He shook his head, as if to drive out the tempting thoughts that began rising up.

He'd spent the last three years trying to forget her — even believed that he had. But no, Ruth's image flooded his mind at the first hint of her presence.

Forget it, he cautioned himself. The gang will change in a few months, and that'll be the end of it.

But he could not restrain his curiosity. He pointed a finger at the eve and growled, "Gets some water." She brought the bucket and ladle, setting it down close to his feet. Eric crouched as he drank, looking up into her veiled face. Abruptly, he tossed the ladle back into the water bucket and motioned her away, attacking the rock face with renewed energy.

It be her!

Crazy thoughts flew into his head. He tried to banish them, but they were just too appealing. For two weeks he fought against himself, and then he began to plan.

During his evening run through the forest, he diverged from his usual route, creeping close to the eve barracks situated on the other side of the mines, well away from the camptown. No one but the overseer-foremen and the domestic-overseers came near here. It was forbidden and dangerous.

Hidden amongst the bushes, he studied the layout of the area.

He'd expected the foremen to be bunked nearby; they were neuters after all, but their barracks were a safe distance from Eric's hiding place and well hidden by the surrounding trees.

It was clear his objective wasn't going to be difficult: security was lax out here away from the city. The courtyard gates stood wide open, although several eves were outside washing clothes while two others stirred a great pot over an open fire. From the smell, Eric guessed they were making soap. He saw only one domestic overseer with his distinctive dyed red hair, coming and going from the building. Eric could hear him clearly fussing and complaining at the eves. He said enough for Eric to glean that

he was stationed there alone.

He watched their routine as they prepared for the night. The doors and shutters closed, and the gate-bolt pushed firmly into place, locking the compound securely.

The place was all in darkness, but still he lingered, not yet decided on a plan.

Finally giving up, he readied himself to leave when the squeak of a door hinge reached his ear.

Straining, he peered through the night and could just make out the shape of the overseer slipping through a small side gate. Eric watched the man steal onto the path and disappear into the trees.

He was tempted to follow, but realized it didn't matter where he went, only what time he returned.

Eric waited through the night, dozing off and then jerking awake at the slightest sound, but the overseer did not return until close to dawn. Once he was back inside the gate, Eric turned his footsteps homeward, arriving at the camptown as if he'd been out for an early run before breakfast — crazy people did that.

For seven nights he hid within the bushes, watching the overseer slink away and then waiting the long hours for his return, certain now that this was his usual habit. While he plotted, Eric didn't go near Ruth or even look in her direction.

On the tenth day, he once again ordered her to bring some water. As he ladled up the liquid, he whispered low, "Waits outside t'night, I be there."

She picked up the bucket with hands that shook.

Now that Eric considered himself committed, the old excitement took hold. His appetite was wetted for adventure, and it had been too long a drought. Impatiently, he waited for night to settle the camptown before slipping silently from his house and into the woods.

At the eve barracks, all was still. Then he heard the familiar squeak of the gate and the shadow of the overseer dissolved into the blackness of the forest.

Quiet returned. Time passed.

With sudden certainty, he knew she wasn't coming.

He hesitated, almost ready to let it go, but he couldn't.

Eric crept through the gate and into the sleeping quarters. "Ruth," he called softly. A fully clothed figure sat up in bed but made no move towards him. Anxious to be gone, he strode over and scooped her up, leaving the other eyes staring after them in shock. He wasn't concerned; they wouldn't speak against him unless asked directly.

Once outside the gates, he set her down, commanding, "Come." But she remained immobile. He had to pull her unwillingly onward through the darkened trail. He released his hold on her hand at the outskirts of the camptown while he made a careful examination of the buildings and streets. All was deserted.

When he returned for her, Ruth was gone. Swearing softly, he set off in pursuit, but she hadn't put much distance between them. Without a word he took her arm, leading her back toward the camp. Within minutes they were safely through the back courtyard and into his house.

Eric bolted the door, making certain the shutters were securely closed before stoking

the hearth fire. Flames lit the room softly. Adrenaline pounded his heart, making him pant with excitement.

I done it! he crowed inwardly.

He looked at Ruth standing frozen where he'd left her. "I feels like uh kid again."

But she made no sign he'd spoken.

Her reaction disappointed him. He had expected some resistance, but figured that once they were together she'd be glad of it, like when they were kids.

But we're kids no more, came the unbidden thought.

"Takes duh seat," he offered, pointing to a chair. "It be warm by duh fire."

Still she did not respond.

This was not how he imagined their reunion. At a loss, he ordered her, "Makes some tea," and was relieved when she did so.

Eric sat before the fire, watching the preparations. It was good to have company again, especially her. She offered the tea, eyes to the floor, her behavior completely circumspect.

"Gets some bread."

She went off to hunt for it inside the tiny pantry, returning with a chunk of dark seed bread. He took it, looking at her with irritation. "Yuh gots yurr face cover on. Yuh never does before, off it comes, first thin'."

But once again she was as still as a statue.

"Okays then, I be tellin' yuh tuh takes it off. Do it now," he snarled, his disappointment turning to anger.

No response.

"Damn it Ruth, do *some*thin'," he complained in frustration, reaching out to tug sharply at the veil, the action revealing part of her face. "Freakin' Gawd," Eric swore, jumping to his feet, shocked by the deep, scarring cross on her cheek. He had a sudden, sickening thought: "That be yurr pun'shment furr that other time?"

She nodded, eyes still properly downcast.

Hesitantly he pulled the veil away so he could see the rest of her face. "Gawd damn," he swore again, his guts turning over. "What else they does tuh yuh?" And when she only shook her head, he was gripped with a terrible fear. "Gawd almighty, they cuts out yurr tongue!"

Vigorously she shook her head, but he needed to see, sighing in relief at the small tip she exposed to him. Eric studied her mutilated flesh. He had caused this, and now he'd put her in danger again.

Remorse assailed him as he reached out to gently touch the scar tissue. "I never knows they be doin' such uh thin'."

Startled by his words and soft touch, her eyes flew up to his face before she could stop herself. What she saw in that brief glance shook her deeply. His face was full of pain — pain for her.

Ruth had prepared herself for tonight, determined to keep to the Law as much as it was in her power to do so. She was resolute that the demon inside her would not possess her will — not this time.

After a year of laboring in her husband's fields, Ruth was chosen for a rotation in the mines. And from that first day, she'd been wrestling for control of herself: since the moment she saw Eric standing on the lift and something in her chest had leapt with pleasure. But immediately she'd dropped her eyes to the ground so none could see the emotions shining there, her good feelings turning to fear.

It was going to happen again: she would tempt him into sin, and they would both be punished — this time far more severely.

She prayed he wouldn't recognize her, though she understood that some knowing was beyond sight. And as the weeks passed, inner chaos consumed her. At times she was certain he didn't recognize her, and the momentary relief she felt was quickly overridden by grief and disappointment. How could he not know me? And this thought would shock her back to sanity, and her prayers would begin again.

She lived in dread of the moment he succumbed to temptation, and when it finally came, her hands shook — not from fear, but with excitement. She had to fight hard against the forces within her to regain her strength of will. She refused to be responsible for Eric's damnation or her own.

Now all the resolutions were eroding away.

Her slight head movement had caused his fingers to graze the unblemished skin on her face. It was the softest thing in the world. His hand strayed across her cheek, reveling in the velvety texture.

Ruth held her breath as the tentative fingers explored her face. She'd never been touched with such tenderness, and it sent warm shivers through her.

They both went very still, intensely aware of each other. Her scent curled its way into Eric's nostrils. She breathed his musky odor. Her pulse quickened.

A burning curiosity seized Eric, pushing all other considerations aside.

Ruth lay motionless as Eric slept, his arm tossed casually over her. How is it possible to mate with such pleasure? she wondered in awe.

Ruth remembered the mating with her husband with deep revulsion. She shivered and pressed closer to the young man beside her. Eric stirred, tightening his arm about her before drifting back to sleep. The feel of his hard muscles, so gentle against her skin, brought a smile of glee, and she wished he would explore her body once more with those wonderfully inquisitive hands.

Kneeling before the fire, he'd slowly removed her clothing, running his fingers tenderly over her skin. When he touched the old welts on her back, he swore softly. "My doin'?" he asked.

"Some," she said, and when he'd hesitated, she was afraid he was going to stop, but a moment later he continued his explorations.

Naked, she felt no shame before him, only an aching need. He removed his own clothing, and took her hands, placing them on his chest. She caressed the hard muscle covering his torso. Slowly, he drew her hands down to his groin. Ruth caught her breath as she felt the stiff organ. Was it this that had caused her such pain?

He guided her hands, stroking the organ gently. She was amazed at its silky surface. When he eased her onto the bed to cover her body with his own, she welcomed it. And when he entered her, she felt a deep sense of relief.

When they were done and lay together recovering, tears suddenly brimmed in her eyes. A lifetime of harsh training had not prepared her for sudden tenderness and passion. A single drop broke free and rolled down her cheek.

"Yurr cryin'," Eric said in awe. He could not remember ever seeing the tears of another. Fascinated, he reached out to touch it with the tip of his finger.

A wave of sadness abruptly dried the wetness from her eyes. "I have led you into sin again," she said, turning her face from his.

"I thinks I done duh leadin'," his tone was light. He put the tear up to his tongue, tasting it gingerly.

But she continued, "I've tempted you, as the catechism warns. You could be damned forever."

"I don't believes it," he stated simply, and bent forward to lick the salt off her cheek.

The sensation was delicious, exciting her beyond anything she'd yet experienced. And his face, so close to her own, brought uncontrollable urges. She stroked his cheek and the short stubble of hair growing on his head. Moving her face against his, she rubbed them lightly together, and this had led to further discoveries and deeper sins.

They had committed many sins this night. Not merely adultery, but fornication: mating face to face, she touching *him*, wrapping her arms and legs around him while they mated — not once, but three times.

They had touched tongues together and explored each other with their mouths. He'd covered her entire body, licking and sucking and tasting. She was sweeter than honey, he'd said.

And their greatest sin of all: the words they'd spoken while his penis moved inside her.

"Yurr my wife now," he whispered. And the thrill this gave her charged her almost unbearably. "Calls me 'usband," he urged. But she could not.

He withdrew his penis, and when she tried to pull him back, he resisted, "Say 'usband," he repeated huskily, using his tongue to make a hot trail between her breasts and up to her lips. Staring deeply into her eyes, he asked again, "Say 'usband."

"Husband," she whispered, almost inaudible. But when he entered her again, she chanted the word over and over, her excitement growing into an explosive spasm of exquisite pleasure.

When they were both finally spent, he promised never to bring her out again, "I won't be causin' yuh no more sufferings." He would not listen to her reminders of Law, that she was responsible for their crimes. "I never be hurtin' yuh agains," he repeated. "It's my oath — and don't say oaths ain't made tuh eves, cuzz I be makin' it."

She'd said nothing more because he could not know that staying away would be the cruelest pain of all. Why did everything pleasurable have to be evil?

The thought reminded her that she must soon return — dawn was not far off. She did not want to leave. It was heaven lying here next to Eric, his body warming hers.

She closed her eyes to enjoy one last breath of sensual comfort.
She slept.

Eric woke to the sound of his front door crashing open. Two priests and several Vatican guards stormed inside the sleeping room, surrounding the bed.

“No!” he shouted, trying to shield Ruth from the blows of the priest’s short whip. A club smashed down upon his back, knocking him to the floor. He lashed out with his foot, connecting hard. A guard staggered back, but six more were instantly on him, clubbing the fight out of him. Dazed, he watched two guards drag Ruth’s naked body from the room while a priest chanted over her.

As he recovered his senses, he realized the danger he was in. This was no child’s indiscretion. He’d committed adultery and fornication — and he’d fought men to protect an eve. The seriousness of his position overwhelmed him.

He threw himself at the feet of the priest, begging, “Fawder, forgives me, furr I have sinned!”

“Yes, my son, you let the child of Satan tempt you.”

“Yes, Fawder, helps me, Fawder!”

The priest laid a hand upon the young man’s head, “All may find forgiveness through the Church, my son.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

RUTH WAS put on public display before the Vatican gates. For two days she was hung by the wrists on a raised platform for passersby to pelt her with garbage, mud and spit. On the third day she was to be flogged, branded on the forehead, and then have her tongue cut out. The flogging was to be administered by her victim, so that he might demonstrate his release from the spell she'd cast upon him.

During a public flogging, eves were presented with an exposed back. It was a tantalizing event and always drew a large crowd. Today was no exception.

A path had to be cleared through the tightly packed bodies to make space for the Cardinal of Discipline and his entourage, draped lavishly in ceremonial splendor, astride magnificent steeds of regal bearing.

The prisoner followed behind, surrounded by Vatican guards in black uniforms trimmed in cardinal red. The crowd hurled insults at Eric as the parade passed through the crowd to arrive theatrically upon the platform. The taunts continued as he was led to center stage and ordered to kneel and remove his shirt.

A discipline priest stepped forward, lash in hand.

Eric remained stoic throughout the punishment, the pain of the whip small in comparison to his humiliation, the crowd hooting and cheering with every stroke. After twenty lashes he was told to rise and put on his shirt, which clung to the pulpy, bloody mess of his back. He was led stumbling to the side of the platform, his powerful New Eden body allowing him to regain his footing, unlike his Earth ancestors, who would have been incapacitated by such a brutal whipping.

At the cardinal's signal, a priest approached Ruth. He was holding a sharp knife, and a sudden hush came over the throng.

Ruth's bladder had eventually given out, and the priest's nose twitched in disgust at the smell of dried urine. Mud and garbage clung thickly to her, and he had to be careful not to get the mess on himself. Taking hold of one corner of the baggy overvest, he cut it off her body with two efficient strokes of the knife, revealing the still clean tunic underneath. Then he slashed through the tunic's coarse material.

A collective sigh rippled the air.

He stuck the knife in the post above her head, and with dramatic flourish ripped the material wide open, exposing her naked back.

"Ah . . ." came the subdued moan of the crowd.

Eric looked upon her scarred back with shame and self-loathing.

How heavily she must pay for my mistakes.

As for Eric, his crimes had earned him a life sentence in the Vatican prison. But it seemed light punishment compared to the price they would exact from Ruth.

Vatican guards prodded Eric over to the cardinal, where he knelt to receive the benediction. As he rose to his feet, a priest stepped forward and presented Eric with a whip. After a moment's hesitation, he accepted. When he took up position behind Ruth, the crowd began to shout and whistle.

Eric stood flexing the whip between his hands. He could see the effects of two days

of hanging by her wrists and was sickened anew. The cheering crowd was beginning to grow restless, but he didn't care. Through the noise of the spectators, he heard her urgent whisper, "I release you from your oath." But still he made no move. "They will Expel us both," she stated calmly, yet the words were enough.

Pausing only fractionally, Eric raised the whip and lashed at her naked back. A flood of cheering went up as it connected with her body. Doggedly, he continued the strokes. Blood splattered him, and Ruth cried out in anguish.

He stopped.

"Continue," the cardinal ordered. "You have twelve remaining."

"Please . . ." Ruth whispered weakly, terrified for him.

But he could not go on. Dropping the whip, Eric grabbed the dagger from the post and slashed at the ropes holding her upright. She collapsed against him, moaning in agony. Nobody moved, too stunned to react.

In one swift motion, he lifted Ruth over his shoulder and leapt off the platform, landing on the cardinal's horse and startling it into action. The animal lunged through the spectators, who scrambled back in fear as Eric hung on with desperate effort. Then the beast was free of the crowd and moving fast.

The cardinal shrieked out, "Stone them! Drive them from Eden!"

The spell was broken.

An animal sound rose up behind them. Something struck Eric's shoulder, and Ruth cried out once more as a rock hit her open wound. He shifted her awkwardly in front of him, laying her across the horse. She cried out again and fell unconscious.

The rocks and noise had frightened the beast to greater speed. Eric leaned across Ruth, holding onto the horse's neck, trying to point it towards the forest. He could hear other horses in pursuit now as the beast lunged dangerously down the hillside while men leapt out of the way and shops and houses blurred past. Then they were clear of the city, the valley floor rushing up to meet them. If only he could make it to the trees. Just a little farther

Suddenly the forest was before them, and the horse stopped dead in its tracks. Eric flew over the animal's head, landing hard against a tree. Staggering to his feet, he looked for Ruth, and then he saw her: a limp pile on the ground. He scooped her up and ran for cover, grabbing the knife that had flown from his hand.

A blinding light exploded through his skull. Eric stumbled and almost fell, but forced his legs to keep moving. Shaking his head, he tried to clear it as the blood trickled down his scalp.

Diving into the forest, he scrambled low, pushing desperately through the underbrush. He could hear the horsemen leaving their mounts to follow on foot, but their missiles would be useless in here: the forest was too dense. And these were Vatican guards, not real soldiers. They didn't have the training of the Army.

He could hear the sound of the mob hurrying after the horsemen. Soon the woods would be filled with hunters, thirsty for vengeance. He needed to put distance between them.

His head was clearing now, his strength returning. He stuck the knife in his belt

before once more draping Ruth over his shoulder. With a deep breath, he started to run, thankful for the hard years of training. And he knew these woods, how to move in them and how to use them.

The hunters did not.

They were used to the Expulsion Trail, a wide swath cut through the forest, once used as a road by the Ancients. It allowed the mob an easy target for their rocks and abuse; the recipients bloodied and often broken by the time they reached the edge of the forest. But rarely would anyone willingly cross into the demon wasteland; most preferred a savage beating by the mob over the unspeakable agony and defilement at the hands of Satan's evil fiends. Beaten unconscious and near death, the mob would catapult their limp bodies down the hill and onto the deserted flatlands, where ancient ruins lay buried under two millennia of rock dust. Those who regained consciousness would see these ominous shapes hovering around them and mistake the ruins for encroaching demons. It would send most insane, tearing the flesh from their bones in a desperate attempt to escape. There were few who retained enough sanity and mobility to find their way onto the vast and empty flatlands.

Hoping to slow the mob still further, Eric resisted the temptation to stay at the base of the mountainside; he ran up and across it instead. Eric kept a steady pace until his lungs were ready to burst and his leg muscles shook from the strain. He needed a hiding place.

And there it was: a tight knot of vines climbing the base of three trees that had grown together in a twisted loop. He pushed his way inside the foliage and fell to his knees.

Easing Ruth to the ground, he collapsed beside her, his breathing ragged and noisy. Through it, he strained to hear sounds of their pursuers, but the woods were quiet — he'd put much distance between them. He lay there listening, letting his breathing return to normal.

Suddenly he felt like howling in triumph. They ain't never gonna forgets this day!

Eric felt his strength return as he viewed his rash act as a daring maneuver — only partially completed. They still had to reach the forest's edge, whole and able. He pushed aside what waited beyond the trees — that was wasted energy. There was no place left to go now for either of them, he'd seen to that.

Ruth moaned, and he covered her mouth to muffle the sound, but she didn't gain consciousness.

"Gawd in heaven, looks what I done tuh yuh," he whispered, appalled at himself.

With the priest's knife, he cut away the band of rope still constricting her wrists. Underneath, the flesh was raw and swollen. He was thankful she was unconscious while the blood returned to her numbed hands. Gently, he rubbed her limbs down to the fingers. She would hurt for days.

He removed the filthy scarf and veil, throwing them across the floor of the den with disgust. Next, he took off her urine-stained trousers, knowing how shamed she must feel to have done such a thing. Reluctantly, he moved to her back, and with great care picked off the small bits of wood and dirt stuck to the wounds. He tried not to think

how the blood came to be there.

When he was finished, he reversed her ripped tunic so that her back was protected. With the knife, he cut a strip off his shirt, wrapping it around her like a belt to keep the tunic tied shut. His own back was begging for notice, forgotten while he'd been on the move, but there was nothing to be done.

Eric cocked his ear: there were noises in the distance. Painfully, he got to his feet.

Lifting Ruth onto his shoulder, he abandoned their hiding place. More confident now, he ran at an easier pace, sure that he could outstrip his pursuers. But after ninety feet, a voice yelled out, "He's over there!"

Ducking low, he forced more speed from his legs, making a zigzag course across the mountainside, running until his breath ached and his muscles were near jellied.

Again, he collapsed inside dense shrubbery, panting into the ground, listening for the approach of hunters.

They were getting close.

He put a hand over Ruth's mouth, and waited in complete stillness. Footsteps neared their hiding place but passed on again. Gradually he relaxed as the mob sounds grew fainter.

When he tried to move again, every muscle shrieked in protest. He bent to rub his strained calves and discovered Ruth watching him. Immediately, she shifted her eyes to the ground.

"Don't looks from me," Eric said tiredly, easing his leg muscles.

She brought her eyes up to rest on his face.

"I be messin' everythin' up real bad."

Ruth shook her head, amazed he could still hold himself responsible after what she'd driven him to. She made to sit up, but he stopped her.

"Yuh rests, gets back yurr strength," he said, stroking the stubble on her scalp. "I be gettin' us outta this." He said it with such conviction that she almost believed him. "I dunno what's gonna happen outside duh trees, but I be strong, we be OK."

With effort, she leaned forward and took his hand, moving it onto the hilt of the dagger. "Use the knife," she whispered. He stared at her in confusion. "It doesn't matter about me, I'm damned anyway. Save your soul. Go back with my blood on your hands. You'll be forgiven."

He pushed her hands away. "Stop it!"

But she forced herself to speak: "Better to kill me than live in eternal damnation."

He grabbed the knife and stabbed it hard into the ground.

He clasped her arms, thrusting his face close to hers and whispering passionately, "Don't yuh understands? I don't believes it! No Devil! No dam'ation! No Gawd! There be only yous and me and tryin' tuh stays alive!" His intensity dissolved and he said more calmly, "Yurr likes uh part of me self, how could I kills yuh? We be two halves of duh same blade. I be knowin' that since duh first day I saws yuh." Gently he helped her to lie down on her side. "Yuh rests now, wife," he said, close to her ear.

It brought a weak smile to her lips. She closed her eyes, and he thought her asleep when she whispered, "Husband."

He took her hand and they rested together in the shrubs.

But too soon it was time to move, before the mob realized they'd overshot their prey and started to backtrack. He had to force himself into action. Crawling stiffly from their hideout, he stretched his aching body in preparation for the next leg of the run.

A few moments later, Ruth emerged to join him. Pain etched her face but she made no sound.

"Does yuh thinks yuh can walks?"

"I'll try."

"Let's gets goin' if yuh cans." They started out, but she stumbled and had to balance against him, fighting off the dizziness. "Cans yuh do it?" She pushed herself away and nodded. Eric started off again, slowly this time. He was grateful that Ruth was keeping pace; he didn't know if he could carry her much farther.

Now they descended as they continued onward, gradually getting closer to the base of the mountain, but not too low — not yet. They came across a little stream and Ruth sucked up the liquid gratefully; it gave her the strength to carry on. After an hour, Eric stopped to whisper in her ear. "It can't be far, duh trees are startin' tuh thins. When I says run, yuh runs. Don't stops furr nothin', not even duh Pope 'imself. Yuh understands?" She nodded. "We goes then," he said, taking Ruth's hand and pulling her along.

Moving cautiously through the decreasing coverage, they crept down to the mountain pass. Ruth was panting hard now, her last reserves fading fast.

In the distance a shout went up, and a moment later Eric felt something whizz past his shoulder — an arrow! The bastards have changed the game! he thought in angry frustration.

Only stoning was permitted during an Expulsion, but these Vatican guards sought revenge by their own hand no matter the means. His insult was too great, too personal. But it was more than this, for they understood that Eric too had changed the game. That he was so profane, so truly corrupt, that he didn't need to be driven from the Garden but was seeking to escape it.

"Run!" he ordered.

They ran noisily, not caring now. But Ruth's legs gave out and she dropped like a dead thing. "Leave me," she cried out in her whispery eve way as Eric went to pull her up.

"No, damn it!"

Again he draped her over his shoulder, almost buckling under the weight. He steadied himself, pushing a wobbly trail through the trees. He was near giving up when the forest evaporated, the barren land suddenly in view. It gave him the strength to push on.

Howling a battle cry, he ran to the edge of the bank, feet closing in behind them. Then he was struck. Ruth gave a sharp gasp of pain and Eric stumbled. They fell to the ground, rolling crazily over each other to the bottom of the slope.

They were out of the Garden.

The hunters stood back from the bluff, not daring to come closer; quickly, they

melted away.

Eric shouted after them, "I wins, yuh stinkin' assholes! I wins!" He laughed loudly, looking to Ruth — and the laughter fizzled out of him. An arrow protruded from her back.

Falling to his knees, he turned her over. Ruth's eyes stared into his, lifeless.

He leapt to his feet, screaming, "Cowards! Lousy, stinkin' cowards!!"

But only his voice echoed back at him. He was alone.

He returned to Ruth, cradling her in his arms, howling out his rage and loss. And when exhaustion forced him into quieter grief, his fingers stroked her scarred face as he spoke the forbidden words she would never hear.

Gradually it came to him where he was. Eric looked around, suddenly nervous. Nothing stirred but the wind out beyond the shelter of the mountains. It was so utterly barren.

And empty, he tried to remind himself, not a demon in sight.

Twirling columns of dust appeared from nowhere, making his hair stand on end. He'd been told about such things, that these were demon spirits. His gaze remained fixed on them as they skirted across the open plain, billowing wildly before gradually dissipating altogether. He shook himself, snapping out of his growing fear. Wind and dust! That's all they be! he told himself sternly, turning his attention back to Ruth. He would allow nothing to interfere with his last moments with her.

Eric gathered rocks and placed them over her body. And because he knew Ruth would have wanted it, above her head he formed a ring of stones with a cross in the center.

It would be dark in a few hours. He looked back at the forest with yearning but knew the hunters would be waiting to prevent his return. With no other choice, he faced the desert and began to walk.

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