**My Wife and My Dead Wife**

by **handful_ofdust**

**Summary**

"Wife"...is a four-letter word.

**Notes**

Written in a white heat over the hiatus between Season Two and Season Three, so this is basically my version of Season Three, the fucking epic. Many details thoroughly Jossed since then, including the central OC of Rachel Renton Schillinger, Mary Sue to beat all Mary Sues. Bad behavior of every possible type all 'round, in case you're wondering; it's *Oz*, for Christ's sake. It also ends unhappily, like every other canonical story arc involving Beecher, Keller and Schillinger.
Chapter 1

WIFE...is a four-letter word.
--Augustus Hill.

ONE

Gen Pop, 5:15 A.M. Vern Schillinger wakes up well before the bell, his right hand knotted, the tendons in his wrist like a lit fuse. Molten pain, worse every morning. He lies looking at the ceiling, schooling himself for another day of pretending to ignore his growing agony. Telling himself: It's nothing, fuck it, you can take it. What are you, some kind of faggot?

(Thank you, Dad.)

Below him, the new guy in the bottom bunk--what the hell IS his name?--turns and sighs, sounding for all the world like Tobias Beecher. Same M.O., every fucking night: Awake, it's the constant ragged hitch in the breath, the "I'm not crying" wheeze; asleep, he whimpers and snores like a bitch in heat. Bad dreams, Vern guesses, though he doesn't much care if he's right or not--'till right as if on cue, the nonentity in question starts to moan, making a brief, nightmare-gripped scrabble against the nearest bedpost like he's trying to ward off whatever's chasing him through sheer bodily effort.

And: Ten more years to go of this, Vern thinks, unable to stop himself. Ten whole more years of listening to other people dream.

He exhales through his nose, slowly. Starts ticking down the daily list: THINGS TO DO, part infinity. Currently, the project marked number one with a bullet involves making whatever accommodations have to happen in order to deal with the empty space left in the wake of Mark Mack's sudden demise. Not that Vern really wants to get directly involved with the Aryan Brotherhood's now-officially-open leadership race anymore; he's kind of enjoying looking good on paper, for novelty's sake alone if nothing more, and there's only so far his Em City hack connections can--or should--safely take him. Sipple, for example, was fun but dumb; he can admit to that, within the private confines of his own skull. Restraint is the key. Planning. You go with what's proven, what's workable--find another idiot figurehead, set him up, then retreat and keep pulling the strings from behind the scene, just like before...

Yeah, sure. That'll do, for starters.

Subsidiary projects include the following:
--Make sure that bad juju motherfucker Adebisi stays in Ad Seg.
--Pay that holier-than-thou would-be spade messiah Said back for throwing his case.
--Offer that devious Mick shit O'Reilly something that'll take his mind off of what Vern did to his retard brother, before Vern's reduced to praying O'Reilly's cancer of the tit reappears in time to keep him from putting Vern on the famous Nino Schibetta ground glass diet.

Lists. You run 'em in your head, so nobody can read over your shoulder. It's a longstanding game Vern plays with himself--keeps him mentally fit, not to mention making sure no one around him has any idea what he thinks until he chooses to tell them. And not even then, maybe.

(whole fucking WRIST feels like it's full of ground glass now...)

This thing with his hand: last Monday, it was a thin ache, like fatigue. By mid-week, a vague spike up the inside of his forearm, worse whenever he picked things up. And now a skewer, twisting. A
bright, keen line of harm. But no big deal, he reminds himself, yet again--his mother had arthritis. The Old Man still does. And Vern's got both sets of their genes plus he's also 47 fucking years old; what with all the time he's already spent in Oz, be more've a surprise if he didn't have something wrong with him. What passes for medical help in this shit-hole is, however--naturally enough--out of the question. You go to doctors, they'll just give you drugs. That pretty mongrel Dr Nathan, O'Reilly's unrequited jack-off fantasy? Word is, she loves to medicate. A fact the real Beecher must surely be well aware of, by now.

And that's Vern's final to-do project for today, right there. Since Operation Toby has finally been laid so far to rest its underside must be cooking on Hell's rooftop, can he maybe now actually start trying to keep his goddamn mind OFF Tobias goddamn Beecher, for more than five goddamn minutes at a goddamn time? It must at least be possible, for Christ's sake.

Not much bounce left in the old Beech-ball, anyway, from what Chris Keller tells him. Just lies there like a broken doll, encased in plaster, making faces; grinning, sometimes. Sometimes even mouthing a few words, apparently, like he's talking to himself...fuckin' little nutcase.

(And what are you doing still watching him that close, exactly, Chris-to-pher? Trying to read his damn lips?)

Aw, but screw Keller, metaphorically speaking. His motivation's not Vern's problem--none of it's his problem, now. Better things to do, not to mention people...

Here Vern catches his reflection in the mirror above the sink, seen sideways, and notes that the back of his head needs a shave. Feels his thumb and index pinch together reflexively, as if gripping a razor's handle, and winces: Shit, that really does HURT. But not enough so for him to say it does, especially out loud; never that. 'Cause that kind of self-indulgent guts-spilling, that's for...what?


(...Beecher.)

Never did know what Beecher was thinking, though, did you? A quiet voice at the back of his head points out, slyly. I mean, not REALLY. As you later found out.

Vern blinks the words away. Feels a headache building, on top of everything else--phantom needle slipped through the soft tissue in back of his bad eye, neatly skewering that floating, hazy spot where his cornea once bunched and scarred against a piece of glass from his old pod's broken window. A little bit of blindness left over for good, even after they finally took his patch away. A little reminder of what happened, of who was responsible. Of what had to be done about it.

Like he'd ever really needed one.

And now the bell's going to ring, any minute, right above his ear. He'll vault out of the top bunk, game face tightly set in place; work all day in the post office, stamping and sorting, every movement like a nail hammered straight through the bone, marrow-deep. His own little one-handed crucifixion: sympathy pains for Sipple, that pedophile priest fuck--not like that's likely, but whatever. He's Vern Schillinger, and that still counts for something...in here, at least.

If nowhere else.

***

Yesterday it was McManus, the ever-fucking-present: His features swimming constantly in and out of focus, lapped and drowned in a shaky haze of light, myopic eyes narrowed introspectively
beneath a wispy suggestion of brows. The image was almost enough to make Tobias Beecher suspect Em City's resident Wizard maybe had his own set of demolished glasses hidden away somewhere—that, just like Beecher himself, McManus had deliberately retreated behind a protective shield of imperfect vision, letting astigmatism de-edge (if only ever-so-slightly) the hard and ugly world around him.

Which would be pretty pathetic, if true. Seeing how McManus was the one who'd created this particular world, in the first place.

"Beecher?" Then, raising his voice just a little—ignoring, as usual, the total lack of response—"Beecher, you hear me? You know who I am?"

(Oh, and how could I ever forget?)

But Beecher simply licked his dry lips and replied, slowly: "Sure. You're...tha' guy who's not...a travel agent."

After which he closed his eyes, dismissively. Then opened them again to find—without surprise, though more than a little dim pleasure—nothing but an empty space where McManus had once been.

Today, however, it's Sister Peter Marie—her clever, weary face peering down at him, smiling in what seems like genuine sympathy. Beecher tries to return the favor, but isn't sure how it works out; not too good, by her carefully-controlled reaction.

"Welcome back, Tobias."

Beecher swallows, wets his tongue. But manages only: "Lo, Siss...er."

Sister Pete's eyelids flicker—shock and dismay, expertly masked. He wonders what the trigger is, exactly: His own obviously stoned incoherence, wandering half-lidded eyes, the four-fold starfish droop of his limp, plaster-covered limbs? Or some combination of the above? Better get used to it, he thinks, so vehemently he surprises even himself.

"We miss you at the office," she tells him.

"...we?"

"Well...me."

Beecher gives the drowned husk of a laugh, liquid with glorious, painkiller-soaked warmth. Forcing himself to enunciate, he replies: "Yooou really gotta get...out more, Siss—ter. Make some...real friends."

Sister Pete plays idly with the string of her bifocals. Tells him, softly: "You're real to me, Tobias."

And with that, her sadly predictable tone of kindness, of understanding, Toby feels all his pushed-aside post-traumatic fatigue fall on him again at once, neatly displacing the pharmaceutical cocoon he's kept himself insulated inside thus far. The deadweight of his own broken bones, pulling him back down into the dark.

"Sure," he replies, exhausted. "...sure I am."

Later:

"Tripped and fell," the nun repeats, her tone pretty firmly unconvinced.
"You...got it."

For a long moment, Sister Pete falls quiet, obviously taking extra time--and care--with her next sentence. Beecher sneaks a hidden glance, through downcast lashes. "If you'd just tell Tim McManus who did this to you..." she begins, slowly, but Beecher cuts her off. "I'M who...did it," he replies, an ironic stress on the "I". "To me."

Impatient: "That's just not true, and you know it."

"Might as...well be."

_Besides which_, a voice in his head wants to ask her, uncharitably, _what are you and him gonna do about it, exactly? Sic God on 'em?_

It's a deep, calm voice--not his, necessarily, yet somehow familiar; takes a second more to place it, but he does. Then feels his stomach knot under its lazy drawl, touched with a trailing, icy finger of unconscious recognition.

Sister Pete sighs. "I know you don't believe me, Tobias, but it's like this: God--"

(that tumor)

"--really never does give you more than you can bear to carry. He's good that way."

"Know that for...sure, huh?"

Sharply: "What are you looking for here, instant karma? Not so easy. God's God; I can't read His mind, and I don't try to. So when I talk about His promises, I just have to take them on faith, same as everybody else. Even you."

"Oh, and thass what I like...best about you, Siss-ter. All advice...and no consent."

Right on cue, Beecher feels his drugged mind begin to wander, and decides--just for a moment--to lie there and let it. Slipping and sliding, brief sideways flashes, stripped to their barest essentials. That last drink as a free man, unneeded and unwanted, burning on its way down. The sick thud of Kathy's body across his front window. Her mother screaming at him, through the glass: _I hope you die in here._

Well: Cheer up, Mrs Rockwell; much as you can, given the circumstances. Not all so much longer to wait on that front, probably.

Caught up in the warm, embracing hollow of God's hand, the Ryan O'Reilly version, heroin singing through his nostrils, his veins. Then back to starch, Tide, an invasive ache and an itchy horrified shame: _The sense-memory scent of Vern Schillinger's freshly-laundered shirts, spilling over into an entirely different sort of violation. Another date, but the same humming bank of machines, as Chris Keller's Judas arms curl tight around him--sweet pressure, fiery rush of passion met and matched--hauling him high, lifting, seeking..._

...and Gen, and the kids. _And Gen. And the kids._

_And Gen._

That one conjugal, standing there with her stupid little picnic basket, ridiculously over-accessorized. The automatic recoil when he touched her, shiver of repressed disgust in her voice. Her hollow words of comfort--transparent lies, cliched, and ill-told to boot. Insultingly so. And his own, long-
deferred anger welling up, frighteningly cold: *Bitch, do you even care what I went through, just to see you today? What I'll be going "home" to, when you're safely back in the REAL world again?*

*You knew I was weak when you married me--just not HOW weak. Or where it might take us both.*

But screw it. No more guilt, no more sadness. Beecher's wiped clean now, decision already made. The next time her folks call, he'll sign the papers willingly; tell them they can feel free to take the kids, move away, pretend he's dead too, if it makes the situation seem any better. Why not? It's pretty much true.

(Husband and wife are one flesh, and you took yours away from me. Took yourself away and left me here, alone.)

He can't remember back before they were married, can't remember why he married her, in the first place. Or how long it's been since he's thought of her at all, except in the possessive: Genevieve Beecher, wife. "My" wife. My...dead wife.

Then, abruptly, he finds himself talking again--faster, clearer. Telling Sister Pete: "Had this...dream, last night. Kinda...interesting. I come into my pod..."

(mine and Keller's)

"...and there I am--the OLD me, right? Glasses, the...hair--you remember." Sister Pete nods. "Sitting there, suit and all, and I'm...smiling up at myself. Like: Oh, pleeease, be niiice to me...And I just think: What an idiot. Kind of guy deserves everything he gets."

He gives her a secret smile, Madonna-blank. With Sister Pete watching him from the corner of her eye, unwilling--or unable--to face his monologue head-on, as it begins to really hit its stride.

"And as I'm sitting--standing--there, thinking 'bout how I...disgust myself, it, uh--sorta starts to...turn me on. So I...grab me by the hair, and I knock me down, really lay the boots to me. Beat me up. Ride me 'til I scream. And then I make me get down on my knees, and I make me kiss me. And I make me tell me--I love me."

His eyes start to ache, retelling it, cheeks pulsing with effort. Lips gone dry again, drained; skin moistly acrawl, unseen, beneath his sweat-damp casts.

"Except--and here's the really interesting part--when I wake up, I'm...coming. First time ever since I got here; unaided, I mean." Once again, he sees her bite back some unguarded comment; damn, but she's tolerant. He isn't sure, anymore, whether that impresses or annoys him. Concluding, viciously: "And it feels GOOD."

"But does it really make you feel any *better*?" Sister Pete asks, quietly.

Such sweet reason. Beecher snorts to hear it.

"Oh, c'mon, Siss-ter; not much left here to get broken. Oh, but wait, I get it--you're thinking 'bout my *soul*." Said with a sweet smile, but a mocking lilt: Sooooul. A polite euphemism for something sordid.

And now those meds from lunch are really kicking back in. Beecher gives a bone-cracking yawn, Sister Pete's face starting to swim. Eyes seeping, just a little; the world fading out around him, all warm, and soft, and sleepy. "Bet you don't like me so much now, huh?" He murmurs. "Anymore." Another big yawn. "Be...honest."
From far away: "I don't think YOU like you very much, Tobias."

Some time passes. Beecher watches it slide by, snail-track slow, The fever growing, paring him down, melting him away. He feels himself become supple, languid, feral. Barely recognizable, to her or to himself. Then he uses the last of his strength on a subtle twist of the head, his new shrug—a quick, bovine squirm, like some tailless bull trying to flick away flies.

"No," he agrees, at last. "Guess...I never did."

And he's gone.

***

Surfacing hours later, he spots Keller lurking outside the glass at the hospital wing's far end; that dark face, intent, unreadable—the invisible man suddenly visible, all hint of protective camouflage stripped away as they lock eyes: I see YOU, motherfucker. And--

"Hey..." Beecher whispers—knowing Keller can't hear, knowing he doesn't have to. "S'my old friend, Chris; c'mon in, friend. Be friendly."

Feels the swelling bubble of his own amusement squeeze his eyes shut again, happy for the distraction. Especially so since, when he pries them back open, Keller's been replaced...by O'Reilly, his new hair brush-cut length now, those Irish-green eyes most definitely smiling.

"Hey, Beech. Scratch your nose?"

"...you're late."

"Yeah, well."

O'Reilly ankles a chair over and slides in beside the bed, checking automatically behind him. Scanning for Dr Nathan, probably; more than happy to get his narrow ass kicked out, Beecher bets... (long as she's the one does it.)

That low voice again from somewhere deep inside, mimicking the words. And this time...this time, Beecher believes he has a fairly good idea who it's meant to be. The human mind being such a predictable fucking thing, all told.

He can still remember when O'Reilly first came to him, after his "accident" in the gym. No apology, per se, for the way they'd drifted apart—but ever since the riot, Beecher's had a fairly uncanny sense of what O'Reilly's thinking, under the usual layers of subterfuge. Not that he cared all that much, back then: His lawyer's logic distracted, submerged beneath a bile-filled flood, all nursery rhymes and aimless antagonism. Chaos for the sake of chaos, dick-biting optional.

Now, however, their interests happen to coincide once more. And Beecher will happily take advantage of that fact, for as long as it continues to be true.

Keller broke his arms, his legs, his heart. But Keller is just a tool. His problem doesn't lie with him; it never has. What Beecher wants is the person behind Keller—that grumbling voice, those osmotically-learned thought-patterns. The living ghost in Beecher's haunted head.

(Oh, just SAY it, cupcake.)

Fine: He wants Vern, so to speak; not the way the old bastard probably wants him to, but even so.
Happy now?

De-fuckin'-lirious.

"So," O'Reilly asks, "you up for all the latest?"

Beecher coughs, clearing his throat. Then reminds him, drily, with an irony both deep and bitter: "...I'm not going anywhere."

***

TWO

One week later: McManus's office--not a place Vern particularly thought he'd ever see the inside of again, anytime soon, at least. And McManus, distractedly self-righteous as ever, gesturing him in. Vern settles into his customary soldier's stance, bad hand (now all one big glowing, glove-shaped ache, shot through and wound tight with red-black streaks of pure pain) kept firmly restrained behind his back. Down on the floor, through McManus's window, he can see the new Aryan heir apparent at wait by the Em City mail truck, loitering and posing: Der Fuhrer in waiting. He's got Vern's vote, mainly by virtue of being even more creatively stupid than the rest of the regulars.

Behind him, C.O. Karl Metzger passes unseen, just completing one of his patented, circling shark-type sweep-'rounds. A big, blond, uniformed shadow, casting a cold blue eye Vern's way as he does so, no doubt wondering what McManus wants with him, and whether or not it involves one or more of the many secrets he and Vern share.

Metzger; now there's a can of worms even Vern isn't exactly eager to jimmy open, whether by accident or intention. A situation looming, maybe--one warranting further study, certainly, one way or another--

(Uuuuuhhh, my fuckin' WRIST)

"--Schillinger?"

"I'm listening."

McManus frowns. "Could've fooled me."

And: Oh, you have NO IDEA, you pathetic liberal dupe, Vern thinks, unable to stop himself. But prompts instead, out loud: "You got a call; great, must be nice having phone privileges. And this involves me how?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, the call was for you. Some woman named Rachel--"

"Never heard of her."

Too fast, not to mention way too loud; Vern can see that freak "Mole" Busmalis jerk 'round on the opposite catwalk, cued by tone alone, as McManus's barely-there eyebrows quirk, dubious. The lanky asshole steeples his fingers, leans back in his chair, obvious questions already implicit in every long, tense inch of him: Nobody named Rachel, anywhere? EVER?

"She says he's your wife," McManus tells him, and Vern feels himself go glacial. Replying, with atypical care: "My wife's dead."

"So who's this?"
"Fuck should I know? Whoever she is, she's lying."

McManus makes that damn face again. "Why the hell would anybody pretend to be your wife, Schillinger?"

Haughtily: "I look like a damn shrink to you?"

This whole world's full of nutcases; McManus should invest in a mirror sometime, find that particular fact out for himself. While the voice in Vern's head just comments, dryly, at almost the same time: _Yeah, sure is--and YOU married two of 'em._

(Two?)

One, goddamnit. Just one. Not that he's going to admit to it, even now.

"Well, whoever she is," McManus continues, apparently unswayed by Vern's vehemence, "she wants to arrange a visit. Somebody on the front desk forwarded her to me; hadn't heard about you being back in Gen Pop, I guess."

Vern shrugs, far as the arm will let him. "Yeah, well, think I'll skip that little get-together. Seeing how I don't actually KNOW her, and all." To which McManus just blinks, mildly, and gives a vaguely offensive little grin.

"Oh, I think it'd be a healthy change of pace for you, personally," he says. "After your little run-in with Sipple, I mean."

'Scuse me?

_He means in the cell, moron. In front of Whittlesey. His ex-squeeze?_

Yeah, sure; that's right. When Metzger arranges "rec time" it tends to stay arranged, not to mention discreet, as plenty of people have already found out. Sipple for one...along with Beecher, most recently, for another.

Keller's revelation, and Toby-baby's reaction--the leap, the sprawl, the four-pack snap. Thinking back, Vern doesn't think he's ever laughed quite so hard in his life; worth a whole year's wait, just to get to _that_ punchline. And McManus, for all his visible display of power, doesn't know a damn thing about it.

Reassured by the memory, therefore, Vern matches Em City's little tin god grin for grin: Wide, hard, flat. "Personally?" He mimics. "Screw that--and screw you, while we're at it. I'm not part of your little rat-maze anymore, remember, McManus? Don't play well enough with others to fit your high and mighty standards, or what-fuckin'-ever. So since I am back in Gen Pop and I don't have another parole hearing scheduled before 2010, I don't see how what you think has to mean a goddamn thing to me, anymore."

Oh, and McManus, he doesn't like that idea at ALL. Frown-lines ruck the skin of his high-domed temples as he points out, softly: "I can still make things pretty hard for you in Oz, Schillinger, and you know it. No matter where you end up."

"I have a legal right to refuse visitors."

"And I do Sunday dinners with Warden Glynn--you remember him, right? Guy you called a nigger to his face?"
Fucking little despot.

Vern hisses through his teeth. Then asks, with admirable restraint: "So when's this delusional bitch of yours due?"

"She said early next week; Monday, maybe Tuesday."

"Fine." He turns for the door. "Now, if you don't mind--I've got mail to deliver."

"Anything for me?"

Vern shoots him a quick, narrow look--that a joke? Hard to tell, with McManus; he only seems to have two expressions and he's already gone back to the first, mild-mannered to the point of vague mental handicap. Not quite Cyril O'Reilly territory, but damn close.

Coolly: "Hadn't noticed. Want me to check?"

McManus smiles again--the free and easy smile of someone who's just jerked a chain, only to hear it clink loud and clear. "Oh, it'll keep." He opens a file; dismissively: "See you on Monday, Schillinger."

(See you in HELL, college boy.)

"Can't hardly wait," Vern replies. And stalks out, letting glass door connect with glass wall, a sharp scrape just this side of a muffled screech.

***

Upstairs and down, pods resound with whispered gossip: The Em City chorus, inquiring minds hard at work, spurred on by the twin goads of boredom and proximity.

Busmalis, to Dave Rebadow: "You hear about Schillinger's wife?"

Rebadow: "Years back."

"But not from GOD, right?"

Rebadow just shrugs. Allowing: "Well, God does still talk to me--but most of the time, I try to ignore Him."

***

In the mess hall, Chris Keller sidles lithely by just out of focus through the background, while Fuhrer-boy and the usual Aryan posse comitatus core membership trade lame jokes about about McManus's suddenly-renewed interest in their erstwhile leader in the fore-. Vern basically ignores them, though not so overtly that they notice. Thinking--or is that the voice in his head talking again, almost out of ear-shot? So goddamn hard to tell, behind this oozing, spreading curtain of pain--

--this really how you thought you were gonna spend your middle years, Vernon? Centre-stage in a clutch of (mainly) dyed-blond, over-swastika'd punks, spouting White Power rhetoric and talking shit as the rest of the world goes by?

(Just shut fucking UP, Dad. You cocksucker.)

Except that doesn't really sound like the Old Man, on closer reflection; more eloquent, more sarcastic. Better educated. More like--
Pretty little Rachel, smart as a whip, and with just as much sting in her tail. Thrill-seeking college girl turned biker's mama, turned mother of his precious sons, turned soldier's wife--then traitor--in the upcoming Racial Holy War. The heart of his house. His once and only love.

(That miscegenating cunt.)

You're dead, he tells her, in his mind. Dead to me, at least; dead for real, I'd ever caught you with that coon, and screw the penalty. So lie the fuck down, and stay there.

Commotion by the door--a protesting squall, man-sized in volume, childlike in nature. Der Fuhrer at his elbow, nudging: "Hey, Vern--looks like somebody grabbed that O'Reilly retard's ball again."

From behind him, laconic: "Guy must lose more balls, that way..."

Keller, of course. Eerie, materializing motherfucker--and with his tone, as ever, hovering on the ragged edge of outright insult. But a blessed distraction, nonetheless.

Vern turns to catch Cyril O'Reilly's blue eyes across the hall, wide with frustration--so soothing, in their trusting idiocy. Recognizing him, they widen further, anger turning to fear. Behind the counter, somebody alerts the other--more dangerous--O'Reilly brother, who snaps around, glaring; makes Vern grin to see Ryan's protective bristle, so he furls his tongue lasciviously in Cyril's direction just for the brief pleasure of making sure Ryan gets to see his big, muscular "little" brother recoil, squirm, sit back down--ball safely forgotten--as a blush of vague but dreadful memory turns his fair skin bright red from jaw to hairline.

And: There, Vern thinks, his outlook brightening exponentially. That's MUCH better.

At which point--with no time to prepare for impact--Keller "helpfully" slaps a tray full of food down into Vern's bad hand, sending a nuclear blast of agony rocketing up through his elbow, shoulder, neck, migraine-pierced eye, SKULL. Vern bolts upright, shrieks aloud, drops it. Swearing, as he does: "Aw, FUUUUCK ME!"

Everybody in the place turns to look at him, in sudden dead silence. Quick hits: Cyril O'Reilly, both hands over his mouth, astonished eyes like big blue pie-plates; Ryan O'Reilly, his initial double-take already tripling, maybe quadrupling, eyebrows practically on top of his head. The Aryan bunch, flash-frozen with shock. And Keller, who knows, just like Beecher would...'cause he's been that close, learned Vern's language that well, both bodily and otherwise: how this is some very bad shit in progress, too bad even for Vern to bear, one fucking minute longer.

"You better get yourself to the doctor, buddy," Keller suggests, quietly, practically in Vern's ear. "Now." To which Vern, too momentarily numb with exhausted pain to call him on his condescending familiarity, can only nod.

***

Two hours later, after Dr Nathan's made him take some pills--actually stood there and watched while he did it, too, like some Grade School teacher auditing a fuckin' spelling test--Vern and she end up in the Oz medical wing's jury-rigged x-ray room, staring at backlit photos of his hand: A fragile-looking naked bone spider, secret failure finally found out; fallen down on the job of keeping him whole and healthy, and set aglow with the radioactive trace elements of its own betrayal.

"Carpal tunnel syndrome," Dr Nathan says. "Pretty classic." She's wearing some kind of perfume; light, floral. Vern feels himself literally twitch at the scent, and hugs his Judas hand like some
talisman to ward off his own arousal. He can't remember, suddenly, when he's last been this close to a real live woman who isn't either a hack or a nun. Is this how O'Reilly got snagged? "Carpet--what?" He forces himself to ask.

"Car-pal. It's a stress injury, characteristic to jobs involving repetitive motion. Like marching fractures, in the infantry?" She peels down one of the photos, peers closer. "Lots of postal workers get it."

"From processing mail."

"Yeah, and sorting, stacking--filing, xeroxing. Typing, sometimes. It's an office thing, one way or another."

Vern's shoulders rise against the implication, neck bunching with offended cords. Some fuckin' educated weakling's disease? "But it gets better, right?" He demands. "Therapy, treatment...you heal from it."

Dr Nathan looks up, away, distracted by something outside. "Uh, not really--well, sort of--" She heads for the door, dropping the photo: "Wait here."

That shadow snaking past: Lean, dark, hungry. Too slim for Keller. O'Reilly? And: Just great, Vern thinks. My right hand's an accident waiting to happen, and that Mick bastard's looking to get his wick dipped. Fuckin' typical. (Typical as anything gets, anyhow, 'round here.)

(Apparently Nathan's not coming back anytime soon, so Vern's mind strays back to the problem "at hand", running scenarios, cross-referencing experiences--all of which look anything but good. A permanent injury, somewhere like Oz? Pain medication dulling his senses...some cast, some brace, some sling like a constant brand of weakness, out there for everybody to see...Might as well paste a "throw me down and fuck me" sign to his own back, and get it over with.

Vern sits down, morosely. Closes his eyes. Then starts, as a voice from the corner says: "Yeah, a woman in my firm had that. Executive secretary. She was still wearing the cast, the day I got arrested."

(Beecher.)

Sitting just to the left, in a wheelchair--startlingly close, but so still that Vern previous mistook him for another part of Nathan's office. "Thought I was a piece of furniture, huh?" Beecher notes, grinning. "Not the first time that's happened."

His intent blue stare, bruising around the eye-sockets like lavender make-up--kind of becoming, weirdly. Rims the lids with shadow, banking a fierce, pale heat. His unwashed hair looks bed-headed, standing partially upright like the stained white curls on some half-mildewed statue, a plaster-cast cemetery angel. And that smile: Kitten-teeth in a wry, sidelong half-moon, disturbingly sharp. Something in his expression, his proximity--broken limbs and all--touches a wary chord in Vern, far deeper than he'd like to admit. Makes him stiffen his spine, deepen his voice--lay on the amused, silken rumble, thick as it'll go. And answer: "Bitch...er."

"Hey, Vern."

"Like the chair."

Weirdly blithe: "Yeah? Well, better take a good look; casts're coming off next week. They'll have me
back on my feet in no time, after that."

The difference between looks and speak is distinct; overall effect's companionable, almost chatty. No nursery rhymes, no posturing--no craziness, as such. And no...visible...fear. Disconcerting, to say the least.

"You fishing for something, Beech-ball?"

Beecher shrugs. "Oh, nothin' much. You just look like you got it bad...and THAT ain't good." After which he just winks at Vern: sly, droll. Creepily intimate.

('Cause we both get that joke, don't we?)

"Are you high, or what?" Vern snaps; Beecher pauses, seems to "consider". Says: "Hmm, let me think." Then replies, brightly: "Boy, AM I! This place is an addict's dream. I may never come down. And the best part is, every time I scream, they bring me more. You should try it."

"I don't--"

"Oh, I know, I know, you superior life-form, you. Geez."

Vern shoots a glance at the door: Is that Nathan, coming back? Nope. Just an orderly, pushing a cart full of meds. I've had just about enough of this crazy prag's bullshit, he thinks. And bellows, as the guy goes by: "Can I maybe WAIT SOMEWHERE ELSE, PLEASE?"

"What you think this is, man, a hospital?" Dude tosses back, already halfway around the corner. (Well, isn't it?)

But: "Verrrn," Beecher says, reprovingly. "Don't tell me you want to rush off so soon. I mean, I haven't seen you since--oh, the gym, I guess! How's that nice Guard Metzger doing, anyway?"

"Would'a thought you'd want to know about Keller."

Beecher wrinkles his nose, seeming entirely sincere. "What for?"

(Just what the FUCK can he be playing at?)

Fine. Enough with the subtlety; not like they're being monitored. Vern leans close, fixes Beecher with his coldest stare, and rumbles: "You're lucky to even be alive, you nutcase bitch."

"Ah, and don't I know it. But you didn't kill me, did you? Not in the end, not even after all those threats, everything I...got away with. And how do you explain that part of it to everybody down at Swastika Central, exactly?"

"I don't have to."

"Noooo, 'course not; you're Vern Schillinger, great white Aryan warrior hope. You do what you want, take what you want...who. You want." A pause, changing channels: "Apropos of which--got yourself another prag yet? Or are you still shopping around?"

(Oh, hold the fuckin' DOOR.)

"I mean, been a while," Beecher continues, idly, barely seeming interested. "You must be missing it. And I'd've thought it'd be a fairly easy situation to remedy, too; new fish served fresh every week, just about. Or are you just...sentimental about the old days?" Quoting himself now, words carrying
just a teasing shade of that same evil energy Vern remembers him humming with during the riot, before the SORT team rushed the doors and all hell broke loose: "...all those...good times...we had together..." Then right back in line, clear as whiplash, almost equally cold: "'Cause you know, I never really thought I was the best fuck in Oz. Not even with all your--careful instruction."

And: I do NOT want to be having this conversation right now, Vern realizes, as his wrist spasms again--tendons flexing, pain boring suddenly inward like a knot of wasps, all stinging the same spot at once. Even under the debilitating buzz of Dr Nathan's drug cocktail, it's obvious, to anyone who cares to listen: not now, not with him, not like this. Maybe not ever.

"Had a lot of time to think about all this, y'know," Beecher continues, apparently unaware of Vern's growing discomfort. His voice drops, conspiratorially. "In bed..."

Goaded beyond endurance: "Man, you really do love the sound of your own mouth--"

"Oh, you used to like my mouth just fine, once upon a time. As I recall."

Beecher peers at him, bland, innocuous; Vern stares back. "Say what?" He blurs, finally.

"You heard me."

A hot bag of blush falls over Vern's head, embarrassment and rage admixed. So annoyed, he can't even calm down far enough to figure out how Beecher just insulted him--because that was an insult, right? Well, what the hell else would it be?

"You," he starts--then clears his throat, and starts again, lashing out with a pre-emptive spurt of bile and mockery: "Think you know how to push my buttons? You don't know shit. I'm the one knows you, sweetpea, you little junkie fuckin' Yuppie whore, inside and out. I KNOW you."

To which Beecher just replies, coolly: "Who are you trying to kid, you self-made redneck? The only thing you ever really knew about me is how far you can stick it in, before it starts to hurt."

Like a lit match to the medulla oblongata, the brain's most primitive part: Vern sees the pod wall collapsing inward, feels the glass pierce his eye. Knows in that one split second before it's too late to do anything exactly how stupid he'd been to turf Beecher out, just because he thought Scott Ross would be more of a challenge to break in--and after all, a man needs challenges. Can't have things too soft, if you want to stay hard. You pussy, idiot, dumb fuckin' faggot, you.

(Shut up, shut UP, just SHUT fuckin' UP)

Lunging, Vern knits his ache-heavy fingers into Beecher's hair, hauls him close enough to touch: "Listen, you--" But: "Ooh, cripple cat-fight!" Beecher grins, and TURNS his face into Vern's hand, too fast to stop, trailing hot breath and sharp tongue alike across the inside of Vern's palm. A lick of sweet fire, cat-rough. A searing, scarring moisture trail.

Vern freezes; Beecher keeps on grinning. "Gee," he says. "Did I catch you off-guard? Then...how's this?"

He leans forward, quick as a striking snake--and kisses Vern full on the mouth, tongue darting inside, swishing across the palate, right, left, then back out again. Leaving nothing behind but a pants-load of fire and ice, plus a dick so unexpectedly and entirely erect that Vern can swear to GOD he feels the seam of his zipper printing itself into the thing's painfully trapped skin. Vern drops him like a hot rock, recoiling; he's up against the glass wall, stomach-kicked. Almost panting.

Beecher, meanwhile, lolls back, lashes lowering. His eyes sultry, paling further to grey so light it's
almost-white, with a faint blue chaser; a banked flame, hot enough to cauterize. And whispers, through that thin, sharp smile: "So what do we do now? Head-butt each other?"

Vern: "You are--so--"

Beecher: "Fucked?"

(One way to put it, yeah.)

Soft: "I'm what you made of me."

And Vern just sits there, unable to muster any sort of comeback. Thinking, numbly: *I've fucked this little bastard, face-fucked him. I made him lick my boots and do my laundry. I set him up to get his heart wrecked and his limbs broken. I mocked his kids. I made him sing in drag. And in all that time, I never kissed him once, not once. Which must be why...*

...*I never knew he could kiss like that.*

At that exact moment, Dr Nathan finally looks back in. A little breathless, a bit rumpled. O'Reilly's work? Like Vern even cares, at this point.

"'Kay, sorry," she says. "Schillinger, be with you in a minute. Beecher?"

"Right here."

She nods to the same orderly, on his way back: "You can take him back, now."

Beecher, bright and cool: "Perfect." Then, leaning a little towards Vern and adding, sotto voce: "By the way--you might want to cross your legs, before she comes back in."

(Oh, you bitch and a half.)

The orderly snags Beecher's chair, pushes him away. Vern takes a deep breath, tries to slow this frantic pulse in his neck, this hammering in his head and veins. This fury below the waist. This utter confusion above.

*What the FUCK just happened here? He wonders. Do I really want to know?*

But it's a bit too late for that now. As even HE can tell.

***

THREE

"You want these now, or later?"

This from the orderly, pouring out Beecher's evening meds. And Beecher, safely laid back out on his bed again--sheathed limbs gone slack, drained and appalled by his own impulsive actions, itchily desperate for anything that'll wash the taste of Vern (literally) from his mouth--thinks: *Now, of course, you dumb-ass. Now, now, NOW.*

(Like relieving your stress through chemicals is a **good** habit to get back into.)

He knows better, though, of course. Which is why he forces himself to shake his head instead, replying, with remarkable conviction: "...I'm fine."
The orderly shrugs. "Your call, man." Then plops the meds back down into a plastic cup, leaves the water-jug uncapped, and pushes Beecher's chair away, whistling. A moment passes.

From behind the nearest screen, another voice entirely: O'Reilly. "He gone?" it asks.

"Yes," Beecher replies, not even glancing over.

Shakespeare, king of the unseen observer, surely would've had a field day with someone like Ryan O: arrases, tapestries, nooks and crevices, secret rooms. In Oz, however, he's regularly forced to make do with a far more prosaic class of hiding place--and cuts it close to the line, more often than not, by sneaking a quick cig between monologues. As Beecher can smell him doing, even now; dragging deep, then exhaling a last thick plume of smoke before crushing the evidence under-heel, stowing it away for later recycling. "Thanks," Beecher tells him.

"For what?"

"The distraction. Dr Nathan?"

O'Reilly grins, scar crinkling. "Hey...my pleasure." Seconds later, he's sprawling lengthwise onto the next empty bed, hands behind his head: "So. Whatcha get up to with ol' Vern in there, anyway?"

Beecher rolls his head from side to side, carefully, a slow-mo shrug. Feels his neck crack, as he answers: "Oh, you know. Needled him a little--stuck the knife in, twisted it--"

(--licked his hand. Kissed him. Left him with a crotch-lump you could see from space.)

And God alone knows what O'Reilly--Mr raving heterocentrist himself--would have to say about THAT.

If he puts some effort into it, Beecher can still dimly remember all his initial dreams of revenge on Vern Schillinger--feverish scenarios cobbled together between humiliations, equal parts fact and fantasy. Alliances with Ryan, with Adebisi, with anyone strong or devious enough to help him play his hatred out to one or more of its most illogical conclusions; poison in Vern's food, a fire in the post office, a group assault in the showers. Elaborate, multipart epics: the Schillinger kids hit Oz, strung out and vulnerable, and Beecher--now so wise to the ugly ways of Oz--prags them while Vern watches, hemmed in on so many sides that he's rendered helpless to prevent it. Or the more direct route: Paying Vern back act for act, with contemptuous, well-learned skill--but shit, let's face it: Rape him? Beecher doesn't even want to TOUCH him.

And his own panicked inner voice, incoherent with speed, with fright: Then what the fuck's with that KISS, Tobias? Teasing him, deliberately, in a way seemingly designed to make him start coming for you again? Man's a fucking bulldozer, you know that better than anyone...

(Except Keller, maybe.)

...he'll crush you flat. What the hell are you, a glutton for punishment?

Babble, babble, babble; yeah, what-the-fuck-ever. I guess maybe I am.

(Provably so.)

Back to the present, to O'Reilly. Joining him in mid-sentence: "--Gloria, before she ran off, she said something about how Schillinger's got--what? Crap syndrome, or some shit. Like that's why he threw the hissy fit in the mess hall."
"Carpal tunnel."

O'Reilly nods, impatient: "Whatever. Point is--does it HURT, or what?"

"I'd say." Beecher flicks a sidelong glance at him. "And Vern doesn't do too well with pain, y'know--when it's his, I mean. Not somebody else's."

Ryan laughs. "Oh YEAH, baby. So--push him?"


Ryan nods, absently. "Yeah..." he repeats, trailing off--his mind already running at high speed, brimming with bad ideas. Oblivious, in the midst of his scheming, to Beecher's own abstraction: Backsliding headlong into memory's trap, as he recalls their conversation earlier today...

If Vern's HERE, O'Reilly, I'm not going anywhere near him. You know that, right?

Just need ya to scope him out, Beech. That's all. 'Cause I need inside information--and YOU got the Vern-o-vision.

Since you're so CLOSE, after all, what with him having spent a half-year doing you like dinner, Beecher remembers interpreting, bitterly--the not-too-subtle subtext beneath O'Reilly's skanky Irish charm. I mean, it's practically your personal area of expertise.

(I'll take Figuring Out What Vern Schillinger Wants Before He Even Knows He Wants It, for a hundred, Alex.)

A backrub. A blowjob. Agreement. Acquiescence. A kiss goodnight, "like you mean it." But no tongue, 'cause that's for fags--and no backtalk either, bitch. So go make yourself pretty, and then spend the next hour or so wandering around the quad, with everybody pointing and laughing. Just so they all know that YOU know you're MINE.

Beecher closes his eyes against the mnemonic flood, feels his head throb, muscles behind his sockets starting to ache. Finding it harder to focus--literally or figuratively--the longer he tries to wait before finally letting himself take those meds. Depression welling up in him again like sequestered blood, a forming bruise: Familiar as his own hide, and roughly twenty thousand times as hard to perforate. And his little "victory" in the x-ray room, if that's even what it was, goes rocketing away down a long, dark hall...swallowed by shadow, drowned in doubt.

I want my glasses back, he thinks, momentarily unable to check the shallow--but intense--rush of self-pity. I want a hot shower, a cold beer, and an hour-long Shiatsu massage. I want to go home, hug my kids, fall asleep watching David Letterman and listening to Gen snore. My glasses. My wife. My life.

Not to mention a drink on top of the beer, a REAL drink--and not one that comes in a paper fuckin' bag, either.

He stares over at the wall behind O'Reilly's head, as though expecting a phantom bartender to emerge from it at any moment. Your usual, sir? Very good. And will that be the Stolnichaya, the Cristal, or the hundred-proof still-brew in the stolen specimen jar?

Stop torturing yourself, Toby.

Oh, but it's such FUN. And everybody ELSE is doing it!
O'Reilly, meanwhile, surfacing from his meditations: "Hey, I almost forgot: Hear about Schillinger's wife yet?"

Beecher, listless, eyes still plaster-locked: "The apple-pie saint? She's dead."

(Something else we have in common, him and me.)

"Apparently--not." As Beecher's head snaps back towards him: "APPARENTLY, she's comin' by. Next week."

"You've got to be fucking kidding me."

"Scout's honor."

Beecher hisses, then snorts. "Yeah, and maybe she'll bring the kids," he mutters, half to himself. "My step-whatevers. They can all have themselves a big contact visit, and I can play chaperone on wheels."

Ryan's eyes narrow, finally recognizing the psychic black hole towards which his ally's derailed train of thought is racing; he raps his knuckles against Beecher's nearest cast, hard and sharp, trying to pull him back. "Yo, Beech: snap out of it, buddy. Don't fade on me now."

Beecher nods, slightly. Tries to organize his thoughts. Offering, at last: "If Vern's wife's alive, then he LIED."

"Like that's a newsflash--but yeah, and not just to you, either." O'Reilly's grin turns scary. "And believe me, I'm gonna fuck him up over it, six ways to Sunday. For what he did to Cyril..."

(And to me?)

Right on cue: "...AND to you."

Beecher allows himself a weary little smile. Like: Did I call THAT one right, or what?

"Wanna preview?"

"Nope."

"It's juicy."

"I'm sure; thanks anyway."

O'Reilly shrugs, rises. "Your loss, bro." Glancing down at Beecher's tray: "You, uh--want those meds, now?"

Beecher starts to refuse, but thinks better of it. "...uh huh." He opens his mouth. O'Reilly palms the pills into it, doses him with water. Wipes away the overflow, brusque but gentle--surprisingly so. Or maybe not, since while it's not like they're friends, or anything--because O'Reilly HAS no friends, just tools or opponents--Beecher does continue to prove himself useful to the Irish Iago's cause, one way or another. And useful things are worthy of their own upkeep.

(VERN taught me that.)

"Sleep tight," O'Reilly tells him. While Beecher just nods in reply, already yawning: yeah, 'nifty...'night. And lets the meds pull him down, down, down once more--down into that deep and suppurating hole in the centre of his soul, that scarred-open place he can never quite fill. His
unhealed, un-healing wound. His truest weapon.

Away from Ryan, from Vern; from the intrusive, intermittent flash of Chris Keller's shadow falling across his thoughts, a death-shroud on the very idea of love. From himself. Away from Oz, for a few brief, stolen hours--pathetically short as such a respite might always be doomed to last.

***

And oh, how right I was about THAT, he thinks--waking a mere three hours later, bladder painfully full, to find Keller himself leaning over him. Beecher lies still, feigning sleep, staring up through his lashes, studying Keller's dark profile, the curve of his throat--head cocked to one side, intent.

"Toby. TOBY." Then: "Toby, don't be an asshole, okay? I know you're awake."

"Call me Toby one more time, you lying 'ho, and I'll bite your fucking throat out."

Keller rocks back on his heels, smirking. "There we go." And looking just so pleased with himself--pleased to have gotten a rise out of Beecher, one way or another; those dark eyes graze the knot of sheets at his waist, checking for damage, and Toby feels himself blush furiously, helplessly. Knowing his splayed condition means he couldn't hide...anything, even if he tried.

Beecher clears his throat. Says, hoarsely: "So: You live in here now, or what? Or do you just not have a job?"

Keller shrugs. "'S IS my job, for now. 'Infirmary janitorial'." He bares his teeth, slyly. "New idea from McManus, like you couldn't guess...everybody should do everything, at least once. Helps 'build up empathy' for each other. Like that whole podmate rotation thing."

(Remember, honey? How we met.)

Beecher sniffs. "Oh, yeah--'cause that one was a REAL winner." Thinking: Well, he tries to take me away from Sister Pete, he's gonna have a fight on his hands, and smiling slightly as he does, distracted by the thought. Keller notices, seems to stiffen--annoyed by losing Beecher's attention? (Because that's YOUR addiction, isn't it, Chris? Making people want you...or want to be wanted. By you.)

The hot, wormy thread in the stomach; the squirming, shameful pleasure-shiver: inadvertent, unwanted. Undeniable. It's a little high in itself; Beecher can admit that. One more in a long, long list--longer every time he turns around, apparently: Ambition, arrogance, booze, faith, heroin, rage, madness, an alcohol-soaked kiss in the laundry room, the bleeding spectre of L-O-V-E luuuv. Trying to draft Jefferson Keane's motion. "ManIpUlating" Vern into taking out a contract on his, Beecher's, life. Teaching Keller chess. Voting Sister Pete the sexiest woman in Oz. Beecher will always find something to glitch on, be it adrenaline, pheremones, that synthetic heroin produced in the pleasure centres of the brain--he's been "gifted", perhaps genetically, with a burning need to be somewhere else. An understandable impulse, especially here in Oz; but the fact is, he's always felt that way, no matter WHERE he was.

That's what landed him here, in the first place.

"Hey, Tobe--" Keller begins--amending, quickly (at Beecher's glare) to "--BEEcher. What happened..." He pauses. "You know it was nothin' personal, right?"

Beecher meets his eyes, coolly, Waits a minute, composing himself. Then says, with almost litigational care: "Sure, Chris. Because personal would imply you had feelings...for anybody but
yourself."

Keller makes an explosive, inarticulate sound--a long HUFF of air, mixed with some kind of repressed curse flattened to its bare consonants. His complexion darkens further, hawk-like profile turning entirely predatory; draws himself up, link by spinal link, like he's winding up for some kind of pitch. "You fuckin' little rich-boy, shyster BRAT," he says, finally. "Swanning around, actin' like your ass is made of gold--what the fuck you think this is, high tragedy? This is Oz, ToBIas. It ain't nice, and it ain't fair, it just is what it fuckin' is. And guys like you, soft guys from good homes, they don't stand up the first fuckin' day, then they get fucked. You lay down and took it: way of the world, baby. Get over it."

It's a hard hit; a year ago, even, it might have rocked the old Beecher's world, just a tad. But that Toby's been and gone, baby. And thus the new Beecher--post-gym--just shows his own teeth, grinning right back at Keller. Asking, sweetly: "Like you did?"

Keller pauses, visibly allows himself a moment to cool down, then turns the charm back on, full-strength. Murmuring: "Well...don't tell me you don't like the results."

_**Stick with the tricks you know,**_ Beecher thinks, contemptuously. Yet feels all the blood in his sheath-sheathed groin clench to see it, yet again--a hot and painful throb, traitorously responsive. Because...damn it, they WORK.

"Oh yeah," he replies, tonelessly. "Vern did a really good job. On both of us."

Keller shrugs. "What happened between us...fuck the reasons, okay? They don't matter. Fact is, you know you wanted it."

"Hey, THAT sounds familiar."

And it does, too. _**Sending out that prime prag vibe, first day I saw you,**_ Vern's memory-voice whispers, all warm and close-range silky, in Beecher's head. _**Everybody could see it, but I got there first. And aren't you GLAD, sweetpea?**_

"Glad," because it could have been Adebisi, or one of the subsidiary Aryans, or anybody else off the Em City floor, God knows, at that point. Gutter psychology, self-taught. Just enough empathy to know which way street-dumb bunnies like Beecher are likely to jump--but not enough to care WHY they do it, scuttle out of immediate danger and into something far worse, locked cheek-by-jowl with you in your pod. Or very much care about what sort of intimate damage you're gonna do to them, after they do.

Keller understands the comparison immediately, and doesn't seem to like it. "So what, I raped you too?" He gives a short, ugly hoot. "Would'a thought for sure you could tell the difference, by now."

"The only difference is, VERN never claimed he loved me."

"You heard what you wanted to hear, baby."

Beecher's grin widens. "Yeah, that's right. And he used to tell me _that_, too."

Which makes Keller blue eyes darken, now--a cold wind blowing in behind his pupils, draining them of life, burnishing them to a hypnotic sheen like coals. But: "Vern ever do THIS to you?" he asks. And, leaning down--STROKES his damnably skillful Judas hands deliberately up and down Beecher, like a man teasing a heat-crazed cat--from the top of his scalp along the line of his neck, his chest, his hip, and further. Sweat springing up, everywhere he touches. As Beecher tries--and fails--to shy away, thrashing helpless, wrenching at his own numb limbs in aroused panic, Keller traces the
blush spreading from his jawline as far down as it'll go--down to the hard little nub of one nipple, straining against the worn fabric of Beecher's issue t-shirt. Pinches it between his thumb and forefinger, with deceptive softness, and feels Beecher draw a ragged breath, pulse jumping in the hollow of his throat, where a damp curl of golden hair nests...

Keller wipes the sweat from that hollow, a deliberate, teasing flick. Then licks his fingers clean, smiling again, smugly. "I don't think so," he concludes.

Lying there pinned, with all his outer defences already broken--easy pickings, with nothing to ward Keller off with but his mind, his tongue. So Beecher snaps: "Yeah, you like it when they can't fight back, don't you, Chris? That what the gym was--foreplay?"

"I think you maybe wanna shut the fuck up about that."

"Or what? You'll step on my neck? You snapped my bones because that Nazi bastard told you to, and you laughed about it. I heard you. I saw you."

"So tell McManus." Beecher falls silent. Quiet: "But you never did, did'ja?"

Muttering: "Not yet."

"Not ever."

"Don't...flatter yourself."

But Keller hears the little crack in Beecher's voice as he says it, and shrugs once more, immediately morphed back into his old, smooth self--hard-carapaced, literally impenetrable. "Got a lot of time left to do, you and me," he says. "And we're still in the same pod, last I heard. So...we'll see."

The last word, cue for a perfect exit--which he now makes, hips swinging. Like if he had a tail to match his black cat's strut, it'd be curled in a sinuous flourish.

Beecher wishes he could cover his eyes; shuts them, instead. And is alone once more with his pressing need to urinate, his scoured and aching skull. His cock so hard, he'd need to jerk off before he could pee straight anyways...which he can't even do, without help. Thinking: Yeah. And fuck you too, Chris, withOUT fucking you...you fucking, lying, cheating, spying, sexy motherfucker.


(Okay. All right. Okay. All right. Fine.)

Thinking: This is what Chris does to me. And this...is what I do. To Vern.

For the first time in a year and a half, Beecher forces himself to consider Vern Schillinger--not just as his enemy, the blight on his life, but part by part: The sheer physical reality of Vern, once so omnipresent in Beecher's day-to-day routine. The way his eyes slant when he smiles, changing color subtly; blue darkening, taking on an almost greyish cast. His bullish shadow. His dry, reptile brain. His half-bald, leonine skull. The Oz-bred pallor of his skin, dusted with a faint, sandy tracing of hair along his forearms, his pecs, the nape of his neck. The surprising smoothness of his soft underbelly--middle-aged spread, incongruously "normal" for his age, nourished by high-starch prison food and worn slung low in a ropy net of muscle. His smell, terrible only in implication--the warm, sweaty odor of any given older male relative. Like when you brush past your uncle at a wedding reception, his shirt plastered to him from dancing with all the available female cousins. And he makes you take a drink of HIS drink, a big swig--Rye and ginger, say--'cause hey, it's a special occasion. You're old
enough. Practically a man, huh, Toby?

(Yeah. And then he drags you into the shower room, and screws you up the ass.)

Oh, those good, good times.

*You poisoned me, you fucking Nazi fuck,* Beecher thinks--eyes wide open and unseeing, staring up at the ceiling of the darkened hospital wing. *Burnt me, branded me, ran me through and ran all THROUGH me, like a disease. Like everything you touch withers--every precious memory. Every safe place.*

All polluted, now, by his constant knowledge of those...other things, the ones Keller must also have experienced. The weight of Vern's torso across your back--the wishbone strain of having your hips spread and elevated from behind--counting the seconds and cursing your own body as it manufactures an endless, rising, wave of automatic pleasure, indistinguishable in its intensity from humiliation, from rage, from a burning desire to kill...or die.

There are parts of Tobias Beecher that no one but Vern Schillinger has ever seen; they both know this. Secret places even Keller hasn't yet broached. Moments of helpless capitulation. The rush and the heat: Thrusting in, hitting something deep, coming and retching at the same breathless time, sickened by his own response. Because, though Vern CAN be cruel, he knows--connoisseur of suffering that he is--how much more insulting deceptive attendance to his victim's "needs" can be, given the right circumstances: *There, there, baby--I know you're much too...delicate to take it like a man. So there you go--and doesn't that feel GOOD?*

(Now thank me. And do it *nicely,* bitch.)

A stream-of-consciousness manifesto, cold and clear. A plan that only someone crazy as Beecher is now could think up--and only someone as crazy as he's going to have to make himself could ever carry through. Thinking: *I'll never be seen apart from Vern, not so long as I'm in Oz, and he's still alive. Crazy Beecher, prag for life--a rebel or an adjunct, publicly branded a nut AND a slut. Always a pariah, no matter how bloodily (or shittily) I proclaim my independence: An Other, for better or worse.*

*I was this, I was that. Soft. Successful. Civilized. Loved.*

(And he was loved, damn it. He was, was, was, was, was.)

Well, fuck WAS. Here's what IS.

*I've been in Oz two years plus now, and every move I've ever made has turned out to be yet one more in an endless string of almost equally bad decisions. Chris is right about one thing, that whoring son of a whore--I lay down and took it, and standing up later don't count for shit. Even if, in this case, most of said shit ended up on Vern's face. But what I never understood so clearly before--probably because I never wanted to--is how everything he's done since then wasn't really some macho rep-repair thing at all. It was because he still wants me--so bad, he must feel like he spends all day walking around with a jackhammer stuck down his pants.*

And Keller's endless, groundless provocations, tweaking Beecher just to tweak him--where do THEY come from? A former prag's jealousy over Vern's continued fascination with the new boy on the block? Or does Keller want to one-up Vern somehow by taking Beecher away from him--to take vicarious revenge for his own defloration, by stealing Vern's "property" right from under his nose?

*I don't know,* Beecher thinks, *and really, I don't care. But I DO know I'm going to play him exactly*
the way you played me--do him just the way you taught me to. We'll have a big 'ho showdown, you and me...and to the victor go the spoils, extremely spoiled as they're eventually going to be.

And now, a little word in O'Reilly's virtual ear. Because he's going to be the silent partner in all of this...yang to Beecher's yin, slowly but surely backing Vern into the corner that'll form his corrida. When Vern goes down, snorting and choking on his own blood, Ryan will be the one who gets to cut his horns off.

See--here's what I know about Vern, Ryan, Beecher thinks. When he's feeling good, he can be pretty magnanimous. It's when he's not--when he's in pain, or afraid--that you have to watch out, because the only way he can get himself straight again is to take a little hit off YOU. Your fear replacing his, your pain, and so on. Sex is not really the primary consideration.

So really, HE's the weak one, because he NEEDS to hurt someone--not just wants, NEEDS. And I guess I really am like a woman, in some ways, because I know for a fact that I can take more pain than Vern even knows about. Gen told me once that until you've had a kid, given birth, you don't know what real pain is. And I think rape is sort of the closest a man can come to that particular experience--watermelon through the asshole time, for sure. So who's the strong one here? Not Vern. The person on the bottom has all the power. They set the pace; they ALLOW what happens to...happen...

(Oh, what the FUCK am I SAYING?)

So all I have to do is let him know I'm here, that I'm waiting to start this whole sick cycle up again--MY way, this time. And see how long it takes him to take advantage. And then you MOVE, Ryan--you keep him dodging. Keep him uncomfortable. You'll see.

He can see O'Reilly's nose wrinkling even now, frankly grossed out by the whole idea. So hard for him to even admit even now, explicitly, what Beecher was when they first met--this macho Irish thug, unable to name what happened to his brother aloud: The "bad thing". As done by "the bad man", aka Vern.

You want me to fist-fight him in the Em City quad, Ryan? Or do you want us to just run at each other, like elks? Drawn dicks at thirty paces? Well, I can't keep on knocking him down and taking a crap on his head. It's exhausting, and it DOESN'T WORK. I just don't have the energy.

The big dog, the alpha male. You think you have to "be a man", right? Be a man, be strong, be tough, don't bend over for anybody...but the funny thing is, when you suddenly have all that taken away from you, in a way--it's not slavery at all. It's freedom. Give up always thinking about having to "be a man", and you can bend over backwards--or forwards, as the case may be--while all around you break. And that's what I'm gonna do.

Because: what DON'T I know about Vern, I just let myself remember? Up to and including that little noise he makes just before he comes...and the fact that HE thinks he doesn't make one.

No, fact is, O'Reilly doesn't want to think about any of this, in theory OR detail. He doesn't want to know what Beecher knows, let alone how he knows it.

So don't ask, Beecher tells him, silently: Just use it. You're good at that.

It's like--pleading a case. You know, when you're litigating on behalf of someone with a truly baseless claim, a moron, some greedy turd with no cause to speak of, who just wants to stir up trouble and pick somebody else's pocket while he does it. And not a jury trial, 'cause that's too easy--all you need is one malcontent on your side to hang the whole thing out to dry. No. A judge trial,
where all you have to do is get one person to believe a point of total bullshit just long enough to convince themselves—though they should know better—to rule in your favor.

Beecher's done that; Ryan hasn't.

*(So between the two of us, I'd be the guy who knows what the fuck he's talking about, wouldn't I?)*

And as for Vern...well. Man and wife really ARE one flesh. Which means, whatever Beecher is--Vern is, too. Weak, and needy, and addicted. And doomed.

*And I'm going to show the whole of Oswald State Penitentiary, Beecher thinks, before I show YOU, you bastard: That whatever drew you to me, in the first place, was nothing more or less than the overt display of every secret thing you carry buried deep inside yourself.*

He lies there in the darkness, and feels it seep inside him with every breath. His drying shell of sweat. His plaster shell, almost ready to crack and shed—a profane cocoon from which he already feels himself begin to emerge: One more version of Toby Beecher, sacred victim. The man whose FIRST impulse is always to throw himself headlong into the path of his own destruction, to hurt himself in order to hurt those he hates.

*(You sad, sick fucker.)*

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

(And what the fuck ELSE is new?)

*Do I DESERVE Vern?* Beecher wonders, for the last time. And finally knows, with utter certainty: *No. But I've got him, if I want him.*

(If.)
Chapter 2

FOUR

Monday morning, by the visitors' gate. Photo I.D. in place, through yet another in a series of contact doors which unlock with a shrieking buzz and the punch of a hidden button—and Tim McManus steps forward as Vern Schillinger's mysterious visitor steps through, clipboard in one hand, offering her the other: "Mrs Schillinger?"

"Rachel. And it's Renton, these days."

Maiden name, or another marriage? She doesn't volunteer; he forces himself not to pursue it. Part of his general post-riot attitude adjustment: Realize that not everyone you come into contact with owes you their secrets, even if you ARE Oz's self-elected resident Wizard. So, instead, he conjures a smile—somewhat dubious in execution, as ever, but (reasonably) pure of intent. And replies: "Tim McManus."

He gives her a brief, businesslike handshake, trying to avoid making eye contact with C.O. Diane Whittlesey, who--of course--just happens to be the escort guard. Not that she seems in any big hurry to look at him, anyway.

"Visiting room's this way," he tells Rachel Renton/Schillinger, who nods. To Diane: "Thanks." And: Not even a shrug, in response. Just a flick of the eyebrow, a little twirl on her heel, plus her blue-clad, high-held back, sauntering away down the hall. Nice.

To distract himself, McManus therefore turns his attention to Rachel--a quick inventory, head to toe. Finding her...nothing at all like he expected. But who would he have cast as Schillinger's wife, really, aside from anybody free, white and fertile? The faceless, All-American wife and mother Sister Peter Marie tells him Schillinger's described, whenever prompted, in her sessions with him? Or, conversely--though far less plausibly--some towering, airbrushed Aryan Warrior Princess, threateningly pneumatic; some submissive, elaborately "feminine" shell of a woman, all make-up and frills, like an anatomically-incorrect drag queen.

Rachel, however, fits into none of the above categories. Ten, maybe twelve years younger than Vern--which would make her what, 35?--with incongruously middle-class clothes (burgundy coat-dress, opaque black tights, sensible shoes) and manners. Three small silver rings in her right ear, two in her left. She carries a flat black bag slung over her shoulder, big enough for basic travel supplies and what looks like a package of legal documentation. (Divorce? Custody? Something medical?)

Just STOP it, Tim.

A long, wheat-sheaf blonde mass of hair worn wound in a crown of heavy braids, already starting to go a little grey at the temples. Blue eyes, frank and level under similarly silvery brows. A small-nosed, flat-cheekboned little face, wryly plain-pretty, bare except for a trace of lipstick. And the mouth, under that slight touch of color: Firm, mobile. Utterly guarded.

So odd: Schillinger's such a predator, and she--doesn't look like prey.

(Or not any more, maybe.)

She reminds him of someone, too. Someone...familiar.

As Rachel watches, McManus flips open a copy of Schillinger's file, and begins: "I don't know how
much you want to be filled in about what your--EX-husband?"

"We're...separated."

"--has been up to, the last five years, but..." Rachel shrugs--fluid, dismissive. Not knowing exactly what to make of the gesture, McManus simply confines himself to clearing his throat, and continues: "...okay, well. He's been active in the Aryan Brotherhood since pretty much the beginning of his stay here in Oz--one of their biggest wheels, in Gen Pop for three years, Em City...that's the experimental facility in cellblock three, which I run...for almost two. We also suspect he's been involved in numerous crimes while imprisoned, none of which we've been able to pin on him so far--except for when he tried to take a contract out on his former pod-, I mean, cellmate."

"And now you've got him back in population?"

"The last few months, yes." McManus gives her another sidelong glance. "I take it you already heard about him losing parole over the contract incident, and the extra time added onto his sentence."

Rachel's thin mouth curves, for the first time, into an equally thin little smile: not exactly humorless, but far too in on the joke to find it as funny as she otherwise might. "Frankly? That's the only reason I decided to approach Vern directly, even now." She pauses. "If I thought he was likely to be back on the street, anytime soon..."

(I'd run like hell, is the clear implication, and keep on running.)

Which, McManus suspects, is probably exactly what Rachel HAS been doing, up 'till now. Must take a hell of a lot of strength, to leave somebody like Schillinger--to face that kind of destroying rage, that calculated will to revenge. But then, he'd never've thought Beecher would have had the strength to leave Vern, either, before it actually happened--let alone the guts. Nobody did.

(Not even Vern.)

Should he tell her about all that, or would she really want to know? Probably not, and not--but it's not like she asks, either way. Just follows alongside him, keeping pace. And now they're almost at the visiting room door.

McManus turns, pauses; finds himself staring, yet again: Such delicate bones in her wrists, her ankles; such an elegant--but fragile--column for a throat. All that impractical hair. How would the weight of it look, down? He wonders. Falling around her--your--face...

But: Jesus, Tim! he snaps at himself, annoyed at the sudden speed with which mere study has broadened into a vague, theoretical rush of desire. Woman's got somebody waiting outside for her, for Christ's sake. Stop acting like a human groin.

And WHO--the hell--is it she reminds me of, exactly? Diane, a little, obviously; that sense of rue and regret--unsentimental, non-judgemental. We make our mistakes, and we move on, and we don't look back, ever. But...someone else, too.

"You don't seem too surprised by anything I've told you," he comments.

She looks him straight in the eye: "Should I be?" A pause; now it's McManus' turn to shrug, uncomfortably, as Rachel gives him that smile again. "I was married to Vern for twelve years, Mr McManus; I'm pretty sure I know what he's capable of. Not much left he could do to shock me."

Which makes for a pretty good place to leave things, really. This time, however, McManus simply can't resist.
"You know--you're a very attractive woman, Mrs--Ms--Renton--"

(oh, good GOING, Tim)

"--if you don't mind me saying so, and...uh..."

Rachel cocks an eyebrow; he trails away, unable to complete the thought. Game called on account of embarrassment. But she steps in--coolly--to finish for him: "...I SEEM smart. Right? So why would I end up with--Vern?"

"...that's what I'm wondering, yeah."

Rachel gives him a narrow glance, seems to consider her answer. McManus can see a variety of things passing behind those squinted blue eyes, information he has no earthly right to access. She doesn't know him; he doesn't know her, and never will. Intimacies are hardly required. "Mr McManus," she says, finally--carefully--"I drove a very long way to get here today, and I wouldn't be here at all if I didn't really need to be. So if it's all the same to you, can I maybe just speak to him, and go home?"

And again, there's that tweak of weird familiarity: something in the way she moves, she talks. Her attention to language. Her impatient, deliberate lack of emotional candor. Her innate ability to call him on his bullshit, without a hint of deliberate rudeness, while still managing to make him feel like the earth's just opened up beneath his feet. But something continues to keep him from figuring out who she resembles; a transpositional glitch, caught--and stranded--halfway between memory and resemblance, needing only one more salient detail to shake itself alive, to become...utterly obvious. Though what that might be, he couldn't even begin to guess.

McManus hands her the clipboard, pointing. "Sign here."

Rachel squints again, blonde brows ruffling. "Just a sec..." And turns to rummage in her bag, explaining: "...I'm, uh--gonna need my glasses."

***

Meanwhile, in Em City: Tobias Beecher makes his return entrance, officially cast-free at last, crab-legging it slowly across the quad with a crutch under either arm. From the floor and the overhanging upper deck, cat-calls, claps--and, here and there, a few cheers--greet him.

"Beecher, shit! How's it hangin'?"

"Hey, Beech--welcome back, you crazy fuck!"

"Bite any good dicks lately, bitch?"

This last from one of the Aryan contingent, sprawled en masse around the TV area's bank of screens. Beecher, limping past, just shows them his teeth, derisively. Asks, sweetly: "Why--you volunteering?" And brings his back molars together, with a vicious CLICK. Some laugh, but more...far more...wince. Which only makes Beecher grin the wider.

Without even a glance back, he heaves his crutches up onto the next level and starts hauling himself bodily up the staircase rail, heading towards his--

(and Keller's)

--pod. And though the effort makes him pant and his wasted muscles burn, he keeps grimly on,
ignoring the pain in his chest, his arms; internalizing it. Hurt becoming heat, banked and carefully nurtured--a smelting forge, a white-hot womb, in which his half-formed weapons already turn and burn. Fuel for the rising fire, and cheap, at half the price.

From above: "Need a hand?"

He looks up, sweat stinging his eyes: sees Ryan and Cyril O'Reilly waiting for him at the staircase's head--Cyril beaming, all innocent elation, like some six-foot-plus toddler at an impromptu birthday party; Ryan hanging back a little, playing it cool. But smiling too, by the set of his eyes, behind the hand that cups his scarred chin. Downstairs, Rebadow and Busmalis stand by their own pod's door, ready to comment and commiserate--the Others welcome wagon, together again. If Hill came rolling up, right about now, it'd be just like old times.

And: You know, I really do MISS old Augustus, Beecher thinks, a little surprised by the sudden force of his own regret. Good podmate, good conversationalist. Good guy, all told, once he finally got over being scared I was gonna circumcise him in his sleep.

But all that seems like a thousand years ago, at least. A millennium to itself.

Just then, Cyril--obviously unable to adequately control his delight for one second longer--rushes forward, hoisting Beecher up bodily into a hug so hard it makes him gasp and wince. "Toby!"

"Hi, Cyr--"

But he's cut off in mid-syllable, as Cyril squeezes tighter. Crowing: "You can walk--I saw you! Right, Ryan?"

O'Reilly saunters over, gives Beecher a dry look: Some fun, huh, Tobe? And tells Cyril: "Sure did."

Beecher coughs, feeling his ribs start to give. Suggests, hoarsely: "Uh, great--but put me down now, huh, Cyril? So I can KEEP on walking."

Slightly offended by this less-than-equally-pleased response, Cyril looks to Ryan--who nods. Lowering Beecher, with exaggerated dignity, he complains: "You said you were gonna teach me that game, remember? With the knights, and the horses."


Brightening: "Today?"

"Um...maybe not. But soon."

As Cyril's face falls, disappointed, Beecher feels himself start to droop, exhaustion rushing over him--and feels a sudden hand on his shoulder, holding him up. "You," O'Reilly tells him, "look like shit warmed over, my man."

Dry: "Thanks."

Cyril knows he's being ignored, and doesn't like it. As his lower lip starts to protrude, Ryan heads off the coming storm by ordering: "Bro. Go show Rebadow and the Mole your ball."

Cyril's pout deepens. "...they've SEEN it."

"Yeah? Well, show 'em again."
Cyril gifts them both with a classic guilt-inducing glare, to which Ryan seems patently immune, and huffs off. O'Reilly taps Beecher's shoulder, gently. "Still hurtin'?"

"Not as bad as it could be; they extended my meds prescription."

Which draws a sharp look, like: 

Maybe you need to watch THAT, man... As though THAT particular thought had never crossed Beecher's mind before, instead of--roughly a million times, by last count.

(Yes, yeah, fucking yeah. I KNOW, okay?)

He feels irritation well up inside him: a sore spot, deliberately scratched. He salves it by reconsidering the Aryans, who all now seem to be deep into discussion about what looks like a program entirely devoted to monster truck trading. "Mail been by yet?" Beecher asks Ryan, deceptively idle. O'Reilly grins. "Nope. Vern's got the day off, far as I know--'cause'a the wife."

Uh HUH.

Beecher casts a glance back at his pod: No Chris. Yet.

(Well, screw it. I'm back, and he's gonna have to learn to deal with it--just like every-fucking-body else.)

"Wanna help me unpack?" he suggests, just to see O'Reilly arch a skeptical brow: You're fuckin' kidding, right? Then raises his voice without missing a beat, to call: "Cyril?"

***

Pausing just outside the visiting room's door, inmates' side, Vern takes a moment to steel himself with a quick, compulsive set of rituals: smooths his shirt sleeves down over his tattooed arms, checking the buttons on collar and cuffs; readjusts the straps on the cumbersome cloth cast he's now forced to wear. Runs a brisk hand over the back of his fresh-shaved skull. Breathes in. Breathes out.

These pills Nathan has him on are making him feel fuzzy, vaguely nauseous--SOFT. Like any second now, his whole head is simply going to detach and float away. And more than a little (extra-)paranoid, too: Catches people looking at him out of the corner of their eyes and smirking at his discomfort--the cast his public badge of weakness, a bright red "P" for pussy, spottable from twenty paces. If this is how Adebisi used to feel, always shoving those tits up his nose, Vern's no longer so surprised that even that stone freak coon finally ended up going completely bugfuck.

On top of which, the damn things don't even WORK, either. His hand keeps right on buzzing, a low-level hum of constant pain-chatter--with the voice in his head already mocking him, sliding idle comments past in a way that seems impossible to block. Like: Way you're actin', you'd think the bitch was someone to be SCARED of.

But: Fuck her, Vern thinks, grimly. And fuck you, too, whoever you are...even if you're me. Then straightens, nods at the C.O. to cue the door, and steps through.

From partition three, Rachel hears the door screech open, and looks over. Their eyes meet through the glass, as Vern freezes--his first glimpse of that lying slut, that cheating cunt, that Day Of the Rope-worthy race traitor who just so happens to still be his lawfully-wedded ex-wife--in six-plus years. And realizes, horrified, that all he can think, seeing her sitting there, is: Oh, CHRIST...

Because goddamn, she looks good. And goddamn, God damn—if she doesn't look like the female version of Tobias goddamn Beecher, sitting there. Especially with her glasses on.

(Do NOT tell me I'm this fuckin' simple.)
He feels his gorge rise, and gives himself a rough internal shake: shit, the HELL. Because the resemblance IS disturbing, granted, but it's only partial—can't be anything but. The idea of comparing tiny Rachel, so feminine it's kind of funny, to ANY man...

And yet. The blonde hair, that peering look. That hovering, almost subconscious sense of constant disapproval--of being examined at close range, held up to the standards of some dismissive, alien intelligence...and found wanting. As ever.

Quick as a stomach-punch, he remembers how he used to take her hand in his sometimes, right at the beginning, just to heft and splay her delicate fingers with a kind of longing amazement: so soft, so easily bruised. So utterly...breakable. The image--its intensity, its inexplicable rightness—makes something turn over inside him, old and slow, an anger fathoms deep. If he could just--get his head straight...clarify. Cauterize.

It's a situation full of friction, calling out for ease, lubrication. Which means, since blood makes such a great lube, somebody is gonna have to bleed.

(Might as well be her.)

So he forces himself to saunter over, with no particular speed; sit down. Lean back in his chair, legs sprawled, and cross his arms, waiting--for her to make the first move.

Rachel picks up her phone. Vern goes to pick up his own phone, with his bad hand, then thinks briefly better of it before noticing her, noticing his hesitation, and doing it anyway. Her voice, comes to him filtered through static: a stab to the heart, with its flat, familiar San Francisco drawl. "Wow," she says. "You put on a LOT of weight."

"What do you want, Rachel?"

"Something wrong with your hand?"

"What do you want, Rachel?"

She sighs. "Look. I just, uh--"

"You want to tell me what you damn well WANT, Rachel?"

Another sigh, longer this time. Then, cool but simple: "I want you to sign over power of attorney on the kids to me, Vern. So I can get 'em away from your Dad."

To which Vern, equally cool, replies: "You still with that nigger?"

"...yes."

He shrugs. "Then there you go."

The message, barely worth voicing: Not in MY lifetime, cupcake. It's a good comeback--just the right tone of authoritative contempt. But his eyes keep sliding away from her, all on their own, unwilling even to acknowledge her presence; skirting her outline reflexively, like she's some vortex he doesn't want to get trapped in. A woman-sized black hole.

"You know where I just came from?" she asks.

"Couldn't even begin to guess."

"The hospital, seeing Jan. Our eldest?" Continuing, as Vern falls silent: "Somebody sold him an
extra-pure dose of Ice; he O.D.ed. Cory was there too, luckily--called 911, then just took off and left him by the side of the road. Cops picked him up an hour later. I'd bail him out, but--"

"—the Old Man says different."

"Oh, so you HAVE heard this one before."

Her smart, sharp mouth—it goes straight to his crotch, just like old times. He can see that junior White Power temper starting to spark and flare in her, peering out from behind the hoity, pseudo-Hippie trappings of what he takes to be the nigger's "civilizing" influence. Fucker must be a full professor by now, dressing her up like some pansy-ass Gap ad. But underneath all the gloss, Vern can still recognize the alcohol-poisoned little punk girl he met in that S.F. biker bar, along for the ride while her college-boy buddy dealt meth out the back of his Honda: Purple hair with yellow eyebrows, safety pins in her ears and backwards swastikas all over her jacket—so drunk she could barely stay vertical, yet imperious enough to stare down anybody who dared to step to her.

_saw you lookin',_ she told him, later. _Back and forth, forth and back—man, you stood out. Every guy in there with hair down to his ass or a Mohawk, and you got a Post Office employee shirt with 'Vern' on the pocket, like somebody's Dad._ Adding, with a crooked grin: _But not MINE._

Her body, her face, her devious, double-crossing Political Science student's mind—all his property, once upon a time. And every move she makes now sheds ever more memories, hot splinters of rage and desire. Leaves him right back where he started, muzzled and rigid with his own hopeless, devouring lust.

He looks at her, eyes lidding, matching her anger for anger. And rumbles: "My personal advice? You really should stop tryin' to sound like you give a shit—'cause you know, it just don't play."

"They're my sons too."

"Oh, yeah, right. Mother of the fuckin' year, that's you."

And what do you know; that actually DOES hurt. Her nose wrinkles, eyes narrowing. "I left them with you," she says, very carefully, "because I know you love them, Vern—better than you ever loved me, that's for sure. So I thought they'd be..._safe_ with you."

An extra stress, subtly mocking, on the "safe". Vern flushes, snapping: "You saying they weren't?"

With deceptive softness: "Oh, no. I mean, you took care of them—for the _first_ five minutes, at least._

(_Before you got yourself thrown back in JAIL, that is._)

Because you really fucked up on that first dealer, didn't you? You got mad, crazy mad, and you got caught—which meant you _weren't_ there for the next one, or the next. And you sure as hell weren't there to protect them from the Old Man, after the courts gave him custody: closest relative, automatic choice, what with Rachel in hiding, with Mom...dead.

_So now you get to sit in here, eat your three squares a day and play your little dominance games, and blame it all on me. And that just lets YOU off the hook, now, doesn't it?_

She doesn't have to say all this, of course, or any of it. And she knows it.

"I'm... _trying_ to be polite to you here, Rachel..."

"Really? Hadn't noticed."
Pain vies Vern's head, making the left side of his face twitch; he looks down, realizes he's been gripping the phone like he wants to crush it flat, other hand already a fist. With her right there, on the other side of the glass—knowing exactly what he wants to do to her, and well aware...revelling...in the fact that...he can't. It's like that first time she left him, when he hunted her back down and dragged her from her parents' home by her newly grown-out hair.

All his life, he's despised men who beat on women—men like the Old Man, who frankly didn't have enough guts to take on anybody who could potentially fuck their ass. Because that was one thing his first stint in jail had taught him: The dark rush of victory which comes with cracking another man wide open, muscle against muscle; nothing natural about it, no hint of REAL union, real responsibility. Just power from power, hurt for hurt: You make your mark, suck out their heart and then throw the rind away—knowing, forever after, that they'll be yours anytime you care to give 'em the nod again.

Since women are already born weak, meanwhile, there's no earthly reason you have to try and make them that way; it's coward bullshit, overkill. But Rachel--there was a girl born not to know her place. She'd slapped him, kicked him, used her too-educated tongue, along with those few secrets he'd been cunt-drunk enough to tell her, to flay him alive. And so he'd beaten her with everything he knew, used every trick the Old Man had ever practiced in front of him--holding her in his arms, afterwards, and berating her in a moaning howl, so unexpected he even scared himself.

You see what you DO to me, you bitch? You see what you MAKE me do?

His only coherent thought, that same old familiar refrain: Mine, mine, mine. My wife, my child inside her; mine forever, better or worse. 'Till death do us part.

Rachel, who'd fought him like a man—always—then taken the consequences, gladly. And oh, these goddamn drugs, making him reel with long-buried things. He wants to sift his own skull, run his fingers through his memories, pick out all the ones that have to do with her, and burn them. Wants to throw her down, right damn now, and fuck her so hard her cold blue eyes bug out; so hard his head sings with blood and his tattoos burn, black lightning bolts humping like parasitic worms beneath his skin...

Feeling those eyes on him, suddenly, he comes to all at once, realizing it's been far too long since he last spoke. That she can see--too much.

"Boy," she says, quietly. "You really are in a lot of pain, aren't you?"

(The worst possible observation, at the worst possible moment.)

"I need you to shut the fuck UP, Rachel, that's what I need. Right fucking now."

"Look, it's pretty obvious you've got some kind of--"

"Woman, will you just shut fucking UP?"

Even shielded, she recoils from his ferocity; he grins to see her flinch. Then start over, after a long moment: "Well. Very sorry indeed to distract you with my dumb little female troubles, Vernon, since I know how much you must be enjoying your stay here in this—estrogen-free zone--"

(Oh, VERY cute. You endless cunt.)

"—but..." Her facade cracks, at last. "...Jesus! This is Jan, Cory. Remember them? You really want
to tell me you want them to end up like that asshole you call Dad? Or—oh, but no, I forgot: YOU just want them to end up like you."

(In jail. In Oz.)

They glare at each other again, Vern's hand throbbing hard; Rachel panting, just a little. He can see her Eve's non-apple rise and fall, between the two popped pearl buttons at her dress's neck. One blue vein just visible, running the taut length of that soft, white throat...Then he turns, rising, back toward the door. Tells the guard: "I'm ready."

"Guess I'll see you next week, then," Rachel says, before he has time to hang up the phone. "Same place, same time."

"Fuck you will."

"Fuck I won't. No trouble, really. My boss lets me work at home—and Paul says he can always drive me up, anytime I want."

Vern pauses, brow twisting: "Who?"

Rachel smiles one more time, a bitter twist of the lips. Explaining, as she leans to hang up: "Paul, Vernon. You know. 'The nigger.'"

***

Screech of contact doors. Vern stomps away down the corridor, back to Gen Pop, with everything on fire: his head, his chest, his groin. Grinding against himself in shameful pleasure, as he curses her anew with every step—'till fuckin' McManus, appearing from behind, calls after him. "So, Schillinger--you guys have a nice talk? Work some stuff out?"

Without turning: "Fuck you, McManus."

"She comes back, you do know I'm gonna make you see her again, right?" Adding, as Vern reaches the corner: "Therapy, Schillinger! Get used to it!"

Grinding his teeth, so hard his whole jaw sings. And refusing to call back, much as he may all but ache to do so: Oh, SUCK my fuckin' DICK, you skinny psych-major prag-in-waiting.

Then they're gone, in separate directions. Leaving the hallway empty once more.

FIVE

Limping back into Sister Peter Marie's office for the first time in eleven long weeks, Beecher finds both Sister Pete herself, already up and smiling, warmly, in his direction--no surprise there--plus his old desk, which sports a massive pile of as-yet-unentered files. He raises an eyebrow. She raises one back.

"Told you you were missed," she says. And opens her arms.

***

Now he sits in front of the blinking terminal, still feeling the residue of that hug cling to him like a warm mist--her bird-like body, so unexpectedly wiry in his grip. So fierce, and so unabashedly free with her own affection. If she only knew what I'm going to do, he thinks, unable to avoid it, to Vern and--myself, really...
...she'd kick your no longer quite so broke ass from here to Heaven's gate, the voice inside his head chimes in, right on cue. And no doubt, she'd be right to.

You know, I can't really believe in God anymore, he remembers telling O'Reilly once, high as the proverbial kite, while they reeled and cackled together by the foot of the Irishman's bunk. But the one thing left I CAN believe in...that's gotta be Sister Pete.

With O'Reilly nodding along, a stoned study in too-solemn agreement: Right on, Toby, my man. Right fuckin' ON.

Knowing it'll hurt her; that's all Beecher has real qualms about. Because, let's face it—everything else, he could pretty much perform in his sleep. Been there, been done like that. Got the t-shirt. Nearly took out a guy's eye and tried to jump off the top deck, just to avoid having to wear it.

And speaking of which—it suddenly occurs to Beecher that he still hasn't seen hide nor (figurative) hair of ol' Vern as yet today, for all that his visit with "the wife" must surely have ended hours before. Such inaccessibility bids fair to put a bit of a damper on all Beecher's evil plans, the same ones he's eager to jump-start before he's had adequate time to try and talk himself out of carrying them through.

But let's face it: There's only so many places Em City and Gen Pop can overlap, in point of fact. It's bound to happen. And then...

...then we get to see, Toby. If you can really stand to put your money where your mouth is, or vice fuckin' versa.

Stretching out his legs, which have already started to cramp and burn with enforced inactivity, Beecher turns his attention back to the task before him. Remembers the last time he was in here, nursing the most recent in a long line of post-heartbreak hangovers; running a dry tongue over furry teeth, desperate to justify his burning urge to call up Keller's file, cross-reference what clues to Chris's inner world he'd (thought) he'd gleaned from enforced proximity and obsessive observation with Sister Pete's notes. Keller's private, intimate consultations with Oz's very own psychiatrist/nun, detail by hard-won detail, left right there on the record for anyone with access...Beecher, say, Sister Pete's most devoted devotee...to pour over.

At first, surreptitiously rifling through the same psych files he spent all day helping to compile had been simple self-defence: a desperate attempt to head off Vern's ploys at the source, by decoding those personal signals far too obscure—or simply alien—for him not to initially fumble. Then returning, after his own little Independence Day celebration and the riot that followed, to rack up ideas for his revenge...boning up on Vern's self-confessed sore spots, preparatory to the elaborate pre-parole mind-fuck Beecher'd so carefully planned out while sitting alone in the hole, licking the walls for moisture and trying (in vain) to cough the taste of that dumb Gen Pop would-be pragholder Jim Robson's genital blood from his throat.

She just leaves you in here, alone?

Oh, all the time, Guard Whittlesey; all the time. She trusts me...more fool HER.

Which might be the perfect cue for a fresh, distracting rush of disgust at the arcane workings of his own black, tangled heart—if a voice from the doorway didn't suddenly intrude. "Am I interrupting anything?"

Beecher swivels, recognizes the man Dr Nathan introduced him to last week, on his way back from getting the casts off—Joe somebody, volunteer physical therapist to the incarcerated. 3:00 already;
time for their first session outside the infirmary. And: Back to the gym, he thinks. That legendary patch of unhallowed ground, where all bad things begin...and end.

Beecher feels memory start to stir, so long deferred, and tenses at its sneaky, seductive touch: A helpless sense of willing complicity in his own betrayal, offset by the koan-like sound of four limbs snapping. He raises his hands from the keyboard, giving his most studiedly "harmless" smile—the same one he used to trot our during contract negotiations, gently self-deprecating, as if to prove himself utterly free of any bad intentions. The same one he gave Gen, just before he asked her out. The same one he gave that cunt of a judge on the first day of his trial—when he looked deep into her unsympathetic eyes, and knew he was going to be convicted. Suspecting, even then, that whatever followed would be worse than anything he could have previously imagined.

(And if nothing else, I sure was right about THAT.)

Rummaging underneath the desk for his crutches, Beecher levers himself up. Replying, as he does: "I'm all yours."

***

Stalking and scowling back through the halls of Gen Pop, Vern already suspects—from long experience of such things—that much like McManus, the Em City chorus will also not have failed to take notice of his ex-wife Rachel's visit. Which turns out, soon enough, to be true.

Poet, to Kenny Wangler: "Yo, yo, li'l dog, you gots to catch a sight'a Schillinger's ol' lady, man. 'Bout so high, all this hair like Malibu fuckin' Barbie or some shit, and yo, she gots the MAD titties on her, too..."

Wangler: "Man, you even more fucked up than usual. Thought you was seein' your bitch up in there today."

Poet: "Aw, sure, but you know how it is, a'ight—I'm in the stall next to 'em, and you KNOW I just gotta take a peek. 'Sides, turns out she on some serious jungle fever shit, for real."

Wangler: "Say what?"

Poet: "Naw, trip on this: O'Reilly got it from some Mick hack on the gate. She may'a come to see ol' Vern, but she goin' home with a BROTHER."

In the kitchen, meanwhile, Ryan O'Reilly whistles while he works. Knowing that phase 1-A of the longterm rep assassination job he's already come to think of as "Operation Vern-baby" is ticking along just as it should...right on track, and right on time.

***

In Oz, as everywhere else, being "part of something" takes work. Case in point:

"Ever since Nappa and Wangler hooked up, gangstas been actin' stone out of control. Them niggaz is laughin' at us, fellas. So what WE gotta do is tear one of 'em's fuckin' head clean off, take a dump down his neck, plus maybe fuck the bloody stump while we're thinkin' 'bout it."

Fritz Duchene, aka "Der Fuhrer", watches his fellow Aryans nod in agreement, and takes a stealthy glance around the yard, scanning for any visible trace of Schillinger—besides the words currently coming out of his own mouth, that is. Because, effective as those words may be, incendiary, concise, what-fuckin'-ever, he's getting just a little tired of playing the big man's duly-elected mouthpiece.
'Course, there's a lot worse things to be. And it's mainly Vern's still-potent influence in Oz which has saved him from exploring most of those options, thus far.

Under his itchy, relatively new A.B. Tattoos, Duchene can feel the lingering traces of the white-boy gangsta-wannabe signifiers he walked in with: "Pretty fly" back when he was dealing on the street, but hardly appropriate after a week or so under Vern's tender care. But it's cool. He can always take to wearing turtlenecks, once he makes it out of this 24 hour-a-day shit-storm with all his parts intact.

And here comes the S-man now, stomping heavy 'round the basketball court, amid the usual jeers and hisses, so preoccupied he doesn't even bother to shoot the offenders an automatic one-finger salute. The right side of his mouth is drawn up in a grim, skewed line; his bad eye looks absent, almost unfocussed. "Hey, Vern," Duchene calls, striking a pretty good balance between Heil-fellow-well-met and beta-dog placatory. But Vern just throws himself down centre-group, not even bothering to respond—his baleful blue glare enough to scare everybody else equally silent.

So what crawled up YOUR butt and died? Duchene thinks, annoyed. Not that he's got quite the wad to say it out loud, as yet—'cause even after all his various setbacks, Vern remains one fairly scary, authoritative motherfucker, tapped in tight with true-life freak magnets like Guard Metzger both inside Oz AND out. So whenever he shines his light on you, you better be ready either to run and jump or duck and cover, and Fritz hasn't spent this much time protecting his own precious ass just to get it reamed out, lit or fig, by another Aryan.

"You been talking about Wangler and Nappa?" Vern asks, without preamble. At Fritz's nod: "'Kay. So here's what we're gonna do..."

...make an example of one of Wangler's crew—some incoming drug mule, preferably...

...cut him open so the heroin-filled condoms in his stomach spill out for everyone to see...

...then kill two birds with one stone by trading the blame for this apparent anti-drug statement on to Kareem Said and his bunch—the bulk of whose Gen Pop-based chapter are, as usual, hard at prayer on the yard's opposite side, salaaming towards Mecca and wailing intermittent cries of "Allah...u'ackbar!" with roughly equal fervor.

It's a sexy plan, and Vern gives it all he's got: the silk-over-steel Big Daddy delivery, hypnotically intimate, cut here and there with a free and easy, "just-plain-folks" grin, as though amused—and just a little aroused—by the sheer extent of his own Machiavellian invention. But Duchene notices him playing with his CT cast, absently. The slight drag on his consonants, a barely-measurable time-lapse between thought and statement. And thinks: Man, if I didn't know better...I'd say he was STONED.

And he is, he realizes, slowly—on Dr Nathan's painkiller cocktail, its original potency obviously doubled by Vern's mounting stress. This thing with his hand, making him surreptitiously pop pills, violating his own strict anti-drug code. Not to mention this thing with his wife.

Sure, Vern's usually got the skinny...but all his White Power certainty didn't save him from a shit facial, did it? Is he going down? And, if so—how can Fritz avoid going down with him?

"...and then, when Wangler's already swingin', we take a pull on his feet just to make sure he's dead," Vern concludes. "McManus identifies him as head of the tits trade, bounces him into the hole; the whole thing reverts back to Nappa, who has to call in—say—Ryan O'Reilly to play prime pusher figurehead, or risk takin' the chance that McManus goes after him next. Which, in turn, gets that fuckin' Mick off our--"

(my)
"--back."

(Here endeth the lesson.)

Vern pauses; Duchene--gripped by a serious Afterschool Special flashback--has to resist the urge to raise his hand, before replying. "Not like I mean to take a crap on your parade," he begins, "but...tell me again why should we give that scheming bastard a fuckin' thing, exactly?"

Vern shoots him a freezing look. Then asks, with exaggerated patience: "Who'd you rather have to deal with, Fritz? A Mick, a wop--or an uppity little fuckin' nigger who ain't even old enough to vote?"

"How 'bout none of the above?"

Vern just smiles. Softly: "Well, there's always gonna be somebody."

(The trick, of course, being to make sure you get to pick the enemy you WANT.)

He snaps his fingers at two of the posse, who dog-jump to his side. "You--and you--I want this done soon, and I want it done...obvious. You got that?" The goons nod--then, remembering Duchene, look to him for confirmation. He nods back. Thinking, as he does: Get the meat to do your dirty work, huh, Vern? They take the risk, you get the glory; choice.

But wait a second. That Duchene ever ended up in line for this position at all, after the late Mark Mack ended up burying himself alive beneath Em City's floor, came about pretty much as a direct result of his personal involvement in one or two earlier...command decisions. So--does that imply Schillinger thinks he—Fritz—is meat? And, maybe always has though so?

Before he can allow this sudden insight the kind of closer observation it deserves, however, Vern rises, turning for the yard's nearest exit. "Where you goin'?" Duchene hears himself snap, too startled even to modify his tone.

Vern: "The gym."

"Now?"

"Right now." Coolly: "And I suggest you tag along--'cause if you wanna stay on top, and out of the hole, we're both gonna need to establish ourselves an alibi."

Duchene bridles, but Vern's already halfway gone; Fritz, flushing, is forced to sprint to catch up, and look dumb doing it—neither of which sensations he enjoys. But: We'll see, he thinks, to himself; after the dust settles, we'll just SEE who has the real advantage--the meat, or the motion.

***

Meanwhile, in the gym:

Chris Keller lays into the punching bag hard—left-right-left, uppercut, jab. Right hook. A half-assed kick, sending it slamming unexpectedly back against his knee and up along the inside his thigh; a painful collision, though one he bites his tongue on rather than do more than grunt. He closes his eyes, leans his damp and aching forehead against the bag's cool, smooth surface. Tries to ignore the spectacle playing itself out right in front of him, through the mesh fence: Tobias Beecher being put through his physio paces on a nearby mat, while the therapist bullies and exhorts him to "make that sweat count!"
Beecher, half-pound weights velcroed to his wrists and ankles, casting the occasional sidelong glance Keller's way, in between each successive stretch and pose—languid, lax, strangely sinuous—as though calculating the effect his display is having on him, so overt he might as well be asking it aloud: *You like this one, Chris? This? Oh, and how 'bout this--my personal favorite. So hard to do, even if you HAVEN'T just recovered from getting your arms and legs snapped like twigs by someone you...*

(trust)

...*love.*

That word, again. The one Keller's never been able to translate with absolute surety. Always saying it, eventually—and always meaning it, for that one brief moment: Sure I "love" you, baby--"love" your mouth, your hands, your eyes. Your body's response, and the response it triggers in mine. How much you obviously want to be "in love" with *me.*

Breathing it into the clean curve of Toby's freshly-shaved jaw, though, as his lips brush up and over--into the sweetly revealed line of his lips, his hot teeth, his wet velvet tongue: *I...love you. Too. And feeling it in his bones, his gut, his stiffening, lit-from-within dick: So fine. So nice. So very, weirdly RIGHT in every way, somehow...he could almost get to believe it himself.*

*We want what we want,* he thinks. *If we're lucky, we even figure out how to GET what we want, before it's too late to do anything about it. And if mouthing one simple phrase is enough to bring me what I want, then really—what the fuck do you EXPECT me to say?*

It's a funny thing, being kept so close to someone--anyone, unsuspecting prospective "favor" for an old friend or not. Breathing the same air, acclimatizing to their smell. Learning, almost subconsciously, to mark off the hours by their personal pattern of ritualized behavior: When they eat, sleep, piss. A certain familiarity can't help but develop. A kind of proprietary interest—all part of the plan, of course. And yet...not.

Because: even ranting and snapping, aloof and nightmare-plagued—even sporting that rancid, four-forked beard, masking his face like the world's ugliest suit of self-produced armor--Tobias Beecher really was one good-lookin' item. Keller could totally understand Vern's continued quest to re-break and regain him, much as the old Nazi might claim it was strictly payback time for their own legendary gym pas-de-deux; there was a perversely seductive current at work beneath Beecher's madness, whether he knew it or not--passionate, immediate, intense as a claws-out slap to the face. Raw enough to pull even Keller in hard, practiced whore that he was; to hook him deep and leave him to squirm, unsatisfied.

*You're such a DOG, Chris,* his first wife Kitty had snarled at him, once, in the midst of yet another argument. *Chase anything that moves, and jump on top of anything that don't. If you can't have pussy, there's always ass--bet you'd fuck a damn snake, you son of a bitch, if you thought you could find the right hole. To which he'd just smirked back at her, not even bothering to defend himself--leaned back against the wall, striking his habitual pose of sexy indifference. Thinking: That's right, honey. And when the snakes run out, you know where to find me--off in some corner, humpin' up against a rock.*

Just not even a problem, pretending to get it up--or *getting* it up, if it went that far--on command, for anybody, anytime. His stock in trade, sorta; the skill that'd saved him from so many tough spots, all through his life, long before Vern, as well as after.

And so, that hug. That ill-timed grope. Those shower-room conversations. Chess and wrestling. That
one brief—far too brief—laundry-room kiss, improv-ed at such short notice it took Keller's breath away, and prefaced by an unplanned, headlong blurt of truth. *I married three different women, Toby, one of 'em twice, each a fucked-up attempt to get close without getting TOO close. Told 'em all what they wanted to hear...only to be pretty damn disappointed, frankly, when they were willfully dumb enough to take me seriously.*

Like YOU did, I guess, in the end. But not anymore.

Like a bolt to the heart, the icy sting of Beecher's disregard. When the gym doors first opened to admit them, and Keller looked up--unprepared--to meet that frigid stare, he'd felt an odd little squeeze in his chest, a hitch and flutter in his breath: his palms gone slick, beneath the wraps. Actually wavering on the ragged edge of saying something, not that he had the faintest idea what--until Beecher just crutched on blithely by him, following Mr Physio without even a backwards glance.

(Oh, you little, fuckin'--LAWYER, you.)

Another kick, spinning the bag on its chain. Another jab.

*I mean, I SAID I was sorry. Meant it, even. And you just blew me off, froze me out--like I crashed your cocktail party, or took a crap in your cappucino, or something.*

*Rich boy, college boy, spoiled-rotten BRAT. Think you're better than me? You lay down and took it too, remember?*

But: *Not forever, he didn't,* Chris's own internal voice reminds him. *Which is more than you can say about yourself.*

Keller hauls back and slugs the bag again, so hard his whole arm jars with pain. Looks over at the mat, almost reflexively...and sees Beecher leaned back now, panting with over-exertion, his wet golden head cradled gently in the therapist's lap. Nothing sexual about the image, really—unless, as Keller finds himself doing, you mentally substitute your own pelvis for the physio-guy's. Feel the silky hairs on the nape of Beech's tense neck make secret contact with your pelvic cage, sharp intersecting ridges of bone and muscle soothed--and teased--by careful pressure. Those calm blue eyes staring up at you, rimmed with pale gilt lash. Those myopic pupils, narrowing in concentration. Then irising open again, eclipsing the blue, as your shadow falls over him. As you lean down, ever closer, closer...

(And THEN what, Chris?)

*Then...he puckers up and spits, right in your fuckin' Judas face.*

Keller hisses through his nose at the image, a sledgehammer to his mental chest. It shouldn't hurt so much; shouldn't mean a damn thing. Doesn't. Not really.

(Except for the fact that it *does.*)

But just then, the gym door opens, admitting some new Aryan guy—Duchene, right? They all kinda run together, after awhile. And, right behind him...Vern.

(OH, boy.)

***

At the sound, Beecher turns his head. Looks up. Meets Vern's eyes, halfway—sees shock and...what? Something else, quickly masked: Remembrance of mats past, maybe. Beecher pinned by
Keller, red-faced and roaring, split seconds away from the most intense pain of his life, though hardly the most enduring. While Keller himself, still over by the punching bag, pretends not to notice—and Vern's latest flunky, also either bent on ignoring or simply unable to perceive the sudden surge of murderous energy rocketing through the room, simply crosses over to the nearest bench and lays back, hands going automatically to the thirty-pound barbell shelved just overhead. Asking Vern: "Spot me?"

Vern shakes himself awake—a nearly imperceptible twitch, to those unversed in the art of Schillinger-reading—and replies: "Sure." Turning away, deliberately, from the therapeutic pieta beyond the mesh. While Beecher shuts his own eyes, thinking--

--and so...it begins.

To Joe, out loud: "I'm done for today."

"Ten more minutes, Toby."

"I'm done, 'Joe'. Had enough. Sweating like a pig, can't move. No more."

The therapist just gives an attempt at a chuckle, professionally warm. "Listen, man, if you got the strength to argue..."

Beecher lets his eyes snap open again, growling up at him: "I hurt, okay? You get that? So you can either have yourself a good ol' time counting off the next ten all on your ownsome while I lie here like a sentient stump, or you can just gimme my goddamn meds and let me go back to my pod, before I pass out and pee all over this lovely new equipment of yours."

Poor Joe sits back on his heels, a little stunned by this sudden rush of bile; Oz's orientation courses probably didn't give him much advice on how to deal with abrupt mood-swings in formerly-crippled white-collar criminals, Beecher guesses. "I...don't have them with me," he begins, hesitant.

"Better go GET them then, huh?" Softening, slightly: "Please."

"...all right."

He gets up, walks away. From his position on the mat, Beecher can see him talking with Whittlesey, who's apparently just replaced that guy who gave Beecher the smarmy, "I know what happened to you"-type grin on their way in. Fine; SHE's got at least a touch of integrity, plus that pleasantly pissy attitude. If Beecher had actually listened to her "welcoming" spiel on his way into Em City, maybe he wouldn't be lying where he is today.

And speaking of which...Still prone, Beecher raises his voice, ever so slightly: "Vern." No response. So he repeats, volume increasing every time: "Hey, Vern. Vern. VERN. Hey, VERN. VERRRRRR--"

From the weights area, just loud enough to betray real annoyance: "Fucking WHAT, you freak?"

Pleased by the quick response, Beecher makes sure to smile to himself, really overtly—along with Chris, who he can just see through the mesh, still playing like he isn't watching. Answering: "Oh, just wanted to know if you were awake. And listening."

***

Just what the fuck does he think he's doing, exactly?
Keller scans Beecher for signs of motive, but finds none: kind of scary, in itself. Because even at his nuttiest, Beech has always been readable--incapable of completely concealing his emotions, any more than he could stop his pale skin from changing color under pressure. Now, though...now, there's something new about him. Some shield, cloaking it all: Invisible, reflective. Impenetrable.

Lawyers lie, that's their job. And according to Toby, he's not a real lawyer anymore, not since they took away his license—but how true can THAT be, really? Maybe he's just so good at it, he can't even tell when he's doing it anymore.

(Or maybe that's yourself you're thinking about, Chris.)

...maybe.

The guy on the bench completes his reps and rises, making way for Vern, who takes his place, apparently bent on ignoring Beecher altogether. As the barbell starts its steady rise and fall once more, however, Beecher snaps the tabs on his wrist-weights and slips them free--one, two. A little clumsy. Freed from their restraint, he pulls himself--slowly--up into a sitting position, then does the same with the weights on his ankles. Taking a moment, he hugs his stiff knees to him, as though for protection; seems to pause, to think, draw a long, slow breath before finally putting his hands on the floor, and forcing himself upwards--up on his feet, swaying slightly. Turning, unsteady, towards the mesh. Taking first one crutch-less step, then another...

The barbell pauses.

Beecher's reached the mesh now, the door-frame. Balancing himself, with the wall's help, he steps through into the weights area itself; the Aryan stares, as does Keller. Thinking, with a sick kind of humor: Whoo, yeah, gang's all here--the ex, the ex and the ex...

(...oh, and THIS guy.)

Vern--NOT staring, pointedly, but apparently feeling his arms start to tremble nonetheless--reshelves the barbell and lies back against the bench, waiting. "You got something to say to me?" He asks.

Beecher pauses again, miming thought. Then replies, brightly: "Well...yes." And smiles--that brisk, characteristic, all-too-wide grimace, full of teeth. The Jim Robson special, in other words.

The Aryan glances over, raises an eyebrow: Do something? But Vern just shakes his head. Telling Beecher: "Then just SAY it, sweetpea. Or go get fucked."

At the sound of this double-barrelled endearment/insult combination, Beecher grins again, but wider; moves past Keller, still frozen at the bag's side, fixing him out of the corner of one glacial blue eye as he goes by. And gifting him, so quick it's almost impossible to register, with a sly, cold...wink. And: "Mmmm," he announces, to no one in particular—the air, maybe. The planet Mars. "Interesting choice of words."

To which Keller can only think in return, aghast: Oh, Toby, what the ever-lovin' FUCK.

Realizing, finally, that he does not know this man, after all—not the version currently in front of him, at least, hobbling towards his former tormentor while forcing his unsteady stride into a parody of Keller's own stray cat (in heat) strut. The one playing idly with his own soaked shirt-tail, sketching light fingers up the moist muscles of his own half-revealed belly...lowering his eyes, demure as some unveiled harem girl. And murmuring: "So, Vern...you enjoy your little visit today? Your fifteen-minute slice of martial bliss?"

"None of your fuckin' business."
"Oh, I think it might be. Being as how--barring any unforeseen complications--the fact that your wifey finally trekked her no doubt pure-white self out to Oz makes me the only REAL widower in here. Unless..." To Keller: "Chris--any of your wives dead, you know of?" Keller shrugs, uncomfortably; Beecher gives a droll coo, in return. "You are SUCH a romantic."

The Aryan snickers, and Keller resists the sharp urge to deck him one. While Vern, never too comfortable when he thinks he's no longer the centre of attention, snaps back: "Hey, bitch: wanna flirt with him all day or do you wanna get on with it, before your nigger nursemaid gets back with the daily fix?"


A shrug. "Well, I really don't know how much more explicit I can possibly get..." And: very close now--right at the bench's edge, practically hovering between Vern's wide-sprawled legs--Beecher lets his hand stray further up, checking his own forehead, as though for signs of fever. Announces, to no one in particular: "Man, I am WIPED." To Vern: "You mind?" After which, with one surprisingly quick, surprising long stride, the crazy son of a bitch actually sits down across Vern's knees, almost in his lap, the sudden impact forcing an inadvertant "Oof!" from Schillinger's throat.

Aryan-guy chokes; Keller gulps down a whoop, converting it--at last possible minute--to a fairly plausible cough. Beecher, meanwhile--smile growing again—shifts slightly; holds Vern's eyes as he re-seats himself with equal firmness, but just a tad more finesse. And Keller, watching both their bodies' language, knows--knows--how not only is Vern already harder than a steel pole in winter, but that Beecher is well able to feel the indisputable proof of that well-concealed fact for himself.

"So where were we? Oh, yeah. My offer."

Vern, hoarse: "You nutbag fuckin' FA--"

But here Beecher touches his lips, gently, with two crossed fingers; a move from which Vern shies like a fly-stung horse, though willpower—along with the prospect of looking weak in front of not one but two underlings—conspires to keep him rigid. And: "Sssh," Beecher says. "Just listen." Leaning in, ever closer, one hand on the barbell but the other on Vern's shoulder, now—fingers splayed, digging in, barely keeping himself aloft. "You know what happened here, Vern? Back then, on that mat, me and Chris? You won. You wanted to punish me; I'm punished. Teach me my place? 'Kay, done. So, since THAT's settled—why don't I come by the post office, sometime in the next few days, or so—and..."

Leaning even further in, as Keller watches, awestruck, to whisper right next to Vern's ear, making it sound far more like a threat than a promise: "...fuck your fuckin' brains out?" Then adding, quickly: "You on top, of course. Just like you like it."

As Vern struggles to compose some kind of coherent reply, meanwhile--the resident Ayran far beyond staring, now--a sudden commotion at the door intrudes; Mr Physio, returning, Guard Whittlesey in tow. Who yells out in amazement, drawing her nightstick: "Break it UP, fellas!"

(No fighting, no fucking, and DEFINITELY no lap-dancing.)

Beecher, still at Vern's ear, ignores the warning except for lowering his voice even further, hissing, as he does: "Or can you only get it up when the other person isn't interested?" At which Vern basically erupts up off the bench, from lengthwise to full height in barely a second--the sheer force of
his movement throwing Beecher to the floor, where he sprawls, wincing, right at his therapist's feet.

Therapist Joe: "What the hell just happened here?"

One good goddamn question, Keller thinks, as Beecher simply looks at Vern, eyes paling with repressed amusement; as Vern glares back, patently unamused. And Whittlesey, similarly immune to the joke, cautions: "You better give him an answer, Beecher."

Gaze still on Vern, Beecher shrugs again. "Fell down, Guard Whittlesey," is all he says, not turning. "Just like you saw."

"Yeah, you keep on DOING that."

Dry: "That's right. Frankly, I'm surprised you guys ever leave me in here at all."

The therapist sighs, and sticks out his hand; Beecher takes it. Allows himself to be drawn up, while Whittlesey deigns to collect his crutches, then follows meekly after poor Joe with her at his heels, playing escort—cocking her head to scowl back at Keller, the Aryan, Vern. Scanning for clues, and getting exactly nothing: Aryan-boy's slack jaw, Keller's world-class game face. And Vern, just standing there, casted hand clenched by his side, wearing a look that could be either baffled rage, or enraged bafflement: Confusion run rampant, just like that very visible swelling behind the fly of his pants. Unwilling, or unable, to lift his eyes from the patch of floor where Beecher used to be--like he expects to still see his former (prag's outline burned onto it, his murmuring mouth, his silken eyes. His smile, radioactive with mocking promise.

A joke, Keller's mind repeats, hopefully. That's what is is. On Vern, on me. On both of us, for what we did. What Vern...MADE me do...

(Oh, uh huh.)

And besides—I SAID I was sorry. Right?

Right.

'Cause it's not like Beech can mean it; not him, not with Vern, no way, nohow. No--fuckin'--WAY.

('Course not.)

Nevertheless, Keller finds himself hugging the punching bag almost surreptitiously, not quite as convinced as he'd like to be. No more than he's able to understand why...given everything that's happened...he's so sure he'd feel so much better, if only he was convinced.

***

An hour later, in the kitchen, Ryan O'Reilly and Kenny Wangler stand figuratively head-to-head—or rather Kenny's head to the Irishman's lanky, compact chest, in Wangler's case—while glaring each other down over a plate of pasta destined for the table of Antonio Nappa.

Wangler: "Look, fuck YOU, a'ight, O'Reilly? I done made that ol' wop motherfucker his goddamn noodles--"

Ryan grits his teeth. "So what do you want, a medal? This ain't even his order, asswipe!"

"Man, you NEED to step back o' that shit, 'fore I--"

"I mean, fuck, Wangler, even Adebisi could tell the difference between red sauce and white sauce;
"one's red, one's white, for Chrissakes! You need me to draw you a fuckin' map?"

"Don't you be throwin' Adebisi up to me, bitch!"

"Who you callin' a bitch, BITCH?"

From behind them both, a dry cough intrudes. It's McManus, materializing from the fuckin' walls as usual, flanked by two of Em City's largest C.O.s--barring Metzger, that is, who Ryan can't help but notice McManus seems to be avoiding, these days.

(Gotta look into that...)

Kenny turns, hands on hips. "What'chu want, McManus?"

"You familiar with a guy name of LeVon Jordaire, Kenny?"

Jordaire: A Jefferson Keane-era gangsta hanger-on usually found moping around the phone booth, nervously twisting the fake-gold Uzi he sports on a chain around his neck and telling barely-plausible lies about all the 'hos he's done back in the 'hood. Ryan's heard he runs tits for Wangler, which seems fairly consistent with the general tenor of Kenny's operation: The fucked-up leading the fuck-ups. One way or another, Nappa's pact with Kenny's getting so it ain't worth the paper it was never signed on, fast. But O'Reilly's just stood back and watched, so far--marking territory, mapping players. Letting nature...the Oz version, at least...take its usual, prospectively bloody course.

"Y'all KNOW it."

McManus nods, slow; a little sad, even. And: "Yeah," he says. "I do know. That you—knew him."

Ryan can see it on Kenny's face, just like it must show all over his own: Knew? But McManus is already nodding to the hacks, who drag Kenny off, protesting; won't even bother to explain why, obviously, 'til Wangler's safely in his office or the hole, whichever comes first. Then glances back over at O'Reilly, who meets his eyes without hesitation, studiedly expressionless. Not even reacting...on the surface, at least.

Think I can't find out for myself what just happened, Timmy-boy? Ryan lets his squinted green eyes ask, silently. Take me five fuckin' minutes, with the word to the right people. Maybe less.

McManus' own pale eyes hold his for a long moment, as if assessing the relative penetrability of O'Reilly's assumed indifference. Then he looks away, looks down, slowly, as if only now noticing the pasta, left cooling on the counter between them. "Appetizing," he says.

(Oh, uh huh. 'Cause I know you got SUCH a high opinion of my...way with food, you skinny, holier-than-who-fuckin'-ever, pale-ass fuckin' fuck.)

Ever since O'Reilly confessed to having Cyril kill Preston Nathan, McManus can always be found hovering at the Irishman's back, like he's looking for the exact right place to jump on. And again, O'Reilly's simply been taking it, without protest--well aware both of McManus's motives (professional frustration, personal jealousy, basic congenital assholism) and the built-in necessities of his (Ryan's) own current situation. Keeping himself cool, free and easy, mobile; always the first—the best—plan of attack. The plan from which all other plans flow.

Because he's not just doing what he does so well for his own benefit now, either: For Cyril, romping puppyish around the Em City quad like it's some bright and shiny new form of jungle gym, too unaware to avoid the predators lurking 'round every see-through corner. And for Beecher, sort of—Tobias "Get Drunk, Kill Somebody, Go to Jail, Get Fucked, Get High, Get Crazy, Get Your Dim-
Bulb Arms and Legs Broken” Beecher, so weirdly smart and so immeasurably friggin' DUMB at the exact same damn time, all deranged law-boy quirks and soft-life hangover baggage. Who remains much the same bottomless pit of mad-dog fuckery he's been since the riot on, but always worth cultivating nevertheless, 'long as O'Reilly still thinks he can get something out of doing so, that is. Which, so far, he has...

(So far.)

And, most of all, for Gloria. Dr Nathan, whether actually she wants him to...or not. Because if Ryan can stick it out, stick around long enough--then maybe, just maybe, she'll actually start saying more than five words at a time to him again, look at him while she's doin' it, even. TOUCH him. Love...

Sure, Ryan makes himself think, deliberately vicious. And maybe I'm gonna jump out the nearest stairwell window, levitate over that barbed-wire fence and fly away. Maybe I turned into Superman in my sleep last night, 'round about the same time all that stuff used to be under my nipple suddenly grew back, and those construction workers I ran over did the funky chicken home from beyond the fuckin' grave.

On the other hand, as he dimly recalls, Ma always used to make like she really believed that every time she lit a candle in church, some dead mook somewhere got let off of ten more years in Purgatory. So maybe anything is possible.

As Augustus Hill might chime in, if only he were available to do so: Yeah, right.

Ryan shrugs, gestures at the pasta. Asks, with a thin smile: "Want some?"

McManus blinks. "Not...right now."

O'Reilly lets his game face crack, momentarily, into his customary grin: bright, blithe, unaffected. Not so much shit-eating, as "I just don't give a shit.” And tossing off, as a parting line: "Well, you name the time, McManus; kitchen's always open."

Drifting over to the door, now, O'Reilly watches the hacks shoehorn Wangler—still struggling! Man, that little asshole just don't know when to quit—into McManus's office, McManus already slipping behind his desk. From up here, it just looks like yet another pod: All of Em City laid out beneath him, two tiers of whitewashed misery all wrapped up in glass and steel. McManus's idea of good, clean prison life: work hard, French-kiss my ass every day, and I'll save your soul...not that it'll shave any time off your sentence, or anything. But it's the thought that counts, right?

Unable to contain his own grim amusement, Ryan turns away, grinning again--only to unexpectedly catch the eye of that tall, bald Aryan with the black lightning bolt tattooed on the back of his naked scalp, standing on the other side of the deck. Watching. "What?" he snaps. Only to watch the Aryan...

...just grin back at him.
Chapter 3

SIX

Agamemnon "Mole" Busmalis kings Bob Rebadow, then pauses before clearing the checkerboard. "Back when we first started playing," he begins, "you always used to win...and I always used to say you were cheating, remember? Because anytime you wanted, God would tell you what I was gonna do next."

"Except that I don't talk to God anymore. Because--"

"--yeah, right, he lied to you. But you COULD have."

"Well, you just weren't very good, either," Rebadow points out. "So I wouldn't ever have had to ask God for advice, even if I was still talking to him. Which I'm not."

The Mole clicks his tongue in annoyance. "Okay, forget I said anything." He pauses. "So—how 'bout that Beecher, huh?"

"I'm sure he thinks he knows what he's doing..." The (even) older man murmurs.

The Mole, perking up: "Ah, yes. But does he?"

Rebadow casts his eyes first upwards—briefly—then back over at the wall of Beecher's pod, where Whittlesey and the physiotherapist redeposited him not so terribly long ago. And replies, shrugging: "...don't ask me."

***

In the pod, meanwhile, Tobias Beecher lies back on his bunk, half-drowsing with the combined lassitude of post-physio exhaustion plus the added kick of those meds he so rudely demanded from poor Joe. Not to mention the adrenaline high—and commensurate let-down—of that stunt he just pulled with Vern...

(...in front of Keller...)

Feeling no pain, in other words, lit or fig, and KNOWING he needs to watch that, thank you very much. But not—right now, at least—really giving too much of a running fuck at a rolling donut. While across the pod, poor Cyril—aware of none of this—chatters on, uninterrupted. Not, apparently, either bored or insulted by Beecher's palpable lack of interest in the current topic of conversation: Whether or not Ryan should have kids, "when they get out"...ha, ha, fucking ha...so Cyril can finally have someone his own age to play with, presumably.

(Ohhh, that's nasty.)

And: Well, Beecher thinks, I'm a fairly nasty person, overall. As proven, and advertised.

It's probably all over Em City by now, considering how he knows those Aryans like to gossip: His “offer,” voiced and avowed in the presence of several witnesses, at least one of whom looked young, dumb and full of cum enough to blab it to the next friendly shaved head he saw—and carrying the added benefit of not being personally tied, one way or another, to either side of this impending psychosexual brouhaha. As opposed to Chris, of course, who's tied to both, and neither. Since nothing (and no one) that whore does seems to leave much of an impression on him, afterwards....
But Beecher's not going to waste his time thinking about Keller, right now. Not when there's a quasinatural high to ride that didn't cost him a goddam thing to manufacture—his stretched-out body knotting and unknotting lazily, muscles gone all pleasantly limp and tingly—or a plaintive-voiced blond giant to smile up at, stoned, yet vaguely paternal: *Sure, Cyril, baby-honey-doll. Ask me whatever you want.* Hell, it's almost like having kids again.

(Almost.)


Harry, conceived during that last dreadful conjugal and born almost just before Gen either decided to or was pushed into taking her carbon-monoxide nap, depending on who you believe; it's not that Beecher necessarily thinks Vern has to be lying about that, just that he well knows the old Nazi bastard's propensity for using other people's trauma to cause even more. And he'd far rather blame what happened to Gen on himself, to be frank, along with post-natal depression—gives Vern less power over his life, let alone hers. Because Vern's touched them—both—quite enough, as it is.

"You got pictures?" Cyril asks, hopefully. But Beecher just shakes—flops—his head from side to side. "Nope. I had some, once—used to. But..."

...I tore 'em up, right in front of Vern, and flushed them down the toilet. He liked that; big joke, big laugh. But fuck him, like I used to tell your big brother, back when that was all I ever DID. Because no one else can take away what you've already gotten rid of; that's how you can actually save what you love, by seeming to destroy it. Subtle, huh?

(And: *Wow, I almost sound like I believe that shit, too. I AM still a good liar, after all.*)

"...not any more," he finishes, finally.

"They gonna visit?"

Beecher shakes his head again, a prone, back-and-forth twitch, wet hair mussing the pillow. Repeating: "Not...any more."

***

Outside, unnoticed by either, O'Reilly comes stalking up past the Mole and Rebadow—but pauses, hearing Cyril's voice from inside Beecher's pod, confiding: "You know, with Shannon, Ryan's wife—Ryan told me, she can do it, but she can't, get, um...get..."

Beecher: "Pregnant?" Cyril nods. "That's too bad. Kids're SUCH a gift. They make you feel, so..."

(whole)

"...real."

Standing there, listening. And for a minute, just a minute—a split micro-second's flicker—O'Reilly actually finds himself wondering what kind of kid he and Gloria might have, they ever got the chance to: a boy, a girl. One with her warm skin and liquid eyes, his long limbs and shaggy pre-cancer hair; her arrogant competence, his rakish tensions. Because she *does* look oh so ripe, so welcoming, a single spot of human warmth in all that sterile pallor. So unbelievably...fertile.

(Aw, *Jesus, STOP it.*)
Thinking, viciously: *Who the fuck're you kidding, O'Reilly? You killed her husband. Even say you did do the deed—and not like THAT's likely—you knock her up, she'd probably flush it down the toilet first chance she got. Plain fact is, Cyril's the only kid YOU're ever gonna have.*

Cyril, sad ghost of the bad-ass he used to be, too dumb to run and too big to hide. Who's now saying, wistfully: "Maybe I could get a girlfriend. 'Cept—I'd have to learn how to drive again, 'cause girls like a guy with a car." While Beecher just smiles on, goonily, head lolling back, obviously whacked out on something besides his normal 'scrip—what is the dude, a fuckin' drug magnet? Agreeing as he does, without the slightest trace of irony: "Oh, yeah. They do like that."

*Just try not to pull a DUI while you're showin' it off, huh, Tobester?*

At which point Ryan gives one long stride, reaches the open pod door; raps his knuckles against the glass, telling his brother: "Cyril—go watch TV."

Cyril, caught out in mid-'thought', frowns. "What's on?"

"*World's Worst Party Disasters.*" As Cyril still hesitates: "C'mon, bro—you don't haul ass, you're gonna miss the birthday cake blowin' up and the flaming string-fight!"

(And that, to quote Vern Schillinger himself, would SUCK.)

The mere prospect of string-in-a-can on fire, however, is enough to finally do the trick—sending Cyril bounding to his feet, up and almost out the door, with a righteous: "All right!" Pausing only to turn—where ARE my manners?—and throw a brief farewell back Beech's way: "Oh...an' see ya, Toby!"

Beecher waves back, a tiny, languid flip of the fingers: "Later." And settles in again—a sort of general squirm, equally lax, cat-stretching over rucked sheets; the sight makes Ryan turn sidelong, uncomfortable, like every other time Beech starts to act a little too...sensitive. 'Cause watching the guy trot out these flirtatious little fake-fag mannerisms, no doubt designed to turn somebody's crank—Vern's, probably, or even Keller's—only ever succeeds in turning O'Reilly's stomach...but he can still see Beecher's blue eyes crinkling, sly and unfocussed: knowing he knows how much Ryan dislikes what he's doing, and doing it anyways. 'Cause that's just the type of hairpin he is, like every other fuckin' lawyer.

"Sooooo," Beecher drawls, finally, cutting into Ryan's musings. "Something you don't care to discuss *devant les enfants,* dear?"

"Say WHAT?"

A sigh. "Okay, whatever. What I *mean* is...you looking to cover subject matter unfit for Cyril's tender ears, O'Reilly? 'Cause you know, I bet I can guess what it is, if so."

Ryan crosses his arms and leans back, nodding. Saying, without preamble: "Hear you're gonna fuck Vern-baby's brains out, apparently—that about the size of it?"

Beecher shrugs. "'Friends close, enemies closer'; *Godfather* logic. Thought the idea'd appeal to you, considering the company you keep."

"Yeah, well, I saw that movie too, Beech. And I don't think he meant THAT close."

"Hey, it's no swastika off your ass." Another sigh. "You wanted him distracted; I'm distracting him."

*Oh, THAT all?* Ryan thinks, uncharitably. But continues, carefully, instead: "What I *want* the old
Nazi son-of-a-bitch is dead, not having fun. Thought YOU wanted that, too.

"I do."

"Oh, so what--you planning on screwing him to death?"

Unexpectedly cold: "In a way."

O'Reilly stares at Beecher, whose wandering eyes have now slipped up onto the bottom of the next bunk—Keller's, that world-class sack of dirt on wheels. Guy plays a good game of cards, but Ryan wouldn't trust him any further than he could throw him (which ain't far, 'cause he's pretty damn built). And this, apparently, is who Beecher chose to hand his heart to after finally slipping Vern's chain—not that O'Reilly's ever asked, directly, or Beecher would ever answer. Like Ryan should even talk about bad decisions, love-life-wise, anyway.

(I had cancer, your honor; I loved her soooooooo much. It was HER fault, really. Honest.)

Augh, fuck. Enough of this shit, already.

Ryan made his move, dumb as it turned out to be, and he's paid for it since; will keep paying, semi-gladly, 'long as Gloria still wants him to. But Beecher...he didn't even snitch to McManus, back when he first hit the ward, even though he must've known it was his best chance going to take both those bastards down at once, for good, without (literally) lifting a finger. No: HIS first call went to Ryan, via a visiting Rebadow—knowing the Irishman had his own reasons for wanting revenge against Vern, no doubt remembering that sotto voce conversation they once shared just before the riot broke out, in their few, hitherto-unrepeated hours of podmate-dom. When O'Reilly had asked him to "be his brother", not knowing how soon fate would fill that slot with an actual blood relative—and Beecher, already just a thin skin of quasi-politeness over pure berserker impulse at that point, had jumped at the chance to prove that slippery fraternal bond several times over in quick succession: strangling the Muslim, backing Ryan up against Aryans and Bikers alike. Standing his ground as the tear-gas grenades started flying, so scarily ready to do or die that Ryan had to pull him bodily away, or risk losing his latest willing tool to imminent self-immolation.

(YEAH, motherFUCKER!)

Putting his revulsion for Beech's methods aside, meanwhile, the fact is, O'Reilly knows this brave new wrinkle Toby's working is just an (illogical) extension of what he's been doing all along: manipulating him, Ryan, by appearing to be manipulated. Shitting the Oz-bound world's best shitter into giving him, Beecher, the best bang for his buck by arranging—and executing—Vern-baby's downfall. And it IS cold, cold as anything Ryan ever saw out on the street...not to mention almost completely out of character for that vaguely sweet dupe Ryan first approached in the library and tried to trick into reviving his case, the career victim slinking around Em City in hooker-red lipstick for his master's amusement, or pretending not to cry while he tried to brush the dirt from Vern's boots off his tongue.

But then again, man, who knows: is this the real Beecher putting himself on display here, at last? Corporate litigator Beecher? Arrogant drunk driver Beecher? The guy who figures out the best deal, calm and cool—an eye on every angle, legal or not—then just rams it through, no matter how much it hurts, and fuck the consequences for anyone but him?

I could get behind that version of Beecher, probably, Ryan thinks. If I only had evidence he could hold it together long enough to make it work.

"You tellin' me you're gonna go all the way with this?" he demands, meanwhile, back in the here
and now—only to watch Beecher's aimless smile peel back, showing teeth.

"Kind of the point of the exercise, wouldn't you say?" Beecher replies. "Besides—what do you think I'd be doing I hadn't already been made to do, and much more than just the once?" Continuing, then, voice laced with a widening thread of contempt: "Oh, but wait—you're embarrassed on my behalf, right? 'Cause we're such good friends. Or just embarrassed, period. Doesn't reflect too well on you, I guess—macho, staff member-fucking man that you are—having a big ol' cellblock slut for a partner." To which Ryan winces, making Beecher add, a little softer: "Anyway...you never seemed to care all too much what Vern got up to on his off-hours, back when he was just doing it to ME."

(Oh, man, that's dirty pool.)

"Cyril can't fight back, okay?" O'Reilly snaps. "And you—" He pauses, searching for the right way to put it—which Beecher, courteous enough, soon provides. Supplying: "—I didn't, right? So fuck me...or rather, let him fuck me."

Close enough, Ryan thinks. Remembering, with a tiny bit of shame, how he never exactly publicly jumped to Beech's rescue, or did more than kinda nod and smile when those around him—solitary-for-lifer Miguel Alvarez, long-dead Nino Schibetta, Adebisi—made cracks about how bad he looked in drag. 'Cause you don't wanna look weak even by association, especially not in Oz—and openly allying yourself with somebody who takes it up the ass every day is not gonna help.

"So what are you gonna tell Cyril?" he asks, to take his mind off all that. Like: About doing "the bad thing" with "the bad man", and all? To which Beecher just raises a skeptical eyebrow.

"Well, gee, O'Reilly," he says. "Cyril's a sweet kid...but he's not my brother."

(The clear implication: And neither are YOU, no matter how often you may claim to the contrary.)

O'Reilly feels himself go equally cold. Warning Beecher, carefully: "Look, I don't like this play much, okay? But here's how it goes: Hurt yourself if you want to—if you want, ALL you want. I'll back ya up. But you hurt Cyril, and havin' Schillinger by the dick won't be enough to keep me off'a you."

"Ah. So 'don't make trouble' or I'm 'next'?"

Quoting O'Reilly's own words back to him, without even a blink. And O'Reilly flushing, in spite of himself: Whoo, that stings. You really ARE some kinda bitch these days, ain't you, Beech?

"But think about it this way," Beecher continues, meanwhile. "The more I start acting like the prag of all time, less there's any way anyone realizes we're in this thing together."

"Uh huh. And you don't give a shit 'bout the hits your own rep's gonna take?"

Beecher laughs. "What rep, exactly? I mean...everybody in Oz already knows I'm crazy."

It's a real laugh, too, warm and free—stoned, sure, but back on track. Kinda like the old Beecher, when the two of them were high, coughing and sputtering breathlessly over some suddenly-hilarious observation. Or would that have been the new Beecher, according to Ryan's earlier theory?

Okay, Ryan thinks; Let it go, for now. And smiles down at Beech, forgivably—who smiles back, gone all conveniently loosey-goosey again. Murmuring: "I do the work, you take advantage afterward...tell me that's not the way you like it, O'Reilly."

Ryan, (mock-)insulted: "Hey, fuck you, man. Not ALL the work."
"Lord of the fuckin' Dance."

"You know it, buddy."

***

And: Well, Beecher thinks, his eyes closing, every muscle softening at once. Then I guess it must be nearly time for you to...get jiggy with it...

***

Down, down, down. Into the dark, the grey, the unwelcome light—the past rushing up at him, blurry and bright around the edges, one time or so removed. As though he's seeing it through the glass walls of his old pod. Vern's pod. Tumbling straight down into memory—a flashback, unwanted, unasked-for, to those "good, good times" he and Schillinger used to share, in between assorted random humiliations and assaults...

(and soon might again, the direction you're going)

...this particular one starting with a sharp jerk of the head and a brief, dazed moment of reaction, as Beecher realizes he's just had his glasses suddenly tugged off from above and behind. Half-rising, he drops the book he was reading (some supermodel puff biography, all they had left in the library bin) on his bunk and peers upward—as Vern, simultaneously, slings his legs off the top bunk and turns to face him, putting Beecher's face at about crotch-level: Business as usual, figuratively speaking.

You MIND? Beecher thinks, automatically. But knowing, even as the words form—no, he really doesn't.

Vern holds the glasses up, studying the way Em City refracts and splinters through their lenses. "'Bout how far can you see without these, anyway?" He asks, with (Beecher can only assume) typically deceptive mildness.

Beecher, tight-lipped: "Not that far."

"No? Seems like you get along fine without 'em, to me. Didn't notice you fallin' off the stage at the talent show, or anything."

"I can't read without my glasses."

"Well, what're you gonna read, anyway—latest issue of Prag Magazine International?" Voice darkening, as Beecher exhales—a bit too impatiently, perhaps, for established standards of submissiveness: "STAND THERE and stop huffin', I'm talkin' to you right now. You might learn something, sweetpea."

(Oh, you think?)

"Sir."

The ultimate fall-back position. Vern smiles, recognizing it, and offers Beecher the glasses; Beecher hesitates, aware he's being teased, then finally moves to take them—at which point Vern immediately snatches them back, chuckling. And: Jesus, Beecher thinks. This is like fucking high school, for Christ's sake.

(But then, Vern probably wouldn't know.)
"So, To-by. Bet you live in a big house. I mean, you have to—you're rich, right?"

"Permission to...speak freely?"

Magnanimous: "Granted."

Beecher grits his teeth, tries not to grind. "I don't live there anymore," he says, at last, carefully, "big or small. I live HERE, with you. So what the fuck does it matter, exactly?"

"It matters, prag. 'Cause I say it matters."

All right, sure: and this time, it really is a huff Beecher finds himself giving. "Fine, okay. Yes, we're well off—"

"Every notice how rich people never wanna SAY they're rich?" Vern announces, to no one in particular.

"—rich, then. By some standards."

(Yours, probably.)

"House?"

"Condo."

"Got a backyard?"

"We're near a park."

"Public?"

"Private."

"Huh. School in the area?"

"Driving distance."

"Who drives?"

"My wife. Usually."

"'Cause she's at home."

"Right."

"Quit her job right after you got married?"

"A little before."

"During the...engagement period."

"Yes."

Vern smiles to himself again; Beecher, who can only see the expression as a slight, vague twitch, just stands there, silently. Struggling—internally—to keep his face unreadable. A flash of light from one lens, then the other; Vern weighs the glasses in one hand, idly. Comments: "Man, you know, I should have been a dentist, because THIS is like pulling teeth." Then adds, brightly: "Maybe I should
step on these right now, what d'you say?"

"...don't?"

Another smile. Followed by the suggestion, “mild” as ever: "Don't...'please'?"

(And: Ohhh—fuck you, fuck YOU, FUCK YOU.)

"Look, you just go ahead and do what you WANT, okay?" Beecher hears himself snap, out loud, at almost the same moment—frankly amazed, in a giddy but terrifying way, at the extent of his own temerity. "You will anyway."

Not that Vern actually seems angered by the outburst, in actual fact. Just raises his hands and eyebrows, shrugging, like: Well, well ToBIAS! Time of the month, I guess; hey, be that way. 'Cause...

...after all, that's simply true. As they both well fucking know.

"My wife..." Vern begins, musingly. Prompting Beecher to think: Oh, and here we go again...

"...her parents, down in San Francisco—they had a house. Big one. Been in the family three generations." He looks up, catches Beecher staring: "What? MY wife can't be somebody well off?"

Beecher grits his teeth, thinking: I'm not saying ANYTHING. And: "You're not sayin' anything," Vern notes, dryly. While Beecher just keeps standing there, mouth clenched, throat burning—no right answer to this one, right? As though there ever is.

"Will you give me my glasses back, or not?" he asks, finally.

"Later. Maybe." A pause. "So. How far CAN you see?"

Throat burning, stomach roiling. Nausea building in every part of him, from head to toe—not today, Christ, not now, not ever. Not even one more time. And thinking, like he seems to roughly fifty thousand times a day: Goddamn him, oh, God...Goddamn, God DAMN. Goddamn him, and God damn ME too, if I'm not damned already.

"I see you fine," Beecher lies, toneless. And hears...

(of course)

...the oh-so-familiar sound of a zipper. Coming down.

"Huh. Well—how 'bout that?"

***

Yeah. That too.

***

Seconds after which, Beecher comes to back on his bunk with Keller shaking him awake, knotted and blind and wet all over. Salt on his face, his hands, in his mouth: Tears? Sweat? (Blood?)

No idea, no living clue. Just Keller's wanted/unwanted touch, rough but efficient; his voice in Beecher's ear, coaxing him up out of the nightmare's clutch: "Beecher, hey—hey, Beech? Hey.
"Uhn," Beecher hears himself gasp—high, warped. Just on the edge of cracking. Heaves himself clear, shrugging Keller's hand off; finds himself halfway up and stumbling towards the door already, his knees weak and pulsing. Hugging himself, still half-immersed in this rush of dreadful memory, as he waits for the C.O. to pass by, to tick him from the register. And thinking, thinking, thinking—

>What the fuck am I doing? No one's making me do this; not Ryan, Keller...Chris. Even with what happened before, he couldn't MAKE me. He had to trick me, and even then—

—even then, he couldn't. Not without me helping, without me being willing to fool myself.

(Which is why you get to trick him, now, instead—him, and Vern, and anybody else who gets in your way. Any fucking way you can.)

And it's not gonna be the same as it was that first time with Vern, either; couldn't be. Because you're not the same...but. But, but, but.

*It's just. I just. I just don't EVER, I don't—EVER—want to be...that person...again.*

(And...I won't.)

Count over, Beecher reels back inside, over to the toilet, for a lengthy pre-lights-out piss. Only to have Chris immediately slip in behind him, reach over his shoulder for the toothpaste and murmur in his ear, a warm, intimate puff of breath: "So what the fuck was *that* all about, huh? Back in the gym?"

"Aside from none of your business?"

Quick and snippy, and his voice doesn't even shake—unlike his traitor legs or his own right hand, say, now struggling to flick the last few drops from his dying stream in the right direction, rather than letting them splash onto the floor. He tucks himself away, tries to turn...only to meet Keller's hand halfway, up against his abdomen, which tenses on contact.

Looking down, quiet: "Let go."

Keller does, with a flourish. "He's never gonna go for it, y'know," he tells Beecher, confidentially. And starts to brush, humming to himself, while Beecher sits back down on his bunk, heavily. Thinking, as he does—

>**You know, Chris—I'd tell you to suck my dick, but you'd probably take that as an invitation.**

From the P.A. System, above: "LIGHTS OUT, LADIES! SHUT THE FUCK UP, AND GET YOURSELVES SOME SHUT-EYE!"

Beecher curls up on the bottom bunk, sheets pulled protectively tight over his aching legs, as Keller rinses, spits, heads for the ladder. Then pauses, leaning down, to whisper: "I'm just telling you this for your own good, Beech."

A mocking cat-sneeze laugh, pillow-muffled. "Don't want to see me hurt?"

"You got it."

Beecher feels his lips retract at that, an instinctive half-snarl, with the barest hint of sob thrown in for bad measure. And asks, in return: "Sure you're not a little—jealous, Chris?"
The strain of being equally quiet flattens Keller's name into a hiss, making Keller smile in the darkness. Whispering back: "...you want me to be?"

No reply. Keller squints down; is that a blush spreading over Beecher's neck and face, like back in the infirmary? Impossible to tell, without light...or through that sheet, as Beech pulls it up further, tighter. Nothing, in fact, to go on at all—except Toby-baby's voice, a bit muffled but louder, not to mention a whole lot colder. Saying, at last: "Frankly? I could give two shits WHAT you do."

And the rest—is silence.

(For tonight, at least.)

SEVEN

Noon, on Tuesday. The infirmary.

"Just take your meds and go back to work, Schillinger," Dr Nathan tells him, exasperated. While Vern—a dangerous flush creeping up the back of his neck, trying hard to keep his (already-frayed) temper in check—explains, with deceptive calm: "Is it possible you got me on the wrong prescription? That's all I'm askin'."

"No."

Sarcastic: "So my concentration is MEANT to be all shot to shit."

"You think it would be better if you were in pain?"

"God damn it, I already AM—" Seeing the orderly's head snap up, across the room, Vern modifies his tone, hastily. Lower: "—in pain, okay? I goddamn well am in pain. That's the part doesn't change."

"Then take your meds."

"They...don't...help."

Nathan sighs, her nostrils flaring. Looks none too good herself, now Vern comes to think about it—hair practically on end, even kinkier than usual, like she combed it with a fork; fresh new shadows under those liquid nigger/Spic eyes. Late nights riding her hand over Ryan O'Reilly, probably, or riding that queasy fucker McManus, to take her so-called mind off O'Reilly. But: I don't think you wanna think about THAT particular image too hard, he tells himself, with a tamped-down shudder.

(Miscegenation, eeuuccch. Makes his fuckin' skin crawl.)

Besides which...strikes just a little close to home for comfort, huh, Vernon? What with Rachel back in the picture, and all—her and her nigger.

Man, it's like some kinda goddamn curse. Last week, everything reminded him of Beecher—and this week, everything seems doomed to remind him of Rachel. But that's no escape, either; nothing is. Discomfort and desire: the undimmed pain in his hand plus this constant, galling pressure below his belt, running roughly parallel. And these pills he "needs" to take, according to Nathan and McManus, continuing to make him feel vulnerable ways he doesn't even recognize—fuzzy, confused, soft. Unlike the thought of Tobias Beecher, say...lurking, luring...which makes him feel hard. 'Cept—

...you're NOT thinking about Beecher. Right? Anything but.
Yeah, uh huh. Sure he's not.

A year, or close as makes no difference, spent with his mind kept firmly on everything but sex: First how to get out and get back with his kids, set 'em straight, make up for everything—then, after, how to take the best possible revenge (allowing for circumstances) over having been cheated out of his one chance to do that, not to mention being able to walk out of Oz sometime before he qualifies for Social Security. Relaxing enough, near the end—when he was good and sure that Beecher was gonna get his—to take advantage of Cyril O'Reilly, for a hot supply-closet second...but that wasn't anything real; no challenge to speak of, just a natural progression, like a snake eating a baby bird. Fun, but easy—almost too easy to enjoy, even while he was doing it.

(Not to mention outta control, in hindsight. I mean, what the hell WERE you thinking, incurring O'Reilly's wrath?)

Oh, not much, Vern knows, in the final analysis. Above the waist, that is.

And now: Shaken by the fallout of Rachel's visit, the unwanted intoxication of her presence; hearing the hacks joke about how McManus looked at her, and finding himself rocked by crippling gusts of disproportionate, inappropriate jealousy. Reeling, all the while, with his own renewed, desperate need for her, a need which—he's vaguely sickened to realize—seems to be spilling back over (by virtue of their...more and more embarrassingly obvious...similarities) onto this fucked-up thing with Beecher. 'Cause after all, Beecher's available, supposedly—amenable, at least. And Rachel...just isn't.

(Or so he says.)

Well, that'd be the question, wouldn't it?

Not that Vern can get away from the motherfucker, one way or another. You'd think having the whole length and breadth of Gen Pop between them would be enough, but nope: It's Toby-baby day in and day out, seemingly everywhere Vern turns, just like back during that pre-parole sting operation—hovering, as though by some subconscious instinct, right under the cataracted spot on Schillinger's bad eye. A scar-haloed human blur, always staring, insolently flirtatious. Practically mouthing the words: Well? NOW?

There's grounds for a complaint, Vern thinks, grimly, conjuring a comic whine: Oh, McMANus, Beecher keeps harRASSing me...

Following Vern around, making cow-eyes, fuckin' licking himself. Freaky, freakish little...FREAK.

So slim now, even at a distance—bent but lithe over the double weight of his crutches, all his carefully-cultivated extra muscle mass melted away. So...soft.

(Christ, just STOP it.)

And how could Vern want him, now, anyway? How fucked up would that be, in context? Same crazy bastard who cut Vern's cornea open, lost him his parole, took a damn dump on his face in front of every-fuckin'-body...how can even a class-A nut-job like Beecher possibly think Vern ever wants to stick his dick anywhere in his direction again?

But then, the same pitch-black day Vern'd come home from work to find the boys watching TV, dinner in the oven and a note saying Rachel had left him, for good this time—when he'd read her note, connected the dots, and finally understood...with a soul-sickening lurch...just who she must have run off with—he'd never thought he'd ever want HER again, either.
With Rachel, anything had seemed possible. Plotting world domination on a mail carrier's salary, putting White Power mailing lists and racist recruiting literature together at their one-bedroom apartment's kitchen table; working double shifts for a half-year to get that first computer, that all-important Internet access, so he could discover all sorts of like-minded friends in high (or low) places—C.O. Karl Metzger, for one. And hadn't that come in handy, eventually...

But after Rachel, with every fresh disappointment, the scope of his goals had just kept on shrinking: raising his kids, fighting his war, winning his court case. Oz domination, Em City domination...Beecher domination.

(With a few rematch possibilities left open on that one, apparently)

Still: Even when things were at their worst—when the only time they ever spoke at all was in bed, 'cause (as she'd once told him, right to his face) she'd simply rather fuck than fight—even when he knew she hated him—

(But: She didn't HATE me, goddamnit. She never HATED me.)

...or maybe she did, he's forced to admit, in his heart of hearts. And he just hadn't been able to tell.

Beecher, though—there, Vern knows he's got it right. Fucker hates him worse'n a Jew hates Christmas. Which is exactly what makes the whole prospect, unlikely as it might be, of slipping back into some sort of groove with that crazy little bastard so—damn—exciting.

(Here comes Rachel again, though, correcting him coolly from the back of his mind: They don't hate it, Vernon. They just IGNORE it.)

Deliberately, with an almost palpable wrench, Vern drags himself out of memory's endless loop and back to Nathan. Who's saying, as he does: "Look, I up your dose, you're running the risk of getting addicted..."

"Yeah, but the thing is, I don't want it upped; LESS, not more, you get it? This some kind of language problem we're havin', here?"

(You mule-stubborn little half-breed cunt.)

They eye each other, equally fierce—Vern's hand knotting, right on cue, as his throat clenches in sympathy. Got his CT cast lashed on so tight he's already blistering beneath his knuckles, on the inside of his wrist: Little raw spots, the skin rubbed away by contact, wear and tear. Hurts like a bitch, which is good. But not good enough, for his purposes.

Just a rub-up between two subspecies, he thinks, that's all you are—a walking, talking, living fucking mistake. Doctor. As she replies, so cold it's like she can hear his thoughts, or something: "You don't want it upped, and I can't cut it; obviously, we've got nothing more to talk about. And since I have a few other patients to see today--do you want to take those pills, or do you want me to call the guard, and have him MAKE you take them?"

Well, gee.

Vern breathes out, slowly. Feels the flush mount. Telling himself: Okay. You take 'em, for now--and then you go find something she wants, and you give it to her. Do this practical, for once. Give her what she wants...flowers, candy, a brand-new scalpel, a conjugal with O'Reilly, the Mick's head on a fuckin' plate...so she'll give you what YOU want. I mean, fuck, she must want something; everybody does. Even as the voice in his skull chimes in, slyly insinuating: Didn't know what YOU wanted, though, did you? Not 'till after you threw her away...
(her OR him)

"'Cause...you never really do. *With anything.*

Wordless, he puts out his right hand—then remembers it's the "bad" one now, and puts out his left. Nathan tucks the meds into his palm, watches him swallow, then hands him a glass of water. "There," she says. "Better?"

*Than getting *fucked in the ASS, I guess*, Vern thinks. Hastily adding, if only to himself: *Not that I'd know.*

"Thank you," he forces himself to reply out loud, giving the glass back and gets only a shrug for his restraint. Across the room, meanwhile, he's fucking *sure* he can see the orderly repressing a snicker; filing it all away, for later distribution and discussion. Shoots a look back at Nathan, thinking, resentfully: *You and Mc-fucking-Manus. I'm up for ten more, so I lose my right to privacy? Think I *NEED* everybody and his brother knowing my goddamn business?*

But this is Oz. And *because* it's Oz—as he knows full well—everybody already does.

***

Afterwards, in the post office, Vern works his way through a never-ending pile of outgoing prisoner mail: Skimming and censoring text, packing and marking envelopes. All the latest modern conveniences available, here in Oz's informational larder—a sponge-roll to save him on flap-licking, addresses culled from the prison's database, printed out on easy-peel, easy-stick labels. When he racks up an even three hundred, he'll switch over to the pre-paid postage machine awhile, stamping each one individually—yet more repetitive motion for his hand to ingest. Gotta keep the monster fed.

Back in the storage closet, meanwhile, there's a whole new shipment of Metzger's favorite contraband to be sorted: Aryan "literature", cleverly disguised for easy distribution—through the Christian coalition's Biker liaisons—as Chick Tracts, those Fundamentalist cartoon booklets most "normal" people find only slightly less offensive than material which wears its swastika on its sleeve. And since there's a remarkable dearth of nigger, Spic or mongrel Christians in Em City to begin with, recruiting directly from their ranks has the double effect of filtering out all the white-*looking* kikes before any annoying misunderstandings even have a chance to occur.

Vern wonders, vaguely, whether any of the stuff Rachel used to write has ended up in those packages, somewhere. All those grand philosophical arguments: Mud People vs. Ice People, backed up with a thousand different examples from history, archaeology, religion...man, she was always so *good* with that kind of shit. (Value of a post-high-school education. Maybe.)

Metzger and his schemes—all revolving around Em City, natch, 'cause that's HIS beat. And screw the fact that Vern's not actually *in* there anymore...how much harder being back in Gen Pop makes it for him to maneuver, plus the extra strain (and insult) of having to use a drug-selling, nigger-imitating hand-puppet like Duchene to express himself through...

Whatever; he said it, he'll do it. One more thing on the list, ticked off.

--Like LeVon Jordaire, drug mule, found literally coughing up his own guts behind the Em City furnace, a mess of blood-slicked, heroin-filled condoms spilling from his perforated stomach.

--Like Kenny Wangler, former teeange tits magnate, now doing his long-deferred detox in the Hole, pissing in his pants and pissing off every hack within earshot with his screams.

--Like Karim Said, self-elected coon Savior, who's already been called into conference with
McManus...a sit-down, Vern hears, which ended with Said stomping away in a self-righteous snit, amazed that anyone could have the sheer stones to suggest _he_—living saint that he is—might've actually been the anti-drug force behind Jordaire's death.

Lists upon lists upon lists. One list done, then right on to the next, an endless progression. Old debts to pay, and new ones to incur: New threats. New goals. New "asks". _Oz_ is a machine that runs on blood and favors, the former greasing the latter. And...

(..._Christ, I'm so damn—tired. Of them both._)

All his adult life, Vern Schillinger has run what few small sections of the world he could grab a hold of with an instinctive combination of impulse and strategy—act, then react. Plan things out beforehand if he can; if not, at least try like hell to plan for their containment, later on. Strike first, fast and hard. Never back down. Regret nothing—well, almost nothing. And never, ever be stupid enough to tell anybody, if you do.

But now, with this fucking carpal tunnel bullcrap to deal with...these _drugs_, blurring his brain and draining him of his normal energy reserve, along with the anger that fuels it...

Movement at the post office door. He looks up, squinting—right into the familiar face of Christopher Keller, already slouched up against the wall in one of his patented "I'm too sexy for the world" poses. Head lowered, staring up under half-lidded eyes. Expressionless.

And: _Now, THAT's different_, Vern thinks. He and Keller's lives have kept themselves remarkably separate, this last month or so—ever since that oh-so-satisfying retributive scene with Beecher in the gym, to be exact. Not that they were up each other's butts before, of course; but that'd been Operation Toby in action, the plan which slid neatly into place that very first day Vern'd spotted Keller tomcatting it arrogantly across the _Oz_ yard, all grown up and fronting like an expert, even with the cast on his arm. A serious nostalgia jolt right there, no doubt about it; a one-way mental trip back to those long-lost days at Lardner, when Chris was carrying a whole lot less muscle, and Vern had sported a _lot_ more hair.

Looking at him, and thinking: _YES. Now I have a weapon, an utterly reliable source of mayhem and deception. The one card left in my deck that Toby friggin' Beecher's never seen._

(As yet.)

Just like the Old Man used to say, that usually-useless fuck: _You got garbage problems, dumb-ass, you call a garbage collector—got thief problems, set another thief. Got prag problems..._

No smile seems forthcoming, so Vern smiles, instead: The old silk-over-steel special. Rumbling: "Hey, Chris. Good to see ya."

('Cause, y'know? We never _talk_ anymore.)

Continuing, as Keller just stands there: "Got a package for me?"

Keller raises a well-defined eyebrow—less at any part of the preceding, far as Vern can figure it, than at something already going on inside his own head. "More like--a message."

Another pause. And now it's Vern's turn to do the facial twitch thing; both sandy brows, plus a leonine mass of forehead. Prompting: "You want me to _guess_, or what?"

"It's from Beecher."
"Oh, no shit."

"Sort of an—ultimatum? Terms, anyway."

Vern hisses at the word, a congested half-laugh. Almost to himself: "Lawyer." Then, to Keller: "'Kay, shoot. Surprise me."

Keller leans back further, arms crossing, and pauses yet again; takes a long breath, like he's charging himself up. Acting like his shorts are too tight, too, while he's doing it—what is that current at work under his game face, anyway? Discomfort? Disgust?

(...disappointment?)

Fuck it, though—Keller's always been unreadable, a walking contradiction. That dark hair and that predatory, almost Jew-like profile, offset by that unmistakably German name: ambiguous enough to fuck, but never trust, unless all you wanted was the traditional prison mentorship transaction—protection for pleasure, no questions asked, no intimacies (beyond the strictly physical) offered. Business as usual, and nothin' but. Vern kept him safe, and Keller kept him...satisfied. Which was, after all, the point of the exercise.

'Cause let's face it, everything finds its natural position, eventually. Sinks to its own level. And Chris had found his long before Vern ever got to him: on his knees or bent over, for anybody strong enough to get him what he wants.

At any rate—

"Beech says to tell you," Keller begins, "he—lemme see, here—he 'still wasn't sure if you got what he was getting at'--"

—him being so god-almighty SUBTLE about it, and all—

"—so here's the dope: You lay off with the vendetta and everything goes back the way it was, 'cept he stays in Em City, and you stay in Gen Pop. Oh, yeah...and he wants a sorta, um, 'marriage contract'."

"'Scuse me?"

Keller shrugs. "Y'know--more equal, kinda? You watch his back, he watches yours; he doesn't fuck around, and you don't get to either. Or share him. Or rent him out."

(Or make him lick your boots. Or dress him up in drag. Or burn a swastika into his other ass-cheek.)

Vern snorts. "Don't want much, does he?"

Keller: "You want my opinion?"

"Not really."

An automatic snub. Remembering how uppity Keller's been through this whole thing, pretty much from the get-go: flexing in front of the other Aryans, correcting him to his face. Talking down, like HE's the Beecher expert, all of a sudden—No, Vern, I'M the key. Cocky little slut.

("Little"? Who the fuck're you fooling, Vernon?)

Okay, sure, Keller's gotten a bit bigger than Vern, height-wise—taller, more pumped. Born prag like that, though, size doesn't matter. Hell, even Beecher has a whole half-inch on Vern, in actual fact—
when he stands up straight, at least, which is almost never, unless MADE to. And Metzger; no shame not measuring up there, though. Guy's the Aryan version of the Incredible Hulk—blond, white and blue all over, instead of green. Shit, Vern finds himself thinking, morosely; they ever got Augustus Hill back on his feet, HE'd probably turn out to be taller than me...

(Jesus, Schillinger! Get your—one good—eye back on the ball.)

But Keller doesn't seem to have noticed the lapse into rumination, thankfully. Just turns his head sideways, fixing Vern with that sharp, dark blue gaze. And asks: "You know he's just jerking your chain, right?"

"And your point is...?"

"He's never gonna go through with it—that enough of a point for you?"

"Says you."

"Yeah, says me. The guy he's in LOVE with."

"Oh, puhlease," Vern scoffs. Then, to himself: "Bitch thinks he can dictate shit to me, he really IS a fuckin' nut."

(Not that that was ever really in doubt.)

"Let it go, Vern."

"What, 'it'? Oh, wait—you mean HIM, don'tcha?" Another smile. "Well, heck, Chris—worried I'm gonna use him all up, and there won't be anything left over for you? Lots of old Toby to go around, still, from what I saw."

A rush of color comes spreading up over Keller's Adam's apple, one muscle humping itself along the hinge of his clenched jaw...and Vern gets a jump-cut flash of how he used to look, back at Lardner—gasping into Vern's shoulder, wrists crossed behind his head, one or both legs bent up and wedged under Vern's laboring arms; always was flexible, that Chris. Faking it, probably, but who really cares, then OR now?

(And that's why you want Beecher so bad, right? 'Cause I've had him. Like I've had you.)

"Kinda sounds like you got a bit too close to your work there, maybe, Chris-to-pher," Vern suggests, idly. "I mean—what I gave you was a job, not some fuckin' prag double-date—"

Keller's eyes spark, darkening further. "I DID your damn job."

"Sure you did."

"And now we're even."

"Sure we are."

Like he's trying to convince himself, almost: "This ain't Lardner, Vern. I'm not seventeen anymore."

"'Course not." A pause. "Funny how you still do whatever I tell you to, though, huh?"

A definite charge in the air, crackling between them; it lifts Vern from the crotch on up, warming and waking him all over. The drug haze cracks and peels back like a shed mental skin, while Keller clenches his hands, contemplating action—and Vern, sensing an advantage to press, lowers his own
head like a bull about to charge. Murmuring: "Or maybe you wanna cut a deal here. That it, Chris? Some kind of trade, you for him? Wanna step in the closet, back there, and show me why you're still the better bet?"

Letting his eyes roam all over Keller's frame, with casual possessiveness—checking out the goods, weighing the price. Back to basics: You make me an offer, and I accept...or I refuse. And either way, you're the one gets fucked.

(Not so big now, are you, cocksucker?)

Keller just stares back at him, admirably cool. And replies: "That's—not gonna happen."

"Aw. I'm crushed."

"I can tell. And this thing, with Beech? THAT's not gonna happen, either."

Another grin, mockery turned up high. "'Cause you just know him so well."

"Better than you do," Keller throws back, then strides away, piece supposedly said. But pauses by the door, nevertheless, to add: "Better than you ever knew me."

Good exit line, if Vern ever heard one. Kinda—what five-dollar word would Rachel use to describe it? Oh, yeah: Pithy. "Tell him I'll think about it," he calls after Keller, lightly—taking a brief moment to admire the lithe, professional sway of Chris's retreating ass. And goes back to his envelopes, whistling slightly.

Thinking: And the game goes to Schillinger. Point, score. Set—and match.

(For fucking once.)

***

The next few days, however, don't go quite as well.

***

Wednesday morning, McManus collars Vern in the hall. Apparently, Dr Nathan's spilled the beans about him asking to get his meds cut—big fuckin' surprise there—so it's off to see Spic-of-some-derivation Sister Peter Marie, hi ho, hi ho...whether Vern actually feels like discussing his supposedly traumatized interior landscape with that creepy midget witch-doctress, or not. Standing in her office, tightening and retightening the straps on his cast, as she throws and he fields: Question after question, all met with the same strict lack of response.

"Tim tells me your wife came to see you on Monday—"

"Mmh."

"Your—dead—wife."

"Mmh."

"And that makes you feel...how?"

A shrug, plus a fish-eyed grimace: You tell me, Sis.

Sister Pete sighs, shuts his file. "I can't help you if you don't express yourself, Schillinger."
"Mmh...hmh."

(But since when have you ever actually helped anyone, you Catholic voodoo bullshit-selling con artist?)

As he stalks back out, meanwhile, who's there in the waiting area but Beecher—tapping away, hard at work on those files he likes so much; looking up at the sound of Vern's footsteps, smiling. And... running his tongue over his lips.

***

Wednesday afternoon, meanwhile—once Vern's stress-spurred migraine has had a little more time to cook—ends up being given over to what the upcoming administrators' meeting will call "this month's mini-riot." It starts in the mess hall, crammed to the gills with Gen Pop and Em City's usual roster of freaks and losers, where meatloaf is being served yet again, which jacks up the tension a notch or two right outta the gate...and leaves Vern pinned, before he quite gets the chance to see it coming, between two halves of the same old shit: on the one hand, some quarterback-sized Muslim, all puffed with zealous ire; on the other, some gold-toothed Wanglerite with his chinos halfway down his ass, throwing his gang sign in Vern's face and babbling like a Baptist on crack.

The Muslim: "...slandering our holy Minister Said..."

The gangsta: "...KNOW y'all capped LeVon, a'ight, fishbelly? 'Cause ain't none of you got the balls to dis Kenny to his face..."

"...Allah, who will judge the wicked and reward the righteous..."

"...gotta go behind a brother's back an' do him dirt..."

Vern, to Fritz "Der Fuhrer" Duchene, who's trapped behind him: "Be SO much easier if they came with subtitles, wouldn't it?" Calm and cool, more amused than threatening, even as his head and hand throb practically in unison, a live-wire current, holding him up against the tidal swell of his own mounting rage. With the Muslim now nearing veritable incoherence, which suits Vern just fine—but the gangsta, on the other hand, reaching new heights of insult. And insight.

"...jes' 'cause the Missus gots a fever for the brown sugar flava—"

And Vern, rounding on him, nose-to-nose. Snapping: "WHAT did you just say, boy?"

"I say, she done run off with some Denzel-type mother, an' you gotta flex to keep it up—'cause you ain't kep' it up far enough to KEEP her."

An answering laugh, from further down the hall: "Word! Thass what the cast for, right, Schillin-jah?"

"Ger!" Vern roars, losing it completely—as, at the same time, that so-called "Poet" Jackson calls out: "Yo, yo, y'all come correct—he been jerkin' off over other folk's mail so long, ol' Vern gone an' sprained somethin'!"

The gangsta, to Vern: "What'chu growlin' at, man?"

"It's SchillinGer, you mongrel."

"Yeah? Ruff RUFF, boy."
At which point, everything explodes. Vern has a vague memory of pivoting to flip his tray in Poet's
direction, then using his casted hand to punch Gang-Banger Guy right in his fuckin' crap-spewing
mouth—pow, BAM, an almost-orgasmic spurt of purifying pain—that gold tooth crunching on
impact, gouging a flap of flesh loose across Vern's knuckles. And then limbs everywhere, yells and
screams—swearing he can hear Beecher's voice filtering down from the front of the line, howling
like a Doberman in heat (“YEAh, motherFUCKER!”) as he cracks one of his crutches over
somebody's too-close head. Rebadow hiding in a corner, with Keller half-sheltering him from a
blundering, duelling pair of El Cid's homeboys; Cyril O'Reilly overturning a table, as Ryan vaults the
counter, ladle in hand; Duchene's grip dragging Vern steadily away from the heart of the fight, even
as he keeps on kicking blindly, wounded fist thrust into his own shirt-front, trying to staunch the
blood and ward off attacks from every angle at the same time...

...until he and Duchene rocket out the mess hall doors, up against the hallway wall with their hands
on their heads, as the SORT team rushes past them: Look, no threat, 'kay? Good cons. Wanna bust
some skulls, go in there and do it, you rubber-armored motherhumps.

Noticing Duchene's arm still in his, and throwing it off, angrily: What the fuck're you trying to DO,
Fritz? Ruin my rep? And Fuhrer-boy watching him pant and sweat, eyes open wide. Yet more
evidence that the "S-man''s starting to lose it, on ample display.

Not, at this exact moment, that Vern can find it in himself to give much of a fuck what that asshole
thinks.

***

Not enough Hole left unoccupied to hold everybody responsible, as usual; the Muslim and Poet
finger Vern, only to have Metzger tell McManus and Glynn he couldn't see who threw the first
punch, exactly. So a few hours later, Vern walks out of the infirmary with a fresh, itchy row of
stiches, and right into the huge, looming shadow of his favorite Internet email-pal, his guardian white
devil: Metzger himself, looking none too pleased with Vern's increasing lack of self-discipline.

"You just forget to bounce that whole Jordaire idea off of me first, Vern?" he asks, gently. "I mean, I
know you've been under a lot of...stress, lately..."

"Nothin' I can't deal with."

"Don't doubt it. Just remember to keep a low profile, from now on—that's what we got Duchene for,
or so you told me. Power behind the throne, remember?"

"Behind the throne's for—"

(prags)

But Metzger just looks at him. And says: "You maybe want to slow down a tad, Vern. Think things
over. Get your head...straight."

And Vern looks back, eyes narrowed, blue on blue. Thinking: There somethin' you wanna SAY to
me, Karl? 'Cept...I guess you just said it. Didn't you?

While Metzger strolls away, jauntily, swinging his nightstick. A study in Supremacy.

***

And now it's Thursday evening, just after lights-out; Vern on the top bunk, nameless/faceless
cellmate on the bottom. Big news of the day is that Wangler cut a deal: preferred confessing to
murder over spending one more night in the Hole, if you can fuckin' believe THAT. Turns out he actually offed that old Nigerian everybody thought Adebisi took a steak-knife to; didn't name anybody else involved—like Nappa, for example—but this pretty much gets rid of his share of the tits trade in Em City, opening the way for O'Reilly. Which just leaves one small matter still to be resolved, the next item on his list, unconsidered (in any great detail) since Keller's post office visit...

Vern turns over, restless; light through the bars hurts his eyes, good and bad; his hand and his new wound hum, cancelling each other out. Feeling prickly all over, feverish, like he's burning up by degrees; kinda like Ortolani must've, that arrogant dago peckerwood, the minute just before the match hit. And thinking about just how long it's been since he's been anywhere but here, doing anything but this—this same set of limited motions, over and over again. Thinking: What day is it now? What year? What fucking SEASON?

Thinking about Rachel, and her nigger; Keller, and his backsliding. Beecher, and his...ultimatum.

So Chris claims the prag has ulterior motives—Vern'd be shocked, frankly, if he didn't. Guy's a lawyer, a liar, a friggin' all-purpose addict, always hiding out at the bottom of a bottle, a packet of tits, a big-time psycho freakout. Just like the Old Man, back in the day, when the only reason Vern even stuck around the same zip code as that worthless son-of-a-bitch (sorry, Grossmutter) was to make sure he kept off'a Mom—Beecher's the kind of weak-minded hypocrite who has to get high before he can do the kind of things he'd never admit to wanting to do while sober. I mean, running over somebody's kid? Drunk's no excuse. That's one step up from Sipple, in Vern's book.

His kids...his boys. Jan in the hospital, Cory in jail. And Rachel, back next week, according to McManus.

(And the week after...and the week after...)

...Christ.

So why the hell shouldn't I get to get my "brains fucked out", every once in a while? Vern finds himself wondering, resentfully. I goddamn well DESERVE it, shit that keeps piling up on my plate. Which sends his brain spinning back, inevitably, to the subject of Beecher as object of desire: a fairly new concept for Vern, weirdly enough, considering the way they routinely used to spend their nights (and days, in part) during Toby-baby's first year at Oz. 'Cause the kick Vern got out of having Beecher under his heel was always more a matter of subjugation, of spectacle, than of straight-up sex —

The high 'n' mighty lawyer, brought to heel; the stuck-up college boy, forcibly silenced—here, suck on THIS awhile. And Beecher himself, too shell-shocked to be much more than utilitarian anyways. Slumping and slinking, only perking up when his humiliation couldn't be contained anymore, or when he was high: Either screaming "May I PLEASE fuck my WIFE?", or cooing incoherently about how God was holding him in the hollow of his hand. Not to mention looking uglier in drag than anybody Vern'd ever seen before, barring maybe Robin Williams.

(So why'd you take him in the first place, if you didn't WANT him?)

Because he told me I could, Vern thinks. Remembering that look in his eyes: the yielding, unconscious or not. The unspoken complicity. That vibe he fairly oozed, minute Vern realized who McManus'd been dumb enough to shack this little hunk of Yuppie roadkill up with: Yes, please, throw me up against the wall and have your way with me, 'cause I just don't deserve any better. And now, he almost seems to be...telling Vern that again. This time out loud. That moment in the infirmary, after—
Beecher, softly: *I'm what you made of me.*

Well, shit—he wants to get fucked, then FUCK him. Pansy, soft-ass college-boy bitch! *Fuck* him. But—

Vern can't. Not...not if Beecher actually—wants?—it...

*(I can't think about this right now.)*

CANT.

*(...not now.)*

That first morning after, with Rachel—holding her as she slept, in bed, hugging close and breathing quiet into the back of her neck, ruffling those fine golden hairs. And knowing, right here, right now—he was happy.

*(So THAT's what that feels like.)*

Wasn't like he'd never *had* pussy before, after all. But in jail, things were different—easier. And the strain of having to *court* her, not just take her...to be charming and persuasive...to listen to what she said and then give back just as deeply, not simply file the information away for later use...it made him crazy with wanting her. Knowing she was his already, had basically told him as much—but forced by circumstance to wait, seemingly in vain, for HER to figure that out.

The first time Vern asked Rachel to marry him, she'd laughed; the second time, she'd groaned...then laughed again. And then there was the third time, when she'd gotten mad: Snapped that this was getting pretty fuckin' old, and why couldn't they just have fun together, without the legal contract bullshit? Like they already were? But he'd kept on, knowing that persistence was one of his better qualities. And finally—the eighth or ninth time—she'd said yes. Of course, by then, she'd been pregnant...with Jan, it turned out...

Rachel. Rachel, Rachel—my one and only. My...intended.

And now she's lying out there, somewhere, far outside this—estrogen-free zone; lying next to someone else. Some fuckin'...jungle bunny. With Vern's dead love still all over her, a skin-sized scar. His mark. His *brand...*

*(...like the one on Beecher, lying—under—Keller. In his bunk. But belonging...under YOU.)*

And: *Oh, Christ Jesus,* Vern thinks, *this whole cell is the size of my fucking storage closet. I'm choking; I've got to get out. Let me the fuck out of here, NOW.*

*He's a liar, a drunk, a wild card, a freak. He screwed me out of my parole. He shit all over my face. He's not RACHEL, for fuck's sake; not even as good-lookin' a piece of ass as Keller—and after the 'tude THAT sword-swallowing little slut's thrown my way lately, I wouldn't touch him again unless he got down on his knees and begged.*

But what if he did, Beecher? Which he just might, you only wait long enough, given the stuff he's already pulled...

Vern presses his fists to his head, hard enough to feel his skull sing, then growls aloud, just this side of a groan. Because now—remembering that split-second x-ray room kiss, slow-mo to freeze-frame,
back and forth and back—it's like he can taste Beecher's over-educated addict's tongue on his, all over again.

At exactly which...highly inopportune moment...the idiot on the bottom bunk chooses to make yet another fucking noise.

"You don't shut the fuck up, down there," Vern tells him, between bared teeth—voice automatically gone all calm and reasonable, almost soothing in its own deep warmth—"I swear to Christ, I'm gonna give you something worth having goddamn nightmares about."

(And, you know...I might just do that anyways.)
EIGHT

Tobias Beecher's version of Tuesday morning, meanwhile, begins like this: Jerking awake in a slick of sweat, half-hard and half-dazed, to find Christopher Keller laid out beside him, full-length—his hawk-sharp nose a bare micro-inch away from Beecher's cheek, dark eyes infinitely watchful, infinitely suggestive.

"Hot dream?"

"Get off me."

"I'm not on you."

(Yet.)

Adding, as Beecher's eyes flick away, automatically scanning the tier outside for any possibility of rescue: "Hack won't be back for ten."

"You think they can't see us from the station?"

Keller chuckles. "Beech. You really think they care?"

And: Given what used to go on pretty well nightly, with Vern—let alone how contemptuously OBVIOUS he was about it, more often than not—Beecher knows Keller's right. But it pisses him off, nonetheless, this certainty of his; the sheer, banked heat of him, crouched and supple, trailing down along Beecher's arm, his hip, his thigh. With Beecher straining not to move, to avoid even the most casual contact, and Keller not straining at all...just smiling, faintly, in the general direction of Beecher's sheeted groin.

Beecher closes his eyes, exhausted all over again, (fairly) good night's sleep notwithstanding. Unable to stop himself from thinking: Why is this happening to me? Why does this KEEP happening to me?

Whine, whine, whine; shut the fuck up, you fuckin' little prep-school pansy.

(Thank you, SIR.)

Because you asked for it. Remember? Drank to put on the false face; drank to maintain the false face. Drank—or drugged—to reward yourself for having to wear the false face. To charge yourself up for that last trip home...afterward, to dull the shock of having actually killed somebody...to get through the trial...to get through Oz...to get through VERN...

And after the laundry room, when Chris was in the Hole—you drank then, too, didn't you? Drank to kill the pain of separation...to rebuild your own flayed hide, recapture the mad self-sufficiency of those days before you dared to let yourself hope that someone--anyone--might ever find you worthy of love again...

(Love, right. Four broken limbs' worth.)

A flash of memory, now, equally uncontrollable—his father, oh-so-righteously "disappointed", after some long-forgotten indiscretion: a lost piece of equipment, a bad mark, a lie found out. Some failure. Patiently explaining that oh, no, of course it wasn't your fault--because NOTHING's ever
your fault. Is it, Tobias?

The Beecher family's essential, Episcopalian dichotomy: Take the blame, and your guilt controls the world. You're responsible for everything. Then all you have to do is lay yourself open, and wait for the comfort to come rolling in.

The magic words: I'm sorry. So sorry. So very, very sorry...

(Yeah, you sure are.)

"You really gonna try 'n' teach Cyril O'Reilly how to play chess?" Keller demands, inadvertently rousing Beecher from the impromptu stew of self-pity he's just slid into. And Beecher, seizing this opportunity to turn away, turn his back on Keller, with pointed emphasis. Replying, coldly: "He couldn't be worse than you."

Skeptical: "Wanna take a bet?"

"Not particularly."

Keller runs an idle finger up Beecher's exposed spine, right to where the first tight, dull gold waves of hair begin, and watches him barely control a shiver—only now realizing (like usual) the possible repercussions of his impulsive shift in position. And tensing, studying Chris's faint reflection on the pod wall in front of him, that predatory shadow. Studying him, at close range, as he tenses, and smiling just a little wider.

(Oh, will you just go away?)

But where would he go? They're locked in, after all—together.

Beecher feels his face tinge red, the blush growing, spreading. Beneath the sheet, he feels himself stiffen further, helpless as ever—his erection crushing up against the bunk's side-panel, pumped to over-sensitivity. Leaking, slightly. And Keller's breath on his scalp, a hot shadow falling over him, murmuring quietly: "You got a nice neck, Beech. The back of it—nape, right?" A pause, waiting—teasingly—for an answer. "Anybody ever tell you that?"

Muffled: "No."

(Not even Vern. And God knows, he SAW it often enough.)

"Want a little help with that?"

With WHAT? Beecher almost snaps. Then realizes that Keller—taller, propped on one elbow, his astigmatism-free eyes wide open—probably has a far better view of Beecher's "problem", all told, than Toby does himself.

(Oh...THAT.)

Oddly prim: "I'm fine, thanks anyway."

Helpless. Hopeless. And how the fuck could he ever have thought he could fight Chris off, anyway, day after endless day, here on his—their—own shared home ground? Always rubbing up against him, impinging on his space, touching him briefly and then moving on before Beecher even had the chance to wonder what he was supposed to think, leaving nothing behind but an itchy, unsatisfied lick of flame—just like during those first few months, back before Beecher knew the real reason Keller kept acting like he wanted to get inside his pants.
"I know you want it," Keller tells him, simply. "And you know I want it. And...sometime soon, when you're finally over that whole—gym thing...we both know you're gonna let me." To which Beecher replies—still without turning, still muffled, gamely mimicking a confidence he doesn't feel: "In your dreams."

"That's right." Adding, leaning down, almost in his ear: "...yours, too." With a moist little flick against his tragus for punctuation: Keller's wicked tongue. Beecher lets his eyes squeeze tight against it, a last desperate defense—as Keller whispers, lips brushing the inner shell of cartilage, the blood-bright whorl: "Who you think you're foolin', man? All you gotta do is smell me, and you're halfway there already."

And Beecher, shaking his head, stubborn, silent. Trying his level best not to breathe--through his nose.

He hears Keller exhale, an amused, annoyed snort; hears the mattress's springs squeal in protest as he shifts over, onto his back, looking up at the top bunk's underside. And says: "'Kay, fine. Be that way. Guess I'll just have to...amuse myself, for now." Then silence for a second or so, followed by a whisper of cloth, up and down. The sound of spitting. An exploratory lull. Then a hitch, a soft growl in the throat, followed by a gradually quickening pattern of breath. Mixed with...

—he CAN'T be doing what I think he's—

...soft, rhythmic...slapping sounds.

(Oh, shit. He IS.)

Lying there, listening to Keller—amuse himself—Beecher digs his nails into his palms, determined to resist the growing urge to hump up, ever so slightly, against the bunk's restraining barrier; coordinate his movements with that onanistic siren song coming from behind him, and rub 'till he finds release. Not deliberately, so much, as almost accidentally: excess sexual energy overspilling like infection, draining away like disease, exploding on contact like a punctured pocket of pus.

Hot and shivering, Beecher lies their paralyzed. Thinking: He's jacking off, and I feel like I'm the one getting fucked—and I didn't even DO anything, damnit.

...damn it.

Appalled and aroused,-mountingly—though much against his will--by the idea that Keller might still be looking at him at he does it, his dark blue gaze riveted to Beecher's neck, back, spine, hidden ass...using him like some kind of visual aid, that shameless 'ho. And, UH: That all-too-familiar rush of sweet pain, making Beecher's throat clench, his eyes water, his head spin. His barely-healed muscles knot and sing with traitorous anticipation, perversely deferred pleasure.

Not wanting to look back; refusing to look back—or forward either, for that matter, just in case he can make out...even through a blurred and distorted play of light on glass...Chris' face, deformed by ecstasy; his mouth, working, shaping. Naming his object of desire, soft but clear: T—oh—beee...

But then, trembling on the verge of protest or surrender, the voice of reason intrudes, coldly insinuating. Asking: And what makes you think he's thinking of YOU at all, Tobias? Which somehow makes him feel, mortifyingly enough—even worse.

This sudden cynical insight, however—unsought, yet pretty well inarguable—is enough to defuse the dopamine/adrenaline cocktail Beecher's been riding on contact, freeing his mind from this
creeping haze of desire, and returning him to a far more normal (ha, ha) state of detached and frigid rage. Prompting him to inquire, icily: "You done yet, or what?"

At which, the sounds...stop. There's a long, dead moment, followed by another squeal, another shift—as Keller swings his long legs off the bunk, stands in one graceful move, takes a half-stride to the sink. And begins washing his hands, with careful attention, as though absolutely nothing just happened at all.

*(Not that it HAS.)*

Masked by the sound of running water, Beecher draws a long, careful breath, recharging; *Christ, I need my meds*, he thinks. *Already.* Then levers himself vertical, ignoring the pain, with a grunt and a jerk—so that when Keller finally spins the taps closed, he turns to find Beecher sitting there, staring at him.

"Well," Beecher begins—his tone cool, measured, infinitely unamused. "That was...interesting. But since you're up anyway..."

***

Which is how, hours later, Keller comes to find himself lurking outside the Oz post office door with a set of "terms" to deliver, watching Vern Schillinger sort, stack and mark his way through a heap of inmate mail—a study in comparison and contrast. So very different, physically, from the version he knew at Lardner: that slimmer, blonder, more overtly angry young(er) man, already twenty-plus with nothing on his plate but three more years to do and an Aryan Brotherhood leadership position to defend. Yet not so different at all, from what little Chris has been able to glean, on the inside; WORSE, if anything.

Look at him now, cast and all. Moving slower, pain inherent in every motion. And the sheer level of obsession he routinely keeps himself vibrating at, mainly over Beech, now Keller comes to think about it...well, it's enough to make even the toughest engine start eating itself alive, 'specially when you're already runnin' on empty. Actually, Keller's never *seen* anyone as physically on point around a prag, ex- or not, as Vern is around Beecher, these days. Not even—when he and Keller were "together".

*(And that kinda rides YOUR rail, doesn't it, Chris? Truth be told.)*

Truth is, though, Keller knows exactly why Toby sent him here. Why he put such special weight on the words, during his "instructions": *Just thought you might want to take it to him yourself, you two being SUCH GOOD FRIENDS...* Which isn't all that "true" itself, not any longer—but, then again, not entirely *untrue*, either. Which is why Beech, lashing out over the whole early-morning bunk-bed episode, had thought for sure that getting lumped back in with Vern would *hurt* Chris somehow...like he even gives Schillinger a second glance, most of the time.

Besides which: *Just what is Beech's big problem, anyways?* Keller thinks, weirdly resentful. *Always gotta make things hard on yourself, don'tcha, Tobe?*

*(Yeah, okay, I guess I made you listen; didn't MAKE you get a hard-on doin' it.)*

Beecher, congenitally unable to see the world from any perspective but his own, who thinks that since they both took the same ride—with Vern as their oh-so-loving tour guide—the fact that Keller would actually still consider himself in Vern's *debt* makes him complicit in everything Schillinger ever did to Beech. 'Cause what he doesn't understand is just how markedly different their experiences were—"sides from the sex, of course. Shit, ol' Vern never had to bust Keller up, just to
get what he wanted...though that maybe wasn't really such a good thing, in hindsight.

But: Fuck good. Ain't any good, any bad—just the score, which Toby didn't know, in any way, shape or form. And why should he, his background? Money, education, a good job. A soft life. Madness always in him, though; somewhere, buried deep, incubating. A seed he watered with alcohol, all the while hoping—subconsciously, but hoping, Keller was pretty damn sure—he'd live long enough to see it flourish in some spectacular way, before his liver exploded.

Beecher'd wanted to be punished, obviously, much as he might deny it now, and Vern was good at that. Match made in hell, or wherever.

And sure, Keller'd never been broken to harness or beaten into submission, the way Toby was; he hadn't had to be, given he already KNEW the rules of engagement, had done for years. The street, and learning how to sell himself, one way or another—that'd been his education. Get the girls all juicy, make the guys throw a rod; exert your one power in the face of powerlessness. The power to give far more pleasure than you let yourself feel...then walk away afterwards, free and fuckin' clear.

Hell, Keller'd been glad, back at Lardner, to snag Schillinger as his protector. Way Chris saw it, it'd been sort of a prag coup: someone shrewd (if not exactly smart), with a bit of a sense of humor (though not about himself) and his own set of hangups—ones that left him open, like anybody else, to Keller's not-always-so-subtle manipulations. Not to mention that Vern could actually deliver on his part of the prag/patron bargain; challenge him, and he very much would fuck you up—but if anyone else tried to step in, they'd get fucked up just as bad.

All that stuff Vern'd let slip here and there about his Dad, how the "Old Man" used to be on him every minute of every day, calling him a weak, needy faggot, facing off with him over anything from politics to skipping school while the same Mom Vern claimed he'd die to protect just hurt herself worse trying to get between them...Keller had filed that diligently away, the same way he knew Vern filed away anything Chris was dumb enough to tell him. In places like Lardner—or Oz—personal information wasn't useful for anything BUT ammunition.

So: With regards to Vern, going passive—or flirtatious, which the guy hated more than most of the "subhumans" he was always ranting on about—was basically the least practical option. You had to come correct, like a true bad-ass, and back it up. Like when Keller broke Mark Mack's nose, right in front of Vern; sure, it pissed him off, but he'd respected it, too. Manly man-ness in action.

Still...maybe that wouldn't've been such great advice, for ol' Tobe. Considering Vern never really seemed to notice him much, except as a sperm depository, before he finally started to fight back.

That symbiotic groove Keller and Vern had eventually fallen into, little dog to Vern's big, one mind in two bodies: Toby had grazed its surface, from what Keller had heard. Running errands, doing chores...carrying messages...

(So what's this make YOU, Chris? Beech's prag?)

Keller folds his arms, scowls to himself—his mind slipping back, unbidden, to the very end of that strangely comfortable arrangement: the end of his sentence, and his release back into a Vern-less world. There, and then gone—in Lardner, then out; one minute Vern's, the next...no one's, or anyone's. Yet again. And remembering, too—Jesus, this was stupid—

—marking off the weeks and days, a vague internal clock, 'till Schillinger's time was up as well. The date familiar enough, from casual conversation; hell, most of the other Aryans rarely talked about anything else. Then realizing he had no way to contact him...no real assurance Vern even wanted his contact, anyway...
(Think I want you fuckin' with my rep, Keller? Sendin' me love letters? Be serious. You ain't THAT good a lay.)

There were only so many Schillingers in the phone book, however, and only one who ran a butcher's shop. So Chris stood outside all day, shivering up against the wall in an alley across the street, studying the family resemblance through the front window—a scary (but fairly accurate) preview of Vern-to-come, minus the terminal alcoholic's complexion. Then continued to stake it out, fruitlessly, well into the night. Thinking: Maybe. If he had absolutely nowhere else to go...

...yeah. And maybe not even then.

Because Vern had zero love for his Dad, basically, no more than Keller had for his. And—unlike Keller—Vern's A.B. connections alone assured him of never having nowhere else to go.

Chris could still feel the cold clutch of it, even now. That loss; that creeping sense of lost-ness. Man, he'd been young.

Looking back, Keller now vaguely realizes, that probably must have been around the time Vern took off for California with that prematurely-grey king snake freak, Scott Ross. When he parked his bike by San Francisco harbor, and—eventually—ended up hitched. Finally got that wife and kids you were always talkin' about, didn't you, Vernon? Just like me and MY wives. And did it help?

...thought not.

Well, that was all one long fuckin' time ago. And Keller had learned better than to expect anything more from sex, inside prison or not, but a good time—or a leverage point, or a simple matter of convenience. Safer that way, in the long run. Safer by far than this goddamn back-and-forth, wishy-washy, teasing fucking...ambivalence, right?...over what he'd (almost) had with Toby-baby, that's for sure. Considering the sheer, high-maintenance pain the ass the whole thing is rapidly turning out to be.

Hurting Beech, that'd been part and parcel of Keller's debt to Vern, non-negotiable from the start. He knows he couldn't've gotten out of it if he'd tried, not that he did—so he doesn't regret it, not much, not even now. Can't afford to. But feeling—and evoking—a genuine response...

(So hey, okay, I know we can't be FRIENDS anymore...but couldn't we at least have sex?)

Keller curses himself, under his breath: it really does sound pathetic, even to him. Chase 'em until they catch you—that's the way he's almost always played it, with guys like Vern, guys who think they have to be on top. But with Toby...ten times the overt victim Keller's ever been, so vulnerable, all one big unhealed wound beneath a thin layer of scar...

Toby Beecher, brave and crazy, who'd kissed him first. Who'd told him he—

(]oved)

—yeah, right.

Still: Hot tongue, wet teeth. The unexpectedly sweet feel of Toby against him, cradled in his arms—so compact, so sturdy, against Keller's own black panther litheness. That smooth, pale skin laid on his, cheek to jowl; the scratchy gilt of Beech's hair between his fingers. And those clear blue eyes, dazed, replete—drunk on HIM, on Keller. Like Chris was a better drug than madness, a better goal than revenge, enough of a human buzz to send somebody like Toby plunging straight off the wagon, smart or not, rich or not; man, that'd been a high and half, in itself.
The ambition had birthed itself then, in that one mad, unscripted moment: to wipe all lingering trace of Vern from Toby's mind and body, fuck 'em away and and replace 'em with a burnt-in self-portrait, one pleasure-soaked nerve at a time...a fresh new brand mocking the red, ridged one on Toby's ass, yet matching the invisible one on Keller's stunted soul.

Because: Vern thinks he knows them both, thinks he OWNS them both—still. But that kiss showed Keller parts of Beecher he can only assume no one's ever seen; not Vern, not Toby's dead ex. No one but Chris, and Toby, when he lets himself remember.

"Love"? Shit. Not likely. But whatever it was—pity, sex, the legendary ell-oh-vee-ee its fuckin' slippery self, or some typically Beecher-fucked combination of all of the above—Keller wants more. And, one way or another...he's gonna make sure he gets it.

Staring at Schillinger, now, Keller thinks: Good news on the way, old buddy. But don't count your prags before they're screwed, okay? 'Cause you and Toby may have a little interference to deal with, 'fore I'm through.

***

Meanwhile, in the infirmary:

"I think we need to look at taking you off these meds," says Dr Nathan—pretty much right as Beecher swallows the pills in question, annoyingly enough. He gulps, trying to clear his throat. And replies: "Can I ask why?"

"Well, with your—history of substance abuse—"

(My alcoholic junkie-hood, you mean, past, present AND future.)

"—I'm afraid you might run the risk of getting re-addicted."

Well, I'm NOT, Beecher thinks, automatically; might even say it aloud—except that they both know how much bullshit that would be. So instead he just swallows again, lump in his larynx moving further down, into liquid—and even though he understands there's no physical way it could've hit gastric juice just yet, Beecher still feels the edges of his worldview, tightened against Chris's taunting, start to loosen. Of course, that's why she's absolutely right. But he needs the drugs, dammit—needs the rush, the distance, the psychosomatically altered perspective on this huge pile of shit he's decided to throw himself into head-first. So he can do what he has to...

(...wants to. Needs to. Whatever.)

And now—now she's going to take it all away, leaving nothing more than yet another useless "it's for your own good, Beecher" homily in its place, and there is nothing he can do about it. A momentary flare of hatred, frighteningly outsize, blazes up over him; Nathan sees him flush, and takes a half-step sideways—not quite worried enough to call the C.O., yet, for all that her dark eyes slide in the hack's general direction. But: Haven't you heard, Glori-osa? Beecher thinks, with sour amusement. I only hurt men, preferably ones who have their dick in my mouth, or who've HAD their dick in my mouth. Oh, yeah—and myself, of course.

"You'll get a full dose today," she tells him. "First one now, next one after physio, just like normal. And then, as of tomorrow, we start replacing one of those doses with simple Tylenol."

He nods, thinking: And tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow. Till it's all Tylenol. Till it's nothing. Hey, look—instant medical degree.
Carefully: "You okay with this, Beecher?"

A hiss. "Does it matter?"

(Well...no.)

*Funny how you never had this much concern over my health when I was coming in here every other week with a reopened rectal tear, Doc.* Beecher's unable to keep himself from musing. Then clamps down on the thought, *hard,* 'cause being bitter gets you nothing but nowhere, fast. Right? Right.

(Like anything ever *does* get you anywhere, anyhow. In here.)

Once outside the door, however, the orderly leans discreetly by him, muttering: "You need a top-up on them meds, man, I can give you a real sweet deal, wedo. Cost ya 'bout as much as that rot-gut Luis been sellin' you—'cept it don't leave no hangover to tip Queen Bitch in there off, you know what I'm sayin'?")

For probably the first time since "checking in", Beecher takes direct note of the guy: so THIS is who got the medical wing 'scrip trade, after Miguel Alvarez bought himself a one-way ticket to life in solitary. With a hefty percentage going straight to El Cid, no doubt, not that Beecher gives much of a good goddamn—except in that it always does to know who's working for whom, in the natural course of things. As Ryan O'Reilly would put it, though...probably not that way, exactly.

"Pass," he forces himself to say—again, a pale imitation of the Irishman. But the orderly isn't insulted. Just shrugs, replying: "Hey, your call, ese. You be back."

So: On the quad, now, dangling his feet from the top deck and floating happily along in the grip his next-to-last full-force pharmaceutical haze, as O'Reilly approaches—sliding, snake-quick, in to lean against the railing beside him. Mentioning, casually: "Hear the latest? Schillinger whacked Jordaire."

Beecher, squinting: "Himself?"

"Fuck, no. What are you, high?" With a quick sidelong glance at Beecher's goony grin: "Don't answer that."

Beecher starts to giggle, then reins himself in. "Ohhhh-kay. Um—what for?"

"So's he could get Wangler off the floor, and blame Said for it."

"Course. And what are you gonna do about it?"

O'Reilly's turn to grin, now. "Oh...tell everybody. Muslims, gangstas..." He pauses. "How's YOUR end comin', by the by?"

"...coming."

Keeping himself visible, just like right after the riot, when he'd already been jacked to the gills on that first strange jolt of madness made flesh; see-sawing constantly between face-shitting profanity and plaintive amazement at his own extremity, between "that's just not normal" and "do you want to touch my dick?" And riding that familiar, exhilarating high, the high of baiting Vern. Like bull-leaping—move, or get gored. Not that the old Nazi's actually *made* any sudden charging motions in Beecher's direction, as yet...but he has hopes.

To Ryan: "Think you could get Cyril to follow me around, the next couple of days?"
"He already does follow you around."

"No, I mean—could you GET him to follow me around?"

Another glance, slightly more focussed this time; he and Beecher sketch out a whole sub-conversation, using only their eyebrows. Like: *Something special you need a chaperone for, bro?*

(Mmmmmmaybe.)

*Wanna TALK about it?*

(Nope.)

And: "Sure," O'Reilly says. "No problem." Amenable, but with just that little touch of sting in it—in other words: *There better not be, you don't want Cyril hurt...and me all over your sorry, swatika'ed ass, for now until the end of fuckin' time. GET it, Beech?*

Oh yeah. Duly gotten.

Then the intervening hours contract, jump-cut fast. Putting Beecher back in his bunk, Keller back in front of the sink—after count, and mere moments before lights out. Beecher asking Keller, with studied lack of emphasis, barely looking at him as he does: "You talk to him?"

Keller gives a stiff jerk of the head. "Says he'll think about it." Which makes Beecher just smile to himself, before replying: "Uh huh. So...where and when?"

Keller shoots him a narrow look. "Pretty sure of yourself, ain'tcha?"

"Think you're the only one who knows how to get Vern hard, Chris? I mean, it's not exactly brain surgery; show up, ass in tow. Have a pulse."

The guard yells; Keller spits, pivots. As the pod goes dim, he settles smoothly onto the upper bunk, pauses. Then says, quietly: "He knows what you're doing, all right? I TOLD him."

Beecher, equally soft: "Did he listen?"

No answer.

***

Wednesday morning ticks by, with Cyril trailing Beecher to the mess hall, the library, the infirmary—Dr Nathan doling out the pills, like it's some kind of new prison game show: *Meds or Tylenol? YOU be the judge.* Tylenol, though, probably...because by noon, Beecher can feel an incipient shiver in every limb, a shuddery coiling in the pit of his stomach. Added to which, there's only so far Cyril gets to go with him, Ryan's promised permission or not, what with both of them having jobs to do, at almost exactly opposite ends of Em City. Nevertheless, when he sees Schillinger come stalking out of Sister Peter Marie's office, Beecher's still able to pull himself together enough to give ol' Vern's chain at least one good yank—then fade rapidly back to half-speed, lethargically hunting and pecking through the file before him, in between frequent bouts of staring blankly at the computer terminal.

Behind him, Sister Pete exits her inner office, sighing slightly. "I have to run this down to Tim's office, Tobias—"

("This" being Vern's file, if Beecher knows his own color-coding system.)
"You all right here alone, or should I call the C.O. in?"

Automatically: "No, I'm fine. Never better, Sister."

To which she only nods, absently—too distracted, luckily, to notice his distraction. Thank God, or whoever. And a minute later she's gone, leaving Beecher alone with his blinking screen, his withdrawal pangs. His rapidly-dulling sense of self-preservation...

...the same sense which fails to warn him—now that Sister Pete's safely out of the way—of Keller's stealthy approach.

***

Keller, pausing by the door to admire Toby for a silent second—the fierce curve of his back, his intent, cat-snub profile. Thinking about the night before, when he lay on the top bunk with his hands beneath his head, taking stock of the ceiling (and how many times has he done THAT, so far? Enough to chart the cracks like some fuckin' map of Planet White-washed Concrete) while replaying Vern's last dismissive words in his head, over and over: *Tell him...I'll think about it.*

But: *You wouldn't even have anything to "think about" if I hadn't shown up, motherfucker,* Keller reminds himself, resentfully. *No chance with Toby what-so-ever, 'till I broke him down for you...piece, by piece, by piece, by piece. And that's just the PHYSICAL stuff.*

(And now, you do. YOU.)

Which, in turn, only serves to remind Keller, yet again—as he observed in the gym, just before Beech did his little lap-dance onto Vern's astounded stiffie—that he does NOT know *this* version of Beecher half as well as he's been hoping. Not the one apparently hell-bent on doing what his Beech...laundry-room Beech...would have always rather died than do: run right back into his former rapist's arms, rather than trust himself around Chris.

*Well—we'll just see who he chooses, at close range; no escape, no mercy, no qualm. It's now or never.*

Closing the door behind him, softly, therefore—Keller leans forward. And blows across the exposed back of Beecher's neck, that *nape,* just for the pleasure of seeing him jump.

***

Turning, heart in mouth, chest hammering—is it Vern, back to kick (or fuck, or both) his ass over an air-mimed kiss? Only to be confronted with Keller's smirking face, telling him, without preamble: "We need to talk."

*(Oh, I SO do not need this now.)*

Beecher snorts. Replying, shortly: "I don't think so." Then tries to turn away, back to his work, only to have Keller block the movement with one solid bicep, braced on the desk between them. Beecher glares over the intruding arm, eyes sparking: A pale blue spurt like gas going up, met and mirrored in Keller's own dark gaze. And the scent of him, like a wave breaking over every part of Beecher at once—so intense, so familiar. So horridly RIGHT, especially for something so absolutely wrong.

Every part. But...one part in particular.

Okay, then. Best defence? Good offence, supposedly. So Beecher strikes the pose, hoping mimicry can call his old friend madness to his rescue before anything too irreparable has time to happen—
imitation, always the sincerest form of flattery. Smiling now, wide and nasty, and asking: "So tell me, Chris—is this how I'm gonna have to spend the next ten years, I flunk my parole hearing? Beating you off with a fuckin' crutch?" He kicks out at the implements in question, pointedly, and is rewarded by seeing Keller flush in response, if only slightly.

"Said I was sorry, goddamnit—"

"Oh, that's right: You DID." With an even wider smile: "And that's one better than the last guy who screwed me over, at least."

Keller huffs. Then ekes out, slowly, between his teeth: "One more time, okay? I owed Vern. So I PAID him what I owed..."

"That'd be me," Beecher puts in here, helpfully.

"As it turns out, yeah." Voice lowering, as Keller presses closer: "But...maybe we would'a clicked up anyway, you 'n' me, Vern hadn't been in the picture. Ever think about that little possibility, ToBIas?"

Oh, far too often for my own comfort.

Beecher draws a breath, embarrassed by its length, its raggedness; feels the coil in his stomach knot tighter, jerking his cock up like a leash—brainless fucking organ that it is—and tries to keep his eyes anywhere but on Chris. Or NEAR Chris. Replying, faintly, as he does: "Yeah, well--we'll never know now, will we?"

But Keller, from whom nothing escapes—the human black hole, as omniscient as he is treacherous—just won't let it go. Claiming: "I know. And so do you."

"So you keep saying," Beecher snaps—jonesing, pissed off, fed the fuck UP. Hearing the words spill out, uncensored, before he has a chance to register them, let alone call them back; bent on provocation, confrontation. An end to all this, happy or otherwise—probably otherwise. But what the hell, huh? Nothing else left to lose, he can only hope. And: "Okay," he says, voice rising, thinning—borne upwards, on a bright, energizing current of reckless rage. "If it'll get you off my back, so to speak—then put up, or shut up. You wanna fuck with me, Chris? C'mon. Let's fuck."

Smiling at him now, that peeled-back, half-snarl, mad dog grin deliberately evoking, Chris'll swear to God, the same sickening moment when Beech met him at the edge of Em City, arms outstretched in "celebration" of his release from the Hole: drunk and disorderly, half-drowned in a self-inflicted booze halo. When he'd thrown his arms around Chris and felt him up just like any other piece of meat, any other whore you could buy with a packet of smokes and a kind word, a slurry invitation to bonk like bunnies; treated him...like Vern would've, in actual fact. Beech's only pattern for that kind of thing, up 'til then, so Keller guesses he can't really fault him for it—

—except that he does. Did. Does. 'Cause: I AIN'T his prag, Toby. Not any more. Or yours, either.

Repeating those same, ill-fated words, even: Let's fuck. And Keller, hardening all over, lit and fig. Thinking: Okay, that the way you want to play it? 'Ho to 'ho? I'm better at this game than you are, Beech. Got more...experience.

(Care for a demonstration?)

Sitting back on his heels, Keller crosses his arms, deliberately—see? Free to leave, anytime you want...not that I see you going anywhere. With Beecher watching him close, fascinated. As Keller tells him, utterly smooth: "Oh, but I don't want to fuck you, Tobe. I mean...I don't want to fuck
YOU.

And: *What the hell does that mean, though, when it's at home?* Beecher wonders, baffled. *Screw this and screw YOU, you fuckin'—fuckin' I don't even know what, aside from the fact I'm not sticking around to find out.*

Exhausted, disgusted, Beecher half-rises, turns away from Keller decisively—having learned nothing, obviously, from yesterday morning's little exercise in watch-your-back-ness—only to jump yet again, a truncated little bob, as he feels Keller come immediately up against him from behind: one hand at his throat, the other at his hip; restraining, *stroking.* Murmuring, hotly, right into his ear: *'Bet you'd like that, though, right? You ever *been* on top yet, Toby? And not with a chick, 'cause that don't count...''*

*(No? Well, shit—there goes all MY previous experience.)*

Keller's hand, spanning his hip, gripping his hip-bone. Tracing the downward curve of his pelvic ridge. The inside of his thigh...

*(Oh God, my God. Oh—)*

...Keller's, *Chris's* tongue, his lips. His burning mouth, promising: *'I'd let you, baby—anytime; wouldn't have to burn a swastika on MY ass. And you, all the hate you got on for me...all the times you had to take it, when you really wanted to be showin' ol' Vern how much it hurts to play pussy-boy for somebody whose idea of good sex looks like two dogs fuckin'—''*

*Christ, oh Chr...Chrrr...issss...''*

'*—you, Toby-baby--you would abso-friggin'-lutely LOVE it.*''

Beecher sags for a moment, lost—then fights his way free, kicking, tearing: A surge of energy so abrupt it catches them both off-guard. Flipping himself around, their legs tangling; up against Keller, muscle on muscle, his chin colliding *hard* with the inside of one broad shoulder—too many bad memories in that other position, to say the least. But as Beecher turns, Keller comes in fast and kisses him deep—teeth clicking, tongue probing, painfully electric. The two of them up against the nearest wall, chair already kicked aside; Keller's hands on Beecher's wrists, pinning him butterfly-style, spread wide and wanting. Aching everywhere Chris touches, everywhere he *doesn't* touch...

Throwing his hip up over Chris's, instinctive, and meeting something just as hard as he is: Hard, hot, rigid. A wet cloth mesh, proof positive of equal arousal. And breaking away momentarily, Keller stares, this time—struck momentarily dumb by the force of his own response—while Beecher snarls, hoarse, into the unexpected silence: *'Careful. I bite.'*

But Keller—though breathless—remains unimpressed. *'Yeah?''* he says. *'Then BITE me.'*

Hit-and-run, no hands, clothes on: just heat and motion, desperate desire in action. It's the perfect thing for skittish customers like Beech; you can come in your pants and pretend it's an accident—the first time, at least. Not that Chris is currently thinking about *strategy,* exactly, not right this very minute...instead, it's Beech's stomach clenching against his as they grapple palm to palm, fingers locked, for dominance. Beech humping up against Keller's thrust-out thigh and Keller bending to shower the hollow of his throat with tiny, tongueless kisses, teasing little flicks, each like a shock straight to the groin; nuzzling, biting, chest to heaving, hammering chest. And Beech keening into Chris's collarbone, muffled, sobbing with helpless pleasure—the same pleasure Chris feels pumping through him now, setting everything from neck to knees alight with glorious possibility, with imminent, earth-shaking, teeth-rattling potential for explosion—
His mind babbling, incoherent: *Uhhn, ahhhn...oh yeah, ohh, ohhh—OHHHH SHIT*...

'Till he can feel himself, feel Beech: pressed together, erupting practically in unison. *Soaking* each other, and themselves.

Keller collapses onto Beecher, wrung out, amazed. Knowing, as clearly as he's ever known one single thing in his whole, entire, oh-so-fucked-up life...that that, right there, right then...was well worth the wait. At which point, predictably—the struggle becomes real, once again: Beech squirming, cursing, beating against Keller's slack arms, though still too weak from his own orgasm to free himself by strength alone. Until Keller, shocked by sudden pain, hears himself yell out: "Ow, FUCK!" Because Beech—

*(MY Beech)*

—that crazy fuck, actually *has* just bitten him; a definite nip, just under the earlobe, above the mastoid muscle. Shallow, sure, but bloody enough to make Keller recoil, clearing a path for Beech's clumsy, clattering retreat—grabbing his crutches, half-hopping, half-sliding out the office door, leaving Chris behind: Pants full, eyes watering. Hoping like holy hell that Sister Pete doesn't come right back through that door and find him there, bleeding all over her nice clean floor. And wondering just what kind of excuse he's gonna have to come up with, when he hits Dr Nathan up for stitches...

Holding his jaw, and thinking: *Mark me yours, then run away, huh? Perverse little son-of-a-bitch. You really sure it's Vern you want, Toby? 'Cause I don't see you takin' a chunk out of HIM.*

An hour later, however, the mini-riot breaks out—and all wounds become instantly explicable.

***

Back in the infirmary, for the third time that day, Beecher—who barely had time to change before he found himself in the mess hall, cracking his left-hand crutch in half over the intrusive, platinum-bleached head of that raving queen who used to do his makeovers—sits next to Bob Rebadow, waiting to take his turn under Nathan's capable hands. Suddenly, he notices that Rebadow's alone: not exactly business as usual, considering how he and Busmalis have been virtually joined at the hip ever since the Mole hit Em City.

"Where's Agamemnon?" Beecher asks.

Rebadow, softly: "Stabbed."

For a minute, Beecher's taken aback, truly unsure—for once—of what to say. Not that very long ago, after all, since Rebadow was stabbed himself: back before he took God's advice on the best way out of Oz, only to be hideously disappointed.

"...badly?" he asks, finally—and is relieved when Rebadow shakes his head. Replying: "I have it on—good authority—he's going to be just fine."

This said with a brief...almost coy...upwards glance; Beecher smiles to see it, thinly. Commenting: "Sounds like you and God made up."

And Rebadow just shrugs. Like always.

No sign of Vern; coming in, Beecher had to fight his way through a knot of gangstas clustered around Poet, who was complaining loudly about Schillinger throwing the first punch—so maybe he's down in McManus's office, *explaining* himself. Then again, not fuckin' likely, with Metzger covering
his behind. That closeted Nazi bastard.

Coming down hard now from the mini-riot's taunting little touch of madness, Beecher feels fear, shame, a hot burst of remembered ecstasy grip him all at once, along with the renewed symptoms of his withdrawal. Knowing he has to remove himself, somehow, from Chris's distracting influence, or face the very real possibility of losing his nerve entirely and giving up his quest for revenge—against Vern, against Metzger. Against the whole goddamn A.B. and anyone who might get in his way while he's doing it, a list of names very much including Keller's.

From beside him, he hears Rebadow's scratchy cough, and looks around to meet the old man's bleak but candid eyes head-on. "Beecher," Rebadow begins. Then, almost hesitant: "If I told you God told me something about you—would you want to know what it was?"

Beecher stares at him, joints singing, heart pounding. Feeling his sins cluster around him, like flies on an open cut: those he's committed, and those he's merely contemplated. Knowing in his heart of hearts there's nothing truly sacred, yet fearing—nevertheless—that he may have already lost the last of what he laughingly used to call his soul.

"Go learn the oboe, Bob," he says, at last. "I think you owe it to Him. Don't you?"

Then he's back at Dr Nathan's door, with Keller just coming out—his jaw all swabbed and plastered, stained orange-red with iodine. "Be careful," she calls after him. "These things can be infectious."

Keller, locking eyes with Beecher: "I know."

With the orderly trying to catch his eye, too, off in the corner—knowing a good customer when he sees one, especially one as strung out as Beecher must look now. And: I have GOT to get out of here for a while, Beecher thinks, unable to stop himself. Away from Chris, from Vern, from THAT dude. Take a little detox vacation. Get myself back on track, so I can keep on going straight to Hell at my own chosen speed, with no one trying to slow me down, or speed me up, or pull me back from the brink of my own personal abyss.

He's still meditating on this statement, in part or whole, by the time McManus and company finally reopen the mess hall for dinner and Keller appears by his elbow, so fast and silent—yet again—that Beecher didn't even know he was there 'till he's already pointing, over his shoulder, in the direction of Vern's usual table. And saying, smugly: "Hey, look. It's the new you."

(Excuse me?)

Beecher follows the line of Chris's pointing finger, automatically, then freezes. Because there's a strange man sitting at the end of the table, next to Vern—some Gen Pop hump Beecher's never even seen before, or maybe he has, and just doesn't remember; guy's not exactly memorable. Just sitting there, hugging himself and staring off into space, like he's just been punched in the gut several times in succession. And boy, does that ever look familiar. Like looking in a fucking mirror that only reflects the past, from maybe a half-year back.

Beecher, staring, catches Vern's eyes: calm, sated. All balance restored. And sees the unspoken message, there for anybody to read, if they want to—like: See, bitch? You're nothin' special. Think I need your "terms," to get what I need? There's a new prag 'round every corner, I want to find one there. Anywhere. Anybody.

(Anybody...but you.)

Beecher catches Keller watching this silent exchange, trying his best not to laugh out loud; jackal at
the lion's feast, that's Chris fucking Keller, all right—barely able to repressed his glee at getting Vern's leavings: Beecher, all his, for good. And feels a huge wad of rage expands inside of him, inflating him like a balloon. Sending him limping across the hall, double-time, stop-motion fast as some voracious desert spider.

*Kill or cure, Tobias,* he thinks, grimly. *Kill or cure.*

Discarding his crutches, Beecher slides in between them like a hot knife through butter; slings an arm over both their shoulders before Vern even has a chance to protest, provocatively casual, and gives them the patented feral grin—with extra teeth. To Schillinger: "Hey, nice one: He's cuuute." Then, to the guy: "You know who I am, guy? He tell you, maybe?"

Guy: "...no..."

"Oh, too bad." A beat. "I'm the WIFE, bitch."

And he *slams* this poor fellow victim's head onto the table—once, twice, so hard, he hauls him up choking on his own front teeth, nose smashed flat. Turning him, streaming blood, to Vern, and hissing: "How ya like them apples, Vern-baby?"

(NOT such a pretty picture.)

Then back to this unlucky bastard, in a cheated mini-lion's roar, loud enough for everyone to hear: "SO KEEP YOUR FUCKIN' PAWS OFF MY MAN!"

For the second time today, chaos rocks the hall: Double takes, triple takes, *quadruple* fuckin' takes—that last one from Keller, by the way. Cheers. Chanting.

(*Bee-cher. Bee-cher. Bee-cher. Bee—*)

Same people who got such a kick out of him (almost) taking his flying leap off the top deck, Beecher thinks, giddily. Too bad Adebisi's in Ad Seg; too bad Wangler's on death row. Because they'd looked sooo sweet, down in the crowd together—hugging each other, and howling like wolves at his sheer, suicidal audacity.

As Vern just sits there frozen, floored, and that *guy* of his continues to sputter, bright red, Beecher just keeps on grinning: shot instantly higher than the moon on nothing but his own screwed inventiveness. Still grinning, even when the guards grab his shoulders, pulling him away en masse—some truly ridiculous amount of them, four or five at least, to handle one jealousy-struck prag—back through the mess, out the door, towards the Hole. Winking at Chris as he goes by, not that he seems to notice...

And screaming back, at Vern: "Schillinger! You think I'm serious NOW?"

*Well. If you don't—you BETTER.*
Chapter 5

NINE

Monday, in the Hole. Cold, and clean, and bare; dark, then bright, then dark again. Silent—a blessing, at first, after the din of Em City. But gradually...as external absence gives place to the babble inside, the tide of his own thoughts lapping up to wash Tobias Beecher from memory to resolution, doubt to despair and back again...more like a fuckin' curse.

Familiar, now, though, as Beecher's own naked skin—his goose-pimpled arms and legs, his chapped and flexing buttocks, limbs wrapped tight around himself as though these mounting detox shakes he's riding might actually crack his fragile, half-healed body apart. Because this is—what? Fourth time lucky, one past the proverbial charm. A home away from home, almost; so redolent with memories...

(all those good, good times)

First time: carried in, strapped down, screaming and thrashing from a BIG-ass dose of Ryan O'Reilly's patented farewell angel dust packet—a one-way express ticket to unlocking the berserker within, peeling loose the mask of strained sanity he'd worn all through those first six months in Oz. Ripping his false face away down the bare and bloody roots for the first time in years—maybe the first time ever—and inadvertently doing unto Vern Schillinger...well, if not exactly what'd been done unto him, Beecher, then at least doing something worth remembering for a long, long time to come.

A scratched cornea, a slight scar quirking the outer eyelid. The marks of victory, however fleeting; a preliminary sketch, and one which fairly begged for embellishment. Leading, almost directly, to Beecher's second trip Hole-bound: Weight to the head, bench to the chest—Vern pinned and snarling up at him, one good eye just visible between Beecher's thighs as he wrenched his pants down, snarled a "Sieg Heil, baby!" back—

—and the less said about that, the better.

Still cackling with mad laughter when they threw him bodily through the door: a barking, clawing, howling full-body rush which didn't abate for hours, maybe days. Best high I ever had, Beecher thinks—not quite able to smile, yet, at the palpable irony. And shivers again, helpless, in the tightening grip of his impromptu no-meds diet; his...no-Keller diet.

Still feeling Chris's lips on his, caustic-sweet as some unhealed phantom scald. Still hearing his whispered words, his profane promise: I'd let you, baby. Wouldn't have to burn a swastika on MY ass...

(Oh, and I'll just bet you would. You 'ho.)

But anyway—on, straight on, to time number three: that would-be Gen Pop cellblock stud Jim Robson and his...tip. Salt skin under Beecher's lips, painful pressure of hands on his shoulders, forcing him down; a faint, equally salty tang of pre-cum on his tongue and the all-too-recognizable smell of unwashed pubes at close range, plus that rubbery, tubular weight gliding past his uvula—in, then out, then in, followed by that scream. And had he only dreamed catching a moment's flash, just one, of Vern through the bars of the next cell on—coming awake all at once, eye snapping open at exactly the same moment Mr Not-Quite-So-Hard-After-All realized just how sharp those teeth he'd trustingly stuck his dick between could be? Thinking, no doubt: Well, hell. That could have been ME.
Which—it could've. Would've, Vern'd caught him in just the right mood. Might yet.

But: You never did seem to GET in that particular mood back then, did you, Toby? One way or another.

(Sweetpea.)

Beecher lets out a long, ragged sigh. Lies back on the frozen floor, painted concrete like a rough, flat cradle against his knotted spine. Crosses his arms again, and lets himself turn sideways, knees coming up flush with his stomach in the classic fetal pose, then feels his stomach clench, as though Chris Keller's long-finger hand has been suddenly laid across it; feels it heave, as though Schillinger's scent has just enveloped him from behind. The heavier man already in position, incongruously cat-silent as ever, before Beecher—too distracted by his own misery to pay the world outside his skull much never-mind—barely has time to realize he's got company.

Rocked by nausea, rolled by remembrance and hallucination alike: what's been, vs. what may be. Two close-matched opponents, fighting the good fight for dominance over Beecher's febrile junkie mind even as he shuts his eyes, digs his cheek into the grainy stone and feels his stubble rasp across it, already sandpaper-thick. While thinking, with a certain grim amusement: You figured out whether what happened in the mess hall was a victory or not yet, Vernon? C'mon, you dumb redneck fuck—jump the way I KNOW you want to. Don't look a gift prag in the butt.

Well, it's not like there's a pressing fucking deadline, after all. The Hole keeps its own clock, slow but sure. All the time in the world, in here—time enough for Beecher to consider, remember, plan. To cough his guts out in the corners, piss and shit in that can by the door. Exercise (hopefully); eat (twice daily); think (way too much). Jerk off. Sleep. Dream.

To steel himself, gradually, for his return to the "real" world, with its myriad threats and temptations: Vern, and his comeuppance; Keller, and his interference. O'Reilly, and his assistance. Innocent Cyril, crazy Rebadow. Poor Sister Pete, still blissfully unaware of the frantic, damnable consummation Beecher carried out with Keller just a few days earlier, up against the pristine plaster of her holy office wall. Which rockets him back, in turn, to Chris's lips, his hands...his breath, so sweet in Beecher's burning ear; those hissing, enticing vows of pleasure, passion...

Lies. All lies, and nothing but.

More shivers rack him, jack-knifing uncontrollably—mere addiction, or a sympathetic jolt of memory? Beecher's cock pulses hard, bladder burning. Teeth digging down into his own lower lip 'till he tastes blood: clean, clarifying copper.

And: Oh, Toby, Toby, he thinks, almost snickering at his own genuine desperation. Got to keep it together, man, just keep a HOLD. Because this is just week one of four, trip four of four—and bad as things seem now, they can really only get worse.

So if I'm halfway bugfuck already, he wonders, what the hell will I be like by the time they finally come to let me OUT?

***

In the visiting room, meanwhile, Rachel Renton/Schillinger watches her ex-husband twist his cast and avoid her eyes, booth phone jammed up awkwardly into the crook between his neck and shoulder. Voice gone as rumbly and monosyllabic as it used to get when he'd just come home from a double shift at the post office, only to find her not quite as impressed with his travails—heat, out-of-date equipment, low pay, affirmative action loading his department down with niggers, Spics and
nigger/Spics who couldn't find their ass with both hands, or remember a postal code "if it was
tattooed inside their girlfriend's snatch"—as she was with her own: Colicky kids, not enough left in
the household fund to buy milk or diapers, unpaid layout and editorial duty on magazines run by
madmen, and Schillinger Senior banging at the front door half-tanked, threatening to take the bike as
repayment for some loan incurred long before Vern and Rachel ever met.

Just another day at the Schillinger homestead, that one-bedroom Racially Pure Zone that'd been
Rachel's sole domain for ten years plus. A White Power sitcom, laugh-track removed; eavesdropping
at close range while Vern and his cronies ran the same old tired shit back and forth to each other,
24/7, and treated each brain-dead stanza of the party line as a fresh and brilliant insight.

Neighborhood gone downhill? That'd be the niggers, ruining it for the rest of us like usual. Can't get
the job you want, qualified or not? That's 'cause the Jews control it all, and they'll keep you out if
they can. Bad grades? The Asians, jacking up standards with their unfair, overachieving ways. No
sex-life? Well, who'd want to breed with most of the mongrels out there, anyway?

_I don't remember if I ever really believed any of that crap, anymore, Rachel thinks. Don't think even
YOU believe most of it, in actual fact, much as you may like to pretend otherwise._

To which her own mind retorts, cynical as ever: _Lovely sentiment, Miss Renton—oh, but wait a sec.
Aren't you Professor Paul Clearwater's famous deprogrammed neo-Nazi squeeze, trophy wife of a
very different kind, exhibit one at cocktail parties and academic lectures alike? As well as being the
anonymous author of such hate-filled bull-flop as “Survival Of The Purest: Doing Your Part” and
“Holocaust Envy: What Jews Don't Want You To Know?”_

(That'd be me, all right.)

But screw it. This isn't about her, or Paul, or the way she's slowly realizing that she may well have
stepped out of one trap only to end up in another (slightly nicer-looking) one—not even about Vern,
come to think of it. It's about getting Cory and Jan away from that maniac grandfather of theirs, any
way she can, up to and including...the most obvious.

So--pointing at Vern's cast, she asks: "That still hurt?"

"Nope."

"How about the eye?"

A surprised scowl, flick-quick—_wondering just what else Mr McManus might've told me about
"your business", Vernon? Yeah, I'll bet._

"Eye's fine," Vern says, at last. Then adds, quietly: "...thanks."

And oh, that's different. So different—it's kind of scary.

Trying to get a rise out of him: "Well, you look like you're still in a LOT of pain."

"Gonna say that every time you come?"

"If that's how you _look_ every time I come? Yes."

Vern snorts. Suggesting: "Wouldn't be feelin' sorry for me, would you, Rachel?" To which _she_ just
snorts back in turn, eyeing him sidelong, from under knit blonde brows. And replies, quietly: "I
almost might. If I didn't know any better."

Sees a corner of his mouth twitch, then—almost starting to lift, before self-censorship takes over
again. And feels the gesture strike her full-force, like an unexpected revelation: a millisecond of the 
man she once knew, buried deep under these protective layers of prison bulk and attitude. The one 
whose amused blue glance she caught, so long ago, across the shimmying crowd which packed that 
skanky little biker bar—the one who drove away with her arms wrapped around his waist while her 
(ex-)boyfriend's curses faded into the wind behind them. Whose big hands kept her up all that night, 
whose deep and lulling voice convinced her to stay all the next day, and the next...

Remembering Tim McManus's hesitantly voiced question, last week, during her first visit: the usual 
question, predictable as ever. Smart woman like you, pretty woman—why Vern Schillinger, of all 
people? All possible people?

Because of my parents, Rachel thinks, tired, and their post-'60's academic pap: unconditional 
acceptance for everyone's views, no matter how radical, a premise I just HAD to test, to map for 
myself just how far the boundaries of their vaunted tolerance would stretch before snapping. 
Because of how nuts it drove them when I brought him home, and how they'd never dare say so...to 
his face. Because he knew exactly what he wanted, while I couldn't have told you what I did, not 
even if you'd held a proverbial gun to my head; because he told me I was his and I believed him, 
until I remembered I knew better.

He's my husband, dammit. Father of my kids. I don't hate him—

(still)

—and I wasn't ALWAYS afraid of him, either. Certainly not back then.

(That would come later.)

Youth. Idiocy. Youthful idiocy. Take your fuckin' pick.

Through the scratched glass, Vern's watching her closely, initial pretence of disinterest pretty much 
fallen by the wayside. Disturbed by her silence, her lack of response? Hard to tell, as ever. "How's 
Jan?" he asks.

Shortly: "Better."

"Cory?"

"His court date's coming up."

"Uh huh. The Old Man?"

"An asshole, like always."

Another twitch, slightly larger this time; another pause. "Boys were pretty fucked up, last I time saw 
'em," he says. Slowly.

She sighs. "Yeah, well--they ARE pretty fucked up. Generally."

(And I say that as their mother.)

Her big, blond, blue-eyed sons, so unpredictably perfect, even in their current, degenerated state. 
Can't quite believe they came out of her, most days, let alone that part of them (and not the better 
part, either) came out of Vern.

Distanced from him, now, though—separated by time, concrete, glass and steel, the full weight of the
law—he finally has objectivity enough to see him for what he really is: another trapped animal, just like she was seven years ago. The only difference being that Rachel chose her cage...

(But as she's already observed, he did, too. In a way.)

Baffled by the outside world and its strictures, he chose to take himself away once more, subtract himself from the equation. To go back to this place he knows so well, instead: the cellblock power struggle, so much more (literally) black and white than this tangled mess of curdled love and entropy her flight had left behind. While her children, and his, ended up being held hostage to the Old Man's hatred for him, stored up over more years than they'd been alive—forced to foot the bill for both their parents' mistakes. Which just isn't fair, goddamnit, to anybody.

Against her better judgement, Rachel feels her moment's jolt of empathy begin to devolve into anger even as he begins: "You need me to testify--" Making her snap back, almost without thinking: "You know what I need you to do, Vernon."

Rage-flare, red and ripe, easy as breath; second nature, to them both. She sees him re-harden, instantly, at its touch. "How's your nigger, Rachel?" he asks, sweetly—to which she retorts, automatic: "How's your cellmate, Vern?"

(And: Go on ahead and blush, honey. 'Cause they told me about THAT, too.)

It's old news, though, at the very best. Considering what he let slip himself, all those years ago...that one time she got him drunk, daring him outright to match her shot for shot, and watched him slide—slowly, but literally—under the kitchen table. Muttering, as he did—

Did some guys when I was in, ya know...'cause you DO, right? But that never meant nothin', not really...

(Not like you and me. Not like love.)

Oh, and he'd been so embarrassed to realize what he'd said, too, the morning after. It'd made him turn green, sicker than the hangover itself; sick as he looks now, in point of fact, with his bad hand fisting, bad eye ticcing half-shut. Grasping for just the right comeback, the knife-twist that'll make her hurt as much as he does.

"Always did wonder what you saw in him," he continues, carefully. "The afro, right? 'Mind you of that Hippie snake-pit I pulled you out of?"

"It's called Berkley, you ignoramus—"

Without missing a beat: "—or, wait, I got it now—he slip you the extra inch, that what did the trick?"

"Yeah, you just keep on telling yourself that."

"Y'know, Ross always said you were party meat, but would I listen? Punk fuckin' dilettante—sell it if you had to, you weren't already givin' it away for free—"

Hitting back just as hard, unable to stop herself: "Well, and he'd know, wouldn't he? Ever do him, while we're on the subject?"

"Cunt."

"Prick."
Half-rising: "'Kay, visit over; I got work."

"I'm sure. Mail to sort, right? Other inmates to screw."

"Aw, screw YOU, you fuckin' little race traitor slut!"

Both fists come slamming down on his half of the counter, as the C.O. jumps to attention, hand on stick. Rachel recoils, instinctively; they lock glares, both panting slightly, humming with that old spark and hiss. That bad old thing between them going up like mortar-fire, burning deep and hard as spread napalm—right to the bone, and deeper.

Thinking, sadly: *Man, we do know each other's triggers, don't we? Where to push, and how far. All the worst places to dig and exactly what we'll find there, when we hit bottom.*

"Just sign the papers, Vern," she tells him, softly. "Please. And you will never have to see me here again."

(*'Cause that's what you want, isn't it? Well...*)

...isn't it?

Standing, pausing, caught between options. Again, she can see him *almost* hesitate—almost think better of what he's going to say, his own automatic reply. But then he just draws back up, full height, smoothing a quick hand over his own skull, as though to remind himself of who...and where...he is; how little he can afford to lose, let alone give away. To anyone.

Even her.

"Not in my lifetime," is all he says, at last. And stalks from the booth, yelling at the guard to punch the door back into Gen Pop open.

***

Ten minutes later, Fritz Duchene—leaning against the post office wall—jerks himself vertical at Vern's approach. Calling out: "Hey, S-man. Metzger's lookin' for ya."

Vern doesn't slow. "Yeah? Good for him."

"Where you been, anyway?"

From the side of his mouth: "Fuckin' McManus made me go see my wife. AGAIN."

And again, and again, and again...

Jesus Christ Almighty, though; the rush of it, the heat—these waves of alternating lust and murder, swarming and squirming all over him like a live maggot bath. The world-shaking impact of her presence, vs. the bone-break ache of her absence. Rachel's very shadow on the booth's partition is enough to start prying him apart, crack by crack, hairline fractures of memory springing open like badly-set sutures, gaping wide. It makes him careless, impatient, and he knows it. Hates it.

Can't stop it, even so. Which makes him hate it all the more.

Burning from the waist on down, too, with no immediate hope of relief: nameless/faceless still in the infirmary, jaw wired shut; Rachel halfway down the highway by now, in that nigger of hers' (no doubt) expensive car. And who's *that* leave, for shit's own sake?
Who indeed.

"Thought your wife was in the Hole," Duchene mutters, annoyed at being thrust aside—and not quite under his breath, this time, either. But Vern is so distracted, worrying over his own distraction...he doesn't even notice.

***

Meanwhile, in the Hole:

"Give me one good reason not to bounce your ass into Gen Pop, Beecher," Tim McManus begins, without preamble—riding a typically self-righteous high, and fairly quivering with the oh-so-moral certitude of it all. While Beecher, still on the floor, just cocks a skeptical brow in his direction: *You talkin' to ME, Timmy-boy? I mean, there's nobody else HERE...*

But, oh: "You mean about that guy," Beecher says, as though suddenly connecting the dots, to which McManus simply crosses his arms, impatiently. Telling him: "Dr Nathan tells me they're still trying to put his face back together."

Beecher shrugs. "He insulted me."

"By what? Sitting next to Schillinger?"

"Well, c'mon, McManus. Everybody knows that's MY job."

Suspecting mockery, McManus stares, but Beecher—seemingly entranced with the play of light over his own knuckles, the dull sheen on his lengthening nails—doesn't even bother to stare back. Arrogant little bastard.

Whoa. And where the hell did that come from?

Whenever he lets himself think too hard about it—which isn't often—Tim McManus is forced to admit the sad truth that he's never much liked Tobias Beecher, one way or the other. Hard to stay human and not empathize with someone who's suffered like Beecher has, but...with every sudden shift the former lawyer's splintered psyche takes, McManus becomes more and more aware that the poor, put-upon soul he first saw come through Em City's gates, eyes wide behind his glasses like a rabbit in the headlights of an oncoming truck—

(or Kathy Rockwell, caught in the headlights of Beecher's own car, a split second before she took her last ride up across his grill and over his hood, leaving a splotch of blood big enough to write her obituary with)

—may have actually been as far away from the real Beecher as Schillinger is from Said.

McManus knows he's failed Beecher, repeatedly so. And the results of that failure, as embodied by Beecher himself, gall him beyond the limits of easy understanding: resentment and regret tied tight together, an insoluble puzzle with so many different explanations to choose from for everything that's happened thus far, each scenario just as acceptable as the next—this way, that way, both ways at once. There's no "right" answer to the Beecher equation, basically. Never has been; never will be.

And: *I ASKED for this*, McManus thinks, amazed—for hardly the first time—by the depths his own miscalculation. *For him, in Em City, because he looked so good on paper. An educated man, no prior record, first offence, enough of a prior commitment to the legal system to guarantee his genuine guilt over what he'd done. Perfect redemptive material, you'd think, by any fucking standards...*
...right up until you stuck me in with Vern and turned your back, forever. Beecher's own voice seems to hiss, suddenly, in his mental ear. 'Cause you're NOT a travel agent, after all. Or did am I remembering that part wrong?

(Yeah, well—and you're no saint, Toby. No martyr, much as you may like to act like one.)

But then, Tim's not exactly innocent in that department, either. So...let's try this again.

"Your physiotherapist wants me to let you out early, this time 'round. Says it'll interfere with your healing process to serve the whole hitch without supervised exercise sessions."

Beecher nods, slightly. "That Joe. Always looking out for my welfare." Then adds, fixing McManus with a surprisingly steely blue glance: "Guess somebody has to."

To which McManus flushes, in spite of himself. Hears his own voice go embarrassingly reedy, snapping: "If you'd just told me who broke your damn arms and legs in the first place, back when I asked you to..."

"Oh, yeah—if. 'Cept for the simple fact that I don't trust you, McManus. I mean...given our history, why the hell would I?"

"Sure," MacManus replies, not quite able to keep a certain needling thread out of his voice. "So maybe you'd feel better if I DID drop you back in the mix, then. Help you be a little closer to your job." Trying to frighten him back in line, on some level, with thoughts of being once more easily within Vern's reach—but Beecher just gives a dry, unimpressed little bark, at the very thought. Pointing out: "I don't think Sister Pete'd approve."

"Yeah, well—I was you, I wouldn't assume I could hide behind Sister Pete's skirts forever."

Beecher gives him much the same glance, narrowed. Then inquires, with just a touch of—weirdly Schillinger-esque—silk in his thin white smile: "You saying I need to hide, McManus?"

Ooh. Walked right into that one.

Beecher lets the smile blossom, show his teeth. Adding, before McManus quite has time to work out a plausible denial: "But that's okay. I kind of like how you don't even bother pretending anymore—you know, that you ever gave a damn what was being done to me, by anybody. Makes my burden of proof all that much easier..."

McManus frowns. "Say again?"

And now it's Beecher's turn to cross his arms, leaning forward slightly. Balancing his chin on his drawn-up knees, solemn and judge-sober, to explain—his voice dipping and deepening, falling into an almost hypnotic, purely rhetorical rhythm like a lecture, a well-learned monologue—

"Ever take a look at what your graduating class from university is doing now, McManus? 'Cause boy, I'll tell you, the Internet's a truly useful thing, specially if you've got an understanding boss who lets you surf around on your break time; all those computerized research aids at your fingertips. All that—information." A beat. "Now, with my graduating class, a surprisingly high proportion actually became prosecutors; guess they really did believe all that stuff our profs used to tell us about truth, justice for all, and yadda yadda yadda." Brightly: "Or maybe they just want to keep people like me off the streets.

“So anyhow: a bunch of them went prosecution, more went defence. And even more ended up where I used to be, back before I started specializing in contract negotiations—over in civil court,
where all the REAL money gets made. 'Cause the difference there, and this is interesting...in civil court, verdicts are based on the plaintiff being able to prove a 'preponderance of the evidence', not 'beyond a reasonable doubt'. Stuff like, say, violating the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments? The ones against—"

McManus, toneless: "'Cruel and unusual punishment'."

"You got it, Pontiac."

"We're talking--inmate against facility, I take it?"

Beecher nods. "A harmful situation in which the respondent—prison officials, whoever—were made aware of a pattern of personal physical and mental injury to an inmate under their protective custody, but practiced 'deliberate indifference' in failing to remove said inmate from the path of said harm. Prove culpable state of mind, prove injury...and go to town."

A speech, yeah. Or a summation.

"You threatening me, Tobias?"

"You? No. Just exploring a few possible scenarios, out loud." He lays his head sideways, cheek to folded hands, like: Ain't I cute? And keeps on smiling up at McManus all the while, wider still—those teeth glinting, well-kept, if slightly uneven. And sharp.

And: So here he is, at last, the voice observes, inside McManus's skull. The famous Tobias Beecher, wolf in suit's clothing. Same guy can knock back four martinis over lunch, then go screw the floor out from under his client's opponents without them even noticing it's gone; same guy with the house, the car, the pretty wife and kids, the guaranteed $300 an hour, and that's not counting overtime. The Beecher YOU never met, Timmy-boy—because the only version of him you recognize is that whiny, freaky, ever-more-crazy angst junkie who's spent the last two years wandering through the wormy heart of your own private Idaho, getting fucked up, fucked over, fucked under, and just plain fucked.

"Most 'cruel and unusual' cases get thrown out on appeal," McManus replies, slowly. "As I guess you know."

"Well, sure. Case like this, though—plaintiff wouldn't be looking to win, place or show so much, as just...oh, how shall I put it? Make a whole lot of trouble, for everybody involved."

Financial trouble. Political trouble. Media trouble—oh God yes, worse than Said's book about the riot multiplied by ten. McManus can practically start writing the headlines now, if he only lets himself—

EMERALD CITY MORE LIKE LIVING HELL, CLAIM INMATES.
McMANUS "OUT OF $%&@ING CONTROL", SAYS GOVERNOR.
DISBARRED LAWYER ENTERS OWN ASS AS EXHIBIT NUMBER ONE.

McManus looks at Beecher, who's still smiling: cool, calm; collected as McManus can ever remember seeing him, just about. And not even pretending to wait for McManus to make the next move...which is just as well, since McManus—abruptly knocked off-balance in some distressingly intimate way by the sheer, cold, calculated effrontery of Beecher's attack—has, basically, no earthly idea what his best response here would be.

"Of course," Beecher remarks, idly, "this is all just speculation, really. You've got more than enough on your plate already, what with the whole Em City council situation...reps dropping like flies, and all: Adebisi, Schibetta, Wangler...Hill..."
McManus keeps on looking and Beecher keeps on smiling, as time passes, Hole-slow. Like hair growing. Until, finally, Em City's resident Wizard feels calm enough to ask: "What about Hill?"

***

Fast-forward to Tuesday, in the Em City stairwell: Cyril and Ryan O'Reilly by the window, Ryan smoking a contraband cigarette and tapping his ash through the grill as he studies the Gen Pop yard below, while Cyril keeps time with his ball on a nearby step: Bounce, catch, bounce, catch. Bounce...catch.

Stop. Turn. And inquire plaintively of his elder sibling, as he does: "But why does Toby have to be in the Hole, Ryan?"

"Cause he hit that dude, Cyril, remember? You were right there."

"Oh yeah." A pause. "But WHY?"

*Good question, bro. Good fuckin' question.*

Sun's out for once, high and dull in a dim grey stretch of sky. O'Reilly can see cons pulling their shirts off right and left, desperate to catch some rays—however weak—before it flees westward; an instant forest of puffy, monochromatically-embellished black, brown and white flesh, blooming everywhere his keen green eyes fall. To the extreme left, meanwhile, C.O. Karl Metzger lingers by the fence, deep in conversation with none other than ol' Vern Schillinger himself. Their heads bent together, blond to bald, as Ryan strains to read Vern's lips, catching nothing more familiar than maybe the barest shadow of a single word: "...ask." As in "I need an..."

*About what?* O'Reilly wonders—then gets a cold, prescient flash of Beecher, sweating it out in the Hole: at least ten times more vulnerable than that tough gay fucker Richie Hanlon was, before Metzger breezed in and "convinced" him to recant on linking Vern and company to their last public murder before Jordaire. The true story having made its way to Ryan by various sources, of course—providing yet more proof that Metzger, and not his favored inmate liaison, is the real White Shadow any Oz-based non-Aryan should fear. 'Specially now that Vern's jizz is finally starting to drain away, slow but sure, without him even really beginning to see it happen...yet.

*Time to get your mind off your marriage problems, Vern-baby,* O'Reilly thinks, mockingly. *Time to break out the phone-book armor and check your little house of cards for rats, 'fore it gets so rotten one good, hard push'll be enough to send it ALL tumbling down around you.*

That Duchene, for example—buying drugs on the sly through O'Reilly's connections, secure enough to flaunt his rediscovered habits under Vern's meds-dulled nose. Or Keller, chasing Toby 'round, so obvious it's painful: his attentions the real driving force behind Beecher's attack on Vern's new prag, O'Reilly'd be willing to bet actual money, assuming he could lay his hands to it. Distracting Beecher, in exactly the same way Beecher vowed to keep Vern distracted. Which he certainly is, but...

...man. What a tangled web we weave, when—much against our own street-savvy better judgement—we involve other people in our plans. Skittish, cross-addicted little ex-Yuppie maniacs whose hidden agendas change with every shift in the weather, for example.

(And ain't THAT the fuckin' truth.)

On the other hand, considering he's the old Nazi's sole remaining secret weapon, Metzger doesn't seem exactly enthused over Vern's request, whatever it might entail. Possible discord there? Something to build on? The man's a shark, all cartilege and dumb, doll-eyed, alien hungers. But even
a shark can be made to swim the way you want, if you keep enough chum on hand to muddy the waters with—blood and guts, torn flesh. A promise of mayhem, now or later.

In Oz, as O'Reilly well knows, such things are not exactly hard commodities to come by: pitifully easy to arrange—and tempting to any sociopath, whatever the bullshit "cause" they claim to represent.

"He's never gonna teach me that game now," Cyril says, sadly.

Without turning: "Toby? Sure he will."

"Not in the Hole."

"'Course not. But after."

Under his breath: "...I GUESS so..."

Cyril pausing, ball in hand, lower lip already starting to protrude. Tears welling up in his vacant eyes, like he'll start bawling any second—and who's gonna have to deal with that mess, if and when? Ryan, that's who. Like always.

_Goddamn you anyways, Beecher, _O'Reilly finds himself thinking, with an unexpected spurt of pure resentment. _Just 'cause you got Keller nipping at your heels, think that gives you the right to leave me stuck babysitting this fuckin' human millstone—this walking wounded clone of MY Cyril, the guy who used to be my brother, my backup, my best and closest friend? When you know I gotta be free to move, to maneuver, to cut deals and turn tables at will—for me, for him and for you too, you selfish fuckin' fuck?_

But here he's forced to force himself to take a much-needed minute, breathe deep, gather his not inconsiderable wits. Telling himself, as he does: _Just—cool it, Ryan, baby. Not Cyril's fault, right? YOUR fault, in actual point of fact. So just...stay cool. Stay cool, and maintain._

'Kay? 'Kay.

Lid firmly back on, therefore, O'Reilly turns to meet Cyril's sad, abstracted gaze—flashes his own scar-crinkling grin, full-force. That hypnotic smirk. And assures him, with utter (in)sincerity: "Bro. I know so."

Drawing a tiny, too-innocent smile in response. And thinking: _Assuming TOBY can keep it together long enough not to prove me wrong._

***

By Tuesday afternoon, withdrawal symptoms aside, Beecher's feeling fairly good about himself; frankly amazed, if vaguely proud, that he was able to guilt McManus into not only halving his Hole time, but letting him join the Em City council as official rep for the Others—a slot left inconveniently vacant, ever since Augustus Hill's sudden...departure.

_And why the hell would I want to do THAT?_ McManus protested, weakly. Only to hear Beecher respond: _'Cause if you do, I'll back your every play, guaranteed, be a free vote to shore up your pretense at democracy, so you won't have to face a riot every time you use your veto. Besides which...I bet I take MUCH better notes than Coushaine._

Remembering McManus's eyes, sliding away. His voice, saying—in uncanny, if unconscious, mimicry of Schillinger's words to Keller—
I'll...think about it.

Uh huh, Beecher remembers thinking, unimpressed. Surrrrre you will, Timbo, you know what's best for this glorified, glass-walled zoo you call a peek into the brave new future of penitentiary design—or, for that matter, for YOURSELF.

This fresh burst of self-confidence disappears like dirty water down a drain, however, when that key he hears in the lock turns out to announce not Beecher's dinner but a surprise visit from every claustrophobic's nightmare: Guard Metzger, that blue-clad human wall, rearing up to block the entire doorway with a single well-placed move. Staring down, expressionless, as Beecher—caught mid-rise—takes an instinctive half-step back, slack limbs gone all stiff and clumsy, almost stumbling into the slop pail. His brain already yammering, light-headed with fear: So this is it, right? Where I "commit suicide", or choke to death on my own vomit. Or...just happen to fall, somehow, and break both my arms and legs. AGAIN.

Feels his lips draw back, equally automatic, flashing his teeth like any cornered thing—knowing exactly how pathetic such a gesture must look to Metzger, who could break him in half with one hand, yet hoping against hope that it might maybe amuse him into postponing the inevitable...for a few moments, at least. While the hack's cold blue gaze flicks up and down as though measuring Beecher for an invisible coffin—and for the first time in days, Beecher suddenly remembers that he is, in fact, totally naked.

This seems to go on for days, though it's probably only seconds. At which point Metzger, tracing the inevitable blush's slow spread with his eyes across Beecher's stippling flesh, remarks, utterly deadpan: "Gotta say—I still can't see the attraction."

What? Beecher thinks, taken aback. Then realizes, letting the mental tumblers click through: Ohhhhh, wait; oh, HO yeah. I get it now...I hope.

So he coughs to clear his dry throat, a faint rasp. And replies, mimicking a confidence he doesn't quite feel: "Well...lucky you don't have to, then. Do you."

Metzger's mouth thins, slightly, shaping something that's not quite a smile or a frown. Something purely other, and pretty much unreadable, unfortunately, to anyone primarily trained in dealing with the inhabitants of Planet Earth.

"You're a funny little man, Beecher," he says, not sounding like he really means it.

Beecher (still a little hoarse): "Thanks."

"I'm assuming you know why I'm here."

"Message from Vern?"

"Bright boy."

And that is a smile now, of some derivation—the kind a piranha might make, if it only had the lips.

"Okay," Metzger begins. "It goes like this: You do not get to dictate terms. Everything back the way it was before, and you either like it, or lump it. Deal?"

The moment we've all been waiting for, folks. Envelope, please.

Waiting, eyes still on Beecher, who takes a slow breath, thinking: "Like before. Except that I stay in Em City, safely at arm's length—further, maybe. Where I don't have to worry about getting my ribs
cracked for talking back, or whether or not I'll be able to sit down in the morning. Our...second
honeymoon, where Vern finally gets me right where he thinks he wants me, and ends up exactly
where I want HIM.

Because: *I'm yours, all right. And you, cupcake, you Nazi rat bastard—you steaming, slimy,
cancerous piece of crap—*  

(*—YOU're all MINE.*)

"I expect protection," Beecher says, toneless, looking Metzger straight in the eye; Metzger shrugs,
slightly. "From?"

Without a moment's hesitation: "Keller."

There's a breathless pause—breathless on Beecher's part, at least, as he watches Metzger consider,
flipping through his mental Rolodex: No handy pre-programmed response to this one, Karl? Aw,
gee. Daring to prompt, eventually: "So. Do we have a deal, or not?"

Surfing the inevitable, unavoidable backlash, meanwhile, now that he's actually said it aloud. His
traitor heart (cock) whining away, just under the din of Beecher's rising pulse, the muffled hum of
Metzger's practically-audible thoughts: *And what if Vern kills him, Toby? How're you going to feel
THEN?*

(He won't.)

*Uh huh. But if?*

Then...

*I tell Metzger, and Metzger tells Vern, and Vern kills him. And he's dead. And nobody gives a shit
but his three wives—*  

(*—plus me. Maybe.*)

No more Chris Keller. No more lips, or eyes, or hands. He's dead, and I'm Vern's, and there's
nothing left to come between me and my sweet revenge—just a few bad memories, a few hot
dreams. And *life goes fucking on...* without him.

Remembering his own thoughts, from the infirmary: *What DON'T I know about Vern, if I let myself
remember?*

So—let yourself, Beecher. Trust what you know, and let it happen; let it all come down, like night,
like fog, a wet and dreadful flowering of wounds. Like a black and stinking rain made from old
blood—yours, his—

(Keller's)

—whoEVER's, so long as it paves the way. Slicks the groove for this rusty machine, this trap
already in place around Vern fucking Schillinger's unsuspecting neck.

Seems like eons, in Beecher's fevered mind, until Metzger's eyes settle back on him, calm and gelid;
decision made, obviously. Stepping back out the door, even as he tells him, on Vern's absent behalf:
"Deal."

***
Which brings us neatly to Wednesday morning, when Chris Keller—momentarily lost in a daze of pleasant (if provoking) memory—walks absentmindedly 'round a corner without checking first, only to find himself abruptly in the midst of a looming crowd of Aryans: Forced to his knees, half-strangled, with both Duchene's heavily-pumped biceps locked tight around his neck. As Vern leans over him, eyes soft with happy anticipation, to murmur, in his ear: "Got a special delivery for ya, Chrissie—a word of advice, 'long with a sorta...object lesson."

Choking out: "Uh—huh—?"

"You need to keep your hands off'a what's mine, from now on."

"...like?"

"Beecher."

Ohhh...shit.

Gasping for enough air to form some kind of objection, however implausible—but cut off, mid-try, as Duchene (prompted by a curt nod from Vern) twists his arm-lock just that little bit tighter. Asking the old bastard, over Keller's purpling face: "Want me to do this?"

Vern shakes his head. Then peels the cast from his hand, one strap at a time, with almost delicate care—hands it to the guy with the black lightning bolt of his scalp, for safekeeping. Flexes his fingers, like he's trying out an unfamiliar piece of equipment; a favorite weapon, long lost, now rediscovered. And tells Duchene: "You just hold him steady."

Keller lets his eyes roll back, going limp against the first blow. Thinking: Well, Toby, guess you got what you wanted...

(Hope you don't choke on him.)

Taking hit after hit after hit as blood fills his mouth, salty-hot as the stolen taste of Beecher's tongue—and he falls, face-forward, into darkness.
TEN

Two weeks is a long time, in Oz—long enough for a lot of action to take place, one way or another. For example:

"Slammed a DOOR on it?" Dr Nathan repeats, frankly incredulous. As Vern Schillinger just shrugs, eyes flicking over the other side of the infirmary, where—through the ward's big glass windows—he can vaguely make out Tim McManus's similarly bald head, bent in inquiry over the prone and battered form of Christopher Keller. Only to hear Vern's former catspaw whisper, with effort: "...coo'n't...see."

"You couldn't see who did this to you."

"Nuh."

"Not at all."

"Nuh."


An hour later, Vern walks out with yet another cast on his bad right hand—stiff plaster, this time. Having broken two more of his already fucked-up bones, it turns out, while in the process of forcibly reminding Keller that prags past—however enjoyable their former owners may have found them, at the time—should learn to keep their fuckin' paws firmly off prags present, if they don't want to get their (still-) pretty faces turned into hamburger meat. Fore- and middle fingers busted, plus a full set of bruised knuckles, plus all those traumatically wrenched-out stitches from that gouge Vern sustained during the mini-riot; quite the load of extra pain to hump around, when placed on top of his chronically debilitating carpal tunnel syndrome.

But: fuck it. Worth every minute, every extra med, in the long run. It's a much-needed facelift for his sagging rep—a full-court jizz injection, run all over Oz five minutes after the hacks found Keller's sprawled and bleeding body. A visible, palpable victory after what seems like months of defeats, and victory tastes good. 'Cause, like everybody knows, to the victor...go the spoils.

Speaking of which—

***

Jump-cut: time telescopes, sending the rest of the week whipping by, and we're right back in the infirmary, watching Tobias Beecher—freshly shaved, clothed and fragrant, after his latest release from the Hole—study Keller's slack, wrecked, spectacularly colorful profile from behind the same stretch of glass. Balancing, one-handed, on his shiny new aluminum cane; frowning slightly, his short-sighted blue eyes squinted against the ward's harsh lights. And thinking, to himself: Is that MY old bed they gave him, the one I used to lie in all day, every day, staring up at the ceiling, bored mindless, and dreaming about the simple joys of being able to scratch my own butt? Or do all those beds just look the same, especially when the person in them's too messed up to move?

Wondering if Keller's really asleep now, or feigning it, expert as ever. For mysterious reasons of his own. And wondering, with roughly equal intensity, just why he—Beecher—should possibly give one crap what Keller does, either way.
From behind him, a familiar voice: "See anything you like?"

"He does look kinda cute, doesn't he?" Beecher says, not turning. Hearing O'Reilly snort, and reply: "Sure. If you like 'em kicked to crap."

(The implication clearly being: Which—you obviously do.)

"Quite the job ol' Vern did on him," O'Reilly comments.

Beecher nods, absently: "Yeah." Then adds, shooting O'Reilly an evil grin: "And wasn't that sweeeet?"

Truly unsettling, that brief quirk of a smile; got a whole wealth of obscure fucked-upitude at work behind it—stuff even Ryan, tough and devious as he is, doesn't want to take a guess at. Just then, however, the ward's inner door opens, admitting Nathan, nose buried in Keller's chart...and at the sight of her, O'Reilly spins and sits in one smooth (if rapid) motion, up against the wall beneath the window before she has a chance to raise her eyes. Asking Beecher, hastily: "Think she saw me?"

"Nope."

Disappointed: "Oh."

Well. THAT was a waste of time and effort.

"So, anyhow—what next, bro?"

"Oh, you know: hit the pod, check in with McManus, go back to work for Sister Pete." A pause. "Visit the post office."

(Fuck Vern's...brains out.)

"Heard he turned down your 'terms'." O'Reilly says, idly. The story of Beecher's ultimatum having also made Em City's rounds, courtesy of a passing, eavesdropping, gossiping Fritz Duchene, who overheard Vern and Keller's conversation on the subject while hanging around the post office door—something he does on a fairly regular basis, apparently. "So I guess you ain't quite the distraction you think you are, huh?"

Beecher smiles again, a little wider and a lot more skewed. Pointing out: "Did THIS for me, though. Didn't he?"

Because, as Beecher now realizes—having originally set this whole ball of wax in motion pretty much on ungoverned instinct—"dictating terms" to Vern, only to have them declined, was always part of the plan. By getting Metzger tell Beecher that everything has to go back the way it was before, Vern thinks he's automatically put himself back on top. A patented alpha male flex, showing his big dog teeth to the world: Grrr, ruff, yipe. Yes sir, no sir. Three prags full, sir...

...ah, but let's not start going down that particular road again, shall we, Toby? Considering we're gonna need all our wits about us, one way or another, to do what we (don't) have to—

(want to)

—NEED to. Or whatever.

But what Vern can't see, pain-ridden and meds-drunk as he now is—so pathetically entranced by the prospect of having Beecher on his knees once more, he can barely spot the proverbial forest for the
proverbial fuckin' trees—is that to accept a re-opening of their "relationship" at all means he's really playing it Beecher's way, by necessity. Since Beecher was the only one actively lobbying to GET said relationship reopened, in the first place.

And as for Keller—

(who really does look bad, whether sleeping or faking, with both sharp, dark eyes swollen raccoon-black, his wicked mouth all strained and torn around the corners)

—that, too, was a test. Which Vern just failed.

This one thing Beecher knows for sure, intimately so: If you're truly "on top", you don't give anything away—and certainly not because the person on bottom TOLD you to.

*I expect protection; Not ask; not beg. And what's that, anyway? Just another "term", when you come right down to it.

A true predator, when it wants something, it doesn't make concessions—it takes, breaks, walks away. Concessions are made out of need, not want, and need...is another name for weakness.

*(VERN taught me that.)*

*And if this argument strikes you as more than a bit implausible, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, Beecher thinks, then I would beg you simply to keep one very important final fact in mind: the plan you see before you, such as it is, was conceived—and is being carried out—by a fuckin' nut.*

Looking up, he realizes he's been silent for a while now, musing these things over; catches O'Reilly staring at him sidelong, assessing the situation. Only to hear the Irishman ask him, quietly: "So, Beech—you really up for this? Got your shit back on track?" Beecher shrugs. "You clean, at least?"

"Actually? Yes."

"Gonna keep it together?"

*(Under pressure, you mean? Or is that...under Vern?)*

Beecher straightens, staring back at O'Reilly, his voice and eyes gone equally—abruptly—cold.

“WATCH me,” is all he says.

***

And, scant minutes later, Beecher asks Sister Peter Marie—meeting her disappointed, disapproving gaze with a charmingly sheepish smile—

"...anything you happen to need posted, Sister?"

***

In the infirmary:

Nathan having already moved safely on, Ryan slips behind a handy screen, freeing his daily pack of cigs from the back band of his jockeys; pops one free, lights it, inhales gratefully. The lingering smell of Gloria's perfume envelopes him from the inside out, a phantom caress, liberally admixed with nicotine, vague medicinal odors, faint human waste bi-product stench. And: "Hey," a hoarse voice says, from the bed nearby. "Reilly. Goh—one a'those—f'me?"
O'Reilly settles back against the wall, squints through the screen's crack. Does a double-take: *Well, look who's talkin'*! Then takes another long, leisurely drag, replying: "Depends on what you give me for it. Keller."

***

In the post office:

Mid-transaction with biker Council rep Jaz Hoyt (a cart-load of mail for Em City, one or two letters resealed after being stuffed with small packets of Metzger's tracts), Vern hears movement at the door, somebody exchanging words with Whittlesey, the hack on duty today. And looks up, just in time, to see—Beecher.

Hoyt: "We done here, man?"

"Uh...yeah. Looks like."

"Cool. Later."

Hoyt's wheels squeaking away in one direction while Vern's eyes stay firmly on Beecher, drifting by to the other, pretending not to pay either of them much attention. Just limping along, cane in hand, a couple of legal-sized envelopes tucked up under his arm; slow, sinuous. Same thing he was doing in the gym, more or less—a screwed imitation of Chris Keller's 'ho-like strut, every fascinatingly deformed movement either a hot stab straight to the gut or something just a little bit...lower.

"...later," Vern repeats, voice dry. And sees Beecher smirk, slightly, at the sound.

Hoyt disappears past Whittlesey, who keeps on looking the other way. But won't stay that way forever, as Vern knows—so he leans forward, over the counter, and barks: "Bitch-er. You got a package."

An arched eyebrow. "Yeah? Who from?"

Vern nods back towards the storage closet. "'S in there."

They lock eyes at for a long, teasing second. Knowing Whittlesey's going to turn around any minute, knowing what'll happen then—or rather, what won't. With Beecher just content, momentarily, to let it go, let it go...

Thinking, as he does: *Yeah. And I do believe I've already seen the size of THAT package.*

"Better show it to me, then," he says, finally. And steps inside.

***

In the infirmary, meanwhile:

Keller's already in mid-sell, spinning his rap, with one of O'Reilly's cigarettes precariously pinched between crushed and splinted fingers. Saying, with difficulty, through two fat lips—

"Too' me a while, buh...Beech 'n' you goh suhthin' goin', some masser plan t'fuck Vern over—guess Beech gonna handle th' 'fuck' par', righ'?" A phlegmy, hacking laugh: "Buh whah'ever. All I know, evrythin' he doh t' geh Vern back down his panss, 't ain' foh luh."

And O'Reilly just sits there, listening. Neither agreeing nor disagreeing, as yet—just taking the other man's measure, silently, while the web of words spills out. Because Keller's a liar, sure; shameless,
inventive, habitual. Sometimes inspired, even, from what O'Reilly's already observed. But then...takes one to know one.

"You know well's I do, 'Reilly: Toby talks tough—"

Oh. So it's TOBY, now.

"—buh he ain't, noh really. 'S juss crazy." Fixing O'Reilly: "Now, you teh me...wanna take on th' whole A.B. wih nuthin' buh'a nut-job foh backup?"

"Schillinger's not the whole A.B. Not anymore."

"Wha', you mean Duchene?" Keller starts to grin, then winces. "Ah'hole may li' to play he'sh Misser Third Reich Squared, but ish a...jai'house conversion, Puh him back onna street, he'sh jus' ano'her white-boy wannabe shovin' product up his nose. And since th' only reason th' A.B. in Oz 's anti-drug inna firss place's 'cause Vern seh so..."

O'Reilly nods. "...if Beech does turn Schillinger out, he'll be off the loop faster than you can say Sieg Heil."

"Whiss 's how I thought ya wanna play 't. Still one big if, 'specially when't loo' like Beech's all ya goh foh Plan A an' Plan B."

Like that's likely, given who he's talking to. But if Keller's actually that dumb, Ryan's fine with letting him think so.

"I'm wondering what is is you want, exactly, Keller," he says, taking another drag. "Sides from the same thing as Vern-baby, that is."

This time, Keller really does smile, if tentatively. "C'mon, 'Reilly," he shoots. "Fuck y'care whah I want, long's you 'n' Beech geh yours?"

(Well, you put it like that...)

O'Reilly blows a plume of smoke, then states the obvious. "Yeah, well...difference 'tween you, him and me is, Beecher's got a million reasons to hate that Nazi fuck and I hate him just as bad, for what he did to Cyril. That creates a bond."

"'Tween you 'n' me, too."

"Yeah? You hate him that time in the gym?"

A spark between bruises, flint on flint. Keller's eyes slit, protectively—but not before O'Reilly gets a flashing, live-wire hit of emotions rushing by like a tapped current, disconnected and contradictory: anger, hurt pride, hurt in general. Arrogant pretence, genuine regret. Even a subtle hint of...is that despair?

Keller pauses, takes a long, rattling breath. Then asks, softly: "Eh'er do suhthin' yuh sorry fuh, 'Reilly...I mean, af'er? Nuh...take-backs?"

Ryan tries not to let his eyes slide, automatic, over to Gloria's desk—tries to act like he's not straining to catch a glimpse of her, some phantom after-image: her black cloud of hair, her depthless eyes; all those smooth brown curves, so strong and soft at the same time. Everything he's never had, and never will. And: "Not much," he says, meaning it. But knowing, at the same time, in his secret heart of hearts...
...yeah. I really did.

***

While at much the same time, back in the closet—

(so to speak)

Vern closes the door behind them, quietly, and jams the lock with a handy piece of wire; leans back, arms crossed, as Beecher turns. Rumbling, without preamble: "Guess you probably already heard what happened, with Keller."

Cool: "Who hasn't?"

The older man nods. "So—what do you say?"

Their eyes lock again, blue on blue, both equally pale, equally unreadable; Beecher lets the pause get about as long as it can, without becoming ridiculous. Then answers, at last, very deliberately: "Thank you."

"Uh huh." Another pause, almost as long. "But...how do you say it?"

***

With Vern thinking: There's no way he's goin' through with this. He'll get to a point, stall, then I can mock him or beat him up, turn it into straight-up rape, 'stead of this...weird-ass...whatEVER this is; something I can control, a fuck I can "run" MY way. Just like before.

'Cause maybe—maybe I tore a hole in him, that first time. And it's taken him two years plus, all this wasted time and useless rage, to realize he just can't get no satisfaction...anywhere else.

Aw, screw it, though: you know what you know, Vernon. You know HIM, right? A born slut, a bottomless pit, a junkie fuckin' Yuppie whore; saw it in him the first time he walked in, very first day. Read it in his face. So what you did to him—that was like evolution, or something. A natural progression.

Everything finds its own level, eventually—like Keller.

(Except that Beecher...is not Keller. Is he.)

Shit, why not? They both put out on demand.

So this is still a transaction, nothing more: prag to owner, sex for safety. Just something you DO, in places like Oz—to blow off steam, keep your head straight. Free your mind, so you can deal with the shit that really matters...

And here comes that hot stab again, fiercer this time. The familiar odor of Beecher's milk-fed skin breaking over him in a wave, intensified by the closet's close-quarter mustiness; kind of hoity, pansy-ass, over-clean smell fairly begs to be thrown face-down in the mud, dragged out into the dark with the rest of the animals and made to earn its keep for the first time in its miserable, useless, parasitical life.

But: He hates me. I can't trust him...

(...can't trust anybody, comes to that.)
The closet's one light catches dimly at Beecher's hair, outlining his head in a faint, dull gold corona. Gilding the lines of his watchful, lowered face—its clean jaw, its cat-snub nose, its firm and ironic lips. And: Did he always look this good, under the makeup, the misery? Or did Vern—living so close as to be (literally) on top of him—just never SEE it, somehow?

Tobias. To-by.

(Sweetpea.)

*He*—hates me. And I hate him...but how much difference did THAT ever make?

*So ask yourself, Schillinger: is he lying? Do you CARE? I mean—not like he can fool you, anyway. Over-educated little son-of-a...bitch.*

*He's MINE, first, last, and always—that doesn't change; check his ass. Mine for as long as I want him, and after. And us, him and me, we—we're, just—*

(made for each other.)

***

As: in the world outside Vern's head, Beecher meets his eyes again. Smiles again. Lays his cane with slow and deliberate care against the closet wall, then lowers himself—just as slowly, just as deliberately—to his knees. And *inside* Vern's head, he hears his father's disembodied voice say, mockingly—

*Well, SON...you sure can pick 'em.*

***

In the infirmary:

"Your call, 'Reilly. I geh t'join th' team, 'r whah?"

Ryan looks at Keller, knowing he can always drop the hawk-faced man like a hot rock in a sauna once his usefulness to Operation Vern-baby becomes questionable. And Keller just looks back, knowing—for once—*exactly* what the Irish Iago must be thinking. But not caring all too much, 'long as it gets him back where he wants to be.

He waits, lips dry, for an answer. And, after a moment: "Okay," O'Reilly tells him. "We'll try."

The two great liars of Oz shake hands, gingerly: a meeting of true minds. Another dirty deal, done dirt cheap, for whatever *that* may eventually turn out to be worth.

***

Back in the closet, meanwhile—yet another moment of truth, rejoined already in progress: Beecher unzipping Vern, freeing the hooded monster one careful set of teeth at a time, already pumped far enough to slap up *hard* against Schillinger's soft underbelly, red and drooling. And thinking, with an evil, giddy jolt of glee: *Oh, hey. Long time no SEE.*

Thinking: *You can do this, Toby. Just like...riding a bike, or something.*

(Down the slippery slope to hell.)

*Well, yeah, sure. But fuck it—what are you gonna do instead, now it gets right down to it? Jump*
back up and run away?

(Ah. If only.)

Leaning forward. Opening wide, lips carefully folding to mask his teeth, and breathing—moist, hot, deliberate—across the half-hidden head of Vern's cock; seeing it jump at the sudden stimulus, pump a quick new bead of pre-cum. And then—

***

Aaaah, Jesus, I've MISSED this.

This heat, these clenching internal muscles; grabbing hard and thrusting deep, hearing Beecher's snuffy little retch as his gag reflex kicks in. This mucus-slick, slightly abrasive motion, almost enough in and of itself to make you pop right fuckin' now—

—but wait a sec. Wait just one, damn...

Left hand knotted in Beecher's hair, clumsy but painful, Vern hauls him bodily back off, with a wet pop. Growling, breathless: "Don't get any ideas, cupcake—I ain't no snack bar. Bite me, I'll rip your fuckin' head right off."

But Beecher simply smiles back up at him, chin spit-wet yet way too many kitten-sharp teeth on display, threats notwithstanding, for comfort. "You just tell me when it starts to hurt," he says. And bends to his task again.

AaaauuuUUGGGGHHH...

***

Inside Beecher, a fresh jitter of helpless amusement, far less funny than crazy: Oh, and there's that fucking SOUND.

***

Aw, shit. Too good; too FAST. And not...that way, either.

Pulling him off again, with a hiss, Vern spins Beecher up onto his feet, half-throwing him against a nearby filing cabinet—same one he keeps dead letters in for the mandatory three weeks, before sending them back out with the rest of the trash. Beecher braces himself as Vern buries his face in the tender back of his neck, arms coming up under Beecher's in a tight double lock, kicking his legs apart: Like being patted down by some extremely zealous hack, complete with impending cavity search. Thinking, sickly: After so much time, this—is definitely gonna hurt.

And the other half of his mind chiming in, harder: So what? You can take it. Point is...can Vern?

Rubbing his ass back, like some g-string diva, only to feel Vern jump slightly at the sensation—amazed, aroused. Not expecting it, one can only assume. Not expecting—to like it so MUCH.

Which brings us to my final observation, ladies and gentlemen of the jury. The same one reached after hours of enforced bedrest, turning this problem of Schillinger plus Beecher equals—

(what, what, what?)

—over and over and OVER in my so-called mind: That there's a difference, a big difference, between being forced to participate and participating. Just like the big grey area between between
doing something because you think you're going to get something out of it—peace of mind, distraction from pain, a sense of your own manly-manhood—and doing it just to DO it. 'Cause...you want to.

(And you DO want to. Don't you, Vern-baby?)

Oh, yeah. Thought so.

One hand on the cabinet and bent almost double, but reaching back to peel his own pants down with the other, like: Look, Ma! No underwear!

(Came prepared, honey. Just like old times.)

This casual revelation of the previously inaccessible, this prize Vern hasn't seen in over a year—and his mark, still there, white scar tissue edged with a kind of blush. Along with all the rest of it, of course: pale, high-held cheeks, weirdly pristine, even now. That shadowed blond cleft.

Beecher, head down and muffled: "Look familiar?"

Oh, and there's that stab, so deep now it feels like a fish-hook down the urethra—except better, Jesus, SO much better. A jerking, painful pulse, every inch of him swollen hard, like he's ready to split at the fuckin' seams.

Vern brings his arms together, rib-crack-tight; feels Beecher gasp at the strain, a glorious little wheezing squeak—then lifts him high, spins him again and lets him go, ass slamming down fast onto the cabinet's top. Not caring if Whittlesey hears, anymore...hell, not caring if McManus does, at this point. Feels something rise in him at the same time, too; unnamable but un-ignorable, a dangerous, alien impulse.

Beecher, finding himself suddenly more than level with Vern's eyes, stares down into them. As Vern "orders" him, hoarsely: "You...kiss me. Like you did, in the infirmary.” Then adding, quickly, a second or so later: "...bitch."

(That second part more like an afterthought than an insult, though. Face-saving 101.)

And: Well, your call, Beecher thinks. SIR.

"Charging himself up" for the chore—by thinking of Keller, natch, not that he'd admit it. The laundry room, lemon-fresh detergent contact high, Chris's hooched-up breath a longed-for after-work martini all to itself. The sheer stupid joy of being held, pinned, fished fuckin' in by those strong arms, that skilled and subtle mouth: Bright skewers of painful pleasure transfixing him like nails to the lips, eyes, groin—

Feeling himself shudder, utterly undone. Wondering if Vern feels it too, if he thinks it's all because of him; wondering if, on some level, he actually...wants it to be.

And oh, OH yeah, yeah, motherFUCKER: That would be the point of the entire fucking exercise.

Temporarily rendered drunk and driven by this sudden plunge into sense-memory, Beecher takes Vern's head in his hands and kisses him deep, bruising, nipping. Vern tasting what must surely be himself—dank, musky—on Beecher's tongue (ugh, yech) before forgetting, again; forgetting everything, but this. Their thoughts overlaid, knit in one bright rush of lust-bright head-static: I want you, I WANT you, I WANT YOU—

(DEAD)
With Beecher actually panting—*moaning* now, directly into his mouth—and Vern's bad hand pulsing, pain like some flesh-and-blood metronome, keeping perfect time. Hooking an arm under Beecher's right leg, pulling him wide, unable to hold off *one damn minute* longer; spitting in his left palm and losing most of it before driving two fingers inside, scissoring them dryly. Then up against him, head already centred, a mere thrust away from final conquest—but hesitating, warned by some indefinite instinct. Thinking: *He wants this, too much. And if he WANTS it...I must be doin' something SERIOUSLY wrong.*

*(Not to mention if I want it—too much—)*

Reeling a bit too close to faggot territory, here, for Vern's tastes, a bit too *dangerously* close. So here he pauses, caught—'till he hears Beecher hiss, voice a barbed goad in his ear: "Hey, Vern—don't TEASE."

*(Ohhhh...kay.)*

Plunging in, then, without further ado—seating himself deep, and immediately seeing it register in Beecher's eyes like impalement, from the popped ring itself all the way up to the base of his spine: *OH boy. Glad to see THAT still hurts.*

*Gunslinger fuck,* Beecher thinks, giddy with pain. *Dare me to look away first? Dare YOU, you Nazi piece of shit...*

Then knits his fists in the small of Vern's back, to pull him further in—unexplored territory, almost. Seeing *that* register, like a pre-orgasmic petit mal spasm: pure h-shot to the pleasure centre, with just a tad more twist to his own agonized sheath.

*(Oh yeah, c'mon. Cuh-MON, you BASTARD—)*

Burying his face in Vern's wide bull-neck and sucking, nipping; feeling wet skin give way as he draws a satisfying yelp, gifting his tormentor with the mother of all impromptu hickeys, right where no shirt-collar will ever manage to cover it completely. Sphincter ablaze, Beecher coos with fake delight, all his old whore's tricks falling right back in place: concentrate on acting like you like what you're doing, so you won't have to *think* about what you're doing. Feels his own cock stir and jerk, traitorously automatic, as Vern catches his prostate on the back-swing, and dredges his memory for still more scenes, sights, stimuli—anything to make his response seem palatable, if not plausible. His role-call of dead loves: Gen, Chris, Gen, Chris, Chris, *CHRIS—*  

—if only, if only—you on top, or me on top of YOU—

Memory sliding straight into fantasy, whiplash quick: kissing Vern and seeing Chris, smelling, feeling, acheing for him, sucking his tongue to the root. With Vern struggling to take control, exact submission, and Beecher matching him again and again with a gripping, immediate imitation of lust. Thinking, as he does: *Don't get it yet, do you, asshole? You can't take anything from me anymore, no matter how hard you try...'cause I am GIVING it away, before you even think to ask.*

Crying silently out, in other words, with every move, every slamming, tearing thrust: *Oh yes, oh please, oh God. Oh God, PLEASE, do that AGAIN.*

But back to that hickey—too aggressive a move by far, apparently, even by Vern's standards. Beecher feels his head slam back onto the counter, the blood-spurt as teeth meet lip, and gives Vern a wide, red grin in return: *Aw, you feelin' ignored, sweetpea? Fine. We'll change the subject.*
Keller discarded, therefore, in favor of a longer, more heterosexual litany: Bobbie Hollensteen, Beecher's wry virginity-taker, in the Dean's office at Milchard...Gen, in tears after that charmingly disastrous second date, in his...Assorted hookers picked up while drunk, in his office, his home, his car—anywhere and everywhere, the mood and price were right...

...Guard Whittlesey (those tits!)...Dr Nathan (sorry, O'Reilly)...Sister Pete (sorry, God)...

(oh, oh Christ, I'm losing it...)

Michelle Pfeiffer. Janeane Garofalo. Uh, shit—uh—Schillinger's phantom wife, on the other side of the visiting room glass, as Vern pounds and howls—oh, yes, yeah, yes indeed—but most of all, most of ALL—

—how much, how much, how MUCH I am going to enjoy watching you DIE—

That's it, that's enough. Enough to make Beecher cry out aloud, a desperate, crooning yelp: "Oh yeah, RIGHT there, JUST LIKE THAT—"

—and come, right on cue, all over the golden fur of his own stomach. While Vern keeps on grinding away, drenched and gasping with Beecher's knee braced up on his straining shoulder; joint stretched wide, the whole shebang very definitely re-opened for business. Thinking, desperate: Shut UP, idiot, somebody's gonnaAAAAAAGH—

—and failing, flailing, finally giving out; burying his face in Beecher's sweat-slick neck and muffling a helpless bellow as he feels him clamp down on him, a sprung flesh trap. Coming himself like his heat-boiled brains are liquifying, exploding, spurting like the rockets' red glare itself from the barrel of his colon-choked cock.

At the fatal moment, it's Vern who has to close his eyes, in inadvertent ecstasy: a bitter mastery, his long-awaited victory as jarringly abrupt—and ruinous—as any given defeat.

***

A half-hour later, Ryan O'Reilly comes whistling 'round the corner of Em City's upper deck, only to find Beecher sitting with his back to his own pod's door: face white and set, mouth still bloody, exhaustion and pain in every knotted inch of him. And though several smart-ass comments spring to mind, Ryan finds—uncharacteristically enough—he frankly doesn't have the heart to voice any of them aloud, let alone to tell him Beecher how he just cut Keller, the other half of all Beecher's troubles, in on their mutual business. Instead, he just sits down too, shoulder to shoulder. And waits.

"Tell me again," Beecher says, finally, his voice exactly as dead and drained as his expression, "how I ever could have thought this was a good idea." But since Ryan just can't, he quotes Beecher back to himself, instead: "'Nothing you never did before.' Right, Beech?"

To which Beecher replies, with a liquid snort: "Yeah, right. But..."—after a pause, and just a bit too softly—"...it's been a while."

No handy answer to that one either, though, as they both well know. So he and Ryan just sit there, quiet, for a moment; quiet as things ever tend to get, in Oz.

***

Then it's dinner-time, in the mess hall. O'Reilly and Beecher walking in together, only to be greeted by the free and easy ring of Schillinger's laughter, rising high above the general din—fresh-fucked, pain-free and back in his old, supremely self-confident stride. Feeling good about himself as one very
bad man can, apparently.

Oh, and what a difference a lay makes, huh?

"My master's voice," Beecher comments, deadpan—the mask back on, with a vengeance. A minute or so later, he slides in beside Vern, right in the middle of the conversation between him and Fritz Duchene—who goggles, ludicrously, at the sight of Beecher setting a full tray of food down next to the Aryans' elder statesman, all bright-eyed and attentive. Gaze drawn, next—instinctively—to that flushed red patch just above Vern's carotid, and not knowing, but suspecting, somehow: Beecher's own brand, left there for the entire Oz-bound world to gawk at.

Before anyone can comment, however, a shadow drifts over, hovering in the immediate background: Vern's nameless/faceless former cellmate, jaw now reset but nose still splinted. Beecher bares his teeth at him, and watches the guy cringe—poor little ruined son-of-a-bitch. Doomed by cruel fate (and a random accident of proximity) to an existence of general pragdom, playing pussy-boy for whoever gets their claim in first.

But: I have no sympathy for you, honey; can't afford to. And, as you'll soon find out—nobody else will, either.

"Uh...Mr Schillinger?" The guy begins. Then, a little more desperately: "...Vern?" But Vern—just waves him away, as Beecher blithely calls out after him: "Better luck next time, baby-doll!"

The other Aryans guffaw, giving Vern time to hiss in Beecher's ear, now that their attention lies momentarily elsewhere: "Told you not to bite me, you fuckin' little freak of the week." And: "Ohhhh," Beecher hisses back, eyes innocently wide. "I thought you were just talking about your DICK."

(Besides which, what are you gonna do about it, anyway? Pull my fuckin' head off?)

Vern flushes, thrown off-balance; opens his mouth to reply—but Duchene's already swinging back around, all ears and all fuckin' mouth, too, he gets five steps outta your sight. So he merely confines himself to growling, sidelong: "Well...don't do it again."

"Course not. Sir."

Beecher flashes him a smile, split lip puffing sexily. And sidles off, cane swinging--singing, just loud enough to be easily audible: "He don't love me, like I love him...no one COULD..."

While Vern sits there silent, spoon tapping idly at the side of his tray—his forgotten hand suddenly hurting again, a deep and regular throb. And suspecting...somewhere deep below the surface of conscious thought, so deep he barely allows it to register...

...that he may have just made a very big mistake.
ELEVEN

Three weeks later:

"Is that a hickey?" Rachel Renton/Schillinger asks, suddenly—sharp blue gaze going straight to yet another discolored patch, (barely) hidden beneath the curve of her ex-husband's jawline. Prompting Vern to answer, automatically: "Uh...no. 'Course not," while she just gives him the eye—slant, narrowed, skeptical. As Vern thinks, impatient: Well, what are you, Rachel? Jealous? 'Cause, baby...you SHOULD be.

Gettin' more ass than a toilet seat, these days, in actual fact, and from the one guy he'd thought would gargle glass rather than ever put out for him again—Tobias Beecher, Rachel's unwitting doppleganger. That thing on his neck, therefore, constituting both the visible proof and inevitable result of hot 'n' heavy action going on here, there and everywhere, no holds barred and no access denied; Beecher back in line, come finally to heel, spreading on (or even before) command. Continually inventive and enthusiastic in ways neither of them would've ever considered possible before the post-Keller era, thus leading Vern to suspect his former prag must've really taught ol' Toby-baby a whole whack of new tricks before finally getting his fine ass beat so thoroughly down in the process of being warned off from administering any further, similar, education. Which is something he really will have to look into, one of these days...but not yet. Not just yet.

So put that in your Dad's hash-pipe and smoke it, cupcake.

Vern stares at Rachel through the visiting room booth's window, ticking the few remaining stages of their visit off in his mind like stops on some all-too-familiar travel schedule, an established routine. She'll ask him to sign the power of attorney forms; he'll refuse. They'll exchange vague pleasantries, try to rile each other up—more out of habit than anything else. Sometimes succeed. Sometimes fail. And then...

...she'll leave. While he...won't.

"Why do you keep coming back here, Rachel?" he asks, telling himself he cares more about her reaction than he does about the answer, to which Rachel just sighs. Replying: "You damn well know why I do, Vernon."

"Yeah, well—aside from that."

She looks at him again, long and hard, in silence. Then answers: "To see, I guess. To—remind myself."

(Of what?)

But she doesn't elaborate, and the silence stretches tight, uncomfortable; an invisible snare, a fishnet tangle, a trip-wire rigged to blow at any sudden movement. A garotte. Until: Lightly, softly—almost without looking, the gesture something she neither condones nor acknowledges—she lays her hand on the partition between them, and waits. To see how he'll react, apparently.

Vern stares at her fingers, splayed pale behind scratched glass, remembering how it felt to hold them, once upon a time; how it felt (what seems an equally long time ago, now) to realize he would never hold them again. And feels his casted hand try to clench, under its stiff plaster shell, as he rejects—violently—the impulse to lay his own fingers atop that smooth, see-through surface: rejects it utterly,
before it cuts the living guts out of his hard-case image, leaving him nothing but a hollow imitation of
the man he desperately needs everyone else around him to think that he is.

"Hope it was worth the trip, then," he says, shortly, standing. And turns his back on her.

But: Who the fuck do you think you're fooling, Vernon? he asks himself, later, walking the long
hallway back into Gen Pop. Recent deluge of free lawyer-ass aside, if you're so cool and things are
going so damn great, then how come you feel you gotta justify yourself at all...to Rachel, or anybody
else?

Still got the carpal tunnel to deal with, of course, along with these more recent broken bones, and
Nathan's upped his meds again—deliberately, he'd take a bet—so his mood swings are becoming
truly spectacular, not to mention unpredictable. Forget just punching some mouthy jungle bunny in
the mess hall; the other day, he actually almost got into it with C.O. Karl Metzger, of all people,
whose previous lack of involvement in Em City politics leaves him completely unimpressed by the
P.R. value of Vern's recent "victory" over Beecher. Not to mention how he sees maintaining their
mutual recruiting drive—distributing texts, tattooing and taking names, signing people up for friggin'
mailing lists, for Christ's sweet sake—as far more important than the Aryan Brotherhood flexing its
newly-rediscovered Oz-based muscle.

"I mean, the Muslims manage to keep their jizz up without murdering somebody every five
minutes," the big hack pointed out, last week, as they stood in the post office together. Obsessed with
Karim Said and his bunch of buttoned-down prayer rug-biters, as usual; still steaming over how that
holier-than-everybody coon bent the whole damn riot to his will yet somehow managed to end up
being McManus's right-hand inmate liaison anyway, once the dust had finally cleared. Then added,
after a moment: "Or fucking somebody."

(Yeah, right. 'Cause that's what REALLY gets up your nose, isn't it, Karl?)

Not exactly Aryan enough for Metzger, this whole prag concept—behaviorally speaking, that is.
And Vern, feeling a scarily overblown surge of anger to realize this particular criticism was directed
at him, had thought:

Man, you're like the world's biggest eight-year-old sometimes. Need someone to run you down the
facts of fuckin' LIFE, before everything we've—

(I've)

—worked so hard to build over all these years goes up in flames, faster than a matchstick skiff in a
lava flow.

Think you're gonna turn the A.B. into a growing concern, Karl? Vern longs to ask him. Make us
"legitimate"? Dress us up in suits, maybe, just like the Klan—yeah, that'd go over REAL well,
specially in the yard or up on the quad, where everything comes down to a scowl and an eye-
fuck: muscle and 'tude, a pose with its origins less in philosophy than in simple self-preservation.

Let me explain a little something you seem to have skipped right on over, OFFICER. We're not a
cult, not a political party—just another damn jailhouse gang, surrounded on all sides by people
ready, willing and all-too-able to kill us deader than Malcolm fuckin' X, 'less we happen to kill them
first; most of us never even made it through high school, so the only place we're likely to turn up on
TV is the six o'clock news, or maybe Jerry Springer. And sure, I'd die to protect my status in the
Brotherhood, 'cause that's what keeps me where I am, makes me what I am—but FOR the
Brotherhood, itself, like some kind of asshole zealot? Cannon-fodder in the RaHoWa, a martyr in the
fuckin' making...'once more into the breach, dear friends, and don't forget to Sieg Heil! loud and
clear, just before the sniper on the gun turret blows your head off?

I don't fuckin' think so.

Clenching his free fist, driving his nails into his palm; anything to stop him telling Metzger off out loud, thus calling down the shit-storm on his own head, for once. Because it drives Vern frankly nuts, this happy horse-crap Metzger seems determined to run both their lives by plus how he can see the rift between them widening steadily, because of it. How Metzger goes around him now, more often than not—deals directly with Duchene, Em City's new neo-Nazi "mastermind" (and hand-picked by Vern for that same position, let's not forget), cutting Vern out of the consultation loop entirely. Or how Duchene just smirks at the spectacle of his elders fighting over who gets to say what gets done where, and by whom—sublimely amused just to be the centre of attention, for once, without having enough brains to realize that if they're reduced to fighting over HIS loyalties, things must be pretty fuckin' bad already. Degenerate, drug-dealing little dipshit.

Enraged, insulted, increasingly convinced that Metzger sees him as both potentially embarrassing and possibly obsolete, Vern spends his phonebook-armored days preparing for all-out war with Muslims and gangstas alike, his nights body-surfing in his own hot sweat, wracked by uncontrollable waves of self-doubting dread. And whenever it all gets a little too much for him to bear alone, there's nothing left to do but grab Beecher by the hair, the shirt, whatever body part comes easiest to hand: grab him, throw him up against any readily-available surface and try to fuck his fears away, again and again and again...

...only to have them come back on him, usually, not that long afterward. Full-force, and twice as hard.

Have to kick that big bastard something, pretty soon, Vern thinks. Give him something else to chew on, besides my own private goddamn business. Not that Vern knows exactly what said "thing" might be, just yet. But it'll come to him.

Meanwhile: Reaching the post office at last, where he starts to assemble the Em City mail-cart, Vern allows himself to muse a little on that aforementioned doppleganger vibe between his "wife" and his "dead" wife—ever more oh-so-ridiculously obvious every time Rachel hauls her cute little butt down here to see him, and all the more...troubling, because of it. The slightly scary way the two of them tend to blend and shift together in his mind, after lights out—Beecher's tongue in Rachel's mouth, her deep, clear eyes peering, similarly myopic, from his secretive, cat-flat face. Their sharp, satirical grins, always quirked just a bit more sidelong at Vern's expense. Their shared blur of blond hair. Their goddamn devious, over-educated brains.

Stop it, Vern warns himself, sternly, yet again. Feeling his cock give a tiny jump, pumping half-hard at the very idea.

Lately, just before the bell rings for morning count, Vern's found himself all too often enmeshed in a strange, recurrent dream: lying with Beecher, languidly entwined, the ex-lawyer's lips pressed deep into the hollow of Vern's throat, sweet against his collarbone. Murmuring sleepily into him, nuzzling and breathing slow. So unlikely, so impossible—and yet so good, so somehow necessary. An aching want satisfied at last, in every fibre of his sleeping body...

...until he wakes, thinking: But—that DID happen. Just not with Beecher.

(With Rachel.)

Taking Beecher because he reminded Vern of Rachel, much as he never saw it at the time—and would have denied it, vehemently, had anyone known him well enough to point it out; wanting her
back, real or imitation...back under his control, to punish, to possess, to own. And then, even after finally recognizing the link—

(Keller, edge-of-angry at Vern's willful refusal to take his unsolicited advice: You know he's just jerkin' your chain, right?)

Yeah, that's right, Chris: Jerkin' MY chain, not yours. And that just kills you, doesn't it, baby? Worse than any beating ever could.

Even after recognizing the link...even after Keller's warnings, his own misgivings...Vern'd still found himself walking right on back into the same two-way trap, eyes wide open, informed but unconvinced. Self-confident to a fault.

(His own voice, groaning internally: Oh, DON'T tell me I'm this fuckin' simple. But—)

We all are, Vernon, Rachel's voice whispers, in reply. All of us. And you much more than most.

Still: Rachel's outside, Beecher's in—and this whole separation thing, with Vern in Gen Pop and Beecher back in Em City, allows Toby-baby a far longer leash than Vern ever allowed him before. Bitch has “responsibilities,” now, what with being on McManus's bullshit Council and all; he can dictate their meetings according to his busy social calendar, then take off again once Vern's been duly satisfied. So while Beecher's with Vern again, on paper, he's not actually with him—not living with him, sleeping with him, subject to his every close-quarter whim. Instead, he spends his nights back in his old pod, with Keller, though not WITH him...or so he claims.

Vern pauses, mid-sort and -stack, to let a fresh new tide of emotion wash over him: the meds hard at work again, unravelling his psyche one thread at a time—making him flush and burn, sending traitorous little sub-thoughts skittering out from under every mental rock. Like Metzger and Duchene, Duchene in particular, both of 'em always acting as though Vern trying to monitor Beecher's movements is somehow weird, suspect—some over-the-top fag freakishness, unbecoming to a true neo-Nazi warrior's dignity. To which Vern can only think, rather than say: Aw, gimme a fuckin' break.

(Or, to put it another way: What are you, jealous?)

Well, Vernon...are ya?

'Course not.

Vern's always demanded monogamy from his conquests—that, along with his policy of mainly breaking in obvious virgins like Beecher, is what's kept him AIDS-free even in the midst of Oz, still able to ride bareback after seven years plus on the prison floor. So “jealousy,” hell; it's just practical. Just a good property management policy.

Keller was out of hospital a week after Vern and Beecher “made up,” back in Beecher's pod that very evening. And while Vern pretty much believes Beecher when he says he still hates Keller far too much even to talk to him, if he doesn't have to—let alone climb down and do the nasty with him, under everybody's prying eyes—these suspicions, pharmaceutically irrational as they may seem, persist.

You sure you never gave it up for Keller, baby? Never let him into that pretty little ass you know is mine?

(Hell, has my damn TRADEMARK on it.)
And that voice in his skull, so sly, so smug: *Bad idea to throw him in the deep end of the pool with Chris "Anything That Moves" Keller in the first place, then, huh, Vern-o? If the idea of them together makes you so bug-fuck.*

But: No. That's *not* gonna happen. Ever.

Not if they know what's good for them.

***

And over in the Em City library, where "Poet" Jackson catches Beecher in the unexpected act of poring over an open law-book—pen in hand and pen-tip to paper with his weak eyes *thisclose* to the page, jotting down tiny, unintelligible notes in a legalese shorthand he hasn't used since he was studying for the bar—

"Yo, Miz Schillinger," Poet begins, appearing over his shoulder. "You tell ol' Vern he been dissin' the brothaz long enough, know what I'm sayin'? Tell him we ain't gonna keep playin' nice with his sorry antique ass, Nazi hack or no Nazi fuckin' hack." Looming closer: "Got that, Beech Blanket Bingo?"

Beecher, muffled: "You looking to lose that nose, Arnold?"

Suddenly appearing to remember what Beecher did to Robson when he got a little too close for comfort—not to mention Mr Nameless/Faceless, of tragic memory, when the poor slob got between him and Vern—Poet rears back, hastily. "Naw, man. Jes' tryin' to pass along the word."

Eyes still on the page: "Fine. I'll make sure to tell him, next time we...make contact."

"Cool. Hey, 'case we do get on down to it—shit blows up, y'all gonna be out there with the Aryans, or what?"

"Or what."

Brows raising: "Bitch, you tellin' me you ain't got yo' man's back?"

At this, Beecher does finally look up, his eyes gone flat and pale under the library's flickering lights. Unreadable as two blank, blue TV screens, tuned in tandem to a single signal-less channel. And: "Oh, I somehow think Vern can look after himself without *my* help," he says, sweetly. "Don't you?"

Poet snorts. "You some piece'a fuckin' work, a'ight."

Beecher smiles. Commenting: "Well. Guess that's probably why they call us 'Others'." And goes right on back to his notes, whistling.

***

From the Em City quad's top deck, meanwhile, Ryan O'Reilly keeps half an eye on his brother Cyril, currently deep engrossed in a game of checkers with God's best friend, Bob Rebadow—poor, companionless crazy old fuck that he is, ever since the Mole got shanked during the mini-riot—and the other firmly on Christopher Keller, who's lounging over by the TV bank, deep in conversation with that dim-bulb Aryan wannabe Duchene: slung back in his seat, talking low, seductive vibe in *full* fuckin' effect, for all he's still sporting the bruises he got for trying to poach on Schillinger's (un)lawfully wedded territory. Duchene, who's already wavering, arms crossed, eyes skittering; so obviously tempted by Keller's unsolicited career counsel, as channelled straight from Ryan's absent lips, that it's kinda pathetic to watch. Already thinking about how to break away from Vern, make his
own bones and get big-ass P-A-I-D-paid all at the same exact time, just by setting up the A.B. as competitors against the Mafia (plus O'Reilly himself) for the reins of Kenny Wangler's discarded tits empire.

If he thought about it for more than five minutes straight, Duchene might possibly twig to the deal's subtext—how it's not only WAY too good to be true, but way too risky to try without considerably more backup than a bunch of cut-rate cellblock stormtroopers can ever hope to provide. Might even figure out who really has the most to gain from setting the Brotherhood against Nappa and his pinochle-playing goons, ie the same green-eyed Irish thug who already suspects, deep down in his gut, that Peter Schibetta's wily old godfather may not only know what really got Dino Ortolani turned into a crispy critter, but may have also put two and two together on who fed Peter's Dad Nino the ground glass special.

Luckily, though, Duchene's an idiot. While Keller...is the best liar Ryan's ever seen in action, basically. Aside from himself.

As if on cue, Duchene gets up, drifts away, shooting Keller a guilty backwards glance--which Keller meets with that knowing smirk of his, all sly innuendo and false cameraderie: Oh yeah, baby. You 'n' me against the world, right?

Riiigght.

Guy's one slick motherfucker, for sure, Ryan thinks, with just a hint of genuine admiration; almost be sad to see him go, time comes. But go Keller will, one way or another—maybe now, maybe later. 'Cause unlike whatever creepy bond remains between Keller and Beecher, this thing of theirs is just a battlefield hook-up, and nothin' but: useful in the short-term, to protect and nurture Ryan's long-term investments, yet imminently expendable whenever those investments start to bear fruit.

And speaking of which...

"Hey, bro," O'Reilly greets Beecher, who's hauling himself up the stairs one weak leg at a time, cane lodged under his arm. "Need some help with that?" But Beecher just shakes his head, red-faced and sweaty. "Thanks anyway."

"No prob." Lower: "You look into that thing we talked about?"

"Uh huh."

"...and?"

Beecher pauses, leaning back against the deck's railing for a moment, working hard to school his unruly breath. "I'm gonna need to phone around a bit more," he tells Ryan. "Consult with a few of my—peers." A beat. "Ones who'll still take my calls, that is," he adds.

(You know: people who've spent the last two years in a court-room, absorbing up-to-the-minute changes in rulings and precedent, rather than face-down on a prison cot, faking orgasm for somebody they'd rather give a fuckin' shotgun enema.)

Ryan nods, absently—eyes back on Rebadow, now that Keller seems to have disappeared, and Cyril, listening wide-eyed to the old man's murmured commentary, probably gettin' a sneak preview of the Almighty's personal plans for everybody, not to mention flipping back his long, blond hair and giggling like the child he is, completely blind to the way the predators ringed around him hang on his every move, practically drooling. And: Good thing you never got around to telling Beecher about Keller switching sides, after all, Ryan thinks. 'Cause it'd just be one more distraction, and distraction
ain't what Toby needs right now...not if he's gonna keep it together long enough to keep on working his old black magic on Vern and put together an appeal on Cyril's behalf, that is: The appeal that'll finally get Cyril—beloved millstone around Ryan's neck—out of Oz and off his big brother's back, for once and for all.

(Which is another reason why Keller's gonna have to go the way of all flesh, in the long run. To make sure Ryan gets Beecher's full, undivided attention for as long as it takes. And after, probably, useful as he undeniably is.)

"You know, Beech," O'Reilly tells him, gaze never shifting, "you DO pull this off, I'm gonna owe you. Big time."

"Just tell me first when Operation Vern-baby actually starts to hit its stride, O'Reilly. That's all I ask."

"Gettin' there, bro. Definitely gettin' there."

***

And: Yeah, sure, thinks Beecher, grimly. Like I've never heard THAT one before.

Jump-cut back to earlier today, in Sister Peter Marie's office. Looking up to find her bird-thin little hand on his shoulder, her worried lips pursed slightly, obviously searching for just the right words to begin with. And knowing: Here it comes, now—the "caring" words of warning, of cold religious comfort. The lecture. The advice, good or bad—equally useless, either way.

"I'm worried about you, Tobias," she says, seeming to meant it. To which Beecher answers, coolly: "Yeah? What about?"

"I think you know."

(Well, yes. I somehow think I do.)

But: Why is he being so pissy about this? It's Sister Pete; of course she means it. Always has. Not, sadly, that it's ever made much of a difference to...well, basically anything that's happened to Beecher since he first arrived here in this shiny, happy, glass 'n' white plaster hell on earth.

"I'm fine, Sister," Beecher replies, suddenly tired beyond belief. "I was fine; now I'm just as fine. Exact same kind of fine, really."

Quietly: "I just remember how unhappy you were, Tobias. Before."

A grim smile, game face on tight."Do I look unhappy to you?"

"No." She pauses. "And that's what frightens me."

(Yeah, well...me too.)

Remembering his most recent check-up with Dr Nathan, as he says it—picking up today's Tylenol from the infirmary and seeing her eyes narrow, tracing the path of bruises, bites and scratches over his torso, shoulders, nape. The visible legacy of his recent trysts with Vern, those outright duels for sexual domination fought hand-to-hand, with no mercy given and none asked, driven on by Vern's endless lust and Beecher's evil parody of "capitulation": Oh yes, oh please, oh sir. Harder, faster, more, worse.

"Want to tell me where you keep getting these?" Nathan asked. And Beecher answered, shrugging:
"Just clumsy?"

(I mean, I AM the guy who broke all his limbs falling down in the gym.)

The depressing part isn't the sex, though, or the chores, or the small humiliations—most of which he's so familiar with, at this point, he can defuse them long before they really have a chance to rankle. A brief return to drag only lasted a week, for example, providing him with the interesting challenge of doing his first Em City Council meeting in full flame-on mode, but a quick burst of old-style corporate lawyer hauteur seemed to do the trick; pretty soon, he was getting mad props for pushing McManus to reinstate movie nights, with _real_ movies—something rated R, NC-17, Triple-X, for the adults they all indisputably are. To which suggestion Poet guffawed, throwing him his set in surprised admiration: _Yo, way to GO, Beech-ah, my dawg! Y'all come correct and no lie, baby!_

Why, _thank you_, Arnold.

A few days later, meanwhile, bored by Beecher's total lack of response, Vern'd finally snarled (right on schedule): "Go wash that crap off--you really do look like shit, you know that?" As though he'd only just noticed; sure thing, _sir._

So no, none of that's the really depressing part. The _really_ depressing part—is more how damn EASY all this has been to pull off, thus far. Beecher knows he'd never get away with it if he was dealing with the "old" Vern, pre-meds, pre-hand, pre-reappearance of his mysterious, Jungle Fever-havin' wife. Or if he was the "old" Beecher, even...

But: Vern's not, and _he's_ not, either. Thank fuckin' Christ.

_So don't think I'm victimizing myself again, Sister, _he tells her, silently. _Because I really don't feel like a victim, not anymore. I feel...like a whore. Get hard on demand, kiss on demand. Fuck, suck, come on demand..._

_Must be—a**w, just say it, cupcake**—how Keller feels, all the time. But Beecher doesn't want to think too hard about _that._

_So—snapping himself back into the here and now, with a palpable effort, Beecher tells O'Reilly:_

:"I'm gonna go take a shower."

:"Yeah, great. See ya."

And then he's downstairs, walking through the shower room door with his kit slung over his shoulder, towel-wrapped, shameless as Adebisi, these days; he could give a shit who wants to hoot and holler as he goes by, not that many do, knowing full well who they'd be going up against if they ever got dumb enough to make an actual play. Then opens the door, stepping through into a blast of steam, to see only one other occupant, back turned, soaping himself leisurely. Those wide shoulders, narrow hips—the whole tapering T-shape of him, damnably familiar, a sharp shock straight to the cock. That dark hair, slicked back from a high, balding forehead, that hawk-like profile, yellow-purple with old bruising. Beecher wants to laugh out loud at the irony, but confines himself to mere thinking, instead—

_Oh, well, hey. Speak...of the Devil._

***

Keller, meanwhile, stands enfolded equally deep in a rush of hot water and surprisingly painful memory: sitting around on the yard at Lardner, trying desperately to ingratiate himself with Schillinger beyond the immediate effects of a blowjob or a quick fuck behind the equipment shed—
crowding the older man just a bit too close, taking unsought liberties, leaning into his space and breathing his air, like just being around Vern was giving him some kind of sick thrill. Which he guesses it kind of did, back then, dumb-ass that he was.

That conversation they'd had out in the yard once, about—what? Fuckin' rock music, of all things...

Vern: "All just sounds like somebody gettin' screwed with a jackhammer to me."

Keller: "Even the Stones? Now, there's a band—"

"White guy tryin' to sing like a nigger."

"Cept he's NOT."

"With those lips? Wouldn't be too sure."

Keller, smirking: "Yeah. Nice, huh?"

Vern threw him a look, and not the kind he'd been hoping for, snapping: "Look, you wanna just stop it with that?" Elaborating, as Keller organized his own face into a mask of ridiculously over-elaborate "innocence," in return: "That flirting shit. It's fuckin' embarrassing." Then glanced past him, deliberately dismissive—Keller automatically craning to follow the movement like some dog, helplessly attuned to the silent lure of his master's voice. Thinking, even as he did: Oh, man; Chris, for Christ's sake. Don't you have ANY pride?

Apparently not. And never quite daring to say, though feeling it hover on the tip of his tongue—well, you ARE screwing me. Knowing full well the oh-so-predictable comeback: Uh huh, sure. But it ain't like I'm gonna marry you.

'Cause: it's a jail thing, you dumb cocksucker—that's all it ever was, all it's ever gonna be. 'Cause: I'm NOT a fag, okay? Just take what I can get, wherever I can get it...so go shit on somebody else's dick for a while and leave me the fuck alone, till I feel like telling you different.

But: Why does this still hurt me? Keller thinks, itchily impatient with himself, Vern, the whole damn deal—so old now, SO over, it's not even funny. Why do I give even the start of a shit about this ancient fuckin' history, when I got more than enough other things to keep me occupied?

O'Reilly's plans. His own revenge. Payback for beatings inflicted, for debts demanded. For being thrown out with the bathwater, back when he was 17. For getting the crap kicked out of him, three weeks ago, just 'cause he actually DID what Vern told him to: Got close to Beecher. Made him—(love)

"Uuuugh..." Keller groans, annoyed and aroused, in equal measure; turns, scrubbing soap from his eyes. And opens them to find Beecher standing right there across the shower-room, staring back at him.

***

It's impossible to ignore Keller entirely, as Beecher's already learned, to his cost. So: Maybe he'll blame me for siccing Vern on him, he catches himself thinking (hoping), instead. Maybe THAT'll make him leave me alone. Keller's eyes don't move, though, and the chemistry between them's as intense as ever, damn it. Even under the shower's spray, Beecher can still feel the heat from Chris's skin as strongly as if it's been laid—moist, sleek, enveloping—directly on top of his own: A twitching spark, set to his genital fuse. A wet, helpless jerk.
They consider each other, sharing a long, measured stare. With Keller settling back, insolently supple and dark blue eyes hooding over, like: **Heyyy, baby. Something you want to SAY to me?**

Well...that'd be a firm no.

Beecher straightens, spine set; looks away, deliberately. And goes right on back to to what he was doing, while Keller thinks, coloring slightly: **Contrary BITCH. You already forget what happened, last time we got up this close together? Came all over my leg, as I recall.**

Oh, and the **look** on Beech's face as he did it—anguished, transfixed. Contorted like the face of Christ crucified on Chris's own shoulder, the same one Beech gasped into, hard and fast and shuddering, just before he gave Chris the desperate nip that's taken longer to heal than all his Vern-inflicted wounds incurred since put together.

_Hmmm. So struggle all you want, Tobe; front all you want, it makes you feel any better, 'cause you and I both know you're just prolonging the inevitable. And take it from a well-known faker—what you're doin' with Vern? Three-dollar bill time, for sure. But what you did with ME...well._

Keller punches the shower off, struts over to pick up his own towel. Shoots Toby-baby a brief, carnal glance, tongue curling quickly over his lips, and admires the result: is that sweat on your brow, sweet thing, or just spray? And down there, where you're making all that lather...that an extra-large bar you got down at the commissary this week, or are you just glad to see me?

"Later," he murmurs. And cat-hips it away, back to his—to their—pod, where Toby will have to end up, eventually, whether he likes it or not. And stay.

***

A frustrated fifteen minutes later, Beecher exits the shower room, violently towel-dried hair still standing on end like a disarrayed wheat-field—only to find his way blocked by Vern, leaning over the end of his mail-cart and scowling up at Keller, now grinning down at both of them through the pod's main window. Demanding, of Beecher: "The fuck was HE doin' in there?"


Thinking: **Is that "he" you mean, though, Vernon? Or is that..."we"? Yeah, that's right—I was in there chokin' his weasel, just like I do every time you can't keep your eyes on me, for one reason or another. So suffer, me-fucker, SUFFER.**

Vern's scowl deepens. "You bein' smart, sweetpea?"

"Not that I knew of. Sir."

Schillinger gives him another, darker stare before bending to rummage through parcels and packages, emerging with a letter. "This's for you."

"Yeah? Who from?"

Vern's features twist, his thought abruptly easy to read as piss on snow: **Think I'm your fuckin' secretary, bitch? But manages to haul himself back on track, albeit with a visible effort—holds the letter in question up, all deceptively benign silk rumble: "Well, let's see. What's your daughter's name, again?"**

“Holly with a 'y,'” no 'i.'"
"That'd be her, then." A creepy grin. "Trade me for it?"

"How? By doing stuff I was gonna do anyway?" Beecher smiles back, equally nasty. "Keep it."

Genuinely off-put: "What the hell would I want to do that for?"

"Gee, I don't know: 'Cause it amuses you? Keep it, read it—wipe your ass with it, for all I care."

Leaning closer, in Vern's ear: "Or if none of that sounds too much like fun, exactly...wait 'till I drop by, later on. And I'm sure we can figure something out together."

Vern's head whips around with a growl, and just for a moment, Beecher thinks, giddily: Oh, now I've done it. Gone too far, gonna pay for sure.

(Finally.)

"Actually," Vern says, with care, "now you mention it, I was thinkin' you could get me something a little more—substantial. You bein' so big up here in Em City, all of a sudden."

"Like?"

"Said's psych file."

(Oh, you fucking Nazi fuck.)

Beecher pauses a minute to absorb it with Vern watching slyly sidelong, obviously pleased by his hesitation: Not so smart NOW, are ya? Suggesting: "Course, I understand you might feel a little bad about screwing Sister Pete over like that, since I know you guys are...friends, or whatever..."

A wealth of contempt, there in that one word: "Friends." Like any white man—even a liberal, Episcopelian, ex-lawyer prag—could ever really consider himself aligned with some pseudo-Spic Catholic nun, 'specially one dumb enough to ask for a posting in Oz.

Think I won't do it, huh? Disobey a direct order, give you tacit permission to beat me bad as you beat Keller, make you feel all MANLY—well, think again. Cupcake.

Beecher looks up, therefore, meeting Vern's eyes straight on, his own gone once more ice-pale, ice-cool. Replying, easily: "Hey...I'm not sucking her dick."

***

A day or so later, meanwhile, as Sister Pete leaves Beecher once more alone in her office—as Beecher waits until her footsteps fade, then crosses to the filing cabinet, key in skillful, traitorous hand—

"I want you to keep an eye on Keller," Vern tells Duchene, in the post office. "Make sure he's not askin' for another lesson, you get me?"

Duchene, resentfully: "Why me?"

"'Sides from 'cause I say so?"

And: "Well," Duchene mutters, still not quite fearless enough to raise his voice right to Vern's face, "maybe I got better things to do."

Vern pauses mid-sort, abruptly gone rigid with repressed fury. "Like what?"
"Like, uh—"

—selling drugs. With Keller.

Oh, hey. Wait just a damn sec...

Duchene backpedals, regroups; flashes Vern a goony grin, along with an okey-doke handsign, much to the other man's obvious amazement. Assures him: "Got it covered, Big V." Then drifts away, leaving Vern thinking: *The fuck? Dumb-ass friggin' freak...*

Seconds later, however, his attention's already elsewhere—on Beecher, specifically, limping down the corridor towards him, something stiff and rectangular just peeking out from beneath the tail of his t-shirt. "Hey, baby," Vern calls, voice lightening at the very sight. "You bring me somethin'?"

('Cause I got something for you, too, it turns out. *Just in case that thing on your ass ain't enough to warn—whoever—off.*)

As Duchene slips off to carve himself a fresh new slice of the pie, leaving behind a little present of his own—a home-made incendiary bomb, courtesy of Keller (or Ryan O'Reilly, really, not that Duchene's to know). Meat in motion at long, long last, grinning to himself and thinking, with truly unholy satisfaction: *Let's see how ya like your little private preseve goin' up in smoke, S-Man...you ever pull your nose out of Beecher's behind long enough to notice.*

Afterward, Vern passes the file to Metzger when the big hack swings by on patrol, offering it as proof positive that Beecher's good for more than Vern's own gratification yet getting insultingly little in return—just a quick skim through the document, noting that Said seems to be under increasing stress about the possibility of his weak heart giving out under pressure. Something to keep in mind, for when the A.B. inevitably goes up against the Muslims in holy combat, as part of Metzger's vaguely-planned crusade for Oz-wide domination...

*Yeah, right.*

But Vern keeps his mouth shut, even against his own better instincts, and watches Metzger walk away, file in hand. Guy wants to fool himself into believing a little piece of paper can give him the upper hand over Em City's resident Islamic army, then fuck it, let him. Vern, at least, now knows what the real deal is (courtesy of Beecher, again, and his warning from Poet): rumors of impending outright war comin' down hard and fast from every side, faithful and un- alike. These niggers following him with their evil juju eyes as he stalks on by—wailing their prayers to Mecca, or blaring rap from every orifice. As of tomorrow, Vern's breaking out the phone-book armor for once and for all; gonna get his soft gut covered, call a Brotherhood council, and figure out a first strike vicious enough it'll leave both enemy camps bleeding in the fuckin' dust—

—Christ, and what is that he keeps smelling, damnit? Smells just like...smoke.

***

An hour later, meanwhile, after all the sprinklers have finally shut off:

Sitting in state behind his usual screen on the (currently unoccupied) infirmary ward floor—effectively cleared, sixty minutes past, by those shrieking alarms announcing that Schillinger's personal mail-managing domain has just gone up in flames—Ryan O'Reilly sneaks the fifth cig of the day while he turns his latest encounter with Tobias Beecher over in his mind. Remembering the blond man pulling him aside just as he and Cyril entered the Em City laundry room, that old, crazy look of his (so notably absent over the last little while) suddenly back with a vengeance—and
whispering, fiercely: "I'm going to show you something, Ryan...and if you laugh, I swear to Christ, I'll knee you right in the nuts."

Pulling up his t-shirt, then, to reveal a fresh, infected-looking tattoo: bruisy red-black, already partially keloided. Two crossed lightning bolts, right above his left nipple.

Ryan winced, sympathetically. "Whoo, man. That's gotta hurt."

"It does."

"Vern pay for that?"

A bright, forced smile. "No, strangely enough; just set me up with it, like one of those makeovers. I'm the one actually gets to fork out, though, 'cause I'm well off." A beat. "But you do actually HAVE a plan, right, O'Reilly? I mean—just asking."

"You know I do, Beech."

"Oh yeah, forgot. 'Gettin' there', right?"

"Right."

A feral hiss, through set teeth: "Riiiight."

Cyril glanced over at them timidly, scared by his nice friend Toby's uncharacteristic vehemence. Forcing Ryan to snap back in turn, coloring slightly—his own voice dropping, to match Beech's: "Hey: Who was it said they were gonna keep it together, huh? Do whatever it takes, however long it takes?"

Another flash of bared teeth. "Now, that I remember. But don't feel you have to hurry on my account, 'kay? Actually, I think you should take as long as humanly possible...so Vern has time to doodle all over the REST of my fuckin' body."

"Beech, c'mon..."

"No, you come on!" Pausing again, to gather himself back in. And adding, in a slightly gentler tone: "Look, I...just want to know there's gonna be an end to all this, someday, is all. Like, soon."

Well—and me too, Beech. Me fuckin' too.

Four months' worth of maneuvering, finally coming to fruition in this afternoon's post office fire—an open strike at Vern's most vulnerable area, designed to make him even more paranoid than he already is, in all the wrong ways. To make him decide the attack must have come from outside, not from in-; setting him up to punish gangstas and Muslims alike for something they didn't even do, while simultaneously softening him up for the fallout from Duchene's betrayal. And then...

Even Ryan can admit how Vern used to be pretty good P.R. for the Brotherhood, all told, back when he was on top of his game—but those days are far over now, and only getting farther. As even Metzger must be noticing. So: Find the right chum, stir the waters; let the shark smell blood, then point him in the right direction. And stand fuckin' back.

It's Ryan's sorta dance, all right, in full, typical swing—a medley of all possible dances, half-arranged, half-improvised. Recognizing opportunity, knowing when to bait and switch. Finding out what to promise, and to who, to get them tapping their toes to your tune. And all the while keeping in mind, of course, that promising someone something—and actually delivering it—are two entirely
different things.

Keller’s smart enough to know this; Metzger isn’t. But then again, Keller's not exactly thinking with his head, right now—not the BIG one, anyway.

'Cause you’re just too sexy for everybody’s shirt, ain'tcha, Chris? Ryan thinks, with a weird kind of affection. Been able to coast on by all your life, I bet, by makin' sure everyone around you wants to do the wild thing with your too-built ass. But the difference here is, see—I care more about fuckin' Vern over than I ever would about fuckin' YOU, even if I was interested. Which I'm not.

After long study, meanwhile, Ryan finally thinks he understands what Beech has been doing; guy knows he's an addict, that he's always gotta have some way to blow off steam, or he'll come unglued under pressure. And mind-fucking Vern, that must be some kind of a high...but not enough, apparently, to keep Beech shrinkwrapped quite as tight as Ryan needs him to be. So—queasy as the idea continues to make him—Ryan's gonna have to push Keller and Beecher together, "fag shit" and all, for two (not so simple) reasons: to give Beech a controllable addiction, thus keeping him from falling off the wagon entirely and taking Ryan's plans with him—fucking up just enough that he accidentally frees Vern's addled mind up to notice how he's being played, for example, before Ryan has everything in place for the final Operation Vern-baby showdown. But also to make Vern so crazy jealous that Keller and Beech's affair will become an unexploded mine Ryan can trigger anytime he wants, goading Vern into a confrontation which'll clear the field for Ryan (and Beech) to assume their rightful places at the top of the Em City pyramid with Cyril avenged, and Beecher let loose to be the legally-trained force of nature Ryan always sort of suspected he could be, if he ever got—and KEPT—his crazy head straight. And Ryan pulling the strings from behind Beech's Others rep throne, the real man behind the curtain in this Wonderful World of Oz.

If only Keller could keep from flaunting himself and Beech under Vern's nose, then none of this might work. And Christ knows, it's amazing to Ryan how he keeps on doing it—who the hell wants to rush headlong into a situation that's bound to get 'em killed? But Ryan's gotta love the results, either way: Vern, slowly rendered insane with rage, pain, injured pride—a charging bull to Keller's human red flag, driven to attack Keller directly for once, in spite of the reinstated death penalty. And if Ryan can get Metzger to turn a blind eye, to let Keller and Duchene take care of what's quickly becoming the Aryan Brotherhood's biggest liability...well, it'll be the Lord of the Dance's biggest score yet. Thing he'd be remembered for, for sure, if he was dumb enough to actually let anybody know he was behind it.

(Which he DID do—once. But only once. And then under...very special circumstances.)

Ryan smirks to himself, scar crinkling. Takes another long drag, and blows a perfect smoke ring—just as a shadow rears itself unexpectedly up behind the screen, too quickly for him to react. Slips one strong brown hand between wall and panel, pulling Ryan's refuge apart with one strong twist, and reveals itself to be Dr Nathan...

(Gloria)

...herself. In all her remembered fineness, her oh-so-palpable flesh.

Ryan freezes, a fresh lungful of smoke just drawn and poised for expulsion but burning, instead, in his locked throat; unable to move, to speak. All Blarney dried up on contact, a stone rendered kiss-less, beneath the sheer weight of her presence—her fathomless eyes washing over him like some black sea he'd sell his soul to drown in, assuming he still had one.

Shocked silent. And hearing her say, into the empty space between them: "Ryan..."
Not O'Reilly; Ryan. So soft, so simple. As though she'd never heard him confess to ordering her husband's murder, or called his love for her a curse she'd have to live with the rest of her life—

"...we need to talk."

Oh—

—GOD.
Chapter 8

TWELVE

One week later:

No one else in the phone booth but that queen from the mini-riot, who gives Tobias Beecher a haughty glare. But Beecher just shows him his cane, along with his famous teeth: Are these the choppers that circumcised a thousand morons?

*(You wanna be number thousand and one, RuPaul, go right on ahead and try. I fucking invite you.)*

But Queenie's not quite interested enough to throw down over it, apparently. Just rolls his eyes, throws his tweezed brows high, and returns to his conversation, like: *Later for YOU, girl/boyfriend.* So Beecher picks up the receiver, looks at it a long moment, then dials. A brief chat with the prison switchboard later, he hears the other end ring once, ring twice, then pick up. The voice that answers is brisk, professional—kind of the way his used to be, once upon a time.

"Judge Grace Lima's office, Starline speaking."

With a click, the operator intercedes before he can speak: "Will Judge Lima accept a collect call from Tobias Beecher, at Oswald Maximum Security Penitentiary?"

"I'll...ask her," the voice replies, after a pause. As Beecher smiles again, to himself this time—thinner, nastier, with no teeth involved. Thinking: *Yeah. I'll just bet you will.*

“Please hold for the Judge,” Starline tells them both, finally, prompting another click followed by yet one more. Followed, eventually, by what Beecher can only think is breath in his ear—that, or his own heart, skittering slightly with nervous energy. "Judge Lima?" he asks at last, into the silence.

"Speaking."

And there's that innately dismissive, edge-of-arrogant voice Beecher remembers so well from his trial—her diction utterly precise, vowels harsh and scratchy like she's talking through a hair shirt, or wearing one.

The operator, breaking in: "I'm sorry, ma'am. Will you accept a collect call from—"

"Obviously, yes; thank you."

The prison switchboard disconnects, returning them both to breath and silence, as Beecher gathers himself. Beginning: "Uh—"

("Your Honor")

Not that he'll ever call her that again. If he can possibly help it. With effort, then: "—Judge. I just wanted to say I'm, um—sorry. For calling you..."

...several times in quick succession, right to McManus's gratifyingly amazed face...

"...a cunt."

Another—far longer—pause ensues, as the jeering little voice in his head comments: *Hey dumb-ass,*
how do you even know she heard about that? Didn't say it to HER, after all.

(Oh, shit...that's right.)

A sharp drop in internal temperature follows, stomach clenching cold, newfound confidence suddenly peeled away like vinyl on a hot car's back seat. Thinking: Well, Tobe, sure blew this one. Be lucky she doesn't sue you for defamation, let alone help you draft Cyril O'Reily's prospective appeal—and man, Ryan's gonna be some pissed, too, which you really do NOT want.) Besides which: Who were you fooling here, anyway, aside from yourself? Playing lawyer, like you're anything more than just a freak in a cage, just another trapped rat...anything more than everybody else here in hell's anteroom, aka Oz...

He stands there waiting, throat dry and pulsing. Feeling that fresh lightning-bolt tattoo on his chest—Vern Schillinger's most recent token of implicit ownership made flesh—beat and burn erratically, as though in ragged time with the heart beneath it. Until at last he hears, faint and tinny through the rising roar of blood in his ears: "Is there something specific I can possibly help you with, Mr Beecher?"

And, oh: how long has it been, exactly, since someone called him "mister" automatically, like it was just normal procedure? Or even—like they meant it?

At any rate: “I sure hope so,” he says, eventually, before taking out the notes he made last week, in the library, on his...client's...case.

***

A few hours later, meanwhile, Beecher's back in the mess hall for dinner, sliding neatly in right between the aforementioned Ryan and Cyril O'Reilly themselves—Cyril grinning his wide, silly innocent's grin, as usual. And Ryan...grinning too, weirdly enough. Equally, goonily wide, very much NOT as usual.

"Hey, Toby!" Cyril says.

"Hey, Cyril."

"They got bananas today."

"Yeah? You mind grabbing me a couple, sw—"

(But: You weren't actually going to call him “sweetpea,” there, were you, Toby?)

Not that Cyril even notices Beecher's hesitation, of course, Just bounds off happily, up and back towards the counter, leaving Beecher and his big brother to exchange a few sotto voce lines of far more serious discussion.

O'Reilly: "How'd it go, man?"

"With the Judge? Very well."

"Cool. So—I just keep on thinkin' happy thoughts?"


Ryan's grin doesn't slacken. "Guess I am," he agrees.
"Wanna fill me in?"

But the Irishman just shakes his head. Replying, as he does: "Wouldn't believe me if I told ya, bro."

Hmmm, well: *Ohhhhh-kay,* Beecher thinks. 'Cause this has been a nice, restful interlude, and all—but across the way, he can already spot Schillinger's bull-thick silhouette drifting in late at the very outskirts of the regular Aryan posse, the sight of whom makes him snap to attention, back on point. Telling O'Reilly, deceptively bright and blithe: "Back to the grind."

He levers himself back up, using his cane for support; brushes past Cyril, accepting the proffered bananas with a grateful smile, then makes his way over to Vern, sultrily slow—hears whispers multiply around him with every step, rippling up and down either side of the hall. The Em City Chorus, crossbred with their Gen Pop equivalent: twice the gossip in half the time, more effective than tom-toms playing deep in the jungle's heart of darkness.

At a nearby table, "Poet" Jackson, to some unidentified, elaborately do-ragged fellow gangsta: "Yo, G, y'all seen Schillinger lately? S'like he's..." "Pussy-whipped," the guy supplies, sucking his teeth, to which Poet just laughs. "Got it in one, dog." Then, as Beecher passes by, eyebrow quirked in his direction...throwing him back his own set at the same time, respectfully accurate, as if to say: *Hey, fellow Council-or! How they hangin'?*...Poet shakes his head, like: *Damn, son!* Concluding: "'Cept—and ain't never thought I'm'a say this, yo—but Beecher ain't no pussy."

And: *Oh, Arnold,* Beecher thinks, almost affectionate. *Baby, you're making me blush.* Before returning his gaze to Vern, lashes lowered fake-submissively—then pausing a moment, to register the fact that he really does look bad, comparatively. In that the usually relentless old Nazi prick truly gives the impression, even at first sight, of a man who's spent the last week paddling hard up shit creek without the benefit of a barbed wire canoe; he's lost weight, gained hair, like he's got so much on his mind he simply forgot to shave—his head, at least. Shirt-collar unbuttoned, stomach rendered puffy and stiff by the halved phone-book cutting into his gut. Even his tattoos look kind of...faded.

*(Not like YOU care, though.)*

Oh, hell no. And yet—

In the wake of the post office fire—an event with which, Beecher would take fairly good odds, Ryan may well have been more than slightly involved—Vern's been left rudderless, bereft of both refuge and raison d'être. Not to mention that most of the other Aryans now clutch around Duchene, leaving Vern effectively cut from the herd...reduced to the status of a hanger-on, a clinger, a lone primate shunned by his own. Like he's got leprosy, or something equally catching. Like he's a walking corpse, an autopsy waiting to happen.

Fresh new plaster cast on his bad hand; broke the last one on a too-nosy Muslim, doing Chris Keller's old trick: Whomp, bam! And the rest of Muslims have followed him ever since, at a distance, waiting. Much like the gangstas, who remember LeVon Jordaire and Kenny Wangler, or the gays—not all of them too femme to fight, with a more-than-occasional razor-blade hidden behind those painted mouths—who remember Richie Hanlon. Or even Em City's small Jewish population, integrated as it is into several different gangs, who remember Alexander Vogel: Strung from his heels, dick flapping out, the word "Jew" scrawled across his slack, drained abdomen. And the Irish, who remember Cyril...even though, for Cyril himself, what Vern did to him has become nothing more than a vague, disturbing memory.

*Good,* Beecher thinks, viciously, smiling into his "master"'s increasingly duller eyes. *Not all that much longer to go, now, probably—thank Christ.*
It's a damn good feeling, overall. Though he's feeling pretty great in general right now, in the wake of his exchange with Judge Lima; back in the saddle again, and all that. The long-lost high of talking law with a fellow pro, just like a real, live citizen again—someone with a job, a car, a wife, a life, a closet full of thousand-dollar suits, a functional pair of glasses. Somebody who doesn't have to go through each successive day knowing he killed another person's daughter just because he was too fucking arrogant to call a cab in front of his peers, or suspecting that everybody he meets has already heard about that swastika burned into his ass.

And whose fault is THAT, now, huh? Well...

...Vern's, and also mine, at least as much. But fuck it.

A barely-suppressed spike of laughter runs through him, spurring him on, making him want to play. Which is how he abruptly finds himself leaning in close over Vern's shoulder, catching him mid-rant and murmuring, in one ear: "Got a little present for you, sir." Breathing it, actually, close and hot as some air-mimed kiss: a calculated gesture of obeisance, specifically designed to make Vern look weak for even receiving it, let alone acknowledging it. Then tucking the banana into Vern's "good" hand, deftly, before moving on—

***

—while Vern, left staring in his wake, can only think: Oh, what the FUCK. Publicly humiliated, and not even sure what he has to feel humiliated about; laughter comes welling up on either side of him, a raucous tide of whoops and snorts from too many sources to identify forming a general wave of amusement. He hears Duchene giggling, down the end of the Aryans' table; catches Keller's eyes as he wheels around to glare them down, glued to Beecher's retreating ass (as always), and sees him give that sneaky sidelong smirk. With Dr Nathan's daily meds cocktail rocking him just as bad as ever, back and forth and sideways, making him feel laid open, exposed. Like everybody around him can read his thoughts...read every secret thing, these endless spurts of lust and fear and rage, bubbling up through him like lava...

Can't sleep 'till he exhausts himself, and when he does, the dreams are choice: finding Rachel's note on the kitchen table, laying into that dealer with the tire iron. His precious boys, shaking and puking their way through withdrawal, cursing him the way he used to curse the Old Man—still does, actually. Rachel, on her nigger. Beecher on Keller, or anybody else that little whore can get next to, 'cause Vern just can't watch him all the time...and how crazy is that tinfoil-hat-wearing type of logic, Vernon? Exactly?

...pretty fuckin' crazy.

No rest. No appetite. The post office he's spent eight years plus building into his own little empire is a burnt-out hulk, doorway strung with yellow crime-scene tape, and they've got him back down in the furnace room now, slinging slag, like he was sixteen fucking years old again; screw that shit. Can't even make lists, let alone go through them—the items skitter around everywhere, altering on contact. A constant internal debate: Did this, didn't do this. Did this, or—didn't I? Well, didn't I?

Know I fuckin' well did this one, dammit. 'Least...I think I did...

As yet another voice keeps on yammering, all along, inside Vern's head: And who has my BACK, goddamnit? Doesn't ANYBODY in here have my fuckin' back?! But apparently not, seeing how C.O. Karl Metzger, once Vern's guaranteed backup, now doesn't seem to feel obligated to do one single friggin' thing to stop these motherfuckers from making fun of him—just looks away, contemplating Mars, like he's embarrassed by Vern's own embarrassment. That useless, slack-jawed, cow-sized jizz-ball special.
Well, piss on it. Vern came in alone; he'll leave alone, one way or another, it comes to that—but not until he's good and fuckin' ready.

"Somethin' you wanna say to me?" Vern demands of his former mouthpiece, voice rough with held-in tension—a grating shadow of his former roar, unimpressive even to himself. And Duchene replies, all barely-muffled insolence: "Well, yeah. You gonna peel that—" He indicates the banana currently drooping, forgotten, between Vern's fingers. "—now? Or later?"

(Exsqueeze me?)

Tossing the banana aside, with a growl, Vern scrubs his "good" hand vigorously back over his skull, feeling his burning, sleep-deprived eyes—already wide—widen even further; the sandy ridge of his brows lifts so high, it almost starts to merge with his...Jesus, is that a hairline? The which observation on serves to make his lips twist at the thought, tightly, as he rumbles: "Think you maybe wanna shut the fuck up, Fritz..." Trying to get a bit of his patented old-style genial menace going, and failing, obviously. Because Duchene just snaps back, without even bothering to think twice about it: "Or what, Vern? Gonna get your wife over there to bite my dick off?"

There's a fresh eruption of laughter; Vern flushes, turning his back on the other Aryans with as much dignity as he can muster. Only to find Beecher back at his side, holding out a freshly-filled tray with some weird kind of flourish: THERE you go, cupcake. Service with a smile! "Want me to stick around?" the insufferable fucking bitch suggests, cutely—like he's any damn sort of honor guard, jaw-breaking cat-fight hissy-fits or not—to which Vern just huffs, takes the tray and stomps off to another table, happy to see the unaligned humps scatter to make room for him, at the very least. And sits there frowning in building pain, his bad hand already starting to throb even as he shovels food into his mouth with the other, while Beecher sprawls out nearby, cat-lithe; watches him produce another banana from his pocket, where it's somehow remained uncrushed. Which he then begins, very deliberately—to eat.

Unhooding the tip. Licking it once, as though for luck. Slipping it between his lips, ridiculously deep, before biting down with an audible click.

(Ooogh. You freaky little fuckin' SLUT.)

It gets Vern iron-hard all in a second, under the table—as Beecher, still toying with the banana's peel on its metal-sheathed top, seems well-able to tell at a glance, just by the way Vern shifts in his seat. Asking, idly, as he does: "Enjoying your fries? I told 'em to put on extra gravy."

Vern hisses through his nose. "Look," he says, "why don't you just step off for a while, bitch? Go sit with the O'Reilly retard; see if he remembers any of that chess shit you been teaching him."

In other words: Leave me the fuck alone, 'till I want you for something. And I think we both know what.

Used to work well enough as a rebuke to make even Chris Keller blush, once upon a time. But Beecher just shrugs, insultingly un-insulted, and pushes himself to his feet once more. Shooting back: "Whatever you say...sweetpea."

Hand giving one last wrenching stab under its cast, Vern's unable to quite avoid watching his "wife" push off towards the O'Reilly enclave, crowd parting around him like clockwork to let him through, limp and all. The craziest cripple in Oz, his rep—and Vern's patronage, much as the Aryans may be contemplating revoking his Brotherhood membership—still a heinous enough combination to keep almost any fellow predator shy of that pretty blond ass. Because: He's MINE, Vern thinks yet again, grimly, like he does roughly a hundred times a day, but also almost as though reassuring himself.
Mine now, mine forever; death do us part, and all that crap. I mean, who the hell else would WANT him? Aside from...

(Keller)

But before he can pursue that thought much further—scan the hall for those dark blue eyes again, staring hyp-mo-tized at the hard-won human prize Vern now once more owns from the inside-out—Vern feels a tap on his shoulder and looks 'round to see C.O. Diane Whittlesey, his favorite un-caught murderer, hovering above him: McManus's right-hand hump once upon a time, now busted back down to running his errands and carrying out his orders just like everybody else, 'cause fucking the Wizard isn't actually a guaranteed way to not get fucked, in turn. After which there's one of those pharmaceutically-induced jump-cuts, the kind Vern's gradually getting more and more scarily "used" to having...and he resurfaces with a sort of shrug, finds he's following her down a long, intricate series of halls leading not to the visiting room but somewhere entirely different—somewhere he hasn't seen the inside of since, oh, it must be...last time his boys came by. The room reserved for contact visits, in other words, through whose door he can just glimpse its sole present occupant: Rachel. Of fucking course.

(Some movie from the '60's, right? "If It's Monday, It Must Be My Dead Wife.")

Whittlesey turns: "Gonna have to cuff you, Schillinger. It's—"

"Procedure? Yeah. I know."

She clicks them on, opens the door. Rachel looks up, scrubbing hair from her face. Has it down today, not in her normal crown of braids but tied back by a brightly-colored, African-patterned scarf that matches her dress, like some blonde Mammy wannabe; he can barely bear to look at her. Honorary nigger drag. And her smell, rushing to meet him, setting him instantly all on edge...her warm and living presence, mere inches away, with no barrier between them...

He can sense Whittlesey watching him, out of the corner of his eye—monitoring him for any sudden moves, attuned to the vibe. Her having had her own marriage problems, as he recalls. Thinking: Well, don't bust a rib, Lady Di. I'm not gonna jump across the damn table and beat the crap out of her, if that's what you're afraid of.

Rachel, without preamble: "Mr McManus thought this would be a good idea, us meeting in here. Some sort of...escalation."

“And you...don't?" Vern lowers himself into the seat across from her, steepling his trapped fingers, deliberately mimicking her tone; he can see her flush a bit, obviously realizing it. Replying, with care: "Well, God knows—the other kind of visit sure didn't exactly seem to be going anywhere, did it?"

(Guess not.)

"Cory's still in juvie, just in case you're interested," she continues, not waiting for an answer. "But Jan's about to be released from hospital--which means I need custody of him, now. Or he goes right on home with the Old Man."

"Wouldn't be so bad, maybe."

Another, deeper flush. "Be serious, Vernon! Why are you fighting me so hard on this?"

Because...
...it's the only way I have to keep you coming back?

That inner voice again, always a bit louder, a bit more insightful. Cutting just a bit deeper, and salting the wound.

Self-protection, that's the key; Vern lets his hands twist tighter, ignoring the pain, and switches conversational gears with a slick speed he learned back when they were still together—arguing in whispers behind closed doors, (hopefully) just out of the boys' earshot. The bad old days, when Rachel used to stick her cat-flat nose next to his and hiss, provocatively: You wanna hit me now, Vern? In front of the kids? Oh, hit me in front of the kids, Vern, PLEASE. I double-dog dare you.

But: I never did, did I? Not if I could possibly help it.

(You contrary little cunt.)

"Nigger drive you up, this time?" he asks, parody-of-idly; she nods, impatient. Answering: "Just like always."

"So how come he never comes in with you, he loves you that much?"

"'Cause he knows you'd call him a nigger?"

"Huh. Brave guy."

Rachel sees the bait but just raises an eyebrow, and doesn't take it—just throws back, a note of irony creeping into her voice: "Oh, he's got his resources. Lives with me, right?" Then smiles at him, a sidelong crook of the lips, so damnably familiar he has to forcibly restrain himself from smiling back, even as every particle of him yearns to meet her halfway. Their eyes locking briefly, sliding together like long-lost puzzle pieces, pale blue on even paler—and sparking. And oh, ugh, he can feel it in his gut, his hand, his groin. This all-over clench of recognition, at a level too basic to ever deny, too visceral to defend against: flesh to flesh, man to wife. With her own gaze softening under his, just for a second, almost as if she feels it too.

"You sign the papers, I go away," Rachel reminds him, one more time. "C'mon, Vern. How hard can it be?"

He swallows; feels the phone-book cut into his gut, abdomen fluttering with tension. And replies, voice far reedier than he'd like it: "You know, every time you come down here—with him—word gets around. First guys on the wall, then it filters down, but pretty soon, every-fuckin'-body knows."

With a distinct chill: "And this is supposed to affect me how?"

"'Affect,' shit. I'm just tellin' you, you don't know what you're playing with, okay, Rachel?" Vern takes a ragged breath, thinking his next sentence over, trying to figure out some kind of loophole that'll allow him to preserve his game face intact—but there's no safe way to say this, so he just does, and damn the torpedoes. "You turning up to Oz with that jungle bunny of yours in tow—all's it does is make it ten times harder for me in here, understand? The Brotherhood..."

Her nose wrinkles, automatic. "Oh, so what, I'm supposed to just park Paul at home, in case I offend your Nazi pals with his presence?"

"You know how it goes, woman! Lose your rep in here, you might as well—"

"—paste a FUCK ME sign to your own back?" Yes, I do know. Ought to by now, considering I've heard it a thousand fucking times before..."
With a barely-suppressed cry of frustration, Vern slams his elbow down hard on the table, enough to feel the shock turn his whole shoulder numb. Demanding, as she jumps at the sound: "Look, you want me dead, Rachel? That really what you want?" Whittlesey has one hand on her nightstick now, ready to intervene—but Rachel ignores her, eyes still on Vern's. Replying, quietly: "...no. I've never wanted that."

And: Impulsively, without thinking it through—like so many other things they've done together, one way or another—Rachel puts her hand on his, the "good," un-casted hand. It's just like that one brief moment, last time, when she pressed her palm to the glass; when he saw what she was doing, responded to it, but kept himself from matching it for fear of looking weak—

Those soft fingertips on his, like a closed circuit: five deceptively mild electric shocks. Vern feels his own fist link with hers and pull abruptly upward, then presses the hand caught between his chained palms to his face, crushes it passionately to his mouth, his teeth, his dry and yearning lips. Thinking, at the same time: Oh, Lord. Oh, Rachel...

Seconds later, crazily—with no apparent transition—they find themselves already full-on kissing, Rachel literally halfway in his lap with a thigh on either side of his, her breasts crushed up against him, so incongruously soft and good-smelling. And so unlike Beecher, yet so like him—those dazed blue eyes, pupils dilated 'till they look almost black. That little growling moan of arousal she breathes straight into Vern's open mouth, thrumming on his tongue. (Ummm.)

And he can swear to God feel her skin on his, sticky-hot even through two pairs of pants, crotch already sopping: that charge between them, strong as ever—a four-alarm genital firestorm, proximity-triggered. Knows damn well she can feel him, 'cause she'd have to be dead not to—could drive fuckin' nails with this thing, probably, he wanted to try. His bad hand pounding, heart contracting, as one breath moves between them, pumped back and forth, back and forth—shared again and again, in great, windy gasps...

From behind them both, Whittlesey, finally amazed into action, same as in the gym: "Hey, break it up! Jesus, Schillinger—" Vern finds himself showing her his teeth, automatic, as she pulls Rachel off him (and where'd he learn that move, exactly? Gee, I wonder), while Rachel simply goes limp, unprotesting. As astounded by her own response, maybe, as either of them.

"Contact visit, ma'am," Whittlesey reminds her. "Not conjugal." To which Rachel nods, eyes downcast, and Vern raises his cuffed hands compliantly, far as the chain will let him: Yeah, fine; GOT that part, actually. But feeling heterosexually alive for the first time in years, all humming and sparking, and Rachel so close to him...come back to him again, after all this time...

(Mine. Again.)

He looks over at her, brim-full of strange affection. All those gentle things he hasn't felt since before she left flowing back into him, parched earth suddenly irrigated—yet there she sits, composing herself, smoothing her skirt back down over her lap. And saying, after a moment: "Well. That—was a mistake." Then adding, as Vern goes rigid again: "And I apologize for it, Vern. I really do...

...which brings back the voice, jeering, harsher than ever: Oh yeah, but what's the alternative? 'Cause you're just such a stud, Vernon, obviously—she just couldn't help herself. Like THAT's likely.

This commotion below the belt makes him vicious, even by usual standards. And so, forcing his
voice down into its most soothingly contemptuous register, Vern forces himself to rumble in return: "Oh, don't worry 'bout it, Rachel; you wanted to hurt me, right? Hurt me, hurt the kids—"

Snapping, her composure cracking on contact: "I would never hurt the boys, and you damn well know it."

"Did, though. Didn't you?"

"Hey, I'm not the one got myself thrown in jail—"

"You think I wanted that?"

She snorts. "Oh, you love doing time, Vernon, you always did, so don't even try. Way you used to talk about this place, you'd think it was Club fuckin' Med; so much easier than real life, when you get down to it, isn't it?" Leaning in now, harder, her own elbows on the table: "But do you love it so much you want to have Jan and Cory in here along with you, all up close and personal? Want to give them the guided tour?"

"Stop it."

"No, YOU stop it, just like you know you can—let them come home, instead. With me."

"—with your nigger, you mean--"

"Yeah, that's right, with him too! Why the fuck not?" Pausing, in the wake of her temper's flare, to gather herself before pleading, tone gone once more quiet: "And yes, I know why, I haven't forgotten; just let them have a life, Vern, that's all I ask. Let them meet—"

Suspicious: “Meet who?"

Because here she's stopped short, mid-sentence, hesitating like she knows she's made yet another kind of mistake; Vern feels a cold worm probe his windpipe, repressing a shudder—is that pain? Or a premonition of more pain to come? And: "Let them meet who, Rachel?" he repeats, throat narrowing further, in anticipation of her answer.

Reluctant: "Let them...meet..."

"Meet WHO?"

Her voice dims further, folding in on itself, like she's afraid—or ashamed—to shape the words. Until she admits, finally: "...their sister."

(Aw, no.)

If only he was still holding her hand now, he could drop it—like a live coal, or a rotten piece of meat. Like love itself, that stupid fucking concept: A pressing deadweight of sting and misery, his soul's unhealed sore. Thinking: So that's why you ran away, huh, Rachel? Why you thought I was gonna kill you, 'stead of just dragging you back by your hair...not 'cause you were just sleeping with him, oh no: I mean, might'a put him in the critical ward over that and made it pretty bad for you, too, but I'd've still wanted you back. You being already knocked up, though—and by HIM—"

"A daughter," he says, hearing it ring hollow.

"Yes."

"Be about, what—ten, now? Eleven?"
"Just about, yes."

"What's her name?"

"Vern..."

He presses on, though, with all the bile of a dream first offered, then destroyed. "I said, what's her name, Rachel? C'mon! What the fuck more can it possibly do to tell me what you chose to call this...little mongrel bitch of yours?"

Rachel looks down. And whispers: "...Jacoba."

(Ohhhhhh, you fucking, fucking, FUCKING WHORE.)

A jolt of memory admixed with lust, hate, cascading carpal tunnel pain, rage: Seeing the telegram confirming his older brother Karl Junior's MIA status clutching her arthritic hand, the webby grey of her bent head. And the blurry print, swimming in front of both their eyes: "Dear [Mrs Jacoba Schillinger], we regret to inform..."

His mother's name. The name, in other words, that they would've given their daughter, if they'd ever had one. Which...they never will.

My hand, Vern thinks, dazedly. Christ, I break it again, or what? Can't even feel my fingers. But all he says, regardless, is: "Gimme those papers."

"What?"

Looking up again, then—looking her straight in the eye, for the very last time. And seeing all of her at once, the inaccessible whole: past, present, future; that punk girl in the bar, his warrior mate. This traitor who made him just soft enough to hurt, but far too hard to bend—ever, under any circumstances—without breaking.

"The papers, Rachel," Vern says at last, utterly cold. "For custody. So I can never see you again."

***

And simultaneously, on the other side of the world—Em City's upper deck, about as far removed from Vern Schillinger's private little marital meltdown as Siam is from Syracuse—

"You told him about the shipment?"

"You know it."

"And he's into it."

Chris Keller cocks a dark, Satanic brow in his co-conspirator's direction, smirking afresh down his hawklike nose. Replying: "O'Reilly, baby. Have I ever let you down?"

Well. Not so far, Ryan thinks, curling a tiny grin back. But then again, 's not like I'm ever gonna give you the chance to, either.

Down on the quad floor, Fritz Duchene—their mutual dupe—stands deep in conversation with Karl Metzger, the other unwitting part of Ryan's Schillinger-plus-pressure-equals-revenge arithmetic. He'll catch up to the big Nazi hack later, sometime when Keller's not around; no point in Chris knowing all the angles, 'specially when one or more of them might...no, make that probably will...get him killed, eventually. Sad, but true—or true, anyway.
For now, however, Ryan has a date to keep with the aforementioned unbelievable source of his current happiness...the deepest, darkest secret in a heart so jam-packed full of dark secrets, it probably wouldn't even show up under a cardial x-ray. So: "Later," he tells Keller, whose eyes have already slid from Duchene back to the shiny glass wall of his own pod—the place where Beecher isn't, as yet, but will be, soon enough. When the Oz workday's finally over and they're both locked back in again, together.

*Hey, whatever floats your boat, guys. Just make your damn move, Mr Mac Daddy sex-machine, and SOON—so I can get everything else I need to happen up and moving, right on schedule.*

With that, Ryan strides off, whistling, bound for his own little adventure cruise: Fuck travel brochures, man! He's talking 'bout a round-trip ticket leaving right damn now to tour the most exotic, romantic ports of call imaginable, destination...fuckin' ecstasy. Or as far as you can get towards it, at least, working horizontally, from that big, comfy desk in Dr Gloria Nathan's office.

***

Speaking of offices, meanwhile...

Tobias Beecher looks up from his own desk and the blinking monitor atop it, as Vern Schillinger appears in Sister Peter Marie's doorway: huffing, sweaty, a veritable miasma of concentrated misery exuding from every visible pore. Already tearing at the collar of his shirt, far too impatient to actually get the thing loose before he simply rips it open down the front, buttons spraying recklessly; dumps the gutted phone-book that spills from his abdominal region into the nearest wastepaper basket and rounds on Beecher, practically before the clang of its passage can register. Growling, as he does: "She gone?"

Beecher: "For a whole half-hour."

"'Kay. Get your ass in there."

There's barely time enough for Beecher to figure out where exactly Vern's pointing before he's being jerked to his feet, then thrust headlong through the door into Sister Pete's inner sanctum—the holiest of holies, of course, where Schillinger feels no doubt automatically drawn to piss. And thinking, along the way: Just as well, really, considering the last time I got fucked chez Sister Pete, it was back out there...by Keller. But that'll just stay our little secret, I guess—right, Chris?

So: up against the wall, Vern kicking the door closed behind them and popping his own fly, while Beecher shucks a shoe and de-pants one leg (gone commando today, due to laundry problems; another inadvertent stroke of "luck"). Then he's lifted slightly and entered, rough as ever, feeling Vern strain to keep them both upright as he slams him back into the plaster, the Nazi bastard's cold blue eyes turned inward, unfocussed. Obviously using Beecher as some kind of glorified stress relief, desperately trying to fuck away the angst of yet another day on the downward spiral...*trying*. And failing.

*Busting my ass not quite the fun hobby it used to be, Vernon?* The evil half of Beecher purrs, from somewhere deep inside. *Well, try THIS on for size.* And he hauls himself up by the older man's wide shoulders, wrapping his legs unexpectedly around Vern's hips, to send them stumbling back—off-balance—right onto Sister Pete's "To Do" pile: pencils crunching under Vern's back, papers sweat-stained and crumpled. While Beecher continues to screw himself up and down onto Vern's dick, relentlessly, sort of like he's on top, for once—and Vern continues to buck and grind, hips in overdrive, sort of like...he actually *likes* it that way.

Hands creep up Beecher's sides, weirdly gentle, playing with his nipples through his issue t-shirt's
rough fabric; it's a startlingly unexpected little jolt of sensation, one which causes Beecher to flinch, squirm, do a bit of impromptu bucking of his own, in unwilling yet unmistakable...arousal. To clench inside, blush boiling up over his face like sunburn, fresh gripping pressure on Vern's buried cock drawing a familiar growl in return.

And: What DO you think you're doing, you—goddamn freak? Beecher thinks, dazed, even as Vern tangles their legs together and rolls, flipping them over—an action that only serves to lift Beecher's pelvis that little bit higher, just enough so the blond man's leaking dick grinds, sandwiched, between them...for all the world as if Vern were almost trying to make it pleasurable for Beecher as well, stark staring crazy as that idea sounds, and is. Still, Vern does just keep on keepin' on, apparently unaware how completely out of character this is for him: twisting those oh-so-responsive nubs, his thrusts slower, deeper, more unhurried than they've ever been before, careful to catch that traitorous gland inside Beecher with every stroke. And nuzzling him, licking him, rubbing his rough lion's head into the hollow of Beecher's jerking shoulder, across his throat, up over his jaw for a bruising, intrusive kiss, abrading his own cheeks with Beecher's dull gold stubble—

(oh God, oh—oh, ah, oh)

—just goddamn well stop it, damn it. Just STOP, before I start...start, actually...

...enjoying this.

Not faking it, or giving Vern what he wants—what he doesn't, more like: a collaborator, a willing victim, the kind of playmate who meets brute strength with ferocity, equally intense, biting and scratching. Because this isn't brutal, for once, just...odd. Well, more than odd—

(oh Christ, MUCH more)

Beecher feels Vern's mouth trace his cheekbone and hears himself moan, appallingly loud, eyes squeezing shut. Because the really disarming thing, the true terror of it, is that Vern is being sort of genuinely—reciprocal—for the first and only time, in his fierce and clumsy way. And that he, Beecher...is actually responding.

'Cause any soft touch gets YOU hot, isn't that right, Tobias? No matter who it belongs to.

(Memory, like a breaking wave: Chris kissing Beecher's neck from behind in the pod, his lips full-on in the laundry room. Wrapping his arms around Beecher's shoulders and pulling their foreheads together, after McManus brought the news about Gen—that warm, slightly slick touch, comfort without compromise, demanding nothing. Yet offering...everything.)

...and you, you monumental mook—you, who should have damn well known better. As though anyone ever COULD want to touch you without a hidden fucking agenda now that Vern's hollowed you out, fucked you raw forever and taken a shit where all your better self's feelings used to be...

A flick of snapped fingers stings his temple, shocking Beecher's eyes open again, to find Vern's fixed gaze mere inches from his own. Saying—and it's definitely not a question: "You like this."

Another slow thrust, for punctuation. Beecher feels himself pump a slug-trail of lube, scarily thick, and gasps, replying: "...yeah."

"Tobias." Closer, in his ear: "Toby."

"Oh! Yes, yeah, yuh—hessss."

(Now...just lay off, you motherfucking son of a bitch. PLEASE.)
But no: it goes on and goes on, it just keeps right on going, while the pleasure just keeps right on building. Bad as it used to be, back in those bad old days, when Vern would pay a mocking kind of attention to his "needs" on occasion; worse, actually. Because this isn't a simple parody of having sex, of the sort Beecher's well and truly used to by now...this, right here, is a parody—a very effective parody, mind you—of making love. With Beecher impaled, stretched wide, strung and slit open on the very knife's edge of genuine orgasm—no fantasies of Chris to distract him from the here and now, however helplessly he might try to conjure them. Just the sure and certain knowledge that this man above him, inside him...his "owner", his rapist, this fucking Nazi fuck who's poisoned every possible portion of his already-ruined life...is about to make him come, for real, so hard his head might possibly blow off at the moment of impact.

(Who's fucking whose brains out NOW, huh, Toby?)

While Vern demands, hoarse: "You're mine: Tell me."

Breathless: "I'm...yours."

"You always knew it."

"I always knew it."

And into his ear, again—a hot rush of breath, borne on even hotter tongue: "Then say it like you mean it, goddamnit!" With a thread-like crack in Vern's voice, accompanying it; a widening hairline fracture, almost...a sob? To which Beecher cries out in turn, with an emphasis that surprises even himself—

"I always knew it!"

—at which point they explode, atom bomb bright and neutron bomb painful, two seared nuclear shadows melting to the surface of Sister Pete's desk, together: Vern collapsing full-length, with Beecher—the only "wife" he's got left, now—glued fast to him by a fresh mixture of his own sweat and semen, limbs coiled tight and locked, hearts going like Geiger counters at Ground fuckin' Zero.

Exhausted. His hand on fire. And realizing, like some dreadful, unsought epiphany: You fuck Beecher to feel better, 'cause it's the only thing that does make you feel better, until the day...today, as it happens...when it DOESN'T, anymore. When, in actual point of fact, it makes you feel, sort of—worse.

So what do you do now, Vern, if anything? What's the plan? What's next on the list?

Lying there all wrung out, panting into the curve of Beecher's throat, his gold-fuzzed chin. Until, tentatively, he feels Beecher's palm slick, slowly, up the back of his neck, fingers splaying to cradle his unshaven skull—a spider's touch, barely there enough to register at all. While Beecher's other arm tightens around Vern...equally slow, equally light..into a kind of a—hug. An ambiguous, one-handed gesture: maybe just simple recognition, basic empathy. Because he's so tense, still, even post-orgasm, so conflicted and unhappy...and Beecher, does he—see it? Could he possibly, actually—

(care?)

They lie there, Beecher not looking at him, him not looking at Beecher; the two of them knit and sprawled, Vern's deflating cock already half-slack, easing slowly from the other man: all this frantic noise and effort, reduced after the fact to eight knotted limbs, two numb and shaken minds. And it only lasts a minute at most, a mere micro-minute if that, throughout which Vern longs to rebel against this galling comfort, this unmanning, unmanly balm. Like: Fuck you, don't you dare feel sorry for
me, you fuck, 'cause—that IS what you're doing, right?

(If I only knew, for one damn time, just what the hell this son-of-a-bitch is REALLY thinking...)

In order to understand Beecher's true motives, though, Vern would have to ask him straight out, which he won't. Which is why, instead, he just lies there—

—and takes it.

***

That evening, filtering back towards his pod from the laundry room, Chris Keller spots an indistinct figure hunched in the shadow of the stairwell and sidles up to investigate, only to find...Beecher, wild-haired and red-eyed like he was on that three-week drunk leading up to his “accident,” a half-empty specimen jar of 100-proof cupped between his hands. Already so blind drunk he doesn't even realize anyone's there, 'till Chris leans down—worried, but knowing him well enough to be wary—and gives him a half-assed tap in the general direction of his shoulder: "Yo, Beech—"

"Fuck off!" Beecher snaps, recognizing him, and recoils up against the wall, almost overbalancing, jar sloshing in protest. Quieting it, quickly, with another long swig.

Keller sits back on his heels, hands up. "Hey, man, nothin' personal..."

(as ever)

...I mean, you wanna go right back in the Hole on some bullshit drunk and disorderly rap, that's your business. Just thought you might need a lookout, or something."

But Beech just hisses at Keller, for his pains, like some feral cat: if you could see his ears, under that disordered mop of his, they'd be laid all the way back and twitching; hugs his alcohol closer, a liquid security blanket. And: Wish you'd tell me what got you so damn upset, Beech, Keller thinks. Wish you'd hold ME tight as you hold that hooch. But if wishes were horses...

...yeah, then fuckin' what?

His second foster Mom had a million of those dumb little sayings, one for every day of the week, or to justify every beating she doled out. Like this one, also about wishes—something you need to get kids to stop doin', he guesses, 'fore they ask you for things you know you can't deliver: Wish in one hand, Chrissie, and take a shit in the other, then see which one fills up faster. Which is harsh, but still pretty solid advice; bet nobody ever told ol' Toby-baby that, back in the day, more's the fuckin' pity.

Unable to come any closer, therefore, Keller retreats back to the corner and lingers there, his eyes peeled for any passing hacks...least he can do, really. So—he does it, of course.

(Like always.)

***

Next morning:

"You have got to be kidding me."

Whittlesey shakes her head. "Swear to God, Tim, she was frenching the Nazi son-of-a-bitch." Adding, after a long, musing swig of coffee: "I mean, what is Schillinger, some human form of
crack? All's you have to do is look away from the guy for five minutes straight, and there's somebody tryin' to hump his leg."

"Miss Renton was married to the man, Diane," Sister Pete points out, from over by the staff lounge's snack dispenser, where she's trying to coax a recalcitrant package of peanut brittle from its chosen refuge. "Twelve years. That's a lot of time to spend with somebody, if there's no physical attraction there at all."

*And isn't THAT a disgusting idea,* Tim McManus thinks, looking down at his own coffee; *pretty little Rachel Renton, tiny enough to heft with one hand, lip-locked—voluntarily—with Vern friggin' Schillinger. Will horrors never cease?* Then gives the coffee an extra stir, as though wiping the thought from his mind, only to notice: "Aw, man! This cream must be off."

Whittlesey, turning: "Here comes trouble."

McManus turns as well, eyes going to the door, and sees—Kareem Said, coming up the stairwell, and taking it two righteously indignant steps at a time.

(Oh, and he looks...pissed.)

***

Meanwhile, in the visitors' room—definitely not a contact visit, this time—Vern Schillinger sits across from his legendary Old Man, Karl, who he hasn't seen since their last heartwarming encounter: that time the old bastard told Vern he could give a shit where his drug-crazed grandsons had gone, then shot him the double finger on his way back out the door.

*(Come back here, Dad, you cocksucker!)*

Thinking: *Ah, well; he's here now, not that it makes a hot rat's shit worth of difference. Guess I might as well pick up the phone and find out what he wants, if only so I can get him to go the fuck away again.*

The Old Man's voice, static-distorted: "Well, YOU look like shit."

Vern (tight-lipped): "Likewise."

"Went to pick up Jan, yesterday. From the hospital." A pause. "Come to find out, your whore wife got there before me."

"Yeah?"

"Uh huh. Court tells me you gave her custody."

"That's right."

Karl Schillinger Snr.'s face gives a brief, weird twist, Apple Grandad sour, like it's trying to pull itself inside-out; his terminal alcoholic's complexion goes bright red, shot through with broken veins—not a pretty sight, but then, what else is new? And: "Always were some kinda king broke-dick around that San Fran-sissy-co slut," he tells Vern. "Amazed you could get it up far enough to have those kids with her at all. You ever make 'em take the blood test?"

Vern gives a long, deliberate huff through his bottom teeth, like a steam engine decompressing—or a bull, vaguely beginning to sense its own anger, revving up for the charge. "Ever tell you I fucked your girlfriend, Dad?" he asks, at last.
The Old Man grins. "Yeah? Which one?" Then adds, after a beat: "Hell—don't matter, I guess. Sure had enough, in my day." The clear implication: Not like YOU, you fuckin' jailbird faggot. Then continues, grin persisting: "Hey, I ever tell you why I cheated on your Ma? It was 'cause she had to be the worst, I mean the all-time world's worst lay. Couldn't raise a stiffie off an Eskimo in an ice-storm."

Vern feels his hands fist so hard the plaster on his new cast starts to crack around the edges, unable to stop himself, even if he actually wanted to. Saying, softly: "You were never fit to kiss that woman's ass."

"Naw, guess not. 'Cause that was always your job, wasn't it?"

"You made my boys into junkies, you sick piece of shit."

"Yep." Leaning forward, hissing: "And you let me."

When they make their report, meanwhile, the visiting rooms hacks will say this is what happens, next: Vern makes a buzzsaw noise, deep in his throat, then hurls himself headlong against the glass that separates him from his father. When C.O. Grover Hensley tries to interfere, Vern twists, kicks him full in the face with one big, black boot, grabbing his nightstick as he goes down, then spins back again, hammering at the barrier with it like it was a half-sized baseball bat. Manages to actually crack the glass where the stick lands first, thus having the distinct—if fleeting—pleasure of seeing his Old Man recoil in shock...in fear, almost...before they drag him away to the Hole, laying whatever's handy to him as they go. 'Cause you don't step to no GUARD, motherfucker! Not EVER!

With Vern just laughing, wildly, all the damn way. Howling like some Black Forest dire-wolf locked in an aging man's lumpy, badly-decorated flesh, as they sling him naked through that iron door: Yeah? Well, bring it on, you scumbags! Bring it fuckin' ON!

After which—the door clangs shut, key turning. And he's left alone under that naked bulb once more, still feeling the phantom touch of Beecher's hand, that instinctive caress of terrible understanding; the insult of being known, inside and out, in all your many weaknesses. That anyone can know you so well, the way nobody else should, unless they're...married to you, or something.

Alone with the misery, his bereavement—the fading image of Rachel still burnt along every nerve, like pain from some lost limb—Vern buries his face in his hands and curls on his side, curls into a ball on the cold, stone floor, and welcomes the coming darkness.
THIRTEEN

"COUNT!"

The morning after, Beecher wakes hungover like never before (and that's saying something), with a mouth full of rotten cat-fur and a head like an impacted wisdom tooth: Too sick to puke, and too utterly paralyzed with self-contempt even to cry about it. His barely-reset bones feel like they've been cored; everything hurts equally. Then someone lays firm hands on his limp, alcohol-poisoned shoulders, shaking him upright—Keller's dark eyes peering down at him, concerned and annoyed, accompanied by a voice so dim it feels more like telepathy than conversation: Yo, Beech, you dumb lush—hear that? 'S count, baby. So get the fuck UP.

While, in the very back of his mind, another tiny voice moans—the way he can't right now, maybe later, thanks anyway—Ohhhhh...and fuck, fuck, fuhhhck YOU.

"G'hoffame," Beecher mutters, mind snappy as ever, for all his body stays rag-doll compliant in Keller's arms, unable to do much more than flop stubbornly in protest as the taller man wrangles his legs over the side of the bed and hoists him vertical. But: "Yeah, yeah," Keller replies, unimpressed. And propels them both out the door, propping Beecher up against the pod's outer wall, as the hack on duty—friendly ol' C.O. Karl Metzger, worse luck—works his way down the line, reeling off names and numbers: O'Reilly, Ryan; O'Reilly, Cyril; Rebadow, Robert; Busmalis, Agamemnon (back from the infirmary at last, his wounds from the mini-riot all plugged and packed, that freaky hat of his crammed on at a celebratorily jaunty angle); Keller, Christopher; Beecher...

Staring down at him, ash-pale and bloody-eyed, weaving slightly in Keller's shadow; wrinkling his oh-so-all-American nose at the stale 100 proof-sweat stench leaking from the ex-lawyer's skin, and observing, lightly: "Not lookin' so good today, are we? Tobias." The clear implication: Not that you ever have, really—to ME. (Thank fuckin' God.)

Beecher, dully: "Needa go th'infirmary. Geh my...Tylenol."

"Yeah, well—you make sure to go on and do that."

"...'ssir."

A half-in-the-bag approximation of his usual Vern-induced obsequiousness, clumsy but automatic. To which Metzger just snorts, slightly, and turns away; a neat, clean movement, unexpectedly quick enough to evoke both vertigo and nausea. Watching, Beecher feels his stomach roil, his legs begin to give out. Turns himself, clutching his gut, and almost makes it all the way to the toilet before...the inevitable.

Sometime later, he heaves (oh, Lord; try not to think of that word) back up, clawing for the toiler's handle. And hears Keller, from behind him—his voice amused, almost admiring: "Man, Beech. Never can do shit half-way, can ya?"

"Nope," Beecher replies, hoarse, throat bile-burnt. Thinking: That's right, Chris—'cause, see, when I make mistakes, they tend to be big ones; just ask Gen, or Kathy Rockwell. Or—youself, for that matter. Or...
Aw, shit.

He struggles to gain his feet again, totters a few halting steps, toddler-shaky—only to find Keller blocking his way. Reminding him: "Hey. Infirmary's north, 'member?"

"Goh'ago—"

"—get your Tylenol; right, fine. I'll walk ya—still workin' up there, right? No biggie."

Beecher sighs, then tries again, making a concerted effort to be coherent, this time. "Mean, I...look, I goh'a. Gotta. Pick up Schillinger's...laundry. Okay?"

Now it's Keller's turn to snort, and look considerably more attractive doing it. "Yeah, well," he says, "ol' Vern ain't gonna have any laundry to speak of, next month or so. Seein' how they threw his lumpy Aryan ass in the Hole."

Beecher frowns. "When?"

"Yesterday. Back when you were doin' your business with Luis, probably."

"How ya...know? 'Bout that?"

Keller laughs. "Toby, please. Who you think put your ass to bed, last night—the hooch fairy?"

"Don'...call me Toby."

"Sure. Baby."

(Oh, you shameless 'ho.)

But: Not like YOU should talk, after all. Right, Toby?

And that's when the memory intrudes, taking hold of him once more, with no lingering scrim of alcohol now to dull its awful sting; Vern growling in his ear, lion-hot, as they do the dirty deed on Sister Peter Marie's sanctified desktop, hitting that spot inside, again and again, with expert care. And Beecher beneath him, arching, moaning—

You LIKE this.

Oh! Yessssss...

(And ain't that a kick in the fuckin' head? Sweetpea.)

Still, what's worse, really? That he did it, liked it...well and truly slid, though never meaning to, across that slippery line between merely letting Vern rape him and finding himself making honest-to-badness love of some kind with that unspeakable old Nazi bastard? Or that, afterward, he actually found himself feeling—sorry—for him?

Sick as that sounds, as that is. Sick as Beecher'd have to be, by any fucking standard, to even conceive of it.

But no, that's not the worst. Because the worst thing, worse than (almost) anything else that's happened to Beecher so far, here in Oz—is knowing that nothing he's learned about himself, or about Vern, will end up making a damn bit of difference to these intricate, instinctual plans of
revenge he's already set in motion: the alliances he's made, the sacrifices he's endured...

You lay there and took it, Keller had told him, that time in the infirmary, before Beecher had quite made up his mind to ride Vern's snake just as far as it'd take him, and see whether or not Hell really did have a bottom; before Keller's own touch, searing him from stem to stern, convinced him to well and truly put his money where his mouth was.

He said it, though. And did it. And now that he's finally stood up—

(finally)

—well, he can't just lie down again. Not even if he wanted to.

And DO you want to, Toby? That little voice inside his head asks, slyly. Murmuring, a moment later: Be...honest. If you can.

Beecher raises his pounding head, gives Keller a long, cold stare: Vern's long-lost discard, converted by fate and the vagaries of the penal system into Beecher's hawk-faced seducer, his never-lover—the man whose mere presence, even now, is enough to set every hair on Toby's aching body erect and alight with sheer sexual electricity: A pheremonal feedback loop, doubling and redoubling with every breath he takes, every move he makes. Every cake he bakes. Every...leg he breaks?


So much time already spent—wasted, really—avoiding him, rebuffing him. Fighting him off, one underhanded, hellaciously subtle, nerve-sparking brush-by at a time, here in this tiny space they share. Forced to breathe his air, smell his scent. Drift into sleep and out again, inextricably cocooned in a net made from Keller's warm, intoxicating breath. And all for what? To postpone that date they made, together, in the laundry-room—back before Vern called in his marker, and Chris had to deliver on quite a different bargain. Back before Beecher knew any better.

The snap, times four; the laugh, like an extra kick to the gut: a crowing, satisfied, triumphant kind of yodel, hideously gleeful over the sight of Beecher's pain. While Vern laughs along, like it's the world's best joke—and Metzger, that fucker, just stands there. Watching.

That's what I feel every time you touch me, Chris; even now, when I'm fairly sure that all you want to do is make it up to me...the only way, I guess, that you know how. That's why I shy from you, even after what you did—

(WE did)

—up against the wall, with my terminal blinking away beside us, and me dancing the Wild Thing on your hip. Why I still can't even let you know how much I liked—

(LOVED)


Thinking, then, with that same sick jitter he felt back in the post office closet: Should've just asked me straight out, baby. 'Cause, apparently, that's all it takes, long as you're the guy who burned a SWASTIKA on my ass. Hell, do it nice enough, I'll even tell you I'm "yours"...and mean it, too. At the
time, at least.

Beecher sighs. And says, at last, aloud but slowly—while keeping his eyes, very firmly, on Keller's: "Bet...you pro'ly think this's your big chance, now. Or something." As Keller just watches him, cat-still, not even bothering to shrug. Til Beecher concludes, at last: "Well...iss not."

"Okay," Keller replies.

"Mean it, Chris."

"Okay."

...okay.

Except that it isn't, of course. Not with Beecher being Beecher, Keller being Keller, and this—being Oz.

Never IS.

***

An hour later, Beecher—cleaned up, medicated, rehydrated, slightly less (overtly) traumatized—puts himself stiffly into Sister Pete's office, scene of his most recent crime against himself, only to be immediately confronted by living fallout from the crime before: Tim McManus glowering at him from the corner as Sister Pete herself hovers nearby, arms crossed, lips pursed. Greeting Beecher, as he steps through the door: "Tobias...Mr McManus has something he wants to ask you."

Like whether or not I stole Said's psych file? Beecher wonders. While McManus demands, at almost exactly the same time: "Did you steal Said's psych file, Beecher?"

(Wow. Just call me psychic.)

"And—why would I do that, exactly?" he asks, to which McManus just makes one of his patently disappointed winces. Snapping back: "Considering what got done with it? Because Schillinger told you to, that'd be my first guess."

Uh oh. Maybe this psychic stuff works both ways.

Beecher feels his nausea, blessedly dormant since this morning's brief scream through the big white porcelain megaphone, begin to rise anew. To distract himself, he repeats: "What got...done with it."

Annoyed: "Don't tell me you haven't heard."

"Fine. Fact is, though—I haven't."

They glare at each other, as Sister Pete sighs, sharply. Explaining: "Kareem Said came into the staff lounge yesterday, Tobias, very upset. He says a friend of his was surfing the Internet, and found large sections of Said's confidential psych file posted at various neo-Nazi sites." She pauses. "With...commentary."

"Gee," Beecher responds, toneless--doing a remarkable, if (mainly) unconscious, Vern Schillinger imitation. "That sucks." And now it's McManus's—long overdue—turn to flush. "Said's threatening to sue," he tells Beecher, incredulously. "Em City, Oswald, Warden Glynn, me..." Continuing after a beat, as though amazed and insulted by the very idea: "He claims we violated his privacy."

Beecher shrugs. "Well, not my area, really—but I'd say he's got a case."
"I notice you never answered my question."

"No. Never did, did I?"

Locking eyes with Em City's resident wizard once again, bloodshot and narrowed vs. pale with righteous indignation—and throwing McManus off his stride long enough, finally, to notice just how crappy Beecher actually looks: lips strained and white under a day's worth of dull gold shadow; one hand braced delicately against the wall, fairly clawing at it for support. That stink, fainter after his pre-mess hall shower, but hardly eradicated. That sulky, provoking half-sneer. Their ensuing silent conversation takes only a few seconds; two brief questions, asked and answered without either of them ever opening their mouth. And it goes a little something like this:

_You're hung over, Beecher. Aren't you?_

..._mmmaybe._

_And you DID steal that file._

..._mmmaybe._

_(But it's not like I'm gonna admit it...so either throw me in the Hole, offer me a Gravol, or fuck the fuck OFF._

Just as McManus is about to demand overt vocal confirmation of his suspicions, however, Sister Pete—Beecher's self-elected God Squad savior—steps in. "Why don't you let me have a few words with Tobias, Tim? In private."

McManus looks at her, hisses through his teeth, briefly. And asks Beecher—as a throwaway, last resort offer, maybe, before the nun gets her turn at bat: "You know Schillinger went ballistic in the vistors' room, right?"

"I heard that, yes."

"So—if you had something you wanted to tell me...just if, just supposing...then he wouldn't be around to stop you. From telling me." To which Beecher just smiles, thinly, replying: "Too bad I don't have anything to tell you, then. Isn't it?"

McManus spins to throw Sister Pete a look. "He's all yours, Sister," he says, tightly, before walking out; Beecher sighs at the sight, so glad to see McManus's back he really would applaud, if only he thought he could get away with it. Asking Sister Pete: "Mind if I sit down?"

Shortly, and with uncharacteristic chilliness: "You do whatever makes you happy, Tobias." The clear implication being: because this does, obviously—all of it—so who am I to tell you any different? And Beecher, feeling a contradictory surge of resentment, catches himself thinking: _Well, Geez...you could at least TRY._

But she can't hold the pose for long, pissed as his betrayal—not to mention his refusal to pay along with her attempts to cover up for him—must make her; her tired eyes shift back to him, full of a barely-repressed, slightly acid sorrow. "Just stop, Tobias," she says, softer. "Whatever you're doing, just...stop."

"I can't."

"Won't, you mean."
Equally soft: "...that too."

Pain in his chest, now, to match the lingering throb in his head; an instinctive clenching against ingratitude, like: *Someone's trying to HELP you, damn it, so let them!* And: "You're so much better than this," she tells him, simply. "*You deserve* so much better."

Gone toneless, again: "Do I?"

"*Yes.*" She pauses, searching for the right words. "Look: I'm not privy to every detail, Tobias, but I think I'm maybe a little smarter than you give me credit for being—and from what I've seen, you are not only doing wrong, you're going about it all wrong, too. Can't you see that?"

"You mean there's a right way to do wrong?"

"...no, that is not what I—well, okay, I guess I don't know what I mean, really. But I do know you're only hurting yourself, Tobias! Hurting...the people who love you."

(like me)

Because who else would those people be,. at this point? Not Gen, his dead wife, provably deceased by any standards, who'd left her body jammed behind the wheel for the kids to find, and him nothing but the blame. Or the kids themselves, Holly, Gary and Harry, same ones he's already decided he'll never see again, even if their grandparents do ever finally prove amenable to the idea of contact visits; his own parents and grandparents, who he's already caused enough grief for three lifetimes. Maybe the Oz-bound contingent of interested parties, then: Cyril, Ryan...Chris? Vern?

Pain shifting to anger at the very idea in one fell swoop, a smooth, swift emotional u-turn. Prompting him to snap back, unnecessarily harsh: "*Oh, puh-lease. Why don't you on on ahead and tell me what I deserve,* Sister? We both know I stole that file. Let Schillinger fuck me afterward, too, right on top of your desk—you like that image?" Voice cracking, suddenly: "*Besides which, shit, I'm no innocent; I killed Kathy Rockwell, and all the sorry in the world won't take that one back. There's career fucking criminals in here less guilty than me..."

*Guilty, because a jury of my peers said so. Because Kathy's mother screamed it, through that glass barrier—cursed me aloud, spit at my shielded face. Because I feel so, KNOW so, every minute of every hour, every hour of every day. Every day for the next twelve years, up for parole in three: world without end, forever and ever, amen. “Let the punishment fit the crime,” and mine sure has—hasn’t it, Sister? ‘Side from me still being alive, that is.*"

(For now.)

"*And you,*" he says, aloud. "*You want me to, what—forgive and forget?*

"Something like that, yes."

"*Uh huh. 'Go thou, and sin no more,' that about the size of it? Like it's just that easy."

"*It COULD be.*"

He stares at her for a moment, wondering if it really ever could. *God is punishing me,* he'd said to her, once—just hoping to hear it confirmed, he guesses. Only to have her reply: *But GOD doesn't punish, Tobias. People punish. They punish each other...and they punish themselves.* And oh, Christ, is that what he's been doing? Holding himself up to some impossible standard, adding sentences onto sentences, then blaming the people he sets up to carry them out, as though blaming the scourge he chose to flagellate himself with?
Judge Lima says "fifteen years in Oz!", and—under your breath—you add, subconsciously: Plus rape, humiliation, mutilation, revenge...a half-year gone feral, labelled face-shitter, dick-biter...false hope followed by lapse and relapse under pressure, one broken heart, four stomped and shattered limbs...

But Sister Pete's speaking again, out on the very edge of his self-evisceration. Explaining, with sweet and damnable reason: "No, I'm not going to play along and give you one more reason to treat yourself like the victim you claim you don't want to be. But I will tell you this, Tobias: deep as the hole you're in looks now, you will not stay here forever. One day, you will leave Oz, and you'll go home...where you'll have to live the rest of your life with the choices you've made, one way or another."

Beecher gives a tiny, liquid laugh. Suggesting: "And all I have to do is—have faith."

Simply: "Yes."

The laugh repeats itself, turning bitter, twisting up from deep within: “Man, you don't want much, do you?” Shaking as he says it, almost imperceptibly; eyes stinging, tone wobbling under the weight of her awful sympathy. Just like Vern did yesterday, under Beecher's own impulsive, knowing touch, and for nearly the exact same reasons.

"Oh, Tobias," Sister Pete says, almost under her breath. And goes to hug him, arms opening wide—only to have him recoil, rigid, putting up a hand to ward her off. "No," Beecher tells her. "Just...no. 'Cause I am NOT going to stop, so you better let me go, maybe: McManus's job transfer thing, right? Been exempt long enough. People'll start thinking I have special privileges, or something."

She frowns, confused. "You're quitting?"

Beecher gives her a shaky smile. "Hey, any monkey can learn Lotus, you take the time to teach him. I'll go half-days, train my replacement; how's that for a severance package? One-time-only offer, Sister."

Thinking: 'Cause...I don't think you want to be around me anymore, not when I'm like this. And much of an asshole as it obviously makes me, I damn well know I don't want to be around YOU.

She looks at him; he looks away, anywhere but—trembling still, yet calmer. 'Till: "Is that really what you want?" she asks, at last, sadly.

Adamant: "Yes."

Seeing the unspoken reply plain in her eyes, as he says it: Then God help you, Tobias Beecher. Right up until the day you finally learn to stop whining over your wounds, get the fuck off your branded ass, and help yourself.

(Ah, Sister.)

Well, God help me indeed, Beecher thinks. Why not? Need all the back-up I can get, these days, and I'll take it where it's offered, even from a tumor. Assuming the cancerous son-of-a-bitch even exists at all.

***

In the infirmary, meanwhile, Chris Keller runs his mop back and forth across the floor and watches the action from the corner of one dark eye: that Hispanic orderly passing drugs to his clientel, and accepting payment on the sly; Dr Nathan, chart in hand, catching Ryan O'Reilly's gaze through the
glass and bustling off like she just remembered something she forgot, while the Irishman sidles after. Took him a little while to twig to that particular soap opera subplot, what with O'Reilly keepin' it so quiet, but proximity is a bitch when it comes to secrets, as even the self-elected Lord of the Dance must surely know.

So cute to watch them together, though—just like puppies, or something. Like...Beech and him, way back when. Way, way back, now; Dark Age, Stone Age, Cretaceous Period. The Rise and Fall of the Roman fuckin' Empire. Ancient history, dead and gone, ashes to ashes—

dust to dust.

Their "courtship period", he guesses some outside observer might have called it: the chess-playing, joke-telling, confidence-sharing portion of the evening. And wrestling, too, here and there, to relieve a bit of the built-up tension; pinning Beech to the ground just to feel him squirm, an elbow in the flat of his back, snuffling his body's hot fragrance. Staring down at that pale, gold-furred—nape—of his, all sweaty under Beech's slicked-up hair...and wanting, desperately, to sink his teeth where Vern Schillinger's had already been. Sink them in and lock on tight, deep enough to leave a mark that'd last long after their mutual former "master" was giving Satan the one-armed salute in Hell.

Half-hard then, just thinking about it, though careful not to let it show. And fully so, now, just remembering.

Movement at the door: Aryan heir apparent Fritz Duchene, reassigned after the post office burned down, arriving to pick up today's garbage along with a far more costly package, wrapped deep in blood-soaked bandages—O'Reilly's latest heroin shipment, ready for distribution, with the Brotherhood unwittingly doing his dirty work. Duchene catches Keller's eye, and shooting him the high sign, and Chris smiles back, thinking: Yeah, yeah...nice to see you too, moron. Now go vandalize a mosque or something, and let me get back to the task at hand.

That task, of course, being to figure out how best to use his time alone with Beech before Vern gets out of the Hole, and everything goes back to—normal. Like that word and Vern's name should ever be used in the same sentence.

Chris pauses, mid-sweep, and feels that weird little tickle again: a spasm of jealousy, narrow and green as O'Reilly's eyes, twisty as his lying tongue. Just like the other day, back in the mess hall, watching Beech's cheek brush Vern's as he leaned to murmur something in his ear, while everyone around them whooped and hollered at the old Nazi's discomfort; rapist and rape-ee, dancing around each other like some dysfunctional old married couple. And Beech, pumping out that cold, strange, sexy cripple vibe of his, every move a study in contemptuous seduction. Hooking his cane over the back of his chair and eating a banana from the bottom up, like he was giving it a fuckin' full-contact blowjob, while Vern shifted in his seat...then biting the shaft in half, and grinning at the way it made him cringe.

Keller, too, truth (whatever that is) be told. Wanting Beech to look at him that way, hatred and all, so long as it potentially got Keller a chance to feel those lips on his unpeeled fruit...and wondering why Vern never had, even back when Chris was the one playing wife. So jealous, obviously. But of who?

Keller casts his eyes to the wet floor, bites his own lips shut. Knowing well how he already knows the answer, to both questions—intimately, one might say. Much as he might wish he didn't.

***

On the other side of Dr Nathan's office door, meanwhile:
Ryan O'Reilly knits his fingers in the silky mass of Gloria Nathan's dark, dark hair and gasps, head thrown back in a neck-straining arc—jaws apart, the scar on his chin deformed by the rictus of his own ecstasy. Eyes rolled 'till they show only white. Hips thrusting, a runaway machine. Thinking, as near to incoherence as his nefarious mind can ever get: Oooow, JeeeeeEEEEEEEZ—

Then spurting hard and boiling hot, like some Yellowstone Park geyser; feeling Gloria's mouth, her...glorious, glorious mouth...nursing him down again. That teasing, velvet tongue spreading white light through every nerve, teeth scraping back towards his tip like the condom isn't even there and milking him just beneath the flange of his aching cock. Her throat working, pressed up against the baby-smooth skin of his vulnerable inner thigh, where the femoral artery lurks; pumping seed from him, some black magic trick in action—more and more with every mimed swallow, without ever seeming to drain him dry. It's like he's died and hasn't gone to Hell, like he'd die gladly, over and over, to even dream of feeling what he's feeling now. And like he'd kill—

(already HAS killed)

—would tear any stupid motherfucker who got in his way apart with his bare fuckin' hands and bathe in his hot red blood, just to feel it again.

Vaguely, Ryan realizes he's forgotten to breathe--so he takes a long, shuddering gulp of air, lets slip one last, thin moan. And whispers: "Oh, Gloria, angel...pinch me, will ya? 'Cause there's no way this is real."

And: You got THAT right, you son-of-a-bitch, Dr Nathan thinks, as she forces herself to look back up at him—and smile.

"Ryan," she says.

"...angel."

"Do you want to touch me?"

Watching his green eyes widen at the very idea. Hearing him moan again, in answer—more of a groan, actually: oh, yeah. 'Cause she damn well knows he does.

Thinking: Same way I want to touch you, Ryan—to glut myself with your skin, your mouth, your hands. Feed this desire I can't get rid of, until we both think we're going to explode. And then...

And then, I'm gone, because I can be. While you...you get to stay right here. And THINK about it.

Gloria slips the lab coat from her shoulders, slowly, as though it were a piece of silk lingerie, and unbuttons the front of her practical, durable, washable cotton-blend shirt, revealing a similarly plain white cotton bra: high-cut cups, scalloped lightly with lace. Knowing the mere, stark contrast between the bra's whiteness and her brown satin skin will be enough to make him instantaneously hard once more. Knowing she could be wearing a bullet-proof vest, and he'd have exactly the same reaction.

Slowly, as though afraid she may evaporate at any moment, Ryan stretches out his hands to span her breasts with delicate care, fingers fanning lightly over each cinnamon-colored mound. Digging his thumbs beneath the clasp in front, and applying just enough pressure to pop it apart, freeing her (fairly limited, in her own opinion) hidden assets: A double handful, topped with two yearning chocolate peaks. At the sight of them unleashed, he slips from the chair with a cry, burying his face in her neck, and Gloria feels her whole body clench against him, a rush of sudden moisture soaking her panties through—the same instinctual response she's fought so hard and failed so miserably to
conquer, all these long nights since Tim first told her that the cops had finally found her missing...

(ex)

...husband Preston's—dead—body. Cyril O'Reilly's work, by Ryan O'Reilly's command; foolish empathy gone very, very wrong, with Preston left to pay the price for something he didn't even know she'd ever done. Which was to be stupid enough to feel sorry for Em City's resident Machiavel in the first place, only to see her best intentions violated with an ease that still makes her skin crawl...willfully misinterpreted in a way that showed her, head-on, the deepest, darkest, most hidden parts of herself.

Ryan's trying to kiss her now, blindly seeking for her lips and tongue as she avoids him at every turn, allowing him nothing closer than her chin, her cheek, her throat—nothing more intimate than her nipples burning his palms, one hand fishing him clear of his fly and jerking upward, peeling the used condom free. Tossing him a fresh one (more medical sleight of hand) and waiting, silent, while he fumbles with it; hiking her skirt up, waist-high, to show him the damp and shiny folds, the opening cleft, that stiff and tender pearl which tops her unshelled oyster.

Falling further, face-first. Lapping and rooting, roles reversed, as his hands slip beneath her, cupping, gripping—breasts abandoned, momentarily, for the springy cheeks of her ass, the long muscles of her thighs. And the awful pleasure of it, spiralling upwards, radiating out: husking her brain, making her struggle not to lose this slippery thread of dreams, memories, plans...

The day she first diagnosed Schillinger's carpal tunnel syndrome, that's when she decided. Yet another "chance" meeting, patently staged to get Beecher within range of his tormentor; O'Reilly, hard at work on yet another scheme, with lies and murder gleaming at the heart of every move. She'd eavesdropped on the ensuing conversation while remembering her own words to Tim, after Ryan's confession bought Preston's killer over the rainbow and into Emerald City's welcoming gates: No one will ever love me the way that Ryan O'Reilly loves me. And I'm going to have to live with that...for the rest of my life. That then leading, in turn, to her eventually confronting him, still crouched behind “his” screen: Ryan...we have to talk. But talk had never really been her primary aim; the very least of it, in actual fact.

They'd given him more time after Preston's murder, of course, as though that meant anything. Life on top of life: so fucking what? He's alive, either way. And no, she and Preston hadn't been together at the time; yes, she'd wanted a separation, possibly a divorce. Had wondered, increasingly, what her life might be like with no Preston in the picture at all. But none of that meant she'd wanted him—

(dead)

...had it?

God, God, God. Still silent in the face of everything, leaving her to draw her own conclusions.

I SAVED you, O'Reilly, she thinks. I held you when you cried. And you, for the sake of a little human comfort, a restrained sexual thrill—a mere moment's shiver of flesh against death, understanding in the face of mortality—you ruined my life.

Infected with lust for a man she can never condone wanting, or brand herself a murderer by proxy. She can't ignore him; she's tried. Can't distract herself with fantasies, or sate herself with alternatives—poor, equally screwed-up McManus, for example. So now...

...we go the other route, Dr Nathan thinks, colder than she can ever remember feeling, for all her reckless sexual heat. And we keep to it, as far as it goes, before the road finally splits. Before I go on
to exile, back to my chilly protests about “why I became a doctor,” and you stay here in Hell—
finally deprived enough to actually start suffering, for once.

Shoving Ryan back off with a wrench now, his tongue unplugging her—an aching absence. And
squatting up onto him instead, quickly, his blunt, latex-wrapped head sliding to lodge against her
entrance. Teasing him with the touch of her, the slick liquid give: You want this, Ryan? Ohhhh, yes. I
know; me too. What would you do, though, exactly—given the chance—to get it?

(But then: they both know the answer to that one.)

So she forces herself downward, lips finding his at last: a biting kiss, a sting, more bitterly
intoxicating than mead made from poisoned honey. Drunk with the irony of it, using her own body
as an inescapable trap. The lie, and the truth, that forms the pattern for her revenge on Oz's liar king
—a lie made from truth. Always the best kind.

Thinking, as she does: And I learned that...from YOU.

"Angel," he whispers once more, into her mouth, while thrusting, gasping, hand burrowing
frantically between them, strumming her sparking clit; Devil, she thinks back. And closes her eyes, as
they—both—explode on contact.

***

FOURTEEN

Three more days pass, slowly: The numbing, "normal" routine of Oz, further exacerbated by
Christopher Keller and Tobias Beecher's equally "normal" little dance of proximity—shaving, teeth-
brushing, relieving themselves. Toby updating his notes on Cyril O'Reilly's appeal, or giving Cyril
himself excruciatingly close-quarters, excruciatingly slow chess lessons; Chris going slowly nuts
from trying not to act on the various impulses which Beecher's teasing presence provokes in him: Not
scope him out, not brush up against him as they jostle for the john. Not grab him, throw him up
against the wall, and yank his chain 'till the two of them think they're gonna come blood.

'Cause...you gotta be subtle, right? he thinks. Can't just jump on a guy—'specially when the guy in
question's a sexually-gunshy, easily-startled mixture of overcivilized dweeb and feral concubine, as
likely to bite the hand that strokes him as he is to lick it, purr, kiss you so deep and sweet and hard
you're about to pop in your shorts like some sixteen-year-old with his first taste of pussy...

(Okay, stop it, Chris. RIGHT fuckin' now.)

...but—Jesus!

Keller clenches his teeth, remembering the stolen pleasures of five months earlier, culminating in that
all-too-brief, semi-public laundry-room clinch: a litany of potentialities, never shared, lost before they
had a chance to spark anything more than a few hot dreams. While remembering, also—from the far
less distant past—dragging Beecher's hooch-slack body through the pod door after evening count,
heaving him face-down across the bottom bunk just as the lights went out only to pause there,
panting, mesmerized by that casually-revealed strip of gold-furred flesh between where the tail of
Beech's t-shirt had ridden up and the waistband of his prison-issue pants. Those compact,
surprisingly broad shoulders, usually slumped in misery or knotted with repressed tension; those half-
spread legs, that spine. That—nape.

Man, I really got some kind of fetish about that NAPE.

And thinking, gripped to the core by a rush of lust so intense it shocked even him (Chris Keller, sex
machine supreme, able to get it up on command for anything animal, vegetable, mineral, Aryan, whatever): Oh Toby, baby. If I only had the time—and the lube—I'd pull those tacky boxers off you with my teeth and show you just how much fun your ex-Yuppie ass can really be, when you're not gettin' forced to give it up for Adoph Hitler's love-child. Eat you for hours, long and slow; tease you 'til you arch and pant and beg me on hands and knees to reach inside, find that gland and give it a turn or two, or two hundred...then slide in to the hilt, a heartbeat at a time, and just—wait—for you to start humping back, whimpering, squalling. 'Til I get you groaning and gasping and calling me names, anything and everything you can think of, so long as it makes me move, thrust, for Christ's sake fuck you 'til you go off like Hiro-fuckin'-shima...with nothing left over for Vern Schillinger to plunder, ever again. And everything else—for us.

At the same time, though, hearing a mocking little voice in his head: That simple, huh, Chris? Good sex conquers all?

Well...sometimes. Most of the time.

(For ME.)

But this is Beech we're talking about, here, right? Same guy who deals with every little setback by falling head-first into the nearest addiction: booze, drugs, revenge. A real live guilt magnet, only happy when it rains; always gotta beat himself up about something, or find somebody else to do it for him.

You really wanna volunteer for THAT position, Chris? Wanna slip right in where Vern pulled out, and take sloppy seconds?

Standing there, lead-pipe-hard, while Toby snored on in drunken sleep—dreaming of pre-Oz life, maybe. Boardroom meetings and dinner parties, all blond and blue and boring, just another suit with glasses and a 'tude; kind of guy Keller'd cut behind on his bike, close enough to scratch his Beamer's bumper, and shoot the finger when he yelled out the window. A cell-phone-usin', ulcer-developin', mortgage-payin', secretary-marryin'—'cause that's what she was, that dead big-hair wife of yours, Chris'd lay even money on it—ball-less, sexless, hopeless little law-boy...brat.

An angry man, pretending to be calm; an unhappy man, pretending to love the rut he was stuck in. A strong man, pretending to be weak, to make everyone around him feel better.

No wonder you drank, baby—I would, too, that was MY life.

And never knowing, never guessing, never even able to conceive, in your wildest fuckin' nightmares: That one day, down here in Hell's butthole, you'd have guys fighting each other tooth and nail just to get a chance to make you blush and scream. Risking a beating, racking up more time, breaking your damn arms and legs to slow you down, show you who was boss. Courting perjury, injury, death, just so they could call you theirs.

But: that voice, again, ever louder. Ever more insistent. Reminding Chris: Beech is who he is, so get over it...and you, you're the guy who busted him up in the first place, inside to out, just 'cause the same fisheyed Nazi bastard who took both your cherries told you to. Really think you can fuck THAT away, no matter how desperately you want to? Faint fuckin' hope.

Yeah, I know. But—I can try, assuming I ever get a chance to.

So: Three (thankfully) Vern-deprived days into a projected month of same, with Schillinger stuck safely away inside the Hole—retching out those meds Dr Nathan's him on, and licking his self-inflicted wounds—while Keller jerks off every night to the sound of Beech breathing slow up above,
cramming the rest of his schedule with endless time-wasting routines. Keeps his dates with Fritz Duchene, who's devolving into a fairly okay drug dealer, then reports straight back to Ryan O'Reilly, whose hot "secret" affair with Dr Nathan apparently hasn't destroyed his desire to tear Vern's beloved Aryan Brotherhood down, brick by philosophical brick...and Vern along with it, one can only assume, once he gets released into population again. Which makes Chris's continued assault on Beecher's virtue just one more potential nail in the old Nazi's coffin—with O'Reilly, as Keller's only recently begun to realize, a willing collaborator in his matchmaking plans, what with Beech basically being the one thing of value Vern still "owns," these days...after the post office burning down, and all.

And here's the wily Irishman in question now, sprawled in front of the TV bank—looking up as though by accident, hitching his chin in Keller's direction. Like: Hey, asshole—that's Cyril comin' down the stairs, right? So where ya think Beecher is?

In—our—pod? Alone?

'Xactly. So get to skankin'.

***

A moment or so later, therefore, Beecher sees a shadow darken the pages of his latest legal text—and looks up, frowning. Only to ask, once he realizes who it is: "You mind?"

But Keller—who's leaning, arms crossed in that damnably...lithe way of his, against the pod's open door—seems utterly undeterred by such (apparent) lack of interest. Announcing instead, as he does, in a half-comic whining drawl: "I'm bo-o-o-o-red."


Keller makes a little moue of disappointment. "Hey, c'mon, Tobe—work with me here." With an insinuating grin: "I mean, not like you got a date for tonight..."

"Man. You just don't give up, do you?"

"Nope."

(All part'a my charm, ToBlas. Or so I been told.)

"I was just thinkin' we could go down to the gym, or something," he continues. "You do those exercises of yours; I spot ya." Voice dropping to a carnal murmur: "Hold your...weights." He punctuates this cheesy punchline with a swift, equally cheddariffic brow-waggle, which draws a snort of brief yet genuine amusement in return. "You really are—" Beecher starts to say, then stops; Keller steps in, filling in the blank. "Shameless?" he suggests.

"That'd be it, yeah."

After which they look at each other, both not quite smiling. For a moment—just a moment—it's almost like being back at the beginning of this whole twisted mess; Chris clowning for Toby's benefit, tempting the beast of Em City from its chosen cage, gentling him out of one of his fits of rhyme-spewing sarcasm. Like: Hey, Beech, don't let the dipshits get ya down, 'specially that Schillinger cocksucker. You know I got your back, though, huh? Wanna go wrestle?

...yeah, RIGHT.

"Thanks, but no thanks," Beecher tells Keller, coldly. "I kind of need my body left the way it is. Got
stuff to do." And goes right on back to his book.

***

And: Well, Keller thinks, it's a start. I mean, he's TALKING to me, at least...

'Sides which, if Nathan can forgive O'Reilly for getting her old man whacked—far enough to let him slip her the snake, if nothing else—then any damn thing must be possible.

***

A few more days after that, meanwhile:

Officially released from Sister Pete's care, Beecher finds himself down in the Gen Pop laundry with Cyril, all smiles and prattle between endless shipments of dirty official Oswald issue shirts, pants, socks, underwear. It's hard work, but bearable--especially for someone who craves exhaustion, distraction, wants to drift through the day in a steamy, detergent-scented dream. Because even that odor, inextricably linked as it is with flashes of Keller's wicked mouth, eyes, hands, smells better by far than the reek which boils from the inner landscape of Beecher's own conflicted, aching head.

As morning slips into early afternoon, however, he's sent off to get a bleach refill and—not knowing the area—gets almost immediately lost. Pausing to lean on his cane, panting slightly, Beecher hears footsteps approaching from behind, turns to greet their maker...then realizes, heart dropping, it's that lone remaining Vern-loyal Aryan, the guy with the lightning bolt tattooed on his naked scalp. The tall, extremely muscular, angrily _frowning_ guy with the lightning bolt tattooed on his scalp.

"Beecher!" this dude yells, no preamble. Adding, a mere second later: "You bitch."

Beecher smiles, straightens. Replies, sweetly: "That'd be me."

"Schillinger's in the Hole 'cause a' you."

Beecher considers this thesis for a second, musing: _Well...in a way, I guess, after all my hard work—but fuck it. And fuck YOU too, fishbelly._ Then: "Schillinger's in the Hole 'cause he tried to knock his Old Man's head in," Beecher returns, coolly. "And I don't remember ever having anything to do with _that_ little psychodrama."

The guy's frown deepens. "Think you're pretty smart," he says. "Don'tcha?"

Beecher, raising an eyebrow: _Comparatively?_

The blow—quick, hard, to the stomach—catches him entirely off-guard. Next thing Beecher knows, this dude's hauling him down the hallway in a headlock, half-lead and half-dragged. His head full of roaring noise, lungs decompressed and thinking, dazedly, to himself: _Well, this just gets better and better. First rape of the day, potentially, and it's not even someone I know._

More footsteps, then, approaching fast—a clatter of running boots. And Cyril, appearing up ahead, his long blonde hair come loose from its tie like a disordered mane. "Toby!" he yells. Then, to Bolt-head Boy: "You leave him _alone_, you—!"

(—bad, bad, bad-thing-doing man!)

Beecher feels his throat constrict further, as the hallway starts to reel around him. Hears the Aryan snap, dimly: "Get lost, retard!" And sees Cyril lower his head, fists white-knuckled—mild eyes flaring, suddenly, with the lingering remnants of some far less benign personality. He bares his teeth
convulsively, screaming back: "NO, YOOOOOUUU GET LOST!"

It's roar of pure bad-ass Irish street rage, so loud Beecher cringes...while the Aryan, even more surprised, simply takes off.

(Good move, guy.)

Beecher drops, head cracking against the floor; groans aloud, curling up. Sees Cyril looming in above him, voice returned to his "normal" hesitant lisp: "Sorry for talking bad, Toby."

Hoarse: "'Salright."

"You 'kay?"

"Oh, yeah...sure," Beecher replies, with effort. And blacks out.

By the time he wakes again, Ryan's already helping Cyril carry him through the infirmary door, past Dr Nathan, the orderly, various surprised staff and patients. Plus, over there in the corner—barely visible, a mere sleek shadow, swishing his mop—Keller. Then Cyril's dumping him down on a gurney, at Nathan's instructions; Ryan's making some kind of face at Keller over her shoulder, smeared past intelligibility by Beecher's myopia: up to something, obviously, but what? Nothing to do with him, he hopes...

(Or: Does he?)

Well, whatever.

Beecher leans back, stiffly, sighs into the needle's sting, and lets the painkiller sweep him away. A liquid pool of time, soothing him unconscious; rocking him fast asleep, down where all injuries turn to vague warmth, and there's nothing to guard against but dreams, bad or good, hot or otherwise...unless you're far too medicated to remember them, that is. The way Beecher's fast becoming, and happy to be so.

Just the way he likes it.

And then, so abruptly it's like some badly-spliced movie jumping from reel to reel, jailhouse epic turning to incipient porno in one quick jerk: resurfacing, all at once, to find his gurney parked in what looks like a deserted examination room—lights turned low, a screen set up between him and that pesky curtain-less window, with his remarkably recovered cock already up and pulsing against the fabric of his pants. While Keller, the chief cause of his discomfort, stares down at him from where he lies; full-length along Beecher's side, one leg atop his inner thigh. And looking far less predatory (for once) than just plain—intent—as he lightly traces the outline of Bolt-head Boy's fist, taking shape one bruisy finger at a time on Beecher's mottled abdomen.

Beecher clears his throat. "Hey."

Keller: "Hey."

That all-too-familiar hand, probing his wounds with wicked expertise. Trailing up through the detritus Vern's left behind, one barely-consensual encounter after another: bite-marks on his arms and shoulders, hickey clustered at the base of his throat like some plague-borne infestation, haematoma thumbprints on his hips and inside both knees; some purple-fresh, on top of the slightly older, brown-and-yellow variety. A litany of ownership, in other words, renewed daily. Keller touches one, gently, then points out his own Schillinger-given mementos—the ones still darkening his jaw, limning his proud nose. Flips his shirt-tail up to show Toby where his own stomach caught the brunt of Vern's
"attentions": a seam of sequestered blood, still tender enough to puff painfully against his waistband whenever he bends over. "Nice, huh?" he says, without any apparent irony. "'S like we match, or somethin'."

(Or...something.)

Beecher sighs again, before once more slowly voicing the old, old question—not that he expects a markedly different answer from the last time he asked it: "What do you want, Chris?"

Hearing the rote response in his head, even as he does: Well, what do I ever want, Toby? You damn, dim little—LAWYER, you.

But...that isn't what Keller says at all, actually. Just exhales through his nose, equally slowly, and replies, aloud: "I...want..." Then pauses, like he's searching himself for just the right words, the aptest phrase—some combination of syllables, picked almost at random, to best express this boiling morass he feels welling up inside. This tangled web binding them together, tight—and painful—as anything either of them's ever known before, four marriages notwithstanding: Desire and deception, trust, and treachery. Anger, affection. Hatred. Healing. Whatever leftover debt Keller thought he owed Vern, from back at Lardner (obedience for protection, like any other prag, payment required on demand), versus what Vern still owes them both.

"I want," Keller repeats. And knows, right then—a flash of sudden insight, laundry room-bright, and sweet as that first, booze-flavored taste of Toby's fresh-shaved lips: "...to say...I'm sorry."

Sorry I hurt you.

Sorry I let you kiss me.

Sorry I let you love me.

Sorry I—

(love)

"Sorry," Chris whispers again, softly...so softly, it's almost like he's saying it to himself...and hears Beech gasp at the sound of it, ragged and shallow, a half-swallowed sob. Feels his chest pulse under his palm, warm and strong; that patented Beecher flush, familiar as breath, spreading up under the dull gold fleece of belly, ribs, pecs. Drawn by the welcoming glow, Keller leans to press his face in the hollow of Toby's throat, inhaling sharply: smells musk, soap, a whiff of fear. That clean tang, even his sweat all milk-fed wholesome, undercut just slightly by a lingering hooch after-scent. Chris moans at the taste of it, muffled and moist, smothered by skin. Then gives that throbbing, stubbled Adam's apple a long, hot lick—and feels Beech's cock jump once, weeping anticipatory pre-cum tears, while his own clenches against his leg in helpless answer, instantly rigid.

Thinking: Ohhhh, yeah—DEFINITELY the right thing to say. Even if I really did mean it.

And Beecher, falling back, laid open. Gone limp, his bones like water—all slack and numb and singing with passion in Keller's Judas arms. Unable to gauge whether or not what Chris just said was bullshit; unable even to care. His whole body suffused with a single, manic word...the old Episcopelian schoolboy's fall-back, whenever things get a little too pleasurable for comfort: God, oh God. Oh God, God, Godddd...

...Jesus, Mary and Joseph, it's like I'm gonna come right here and now, before he's even DONE anything.
Feeling Chris peel his shirt up further, meanwhile, revealing the fresh tattoo over his nipple—still red-black, infected, a constant ache keeping the nub half-erect. And the rush of cool air, making it twitch, sending a thin jolt straight to Beecher's groin: A literally sick thrill, deepening his flush from sun-kissed pink to sunburn red.

"Man," Keller says, shaking his head. "That really is gross."

Beecher, hoarse: "...thanks a lot."

Then moans himself a second later, harsh and loud, as Keller swoops down to "soothe" the offensive mark with a wet, open-mouthed kiss, tongue laving gently, just shy of an outright suck. No thin jolt, this time; more like a thick, surging current, hips dancing as Keller roots between them, pops his fly, pushes down his waistband. Frees his trapped dick, already pre-cum-slick, all stiff and shiny in the examination room's dim glow.

"Nathan know about this?" Beecher suddenly demands, making a concerted effort to stay coherent. To which Keller simply replies, reaching down further: "...sorta."

"Uh, ugh..." Beecher breaks off as Keller thumbs the seam between his straining balls, hefting their delicate weight. Managing, after a minute more: "...she and Ryan, is there—something—going on? There?"

"Well...you should maybe ask him 'bout that, I guess." Adding in whisper, right in Beecher's ear, with an accompanying flick of tongue: "But later."

“...okay.”

Their hands twine, Chris kissing his way back down across Beecher's chest, his stomach—pausing slightly to rim Beech's navel, fast and hard, before applying much the same treatment he gave Toby's nipple to the head of his cock, and savoring the shocked reaction: that jackknife shudder, that full-body jerk. While Beecher hears himself groan, croon, bite his tongue against the urge to detonate without warning as Keller takes him right to the root and gulps like a dying man, mouth tight, jaw working. And liquid, lava-hot pleasure washes up in a wave, drowning every part of him, a tidal rush to climax...

But: that same damn voice, yammering on with same damn questions, never satisfied no matter HOW much internal debate he puts himself through, time and again: Ask yourself, Toby. How can you trust him?

(I can't.)

Then just trust THIS, this thing that feels so right, and nothing further—no personality, just flesh. Your body, his body. His body, on your body...

Passive beneath the weight of it, this fierce delight; pinned and splayed, just like he is beneath Chris's own weight. Passive, the way he always seems to end up, eventually—no matter who's on top.

Thinking: So how can I trust that, either? My body's a traitor. MY body'll respond to anything, anyone, even—

(Vern)

With the memory breaking in on top, hot and horrid; a mouthful of bile, a full-body retch, a pre-orgasmic spasm. His own words, echoing through blood and bone, forever: I ALWAYS knew it!
Oh, shit, though: What the hell does it matter, then, anyway? If Beecher can feel sorry for Vern—feel, for Vern—all bets really are off. Even with Keller.

So: back again to Chris's wicked mouth, those smirking lips, that lying tongue—the teeth ringing Beecher's flange, scraping the cord along his underside. To Beecher's balls, creeping upward even as the voice gets ever louder, ever colder...

Like I said, DON'T trust him—just fuck him. I mean...

(...fuck him, Tobias.)

'Cause—THAT'd be different. Wouldn't it?

Beecher takes a long breath, settling into it—then grabs Keller by the ears, and hauls him loose. Hikes him upward, bodily, surprised by the strength in his own aching sinews; locks eyes, light blue on dark. And tells him, firmly: "I'm gonna fuck you, Chris."

That fucking smirk, all he gets by way of reply. Which, in turn, sends a growl rumbling up through Beecher, so deep it sounds almost (scarily) Vern-like. Makes him thrusts a knee under Keller's hip and wrestles him over, face-down, the gurney protesting—bending Keller's arm behind his back and plastering himself full-length along the taller man's spine, forcing those lean thighs apart; grinding himself into Chris's ass, planting his own hot kiss on the back of Chris's neck and biting in, hard enough to wrench the skin. Shaking him like a mother cat shakes her kitten.

Keller, muffled: "Shit, Beech!"

Thought I was joking, huh? Beecher thinks, with grim satisfaction. Well—not so much. Then orders, voice raw: "Just shut the fuck up...and take your fucking pants down, too." Without wasting time on protests, Keller humps up far enough to unzip and slides himself free, shucked pants pooling around his calves, trapping him like cloth shackles; looks painful, not that Beecher gives much of a shit, at this point. He's too busy staring at Keller's naked butt, never having actually seen one (a guy's, at least) from this angle—besides which, Keller's got one nice-looking ass, all told: Round, firm, vulnerable. Nicer than Beecher's, that's for sure, even without all the creative enhancements...though he guesses Vern might disagree, on that point.

"Use spit," Keller suggests. To which Beecher snaps back: "You do not get to tell me what to do, Chris."

"Look, I'm just sayin'—you ain't with Vern, that's all. Okay?"

Fierce: "You think I think I am?"

To this, Keller just huffs, quietly—and spreads his thighs further, back hollowing. Giving Beecher a highly accommodating view of just where to stick tab A, if he ever gets around to it...

And: Oh, so. Going about this a bit too SLOW for your tastes?

All right.

Beecher takes himself in hand, milking a fresh stream of precum, smears it all over then sets his head against that winking target, and repeats the process. Feels Keller hump higher, grind back slightly, testing the waters; spreading himself around Beecher's dick until the dilating ring, opening like some flower made of muscle, threatens to swallow him whole. Looking back, eyes sultry, over his folded arms. And inquiring, silkily: "You gonna wait 'till Nathan comes lookin' for us, or what?"
"Maybe I won't do it at all, you don't zip it," Beecher retorts—half-trapped already, and considerably more than half-shocked by the sheer heat of Keller's insides, lapping at him like some tiny, toothless mouth. But: "Yes you fuckin' well will," Keller purrs back. And reaches around with both hands, too quick for Beecher to react, pulling him in by the hips—forcing Beecher's cock deep inside him, with an ease that makes him cry out aloud: so hot, so tight, so alien.

(If this is what Vern feels...)

Beecher doesn't want to go anywhere near that particular observation, though, not really. Not with Chris's words from their pas-de-deux in Sister Pete's office already returning, like a landslide: You, Toby-baby, would abso-fuckin'-lutely LOVE it. As Beecher thinks, in disbelieving response: Oh Keller, oh Chris—

—you, YOU...are SO fuckin' right.

Jammed together now, and falling face-first into a rhythm older than time; it's Beecher ostensibly doing the fucking but Keller most definitely setting the pace, continually forcing Beecher to ride him further, faster, harder. And both of them grunting, gasping, gaping wide and whining with the building ecstasy of it all, Toby into Chris's shoulder, Chris into his own bicep; Beecher plumbing Keller's depths, hitting his spot, while Keller plays squeeze and release on Beecher's sore, swollen, close-to-splitting dick until—until—they collapse, Beecher hugging onto Keller for dear life, spewing deep as Chris grinds to his own release on the sweat-slick steel beneath them both. And panting, heart a jazz drum solo taken to its most illogical extreme, thumping through Keller's back and into his own chest like some double image made flesh...

A long, long pause follows. Into which Keller eventually says, with genuine admiration: "Wow. I guess you really CAN fuck a guy's brains out."

But all this provokes is another long pause, after which Keller feels Beecher, still lodged on top (and partially inside) of him, begin to shudder. No noise, no words—just few hot drops on the back of his neck. A general...trembling. While Keller lies there, wondering: Is he—? Could he actually be—crying?

Reaching back again, then—gently, this time. Taking hold of Beecher's gold-furred arms, and locking them tight around himself, as he whispers: "Oh, baby, sssh. It's all right, baby. I'm here."

With Beecher snuffling, hot face buried between Chris's shoulderblades, and Chris, not letting go—just locking Beech's square little hands in his, forming fists against the world, continuing to comfort him: Oh, sssh, sssh. Sssh, Toby, baby. It's all right, now; gonna BE all right, no matter what.

Because...

(....I'm here.)

***

Afterwards, they're both replete, practically levitating; they drift through the rest of the day, barely speaking, barely touching. Not needing to. Until—after lockdown—Beecher's at the sink, reaching for the toothpaste, when Chris's hand suddenly appears on his: dark on light, fingers encircling his wrist firmly, a pair of flesh handcuffs. And then they're falling on each other, kissing hard, both equally shameless now: humped up against the back wall of the pod with everyone within range watching, out there in the darkness—all those prying eyes, avid, amazed. Aroused, some of them; some disgusted, or amused. But Beecher and Keller are far past caring about any of that, at all.

Later, lying together on the bottom bunk with one eye kept out for hacks, even as Chris's hands roam possessively all over Beecher's wrung-out body, Toby murmurs, quiet, into his ear: "Chris—"
"Uh huh?"

A beat, then: "Nothing."

Keller folds him closer, marvelling at the beat of his breath, the pulse at his throat, that scratchy gilt hair, that smell. All his, and consensually too, amazingly enough—for now, at least.

(But: If Vern was here...)

Yeah, yeah. And if things were different, they wouldn't be the same; if my aunt had nuts, she'd be my uncle. Point is, he's NOT here...not for a long, long time to come. And then—

—well. Then...we'll just have to see.

Keller preens just a tad, if only inside his head, enjoying those fabled spoils. While Beecher, in turn, tucks his head into the space between Keller's jaw and shoulder, curling 'round him like a cat, or a fetus, or a fetal cat. Thinking, as he does—

This thing with Keller, the culmination of all that explosive sexual tension...when all's said and done, though it still gets (and keeps) Beecher harder than he's ever been, it remains a distraction, nothing more. Not so much different from getting blind drunk to avoid thinking about Vern—though it sure does beat the hangover. And better yet, it'll help him work.

Because...he really did love Keller, he can only assume, once upon a time. But now he just doesn't—and he never will again.

Luck of the draw, Beecher guesses; a professional hazard, proved once again. When Keller told him he loved him too, he believed it as gospel. And when Keller refuted that claim—in the gym, his arm around Vern, best buddies laughing hard at Beecher's expense—well, that was when Beecher lost his newfound faith...and he hasn't regained it since.

(Not that he's been looking all that awfully hard, mind you.)

Simple, animal pleasure: A cheap and perfect method of stress relief for Beecher to rely on, long as it doesn't interfere with his agreed-upon plans for revenge and retribution. But Chris, poor bastard—Chris actually thinks it means something more, or wants to, at least. Very, very badly. Which, in a way...

...is the best revenge that Beecher ever could have wanted.

***

This, then, is how Beecher and Keller pass their time together, what little time they have left: almost one month, exactly, to Ryan O'Reilly's personal D-Day—or V-Day, to be more accurate. The day Vern Schillinger finally gets out of the Hole...and everything, everywhere, for everyone involved...

...falls apart within a matter of hours, like a glass pinata stuffed full of shit.
Chapter 10

FIFTEEN

This, then, is how it all goes down: a month in the Hole, followed by release back into Gen Pop; the last temptation of Vernon Schillinger, rejoined already in progress. Self-crucifixion, Aryan Brotherhood style—one final chance to prove, publicly, that he does not actually have "loser" written all over him, plain as the fresh new growth of hair on his unshaved head. To break this goddamn downward cycle he seems stuck in, once and for all...or die trying.

He hears a key in the lock, now—a whole day early—and rises to greet his chosen escorts: C.O. Karl Metzger himself, Vern's former co-conspirator, backed up by that nigger hack who got kicked in the head during that whole visitor's room meltdown fiasco. The latter glaring sidelong, his expression reminding Vern irresistibly of the similarly (shall we say) non-melanin-challenged cop who got his ass thrown in Lardner; same guy took one look at Vern's tats, and decided a righteous bar brawl over whether or not some Mick/Wop/Spic/WhatEVER motherfucker had stepped to him wrong suddenly seemed more like a fuckin' hate crime. Only real case of reverse discrimination Vern'd ever come across, right there, not that anyone involved would ever admit it—two whole extra years tacked on for wearing your ideals on your arm, where everybody can see, 'stead of hiding them under your shirt like a good little closet Nazi. Like some other people Vern could mention.

Case in point...Metzger, who steadfastly refuses even to meet Schillinger's (one good) eye, like he's afraid of being contaminated. Him having to report back to Fritz Duchene, after all; Vern's old protege, now lording it over the rest of Em City's swastika brigade. Talk about an all-too-visible sign of serious downward motion.

So how's it feel, Karl? Vern thinks. Having to set up some degenerate, dumb-ass little white-boy wannabe gangsta as your glorious racial separatist crusade's figurehead, just 'cause there's no one else left to fit the bill?

(You cow-brained, shit-spined, barn-sized son of a bitch.)

Ignoring Metzger, Vern dresses quickly, ticking down the various items on his latest mental list. On the plus side, he's finally detoxed from Dr Nathan's drugs, brain once more blessedly clear and running on pain alone, the best kind of fuel; on the minus, however, this clarity only makes it all the more obvious just how far everything around him has fallen to crap. No post office, so no tract distribution system. Duchene, that idiot's idiot, dragging the whole A.B. to Hell in a handbasket right along with him; Ryan O'Reilly breathing hard down all of their backs and working his revenge with the same effort Duchene usually keeps reserved strictly for either kissing ass or jerking off. Besides which...

...just where the hell are these cocksuckers taking him, anyway? He didn't know better, he'd think it was—Warden Glynn's office.

(Well. And isn't this just precious.)

Glynn behind the desk, trying to look all important, while McManus lurks by the window. And barking, without preamble, as Vern walks in: "We got shipments of heroin have been coming into Em City, Schillinger—much larger than normal, and way too pure. Tim's had seven overdoses already."

"Yeah?" Vern jerks his head in McManus's direction. "Surprised he's still up and kicking."
"PRISONER overdoses."

"Huh, 'course." A pause. "So?"

Glynn looks at McManus. Who explains, like Vern's some idiot child: "The Mafia bring it in, through Nappa these days; we've known that for years, though we've never been able to prove it. Now, however, we have reason to suspect that the distribution end may have been taken over by your boys."

And: Jan and Cory? Vern's mind spasms, momentarily. Then, connecting the dots: Ohhh...you mean the BROTHERHOOD. This almost immediately followed by yet another revelation that hits him fist-first, a low blow straight to the gut; Duchene, that fuckin' motherfucker. But denying it out loud even so, snapping back automatically: "The hell you say?"

McManus, to Glynn: "See? I told you he wouldn't know anything."

Glynn sighs. "Yeah, you did."

(Oh, and just talk about me like I'm not even here, why don't you.)

Vern feels his bad hand clench, hard; looks over at Metzger, who now seems to be making a fairly serious study of the planet Mars. Catches the nigger C.O.'s gaze instead, practically snickering at him behind his palm, and finds himself lit from within by a sudden stab of rage so strong it threatens to turn him inside-fuckin'-out. So he forces himself to transfer his attention back to Glynn and McManus, before he does something he regrets—something that'll get him slung right back in the Hole, after a mere ten minutes of "freedom". And says, carefully: "Aryans...do not push drugs."

"Not YOUR Aryans."

This from McManus, deceptively mild—that semi-retard look of his in full effect. Like, hey: Nothing personal, right? Just stating the obvious. 'Cause you are NOT actually king White Power shit around here, anymore, Vernon. As we—

(both)

—and know.

That surge again, gripping him and shaking, an invisible, full-body fist; McManus's face haloed in corneal scar, leaking light—reduced, if Vern squints just right, to a mere smeary caricature: bald, bearded, peering. Meaningless. But: Fuckin' STOP that, Vern tells himself, firmly. Knowing he'll probably need every ounce of objectivity he can muster, one way or another, before today is through.

"All right, Schillinger," Glynn says, finally. "You can go."

Vern: "Now, hold on just a—"

"I said, you can GO."

So—go, already. You over-the-hill, flabby, one step up (and maybe not even that much, anymore) from an outright fuckin' faggot...loser.

Vern draws himself up, full height; returns, frostily: "My pleasure." And slams from the office, the black hack trailing him, stalking away towards the Gen Pop showers, while Metzger turns and takes off, with uncharacteristically brisk stride—
—right in the opposite direction.

***

Down in the kitchen, meanwhile—inside the same supply closet where Peter Schibetta and Adebisi once did their dance, before being hauled off to Ad Seg and the Hole, respectively—Ryan O'Reilly hoists Dr Nathan onto him by her hips, provoking a gasp which runs through them both like a cracked whip. Amazed she's actually here, down in HIS domain: this echoing steel tank, crammed full of canned goods and boxes of plastic cutlery, where even the walls smell of garbage, ratshit and rancid margarine. And equally amazed, to be frank, that she's with him, on him, at all...actually letting him back inside of her yet once again, let alone (from all apparent evidence) enjoying the experience...

Feeling her internal muscles clamp down on him, like wet, raw silk. Feeling her tongue trace his scar, and groaning aloud as he whispers, helpless: "Oh, Gloria—"

(my angel)

Until: everything leading up to this one perfect moment just, suddenly—boils away, all at once, like a gush of steam, a bath for the soul, leaving him all pink and peeled and naked inside...emptied out, scoured clean...

While Nathan pauses too, panting, wracked by her own set of uncontrollable pleasure-shudders. Studying O'Reilly's face in extreme close-up, as the hand with the bleeding shamrock tattoo strokes the sweaty small of her back, cupping her tight; watching a film of pleasure pass across those narrow, snake-green eyes, render them momentarily harmless, calm, quiet. Almost innocent.

(Almost.)

But then the film lifts, separates—reveals the devious brain beneath, already revving inevitably back up to speed; plotting and planning, slipping and sliding. Manipulating allies and enemies alike like pieces on some mental gameboard: Em City, the home version. Fun for the whole family! Most especially the ones containing brain-damaged, highly suggestible little brothers, all too innocently willing to shore up their Machiavellian elder siblings' psychotic romantic attachments through carjacking, kidnapping, murder—

Staring deep into those eyes of his, Nathan would swear to God she can actually see O'Reilly filing the orgasm he just had away for further reference, while simultaneously projecting it into the future—already thinking about their next kiss, their next tryst, their next half-desperate coupling. A sick, all-consuming flood of desire, made all the sweeter both by constant threat of discovery and its own basic implausibility.

Because just look at me, Ryan, and then...look at YOU. Ever try and spread this story around after the fact, and whose version you think everyone's really going to be more likely to believe?

Kissing her neck now, peppering her cinnamon-colored cleavage with tiny bee-sting flicks—and oh, the sweet, moist trace of those thin lips, that mobile mouth. She can feel him smiling into her breasts, breath slowing, pulse returning to normal. Can practically HEAR him thinking it: next time, and the next, and the next...

As Nathan thinks back, coldly all the while: But—there isn't going to BE a next time, Ryan; not for you. Not ever again.

(Not for either either of us.)
And at almost the same time, back in Gen Pop:

Vern emerges from the shower, all freshly bald and buttoned-down, to find what looks like the entire A.B. roll-call (minus Duchene, rendered conspicuous by his very absence) lurking hesitantly around his cell door: Eyes downcast, arms crossed. Avoiding his gaze.

*(Oh, yeah—JUST what I needed.)*

Vern leans back a touch, taking up his old soldier's stance; at ease, but watchful. Draws a long, relaxing breath, then asks, voice dropping instinctively to its lowest, most authoritarian register: "This the 'welcome back' wagon, fellas? Or are you all just...really happy to see me?"

*I mean—didn't know you cared.*

More shuffling ensues, along with a seemingly endless silence. Until in the end, it's ol' bolt-scalped Luke Gorman, never one to fuck around, who begins: "Vern...we, uh—took a vote..."

A fuckin' VOTE.

(And when the fuck did this become a democracy, exactly, anyhow?)

Schillinger nods, slightly. "So you're—what? Throwin' me out?" Relying on their own memories, shaky though they might be, to tell them exactly how ridiculous the very idea is: throwing him out, of the Aryan fuckin' Brotherhood. HIM. Like that could ever even happen.

Vern feels a reckless sort of glee bubble up from deep inside, at the thought—a reeling, giddy pain, worse (by far) than glass in his eye, or anything his hand ever produced. Worse than getting your balls kicked and your face shit on, in public, by some guy you thought was too much of a natural whore to even bother worrying over; Tobias Beecher, your bitch-turned-'boyfriend'—that soft, overeducated, drunk-driving little Yuppie party favor—who worked his way back into your good graces, even after you got Chris Keller to cripple his pretty little ass, then topped you from below in front of the whole damn jail. Your property. Your enemy. Your wife.

*(And speaking of which, where IS Beecher, anyway? Off helping Duchene sell drugs, or sucking Keller's dick? Either's just as likely, I guess...)*

An incipient howl, marrow-buried, runs up and down Vern's body like a current; makes his hand sing, his bad eye dull and skew, his face—TWITCH. He can see Luke noticing, though trying not to, before adding, hastily: "I mean, it's nothin' personal, man. Just, you know..."

...you're a liability.

...a loose cannon.

...got more enemies than every other career bad-ass in Oz combined, which can't help but rub off on the rest of us, eventually. And to top it all off—you're a fuckin' faggot.

That same old song, again and again; that same damn word, and always in his Old Man's jeering voice. He heard it back in the Hole, mirroring his every thought. Heard it in the very depths of his despair, whenever he felt Beecher's phantom, comforting hand on the back of his neck and remembered, *remembered*—

But fuck it. Fuck it, and fuck these assholes, too: what are they gonna do, revoke his membership,
take away his keys to the neo-Nazi clubhouse? Gonna strike his name from the register, take him off all the mailing lists, and make sure Vern can never shave his head in public again?

...and ohhh my sweet Lord Jesus Christ, I really AM startin' to lose it...

But: Not—right—now.

So okay—let’s make a new list, how ’bout that? Item one: Get done with this bullshit. Two: Find Duchene, and tear him a new asshole. Three: Find Beecher. And Keller, maybe. And then...

Vern puts his head down, exhaling sharp through his nose: that huff they all know so well, the calm before the charge. "Luke," he begins.

Gorman: "Yeah, Vern?"

Another pause, followed by a truly disturbing smile—wide, bright, pleasant. Sort of like your Dad might give if he was contemplating cannibalism, or incest. And: "Your vote," Vern says, with deceptive sweetness, "can suck my fuckin' dick. 'Cause I QUIT." Adding, as the men around him gape: "And if the rest of you back-stabbing, drug-dealing, jizzball race traitor pussies don't like it—then I think you all know where to find me."

(Assuming you actually got the stones to want to do anything about it, that is.)

A moment or so later, after Vern's safely long gone, the crowd gives a general sigh—posturing and bravado, crossbred with a definite undertone of relief at not being forced to confront their former leader directly. As yet.

One of the other Aryans, to Gorman: "Think you should'a told him about Beecher?"

Gorman shoots him a look. And growls: "You wanna tell him, then go on ahead and do it, shit-for-brains. I fuckin' DARE ya."

***

In the Laundry, meanwhile:

"Where ya goin', Toby?" Cyril O'Reilly asks, plaintively.

Beecher, reminding him: "Bleach?"

"Oh, yeah." A pause. "Back soon, right?"

"Absolutely." Beecher replies, unslinging his cane from a nearby steam-pipe. And limps off, quickly, in the direction of the infirmary.

***

Up on the Em City deck—where "Mole" Busmalis, still on half-days while his small intestine recuperates from being multiply perforated during last month's mini-riot, is already laying out the checkerboard in anticipation of Bob Rebadow's return from work—Metzger finds O'Reilly, lurking (and sneaking a quick cigarette) near Keller and Beecher's pod, and taking the opportunity to thumb through Beecher's notes for Cyril's appeal as he does so. Announcing, with a long drag, as Metzger's shadow engulfs his: "Man, you ever see this much legalese in one place? Shit barely looks like English, that's for fuckin' sure."

"There's no smoking in Em City, O'Reilly."
O'Reilly licks two fingers, tamps the offending butt. And drawls: "Riiiight. No smoking, no fucking, no fighting...definitely no lookin' the other way while Duchene sells the brothaz enough dope to keep 'em sedated, just so's you two can perpetuate the Master Race in peace..."

"Shut up." As the Irishman smirks: "Schillinger's back, by the way."

"Not 'till tomorrow."

"Yeah, well, Glynn had questions; let him out early."

O'Reilly, rising: "He go after Beecher?"

The giant hack shrugs. "What else?"

But Ryan's already on the move, notes discarded, gesturing for Metzger to follow—which he does, reluctantly. Thinking: Way people bend over backwards to protect that little hooker, it's like his pasty lawyer ass shits gold bricks, or something...

Not that O'Reilly takes quite the same type of interest in Beecher that Vern does, of course; a simple business investment there, far as Metzger can work out. Just needs Beecher kept alive and in full working order, so he can get that retard brother of his off his back—and while Metzger can't quite sympathize (since, in his opinion, all mental cases should just be given a mercy shot straight to the back of the skull), he does understand. "You don't even know where Vern is, O'Reilly," he points out, as they reach the hallway.

But Ryan doesn't slow. Just throws back, over his shoulder: "Nope. But where's the first place you think he's gonna look?"

***

...Sister Peter Marie's office, first off. Where, even as Metzger and O'Reilly speak, Vern has just thrown open the door to reveal some guy he's never seen before—some fuckin' jungle-bunny, to boot—goggling up at him from Beecher's chair. "Hey, man," the coon blurts out, "ain't you that Schillinger motherfucker?"

(Well, I guess SO.)

Vern stands there glaring at the guy 'til he explains, helpfully: "You lookin' for Beecher, dude got transferred, 'bout a month back; works down in the laundry, slingin' shirts with O'Reilly—the dumb one, you dig?" As Vern turns: "But he ain't gonna be in there now."

Turning back: "And why not?"

The guy snorts. "Man, you just don't know shit around here anymore, do you?"

Vern feels his hands fist. And rumbles, dangerously quiet: "Nigger...I'm in no mood."

It's a cold wave of hate crashing up against Replacement Boy's cheerful 'tude, crushing it flat; the guy bristles, momentarily, like he wants to respond in kind, then notices Vern's eyes, and thinks better of it. Offering, instead: "'S in the infirmary. Always is, this time a' day."

"Somebody beat him up?"

Obviously hedging: "Not...exactly."

Vern leans forward, shoulders bunched with effort, to ask—both slowly and clearly: "Then
Thinking, to himself: And if you say what I think you're gonna say...well, I—genuinely do not know WHAT I'll do. At all.

A brief, breathless pause ensues. Into which the guy eventually replies, equally clear—

"...Keller."

—at the (fucking inevitable) sound of whose name, Vern takes off, surprisingly fast for all his bulk. Flat-out running.

***

Halfway down the hall behind him, O'Reilly and Metzger catch just a flash of movement—the back of Vern's shirt, going around the corner. As, behind them, an all-too-familiar voice calls out: "O'Reilly!"

It's McManus. Ryan turns, not bothering to look at Metzger, who drifts off, eerily quick and silent as ever; heading for the infirmary, where Gloria should already be re-ensconced, but—isn't, obviously. 'Cause—

(the fuck?)

—there she is, right now, standing by McManus's side; McManus frowning, his lips pursed under that straggly little goatee of his. Trying hard to front, like usual, and getting exactly nowhere—eyefucking Ryan the way a drunk first-timer busts cherry, while Ryan's own eyes stay helplessly locked on Gloria's...Dr Nathan's...utterly unsmiling, unwelcoming, unfamiliar face. So startlingly different from the woman he was just with, a scant half-hour previous, that it's like some badly-made human skin mask: a portrait drawn by Cyril, in crayon, with one hand tied behind his back.

Trying, silently, to raise some spark of recognition from her liquid black gaze, some tiny acknowledgement of who he is, what he is...to her...

(Guy who loves you, angel. Who'd die for you, kill for you—)

Would, and did. And would again, she only cared to ask, in a New York fuckin' minute.

Plan at risk, Ryan, he reminds himself, desperately trying to force his mind back onto the topic at hand. Five months of work, possibly washing away down the drain RIGHT NOW, even as we speak; all those under-the-table deals with Keller, and Duchene, and Metzger. And—

(Beecher)

While Schillinger plummets straight into the middle of this minefield Ryan's labored so long and hard to create, primed and ready to blow, with nothing to contain his potentially deadly impact but Metzger. Who can not be trusted, any more than anyone else can be, unsupervised...not even when you're the Lord of the fuckin' Dance.

But: trying, and failing. Just like he's failing here, with her—while McManus repeats, from somewhere very far away indeed: "O'Reilly, I've cautioned her against this, but...Dr Nathan has something she wants to tell you."

Ryan, hoarse: "...uh huh?"
Cut to—

***

—the infirmary: that same examination room, behind their usual screen. Where Beecher, already primed for Keller's approach, hears noise from behind and turns, smiling—to find Vern, instead, right there. **Staring** at him.

Clean-shaved and close-cropped, his dull gold hair almost sleek: Beecher's got what must be a new pair of glasses on, dimming his myopic blue eyes back down to normal. And looking, for all the world...well, sane, stable, **respectable.** Happy, even. Not to mention **so** much like Rachel, frankly, it makes Vern's teeth hurt just to see him.

Beecher, hoarse: "Thought you weren't back 'till tomorrow."

"Yeah," Vern says. "Me too."

Grabbing Beecher by the shoulders, then, before he has any time to object; crushing their bodies together and kissing him passionately, right on the mouth—all hot tongue, wet lips, devouring teeth. A wild, desperate, breathless kiss, filled with emotions far too deep and conflicted to sort, let alone translate. And Beecher—too stunned to do much more than fold, automatically, into the older man's tight embrace—feels himself rouse, nevertheless, in a way he's never done before...with Vern, at least; not even—that one time.

Vern hears himself make an inarticulate sound into Beecher's mouth, half-growl, half-sob, before just...letting him go. After which they stare each other down, still winded, 'til Vern gets back enough breath to speak before finally saying, his eyes kept tight on Beecher's face: “You...cheating. **Fucking. LITTLE. CUNT.**”

*(Oh crap.)*

Beecher opens his mouth, perhaps to explain, or at least to try—just as Vern hauls off, and punches him full in the face.

*(WHOMP!)*

Neck-crack, sharp, to the left; Beecher's glasses fly off, hit the wall and splinter on impact, sound like a gunshot in this tiny room. Glass sprays, narrowly missing them both. Vern, toneless: "Oops."

And: "You," Beecher says, through a mouthful of blood; spits on the floor between them, bright red. Then repeats, louder: "...you fucking, fuckin'..." Rising to a scream, now—so long-deferred, it sounds like a whole world of self-inflicted misery splitting apart at once— "...fucking FUUUUUUUUCK YOOOOOU!"

—before hauling off himself, at last, and hitting Vern back.

***

Back outside Sister Pete's:

"We won't be seeing each other again, O'Reilly," Dr Nathan tells Ryan, slowly, under McManus's wary gaze. “Because—”

—I've put in my request for a transfer.
Like telepathy. Like osmosis. Like he can't even remember hearing the words, just feeling them. Feeling them in his blood, his bones; his heart, so suddenly cold, a ticking frozen bomb—and wanting to puke, chemo-hard. Wanting to fall down and die, right there in front of McManus, in front of Oz. In front of the whole fuckin’ world.

"I put it in," she continues, eyes on his. "A month back. And—"

A month back. So back in the infirmary, behind the screen...even back the, she'd already known. Right when she'd emerged, breathing the words that unlocked paradise: Ryan...we have to talk.

"—they granted it."

And: *Oh my God,* he thinks, so far beyond amazement it isn't even funny. *Holy Jesus fuck. O'Reilly, baby—YOU got PLAYED.* Not knowing who he's angrier at, her or himself, for falling for it. The liar king, the great manipulator, manipulated to a fuckin' fault—a fault-line, a crevasse, a crack to the centre of the world. One-way elevator to Hell, goin' down!

All pain, and rage, and misery, everywhere he looks: no light, no hope, no love, no fuckin' nothing. Just a plunge straight down, into the dark; down into Oz itself, surely the beating fucking heart of darkness. That black heart, where he now knows—parole in twelve, fifteen, twenty-five, *fifty* or not—that he WILL stay now, entombed, alone and unmourned...forever.

***

In the infirmary:

Vern’s nose squishes flat under Beecher's fist with a satisfying, cartilaginous crack, blood gouting down onto his upper lip as Toby pauses, amazed by his own actions; hugs his bruised knuckles to him and watches Vern touch the blood, gently. Dab it from his lip; smell it. *Taste* it. With Beecher thinking all the while to himself, wreathed in a certain unearthly calm: ...and now—he actually *IS* going to have to kill me. For real, this time.

Vern looks at him, eyes narrowed. Confirming: "You know I'm gonna *kill* you for that, right? Like I should'a that time, in the gym—"

*Yeah, yeah, yeah. Just figure that one out, huh?*

Beecher's scalp pricks, hair beginning to rise as Vern continues, conversationally gentle: "And you know what else, sweetpea? I'm gonna *ENJOY* it."

A shot of pure adrenaline, straight to the medulla oblongata. Beecher feels his patented berserker side, absent for so blessedly long, take over completely; lets his lips draw back, showing teeth, as he's jolted by a sudden snatch of memory, some half-lost teenage fantasy of rabid rage and righteous self-immolation: *One of these days, I'll run wild, like a mad dog. They'll have to PUT ME DOWN.*

And snarls back, *grinning:*

"—yeah? Well, don't just *talk* about it. Prag."

***

Outside Sister Pete's:

"Guess that makes this goodbye," Ryan says.

Dr Nathan: "That's right."
Under the harsh lights of Oz, trapped equally between the weight of the windowless walls on either side of him and McManus's unforgiving, misunderstanding, stupid-ass stare, Ryan O'Reilly looks his one true love in the face, for what he knows will be the last time ever. Forces himself to smile, wide and thin: A crooked blade, slashed deep across his own heart. And replies: "Then...'bye."

After which he just walks away, hips swinging, like she means nothing to him—like she never did. Leaving them both behind, along with what's left of his soul.

Slouching 'round the corner, out of range, before taking off too, faster than Vern'll ever move, like he's trying to outrun his own pain. Heading for—

***

The infirmary. Where Vern leaps at Beecher with a roar and Beecher recoils, shoving the screen between them, grabbing for his cane; whacks Vern across the face with it, once, twice, as the screen goes flying. Only to overbalance, at which point Vern grabs him by the hair—and Beecher twists in his arms, scalp ripping, to latch onto Vern's bad arm with his teeth. Vern cursing, in surprised pain: "Aw fuck, you fuckin' bitch—" Then slams him into the nearest wall face-first, several times, 'til Beecher's grip slackens, 'til he's able to pry him free. Knees him in the stomach then, before throwing him back up against the wall again, leaving a bloody splotch; presses against him from behind, arm-locked, and feels himself twitch half-hard, jerk up like steel against Beecher's ass as the blond man kicks, spits, hisses, drools blood. Virtually daring Vern to finish off the job, before he gets another chance to fight back: What are you, cupcake, getting SOFT?

"This what you wanted?" Vern demands, harshly, in his ear. “Huh? This what gets you hot?"

Beecher grits his teeth. "You tell me if I seem aroused."

"Oh, you're pretty good at fakin' it by now, I bet—"

"Yeah, well; learned from the best."

Stung by the implication, Vern spins him around again, then shoves him wide, pinned and still struggling. Accusing: "You been fuckin' Keller—"

"Really are kinda obsessed on that subject, aren't'cha?" Snarling back, nose to nose: "That what happened with your wife?"

Vern punches him in the stomach, then the rib-cage; hears something crack as Beecher doubles up, sobbing with rage. Then leans in and whispers: "You said you hated him, you slut..." Almost to himself, less a growl than a whine, or something similar; makes him more than a little sick to hear it coming out of his own mouth, that weird, thin crack in his voice like it's turning inward, stretched beyond its limits. Like it's just about to—break. Same tone he used while beating Rachel that first time, almost: a mourning, baffled keen.

(See what you DO to me, you whore? What you...make...ME do?)

But Beecher just hacks, gulping; spits blood once more, utterly unimpressed. And snaps, without a second's thought: "Guess I lied, then, dumb-shit. 'Cause I do it with him daily, anywhere, everywhere—" Concluding, vicious: "—every single chance I GET."

Vern slaps Beecher to the ground, then—kicks him again and watches him curl up further, hugging himself, before pausing, lost inside the coils of memory, paralyzed by patterns. Horrified, one last
time, by his own sheer predictability, and everything it implies about him; all those things he'd rather
forget about himself, or not know at all. And all while Beecher gathers his breath, a wealth of
contempt in every line of his half-rebroken body. Adding, through crimson teeth: ". . . 'sides which...I
a'ways—hated you..."

...and 

that never made all too much of a difference, in the end. Did it?

Vern makes an awful, growling sound, tearing up from inside, and goes to stomp right on Beecher's
upturned, mocking, cat-flat face—but a shout interrupts, from behind him: "Hey!" He turns to find
the examination room doorway suddenly full of people he knows: Duchene, Keller—Metzger
lurking behind, just watching. Oh, and doesn't that look familiar: 'Cause you're HIS angel now,
right, Karl? Fucking Duchene...

But no. 'Cause Duchene's hanging back too, just a tad...meaning the real bad-ass in the room,
supposedly, must be fucking KELLER.

Behind him, Beecher claws his way back up the wall, supporting himself on shaky legs; catches
Chris's eye over Vern's shoulder, and throws him a look that makes Vern's hand, his eye, that
suppurating fresh new human bite on his forearm clench all at once, needle-bright—an icepick stab,
straight to the heart. While Chris, lounging there in the doorway, just can't resist the urge to taunt,
like the fuckin' little bitch on heat he really is: Told ya I was the key, now, didn't I? Sweetpea.

Murmuring, eyebrows raised: "So what, Vern—you jealous, like you love him, or somethin'? Want
him to—"

(l

love)

"—you?"

And Vern thinking back, fiercely: No, never; never EVER. Not even if she begged me, pleaded,
crawled back to me on hands and fuckin' knees...

(. . .he, you mean, though. Beecher, not Rachel.)

Yeah, 'course.

Caught for a second between thoughts, a bit too long to hide. And Keller, seeing it; adding with a
taunting extra little curl of those wicked lips, as he does: "Kinda faggy, for a straight, married man
like yourself. Ain't it?"

UhhrrraaaAAAAAAAAHHH—

***

Outside, through the infirmary's inner windows, Metzger spots O'Reilly exploding up out of the
stairwell—as, inside, Vern charges while Keller dodges, trapping the bulkier man's arm under his;
Duchene draws a shank, and rips Vern across the side with it, shallowly; Jesus FUCK! After which
it's Vern roaring, Keller laughing, Duchene staring dumbly at the stains on his hands: Never did
nobody hand-to-hand before, huh, Fritz? Vern thinks, contemptuously, pain dimming; you fuckin'
amateur. Then Keller's wrenching hard at his rotator cuff, wrestling him around; Vern yells again,
sharper this time, as his wound opens further. But the exhilaration of finally getting the upper hand—
in front of Beecher, no less—has obviously made Chris overconfident (no big surprise there)...so
before he can react, Vern's already spun him into a choke-hold and rammed him, deep, onto
Duchene's unsuspecting blade.
Beecher: "Chris!"

O'Reilly, to Metzger: "What?"

Duchene: "Oh...shit."

And Vern, smiling to himself: *Not too bad at all, huh, motherfuckers? For an OLD MAN.*

Keller's coughing blood now, to match Beecher's, so Vern turns him, hoisting him bodily, using the shank like a meathook—leans in to lick back and forth across Keller's stunned-silent mouth, trap-snap-quick, using the blood like lipstick. And hisses right into his mouth, eerily breathy: "Who's the fag now, faggot?" Then twists him bodily upward, zigging the shank jaggedly through his abdominal muscle-wall, and shoves him back into Beecher's horrified arms—instantly—intestines spilling free, in one visceral gush, as they fall in a heap, tangled together.

Metzger, atypically amazed: "Whoah nellie."

O'Reilly, repeating, right behind him now: "WHAT?"

While Beecher presses his hands fast to Keller's wounds, already wrist-deep in gore but trying to stay calm. Assuring Chris, over and over: "Be okay, be alright. Oh baby, be okay, be—"

"He's dead, you dizzy 'ho," Vern snaps back, without one single jolt of sympathy. Then adds, quick-tweezing the shank from Duchene's grip while Keller flops between them, eyes rolled up and twitching—mere autonomic function gone wild, a meat-bag shaken by spasms—and pressing it to Toby's throat, right on the carotid: "You too."

Duchene looks to Metzger, to O'Reilly pounding hard against the big hack's side, blocked from the action by one massive arm, his mouth contorting helplessly, eyes pleading. Like: *Hey, man—shouldn't you, I mean—DO something?* To which Metzger nods, shaking Ryan off to punch the nearest alarm...then just turns his back on the whole scene, decisively. Trusting the chips to fall where they may.

A moment of eerie calm, now, as the alarm shrieks out through Oz. Beecher looks down at Keller, head in his lap, that keen hawk's profile already gone grey in the infirmary's artificial glare—then back up at Vern, as the shank's blade nicks the skin just over his pulse. Shuts his eyes just for a second, seeming like he really might just slide down the wall and melt away in front of everybody there, internally combust with grief and guilt and anger; an endless second of wrenching pain and regret, caught between one breath and the next. Until—

—he opens them again, corpse-blue, wiped clean; dead as Keller, one way or another. Barely recognizable as human. Fixes Vern with this emptily quizzical look, like: *Oh, riïight, YOU again.* Then leans straight forward, into the shank's sharp edge, hissing: "Go ahead, asshole: Do it, you know you want to. And won't you be quite the big, bad death row Daddy then, huh? Some political prisoner, some *soldier.)*" Voice dropping, nastily intimate: "You'll just be the guy who killed his prag, over his prag, Vernon. Or...was that the other way around?"

And Vern pauses. Knowing—well, fuck it: It's just true, isn't it? After all.

*(Not unless I LET it be, it ain't.)*

Meeting Beecher's eyes, blue on blue, like ice from the same frozen river; mimicking his smile, crazy as it is. And rumbling back, equally low—equally intimate—

"Wrong again, Toby. Baby."
Already up and back on his feet, then, as the contact door squeals, and McManus—flanked by a cadre of Metzger's peers, Whittlesey among them—rushes the infirmary floor while Dr Nathan trails along behind them, studiously ignoring O'Reilly's accusative glance. Surprisingly graceful, utterly without warning, Vern buries Duchene's shank to its tape-wrapped hilt in the side of Metzger's arrogant bull-neck, then wrenches it loose again in a severed-artery SPURT, before anyone...even Metzger himself...has enough time to react. Then falls to the floor, hands on his head, flanked by corpses: knees-down in a mixed flood of blood, with Metzger on one side—holding his throat shut—and Keller on the other, still twitching, though only slightly. Cooling, by steady degrees, in Beecher's tight-locked arms.

Vern waits for the first blow, patiently, head bent. Thinking: So ignore that, if you can—you pretentious fuckin' crooked HACK.

***

Screams. Alarms. And a flood of alternate realities converging, divergent streams from the same source merging to form a single, unanswerable question—how far back would one have to go, exactly, to stem the angry tide that washed us here?

A few possible scenarios, played out between synapses:

—Jacoba Rausch Schillinger leaves Karl Senior, takes Vern with her. She marries again. Vern grows up happy, loved, different.
—Chris doesn't end up in Lardner. He and Vern never meet. Terrible things may still happen to him —do, probably. But not this particular one.
—Toby goes to that A.A. meeting Jill Hu, the woman in the office down the hall, told him about. He stays more than five minutes, has a revelation. Gives up his practice. Starts a band.
—Rachel Renton breaks up with her meth-selling boyfriend, completes her degree, gets tenure.
—Kathy Rockwell leaves her bike a home, and takes the bus.

Or: They all end up in Oz, just like before, and everything goes the way it goes. Except that, at some crucial moment...

(After the pod attack? After the gym? After the riot? After the gym, again?)

...Beecher and Schillinger simply agree to leave each other the fuck alone.

None of that's true, though. What's true is Keller, dead before he knew what hit him; no last words, no long goodbye. Beecher clutching him, hollowed and cold. Duchene, staring—Ryan's hand on his shoulder—at Metzger's shuddering hulk. And Vern, already submerged beneath a chaotic pile of guards, taking the last/worst beating of his life like a blessing, a gift, an all-too-fitting culmination. Smiling to himself, perversely happy, and thinking, as the blows rain down: You only get to kill me 'cause I let you, same way I make everything else happen—call the shots, give the orders. MY way, or the highway. 'Cause...I'm Vern Schillinger, damnit. And that still DOES count for something, if only in here.

Well, but where else is there, anyway? Nowhere, really. Not for him, or Keller, or O'Reilly. Or even —

(Beecher)

Nowhere else left, in this whole hateful world, but the Merry Old Land of Oz...for any of them.

***
EPILOGUE

Ten months later:

"Closure," Tobias Beecher says. "That'd be the word. You believe in that kind of stuff, right, McManus? Always did. Get someone's Mom to come see them 'cause they're on drugs; make someone go talk to the woman whose kid they ran over or the judge who sent them to Oz, some smooth move like that. Very...oh, you know. Therapeutic."

Cold words, if well-chosen, and offered with an equally cold smile to top them off. But then, everything about Beecher is fairly cold, these days—his sleek little blond beard, regrown into a pseudo-goatee, like a parody of Tim McManus's own; his cropped hair and overcast eyes, behind that new new pair of glasses. His pale skin, rarely if ever lit anymore by that infamous customary flush of temper, embarrassment, arousal. His voice, his mind. His...

(...heart.)

Or so McManus can only assume. Really, he knows nothing about Beecher's heart, let alone about anything else that might be going on inside the former lawyer. On occasion, he passes Beecher caning his slow, deceptively mild-mannered way through the usual inmate crowd, in between Em City council meetings—the only prisoner in Oz with a medically-based license to carry a potentially deadly weapon. Limp and all, however, even the newest and most aggressive fish routinely get told enough to know to avoid him: Don't stick your dick anywhere near Beecher, man, you wanna keep your shit intact. Dude may LOOK like a pussy, yo, but he's bad fuckin' luck.

"Widow Beecher," "Poet" Jackson calls him; widow-maker, more like. Or—what was it they used to call the Queen of Spades, back in the wild, wild West? McManus remembers reading it, somewhere. That sulky, sultry card, its headdress set rakishly askew, chief ingredient in Wild Bill Hickock's famous dead man's hand...

...oh yeah, that's right: the bitch. Which certainly fits.

Ryan O'Reilly's favored confidante and Cyril O'Reilly's duly elected chaperone, but still the official Em City Others rep; kept hard at work on Cyril's pending appeal, plus continually hacking away at his own personal civil suits against Oz, Warden Glynn, Em City and former Governor Devlin's administration. In the wake of Vern Schillinger's infirmary meltdown, Beecher's spent almost a year demanding both "wrongful death" restitution on behalf of the late Christopher Keller's three wives and a substantial "pain and suffering" monetary settlement for himself, the bulk of which (if he's ever awarded it) will apparently end up going to defray the cosmetic surgical cost of removing that swastika from his ass. Of course, McManus's name has yet to be mentioned on the roll-call of those held "responsible" for Schillinger's carnage—a deliberate, vaguely insulting oversight, and one for which Tim can't quite manage to be properly grateful. It's just more evidence of Beecher's current mindset, from McManus's POV: hollowed and hard, infinitely logical.

With whatever conflicted currents of passion and hatred once burned in him long doused, and all love burnt out of him, save for the vague, fatherly affection he has for Cyril, the semi-friendship (buddyhood?) he preserves with Ryan, he's a walking reminder of McManus's failure, all the way down along the line. Failure to recognize, or halt, Beecher's suffering at Schillinger's hands, or Keller's—not even at his own, now he comes to think about it—culminating in utter and total failure to prevent all three men's descent into a self-destructive whirlwind of psychosexual strike and counterstrike, a close-quarters power struggle whose fallout has left Em City cleansed of virtually all Aryan presence. Once Fritz Duchene's misguided try for the tits trade crown attracted Antonio Nappa's attention, after all, "Der Fuhrer"'s murder became pretty much of a foregone conclusion...and since then, the rest of the Neo-Nazi Cause's remaining adherents have either been
transferred back to Gen Pop at their own request, or sheepishly absorbed into other groups. One actually came out and joined the Gays, if you can believe that unlikely turn of events; as much as anything else that's happened, McManus guesses.

Now here Beecher is, right in his office, talking to McManus directly for what must be the first time in months; trying to be polite, if not exactly ingratiating. And all of this effort expended, believe it or not—

(NOT)

—expressly for the purpose of getting permission to visit Schillinger, for Christ's own sweet sake, on Death Row. Though this really is the only time for it, McManus supposes, now that the last of ol' Vern's automatic appeals has been turned down, and a date for his execution finally set.

He can still remember sitting in on that last interview in Ad Seg, at Warden Glynn's request: Listening, with a kind of horrified awe, as Vern—still suffering the after-effects of getting the shit repeatedly kicked out of him by various guards, more out of general principle than anything else, for shanking C.O. Karl Metzger—reeled off a seemingly endless list of additional reasons to fry his big white ass, name by name by name: "...Sippel, I did that one myself, that fuckin' pervert—oh, and Jordaire, I ordered that done. And that big Jew, whatever the fuck his name was—Vogel, right, that roadkill fuckin' mutt; needed a symbol, some sign we were back on top, so...Metzger got Hanlon to cop to it after, which I guess means you might as well let the cocksucker back into population now. Uhhhh, and...what else, what else." Spitting blood into a proffered paper cup while clearing his throat, before continuing: "Set up Keller to break Beecher's arms and legs; beat him up, later, when he wouldn't let go. Fell in love with the little slut, dumb faggot, more fuckin' fool him..." Another pause. "That enough yet?"

"I think we had you back at killing Keller."

"Hey: Duchene killed Keller. His shank, right?"

"Yeah, but your fingerprints," Glynn pointed out, from the sidelines. To which Vern shot back, swiftly: "From when I pulled it out of Keller."

"Apparently, he might've lived, if you'd left it in."

"I look like a doctor to you?" A grim red smile, through lips bruised almost black. "Prag was dead 'fore I had time to do much more than stare, anyway."

"Not according to Beecher."

"Yeah, well—Beecher's...bereft; tell him I understand. So why don't you just do me for Metzger, and call it even?"

In typically grandiose fashion, Schillinger—claiming he "didn't want anybody confusing [him] with that nutbag Groves"—hadn't ended up opting for the firing squad after all. Instead...

"HANGing?" Then-Governor Devlin spat in amazement, when Glynn broke the bad news. "Nobody's been hung in this state since we stopped riding horses to work!"

Glynn, typically practical: "We could do it in the gym—rig a scaffold. Ceiling's probably high enough to get the right kind of drop."

"Yeah, fine, whatever. And how much is all this going to cost, exactly?"
While McManus, feeling his stomach lurch, could only think: *Oh, God. Not again.*

Roll-call of the dead and missing, all those phantoms clustering around the window during the riot: Dino Ortolani, Jefferson Keane, Richard L'Italien, Donald Groves. Glynn's "cousin", the undercover cop; Johnny Post, canoli-boxed dick in hand. Plus Nino Schibetta, his killer several times removed, bleeding out through every orifice; plus Mark Mack and friend, suffocated in their collapsing escape tunnel. Anybody and everybody McManus didn't try—or care about—hard enough to save, up to and including Scott fucking Ross...

And now, three more. Keller, Metzger—

(Schillinger)


The sound of his own name, patiently (if disrespectfully) repeated, brings him back to the here and now with an abrupt jerk, where he finds Beecher leaning on his cane, hands crossed: A civilized stance, as used by...civilized people, educated people. *People like you and me, Timmy-boy,* he can almost hear Beecher projecting. *Right?*

...right.

Pointing out, with eerie calm: "I mean, it's a fairly simple question: Yes...or no?"

The answer, apparently, being—yes.

***

Which is how, a mere half hour later, Beecher finds himself waiting behind C.O. Diane Whittlesey as she keys the contact door into Death Row; palms wet, back stiff. Hearing nothing but the dull drum of his own heart going thud, thud, thud...and, somewhere behind that—beyond that opening door, as the screech springs it free—another sound, equally rhythmic: The grunting breath of someone—Vern, natch—working out, doing diffident pull-ups against the bars of their cell. And humming, tunelessly, just under their breath, as they count each movement off: One-ninety-nine, two, two-one, two-two, two-three...

Not really such a necessary part of the daily routine anymore, considering. But old habits, like old Nazis, die hard.

The door slams shut again behind them, locking, and Whittlesey takes up her position beside it, relaxed but wary. She meets Beecher's automatic backwards glance with nothing but a raised brow and a vague grimace, like: *Well, go on, here's what you wanted—what'cha waiting for, spring? Shit or get off the pot, law-boy.*

(*Hey bitch, you think I WON'T? Well...think again.)*

This tiny internal anti-authoritarian spasm spurs him forward, so that before he can think better of it, Beecher's already stepped forward into Vern's line of sight. Those same pale blue eyes, last seen over Chris's cooling corpse, lock with his for the first time in almost a year and widen, ever-so-slightly, in recognition.

"Well," Vern says, slowly. *"This is...cute."*

Though not entirely unexpected either, Beecher can only assume, considering how he just stands there silently, his bulky body lightly sheened with sweat; guess you don't lose much weight, penned
under the suicide watch cameras like veal in a stall. Staring at Beecher with an expression of mild surprise, like he still can't understand how Beecher ever got the idea he could do this to him—let alone finally grew balls big enough to actually make it so.

Yeah, well, Beecher thinks, unsympathetically, not the world's hardest equation to parse, really; you fucked me, so I fucked you back. And turnabout is fair fly.

Vern wipes his forehead with the back of one hand, looking over at a towel hanging by the sink. To Beecher, ironically polite: "You mind?"

"Feel free."

(I mean—you do LIVE here, and all. For now.)

Stripping his t-shirt off and turning his back on Beecher, Vern uses the towel to wipe under both armpits, exhaling a sour smell of fresh, middle-aged sweat, released into the air like some caged animal's spoor. Under one rib, Beecher can see the reddish curl of scar tissue that marks Duchene's shank-wound, stretching as Vern works the kinks from his spine and shoulders with a few brief neck-rolls. "Heard they turned down your parole," he says, without turning, running water. Then adds, over his shoulder, with a brief flash of his old nasty bonhomie: "Sucks, don't it?"

Beecher snorts. "The, uh--dick-biting incident didn't sit too well with most of the panel, no."

"Wouldn't think. Guess you never really expected to get it first time 'round, though, you being such an expert in the process."

"That's what appeals are for," Beecher points out, to which Vern just shrugs.

A small pause ensues. Beecher can hear Whittlesey shifting stance, back near the door; her shoes squeak. Reminds him of how uncomfortable he's getting, balancing here with his bad leg already starting to twinge and burn while Vern, well aware there's nowhere for his "guests" to sit, crippled or not, just flops back down onto his bunk and stretches, lazily. Rumbling: "Soooo...to what do I owe the pleasure? You findin' it kinda hard to cope, out there all on your lonesome; just wanted to remind yourself what I look like, or something? Or—oh, I know, now..." Voice dropping further, then, growing sly—nostrils practically flaring as he senses the remotest chance to probe an unhealed wound, even here in the death-house; to suck out some tiny bit of pain to give him pleasure after he's left alone, once again, to contemplate his own impending demise: "...you're missin' Chris. Right, cupcake?"

(Oh, you sick Nazi fuck.)

It's true that Beecher used to dream of Chris and wake up hard, his face wet. But not anymore—well, not as often.

After the infirmary he spent three days in a half-empty pod, staring at the wall and trying not to think about the fact that no one had come to take Chris's stuff away yet, before McManus finally stuck a new guy in with him—some huge gangsta named Binks, who took one look at Beecher, and licked his lips; yet another good call on Timmy's part, that one. But Binks' brief tenure in the House of Beecher ended...badly, so now Beecher shares with the Mole, who barely says two words to anybody, most days. Drifting quiet, almost shell-shocked, since Bob Rebadow died in his sleep of a massive coronary. Reconciled with God at last, perhaps, in the split second before his heart wheezed to a halt—though no longer there to tell, if so. And speaking of God...

"In case you're wondering," Beecher once found himself blurring out to Sister Peter Marie, abruptly,
they having found themselves briefly trapped between two sets of contact doors, "yes."

"Yes what, Tobias?"

"...it was all worth it, in the end. Even so."

Worth every fucking penny of the price he'd had to pay, all told—the same price he'd gladly pay again (and again, and again) just to see the look on Vern's face, when he realized there was literally no other "honorable" choice but to grab his own death with both hands and Bristol-kiss it, so he could at least go down fighting. Because: That's my version, Sister, and I'm sticking to it, no matter what. And yes, he does miss Chris, still—like he misses Gen, misses his kids, himself. All his dead loves, come back to roost in memory and dream; every tangled thing, this never-ending knot of tenderness and pain that tightens further every time he thinks of any of them for too long...even Vern himself, on very rare occasion.

So: "Sometimes," Beecher says, cool. Inquiring, sweetly: "You missin' me?"

Vern looks at him again, for a long moment. Then replies, quiet: "...sometimes."

(Parts of you, sure. 'Cause I ain't dead yet.)

Adding: "But don't tell me there haven't been any new—takers."

"People pretty much leave me alone, these days."

Vern nods. "Yeah, right, 'course. 'Cause you're O'Reilly's bitch, now." But: "No," Beecher snaps back, eyes suddenly sparking. "That'd be 'cause I'm ME." And Vern feels a perverse, twisting little stab of pride, unable to stop himself from thinking: Oh, and that's my baby.

So much between them, even now. He can hear it in Beecher's voice, in his own: a coiling flood of memories, pulling all their long-buried ancient history up into the light for one more go-'round. And bringing with it the shadow—equally long-buried—of certain...other things.

Well, and who else is gonna hear this, Vernon, now the Day Of The Rope draws near for real? That little voice inside asks, impatiently. Not like you're planning to spill your guts to that slant-eyed fuckin' priest, huh? Better get it off your chest while you can.

"Did my first hitch in Oz," Vern says, therefore, without preamble. "I ever tell you that?"

Hmmm, Beecher thinks, let's see. You told me going to Harvard made me an honorary Jew; woke me up in the middle of the night once to ask me where I was from, like it'd suddenly occurred to you I could actually be FROM somewhere. Told me Baltimore had more niggers per capita than any other city in America. Gasped out during our next-to-last time in the shower room how I was "tighter than [your] wife," then told me your wife was DEAD...

But in the end, he hauls his mind back to the conversation at hand with a jerk, shedding memory like dead skin. And says, aloud: "You told me a lot of things, Vern—and to be frank, I wasn't always paying attention."

"Huh," Vern snorts, as if to himself. "Clever little bitch, ain'tcha?" While Beecher simply stares back at him, deadpan, like: Oh I do do my best. SIR.

(Still.)

"So I'm 19," he begins again, ignoring Beecher's apparent lack of interest. "And I come home from
the post office, right? For supper. Mom's cookin', the Old Man's off on a tear somewhere—they had some kinda dance earlier that day, not like I'm gonna know. But.” Vern pauses here, remembering—trying to figure out just the right way to phrase this, never having done so before. Not even with Rachel. "She gets up to take the meatloaf out of the stove,” he says, at last, “and I can see she's not looking too good. Pale, a little—like she's gonna puke, or something. Ever see your Mom look like that, *Toby*?”

Beecher doesn't answer, just shifts himself, restless, like he's got Whittlesey's disease, all of a sudden. Like he wants to up cane and limp off, fast as his busted little legs will take him. And: *Yeah, didn't think so,* Vern thinks. *But anyway—*

"She gets up, puts her hand on the oven door, and she just—falls over. KEELS over, like somebody hit her with a two-four..."

Pausing again, as Beecher interjects: "Look, I don't want to hear this." But now it's Vern's turn to snap back, which he does, growling: "Yeah? Well, so fuckin' what? Don't like it, get up and leave—not like I care."

(Much.)

Beecher's quiet now, listening, as Vern goes on. "So she falls down, and her skirt—comes up. And there's blood, everywhere...lot like ol' Chrissie, come to think about it.” Smiling to himself, briefly: “Now, *that* was sweet.”

Beecher shakes his head, refusing to be drawn. "You took her to the hospital?"

"Sure, not that that did a shit's worth of good, in the end. 'Cause she crashed out and bled to death, on the way over there.”

All messed up inside, that's what the doctors said—those miscarriages, and the fact that the Old Man never left her alone between repair work, never really gave the stitches time to...heal up. Got some kind of infection, down there, and that was that.

They came out to find him, waiting in the hallway by the coffee machine. 19 years old, and even full-grown as he was, there's no way they could have thought *he* was Karl fucking Schillinger Senior—but they let him sign the death certificate anyway; somebody had to. Better the Schillinger you know...

And when he got home, the Old Man was back, drunk. "Drunk like I've seen *you,* ToBIas—"

Vern told him what happened, and Karl—laughed. Said: *Guess it's time to start shoppin' around again,* so Vern picked him up, by the throat, and threw him down the stairs. Strained his fuckin' arm doing it, too; surprised he didn't BREAK it, size of the bastard. Went down and stomped on him some more, 'till he thought the cocksucker really was dead, then went off to Karl's usual bar and ordered his usual drinks. Made the bartender call him Karl. Made *everybody* call him Karl, even the cops he rumbled with, when they came to pick him up. That's why there's a K. next to Vern's name, in his file—as Beecher, having studied that puppy, well knows. Because, for the whole of his first stretch in Oz, he made everyone call him by his father's name.

Beecher gives him another long, questioning stare, scanning for hidden meaning, finding none. Then says, carefully: "This is some pretty...intimate stuff you're telling me..."

“Yeah, well.”

(*Think we been pretty intimate already, you and me. Don't you?*)
"Did my first hitch in Oz," Vern repeats. "Not Em City, 'cause there wasn't one, back then—Oz, Gen Pop, and you know what? It hasn't changed much. Never does." Pausing, slightly; breath a little ragged, but game face intact. As Beecher watches, feeling—what? That same horrid stab of empathy? This ruined man, wrecked from the inside out; this many-layered monster, holding Beecher's eyes with his—voice dropping, lulling. Saying: "Oz was there before I was, will be after, and me being gone? Won't change a thing. Won't make it any better, won't make it any worse. 'Cause, believe it or not...believe it or NOT, I am *not* the most terrible thing ever, not in here...and not anywhere else, either."

Beecher resists the urge to look away; forces himself to look back, instead—look deeper. To meet the force of Vern's gaze with the full force of his own and reply, with (almost) equal certainty: "I never really thought you were."

A second of mutual understanding, no more—a split nanosecond, maybe. But then...Vern's mouth twitches, eyes lidding, turning cold. Like shutters coming down over an exposed soul: a dry, amused, lizard-brain intelligence, slitted and gelid, peering forth. Like a rough hand thrust deep inside, hard enough to hurt, its grasp of your anatomy both pitilessly and obscenely knowing.

And: "BullSHIT, you didn't," he drawls, silkily. "*Sweetpea.*"

Oh...

...whoo.

So much for detente, let alone reconciliation.

Beecher turns, balancing on his cane, stomach abruptly empty: full of wind and terror, sick aftershocks prickling his spine. Knees giving, he takes a shaky step towards Whittlesey, almost yelling: "Ready, I'm ready—"

She nods, goes for the door. While, behind him...

(like a cold tongue up the small of his back, a dry finger twisting inside—like the pressure of his face crushed up against the back window of their pod, staring blindly out into Em City's darkness as that searing, intrusive pain cramps him again and again—like that constant, demeaning fear of soiling himself, or Vern, and being forced to clean it up, on hands and knees)

Like knowing everyone's watching, and nobody gives a damn. Like knowing you don't deserve it, yet knowing, too—that you don't deserve. Anything. Better.

From behind him, that voice he knows so well, SO well. Calling out, undeterred: "Hey, Beecher—hey, Tobias. *Toby, HEY.*" And Beecher, not turning, not reacting; holding himself as straight as humanly possible, as the Whittlesey's shadow slips into place, keying the lock. Yet hearing, all the same, even over the contact door's screech—

"Just how much jizz you think you're gonna have in here, Bitch-er, being my *ex*, and all...when there's nobody left even remembers who I was, anymore?"

But the door's already closing. And Beecher—is gone.

Vern lies back on the bed, suddenly exhausted. Massages his throbbing hand. Shuts his eyes. Telling Toby-baby, in his mind: *Think you're gonna be free of me when I'm dead, babydoll? Hell, you won't even be free when you're free. 'Cause every time you fuck somebody, you're gonna think of Keller...and every time somebody's fucking YOU, you're gonna think of ME.*
Oh, and he can see Beecher's face, still, glaring at him. Like: *But nobody's ever gonna fuck me again, you son of a bitch. Not YOU, that's for damn sure.* And hey, that's okay. In fact—that's even better.

*First and last, cupcake, just like I told you that night—same night I took a lighter to your ass, popped your cherry, and made you come for me while I did it. And you really thought I couldn't hear you crying, right? Afterward?*

(*Hoped, I guess.*)

First and last, beginning and end; one...flesh. Mine, mine, now and forever. Just like—

(*Well.*)

That'd be the single side-benefit of his current condition: his next—scheduled—visitor. One who should be arriving right about now, even as we speak, same way she does every Monday...

***

...and out in the hall, pausing between doors; Beecher, bent over and shaking, with Whittlesey at his elbow—her touch on his shoulder, brisk and expect, yet weirdly comforting. Telling him, not with sympathy: "Gotta move on, Beecher."

Beecher, hoarse: "A fucking *minute*, okay? Is that too much to ask?"

Whittlesey lets go, shrugging. Then turns, surprised, as the next set of doors springs open, revealing McManus, C.O. Hensley. And—

Beecher straightens up, slowly, every inch of him instinctually singing with a terrible premonition—and his eyes riveted, *riveted* to the figure by McManus's side: this tiny, female, flat-faced, wry-mouthed, blue-eyed, dull-gold-haired, glasses-wearing version of...himself. Whispering, through lips gone numb: "Who..." As she whispers back, almost at the same time: "...*is* this?"

McManus looks from one to the other, then back again. And says, pointing: "Tobias Beecher, Rachel Renton—"

Her eyes still on Beecher's: "—Schillinger."

And: *Ohhhhhh. So this must be...the REAL wife.*

Beecher looks at McManus, eyes shining, face twitching. Feels himself shift and burn, gone temporarily pointilescent: a febrile, glowing cloud of energy trapped in vaguely human form. A red-black mass of hate and anger, hot enough to burn Em City down on contact—to burn his way from Oz, one wall at a time, and out into the universe, melting everything he touches as he goes.

And is it better to know now, Beecher wonders; to learn the truth, even if it comes like this? Better than the cold, the hollow shell over frozen grief? Better than fear and self-disgust? Than misplaced physical pleasure in the midst of pain, mimicking an ugly mirror version—so cracked, so bent, so utterly grotesque—of something resembling, in some hideous way...a twisted form of love?

*It is* better, isn't it? Must be. 'Cause—it really couldn't be worse.

There's Oz, back through that door, where Ryan sits brooding over a postcard Dr Nathan sent him yesterday—no signature, just a tropical slice of paradise on the front and a message on the back: *BET YOU WISH YOU WERE HERE.* Cyril sitting by, sad-eyed. And a slot left open for Beecher
to fill, near as O'Reilly's Irish thug pride can bear to have him, so they can sit there cocooned in mutual misery; feel this crazy, utilitarian friendship they share slowly recharge them far enough to start the whole endless game up again. Lie, cheat, steal, connive...do whatever, however, to stay on top of Em City's shifting political quicksand, last long enough to get Cyril out, make parole. To stay alive, plain and simple, in the only way which makes that fact worth something: with power.

Oz, Hell's heart, the scene of the crime—every and any, past and present, now and to come. Home sweet fuckin' home.

(No place like it, after all.)

Toby, Rachel; Rachel, Toby. Toby, looking at Rachel, seeing both the obvious similarities and the subtle, but equally legitimate, differences. How they define each other, counter each other. Cancel each other out.

Feeling himself begin to smile again, slowly. And say: "Well. This explains a lot."

Nodding to her, then, before hitching his head back in the direction he just came from. Adding, as he does: "He's all yours."

THE END

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!