**Saigon 1965**

Christopher Remington Applegate Porter IV arrived at the United States Embassy's Saigon office an hour early. He set his alarm clock wrong and before he realized it, he was half-way to work. Actually the walk in the early morning was much nicer. The air was freshly scented without the stench that seemed to rise with the sun even in the dead of winter. As he climbed the steps to the main entrance, he was conscious that for the first time in the six months he had been here, he didn't feel the need for a shower before the day even began. Glancing over the duty roster on the bulletin board, he noted with irritation that he had the communications room watch again that evening.

It was a bother. He was yet to be assigned a regular task, so he was able to spend most of his time swimming and playing tennis, which brought him into contact with a number of high-ranking officials. "Keep your eye on that Porter," they'd say. "He's a comer." Or, "His assignment is so hush-hush, not even the Ambassador knows what he does." In fact, elegant and influential people made such a to-do over him that he began to feel that it was unfair that he be called upon to stand so menial a duty as the comm watch. Besides, tonight was to have been a blowout back at the apartment, with lots of food, booze, broads, and some freaky doings in the bedroom. Blinky Scumbag was coming in from his quarterly jaunt to the mid-east, which meant goodies for everyone. Tomorrow was Saturday and except for a skeleton crew, the office would be closed.

"Damn," he muttered as he pushed past a stack of chairs blocking the door to his cubicle, seeing his whole day--indeed the entire weekend--ruined by some crewcut misanthrope in the personnel section.

"About the only duty you'll have to stand here is the comm watch, which comes around about every twenty days," he was told by his section chief when he reported in. "You can't consider it a great hardship."

As time went on, Chris had the nagging suspicion that he was catching the duty more and more often so that every time he turned around it was his turn in the barrel again. The truth of the matter is that had he done a little checking, he'd have found that indeed he was getting the shaft, standing watch far more often than was his share, and that there were those of lesser rank who never stood it at all. "This guy Porter is so out of it, he wouldn't notice if we assigned him to the watch every other night," offered Whimple who worked in the coding room. "No, he'd catch on eventually," Powdermilk from Personnel disagreed. "Let's not take a chance of lousing up a good deal. Let's schedule him every two weeks and see how it goes," suggested Milscript from Fiscal. In the end, they compromised, choosing nine days as the lower limit."Try to nail him for weekends and holidays as often as possible," Whimple reminded them with a satisfied leer. Obviously the working staff were not overawed by Chris's importance.

Actually, it had been ever so since Chris had arrived at Harvard for freshman orientation in his Mercury convertible replete with surfboard, skis, golf clubs, tennis racquet, polo mallets, hockey stick, baseball spikes, ping-pong table, jock strap, and soccer shoes. The rest of his belongings were wedged on the floor between the seats. Chris was a real sport. The fact that he was suspended in two quarters (quite a feat considering that he carried a minimum load) attested not so much to his penchant for goofing off--most everyone did in those days--rather it pointed up what his grandfather had been saying for years.

"That lily-livered puke just doesn't have it." What he meant by that was that Chris didn't have enough intelligence on his own to get out there and cheat. "That boy's a great disappointment to me," he whined to his daughter-in-law Constance. "It's bound to cost me a bunch for Harvard to take notice of his true talents."

Customarily, reinstatement followed close on the heels of a generous gift by one's family to the university's endowment fund, but in Chris's case it took not merely the addition of a wing to the library, but the contribution of the books to stock it. Lest one fear that the lad was not up to success given a second chance, it should be noted that he went on to become a straight-A scholar, owing in no small part to the wisdom of his grandfather who hired a surrogate to go to classes while Chris was sent to Europe, Africa, Australia, New Zealand, the Far East, and finally to Miami beach when there was nowhere else left. Accepting his diploma and Phi Beta Kappa key before a somewhat confused gallery of his peers (ah, those lifelong contacts that make one's schooldays among the most important of our lives) Chris headed south to that incubus of liberty, Langley, Virginia, a.k.a. Moscow on the Potomac.

After completing a battery of tests assessing his skills for clandestine and sometimes labyrinthine pursuits in which he was found to be proficient in no known occupation or language (including his own) on the face of the Earth, Chris was summoned before the Deputy Director " . . . for a little chat, old boy."

One of the problems in those days was that although a certain amount of paranoia existed at all levels of the Company (as grown men were want to call the CIA to establish its Machiavellian identity), it became more pronounced the closer one came to the fountainhead. So it was that Chris spent almost a whole day in search of the Deputy Director's office. It wasn't so much that anyone bore him any ill will (though they would have had they given the matter any thought), rather it was that most of the people from whom he sought directions either didn't know, or felt that they would be breaking security by telling. As for the others who knew, it must be assumed that they suspected foul play, because he was seized by overzealous "Zonal Security Specialists" on no less than four occasions and subjected to harsh interrogation. Luckily for Chris, the inquisitors came to the correct conclusion that he knew nothing--absolutely, irrevocably, irrefutably nothing!

And so it was that, nearing the end of his meager inner resources, Chris opened a door marked Keep Out and found himself confronted by an officious bitch who fairly spat at him even before he had entered the room.

"Where the hell've you been, turkey? D-Squared's been waiting all day for you and he's climbing the walls. Five minutes more, buster, and there'd have been a contract let. Now get your ass in there while you've still got it."

There was a blank wall with no visible seams, so Chris stood before it transfixed, but without the slightest trace of curiosity.

"What are you waiting for, asswipe," she hissed menacingly. "Say 'open sesame'."

"Open sesame."

Nothing moved. Nothing parted. No panel swung back. The wall just slowly dematerialized and Chris found himself at the edge of a gigantic circular room that seemed to be but the upper level of a vortex. All along the walls for as far as the eye could see, there were shelves of books. Mystery books, spy books, books of arcane and perverse crime. Books on witches and warlocks, books on the supernatural. Sheaves of papyrus and tapestries lay in ten story stacks and further down the walls themselves were covered with symbols and icons.

Hanging from an indefinite ceiling was a banner containing an indecipherable slogan, and floating about the free space within the confines of the stacks were dozens of sallow Ivy-league youths in Brooks Brothers three-piece suits, bored to absolute tears.

Presently, Chris became aware of not so much an object or a movement, but more a loosely aggregated arrangement of molecules and bundles of energy that seemed any second now to coalesce in the space directly before him.

"Whooo . . . sennnt . . . yoooo?" It wasn't a voice, it was the rustle of neurons fluttering in response to some preternatural urge.

"My grandfather, C-2."

"You mean good old Crap?"

There was a flash of light, then darkness. Immediately the scene changed and Chris found himself in a standard government issue green-walled office standing in front of a light steel desk occupied by a balding functionary of indeterminate age whose ashtray was littered with gnarled cigar butts.

"Sit down, young man. Your qualifications are extraordinary to say the least." He spent several minutes leafing through files until he came to what he wanted. "Ah, here we are. It's the notes from my last meeting with your grandfather. Let's see here."

"See if you can't find something within his capabilities," the old man had implored as the two sat in the gazebo overlooking the Severn River. "At least put him some place where he won't embarrass the family name." The Deputy Director thought of the many new jobs that were opening up in the agency, but all were sensitive.

"Well, we can bring him in for testing and go from there. Just what seems to be the matter with the lad?"

"For openers, he's a bastard. Not my bloodlines at all. His mother's a true bitch and his natural father's pretty bright so there may be hope for him." He took a long pull at his drink, searching for the right words to sum up Chris. "His performance to this point leaves so much to be desired that I guess you'd have to classify him as an idiot." The word made him stop. "Well, that's a little strong. My son Porter is an idiot. Chris is merely a nincompoop by comparison."

"Well, my boy," the Deputy Director looked up from his file and leaned back, hands behind his head. "Your grandfather has high hopes for your future and I think that we have just the job for you. Have you ever been to Southeast Asia? No? Just the place to get your career off to a good start, I'd say. We're in the process of building up a staff in that neck of the woods and the section chief is an old friend. I'll assign you to him so that he can take you under his . . . ah . . . wing, so to speak."

Thus it was that Chris was posted to Saigon, where Sandiver Keck Holmes assigned him to Embassy staff without title or job description. It marked him as a very special person.

Saigon was fascinating with a grace and ambience that in early 1965 belied the rumor of a major war in the offing. To Chris, it seemed that all that needed to happen was for the Catholic families to sit down with the Buddhists and carve things up to their mutual liking the way things were done back home. There was no sense expending so much time (much less manpower and treasure) unless there was profit in it. Since they wouldn't be the ones supplying the guns and grits, there was no sense in fighting. "No," he reasoned, lying beside the pool at his apartment, "fighting makes no sense at all."

"It all comes out of their own pockets," Chris explained to Mai Anh, the raven-haired wisp of beauty who sat across from him at the Lotus Gardens Lounge at the Hilton. "What the hell have they got to gain when they already have it all to begin with? What they should do is hang crosses in all the temples and set cute little gold statues of Buddha next to all the Virgin Marys, and everyone's covered, right?" It was like merging cowboy and hillbilly music so that record companies could make more money. If the boys could make country 'n western fly, why not Buddolicism?

It had taken Mai Anh nearly an hour to attract Chris's attention. Her assignment carried a top priority, requiring her to drop all else while she gained the favor of this enigma who roamed the U.S. Embassy without portfolio. Secretly she relished the opportunity to live off the fat of the land after her last mission, which had all too often taken her off to the rice paddies to live among paddy-stompers whose stench and life she had managed to escape at the age of ten.

It was through no fault of her own. A French airplane swooped out of a cloudless sky one morning with machine guns blazing, throwing up geysers of swampy water in front of the hovel in which she had been born. The family water buffalo exploded into a thousand bits and pieces of gleaming gristle, purple meat, and foaming gore leaving the cowering clan instantly destitute. The sun had yet to achieve the meridian that she was on her way to Saigon in the clutches of Fat Duc, the whoremonger, in exchange for a new water buffalo. From that day forward, she felt a genuine fondness for the French, crediting them for her good fortune. So it had been with sadness that she witnessed their departure in the glorious victory of 1954. Now that she was twenty-seven (though she looked hardly a day over fifteen), she felt abandoned by her former benefactors, left to fend with a bunch of mindless barbarians who thought it their role to improve Vietnam's lot to the tune of five dollars a crack.

Fat Duc had moved up in the world, carrying with him Mai Anh who had more than repaid him for the water buffalo. How fondly he remembered the skinny little wretch who could plead that she was a virgin with the best of them. Night after night, the wealthiest men in Saigon emptied their coffers and their loins to make the little girl scream and howl in pain and terror. Her true talent lay in her ability to sense the instant when these lechers would begin to feel some remorse over their brutal assaults, at which point she would reverse course and beg for more. The ploy inevitably succeeded, engendering such sincere gratitude that Fat Duc's wealth multiplied and her fame began to spread. Eventually, her renown scotched the local market, so it was time to bring her to the notice of wealthy Frenchmen. When this market dried up, they moved up-country until, at seventeen, nature could no longer be denied.

From the beginning, Fat Duc would reward her with treats and she would reward him with treasures of gossip that he entered into a little notebook. Men, it seemed, would tell her anything, believing her to be an air-headed peasant. Fat Duc grew richer and more powerful with each thrust of Mai Anh's silken thighs and he never forgot to give her treats. This time it was a bottle of rich perfume that accompanied her new orders but he could provide no amplifying information other than she had less than three weeks to gain Chris's total confidence. The dossier gave her precious little to go on other than he came from a wealthy family and appeared destined for some special purpose.

"Good looking," she noted approvingly, because most Americans around the embassy in Saigon were bloated castoffs, prone to be incoherent before noon and given to smelling like goats. It was their diet she realized more than their sanitary habits, but still it made in no easier to be in close quarters with them. To Mai Anh, intimacy with a westerner (except Frenchmen) was an act of contrition for sins of another life. "He will be different," she decided (as if the choice were hers), and set off about her mission with a happy heart.

In the beginning, she was a little in awe of this handsome young lion of obvious wealth and breeding whose cryptic pronouncements were delivered with such a finality as to make it seem that they came from the font of all knowledge. Besides, he had a way of looking at her that made her feel as if he were tuned into her every thought and she was filled with a momentary panic until she realized that was not the case at all. It was puppy love, pure and simple.

Chris was happier than a pig in whale snort. Mai Anh was easily the most beautiful and fascinating woman he had ever met, with eyes that seemed to focus at the depth of his soul, skin radiating little tongues of flame to highlight the soft curves of her womanhood, and a voice with a timbre and clarity reminiscent of crystalline bells across a glacial valley. So captivated was he that it never occurred to him, even as he lay on his back squirming submissively while she sawed violently back and forth from above, that he was being taken in.

Reporting the ease with which she had gained Chris's confidence, Mai Anh described in minute detail the entire encounter including his lackluster performance in bed. "He's not like any American I've ever been with," she confided sourly to Fat Duc. "He didn't even ask for a blowjob."

Chris's first assignment came as a surprise. He returned from a game of doubles with the Australian Ambassador's daughter to find a message asking him to get in touch with a Mr. Childress of the Spotted Tiger Oriental Industries Company as soon as possible.

"Thank you for getting back to me so quickly, Chris . . . may I call you Chris?" He was seated across from a lean-muscled man in his mid-thirties dressed in a severely cut Italian silk/wool suit showing the unmistakable bulge of a pistol butt just below the left armpit. He wore no jewelry, yet there was about him the aura of a fop. Perhaps it was his manicured fingernails that gave this impression, or maybe his gestures, which were full and precise. Chris wasn't able to verbalize such things, but something about Childress put him on his guard.

Viewed from the street, the run-down warehouse where they met was indistinguishable from its seedy neighbors, but inside it was a different story. Once past the tacky waiting room, Chris felt as if he had stepped out of Saigon and into his father's office building in Newport Beach. The floors were carpeted in a deep cut pile. The walls were finished with rich swathes of Thai silk. Evergreen shrubs imparted a vernal scent to the filtered air held rigidly at 67 degrees by an obviously immense air conditioning system. The high-speed clicking of muted data terminals spilled softly into the halls. Underlying all of this was the barely perceived thrum of a heavy generator loafing under its easy load.

"Did your Section Chief tell you of his plans for you?" The tone was mild, belying the ominous intensity behind the words.

"Uh-uh," Chris answered, peering at the picture of scantily clad Oriental pin-ups adorning all four walls. "He said he had something in mind, but I'll be dipped if I know what. I think he wants me to work on my backhand, so I've been playing tennis every day."

"So I've heard. Well, it's time for you to start earning your pay." Childress got up abruptly and beckoned Chris to follow.

"We're going to start you out in our logistics operation. You'll pick up special shipments at this warehouse and turn them over to the Army for transfer to their final destinations. It's not too difficult nor will it take you away from your tennis all that often. It's merely a matter of keeping track of things and making sure the shipments get into the right hands."

"Do I get some sort of a title and will this get me out of standing the comm watch at the embassy?"

"Sorry Chris," Childress answered with a certain malice. " We don't want to call attention to you in any way. You're what one might call a front, but don't get it into your head that you're not important. To a very real extent, the success of the project depends on you. A lot of people have gone to a bunch of trouble to put on this little field exercise, so we can't blow it on our end, ok?"

"Got ya," Chris answered in his saltiest voice "Sure, only I wish I could get out of the comm watch."

By the way," he asked after a pause. "What are these shipments?"

"What's in the boxes?" Childress stopped in the middle of the corridor to consider the question.

"The boxes contain strategic materials and no one but the person to whom they are addressed is to have access."

Presently, they had come to what appeared to be a dead end to the corridor. Childress fished in his pocket and produced credit card-like device that he inserted in a hidden slot in the wall near the floor. With just the slightest hiss of a hydraulic cylinder in action, the wall disappeared into the floor revealing an expansive warehouse area all but empty of cargo.

"You'll sign the manifests for them there," Childress explained, pointing to a counter on the far side of the bay. "You'll check to make sure the seals are unbroken before they're loaded aboard the truck. It will be up to you to arrange for a driver and a six man guard detachment for the trip to Tan Son Nhut Airport." He noticed an apprehensive look suddenly come over Chris's face. "I know," he said reassuringly. "We could do all the arranging for you, but we don't have the clout. You do because you work at the embassy and it's got to be your show from start to finish." Chris wasn't altogether satisfied, but he nodded his head in assent.

"When you arrive there, you will again check the seals before releasing the cargo to the Army. You get a signature from the quartermaster in charge. Got that?"

"Sure," he answered enthusiastically, but everything after the guard detachment was a blank. "When do I start?"

"The first shipment arrived today and is being prepared." Childress pointed at activity in a side bay. "You'll make your first pickup day after tomorrow right after lunch. Come and I'll show you where to bring the truck."

After Chris had gone, Childress forced himself to step through the entire operation looking for flaws. It all seemed so perfect yet he still worried that he was overlooking something. Chris was perfect--a real tool. The Deputy Director had been spot-on about the guy. He hadn't given the slightest indication of curiosity or spontaneous thought. If and when he ever found out what was going he was going to be into it up to his nugies with no chance to back out. The prospects were limitless.

In the beginning, the project would be small potatoes compared to the rest of the build-up that would be taking place, but you had to start somewhere to get the logistics side in place and operating smoothly. Childress figured that in two years it would require nearly a thousand troops to handle all the shipments at this end and another thousand to distribute the stuff in the field. The other end was even more labor intensive, but that wasn't his worry.

Because of Chris's position, the boxes would move with diplomatic immunity. Nobody without diplomatic authorization could touch much less open and inspect the contents. Indeed, a box could fall off the truck, break open, and spill its contents onto the ground in front of the Inspector General himself, and there'd be nothing anyone could do about it except pick the stuff up, repack the box, put it back on the truck, and forget the whole incident.

"God, its magnificent," he mused. "Just think what you could do with an operation like this back home."

"It's times like this I wish I were back home," Chris complained aloud as he paced back and forth in his cramped bedroom watched curiously by Mai Anh.

"What you think about, honey (it came out hoe-nee)?" the girl asked, stretching sensuously against the cushion, then turning slightly sideways to present Chris with a better view of her pubic mound.

"Oh, nothing," he waved his hand vaguely as if by doing so his confusion would magically disappear. "It's just that I've got an assignment that has me stumped." He knitted his brow in an attemp to think, but it was, as usual a futile gesture. "It's just that it's up to me to make some arrangements and I don't know how."

"Maybe I can help."

"What would you know?" he whined, causing her to feign subservience. "I've got to set up a transportation network within the military, but I don't know where to start."

"Why don't you get the Army to set it up for you. That's what they're here for. isn't it?"

"Yes, I guess it is."

"Why don't you just call the Army up and tell them your problem and get them to figure it out.?" She was about to suggest that he ask to talk with Major Bagwell who was busy diverting arms and ammunition to the Cong, but she decided that putting two of her marks together might be a bit risky.

"You know, Bao, that's exactly what I'm going to do. I'll just call out there to Tan Son Nhut and tell them to take care of it. That's what my grandfather would do."

And that's what he did the very next morning, which was exactly one week before the day he came in early by mistake and received a phone call from a Major at Tan Son Nhut who wanted to know if he was responsible for the special shipments of strategic materials that had begun to arrive on a daily basis.

"Of course I am," Chris shot back brusquely, proud of his new stature. "Doesn't it say so on the manifest?"

"Yeah, but I don't want to take the slightest chance of talking to the wrong guy. We need to get together to coordinate our plans."

"Oh," Chris responded in surprise. "Well, can you come to the embassy?"

"Are you nuts? No, I mean somewhere in private."

"Why don't you meet me at the Parisian Room? One o'clock sharp." he added authoritatively.

"A real pro," Major Bagwell admitted to himself admiringly. "Well, you don't get into the embassy business without having a little class in your act." It boggled his mind to think what kind of an operator this guy Porter had to be to even consider sending dope around to the different commands in five-point-nine boxes marked Strategic Material. He could do it and get away with it because it was under diplomatic immunity that Bagwell fully recognized as the way most illegal things got transported to make sure that it was the guys on the top of the heap who got to stay there rather than crumbs who came from the wrong side of the tracks. If the rumors of a big troop buildup in Vietnam were only a quarter true, this could be the scam of the century.

"Strategic Material, hell. Stuff like this could make a man rich overnight." That's what he told Mai Anh the night after he pried the lid off one of the boxes that came from a warehouse down by the river. "That's better than sending grenades to gooks who refuse to pay even half what Uncle Sam gets soaked by a bunch of money grubbing shyster arms dealers back home. But dope? Man, some of those snuffies with the thousand-yard stares would give half their pay to stay stoned from now until time to go home." As he talked, he began rolling a joint. "Some of those jokers would probably be willing to go into hock up to their eyeballs for this stuff." He produced a Zippo lighter, fired up, and dragged deeply with obvious relish. "It's great stuff. The best I've ever done."

Two joints, four hours, and thirty-one different positions later, Bagwell was ecstatic. "If marijuana, why not heroin," he asked of the inert form of Mai Anh who would take nearly a day to recover from the most incredible series of end-to-end orgasms she had ever experienced. "It takes up a lot less space and there's much less chance of it being spotted." Still, Porter was the man with the stash. "Let's see what kind of profit-sharing program he's got."

It wasn't until the next evening that Mai Anh reported Bagwell's revelation to Fat Duc who doubled her up with a punch to the solar plexus for failing to find out who the embassy contact was. It would not have occurred to either that Chris might be involved, because by then, neither was impressed by his intellectual attainments.

"It's too bad that his IQ is the same size as his dick," she told Fat Duc after the first night, "because it leaves him dwarfed at both ends."

The lunch crowd at the Parisian Room was rapidly thinning, leaving the place to Bagwell, Chris, and a few die-hard journalists who had already filed their stories for the day and were awaiting the daily nepenthean brown out.

"Marijuana,"Chris exploded, spraying Chicken Curry over several of the neighboring tables. "What do you mean marijuana?

"Ssh, goddammit! People are looking." Indeed, half the bleary eyes in the room were turned their way. "Keep your voice down. What did you think was in those boxes, sody pop?"

"Strategic materials. That's what I was told by Mr. . . . uh . . . by them." Bagwell groaned in disbelief while Chris began working up a righteous head of steam. "I'd never have gotten into this had I known. I'm going to go right back and tell them that I don't like it one bit. No sir! Not one bit." He started to rise.

"You know, I have half a mind to go to the press about this. Imagine using me to smuggle dope to All-American boys, I'm certainly glad you informed me, Major Bagwell."

"Hold on," ordered Bagwell in a low but menacing voice. "You mean you really didn't know what was in the boxes?" For several seconds, he was genuinely unable to come to grips with that possibility. "Let's think this thing through."

"Stay calm," he ordered himself. "Just keep it cool and we can come out of this smelling like a rose."

"Tell me, Mr. Porter, who are they?"

"Oh, I'm not at liberty to say, but they're very important people, I can promise that."

"Well look, let's get together with them to talk this over. Maybe there's something we don't know. The last thing we want to do is run off like a couple of idiots and blow some important program. You let me handle this. Maybe it's a test of some kind?

Actually it was and Childress had to laugh at Bagwell's petty attempt at blackmail.

"Harry Bagwell," Childress said pleasantly, studying a paper on his desk. "It says here that you supplement your $540.00 a month paycheck with another three grand or so every time you deliver arms and munitions to our enemy." He sat back smugly. "Is that substantially correct?" Major Bagwell's sense of purpose turned to instant terror. Visions of a firing squad loomed before his eyes. His starched khaki shirt dissolved into crumpled mush despite the painfully cold temperature in the office.

"And now you think that you're ready for the big time, so you dropped by to shake me down for a little piece of the action, is that about right?" Harry gave a little sob as he felt his bladder go.

"Actually, Harry, I was wondering how long it would take for you to tumble to the deal and see the possibilities. Now let me tell you what we're prepared to do." Harry's sphincter was next to go on strike, but Childress seemed to take no notice.

"First, this is chicken feed--hardly 500 pounds in all--but next year we'll be delivering five tons a week if all goes according to schedule, and within four years we'll be pumping out over twenty tons a day." Harry's breathing returned to more towards normal as the enormity of the situation began to penetrate his battered brain.

"Today, everything stays in this area, but starting next month we'll begin deliveries in Three Corps and then to Pleiku up in Two Corps the month after. Eye Corps will have to wait until next year, but by then we should have all the bugs worked out and it'll be Katie-bar-the-door."

"What we need are some trustworthy NCOs and a bunch of people who don't ask questions. That's where you come in." Harry's mind was in overdrive sorting out the people for the job. "We want you to put together a tight organization and make sure that it operates like clockwork."

"Yes sir, but you've got to give me a couple of days and I'll need help in getting some people transferred."

"Put together an organizational chart and budget and get me the names. I'll see that they get transferred . . . rather Chris will."

"What happens if this thing gets busted?"

"Who's to catch on? With diplomatic immunity we can keep the lid on from here and if someone down the line gets wise and tries to blow the whistle, we can pay him off or snuff him whichever seems appropriate."

"Who handles the collections?"

"What collections? I thought you understood that we're a non-profit corporation."

"Well, what about the end-user level? Don't they pay?"

"Maybe, but it'll be penny-ante stuff just to make it look legit, so don't let me hear that you're trying to get something going on that score. I don't care about the dealers at the unit level as long as they keep it cheap. A little profit is fine, but if we hear of someone taking advantage of the situation, we'll put a stop to it. Understand?"

"It sure is screwy, but it's your ballgame. What about this nincompoop Chris? Where does he fit into all of this?"

"Don't you worry about him, just make sure your own act is squared away. Anyway, he's our bailout position if it ever comes to that." Childress smiled again at the providence that had placed Chris, grandson of the great Crap into his hands. With Crap's power and connections, this deal couldn't be fucked by a fucking machine.

"Two things more, Harry," he cautioned, reaching into his desk drawer for an envelope. Don't say anything more to Mai Anh about this. She's got other things to worry about. More important is that you don't change your lifestyle. The money will be deposited to a numbered account, and it's my advice that you don't touch it until you're out of the program."

"Yes sir, you're the boss."

"Damn right, Harry. By the way, here's $500.00 walking around money to get your uniform cleaned. Shitty britches don't do a thing for your command presence.