

Dark Paradise



... Tails of The Snake

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A Snake Plissken zine



published by Last Minit Press, Edited by Nan Mack,
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"RITE OF PASSAGE" AND "THE PRICE OF SURVIVAL" ORIGINALLY APPEARED IN
REMOTE CONTROL #6.

THIS ZINE IS "R" RATED AND CONTAINS ADULT CONTENT.

THANKS TO: JUDI R. WHO DID IT FIRST, THE REST OF THE ORPHANS IN THIS
FANDOM, THE "GUYS" FOR PUTTING UP WITH ME AND TIMOTHY THE MOUSE
FOR ALWAYS HAVING THE FEATHER HANDY.

PLEASE EXCUSE THE MOMENTARY LAPSE OF CONCENTRATION ON THE PART
OF THE PUBLISHER THAT RESULTED IN THIS BLANK PAGE.

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CONSIDER IT AN INTERMISSION.

Rite Of Passage

by
Nan Mack

Snake Plissken rolled over on the thin, musty mattress, stretching out on his back with a groan. The bed was probably the most uncomfortable he'd ever slept in, but at least it was a bed. Indoors. The past week had been full of restless nights in abandoned buildings, on hard benches and in cold back alleys. Besides, he hadn't actually done any sleeping yet.

He boosted up and leaned back against the cheap plywood headboard. It gave under his weight, creaking loudly and waking the dozing woman who lay sprawled beside him. She raised her dark head and looked at him in drunken confusion. After a moment, dim recognition lit her mascara-smeared eyes and she dropped her head back to the pillow.

Plissken glanced at her indifferently and parked a cigarette in the corner of his mouth. He scratched a match to life on the nightstand beside him and lit up, taking a deep drag. Then he reached down beside the bed and retrieved a bottle of cheap liquor from the floor. Spinning the cap free, he upended the bottle, and sucked down a few mouthfuls as if it were water.

The scotch wasn't the best he'd had, that was for damn sure. It had taken more than half the bottle before the woman -- whose name he still didn't know -- had begun to look good to him.

She wasn't the best he'd had either. But she was good enough for what he'd wanted tonight. No doubt that was all she was good for.

She woke up completely and shifted position so that her bare breasts pressed against his hip through the sheet that covered him. He felt her lips touch his side and pointedly ignored it.

But he couldn't ignore her cool fingers as they slid over the flat of his belly, stopping to rest on the rearing cobra tattoo.

"Never seen anything like this before," she said, tracing around the outline with a scarlet fingernail. "Did it hurt much?"

A memory stabbed at Snake's brain. He snorted and took another swallow from the bottle. "Yeah," he replied finally, his voice as rough as the whiskey. "It hurt like hell."

Her hand crept along the length of the painted serpent, inching down the sheet as she went. "Jesus," she breathed, taking a good look. "How'd you ever come to get such a thing?"

Plissken turned his head toward her, fixing her with a withering blue gaze. But it was too late to stop the floodtide of recollection that her questions had brought on. He drank again, a generous mind-numbing gulp and closed his eyes as she rambled on.

"Damn, this is mean-lookin'..."

"Hey, Stevie, check it out, man. This one's really mean-lookin'."

Jack Barber's voice cut across the hum of the tall floor fan parked in the corner of Spider John's Tattoo Emporium. The overworked fan was no match for the brutal and relentless August heat. It blew a stale, listless breeze around the inside of the place, making more noise than cool air.

Spider John's was an old storefront in one of the seedier sections of town. It was underground,

with an entrance below street level and painted footprints on the sidewalk that led down to the front door. The inside was dark and smelled of damp wood, whiskey and cigarettes. The place had the nostalgic air of a secret clubhouse and had been in his hometown for as long as Steven Plissken could remember -- far longer than his twenty-one years. It went all the way back to when they still called the trade tattooing and not body art. This was his first time inside.

Steve crossed the room in response to his friend's summons, and the warped floorboards creaked under his feet with every step. On the walls hung colored illustrations of some of the more elaborate tattoos available and photographs of the Spider's best work. The prints fluttered lazily under the coaxing of the fan. On the worn oak counter, lay books containing more pictures. There were hundreds of choices. One thing was for sure, Steve thought, if he was going to go through with this, he was in the right place.

In the far corner, Jack pointed to a picture of a Bengal tiger, a good nine inches long, holding a writhing, bleeding eagle in his jaws. Steve snorted in disapproval, but his grin was easy-going.

"Christ, Jack," he said, turning away to look through one of the books. "I'm a glider pilot not a goddamn wrestler. Find somethin' with a little dignity, will ya?"

Glider pilot. Even after a crash course in Officer's Training School, three months of flight training and the wings he'd just gotten that morning, Steve -- now Lieutenant -- Plissken still had a hard time believing it. Not too many such dreams came true for him. Maybe that was why he was here, to remember the day with a permanent mark -- proof that it wasn't all just a young boy's fantasy.

The tattoo was almost required. It was like an act of camaraderie among the flyers. A rite of passage. So far, Steve was the only one in his flight class who hadn't done it. In the past, he'd resisted the drunken excursions with the rest of squad to the sleazy parlor just off the base. If he was going to do it, it would be in his own time and his own way, like everything else he did.

But now his time was running out. This leave was a short one. He had about forty-eight hours to get home for a quick visit with his parents before he took off for Europe to meet the war face to face. At least the war between nations. Home was often no less a battlefield. He flipped the pages of the book idly, suddenly seeing none of them.

Shoulda made this trip a surprise attack, he thought.

"Whoa!"

Jack's voice snapped him to attention again. This time, it was for a huge cobra, reared to strike. The hood was three inches across and the serpent slithered downward well over a foot before finally ending.

"You really gotta have balls to get that." Jack said with a chuckle. "So, whatcha gonna pick?"

Steve shrugged. His enthusiasm was gone. "Can't decide. Maybe I'll sleep on it."

"Ah, come on, Stevie --"

"Jack, I gotta be somewhere," Steve said, cutting him off. He smiled weakly. "Give me a lift home?"

Jack sighed and nodded. "Sure man, sure. What're friends for?"

Steve did a fast sprint down memory lane on the ride home, like an athlete prepares for competition. Sometimes it helped. He found the memories came easily lately. He didn't know why. Separation, maybe. It was funny, he'd wanted so much to be gone in the beginning, he was surprised to find out how much he'd missed his home. And his parents. Now, the good times buzzed around his consciousness like summer bees, making lazy circles in his thoughts. As Jack's car made its way through the endless expanse of wasted Midwestern farmland, he watched the sunset and flipped through them all, like he had the pictures in the tattoo shop.

There were summers at the airfield where he watched in silent awe as his father worked for

hours with the most uncooperative plane engines, finally seducing a purr from each of them with only the magic in his hands. It was there, first as a spectator and then later as apprentice to the magician, Steve discovered his own first love -- flying.

There were hunting trips and the rush of pride they shared on his first kill. It was followed by a long celebration and, the next morning, by the shared misery of his first hangover. There were baseball games and Christmas tree cuttings; there was the backyard treehouse and the money for his college tuition and the usual harmless conspiracies fathers and sons shared against the lone woman of the household. There were plenty of good times. Sure, plenty.

Steve was wearing the warmth of them on his face when he got to the back door. He yanked open the screen and peeked in the window, through an opening in the yellow ruffled curtains at the same time his mother did so on the opposite side. He heard her gasp out loud and she whipped the wooden door open just as his hand touched the knob. He managed to squeeze out a hello before she lit into him.

"God, Steven you nearly scared the life out of me!" she exclaimed, moving out of the way to let him enter. "Doesn't the Army teach you better manners than to skulk around back doors." There was a light, teasing tone to her voice and her eyes --- as blue as her son's --- sparkled as she spoke to him. She took a step back to look him over and then raised a hand to his face lovingly.

"Jesus, are you ever handsome in that uniform." She said it with a mixture of pride and loss and fear of the future and her eyes glistened.

A lifetime of tears and defeat had aged Claire Plissken's once pretty face early. The lines were the lingering shadows of secrets that she never gave voice. She wore her infrequent smile awkwardly, like a hand-me-down dress that never fit quite right.

Steve dropped his flight bag by the door and closed his arms around her gently. He was always afraid to hug her too tight. You never knew where it might hurt, so you touched slowly, tentatively. It was one thing they always had in common, that fragile, sad way of touching.

"Shh, Mom, come on," he whispered. "You're supposed to do this when I leave, not when I get here, remember?"

He felt her nod vigorously against his chest and then she pulled away, kissing his cheek. She wiped the tears away quickly, with practiced stealth.

"You must be tired," she said. "Go on, sit down, honey. I'll get you a cup of coffee. Did you have dinner? Are you hungry?"

In fact, the fatigue of traveling was beginning to creep up on Steve. He wasn't hungry but he could sure use the caffeine. "Coffee sounds great," he said. He dropped into a kitchen chair and tossed his cap on the table. "Where's Dad?"

"And who wants to know?"

His father's voice boomed like thunder from behind him. Steve twisted in the chair, then got to his feet, taking the hand of the man who filled the doorway.

He wasn't tall, just under six feet, but he was built, with muscles earned by hard work not working out. He'd let his hair grow again. No doubt it would have hung over the collar of his shirt, if he'd been wearing one. But it was too hot for that. Instead there was a fine layer of sweat on his bare chest. Scars that were his wartime souvenirs stood out against his summer tan.

The power in his grasp flowed through Steve like a current, as always. It was, at the same time, a loving and terrible strength. Those hands, thick and calloused, with the creases lined permanently in black engine grease, had saved him from a drowning death once, and wiped away his little boy's tears more than once. They had clapped for him in victory, built a home for him and worked for him all his life. They had also often made him wish he'd never been born.

"Well, whatta we got here?" George Plissken asked, grinning. "Soldier? No, wait --" He fingered

the gleaming silver wings pinned to Steve's uniform shirt. "Special Forces Pilot. Well, I'll be damned."

He clasped Steve by the shoulders warmly. There was amazement and something else in his voice. Steve couldn't tell what. Pride maybe? Maybe envy. He smiled.

"Hi, Dad."

George clapped him hard on the back, easing him back to the chair. "Been waitin' for you," he said, moving automatically to his seat at the head of the table. "Figured you'd call when you got off the hummer."

Steve felt his mother floating around behind him silently, keeping busy with the coffee. Was it his imagination or was there the abruptness of stifled resentment in her movements?

"I met Jack in town for a little while. He gave me a ride out here."

"Johnny Barber's kid? You still hangin' around with that deadbeat?" George snorted, shaking his head.

Steve looked away. "Ah, Jack's all right, Dad." Claire came around the table and set a cup of coffee before him. George laughed aloud. It was a harsh, loveless sound.

"Coffee? For crissakes, Claire. It's hot as hell in July out there. Get him a cold beer."

Claire froze with her hand on the cup. She looked at her husband and then at her son. "You don't want coffee?" she said to Steve.

Steve looked pained. *Who says you can't go home again?* he thought ruefully. Outside their door, the world moved as it always did, fast and in the wrong direction. Inside, time had stopped. Life here was a damaged record, where the same off-key notes repeated again and again and again. In the war that was fought here, Steve was ammunition, hostage and the victory spoils. He sighed helplessly, flanked as always by the divided factions of his battling family.

"Coffee's fine, Mom," he said.

"If you don't want it, just say so --"

He smiled up at her, trying to make it genuine, wanting to put everything right quickly. It was a delicate balancing act and he was out of practice.

"It's fine." He turned to his father. "Save the beer for later, Dad. We got plenty of time, okay?"

George shrugged. "Suit yourself. Thought you might be hot, is all. Me, I'm havin' a beer."

Without being told, Claire went to the refrigerator and emerged with a cold can. She placed it on the table in front of her husband dutifully, no joy in the gesture.

"How long can you stay, Steven?" she asked, pouring coffee for herself.

"I have to be back to the base day after tomorrow. We ship out on Saturday."

"Where they sendin' you off to, son?" George asked.

Son. A warm sensation spread through Steve at the sound of the word. It was a word his father used only in his better moods, when he felt generous and pleased with himself and his family. To Steve, it meant lack of shame at their kinship. Hearing it now made him proud and a little of his tension began to ease. He settled back in the chair.

"Helsinki. At least that's what they told me before I left. Things are changin' so fast, though, you never know." He chuckled. "Last week, they had a transport on the runway, awaiting final clearance, and changed their orders at the last minute. They had to haul it back in and start all over again. You believe that?"

His father snorted again. He tossed back half of the beer he'd just opened and stretched, rocking his chair on it's back legs. "Sure I do," he said with another harsh laugh. "Goddamn Army doesn't know their ass from a hole in the ground. Told ya that a million times. What've they got you flyin'? Fighters?"

Steve shook his head. "Nope. Glider. Somethin' new. It's called the Gulfire." He sat forward,

animated, as always by the subject he loved. "You should see it, Dad. It's light and sleek, black as midnight. All instruments, you know? Inside that cockpit, it's as quiet as a tomb. Just you and the plane. It's like you were one being. She can get in under radar, sneak right up on the target and then -- wham!" He smiled. "You'd love it."

George nodded. "What about her engine?"

"Real compact. Just a jet pack back by the tail section."

His father blinked, momentarily confused by the realization that time and technology had shot past when he wasn't looking.

"That's it?" he said.

Steve grinned. "That's it. Swear to God."

George drained the last of his beer. "Sounds kinda light on protection for the long battles."

Steve shrugged. "That's not what the Gulfstream's for. They have Slant Wings for that."

His father dropped the chair back to the floor with a scrape. "Maybe, but I'd like to know I had some power under me. You never know who's gonna be sneaking up behind you up there." He got up to go to the refrigerator himself this time. On his way, he pitched the empty can across the room to a paper bag by the back door. It landed dead center and he grinned.

"Ha. Good aim, huh? Maybe I should join up again, take on a few of those Russkies. Shit, they can't be any tougher than the Gooks we fought in 'Nam. You ready for that beer now?"

Steve peered down at the half-finished cup of coffee. It was getting cold anyway. "Sure, Dad," he said. His father fired a can at him from where he stood. Steve lifted a hand and caught it easily.

"Helsinki's very close to the Russian border isn't it?" Claire said. "That's where all the heavy fighting is."

Steve wanted to ease the worry in his mother's eyes, but couldn't. She was stating a plain fact. "Well, that's where they need me, Mom."

"You go where they tell ya," his father broke in. "Unless you got the clout to say otherwise. You shoulda done like I told you and stayed in college. Then you woulda been someone with clout. You coulda told them where you were going. You wait, they'll end up screwing you, just like they did me. One minor injury and they'll throw you away like so much garbage." He shook his head, popping open the new beer.

Steve closed his eyes. He was sitting in the front car of the roller coaster again, feeling his stomach drop as it began its slow, rocky climb. *Get out*, he told himself silently. *Get out now, before it reaches the top*. But he couldn't and he knew it. This time, though, it would be different. He would make it be different. He opened his own beer and took a long swallow.

"They aren't screwing me, Dad. It won't be the same as it was with you. It's a different time. A different war," he said, trying to keep his voice neutral. "And I am going where I want to. I want to fly. I love it. Didn't they commission me anyway, without a degree? I can finish my last year of college when I get out. Hell, the Army'll even pay for it."

George's eyes grew hard. "I don't need the goddamn Army to send my kid to college. I was doin' fine myself. Maybe I only made a aircraft mechanic's money, but there wasn't nothin' you ever needed that I didn't provide for you."

Steve stared at the top of his beer can a long minute. His father's feelings were easily injured after a few beers and his moods unstable and dangerous. And there was something lurking there, beneath the calm surface of his paternal interest. Steve never had been able to figure out what. He struggled to squelch the rising storm before it hit full force. Over the door, the electric clock whirled in the heavy silence.

Finally, he took a breath and helped himself to another swig. "I know that, Dad. I didn't say you didn't. But now you can take it easy, use some of that money for you and Mom."

"Now, there's a good idea," Claire broke in, her smile false and nervous, her voice high-pitched with strained cheer. She looked at her husband. "Let's not argue on Steven's last night, with us, please?" She turned to Steve. "What did you and Jack do in town, honey?"

Steve set the can on the table and turned it around as he spoke. "We stopped by Spider John's," he told her, laughing. "I'm thinkin' about gettin' a tattoo."

"What?" George's mouth dropped open and for an instant, hung that way. Oh, for crissakes --" he growled. He slammed an open palm on the table and Steve's beer can jumped under his hand. "Shit, the Army's really got you brainwashed, don't they?"

Steve felt a hot flush of embarrassment color his neck. "I'm not brainwashed," he said tightly. "It's a tradition. Most of the squad already has theirs."

"So, you gotta chase after the crowd like some stupid lemming. Christ, just like I told ya, the Army gets a hold of you and your brains turn to shit."

Like yours? Steve swallowed down the angry retort with the last of his beer. Not tonight. He was no longer George Plissken's smartass kid. He was a grown man. Army pilot. Second Lieutenant. He had the uniform and the wings to prove it. He wasn't gonna let the old man bait him tonight.

"C'mon, Dad, it's no big deal. It's just a tattoo."

"It's a fucking stupid idea and no kid of mine is gonna get one."

Steve glanced at his mother. Her face had taken on a numb expression, her eyes blank and glassy. He swallowed hard, suddenly deaf to the inside voice of caution that hammered at him. The roller coaster crested the first climb and tilted downward.

"I'm not a kid, Dad," he said quietly. "You don't make rules for me anymore."

It was a cue only Claire heard, one that switched on a warning light and a practiced response. She got up from the table and laid her cup in the sink. With no more life in her than a robot, she moved to the back door and closed it.

Don't, Mom. Please ... Steve felt a chill of irrational fear surface from somewhere in his damaged childhood at the sound of the closing door. *What goes on in our house is our business*, she would tell him calmly as if what went on was nothing worse than petty gossip. *The neighbors don't need to hear it.* Had that been her idea of protecting him, he wondered? Well, he didn't need her protection now. He was a man. He could take care of himself.

"I'm still your goddamn father, Mister Hot Shot Special Forces Pilot. I deserve your respect." George ranted. He got up for another beer. Steve saw the six pack was almost gone. "S'that what the Army taught you -- to disrespect your parents, huh? To spit on the people who raised you? When I was a kid I had respect for my old man."

Words fell from Steve's mouth before he could stop them. "Maybe because your old man wasn't a drunk." He clamped his mouth shut quickly, his hand clenched tight around the beer can. But it was too late.

"What?" his father demanded.

"Nothin' Dad. Sorry. I'm kinda tired, is all."

George spoke in a clipped, cold tone, his expression solidifying into something dark and ugly, something from a young boy's nightmare.

"What ... did ... you ... say?"

The look alone shot fear down Steve's spine and he hated himself for allowing it. He wasn't the little boy who was so easily bullied by this brute who disguised his cruelty behind the guise of discipline. In basic training and at flight school, he was the tough guy, the one who could take any punishment but never any shit. He liked that image. Liked it a lot.

He pushed his chair back and took note of his bag behind the door. Guess he'd worn out his welcome already. A new record. *Not a surprise attack*, he thought bitterly. *Should have aborted this*

mission altogether.

He looked around for his mother, knowing he wouldn't see her. His family lived by their animal instincts. Survival above all. At the first sign of danger, she would scurry off to a place of safety, to protect herself from the fallout of her husband's rage. Had there been a time, long ago, that she did try to defend her child? Did constant failure make her afraid to try anymore? Or had she just sacrificed him eagerly, grateful for another victim to ease her pain? A sudden rush of hatred and guilt flowed into him, and his blood sang with anger.

"I told you. It wasn't anything. Just forget it." he said, the hold he kept on his temper starting to slip.

George got to his feet slowly, the six pack of beer he'd swallowed evident in the way he swayed when he stood. He glared at his son. "You tell me what you said, you spoiled little sonofabitch," he snarled. "Or I'll take your fuckin' head off."

Steve made himself meet those frightening eyes, as cold and deadly as a shark's. He let the uniform give him strength and pictured himself in it, strong and in control. But still he shook as he spoke.

"Ah, shit, you heard what I said. I said you were a goddamn drunk. Don't preach to me about respect. You want respect? You gotta earn it. That's what the Army taught me."

He felt the wild, exhilarating feeling of freedom that he always felt when he stood up to his father. It was the roller coaster again, plummeting down at full speed, glorious and terrifying. As a kid he sought it like a junkie craves dope. It was one of the few pleasures he enjoyed and small compensation for the abuse. Back then, he paid for the rush dearly. But not anymore. George hadn't laid a hand on him since he was seventeen, since he was old enough and strong enough to be a threat of his own. Their battles were verbal now, and that was bad enough.

"They didn't teach you a friggin' thing," his father growled. He came around the table like a wounded bear, lurching from the alcohol. "You're still nothin' but a smartmouth bastard."

Steve whirled, glaring at his father in his most familiar form. His own hurt was in full bloom now. "Like hell, old man," he said, tugging at the wings pinned to his own chest. "Just like you said: I'm a 'Hot Shot Special Forces Pilot', which is a damn sight more than you ever were. I'm not sittin' on the ground, sweatin' over engines, eaten up with jealousy, wishin' I could fly. I'm *doin'* it."

Claire came out of nowhere, her eyes reddened, her face pinched with fear. She clutched her husband's arm. "Please, George, take it easy, please. Don't work yourself up like this." For an instant, her weak pleading made Steve sick with disgust and loathing.

George barely looked at her. He raised his arm even as she held tight to it, and flung it away from his body, sending her flying through the door to the living room. She stumbled and landed in a sprawl on the worn carpet.

"Oh, Jesus," Steve said, moving from the kitchen to his mother's side. "What the hell'd you do that for?" he screamed. "She's not a part of this." She was on her knees, crawling away when he lifted her to her feet. She clung to him desperately.

George looked at his wife and son without awareness. Steve felt his mother pull out of his arms and retreat to a corner. He was alone, as always, staring into the madman's eyes. Whatever pride and love he'd ever seen there was gone. Now there was only pain and fury. Steve recognized it well. Those same feelings had a place in his heart, too. But unlike the son, the father no longer felt anything else.

"She's a part of this household," George said in a deathly calm tone. "And I'm the head of this household. And I want respect from this household. Your mother respects me, she does what I say. And if you forgot how, then I'll just have to give you another lesson."

Steve swallowed hard. His mouth was dry as the desert. Maybe his father thought he could

scare the little boy with that threat but not the man. Steve twisted his mouth up into a cold grin. "Yeah, right," he sneered contemptuously, turning away. "*Fuck you.*"

It was the wrong thing to say -- as always -- the one intolerable insult that broke down all his father's fragile barriers of reason. Steve knew it as soon as the words passed his lips. He spun around quickly, instinctively wanting to apologize but it was too late. His father's backhand slap caught him halfway through the turn, staggering him. He stared, momentarily paralyzed with shock. Blood oozed from his split lip. The feel of his father's hand on him -- never completely forgotten -- came rushing back to him and his face turned crimson with humiliation. The blow was a spark igniting his own buried hate and the fire blazed hot and bright and frightening.

"Don't --" he said, his voice trembling. "You son of a bitch, don't you touch me again."

His father's eyes narrowed until they were barely slits in the florid face. "You're my son and I'll do what I damn well please," he said. "Until you show me some respect."

Steve fought the volcano of emotion erupting inside him. *Forget it, just forget it*, he chanted. *Get out. Cut your losses.* He turned away, to head for the kitchen. And the way out.

"Go to hell," he spat over his shoulder.

George clamped a hand down on his arm, his grip like a vice. He spun his only son around, directly into the path of a clenched fist as solid as a cannonball.

The punch rocked Steve and he careened backwards, landing hard on the floor. The light dimmed and his ears rang from the force of the blow. He shook his head to clear it, struggling to get to his feet. He made it as far as his knees before he felt that powerful grip in his hair and then the fiery sting of an open hand slap to his face.

Blood trickled from his nose and dripped silently on to the newly starched uniform shirt. His father released him and he stayed on his knees, dazed. From somewhere far away, he heard his mother sobbing but it was as useless as his own empty threats had been. Behind him, his father's voice pounded at him,

"I'll show you who deserves respect. And it ain't no pansy-ass glider pilot with no balls. That uniform don't mean shit."

Steve struggled to hold on to the light and to the dignity his uniform had given him. But it was gone now and he saw himself a child again, beaten and defeated, on his knees. Bitter bile rose up and burned his throat and his eyes stung.

All the hurt and shame of a tortured childhood flooded through him, filling the place where the flame of his hatred flickered weakly. He let each feeling stoke the fire and it surged with every remembered word; with every blow; with every drop of shed blood. Within moments, it blazed bright and strong, all-consuming and deliciously powerful. He fed off of it, drawing strength and comfort.

"For chrissakes, get up."

Steve did. He exploded off the floor with a roar, finally giving voice and form to years of impotent rage. He swung hard, with purpose and intent and felt his balled fist connect with his father's jaw. His heart leapt as George reeled from the blow and at the same time, his stomach rolled in horror.

But he didn't stop. He followed the first blow with another and another, rejoicing in triumph as his father stumbled across the room, grabbing for the table, breaking a lamp, his face etched in numb surprise. His mother's cries had turned to screams but he ignored them, as she had ignored his in the past, intoxicated by the dangerous, seductive strength of his anger.

Finally, his father fell, groaning in pain, his bluster and bravado gone. Breathing hard, Steve watched as he cowered beside the sofa, bloody and quiet. The hands that had done that damage -- his own hands -- shook badly and he stared at them. Violence had been the predominant lesson of

his childhood and he'd learned the lesson all too well. A moan of revulsion and grief welled up from the deepest part of his soul and he looked away.

"Oh, Jesus, God, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

He found his mother's eyes and saw resignation and sadness in them. And he saw the same terrible fear that was always there when she looked at his father. Nausea rose up in him like a wave and he backed out of the room, stumbling through the kitchen. He grabbed his hat and flight bag and ran from the house, leaving the door open.

He made it as far as the porch, then he leaned over the white painted railing and threw up in his mother's rose bushes. When he was done, he drew a hand across his mouth and walked down the driveway to the main road.

Two hours and three rides later, he staggered from the bar where he'd spent his last night at home, dragging himself along the building face, past the doorway and along the plate glass window of the dry cleaners next door. Stumbling his way down the block with his flight bag in one hand and the unfinished bottle in the other, he made it to Spider John's without once falling down. He followed the painted footprints down to the dark, cavernous hole, pushing the door open with a violent shove. It rattled under his strength and he stepped inside, slamming it behind him.

The place was empty of customers. The door to the back room opened and a huge man appeared in the doorway. His hair was absent in the front, but long in the back, tied in a ponytail. Every spare inch of exposed skin was covered with tattoos. He looked like the bouncer in a biker bar. He was forty, maybe fifty years old and on the wide, muscular expanse of his chest was an elaborate spider web, with a deadly black widow perched in the upper corner.

"Spider John himself," Steve said aloud, glancing around the room.

The man looked at him sympathetically. "Can I help you, son?"

Steve's blue eyes turned to ice. "Don't call me that," he slurred. He dropped the bag, but held tight to the bottle and took a few more wobbly steps into the room. "I'm nobody's son anymore. Came to celebrate that." He grinned. "I want a tattoo."

John held up his hands in peace. "Fine," he said agreeably. "That's what we do here. What's it going to be?"

Steve looked around the room, his bleary gaze falling on the huge cobra Jack had spotted earlier. *You really gotta have balls to get that ... No kid of mine is gonna get one ... pansy-ass pilot with no balls ...* The choice was easy.

"That one," he said, pointing to the cobra.

Spider John raised his eyebrow skeptically. "This your first one?" Steve nodded, already starting to unbutton his shirt.

"Maybe you want to start out with something smaller?"

"Nope."

The man shrugged. "Back here." He pointed through another doorway to a padded table. Steve peeled off the blood-stained shirt, tossing it away. Next he unzipped the pants and stripped to his shorts. He stretched out on the table on his back. The vinyl was cold against his sweaty skin.

John looked at him again. "Not your back?"

Steve shook his head. "Nope. I want it right where I can see it every day. Every goddamn day." He took another swallow.

"Save some of that," Spider John warned as he prepared his equipment. "This is gonna hurt like hell."

Steve's voice was hard. "Just fuckin' do it, man."

The first needle burned like fire. It made him wince, squeezing a hot tear from his eyes. For an hour he lay there, enduring the pain in absolute silence, the way he'd been taught. He kept

drinking, waiting for the awful pictures in his head to fade, but they didn't. They repeated over and over and over again. And with each touch of the needle, each searing prick, he felt the bitter sting of his father's hand.

The woman sighed in frustration and rolled away from Snake, pouting. He looked at her for a moment, apathy the only emotion visible on his hard features.

"C'mon," she whined. "Talk to me." Plissken wondered if the bed was worth listening to that whine. Well, he wouldn't be listening to it much longer. He swallowed down the final mouthful of scotch and dropped the bottle to the floor. The stuff had finally done its job. His brain felt numb and soft, and thinking was getting difficult. He wished remembering hadn't been so easy.

She continued to stroke the tattoo without response. "You're not gonna tell me how you got it, are you?"

Without a word, he turned his back to her. Her hand dragged listlessly over his side and flopped to the bed. He heard her sigh in disappointment and he closed his eyes to it, shutting her out completely. Pulling the sheet over him, he surrendered to sleep, bracing himself for the nightmares.



RE: Plissken

by
Sylvia Stevens

Text of an unread memo which fell off a desk and into a wastebasket:

FROM: Lt. S.D. Plissken

TO: Col. J.L. Davis

Dec 17 1991

Sir: I respectfully request two weeks holiday leave from duty. There are personal matters which must be dealt with at home and I need to get back to attend to them. Due to the recent Time Magazine article about Black Light, there are rumors circulating. One in particular, that I plan to quit the Army and go into politics, I specifically wish to put an immediate stop to. I need to return to see about that idiotic story that says (continued on next page)

Text of the remaining memo page found on Colonel J.L. Davis' secretary's desk:

--Lt. S.D. Plissken is dead. There is no further information at the moment. Family has been contacted, but I need you to notify the Unit. I will make the arrangements for the return to the States. Thank you for your attention in this matter.

S.D.

MEMO to Cpl. Paul Lewis, Secretary to Col J.L. Davis

Dec 17- Paul; I'm leaving for Xmas vacation soon. Handle all the regular stuff for me until I get back, OK?

Col. Davis.

Text of a letter from Company L Headquarters in Helsinki, Finland to the Joint Chiefs of

Staff: Pentagon:

December 18, 1992

FROM: Col. J. L. Davis

TO: Gen. Robert C. Chamberlain

Sir: Below is the updated list of men killed in action on the recent Siberian Campaign.

Lt. William J. Collins
Lt. Steven D. Plissken
Cpl. Randolph Prohaska
PFC. Calvin D. Homer
PFC Adam R. Mattson

Please notify families and add these men to the next published list of casualties in the Russian Front Operation. Purple Hearts for all.
(letter typed by Cpl. Lewis. Stamped signature, Col. Davis)

Text of a note to Sgt. William Taylor from Lt. S. D. Plissken:

Sarge.

How was your New Year? I didn't get my leave after all. Never heard from Ironbutt. Something strange is going on. I just checked my account and my pay hasn't been deposited. It's already January 5 and two checks have bounced. Can you look into this?

Thanks!

Snake.

Text of a note to Lt. Plissken from Sgt. Taylor:

Sir:

I just checked with Central and they say you were killed in action. I tried to tell the idiot on the phone you were OK, but he insisted they got some official notification from Old Ironbutt. Your pay's been suspended. What should I do?

Bill T.

To: Col. J.L. Davis
From: Lt. S.D. Plissken:
January 14, 1992

Sir. I have just been notified that there is a casualty report from your office which lists me as having been killed in action. I am very much alive! Please notify the Pentagon.
Lt. S.D. Plissken

Notice placed in Company L Bulletin for February 1992:

Colonel John Davis will be rotating back to the States and will not return from his current holiday leave. Until his replacement arrives, all correspondence will go to Base Commander Jackson.

Text of a letter from Lt. S.D. Plissken to Paymaster, United States Army Russian Sector:

February 5th 1992

Sir. There has been a mistake and I have been reported as killed in action. Please note that the report is in error and I am taking steps to correct the situation. Please reinstate my pay.
Lt. S.D. Plissken

From the desk Of Major Randall Johnson:

March 20, 1992
RE: the death of Lt. S.D. Plissken:

Lt. Plissken:

It is not possible to reinstate the service payments of Lt. S.D. Plissken. Lt. Plissken was killed in action in December of 1991. He has been awarded the Purple Heart posthumously. Please accept my sincerest condolences on the death of your family member.

Maj. R. Johnson

Note from Lt. Plissken to Sgt. Taylor:

Sarge, can you lend me a few bucks? Those fucking assholes at the Pentagon won't change my records until Col. Davis tells them I'm alive! He's gone to God knows where and the damn bank's closed my

account! My mails been stopped. I've been on the phone all afternoon but everybody insists I'm officially dead. This is crazy!

Snake

Text of a letter to the President of the United States of America, Commander In Chief of the Armed Forces: Soviet American War:

FROM: Lt. S.D. Plissken, Company L, Helsinki, Finland
April 2nd 1992

Mr. President, Sir:

It has been erroneously reported that Lt. S.D. Plissken has been killed in action. The report is in error and Lt. Plissken is very much alive. I am returning the Purple Heart medal (enclosed). Please remove my name from the rolls of the deceased.

Respectfully,
Lt. S.D. Plissken

FROM: the White House, Washington D.C.
TO: Lt. S.D. Plissken
5/17/92

Dear Mr. Plissken:

Thank you for your recent letter and gift for the President. While the President cannot acknowledge gifts and letters directly, I am pleased to tell you that he is very aware of the patriotic support of citizens such as yourself. Please know that the President acknowledges and is grateful for the effort and sacrifice of the men and women in the Armed Services.

Sincerely, Janice Goldman
Secretary to the President

Text of a letter to Col K.R. McNerney from Lt. S.D. Plissken

June 29, 1992

Sir: It has been six months since I was reported dead. Please tell the Pentagon that I am still alive! My pay has been frozen, the PX has stopped my account and I am being billed for a military funeral.

Please rectify this matter at once.

Lt. S.D. Plissken

Text of a reply to Lt. S.D. Plissken from Col. MacInerney:

July 7th 1992

I don't know who the Hell you are, but Lt. Plissken is dead. You are hereby ordered to cease and desist at once from impersonating Lt. Plissken! If you do not leave the base at once, you will be escorted from it by the MP's delivering this letter.

Col MacInerney

Text of a letter from Steven Plissken to Bill Taylor:

August 24, 1992

Hi, Bill! Got here safely. Thank your folks for wiring me the money to fly back home. This is awful. Mom was a wreck and Dad wants to sue the Army for damages. They sent him a letter of condolence. I am going to go in person to talk to Col. Davis in Cleveland and get this shit straightened out!
Snake

Text of a Letter to Col. J.L. Davis to Col. K.R. MacInerney

August 29th, 1992

Ken, you damned fool, what is this I hear about Lieutenant Plissken Being dead?! He just left my office a few minutes ago and he's alive and Breathing! The minute I turn my back, it seems the whole God damned PLACE falls apart. He's going to be on the next transport back to Helsinki and this mess had better be straightened out completely. Oh, and tell Darlene I loved the cookies.

Jack

Text of a notice placed on the bulletin board in the mess hall of Company L, Helsinki Finland:

Effective September 19, 1992

TO ALL:

Lieutenant S.D. "Snake" Plissken will not be on duty as he is in the stockade for being AWOL and for falsifying his own death. He will return to duty when this matter is settled.

Col. K.R. MacInerney

From the Prison Diary of S.D. Plissken

Day 23 of my Sentence. The God Damned Army still insists I faked my own death. Memo that started this mess was in my handwriting. If I ever get out of this fucking mess, I'm gonna take some of these pompous assholes WITH me!

Col MacInerney says that they cannot spare me, though, there is some kind of action planned for Monday. Some mission over Leningrad. I'll be released for that and this whole matter will come up for a full review after we get back to Base.

I hope so. Things just couldn't get much worse.

"Gassed Light"

by
Kim August

U.S. Med Unit, Helsinki, Finland

A series of ungodly sounds cut through his slumber: rumbling basso tones, high-pitched whines, Berrigan's voice drenched in details of Black Light's mission, the whoosh of the Gulfstream squadron gliding towards their quarry. Images flashed in sync to the noise, constantly punctuated by explosions of orange, yellow and red. As always, everything faded into a sea of crimson. These visions slammed his half dormant mind. Through the cacophony he could hear the distinct noise of a body thrashing. Was it his own?

As if listening to this subliminal suggestion, his taut frame shifted violently in the bed where he lay. *Bed? Last thing I remember, we were over Leningrad goin' in.* He rolled over again, noticing the mattress he was presently stretched out on was not the usual Army cot. A couple of hours lying on its standard issue stiffness was like being strapped down to a torture rack. Despite his rank of Lieutenant, he didn't have the privilege of a new mattress, not even now. Here he was, lying smack dab on a *downer* that wore the softness of at least one prior occupant and the unwelcome metallic stench of blood. Blood meant pain and death. Was he dying?

A detached voice cut through the air, it was muffled, not in the room with him. Still he could make out the words. "Serpent, aye it lies there in that room. The cobra on his tum, coom ta life it will ... heh, heh. That I will see! See the Reptile rise before me." Suddenly, the tone changed. "NO! Get away from me bitch Inquisitor! I will not bow to your faith. Stay away from me! No, NO needles---ugh!"

British and not at all sane. A Crazy! Where the hell was the Lieutenant? A loud thunk resonated outside his room. All became quiet.

Again his thoughts turned inward. *A bed, Crazies, blood. Open your eyes see! Where am I? Open your eyes!* Frantically, the youthful C.O. bolted upright. The room was in half total darkness, half dimly lit. Strange. His sharp blue gaze caught what looked like a worn partition not far from where he lay. His large hands exploded from his side, finding and grasping iron bars that framed the bed. Looking down he saw he was wearing a sterile white gown. That clinched it.

"A hospital, a fucking hospital!" Lt. S.D. Snake Plissken growled. He spied what looked like scrubs at the foot of his bed. Quickly Snake removed the gown. Hospitals were anathema to him, the gown a physical reminder of that. He tossed the top aside and allowed himself only the pants.

"A hospital ..." the word fell into a moan. With the revelation of where he was came pain. Pain like he'd never known, a wave of queasiness permeated his senses. He didn't want light, almost afraid of finding out how he wound up here. His left eye was throbbing horribly, as if it would burst and fall out of the socket. Snake shook his head, attempting to banish the pounding fire. He felt the now shaggy mane touching the base of his skull. He never wore his hair in the voluntary militant buzz, but it hadn't been this long in 'Grad. *How long have I been here?* Scratching at his chin brought another new sensation, the veil of beard.

A hospital! Long enough for the hair and chin to grow! Where was Taylor and the rest of Black Light? It didn't make sense -- the Crazies, the eye pain. Was he going insane?

The throbbing in his head was constant and getting worse. Each pulse brought him closer to buckling down. His mind raced. What was going on? A pain he couldn't banish, a future uncertain. He dropped his head into his hands and tried deep breathing to relax and hopefully aid in nullifying the



agony threatening to shut down his body. He trembled. *Am I losing it? Will I be fuckin' nut job like that Limey outside the room?*

His large fingers began to massage the temples. The darkness seemed to move in around him, swirling, getting thicker like fog. He tried not to let his thoughts be tainted with the black about him. The rubbing of the temples continued, to -- *please!* --relieve a little of the pressure. The left side wasn't responding. In fact, it was doing just the opposite. As his fingers probed, the pain became more pronounced.

Snake's fingers went astray, moving down the from the temple to what should have been the eye socket. His digits struck something else, something foreign. *Cloth ...* Plissken repeated the action numerous times to make sure he wasn't hallucinating. Every time he struck the cloth and the band that held it in place. *A patch.*

Hell was here. Crazies outside his door, the pain, the patch. He began to breathe deep again, as the minutes of repetition strengthened him for the final blow. Daring to go beneath the fabric, it gently gave way to the godawful truth. Scar tissue, thick and web-like ran about the eyelid and socket. The organ itself was barely intact, a gentle tap of what was the remnants of the iris revealed a thick white membrane. It veiled the pupil completely. Bile rose to the back of his throat. His fingers retreated from underneath the patch. *Dead ... it's dead!*

His mind drifted back to the morning that Black Light rained fire flares down upon Leningrad. Orange-yellow-red and in the center, Berrigan. The architect of his present and future pain. The Commander's plans sounded like a no-win situation. Snake and Sargent Bill Taylor knew this. But duty was duty. And they obeyed. A soft rattle of air escaped his lips, the Lieutenant sighed. *Dead ... pretty much fuckin' sums up my state.*

Snake didn't hear the door open as he was lost in thought, his head again cupped in massive hands. His good eye peered out from the fingers, he couldn't see clearly in the barely lit room and his peripheral vision was now non-existent. That scuffle he heard beyond his room only moments before gave way to an eerie silence. It bothered Plissken that it was too quiet. With Crazies in the hospital, Snake had to be on guard. The hairs on the nape of his neck perked up. Now, light would help. There had to be a switch around somewhere. Kneeling on the mattress with his face to the wall, Snake began probing the cracks and paint-chipped areas closest to the bed. Like a blind man, he cautiously groped the stucco. Light would snap his senses to attention.

Too quiet, he thought as his fingers struck pay dirt, the toggle and something else. Something slimy, stringy and unpleasant.

"What the devil?!" the Lieutenant hissed.

He flipped the switch and light flooded the room in all its sanitized glory. It also defined the horror swaying before Snake. Hair and the tangled remains of a bloody I.V. tube were gripped in Plissken's left hand. The other end was attached to the most ghoulish-looking creature the Snake had ever seen. Clumps of predominately white-gray hair; chest-length, thin, dirty, dead.

"Jesus!" Plissken rasped, letting go of the mess as if it were poison ivy. He stared blankly at his quarry, refusing to show fear even though his present state left him less than bold.

"Wow! A man of many faiths are you! Right on! Tell me now, what faith is the serpent on your tum? The one you charmed friend. Black, black, yesssss!" The Crazy pointed lovingly at the cobra tattooed on Snake's washboard hard middle.

The basso deep, almost melodious accent was the only pleasant thing about the wraith. It looked wasted, almost ancient. The tangled full growth of ashen beard threw the already angular face further into decay. Its dark violet eyes locked with Plissken's one-eyed glare. There was a youthfulness in their gaze and in the thing's voice. But the skin was almost the pallor of death and stretched tight over the skull.

Despite its appearance, this was no old man, rather a boy barely out of his teens struck with at least three different bio-chems causing him to rot prematurely. The scrubs the kid wore were beige and self-adorned with a hand painted symbol: The top of it had a loop like the eye of a needle and it was inside a flaming heart. Plissken saw a crimson stain smeared all about the outfit, and looked again at the

youth's face. In particular he fixed on those violet eyes. The Lieutenant stared, untrusting. Already in this stage of his military career, the Snake had seen enough gas-damaged people to know not to let down his guard. He continued eye contact with the ghoul, now focusing on the red-stain about the fur-lined, blistered lips, trying to recall the gas...

His unwanted guest did not like the silence, its piercing purple eyes narrowed. They wore the fire of instability, insanity. Plissken steadied himself, watching in fascination as the wraith suddenly smiled. It was the grin of a demon, right down to the deep red stain that shrouded the broken fang-like teeth. The crimson stain dripped off the teeth like drool. It smelled of blood.

"Blood I see, Blood is me! Blood makes me strong. So strong my friend," the boy cackled. Snake saw there was more than blood. Little bits of fleshy gore spewed forth as the creature sing-talked. "Blood is the life, the energy of ritual! Magick on high, like your serpent brother! I need it! Want it, it will bring me to the promised path of immortality! Just like me Masters, the Templar! Perchance you wish a bit, cobra?" the youth railed as he held up a horribly ravaged sinewy arm full of gory teeth marks.

Blood lust! Christ! Snake's mind shrieked. It's Russkie Red, Thirst 9 Gas! So all those holo news reels from the Middle East and the Netherlands were true. Visions of Arabs and Dutch people tearing themselves and others apart came to mind. Biting, kicking, ripping, gouging themselves on blood. It was like a bad horror movie. Thirst 9 poisoned your own life force, turning precious oxygen into carbon dioxide, as the tainted blood devoured your insides slowly, it brought death not life. As if this cancerous reaction wasn't enough, the victim became vampyric, craving pure, untainted blood. And this kid before me is possessed by its insanity big time!

"You silent serpent, join me in the feast. We are of darkness friend! Coom have a bit, I won't mind the touch of your fangs and forked tongue," the youth chuckled again waving his ravaged arm before Snake.

"No. Thanks. Liquid fire is more my bag." Snake heard movements outside the room. Commotion, screams. He hoped it was some sort of med worker, someone who could get Little Dracula the fuck out of here.

A shape loomed at the door, forcing Plissken to rear into a defensive stance, keeping distance from the ghoul and enough space to evade the possible threat outside. He grabbed a large pitcher from the night table not far from his bed. The door creaked open, revealing a young RN. She was lithe and well built; a backpack slung on her form only accentuated her curves. For a moment Snake forgot the Crazy only meters away. She looked over at Snake and then at the Lieutenant's unwanted guest.

Striding over to both men, she scolded the young Briton. "Damen Gregori Quist, I suspect you're working overtime today! Those dead attendants outside--"

"Witchfuckkinfinders lady! They won't have me!" He growled low. "Neither will you!"

Snake shook his head. When the fuck did he win a part in the Twilight Zone? He stayed locked in that stance, his trust all but zilch.

"You didn't hurt him." She said pointing to Snake.

That's right baby, give the little bloodsucker a reason to bite me. Plissken glared at her.

The Crazy laughed. "Ya have got to be kidding me, Virgin! This serpent aligned with me! We both be of the Black arts, he's the cobra and I am the warlock. Servin' the Aquarian Master baby! And you should know I like my blood from the pure, the Christian, from Virgins! Into me mouth, aye Dark Master!" He growled again. "Come hither baby!" He lunged for the Nurse, grabbing her arm with a speed that surprised Snake.

The girl was faster though, wielding a huge hypodermic needle like a cross, and quickly injected a sedative into his arm. Damen fought but it was no use, his tall, wispy form shaking from the potent drug. His grip faltered almost immediately.

"Cripes woman! Saved by your faith again. I don't even get nibble of your pretty flesh. The sweetness of your blood ... Shit!" He slumped to the floor unconscious. Plissken watched intently as the Nurse tore off her pack, and quickly extracted a straight jacket and some sort of mouth restraint.

She worked quickly, stuffing the Thirster into the jacket. She continued, jamming the restraint into its mouth. Snake still glared her. And feeling the heat she looked up at him. An apology the first thing

out of her mouth.

"I'm sorry, sir. We can't contain some of the civilians. Like this one, Quist, he's killed a number of attendants already. We've tried everything: solitary, sedatives, manacles. He always seems to slip out. This ward, the military area was unbreachable. I don't know how he got in. He's fast, strong, slipping in and out like, ah, snakes." She stammered as she caught a glimpse of Plissken's tattoo.

"Uh-huh. Well, I think you better tighten up your security. Enough about your boyfriend's Twilight Zone baby, how'd I wind up here! Where's my squad. Black Light?"

The boyfriend crack upset her, blocking any personal information she knew and her reply was vague. "Black Light? Your squad Sir?"

He nodded.

"I don't know. All I remember about other soldiers coming in were you and one other. One leg had been shattered in an emergency landing. I remember that because I worked on his leg, and you ... I don't know. I'm sorry."

She was scared of Snake. More so than the Crazy, there was no gas to blame his fury on, and she knew he wasn't insane. She looked at his chart, saw his rank, name. "Lieutenant Plissken, I will try to find the doctor that worked on you."

She was anxious to leave but Snake wouldn't let her go until her answers satisfied him. "This other soldier, still here? Male? Female? Give me somethin' to work with babe. I'm already half in the dark." He growled tapping the eye patch, then made a move toward her.

It scared her into remembering details. "A man, little, sort of weak-looking but very tough. He has a real interesting tattoo. A Man-o-War jelly fish attacking a Russian Black Bear."

"The Sarge. Taylor!" Snake cut her off. "I gotta see him."

"Yes, I'll check on your friend Taylor. The ushers will be around to collect Damen soon." Wasting no time, she made toward the door.

"Hey!"

She jumped and looked back at him. Snake stared at the name tag on her chest. "Kyla, thanks." He saluted her. She nodded and quickly fled

Snake watched her amble out of the room. In a way, she reminded him of a few of the women in Black Light. Strong, fast, intelligent and sexy. *You and one other. Taylor, shit! What the hell happened up there over 'Grad? What the fuck went wrong?* His mind tried to concoct answers but he didn't know. The entire event was foggy: the loss of a working eye, the deaths of the squad. Nothing came to him.

Coughing broke Plissken's train of thought. Just as Kyla said, this Thirster before him was hard to control. He was coming to. Snake watched as Quist spit out the retainer along with a couple of rotting teeth. He looked up at the obviously angry Snake and recognized the emotions that kept him going.

"Heh heh, brother. Revenge, the most lovely of emotions ... you're burning with it, ooooh! Yes, serpent we walk the same path you and I! Both cursed by the Clergy of Light, both wanting so bad to destroy them ... get back..."

This was all Snake needed to hear right now. He tried ignoring the Briton's banter. They just weren't the same. Snake wasn't insanely high on revenge. The kid had it all wrong in his deteriorating mind; those chemicals ravaging his brain and flesh. He changed the subject, hoping it would calm the blood hunger building in the Crazy.

"S'you're a Wizard or something huh?" Snake asked, playing along with the lunatic.

"Yes, a Necromancer. Defying death, so I can live forever! Blood, helps this yes. Satisfies the Aquarian Master, and me. Oh! I had such great teachers Cobra! Yes, Faust, Merlin, Saruman! And Morgan Le Fay, and the greatest of them all the Knights Templar!" the boy stood up proudly in a spell casting stance. "Mmmm yeah, doth fucked the knowledge outta that witch Le Fay numerous times. What a good bitch. I helped her bring down Arthur y'know. With the bones of his father, heh! But nothing, serpent, nothing was like learning from me Masters the Templar and their God!"

"Right ..." Snake was still holding the pitcher.

"It's true. They've visited me and told me, I'm a Master, my blood drinking confirms it. And that I'll live long after you're only dust and a memory Serpent! Blood to live forever just like the Templar! You know, I'll be more than gracious and teach you. We are alike serpent! Yes, teach you the secrets of

immortality! Doon'tcha wanna live forever?"

"No ..." the Snake hissed through clenched teeth.

"You can't tell me you're not interested in never dying. Imagine it. All the pain you could cause, all the pussy you can eat. I prefer dead pussy m'self. Imagine it free from death..."

Snake shut out the words. The Briton's banter got more disgusting with each new revelation. Time to end this talk. "Catches up to everyone. You'll die too Damden."

"It's Damen, you fool! Address me proper Serpent or I'll curse I will, send you back into the egg of the Mother Snake and leave you there!"

There a was a rage consuming those eyes. Snake watched the youth shaking the bones that hung on his hips. Charms. Or the remnants of last night's chicken dinner. Whoopee ...

"I'm real scared kid." Plissken mocked, now getting angry at himself for talking to this lunatic a second time. Maybe that was the curse. "You'll die."

"Oh really? Who the fuck are YOU. Serpent: Death Himself-like?" The Briton was furious, and beginning to fight his way out of the jacket. Madness was overtaking him.

"Maybe ... but I'll out live you."

"Bullshit! You're a mortal."

"Your death is soon. Very painful. You're being eaten alive by Thirst 9, Nerve Gas and it looks like --" the Snake was cut off by a familiar voice.

"DK-7! Lieutenant are you all right?"

Snake whirled around to see Sergeant Bill Taylor in the company of three very large attendants. They moved into the room, leaving Taylor alone by the doorway. The Sarge waited until the aides drugged and scooped up a fighting and reluctant Quist.

"'Tis been a pleasure Serpent, Deathbringer. I hope we can share blood sometime, so alike you and I." The Briton thrashed turning his attentions to the aides. "Unhand me before I turn you into ..."

The door slammed leaving Taylor alone in the room with Snake. The Sergeant slowly walked over to the bed where Plissken sat shaking his head in disbelief. At least he and the Sarge wouldn't wind up that bad.

Taylor spoke first. "Man, I've been fighting to see you for almost six weeks now Snake. They wouldn't let me come in. As if you were contaminated or something. What the fuck was that Crazy doing in here?"

"Hospital Security showin' how great they are. Siddown Bill, you look like you need to," Plissken invited, noticing the damaged leg that forced Taylor to limp.

"Thanks, yeah this leg. It's fucked Snake. Thought I was going to lose it. This damn close to being useless." He gestured. "'Tho' the doctors say it'll heal almost perfectly. Been real rough on me, fevers, pain--" Taylor stopped as he finally noticed the protection shrouding his Commander's left eye. "Shit! Your eye!"

"Uh-huh. Stopped workin' when the shit hit the fan up there over 'Grad. Too bad they couldn't give me a new one." Snake chuckled, but it was forced, and Plissken quickly fell back into somberness. "Don't remember it happening, Bill."

"It's kind of sketchy to me too. Intelligence was trying to sort it out, but I didn't buy their report. You're not gonna like what I gotta say Lieuten--"

Taylor was cut off abruptly by the return of Kyla. He nodded at her, remembering her fear of Snake when she came looking for the Sergeant.

"Thought you had a thing against Snakes." Taylor jabbed.

Kyla blushed. "Gentlemen, I hope I'm not disturbing anything important but I have wonderful news for the both of you!"

"S'lemme guess baby, this is all a dream?" Plissken snorted.

"Ah, no Sir. But you are the first American soldiers to receive a telex direct from D.C., from the president himself."

"Oh goody, news from the promised land." Taylor yawned.

Snake wasn't so cordial. "The President huh? Don't tell me. He wants to plant another Purple Heart on my ass!"

Their reactions disturbed Kyla, her face went as white as their surroundings. "Ah yes, that's right." She seemed to take their jabs personally. Plissken nodded to Taylor, the Lieutenant's tone changed. After all, it wasn't Kyla's fault they were in here.

"Okay Kyla. What's the telex say," Plissken stated with the most kindness he could muster.

She eased up a little. "Well, Lieutenant Plissken, Sergeant Taylor you are both being commended for your valiant efforts in the War against Russia and China. Purple Hearts will be given to you, along with Medals of Honor. The president himself will present them to you. Our Commander in Chief also wishes to thank the young men and women of Black Light for their service --"

"Rah, rah! You know Kyla our cohorts died fighting following bogus --" Taylor swallowed the rest, not wanting a civilian to be in the room when he broke the news to Snake

"Oh, I'm sorry. I really am sorry, Sirs. You both will be discharged in three days, after the presentation ceremonies." She left the room, shaken up more now than before.

"Kay Taylor level with me. What's going on? You know! Tell me. That's a fuckin' order!"

"Yes sir!" Bill said out of habit. "As I mentioned earlier, the home field came up with a report that looked falsified to me. Being that we're military and special patients here, I used that pull to get onto a computer, go digging through the 'Net. You'd be surprised how lax the government agencies are with on-line security--"

"Taylor, skip the bullshit, get on with it!"

"Sorry Lieutenant. Anyway I went digging, seems like the Russkies and our government wanted Black Light wiped out. Our battle record was perfect, we'd have won the war. And then that'd have to force the U.S. govs to deal with the domestic problems of millions of gas-maddened citizens and so forth. They're not ready, and they don't --" He paused. Snake was getting antsy, angry.

"So Black Light was to be rubbed out, replaced by Texas Thunder, an SFU that kissed up, won just enough to keep the fires flaming. When Berrigan showed up, his ideas were perfect. Stick a low ranking scrub inside a Leningrad installation and have us get 'im out. But we would be ambushed, not only by the Russkies, but ... our own." Taylor broke down, hissing. "The Intelligence officer was a fake and we were sent in to make it look official. Yeah it was all Berrigan's ploy.

"Snake our government had no records on Berrigan, he walked right in. Guess who he's loyal to? The Reds. He's a Red Corporal fucking masquerading as states intelligence operative, so the Russkies got in, listened to the jealous militants in the Pentagon. We were unwanted by either side! A fucking trick!"

Bill Taylor's face looked more like a corpse, white, drained. "A trick and we flew right into it! Man, Snake!"

Plissken said nothing, his fists opening and closing rapidly. He wouldn't suffer gas-madness like that Brit. Anger welled deep within, at the truths both the Sarge and the Thirster said. *Revenge ... you're burning with it.*

WE ARE ALIKE YOU AND I ... Well fuck me, it's true. And there's nothing I can do but act on it.

The agonizing pain in his head came from not only the destroyed eye, but the truth. It hurt like a sonofabitch, but he would be pain too. Payback for the loss of his squad, eye and soul.

He spat, slamming his fist through the thin stucco wall. Berrigan would be his purpose, his provider of present and future pain. The fuck took a good deal of Snake's being with the forty-eight soldiers he killed. Revenge ... the new emotion that would be foremost above all others. The fire that would stoke a powerful furnace deep within. The fire that would keep him alive and fighting.

The military, the government all turned their backs on him, lied to him and Plissken would *do unto others as they did unto him*. He looked at Taylor, the Sergeant nodded in agreement. He would join his C.O. in payback. Revenge ... the most lovely of emotions, the gleam that burned in both soldier's eyes as they sat in silence. Vengeance the only path to tread.

FLASHPOINT

BY

SYLVIA STEVENS AND KAREN WINTER

Former lieutenant S.D. Plissken slumped wearily in his seat, watching Arizona desert roll by outside the window of the dusty Greyhound bus. *Heading home*, he thought without enthusiasm. As he closed his eyes, visualizing his parents and the tan stucco house, his bandaged left eye under the stiff cloth eyepatch stabbed a reminder of his raw new wounds. And when he reached home, he thought -- then what? He was coming home a hero and a failure, his military career destroyed by his own choice.

It had all been built on lies, he thought bitterly. He had led forty-eight of his men, men who trusted him, to their deaths for a pointless diversion: the Leningrad Ruse. If the brass had been honest with him, he could have accepted the necessity. War demands sacrifices; he knew that. He had been prepared for that. But they had fed him a line of bullshit, lied to him, and used all of them as mindless cannon fodder, pieces deemed casually expendable by everybody except Lt. Steven D. Plissken, in somebody's high-tech video-game. The two Purple Hearts, the decoration from the President, were meaningless reminders of an idealism that had been replaced by cynical disillusionment and two inches of stiff black cloth on an elastic band. He hated the patch, but he bore the constant pain of his gassed eye like a penance and a pledge never to forget. He was through with the Army, through with taking orders from men who had no business giving them.

He knew what his father would say when he saw the torn uniform where the patches and insignia had been ripped off in fury and discarded along with the "junk metal" and bits of purple enamel. The country was still at war. Col. Robert Plissken would undoubtedly dress him down as an insubordinate deserter abandoning his post in the face of the enemy, and tell him to leave his house and never come back. His father had always treated him more like a promising recruit who needed to be whipped into Army spit-and-polish than a son, and Steven's goal had always been to beat his father's record as a good officer. No hope of that now, he thought wryly. He was not looking forward to facing the colonel, but he wasn't going to run.

The bus slowed and stopped, pulling him from his thoughts, and gravel crunched underfoot as he stepped down in front of the shabby station. He shouldered his duffel and started walking home. Since the gas shortage had become acute, city busses only ran twice a day. It took him a while to reach the subdivision where his parents lived, a tract of middle-class homes set back from the road on winding streets named after trees that had never grown in the harsh Arizona climate. Many of them were empty and deserted, derelict now. The war had reached even here, to this peaceful, smug, patriotic suburb where people like Col. Plissken still believed in America.

Steven snorted to himself at the thought as he looked across front yards of patterned rock and spiky bushes toward the corner house. The wrought-iron gate in the low stucco wall was

open, fluttering a yellow plastic ribbon. *How fuckin' corny can you...* He froze, the thought half completed. His parents didn't know he was coming home. He hadn't been able to reach them.

Cold fear chattered in his head as he studied the plastic band twisting in the light, hot desert breeze. He read the letters: **...ICE LINE! DO NOT CROSS! POLICE LI...**

He broke into a run up the driveway, through the patio, tangling and breaking tape, over the threshold where scorch marks and fire damage showed on the walls and above the window. The front door lay, splintered, across the step. "Mom! DAD!" he called as he raced through the burned and ransacked house, past smoky walls scarred with bullet holes, charred, broken furniture and shattered glass. The place was deserted, filled with dead silence and emptiness.

Oh, no! He ran down the hall to his room. Glass crunched under his boots as he skidded to an abrupt stop in front of the broken herpetarium on its stand by the window. A spray of bullet holes in the wall behind it told him a chilling tale. Gingerly, he reached into the ruined enclosure and picked up a small, pale, scaled shape covered in dried blood: what was left of *Snake*, his de venomed Asian white cobra, a gift from his Uncle Ron several years ago. She had been his favorite, the only one of his snakes he had kept when he went into the Service. He remembered how much talking it had taken before his dad had promised to feed her for him while he was gone. He stared numbly at the scrap of flesh. It was just the tail. A thin, bloody track led across the floor of her shattered cage, across the glass on the carpet, to the space behind his bed's headboard which had been her usual hiding place whenever she accomplished one of her numerous escapes. There he found her, flecked with blood and covered with dust, her mouth open in a petrified gape of suffering, her bronze eyes filmed with death.

A burning pain spread along the skin of his belly where he'd had her picture, from a drawing he'd done, tattooed over a year ago. His buddies in Black Light had laughed and called him "Snake," after the tattoo. Now there was nothing left of her but a dead body and the image in his flesh. He picked up one of the dozen or more shell casings lying among the shards of glass on the carpet and called on his military training to identify it: United States Police Force issue. Blackbellies! What the hell were blackbellies doing shooting up his parents' house? He threw down the bit of metal and jumped to his feet; he wanted answers.

Jerry would know. In seconds he was out the front door and over the low fence that separated his driveways from the house next door, hammering a fist against the doorbell. Distant chimes sounded. There was no response. Impatient, Steven peered through the front window, trying to see in. After several minutes, he reached into his pocket, found the right key, sprinted to the garage, and threw up the wide, rolling metal door. Jerry's car was gone, but the tarpaulined bulk that was Steven's motorcycle was still there, where he had left it with his friend for safekeeping while he was overseas.

He slipped the lock to the kitchen door with his ID card and took a quick look around, spotting the newspaper with today's date on the breakfast table. Yeah, today was Tuesday; Jerry would be at work. He backed out and locked the door behind him, then returned to his bike. When he pulled off the tarp, the powerful motor cycle looked exactly as he had left it, clean and polished, the chrome shining, the beautiful enameled detailing of a rearing white cobra still gleaming on the tank. Steven hit the combination on the electronic ignition system and the bike awoke with a full-throated snarl, magnified by the garage walls. The gas gauge pinned on Full, and he grinned thankfully: Jerry had taken care of the machine just as he had promised. Steven moved the bike out onto the driveway, closed and relocked the garage door, then gunned the engine and roared off toward the police station.

Twenty minutes later, he was standing in the station talking to a patrolman while the officer punched up a file on his computer screen. "S. D. Plissken. You're the son, right?" At Steven's brusque nod, a tinge of sympathy crossed the other man's face and he said, "You'd better sit down."

Steven sank slowly into the chair opposite as the officer continued, "It was a hostage situation. Some gas-crazy freaked out and picked your parents' house to barricade himself in. The USPF went in with guns and a flame thrower, swept the house, and both of your parents were killed along with the crazy." The officer shook his head and muttered something under his breath that sounded like "...unprofessional...." The look on the man's face told Steven he wanted to say more, but felt it was unwise to discuss it. The newly-formed USPF was already moving in on the regular police force, taking over, filling slots with gassed veterans only slightly more sane than the crazies they were supposed to defend the public against.

And the cobra had probably been shot just for sport, Steven thought. Rage and sorrow welled up in him. She hadn't died quickly, either. Like his parents, she had spent her last moments in terror and pain. Collateral damage. Friendly fire. Just a mistake. *We're sorry, Lieutenant Plissken, but your men's deaths were...your parents' deaths were...your fucking SNAKE'S death was....* Somehow, the limp white body he had left behind in his room was the final straw, the final, totally innocent, death that crystalized the whole insane thing for him. He grabbed at the fading details of normality. "My folks. Where are they buried?"

Steven remembered his father's firm instructions that he be buried in the veteran's cemetery with proper military honors: taps and a rifle volley. That had meant a lot to Col. Plissken, and his son had promised to carry out that last order when the time came. His failure fell on Steven's sense of honor like a crushing weight, and he felt himself being ground painfully to fragments under the blow.

"Your parents were cremated and buried in a paupers grave. You weren't informed at the time because we didn't know where you were. The Army said giving out that information would jeopardize national security. I'm sorry." The officer's face mirrored sympathy at him. "The house and grounds, your parents' bank account -- they're government property now. IRS and USPF claimed them for taxes."

Everything had been confiscated by the government he was fighting for while he had been flying over Russia on a fake mission staged for propaganda. Steven felt the throbbing pain behind his ruined eye rising. A paper was being pushed across the desk at him from the edge of his blurring vision. "We can give you a voucher for five nights at the Motel 6, while your taking care of things here," the officer was saying, "If you want...."

Something tore inside S.D. Plissken, painfully. "No!" He lunged to his feet, shouting at the startled policeman across from him. Rage caught, flared like a firestorm, filling him with raw, wild fury and hatred. All of it was gone: home, family, military career, the foundation of belief and duty on which he had built his life, all destroyed by the men who had destroyed Black Light. Bill Taylor had been right: it was all a fucking lie! He stood, shaking with anger, as the fires took him and his past burned in the flame.

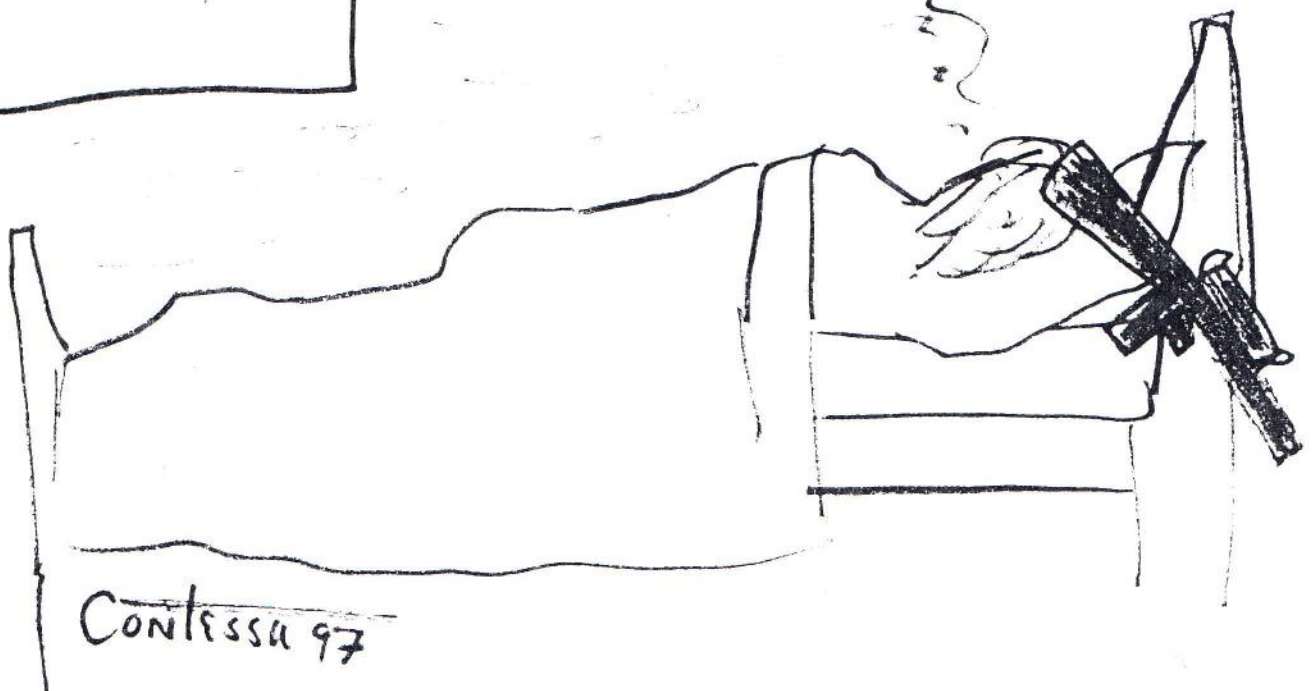
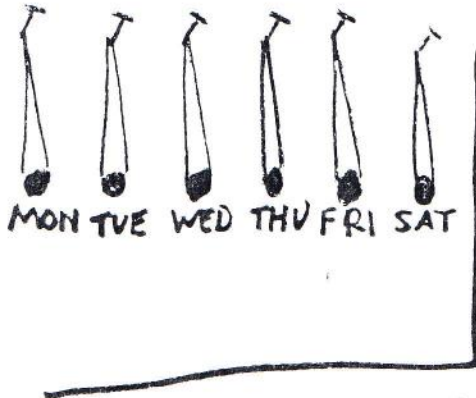
The officer rose quickly. "Look, Mr. Plissken...."

The rage imploded like a dying star into a dull, red core, his new center. He was on his own now, cut off from everything he had been before. No more connections, no more cooperation, no more compromises; Steven David Plissken was dead among the shattered glass and charred wood, gutted like the slaughtered cobra. At the thought, the burning in his belly seemed to curl out along his body like the shape tattooed into him: venomous, deadly, and

implacable. His good eye glittered with cold blue fire as the thing that was left alive answered in a low all-but-whispering voice.

"Call me...Snake...."

The Burning Time had begun.



Confessa 97

You Know What They Did To Bob?

by
Kim August

Kansas City Federal Reserve Depository

02:23 AM 1993 August 9

Twenty meters shy of the largest bank in the midwest, a trio of thieves crouched low behind a wall of dumpsters. Their forms seamlessly blended into the darkness as they waited for the right moment to take the Reserve.

The bank was like most of the government buildings still standing; cold, gray and solemn. It too seemed to vanish in the utter pitch of night, like the small band of thieves sharing its shadows, it was there. But from inside, billions of Credits beckoned to them like a siren song; whispering of a treasure waiting to be plundered.

Fresno Bob gathered his golden hair into a pony-tail letting it fall in line to the small of his back. Piercing green eyes watched the main entrance, as his large hands prepped the equipment that would insure the criminals break-in and survival. Satchels, fatigue pockets all got the once-over. In less than ten minutes the Bank's human security team would abandon their post and machines would pick up the task of holding down the fort with the elaborate anti-theft system. Fresno smiled. He knew the system: the ALrt1 unit. This heist wouldn't be a problem: he'd hold off the cops, gas rigs and keep the sirens quiet.

Whereas Bob was the technologic piece of the puzzle, the streetwise suss was handled by Harold "Brain" Hellman. A con man that could sweet talk an atomic bomb out of detonating, it was clear all Brain had was his smarts. Not as confident as his partner, his lanky form quivered and moved about nervously. He was sure this withdrawal would end in arrest for them, if not death. Tonight, he would take care of their wheels and be look out.

As he watched Brain fidget with his trenchcoat, Bob could only hope that the chickenshit scarecrow Hellman would look out for all of them.

The band's leader, Snake Plissken, kept to the shadows. His head-to-toe black ensemble rendered him almost invisible. Only the burning glare from his lone blue eye indicated his presence. The Snake said nothing as he casually checked his gear and large lead pipe just underneath his leather trench coat.

Out here, guns were scarce unless you were USPF or Government goon. If you couldn't snag one from a dead member of authority, weapons became whatever was available. It added an element of glory to being a criminal. Fuck up as much and many as possible without a gun. But Plissken didn't need weapons. Training in hand to hand combat while in the Service made him just as deadly unarmed. And his bare hands crushed the windpipe of many a foe.

A great heat was burning inside him. Adrenaline surged as the Snake prepared for the heist. He loved the rush, the excitement of the hit. It would be another blow to the government that murdered not only his family, but his soul. Every day since returning from the Russian Front, Plissken did something against the assholes that ran this country. Robbing banks was favored because it crippled the Politicos almost instantly. He was running up quite the rep. He looked at his watch, and then at Bob.

The blond nodded. It was almost time.

02:29 AM

"Frenso, what're our friends doing?" Snake was eager and ready.

"I see them, they're approaching the door. Harold, you idiot get down!" Frenso growled at Brain, yanking the con man's coat, pulling him down fast. Hellman scrambled as he almost fell over the broad Californian. Bob considered doing more than just chiding Brain, as his head had been visible over the dumpsters, quite visible to anyone exiting the bank. There was no time though.

The security team exited. Their midnight blue uniforms cousins to the infamous attire of the monsters who made up the USPF. The eight guards streamed through the main door in militant fashion. As Frenso had explained on the way over, the lock up procedures were swift and simple. A simple punched-in code left the Reserve in the hands of the machines. And wide open to theft. The guards vanished, eager to get home to whatever was there.

02:32 AM

"I'm ready Snake." Bob said

"Lead on." Frenso felt Plissken's right hand lock onto his shoulder. Bob was programming what looked like a small calculator, which he promptly handed over to Brain.

"Brain take this. It'll send my signal to you to get the car...this button here, Brain.."

Hellman was jumpier than usual. He couldn't contain his anxiety. "You both know Blackbellies patrol around here every fifteen minutes. This isn't a small town bank, there won't be enough time..."

"Brain, shut up and listen to me," Bob spat. He thrust the device into Hellman's hand.

"This button here, use it to warn us in case the calvary comes."

Hellman wasn't listening "If you're not back fourteen minutes..."

Snake was before Brain instantly. "Stay put Brain."

Hellman went to protest, but Plissken's hands silenced the complaint before it could be voiced. Brain was pinned against the wall of a ruined coffee shop near the dumpsters. The con man's face quickly went a gruesome shade of purple, his breath ragged. Snake's command rang in his ears. "Stay put Brain. Don't get any ideas."

Plissken relaxed his grip on Hellman's windpipe, as Hellman held up his thumb. He understood. Snake kept his eye on Brain as long as he could, and quickly made toward the main entrance. Bob was already working on the ALrt 1 system.

02:35 AM

Brain collapsed against the crumbling wall, sinking behind the dumpsters. Curses managed to escape his lips in between the gasps for air, as he sucked oxygen into his lungs. The con man looked at the tracer Frenso gave him, and peered through the trash bins to watch as his accomplices ducked inside the bank. Blackness engulfed them.

02:36 AM

So far so good...they had nine minutes. Brain again dared to peer over the dumpsters his gaze watching the end of the block, knowing a Blackbelly cruiser could turn down this street any time. Alarm systems were sensitive, and the police hungry for blood. Hellman decided to get their car going. It was an old Caddy, one that had served the trio's purposes well the last couple of years. Brain knew cars and how to coax an old clunker like this into a prime *'flee the*

scene machine. As he always did, Brain began his once over on the vehicle so no last minute surprises would fail him and his companions. Walking toward the back of the car, Hellman had to bend low to get at the tail license plate. The gas tank was behind it. His nimble fingers struck pay dirt seconds later. Unscrewing cap the blessed aroma of ether greeted his nostrils. Pulling a metal ruler from deep within his trench coat, he stuck it in, swirled it around and pulled it out. A slick sheen of gasoline glazed it's surface. While this was encouraging, Brain had no real idea how much gas the car had left. The gas gauge had been broken for weeks now. He took care of the gas cap and hopped back into the Caddy, waiting and praying for his friends to hurry the fuck up.

02:38 AM 7 Minutes...Reserve Vault

Snake and Bob moved through the maze-like corridors of the Depository with ease. Bob's shutdown of the alarm system meant no problems for the duo as they sped towards their quarry. Again, Hellman's confiscated blueprints were right on the money! Fresno smiled as he rigged the plastique securing it to the safe door, Snake prepped himself for a rapid withdrawal. Plissken knew the deal, dive in and get what you can. Go for the platinum cards, those were government grade; worth the most and the most damaging to the glorious Police State ifgrabbed. Snake ducked behind the security access machine to left of the Vault door, bracing himself for the explosion. Bob planted the plastique so the door would implode, the deadly steel shards bending inward.

Seconds later, it did just that, leaving a gaping hole that seemed like it was framed with large metallic fangs. Credits glinted in the dim light of the Vault, beckoning the men. Snake and Bob dove through the maw, satchels open, ready to plunder. With six duffel bags between them, credits were dumped and stuffed to bursting. Fresno tripped over one bag, spilling the open satchel in his right hand. "Shit!"

"Forget it. Get Brain ready Bob."

"But these are Ultra Platinum, Snake!"

02:42 AM 3 Minutes...

"Leave it to me, get on the horn!"

Fresno nodded, quickly extracting the duplicate to Brain's tracer. He punched in the signal unaware of the time lost in recovering the Ultra Platinum Credits.

Spigs Street-- six blocks west of the Reserve.

A couple of USPF cruisers were parked, on a side street waiting to do the Reserve run. Their occupants talking in clipped tones of the latest criminal scum they bagged. Suddenly a shriek exploded from the weapons belt of one officer.

"You know that sonofabitch spit at me, before I---"

"That's your theft alert tracer ain't it Mcquire?"

"Yeah, and it's picking up a signal from within the KC Reserve!"

"Wha? The security team just drove by here. Respond to the signal, make whoever the fuck is in there think the coast is clear and get the Captain on the horn!" Mcquire's superior screeched.

"Roger. More fresh meat!" Mcquire cooed, as he wired the home station. The cars sped off in the direction of the Reserve, their drivers blood lust on high.

Bags full, Bob and Plissken blew up the remaining loot. If they couldn't have it, no one would. Running through the halls, the men slipped in and out of the shadows avoiding the

security cams just in case the system could override itself. Bounding a flight of stairs and getting closer to the ground level, Plissken and Bob kept up the pace. Bob was confident, but Plissken never allowed the adrenaline to overflow. The cockiness only rose up after they were long gone. They were not safe yet. Their escape depended on Brain. And Brain was a basket case.

"Bob, did you get Brain?"

"Sent the signal, yeah! He just replied!" Fresno was looking at the tracer. "We're okay Snake!"

"Uh-huh..."

02:44AM

The pitch blackbelly sedans abruptly turned onto the Reserve block. Hellman was just about finished with his backup checks. He was lying on the seat doing last minute readings of gauges when the blood red flash of USPF sirens startled him. *Shit!* Something fell out of his coat pocket. The tracer! Hellman scrambled to reach it, sinking closer to the floor of the Caddy, as the patrol cars stopped before the main entrance. He stole a quick glance at the tracer, seeing Bob's code and a sister reply! The pigs had intercepted the signal. They knew! Brain checked his watch: 02:44! The pigs were early, but Snake and Bob were already too late! His accomplices were no longer top priority. Plissken slithered out of many blackbelly ambushes, he'd get out of this one too. And Bob can take care of himself. *I'll only get out if I leave now!* Brain thought frantically, his eyes peering just over the dash board watching the police. They were at the entrance testing the alarm system.

Hellman rolled the driver's side window down a crack, just enough to hear the conversation only meters away.

"Sir. The sensors aren't responding to my access code," Mcquire said to a large man. A hideous C.O. who would obviously relish getting his hands on the scum raiding this wondrous government institution.

"Repeat the code."

"Done sir, still no entry."

"Mcquire, prepare for ambush, you're about to taste some criminal fly pie!" The police hunch proved right.

"Yes Sir!"

The commander dispatched police all about the building, covering all windows and exits.

Inside, the Reserve was silent but Snake held back. The hairs on the nape of his neck rose. Something felt wrong.

Bob kept running, his adrenaline pushing him into the waiting armada of death. Plissken ducked into an alcove just to left of the the roof elevator. He pulled the slotpick from his fatigues, and quickly accessed the 'vator's man trap. Fresno sensed his friend's uneasiness as he crept ever closer to the front door.

"Don't worry Snake we----" Fresno stopped, as an alien noise arose from behind the door. A monstrous pounding The cops were here and they were using a rambat!

Both men looked at door which was buckling

"Shit, we have company. C'mon Bob!" Plissken growled. As the slot pick worked it's magic, he dove into the now open 'vator.

"Snake, I can hold them---aacck!" Bob said waving another gadget one that would kick start the laser beam security rig back into action. It fell free of his grip as Bob was thrown to the floor by the impact of the battering. The door was now gone, exposing Hell to both men. Satan's finest were pouring into the Reserve, black angels of death, hungry for blood. Snake grimaced,

already in the vator. He wanted to save his cohort.

But Frenso suddenly knew there would not be another run with Snake. The bellies had only seen Bob. The blond squinted looking into the pitch black vator, he saw a brief glint of light off metal: the metal shin guards on Snake's boots, quickly Bob looked away. Plissken was enveloped in darkness, invisible to the killer cops. Frenso refused to give away his friend's hiding place. *Get away, that's it*, he thought. He could help Snake get away with Brain.

Discreetly as he could with the looming 'bellies, Bob slid his hand over a fatigue pocket, and allowed himself a slight smile. His fingers traced the outline of a circular object; a vator override pad! Bob would be able to blot out the cops infrared heat scan of the vators and take control of a vator within five meters of him, the one his friend was in now. He knew Plissken would never leave him, but Bob would not allow them both to die, Plissken saved his ass countless times. That was enough for Bob. As the black killer angels strode closer, his fingers wrapped around the little remote, and he blanked his mind. It would take all of his cunning to keep the cops attentions away from the vator with Snake inside. Bob winced as a steel-tipped boot made contact with his gut. The three bulging satchels still hung about his broad frame. The blackbellies spat on him. And then they parted, as the Commander strode through the ranks to get a look at his catch of the day.

The man was a monstrosity, all bulk, with a face only a warthog could love. He bent low over Frenso. His boot now on top of Bob's chest.

"Well lookee here a thief!"

"And not a very good one at that Sir!"

"No, you're right Sutter. But let's make him squeal anyway!"

The leader bent down into Frenso's face. His breath equalled his ugliness. "We'll make this easy bastard, give us the credits and your cohorts and maybe you'll get to NY Max alive."

"No!" Bob spat, pressing the vator activation button. Snake watched from the shadows of the vator, helpless. Suddenly the door closed. The vator was going up! Plissken slung the satchels across his back like packs, and pulled that lead pipe from within the folds of his coat. The vator ascended slowly, allowing Snake the unwelcome opportunity to hear Fresno's interrogation now almost a floor below him.

Bob smiled as he saw the vator working. He spit on the commander's boots.

The Chief snarled, "You'll pay for that, whether you sing or not! Private, your rifle!"

A young soldier came forth proudly handing his Scorpion over to the boss. The mountain again came close to Bob, with a practiced aim he slammed the butt of the automatic at Fresno's forehead. Swelling and a huge bruise emerged from the point of impact. The worst headache he'd ever known.

"Talk Scum!"

"No!" Fresno was defiant despite the agony.

The younger cops crowded around the fallen criminal eager to spill his blood.

"Yes Sir, break the fuck!"

"Show the bastard the crime doesn't pay!"

The Commander egged on by his troops, pulled a huge buck knife from his hip. Fresno's green eyes grew wide.

"Now fellow officers watch and learn. This perp wouldn't talk, so now we make him talk. For the last time scum, who are your accomplices?" The commander slammed Bob in the mouth with a billyclub, using just enough force to knock out teeth, but the leave the jaw intact.

Bob gurgled, spitting out teeth and blood. So much blood, he marvelled at the amount spilling from his mouth. He said nothing.

The Commander held up his blade and pointed at his second in command who now

wielded the sister of the chief's buck knife. The flaying began. Bob screamed as the blades stripped his right arm of skin. Bob's anguished shrieks broke the night stillness.

The vator reached the roof without incident. Snake heard Bob's screams and ran to the edge of the roof. The night acted like a shield, his virtually pitch form blending in with the darkness. Bob...damn it! There was nothing Plissken could do for his friend so he began to look for Brain. Frantically, Snake scanned the street below, the gun-metal colored car was nowhere to be seen! SHIT!

Plissken checked his watch. 02:45:39! Thirty-nine fucking seconds. "He left me sittin' here!" Snake growled, trying to figure a way out. He looked about saw a group of buildings nearby, warehouses with steel rooftops, pretty easy for him to scale, but almost impossible for Blackbellies in full riot gear.

The cops relished Frenso's agony. Mimicking him, as his frame became more like beef on a butcher's block.

Bob looked through the open door to the spot where their car was parked. It was gone! Some how he knew it was long gone before the elevator with Snake it in could get to the roof. Brain had bailed on them. Now he would talk. "The...re wa..s one othe....r."

"He's talking Sir! Can you believe the beef is talking!" Mcquire exclaimed. The head blackbelly smiled. Even if this rogue spoke before the flaying started he would have been killed anyway.

"A little too late to save yourself boy!" he growled.

Snake bolted from the Reserve roof and leapt to an adjoining one. His feet made no sound, and he willed himself onward. Free for now. His anger rang forth, knowing that Brain left him and Bob to die.

"When I find you Harold, you're gonna wish you were never born!" he hissed. There would be no glory in this job.

"Brain...fuc...kin' Hellman..." Bob croaked.

"Did he say Brain Sir?" the Private who gave over his Scorpion laughed.

"Like he's got one!" another cop chuckled.

"Shaddup! what punk?!" The Chief purred over Frenso's mangled form.

"Bra...in, his name. lank.e..scare...crow looking fuc...he's got..."

"Say good night scum!" the Commander nodded at his second in command. Both dragged their blades across the path of Frenso's chest, tracing the muscles up and around from the collar bone to the navel. Blood sprayed like rain all over the tormentors. The duo laughed licking the gore off their lips, watching as Bob's body twitched the death dance.

"Spread out, find this Brain character! We'll see if he's as smart as his buddy says! You two, stay behind. Watch our rag here, his pals are gonna wonder what happened, if not to him then at least the loot he's got." The two death angels remained. Hovering over the broken heap that moments before was a living, breathing, complete man. The duo chuckled at this, stealing a glance at Frenso. The gruesome parody of humanity looked up at them with his remaining eye.

A slow smile spread across the thief's face. Now he knew what Snake's line of vision was like, it was all so clear. His final snatch of life revealed thirteen black-gearred troops fanning out over the stretch of land the Reserve covered.

They would find Brain just outside of the Reserve grounds in the stalled, out of gas Caddy...

the Price of Survival

NAN MACK



The rusted green sedan slowed and came to a stop at the old tavern on the corner. The passenger in the front seat leaned forward and peered out at the place through the rain-spattered windshield. The bar obviously wasn't the best in town and probably never had been but Snake Plissken didn't much care. His tastes were simple, and dictated more out of need than choice. Right now, his need was to escape the confines of this car and find a place to spend the night. This dive was his best lead so far.

Glad the rain had slowed down to a drizzle, Plissken stepped out onto the wet street and growled his thanks to the driver. The car pulled away into the darkness and he watched until it was long out of sight.

Alone on the corner, he held his breath and listened, not even sure of what he expected to hear. Maybe nothing. Maybe Hauk really had let him walk away without a tail and Snake's short time inside New York Max had left him crazy with paranoia to spare. But like the old saying went: just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they aren't out to get you. So he waited, hearing nothing but the low whistle of the evening breeze. Only when he was satisfied that he hadn't been followed, did he make his way to the front door.

Inside, with the last thirty hours one step farther behind him, Snake let his eye adjust to the dim light, and took in the once familiar tavern atmosphere. He almost smiled. After spending the last few months a prisoner, even the rancid smell of beer and cigarettes was like a delicious taste of forbidden fruit.

Without moving from the door, he swept the small room with a careful look. More than a few of the faces he saw wore the dazed blank stare of gas damage. The others looked back at him with timid expressions of recognition that he knew all too well. He ignored them and the whispering that followed and glanced back over his shoulder out the dirty front window. The glistening street was still nearly empty. No blackbellies in sight. Finally, he allowed himself to relax.

There was no reason why he shouldn't. Technically, he was no longer a hunted man. But, like a too-new pair of jeans, that fact was something he wasn't quite comfortable with. Until he was, excess caution was a habit that he didn't intend to break.

SNAKE suspected it was only a matter of time before the signed pardon he had tucked away in his pocket didn't mean a whole lot. The President would come out of shock soon enough, ready to put together the pieces of his nightmare inside New York Max. And when the fat little bastard did, he'd realize what had really happened to his precious tape and Plissken would be on the run again. Hauk's promises wouldn't mean shit.

But for tonight at least, Snake was free. Physically and legally. He could do what he wanted, when he wanted and for as long as he wanted, without having to kiss the ass of some USPF flunky for permission. He could do the things free men took for granted. And his first stop was the bar.

As he approached, the bartender looked up, ready with a smile and a pleasant greeting. One look at Plissken and the words died in his throat. There was no warmth in the young man's well-known face and only menace in his unpatched blue eye. The bartender's smile turned wary. He reached under the counter to finger the gun he kept there, feeling safer just from the touch of it. Maybe this guy wasn't looking for trouble -- although trouble seemed to occur wherever he was -- but it didn't hurt to be cautious. The bartender was grateful when Plissken simply ordered a bottle and a glass, and limped toward a table in the far corner.

SNAKE picked a seat that let him keep his back to the wall and dropped into it heavily, dragging over another chair to prop up his injured right leg. He'd refused to let Cronenberg do

anything more than slap a bandage on it and now he was almost sorry. The arrow wound continued to throb unmercifully and walking Christ-knew-how-far to hitch a ride hadn't helped.

Hauk had offered him a place to stay the night, there in the blackbelly barracks, but Plissken had only laughed and headed for the nearest main road. He'd sooner lay down with jackals than turn his back on any of them. Especially Bob Hauk.

The old man seemed to think that things had changed now, because Snake had accepted his deal and made it out of New York alive. Well, the asshole was wrong. Things hadn't changed. They never would. Snake opened the bottle and filled his glass, then drank it down in one swallow. Liquid fire spread through him and he coughed. Then he did smile. He'd almost forgotten.

Yeah, he'd survived all right. Just barely and no thanks to Hauk. His hand went to his throat. Two seconds. Two more seconds and he'd have been sleeping permanently. But he'd been lucky. Again. And once again, he was the only one who had been. He drank another glassful.

First, in the poisoned cold of Leningrad, then across the states to the hot stench of New York, death still chased him, no matter the geography. It surrounded him, cornered him -- but never got him. And if Plissken had his way, the fucker never would.

It would have to be satisfied with the others. Christ knew there'd been enough of them. From his squad, whose blood made the Russian snow as red as their flag, to Taylor. Cabbie and Harold. Maggie.

Snake splashed more liquor in the glass. He stared into it and saw Maggie's sad brown eyes staring back. What the hell. She'd made her choice. They all did. Maybe it wasn't such a bad one, either. In that place, they were worse than dead. Hooking up with him had just ended their misery a little sooner. Shit, maybe he'd even done them a favor. He tossed the drink down, wiping her image away.

The whiskey was catching up with him quickly. He felt detached, strangely isolated from his surroundings and recognized the feeling as a warning that he was drunk. Tonight, he welcomed it. *"Ain't no kind of insulation keeps you warmer than the fermented kind, sir,"* Taylor used to tell him back in Helsinki. Here, fighting a different kind of cold, Snake Plissken toasted his own survival and with each drink, thought less and less about the price of it.

It was a quarter past midnight and he was halfway to oblivion when Lilah came in through the back door. She nodded hello to the bartender, who didn't need to hear her order, then took her usual seat at the end of the bar. While she waited for her drink, she gave the place a quick once over, and frowned. The bar, just over the Jersey line, was close to the prison called New York Max and was usually crowded with men wearing the black uniforms of the USPF. Tonight, the place was dead, empty of her customers and competition both.

"You're late tonight," the bartender said when he returned.

"Busy," Lilah explained with a good-natured wink. She gestured out to the floor. "Where in hell is everybody, Jake? Looks like a funeral parlor in here."

The man leaned an elbow on the bar and watched Lilah sip her drink. "Don't know. Coupla blackbellies in here earlier said passes were canceled. Some kinda major trouble over on Liberty."

"My luck," Lilah grumbled. "Rent's due this week." She smiled at Jake, then looked around once more, this time stopping when she saw Plissken in the corner.

Jake noticed her interest. "My money says there's your trouble, right there," he said, lowering his voice.

"Yeah, maybe," Lilah said absently, continuing to stare. She, too recognized the man



instantly and an involuntary smile snuck across her face. Snake Plissken was probably the last person she expected to see, here or anywhere else. Supposedly, he was in custody, or so she had been told by more than one USPF cop anxious to impress her. Then too, there was that rumor that insisted he was dead.

He might as well be a ghost, she thought, seeing how everyone took pains to pretend he wasn't there. Maybe they were all too far gone from gas to know who he was. Or maybe it was instinct that told them not to cross his path the wrong way when he'd been drinking. Lilah chuckled to herself. Well, that had always been true.

"Yeah, I'll bet he's got something to do with it," the bartender repeated, annoyed that Plissken still held Lilah's attention.

She finished her drink, slid off the seat and said: "Well, if I find out, I'll let you know."

The older man reached out and closed his hand over hers. "No honey, not this one," he begged. "Better let him alone."

She patted his hand patiently. "I gotta survive somehow, don't I?"

"He don't look much like he wants company," the bartender warned.

Lilah smiled again. Men could claim what they wanted, but she'd never met one drinking alone who preferred it that way. And she'd met plenty.

"Just mind the bar, Jake. Okay?" She winked again and crossed the floor.

Lilah came up on his blind side, so Snake felt her beside him before he saw her. He took a deep breath, then turned his head slowly and found himself gazing at hips with a definite feminine curve. The skirt she wore was short, offering him more than a glimpse of her long legs. Above her waist, a tight, low-cut tank top did nothing to hide the full swell of her breasts or the slight outline of her nipples. But, of course, it wasn't supposed to. Snake exhaled, long and slow, then went back to his bottle.

"You gonna finish that all by yourself?" Lilah asked.

"Plannin' to."

She eased into the seat next to him. "Don't you like sharing?"

S Snake slouched in his chair, twisting to get a better look at her. She wasn't too bad, really. Not beautiful. More like small town pretty and not yet hard and used like some hookers he'd seen. Her hair was long and full, cascading over her shoulders in waves. Sometime in her past it had probably been naturally blonde. Her eyes were a deep, brooding brown and looked almost familiar. *Sad eyes*, he thought drunkenly. *Like Maggie's*. But it was her mouth he stared at. It was red and full and looking at it made his own dry. Drinking wasn't the only pleasure free men took for granted.

"Depends on what you have to share," he said finally.

Lilah leaned forward across the table and tugged the bottle from his hand. "Funny," she said, pouring herself a drink in his glass. "You didn't look that dumb from the bar."

Plissken snorted and reclaimed his whiskey. Outwardly indifferent, inside he was beginning to enjoy her and the slow burn below his waist that started the moment he saw her. He could think of worse ways to end a day and no better way to celebrate his freedom. Too bad he was so goddamn tired. He took another long swallow, straight from the bottle.

"Maybe we should get out of here while you can still walk," Lilah said. She moved to push the chair back, but Snake hooked his boot around the leg, holding her where she was.

"How much?" he demanded.

The only money in Plissken's pocket was a few twenties, courtesy of Hawk's second-in-command, Tom Rheme. Imagining Hawk's reaction to Rheme's offer was half the reason why Snake accepted it. He also needed it to survive. So, tempting as it was, a night in bed

with a willing warm body wasn't a good idea if it took all the cash he had.

Lilah licked her tongue along her lips, savoring a trace of the liquor and Plissken felt his throat tighten. "Quality doesn't come cheap," she said.

Snake glanced around the run-down bar, then chuckled aloud, his laugh cold and cynical. "S' that what you are? Quality?"

She dipped her head down to look at his foot on her chair. then met his icy blue gaze unintimidated. "Let me up now," she said quietly. "Or you'll never find out."

Snake grinned. So, she had some fight in her. The idea excited him, arousing him all the more and pushing his pain and fatigue to a far corner of his mind. The burning swelled to a pleasureable ache that felt better than he'd ever admit. He pulled his foot back, releasing her.

"Answer the question, baby."

"Price is always negotiable," she said finally. "And I place a lot of value on my own satisfaction." She slid her hand up the length of his bare arm as she stood. "You interested, friend? I don't have all night."

Plissken shifted in the seat. He tried not to see his hands on her body, tried not to wonder how she'd feel and smell and taste but the pictures were already alive in his mind. She was getting to him too easily, touching a need in him that he had all but buried. Damn her, anyway. Displaying a final streak of stubbornness, he glanced past her without comment, a tired, bored expression on his face.

Lilah sighed and shrugged. "Suit yourself."

As she turned to go, his left hand shot out, catching her by the waist. He let it linger there.

"You got a name?" he hissed.

She hesitated a moment, a wry smile masking her disappointment. "Lilah," she answered. "Who're you?"

He looked up at her and smiled.

"Call me Snake."

Lilah's apartment was above the bar. Snake followed her out the way she had come in, up a narrow, creaking staircase to the second floor. Fortified by half a bottle of liquor, and his vision riveted on the sway of Lilah's inviting body, Snake made it up the two flights barely aware of the pain in his leg. At her doorway, he stood close behind her, enjoying the warmth that radiated from her. Unlocking the door seemed to take a long time.

Finally it opened and she snapped on a soft light, revealing a single room that served as living room and kitchen. Off of it there was a hallway and beyond that, he assumed, a bedroom. Plissken stepped inside and glanced around, barely interested. He placed his bottle on a table beside the sofa and waited long enough for her to re-lock the door.

"Go ahead, make yourself comfort --" Lilah turned and found him standing before her. He placed his hands on the door, one on each side of her, then tilted his head to kiss her, his long hair falling forward across his face.

The first taste of her broke down the last barrier in him, and the kiss turned hungrier. His tongue worked its way into her mouth and he held her to him as he sucked the very breath from her.

Lilah broke it off, amused. "Well, what woke you up?" she asked, kicking both her shoes off.

Snake buried his face in her hair, inhaling its sweetness and fingering the bronze colored tendrils. Her scent was as intoxicating as the whiskey and he was anxious now to lose himself in it. "Been awhile," he murmured.

His lips traced a path along her neck to the soft spot where her pulse beat. Lilah leaned



forward and pressed her body tightly along the curve of his, feeling his erection hard against her upper thigh. He pushed back eagerly, and Lilah thudded against the wall behind her. Snake pulled free her tank top and his hands slithered under the knit fabric to the soft fullness of her breasts.

Pinning her hips to the wall with his own, Snake stripped off his black jersey shirt. Lilah had hers halfway over her head and stopped to look at the rearing cobra tattooed on Plissken's belly. Impatient, Snake pulled the shirt off himself and tossed it away carelessly. Roughly, he yanked her to him, drinking in the velvety heat of her bare skin against his.

His mouth explored her face and throat as he let his hands roam insistently over her body, along her back and down to the outside of her thighs. Grasping the edges of her skirt, he slid it up until her legs were free, then wedged them apart with his knee.

Lilah cried out softly, surprised at his urgency. She wanted to take her time with him, make him comfortable and give him the pleasure she suspected he hadn't had in a very long while. And she planned to enjoy herself in the process.

"Don't rush it, now," she whispered, caressing his back. "You want to make it last, don't you?"

Snake laughed low against her throat, making her shiver. *Make it last?* He was past caring. It had been too long and he was too drunk for such a luxury.

Snake ground his hips against her as he kissed her again. He closed one hand around both her wrists and held them together at her back. The other, he slipped behind her, under the skirt and jerked her pelvis to him. Lilah's back arched and Snake lowered his head to close his mouth over a warm, pink nipple.

Lilah tried to pull away, but Plissken responded by tightening his grip. At the thought that she was trapped, a sudden, sharp rush of panic shot through her. She twisted hard, but Snake held on, making it clear he did not need her cooperation. Nor did he want it, Lilah realized all at once. She'd gotten to him just like she wanted to, playing on a weakness, a chink in his wall. But she hadn't known what was behind the wall and now it was too late. She would be neither lover nor bedpartner here. He would simply take her and use her, without conscience, the same way he'd taken everything since Leningrad.

"Let me go," she said, keeping her voice controlled. She tried her wrists again, and to her surprise, this time he released her. His breathing was rapid, and a drunken, hungry smile spread across his unshaven face. He reached down to slip open the buttons of his camouflage pants.

"C'mon Snake, slow down a minute," Lilah said, out of breath. She forced a smile and retreated into the living room but Snake lunged and caught her by the arm, pulling her to him again.

"Why?" he asked huskily. If she answered, he never heard it. His mind was in a tailspin now and he heard no words of reason or tenderness. He heard nothing but the feral scream in his ears, driving him toward release. Taking a handful of her hair, Snake crushed her mouth to his as he worked himself free of the pants. Lifting her against him off the floor, he took the two steps to the couch easily and forced her down onto it.

Lilah didn't struggle. Pinned under the weight of his compact, muscular body, she knew it would be useless, even dangerous. In any contest of physical strength, he was a formidable opponent. Angry, he was deadly. And she was afraid of him now.

His breath was sweet from the whiskey and hot as fire on her skin. She turned her face away but he twisted it back, staring arrogantly down at her with a single glazed eye. His hands seemed to be everywhere, on her face, her breasts, between her thighs. He left the rest of her

clothes on her, pushing aside or pulling away what he needed to and entered her hard enough to make her

gasp. Her body jerked beneath his as he drove himself inside her. She felt the vice-like grip of his hands on her arms and winced as the metal on his boots scraped against her legs.

In Lilah's profession there was no such thing as rape. There were only men who paid you and men who didn't. Men who were gentle and others who weren't. In some alley, or on an isolated road, what happened between her and Snake Plissken might have been called rape. But here, behind her closed door, it was simply customer satisfaction.

His fevered rhythm built quickly to a climax. Lilah felt him go rigid above her, his only sound a low, animal growl. Then his movement changed to short, erratic pulses before a shudder raced through his body and he relaxed. After a moment, he let the air out of his lungs and withdrew, releasing her without a word.

Shaking, Lilah gathered herself together and moved away quickly, needing to put distance between them. Now that it was over, disappointment and hurt flooded through her, as painful as a fresh wound. Being close to him was the salt. She retrieved her discarded top, slipped it on, then crossed the room to the kitchen area.

Taking a cigarette from the pack on the small table, she lit one and dropped into a chair. "Nice technique, Plissken," she said after a deep drag. "Must get you a lot of compliments." Her voice was thick with sarcasm.

Snake was on his feet, his pants still open at the waist and the unfinished whiskey bottle to his lips. He swallowed and looked up, only mildly surprised she had recognized him. A spark of familiarity pierced through his drunken haze, then disappeared. He raked a hand through his hair and sat back down, laughing shortly.

"Whad'ya expect, sweetheart?"

It was a good question. And the only answer Lilah came up with made her angry. With herself. What did she expect? That the denim blue eyes and boyish smile of a charming Special Forces pilot would still be there, buried deep beneath Plissken's cold and bitter shell. She'd seen too much of human nature to be so goddamn naive. Maybe the rude awakening she'd gotten was her own damn fault. She should have learned by now not to pick up strays. Even ones that used to be friends.

"I expect to be well paid," she snapped, stubbing out the cigarette. "Leave my money on the table and get out."

Snake didn't move. His efforts with Lilah had drained him of the last of his energy. Without the boost of the amphetamines that had kept him awake the past thirty hours, his body seemed as heavy as lead. He dropped his head back against the couch and let his aching shoulders sink into the softness. It was comfortable here. And warm. Not like the prison cells that had been his home for the past months. He felt himself drifting away, as Lilah's voice grew fainter and more distant. God, he was so very tired. And he wasn't running anymore. He'd be safe enough here. Just for a little while.

"Later," he said finally, slurring the word. He stretched out along the couch, unconcerned that he was still half-dressed.

Lilah, on her way to the bathroom, stopped and whirled on him. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" she demanded.

"Need some sleep," Snake mumbled. "Coupla hours, is all."

"Well, go get it somewhere else. This isn't a hotel." She waited, and when he didn't answer, she marched over to where he lay.

"Plissken!"

He raised his head slightly, snarling at her. "I said, *later*."

Furious now, she grabbed the bottle from his limp grasp and slammed it down on the table, splashing the contents over her hand. "Look, you're not the only guy I planned to see tonight. What am I supposed to do with the rest of my customers?"

Snake rolled over, turning his back to her and answered with his face buried in the sofa's worn cushions.

"Tell 'em to keep it quiet."

It was sometime around three when the light rain that had fallen all night turned into a downpour. Lilah wasn't surprised that the accompanying thunder had woken her up. Her sleep had been light and anything but restful.

She had watched Plissken for nearly half an hour, finishing up his bottle of whiskey and trying to decide what to do. Going back to Jake's was pointless. Not only would Snake's half naked body on her sofa be bad for business, she didn't dare leave her apartment in case he woke up and robbed her blind before running off. And she wasn't fool enough to disturb him again. Exhausted and drunk as he was, he'd no doubt come to with the disposition of a wounded bear. Lilah had seen the results of his bad temper before and had no desire to be on the receiving end of it. Finally, she had just given up and gone to bed. In spite of being drunk herself by then, it was a long time before she cooled off enough to fall asleep.

Now, she sat up in bed, listening to the deep, angry rumbles of thunder that followed every flash of light. She had once loved the sounds of these storms, but not anymore. Now they only reminded her of the sounds of war. With that thought, the memory of her unwelcome guest returned. He had said a couple of hours. Those hours were up. Shivering in her nightshirt, she slipped out of bed and padded down the short hall to the living room.

The room was as black as pitch, but it was not quiet and the sounds she heard coming from where Plissken slept sent a chill through her. She stopped, just as lightning flashed through the oversized kitchen windows, illuminating both rooms and allowing her a quick glimpse of him.

Still asleep, Snake tossed and turned on the sofa, trapped in a nightmare. He spoke aloud in desperate, garbled sounds she did not understand. Holding her breath, Lilah watched from the doorway, uncomfortable but unable to turn away. She felt a twinge of unexpected sympathy. Switching on a dim hall light that melted some of the darkness, she crept into the room and crouched down beside him. Gently, she laid a hand on his arm.

Snake woke with a start. "*Goddammitharker--*"

He sat straight up before her, wild-eyed and slick with sweat and looked around quickly. Lilah rolled back on her heels, away from him. Another volley of lightning flashed long enough for him to focus on her and he remembered where he was.

"You were dreaming," she said simply, getting to her feet.

Snake said nothing. Running both hands through his hair, he took a minute to relax. The nightmare was fading quickly, leaving only fragments for him to grasp: the grimy odor of the concrete wall inches from his face, the taut pull of the leather straps on his wrists. Fire in his leg. The staccato sound of gunfire and behind it, the screams of a madman a little too willing to trade Plissken's life for his own revenge. One image was still vivid: the taste of raw fear and helplessness choking him as the seconds of his chronometer ticked down toward blinding pain, darkness and death.

Lilah found her cigarettes and lit another, wandering aimlessly around the kitchen. She avoided his gaze, though she could feel it against her back. *Don't tell me*, she thought fervently. *I don't want to know what haunts you. I have demons of my own.* After a moment, when she heard his



breathing slow to normal, she turned and tossed him the half empty pack. He nodded, staring at her again until she looked away.

Snake got up from the couch slowly, and limped over to the window to look out at the storm. A match flared as he lit his cigarette, and in its brief, eerie light, he was every bit the image his name evoked: dark, threatening, frighteningly dangerous. His face was haggard from exhaustion. He was scraped and bruised everywhere Lilah looked. A particularly ugly blot of purple and black along his left side made her wince. She watched him favor his right leg and now she saw why: just above the knee, his pants were torn and stained with the familiar dark red of old blood and the ominous brighter red of new. He needed a doctor, a shower and another twelve hours of sleep, not necessarily in that order.

"How far to the next town?" he asked, still watching the street. Outside, the thunderstorm kept up its violent pace.

"Thirteen miles. Fifteen, maybe," Lilah said.

Snake exhaled heavily. "Shit." Might as well be fifteen hundred, in the shape he was in. The instant he was on his feet, his leg had started to throb again, matching the pounding of his constant headache beat for painful beat.

Lilah sat down and drew one knee up against her chest. "You won't get far," she said.

Plissken looked over at her, annoyed. Pain always shortened his fuse and he was in a great deal of it now. "Why not?" he rasped.

Lilah hadn't slept off much of the whiskey yet and she was feeling foolishly brave and generous from its lingering effects. She pointed to his leg. "I have intimate knowledge of the workings of the human body --"

Snake interrupted with a scornful laugh. "Right, baby."

"-- and yours looks like shit," she finished, ignoring him. "That leg needs attention." She stood up out of the chair and opened a high cabinet over her sink, taking down a old cardboard box. As she did, the nightshirt hiked up, revealing the whole length of her long legs and a peek of her silken panties.

Snake's mind flashed back to a few hours ago, to how good it felt even to touch a woman again. If his goddamn leg didn't hurt so much ...

She put out the cigarette and washed her hands. "Take you pants off," she told him.

He didn't move. "What for?"

Lilah began to take first aid supplies from the box: bandages, scissors, tape and few bottles of solutions Snake did not recognize. As she talked, the tone of her voice changed, becoming serious. "If you don't change that bandage, that wound will keep bleeding. Or infect. At best, it'll slow you down. At worst --" She looked directly at him. "-- you'll end up losing it."

Her sudden, no-nonsense manner allowed for no arguments but Plissken wasn't going to give her one. He knew she was right. But in his world, kindness was rare. There was no favor that didn't have strings attached. He looked at her suspiciously. "What's it to you?" he asked.

Lilah laughed bitterly. Another good question. "Maybe I'm your fucking guardian angel," she said coldly.

She went into the bathroom for a towel and when she returned, he had stripped the pants off the injured leg, and was sitting in a chair. Lilah knelt on the floor before him and Plissken tensed, anticipating more pain.

"Relax," she said, slowly removing the old bandage. "I'll tell you when it's going to hurt."

Lilah studied the wound as she cleansed the area around it and Snake studied her face, looking for a clue to the degree of damage. But her expression remained calm and impassive, revealing nothing. With one hand, she cradled his leg in the towel. In the other, she held a bottle

of peroxide.

"Hold on," she told him. "This'll sting a bit."

"Heard that bef--" Snake's word's dissolved into a sharp breath sucked in through his clenched jaw as the liquid bubbled furiously over the open wound. He glared at her but she ignored him, dabbing away the foamy excess.

When the burning passed, Snake began to breathe again and watched Lilah as she worked. Her touch was surprisingly sure and skilled as she closed the edges of the wound and taped a tight pressure bandage to the site. The movements were almost rhythmic and oddly comforting. And *familiar*. Sudden recognition welled up in him, so strong it left him slack-jawed and speechless. He found his voice as she put the last piece of tape in place.

"I know you."

Lilah looked up at him, an ironic smile on her face. She smoothed down the edges of the tape, and moved to get up. "All done," was all she said.

She'd told him her name and now he struggled to remember it. *Lilah*. He rolled it around mentally, struggling to find its place in his memory. It wasn't there but her face was, he was sure, buried somewhere with the rest of his past. "Lilah," he said aloud. "That's not your name."

"Sure it is," she said, replacing the supplies back in the box. "Short for Delilah."

Images flashed, rapid-fire: *Helsinki, the base, the officers club, the hospital...*

"Connelly," he said as her picture came to mind. "Dee Dee Connelly."

And then he remembered. She was a nurse at the base hospital, part of the small group of female officers that spent whatever free time they had at the officer's club, much to the delight of the men in Plissken's squad. They met there almost daily, taking refuge from the pressures and setbacks of war. Inside they would flirt over drinks, talk and tease each other like teenagers at the local hangout. Sharing stories of the day's missions became a nightly routine, as did choosing someone to share your bed. They continued the game even as the war turned uglier, but by then it was with the desperation of men and women facing the end of the life they knew. Dee Dee spent most of her nights with Randy Barton, a flier under Plissken's command, but Snake could recall a few she'd spent with him ...

"Not any more," Lilah said, drawing Snake back to the present. "I left her in Helsinki." She hefted the box back into the cabinet and Snake dressed as her back was turned.

"Why didn't you say somethin' in the bar?" he asked and Lilah wondered if that was regret she saw on his face.

"I was waiting for the right moment," she said with a tipsy grin. "Guess I missed it, huh?"

"What are you doin' here?" he asked, too stunned to smile at the joke.

Lilah rubbed her tired eyes. "Livin' Plissken. Just livin'."

"Like this?"

Her eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Well, you're the last person I'd figure for a moralist, Snake."

Their eyes locked for a minute, then he turned away. "It's your life," he said with an indifferent shrug. "Doesn't mean shit to me." He made his way around the room with effort, collecting his shirt and boots.

Lilah's gaze followed him. In spite of the changes in him, he still drew her attention like a magnet. And once upon a time they had been friends ...

"Do you know where you're going?" she asked.

No, he didn't. Not that it made a difference. Most of the time, neither he nor Taylor had any idea what they were going to do next. But they managed. Finding a friend here, a little money there, making it up as they went along. Sadness snuck up on him, overwhelming him briefly.

Things would be different now. There would be no one around to watch his back anymore.

"I'll work it out," he said.

Lilah thought hard before she spoke. "Listen," she began awkwardly. "You might as well stay here 'til morning." Snake stopped moving and looked at her. Lilah shrugged. "What the hell, the night's half over. And you really should rest that leg awhile. Besides --" her face softened to a bittersweet smile. "-- Randy'd send his ghost back to haunt me if I kicked his C.O. out in this storm."

Plissken hesitated. He should go. And he should go now, while he still had darkness on his side and a head start on Hauk's toy soldiers. But the idea of a decent night's sleep was more than he could resist.

And there were other reasons, ones he couldn't admit to quite so easily. She was getting to him again, tempting him with more than her body this time. He felt the stirrings of a different desire, one he had denied longer than the craving for physical pleasure and one he saw reflected back at him. The need for simple human contact. Slowly, he sank into the nearest kitchen chair.

"Thanks."

Lilah went to the narrow closet in the hall, coming back out with a blanket and pillow. She tossed them on the couch, not bothering to make up a bed.

"Bathroom's that way," she said, pointing down the hall as she circled him to get to the refrigerator. She opened it and began rummaging around. "You hungry?" she asked from inside.

He was, but only when he saw the food she laid on the table did he realize how much. It had been nearly forty-eight hours since he'd eaten and the sight of rolled sausage, bread and cheese seemed like a feast.

Images of New York came to him unbidden. He remembered the crazies, depraved and desperate, crawling the streets like starved rats scavenging for something to eat. Anything to eat. Until the search ended inside Chock Full O' Nuts. Plissken closed his eye, suppressing a wave of revulsion. Survival. Self-preservation. They came at a high price inside that hellhole.

"Here."

Snake blinked, coming back to himself. He looked up and took the paring knife Lilah held out to him and began carving off slices of the meat and cheese. She took the seat opposite him.

His memories of her were returning in pieces, like reflections in a broken mirror. Fragmented. Incomplete. He saw her at the club, on Randy's lap, giving the novice poker player some equally novice advice. He saw her on the landing field helping unload wounded from the rescue choppers. And he remembered her face, distorted by his own damaged vision and haze of agony, at the hospital. He glanced around the tiny apartment. It was a long way from Helsinki to this place.

Talking around a mouthful of food, he asked again: "Dee Dee, what're you doin' here?"

Lilah swallowed and pointed at him. "Look, Plissken," she began. "Dee Dee is a kid's name, the name of someone young and naive. Even in your hurry before you might have noticed I'm neither anymore. It's Lilah now, okay?"

"You gonna answer me?" he pressed, appearing to ignore her. "How'd you end up here?"

Lilah got up and went over to the stove to put on a pot of coffee. Another bolt of lightning flashed, and for an instant, Snake could see the outline of her slender form clearly through the nightshirt. His body's response was automatic. He shifted in the seat and glanced away.

"My tour was up about a month after you got shipped out of Helsinki," she said. "And I declined the army's cordial invitation to reenlist. The brass didn't like my decision, but by then I didn't think too highly of any of theirs, either. So I split."

"For this?"



"I'm afraid I had my fill of the Florence Nightingale thing in Helsinki," she said, as she sauntered over to sit beside him on the table. "I thought I was gonna save the world, but that got old real fast. Instead I ended up crawling around a landing field in the frozen dark, trying to decide who we might be able to save and who we couldn't waste valuable time on. Taking men off the choppers in pieces. Men I'd known. Drank with. Slept with." She lit up another cigarette and her voice dropped to a whisper. "I got tired of zipping up body bags over faces I'd kissed."

When she turned to offer him the pack again, the expression on Plissken's face was one of raw pain. Lilah slid off the table. "You asked," she said.

"Anyway Plissken, if you think about it, my profession gives us something in common."

"Yeah? What's that?"

She leaned close to him. "The blackbellies that come into Jake's want your ass as much as they want mine," she said with a sexy grin that made his skin tingle. "I figure between the two of us -- one way or the other -- we've fucked most of them."

The remark finally drew a smile from him and Lilah went back to the coffee, pleased with herself. Years before, in the midst of a crowded bar, that smile had been the first thing she noticed about him. Since Leningrad, all he'd managed was the cruel, arrogant grin he saved for the police and the news media.

When the coffee was ready, she brought the pot and mugs to the table, taking back her seat. "So tell me, are you the reason for all the panic over on Liberty?" she asked.

Snake took a cup of the strong black brew, and sipped at it slowly. The hot liquid coursed through him, chasing away some of the chill he'd felt since he landed in New York. Good coffee was another thing he hadn't had in longer than he could remember. "Don't know," he answered finally, honestly.

"C'mon Snake, don't bullshit an old friend. You're not supposed to be among the living anymore." Her voice turned grave. "At least not among the ones who are happy to be living."

Plissken relaxed, rocking the chair on its back legs. "And just where am I supposed to be?" he challenged.

There was a strange sadness in her brown eyes. "Inside. Today was the day you were going Inside."

Part of Lilah's statement was hardly news. Any citizen with a television had had front row seats for Plissken's capture in San Francisco and most had breathed a sigh of relief when he was convicted and sentenced to New York Max. But the actual date of his entry was a carefully guarded secret. One that a small town hooker shouldn't know. He figured he could guess how she did.

"Some of your customers leave that information under your pillow with their twenty bucks?" he asked.

Lilah drew her leg up against her chest again, showing him a flash of thigh. She smiled in amusement, and circled the rim of her cup with a manicured finger. "Fifty bucks, Plissken. I told you I wasn't cheap. It's true, isn't it?"

He nodded.

"You keep stompin' their pride the way you do, and they'll never let you live long enough to see the inside of that place."

"I've already seen it."

Lilah froze with the cup to her lips. "New York? That's impossible," she said. "Even the dead don't come out of there. How in hell did you manage?"

"Doin' Hauk a favor," he explained. Maybe Hauk had done him a favor, too, although he didn't believe that was the old man's motivation by any stretch. Still, he could be in there now.

New kid on the block and no way out. Ever. A shiver ran through him and he drained the coffee cup.

"You? Working for the Commissioner?" She grinned in disbelief. "What part of his anatomy did you demand for that?" Plissken refilled his cup in silence.

Lilah took a long hard look at him, talking inventory of his battered body and his wounded spirit. She had long ago stopped believing in a merciful God and the promise of heaven and hell. But there was a haunted look on Plissken's face that told her hell did indeed exist and he had seen it. On the other side of New York's fifty-foot wall.

"I thought the cops did all that," she breathed. "Jesus, Snake was it worth it?"

Plissken slid forward in the seat and reached into the front pocket of his pants. Pulling out the folded pardon, he tossed it on the table between them. Lilah looked at him curiously, then took it and scanned it, slowly digesting the legal jargon. Her eyes grew wider with each word.

"I guess so," she said quietly. "And here, I thought I was harboring a fugitive."

She shook her head, tossing her hair back. Snake stared at the way it settled and laid across her shoulders, unable to forget how it felt in his hands, against his skin. He was acutely aware of her now and still too drunk to deny the effect she continued to have on him.

"How's the leg?" she asked, coming out of her chair. She beckoned him to turn around and he complied.

"Better," he said, as she knelt down before him to look. Her hair fell forward as she bent her head. Snake brushed it back, let his hand linger in the soft strands.

"Blackbellies can get real ugly with people who cross 'em," he said softly. "If you thought I was running, why'd you let me up here?"

She answered without looking up. "You're a friend, Snake."

"That the only reason?"

Lilah hesitated a moment. When she raised her head, there was longing and defiance in her gaze. "No," she said. "Sometimes I get tired of being touched by strangers."

His fingers slipped to the buttons on her nightshirt. The satin was cool to the touch, but beneath it he could feel her heat, and her quickened heartbeat. She pulled back from him abruptly.

"Forget it, Plissken. I've seen the way you work now. I don't get off on being used like that, not even for money." She got to her feet and Snake closed his hand on empty air.

"Look, I didn't kn --"

Snake was interrupted by a sharp knock at the door. He looked at Lilah, who shook her head and shrugged. Plissken held up a hand for silence. After a second, the knock came again, louder than the first and this time, a voice with it.

"Police. Open up."

Adrenaline flooded through Snake, as if from a burst dam, driving every thought but survival from his mind. He sprang from the chair and grabbed Lilah on her way to the door, clamping a hand roughly over her mouth.

"You invite some friends while I was sleepin'?" he hissed in her ear. She could hear the fear and betrayal in his voice, could feel his heart pounding against her back. "They pay you good to keep me here, all those blackbellies you lay down for?"

Lilah tried to shake her head in denial, but Plissken's other hand slipped to her neck, closing on her throat. He pressed her cheek against his shoulder. "You make one sound and I'll snap your neck clean. Understand?"

His grip was like iron, leaving Lilah struggling for air. In spite of the history between them, she had no doubt he could and would keep his promise. She held up her hands, palms spread.

After a long second, he released her. She bolted for the door and as she did, he caught her and held fast.

"No! Let go of me, godammit!" she whispered angrily but Plissken ignored her. He looked around, cursing under his breath. There was no place to escape to, no decent place to hide. If she got to the door, told them he was here ... He spotted the knife on the kitchen table and reached for it. For a split second, his grasp on Lilah loosened and she pulled away from him.

Now the police were pounding on the door. "Lilah? Come on, honey we gotta talk to you."

"Coming," she called back. Snake caught up to her as she touched the doorknob. He closed his fist in her hair, snapping her head back. In an instant, the knife was at her throat.

He opened his mouth to speak, but Lilah elbowed him sharply in his already bruised ribs. All that emerged was a strangled cry of pain. Dropping back, he struggled to be silent, then desperately stumbled toward the door just as she cracked it open. Out of options, he quickly slipped behind it, the knife clenched tight in his fist.

"Who izzit?" Lilah mumbled. She brushed a tangle of hair away from her face and squinted into the darkened hallway. Outside were two faces she knew well. Rain dripped off their black USPF slickers into a puddle forming at their feet.

"Oh, hiya, Mike. Billy," she greeted, leaning up against the edge of the door.

"Lilah, we gotta see you," the cop called Mike said, straining to look behind her into the apartment. "Is everything okay?" he asked. "I thought I heard somethin'"

Behind the door, Plissken tensed his body like a coiled spring. Out of sight, he squeezed his hand around Lilah's arm until she winced. She felt the sharp point of the knife blade along the inside of her wrist.

"All you heard was me tripping over the furniture, trying to get here before you woke up the whole damn building," she snapped.

Beside Mike, his partner cursed. "Open the goddamn door fer chrissakes!"

Lilah shook her head. "Can't, do that, Billy. I'm busy right now." She shifted, leaning up against the door jamb but Plissken held tight.

"Busy with who?" Billy demanded. "Wouldn't be Snake Plissken by any chance?"

Snake's breath caught in his throat. So much for Hauk's word. No doubt the bastard had planned all along to send him back Inside. Well, there'd be a hell of a pile of dead blackbellies before that happened, with Hauk himself on top of the heap.

"Jake tell you that?" Lilah asked. She slurred the words, sounding a good deal drunker than Snake knew she was. "Well, the posse's too late." She yawned and shook the hair out of her eyes.

"Lilah, are you telling me Plissken isn't here?" Mike asked patiently.

"He was. A few hours ago. But he just came and went." She grinned at the crude joke, then lowered her head to Mike's chest. "Classic hit and run," she told him with a drunken giggle. "I shoulda called a traffic cop."

"Bullshit," Billy spat.

Lilah looked up at him. "Don't worry, Billy, he didn't break your record."

Mike chuckled as his partner turned red-faced. Shamed, Billy pushed his way forward. "Open this, we're takin' a look."

"I told you, I've got a customer," Lilah said, tightening her grip on the door. Mike stopped Billy with a firm hand on the bigger man's chest.

Billy cursed again. "Hauk'll have our asses if somebody doesn't find that sonofabitch."

Lilah saw her chance to get rid of them. "Maybe," she whispered. "But not until after he has *mine*." She cocked a thumb behind her knowingly. Mike pointed and mouthed the Commissioner's name silently. Lilah nodded and winked.

"Figures. While we're out here doin' his dirty work," Billy complained. He pushed once more on the door and laughed, lewd and guttural. "Maybe we should tell him exactly whose sloppy seconds he's getting?"

The hand on her wrist disappeared. Without missing a beat, Lilah threw the door open.

"Be my guest, asshole."

The burly officer didn't move. Mike gave it one last try. "Lilah, did Plissken give you an idea where he was headed? Did he say anything?"

Lilah sighed. "Handsome, he didn't even say thank you."

They left, and Lilah waited until she heard the click of the street door below before she closed her own and locked it. She whirled around to face Snake.

"You stupid bastard!" she breathed, shaking. "You're lucky they didn't march right in here." She rubbed her wrist, where the red marks of his grasp stood out against her ivory skin. The memory made her even angrier. "Goddamn you, Plissken. I should have let them find you."

Snake stepped out of the corner, snapping off one light and heading for the window. Hidden behind the curtain, he watched the two cops make their way up the street to a waiting van. "Why didn't you?" he asked, as the van pulled away.

"Well it sure as hell wasn't because I was afraid of you and my kitchen knife. I told you. We were friends once. That means something to me. Time was it meant something to you, too."

His response was a bitter chuckle from the shadows. "I'll tell you what it means," he said. "Watch your back. You can't get sold out by your enemies." He relaxed and turned away from the window. "Friends are hard to recognize these days."

Lilah looked at him in disgust. "Maybe Snake Plissken should have died at Leningrad," she said in a voice that was pure ice. "The best parts of him did."

Stung, he glared back at her. "Price of survival, baby."

Lilah lowered her gaze to the knife he still held tightly in his hand and touched the hand print on her neck. "Maybe you're right, Snake," she said with a harsh laugh. "Maybe I don't know friends from strangers anymore, either." She sighed wearily. "Go on to sleep. Those two won't be back."

Snake felt his anger fade to regret as she turned away. She'd given him food and shelter and jeopardized her own comfortable arrangement with the blackbellies to keep him hidden. All he'd repaid her with was suspicion and mistrust. Tossing the knife to the table, he stepped up behind her and took her by the shoulders. Lilah stiffened at his touch, but he held fast.

"You're wrong, babe," he said. "You do know the difference." His voice was husky, his breath warm on her neck. "You know."

Lilah made no move away from him and Snake turned her to face him. His lips brushed her cheek and she pulled back slightly, afraid.

"Don't hurt me," she said softly.

With his eye still locked to hers, he cradled her face and wordlessly shook his head. He stroked her hair before guiding her mouth to his and then kissed her deeply, with all the restraint he could muster. He wanted her badly now and his physical desire was only part of it. Was she right? Had none of his soul survived? He felt a need to prove he didn't belong inside that inhuman hell of a prison. He needed to prove it not just to Lilah, but to himself.

She answered his kiss with an eagerness that surprised and excited him. Her tongue darted alongside his as her fingers entwined in his hair. She pulled away only to nibble his lower lip and gently kiss the scar along his left cheek.

He groped for the bikinis that were all she wore beneath the nightshirt, then slipped one hand between the silk fabric and her skin. He moved from the cool firmness of her buttocks to

the soft, warm folds between her thighs. Lilah moaned softly and rocked her hips toward him in response.

In turn, she trailed kisses along length of his bare chest, then dropped her hands to his waist and below. One hand stroked hard against his crotch, while the other expertly opened each button slowly, deliberately. She was as eager to touch him as he was to be touched and she knew her approach was maddening and delicious.

He hardly needed her help. As before, he was ready for her. She worked the pants down far enough for him to step free of them, then took a slender finger and traced the outline of the flaring cobra to its end.

Snake quickly undid the buttons of her shirt, baring her body. The grip on her arms was white-knuckle tight as his mouth moved to her breasts, suckling each nipple in turn, until she cried out for him to stop. It was a long moment before he did, before he even realized she had spoken.

He slid the bikinis down until Lilah was able to wriggle out of them completely. Then he stood and cupped her buttocks in both hands, pulling her to him insistently.

Lilah felt the table behind her. She eased her hips on its edge, then stretched out onto it, opening herself to him. Nearing the end of his endurance, Snake could only moan his approval.

He entered her standing and Lilah circled him with her legs, arching her pelvis to meet his thrusts. He held tight to her wrists, keeping her with him as his rhythm increased in intensity. His gaze swept from her erect nipples peeking out from the edges of the open nightshirt to the bronze-gold waves of her hair spread out on the table, to her face, where the signs of her own building passion were clear. Her face was flushed with heat, her eyes riveted to him.

Snake watched her hungrily, letting her movements and sounds of pleasure increase his own. With a cry from deep in his throat, he exploded inside her and the image of him pushed Lilah to her own climax instantly. She clutched at his arms as she convulsed before him, giving her body over to its need.

Snake pulled her against him as she quieted, both of them breathless and spent. Lilah circled her arms around his neck, burying her face in the curve of his shoulder. She took in deep breaths, drawing the smell of him inside her, forcing it into her memory and knowing all the while that tomorrow it would be gone, replaced by the scent of a dozen others. But that was tomorrow.

Snake held her close, pulling free the damp strands of hair that clung to her face and running his fingers along her back until she shivered. When he spoke, his voice was a low whisper in her ear.

"This could get damn expensive."

Lilah drew back to look at him. His wearied face wore a rare, warm smile.

"I told you price was negotiable," she said, then she grinned back at him. "Make 'em all like that and they're on the house."

His smile faded, replaced by an expression she knew meant his fire had cooled but was far from out. He lifted her and, with her legs still wrapped around his waist, carried her to the bedroom.

Plissken shared Lilah's bed for the rest of that night and the next day. There was no place she was expected during daylight hours, she told him, no chance that her absence would look suspicious and point to his whereabouts.

Most of the time he slept, allowing his ragged, exhausted body the rest it desperately needed. But each time he awoke, it was with the same desire: to touch and be touched by



something warm and alive.

When she wasn't dozing herself, Lilah gazed at his bruised and scarred body, remembering Helsinki and the other times she had awakened beside him. Back when he was whole. When they both were. They had both paid a high price for survival. But they had survived.

Later that evening, she awoke to an empty bed and a silent room bathed in shadow. For a brief second, she felt a pang of loneliness like a physical pain. Quickly, she slipped on the nightshirt and headed to the living room.

Snake stood at the window, gazing out to the street below, a cigarette pressed tightly between his lips. He glanced up as she entered, then went back to his vigil.

"You don't even know what Hauk wants with you," she said after a moment.

Snake sighed. "Can't let 'em catch me just to find out."

She walked over and sat down at the table, helping herself to a cigarette.

"Know where you're headed?"

He said nothing. Lilah didn't push him. It would be safer for both of them if she didn't know.

He turned away from the window only to find Lilah staring at him. They locked eyes for a moment as she tried to read his unreadable expression. Then he headed for the door.

"Plissken --"

He stopped, glanced back over his shoulder.

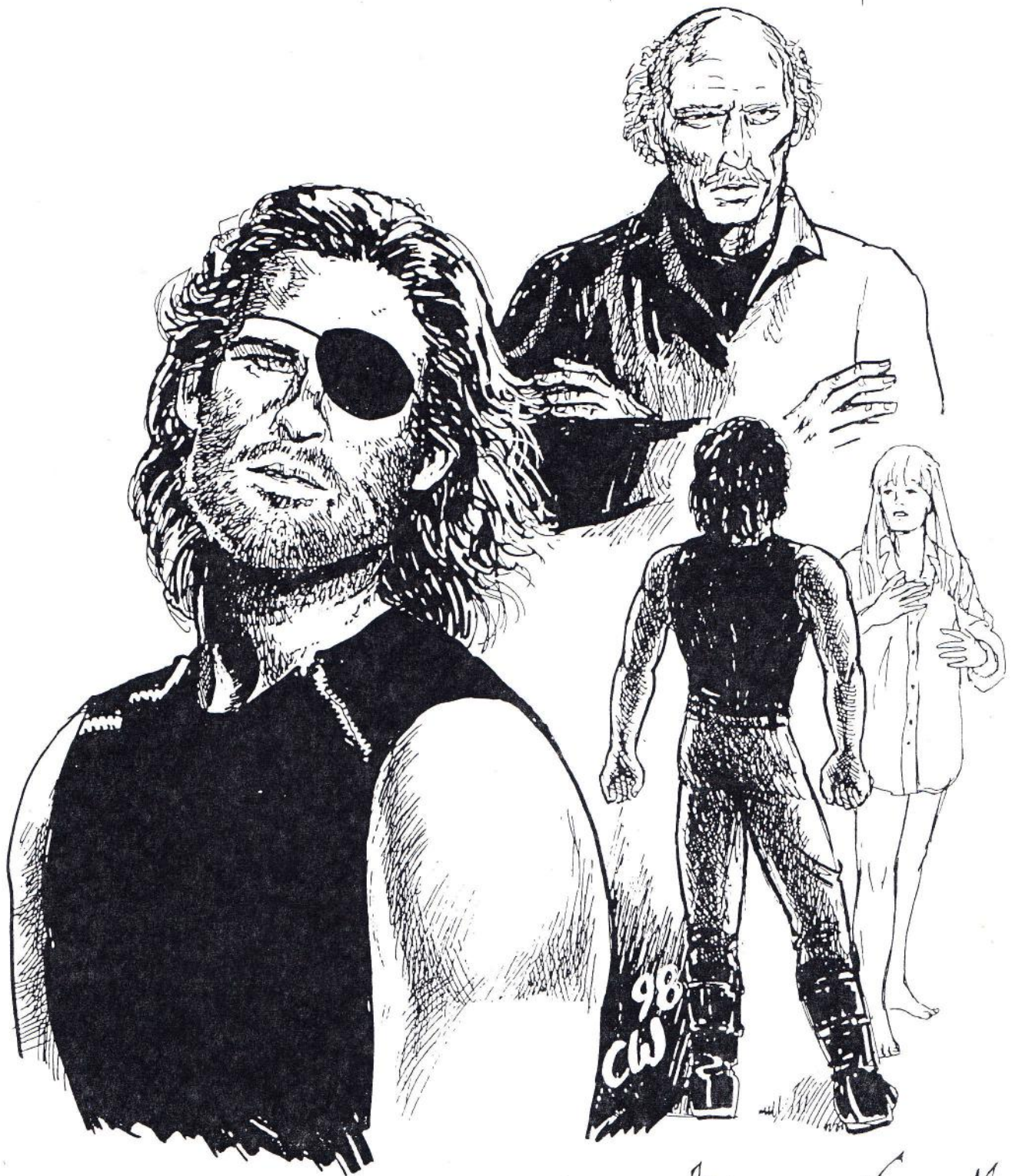
"Watch your ass, okay?"

Then he smiled and was gone.

Half an hour later, Lilah entered the bar through the back door and took her usual seat. She looked over the crowd and saw that the place was thick with cops who clearly intended to make up for last night's mandatory overtime. No need to stalk game tonight. Sooner or later, they would come to her.

She made herself comfortable and settled back to wait. With a resigned sigh, she signaled the bartender, who brought her drink at once. As she accepted it, she glanced out to the window and saw -- just for an instant -- the familiar blue eyes and boyish smile of a man she used to know.

DOTPLEGANGER



by Nan Mack

By the time he saw the lights, he'd been walking most of the day and was tired and annoyed. And freezing. Daytime had been warm enough -- abnormally warm for early winter -- but the sun had begun to go down half an hour ago and the temperature with it. Nights got real cold real quick these days. The toxic gases let loose into the atmosphere by the war had played hell with the weather, too, he supposed. His head was pounding and his fingers and toes were starting to numb up. He shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans and kept moving.

He didn't argue with his pain, or try to talk himself out of it. That was just bullshit, anyway. Instead, he concentrated, focusing in on it, letting his misery work for him. With each painful step he remembered how he came to be there and why, letting his annoyance grow to genuine anger. He liked the way anger made him feel. Powerful. Invincible. Even now, after everything else was gone, his hate and anger was the only thing that made him feel alive.

The lights were brighter now and he could see where they came from. In the distance, beyond an abandoned railroad crossing overgrown with dead weeds, was a tiny store with a service station attached. He wondered how the owners survived. Population was sparse this close to New York. Not a single car had passed him for hours and there wasn't even another building for miles.

As he got closer, he saw the parking lot was empty. A smile spread slowly across his face. No one stopping off to pick up a six pack. No one filling up their tank at the station's solitary pump. Goddamn, it was fucking perfect.

He reached the front door and stopped, scanning the inside. The place was old and although the shelves were well-stocked, he could see there was room for plenty more on them. It had probably been a decent business once. Back when this road serviced the bigger cities and the people who lived outside them. Back before Soviet bombs laden with their obscene poisons had found their secondary targets ...

He stroked the gun that sat snugly in the waistband of his jeans. The touch of cold steel made his heart beat faster and he could feel a quivering tension in each of his muscles. Then he took a deep breath and tugged at his jacket, making sure the weapon was hidden, and went inside. A small bell, affixed to the door jamb, announced his arrival.

The place was warm and smelled faintly of coffee and motor oil. On the wall to his left, a door led out to the service bays. Directly in front of him, on a worn white counter, the cash register sat unattended.

He chuckled in disbelief and waited a minute before calling out.

"Anybody here?"

Another few seconds passed before a man entered from the garage area, hastily wiping grease from his hands onto a rag. He stuffed the filthy cloth into a back pocket and hurried behind the counter.

"Sorry," he said. "My kid's supposed to be watching the place. Don't know where she could've got off to." The storekeeper looked at his customer. The young man's face bore the marks of battle. A thin scar ran perpendicular to his mouth from his nose to left jawline and his left eye was covered by a black leather patch. The defiant stare from his good, right eye was a cold, ice blue. It was a face the storekeeper recognized.

"What can I get for you?" he asked warily.

The young man never moved. "Cold outside," he said, his voice low and menacing. "Got any coffee?"

"Sure, sure I do." The storekeeper jerked his head toward the back of the store. "Hang on, I'll get --"

As he turned to go, the door at the back opened and a girl came bounding into the store. "God, Dad, I'm sorry," she apologized. The young man looked at her, the coffee and the storekeeper momentarily forgotten.

She was young. Fifteen, sixteen at most, with straight hair that hung almost to her waist. Still, beneath the baggy sweatshirt and tight jeans he could see the beginnings of a body men would someday kill for. A familiar urge rose up in him suddenly, with the force of a runaway train.

"Go get this man a cup of coffee," the girl's father said sternly. She glanced over, unable to hide her distaste. The young man's gaze never left her as she walked away.

"You want anything else?" the storekeeper said when she was gone.

The young man looked back and smiled. "Oh, yeah." In an instant, he closed his hand around the gun and brought it level with the man's face. The fear he saw there hit him like a jolt of meth, switching on his every nerve.

"Open it," he ordered, nodding at the cash register. The storekeeper moved toward it quickly, and pushed the right combination of buttons with shaking hands. It opened with a snap and he gathered the bills up, laying them on the counter.

"That's all I've got, I s-swear," he stammered.

The young man chuckled, his eye darting to the rear of the store. "Not all," he said. The door opened once again and the girl came through it, her eyes fixed on the coffee cup in her hand. She walked slowly and deliberately, so it would not spill. When she reached the counter, she finally looked up.

"Dad --"

The bullet caught the storekeeper point blank in the chest. His body jumped back from the impact, crashing into a display of canned goods. The girl gasped and the coffee tumbled from her hand. She sank to her knees in the puddle it made, reaching out for her father as he hit the floor.

"Daddy!"

Dark blood bubbled up from a hole in his overalls and the girl's hands fluttered helplessly over the wound. She made a soft, hurt sound as life ebbed out of him and the young man felt the



urge inside him swell.

He was sorry she didn't scream. He liked to hear their screams, their crying. But she didn't. She only made that little sound to tease him. That's what she was, nothing but a tease.

Behind him, the garage door burst open and a boy not much older than she stood there. The girl came around the counter, crying out.

"Brian, no!"

The gun roared again and the boy dropped where he was, a neat, round circle in his forehead. Now the girl wailed in anguish. She turned and stared at the young man, waiting her turn.

His smile turned dark and leering, and he slowly shook his head. "No way, baby," he hissed. He laid the gun on the counter and slipped his jacket off.

Understanding his intent, the girl shook her head dumbly. Then self-preservation took over and she began backing away from him.

"No," she whimpered. "No. Oh, please, no."

He stopped her at the door, locking his arms around her, pinning hers to her side. She twisted like a wild animal, throwing them off balance. They went down together, landing on top of her brother's still warm body. She moaned aloud, then scrambled away into the cool darkness of the garage.

He went after her, his heart racing and his breath short, the ache inside him almost unbearable now. He could hear her breathing too, and he tracked her from the sound. She was at the far end of the service bay, behind an old, battered Chrysler.

"C'mon, baby," he called out, his voice hollow in the big room. He crawled toward her, his words covering the sound. "Don't be a tease, now."

He found her crouched in a corner, wedged between the car and the cinderblock wall, a hammer clenched in her hand. She saw him and swung it hard on his blind side, just missing his head. He caught her by the wrist and pulled her toward him, then rocked her back, letting momentum carry him forward on top of her. He slammed her wrist against the car's bumper and she dropped the hammer with a howl of pain.

Icy moonlight from the room's single window shone on her face. She sobbed openly and glistening tears streamed down her cheeks. God, he loved it when they cried. He closed his eyes briefly, dizzy from the rush it gave him, then shifted his weight to straddle her.

She clawed at him with her good hand, scratching his face, tearing open his shirt. She saw the tattoo then. A malevolent black cobra reared to strike, it moved at her with every ripple of his muscles. He saw her eyes widen in terror and he laughed.

And then she began to scream.

Police Commissioner Hauk strode quickly through the concrete corridors of the Liberty Island Security Control building, fixing his gaze straight ahead, ignoring the dozen or so USPF officers he passed. Nothing official prompted the urgency. It was just his habit

The Commissioner genuinely hated the place -- decorated as it was in early bomb shelter -- and he hated the job that kept him here. He'd be willing to bet that none of the men who hurried out of his path could ever guess how much.

Burn out. That's what they called it back in the seventies and eighties, back when people gave catchy little names to man's petty problems. Hauk smiled grimly to himself. Since the war, no one had time for such luxuries. All that mattered now was survival. And the military had given 'burn out' a whole new meaning.

There were more officers in the corridor that led to his office. This time he looked at them as he passed, wondering. There was madness in their eyes. A little more every day. Did they see the same in his? Not that it mattered a damn. Crazy or not, he was in charge. King of the madhouse. Responsible for them all.

Hauk knew all about responsibility. He'd had plenty of it during his Special Forces days. He'd figured this job was simply a trade: one war zone for another. At least he hadn't deluded himself on that point. Not like he had with the other reasons for taking the job. Those reasons -- personal ones -- didn't exist anymore. But still he stayed. Maybe that alone was proof of his madness.

Some days were better than others, but he hadn't seen any of the good ones for a while, now. Most of time they were days like today. Like yesterday. And the day before that.

He entered his private office and closed the door behind him, letting the warmth and quiet seep into his frayed nerves. He took a seat behind the heavy wooden desk and reached into the lower right hand drawer, pulling out a bottle of good scotch and a glass. He poured two fingers worth, glanced at it, and poured another two. Then he left it where it sat. He dropped his face into his hands and rubbed his tired eyes.

Three in the last twenty-four hours. Three more attempted escapes that were terminated the hard way. Eight more people who preferred death to life inside New York Maximum Security Penitentiary. But then, by Christ, who wouldn't?

The escape attempts had grown more frequent in the last few weeks, but the reason was no mystery to Hauk. It didn't seem to matter that the inmates were denied any outside news. Somehow, word had reached them. Word that spurred a dozen other desperate schemes.

Someone had made it out.

And Hauk was responsible for that, too.

Not solely, of course. Snake Plissken had a little something to do with it. It was Plissken after all, who had spit into the eye of the monster that was New York Max and escaped its fate. A

slight smile melted the hard lines of Hauk's face. Although he wouldn't care to live it over again, that day had been one of the good ones. For the first time since he'd taken this job, Hauk thought he'd seen justice done.

And by the time it was all over, Plissken had dealt them all his own brand of justice. Maybe "Mousey" John Harker thought his tape was lost Inside, but Hauk knew better.

He'd meant it when he said he wanted to give Snake a job and he had no intention of abandoning his plan just because Plissken didn't like the idea. Letting Snake know Hauk shared his little "secret" would be a convenient way to make sure the outlaw stayed available. Some might call that blackmail. The fact that Plissken would be one of them didn't disturb Hauk much at all.

The Commissioner had tried to find him, sending squads out almost immediately after Snake left the island and advising all stations to keep an eye out. But Snake Plissken had slithered out of their grasp, disappearing as quickly and completely as a ghost. Grudgingly, Hauk had to give the first round to him. It had been six weeks now, without a trace.

A sharp urgent knock on his door brought him back. "Come," he called.

He looked up, and the surprise he felt at seeing Sergeant Henry Shaw enter was quickly replaced by annoyance. At himself. The shakeup in ranks that had gotten Tom Rheme temporarily reassigned had occurred over a month ago. Maybe it was the fact that he'd worked with Rheme since their military days that kept Hauk from remembering Shaw was around or maybe he really was slipping. It certainly wasn't Shaw's fault. He'd been invaluable in the search for Plissken and was more distressed than any of them that it had, so far, proven fruitless.

Instead of his normal, businesslike appearance, Shaw's face was etched with obvious distress. Hauk saw the familiar yellow of an emergency dispatch in his hand. The commissioner sighed. "Whatcha got?" he asked.

"This just came in," Shaw said, handing over the ragged-edged computer printout. Hauk slipped on his glasses and read.

The incident at the convenience store in Linvale was not unlike a dozen others that happened in the course of a day, brutal and capricious. It wasn't until Hauk read the description of the suspect given by the young survivor that his expression began to grow cold with anger. He looked at the paper for a long moment.

"They're sure?" He asked the question without looking up.

Shaw nodded. "It was three days before the girl recovered enough to speak. But she remembered everything. Coloring. Build. The eyepatch. Even the tattoo."

Hauk had stopped listening. Disbelief dominated his thoughts. ... *You'll receive a full pardon for every criminal action you've committed in the United States* ... He'd seen hunger in Plissken's face when he'd said those words. A hunger so profound Hauk thought Snake might just sell his soul

for that piece of paper. Could he have been so wrong about the man?

The disbelief began to fade to something else, something he knew he had no right to feel. Betrayal. He closed it off. This could not, would not, become personal. He had a job to do. A job he hated but a job he'd committed to. Given his word. And to Bob Hauk, nothing meant more.

"What do you want to do?" Shaw asked.

Hauk's voice was hard. "I want you to get everybody available out there. I want them to check every square inch around that town. Look in every bar and boardinghouses, whorehouses, and doghouse. Look in the trees. Look in the caves. Look under the goddamn rocks, for crissakes. Twice. I kept that son-of-a-bitch out of New York and I can kick his ass right back in there."

Shaw was already moving. "Yes, sir." The door closed on his words.

Hauk looked across the room at the brown leather chair. He could see Plissken sitting there as he had six weeks ago. Had he seen the real man? Or just what he wanted to see, a comrade-in-arms who'd survived the same hell that Hauk himself had? Had his decision really been a victory for justice? Or had he simply turned another madman loose?

His gaze drifted back to the paper he still held in his hand. Two people dead, one cruelly left alive to remember. And now it seemed that Hauk was responsible for that, too. As surely as if he'd committed the acts himself.

He stared at the paper until he heard the sounds of Shaw's footsteps fade down the corridor. Then he reached for the scotch and took it down in one swallow.

Snake Plissken approached the old, brick structure with caution. It wasn't the first condemned building he'd seen on his slow trek west, but it might have been the biggest still standing. Fourteen stories plus, it overshadowed everything else in the war-ravaged ghost town he found himself in. He wasn't even sure where that was. Jersey, maybe. Or Pennsylvania by now.

In the moonlight, its silhouette was an uneven, jagged line. He could see that the top floors were gone. Gutted. As if some huge monster had thundered by and taken a bite out of it. Plissken snorted. Maybe one had. It wouldn't have surprised him.

He stopped at what used to be the front door and was now just a gaping rectangular hole in the red brick face. The main room was large and the skeleton of a huge desk sat in the center, its wood panels gone long ago for fuel. On the wall behind it, engraved in the stone and almost obliterated by graffiti, were the words New Hope General Hospital.

New Hope. The name was like a bad joke. It had once been a place of healing. Now it was a only one more collecting place for an army of homeless. For Snake, it was simply a roof for the night. Rides were scarce today and he'd made most of his progress on foot. Now it was late and he was bone tired.

He stepped inside, picking his way carefully around the small fires and the people sprawled on the floor, looking for an open space. Several of the squatters looked up, their eyes wary. Women cradled their dirty, hungry children, and stretched out their hands to him, begging for anything he was willing to give. The rest never knew he was there.

His search took him down a corridor that led to the stairs. Gritting his teeth, he took them slowly, putting as little weight as possible on his right leg. The wound was healing well enough, but walking all day in the early December cold had made it ache like it hadn't for weeks.

He swept his gaze back and forth as he climbed. Bodies littered the landings. Dead or alive, he couldn't tell. Last time he made a climb like this, he could. The odor of death had been strong inside the World Trade Center, and the stairs slick with the slime of decay.

The door to the second floor was half off its hinges, hanging at angle and Snake had to crouch to squeeze through it. This hallway was black as pitch and an icy wind whistled through a dozen broken windows.

He felt his way along, his good eye straining for any break in the darkness. The rooms here must have once been for patients. A metal railing ran along the wall and some of the rooms had numbers on their doors -- those few that still had doors. Unlike the lobby, this floor was nearly empty and Snake soon found a room that suited his needs. The window was miraculously intact and the silver glow from the full moon lit a space under it that looked clean enough.

Plissken dropped his makeshift bedroll to the floor, unrolled it, then sat. He slipped a small bundle of dried meat from inside his jacket and took a bite, hoping to take the edge off the gnawing in his stomach if not the pounding pain in his head. After a few more swallows, he stretched out and closed his eyes. He considered taking off the jacket to use as a pillow, but was asleep before he could finish the thought.

Sometime later, the sound of approaching engines woke him. He came instantly alert, as he always did, and held his breath to listen. The engines got louder, then stopped just outside the building. Snake got stiffly to his feet and squinted out of the dirty glass to look.

There were two vehicles, a motorcycle and an armored van, both bearing the stark, red, white and blue eagle emblem of the USPF. A blackbelly in full riot gear got off the bike. The van discharged two more.

Snake was already moving when the rumble of terror from downstairs reached his ears. He couldn't make out the words, but he didn't have to. There was a loud, harsh voice barking questions and several other weaker voices offering answers. Unsatisfactory answers it seemed, from the cries of pain he also heard. He felt a familiar hatred rise up in him and pushed away the dark memories to concentrate on survival.

Footsteps thundered up the stairs as he headed down the hall, toward the far exit. Without looking back, he heard the scream of the old door's twisted hinge. A circle of light jumped in

front of him, shattering the darkness and a voice called out loud.

"Hold it right there!"

Snake heard the bolt of an assault rifle and froze where he was, arms extended away from his body. As if it meant anything to a blackbelly that he was unarmed. He remembered San Francisco. No. If they wanted him dead, it wouldn't matter a rat's ass.

Two of them were on him instantly, pushing him face first against the corridor wall, his arms pinned at his back. They patted him down roughly, coming up empty, but they did not release him.

The man who held the powerful flashlight brought it up to shine in Plissken's face. The stinging, bright beam sent a stab of pain through Snake's good eye. He let out his breath as a grunt.

"Well, whaddya know, Sarge?" the man with the flashlight said, snapping up his helmet's visor for a good look. His breath was foul and his teeth visibly rotten even in the dark. "He was pretty easy to catch after all."

The Sergeant, obviously the leader of the squad, kept his distance, watching the entire scene with clinical detachment. Snake tried for a glimpse of the man, but his head was twisted back and slapped hard against the wall. The pain in his head exploded into glittering stars.

"Try slithering out of this, Plissken," Flashlight said.

"Don't have to," Snake growled. "Can't you assholes read your dispatches? I'm a free man."

He was jerked around suddenly to face them. "Used to be," Flashlight said. "That was before your little party up north. Now we got orders from the Commissioner himself to hit the road and collect your slippery little ass." His lips curled in a triumphant smile. "And this time you're goin' Inside for good."

Snake ignored the flunkies that held him down, and glared at the Sergeant. The man kept his visor down, his features hidden. Another faceless man who gave the orders. Had all the answers. Plissken's voice was cold.

"What th' fuck is he talkin' about?"

He barely got the sentence out when the barrel of an automatic slammed into his belly. Snake doubled over and sank to his knees, fighting off the nausea.

"Don't talk dirty to the Sergeant," Flashlight said with a grin.

The silent man finally spoke. "He's talking about the two men you killed and the child you raped and brutalized in Linvale."

Snake struggled to look up, fixing the man with a murderous gaze. "You're crazy," he hissed.

The guard raised his rifle butt again, but the Sergeant's voice stopped him. "That's enough." He inclined his head to the stairwell. "Take him outside."

Snake let them drag him to his feet. They went back down the stairs as a unit. On ground level, the frightened human mass backed away, giving them a clear path to the door. When they left the building, no one followed and only a few of the braver ones even risked a look at

unfortunate prisoner. They all knew better.

Snake strained for a look. He couldn't see the bike. He guessed it was on the far side of the van, parked thirty yards away. He held his temper as they pushed and shoved him in that direction, letting the adrenaline in his system build. At the rear, they stopped. Flashlight took one hand off Plissken to reach for the handle of the van's back door.

Snake moved instantly. He pulled free of the first guard, the one on his right, and brought his elbow up sharply. The blow caught the blackbelly under the chin, snapping his head back, staggering him. Snake spun, and thrust his knee into Flashlight's groin, sending the man to the ground, groaning in agony.

The first guard recovered quickly and swung his automatic off his shoulder. Before he could aim it, Snake grabbed the barrel with both hands, pulling it free. He thrust outward and the weapon's butt connected soundly with the blackbelly's throat. There was a strangled cry of pain and the man went down, gasping desperately for air.

The Sergeant's gun was drawn when Snake looked up to find him. Plissken dropped as the shots rang out past him. He rolled to his knees, using the van for cover and emerged firing. The automatic chewed the ground at the Sergeant's feet, sending chunks of frozen earth into the air and forcing the man to retreat.

Plissken scrambled up. He fired a spray of bullets at the tires, then the window. Acrid smoke filled the cab as the radio inside exploded in a shower of spark and flame.

Snake dropped the now empty weapon and hopped on the USPF bike. He turned the key, punched the ignition switch and the engine roared alive. With no time for a backward glance, he twisted the throttle and tore off into the night.

If he had looked back, he might have seen the Sergeant slip off his helmet and calmly retrieve the empty gun with gloved hands. He might even have been able to see the man smile as he watched his prisoner disappear down the dark highway.

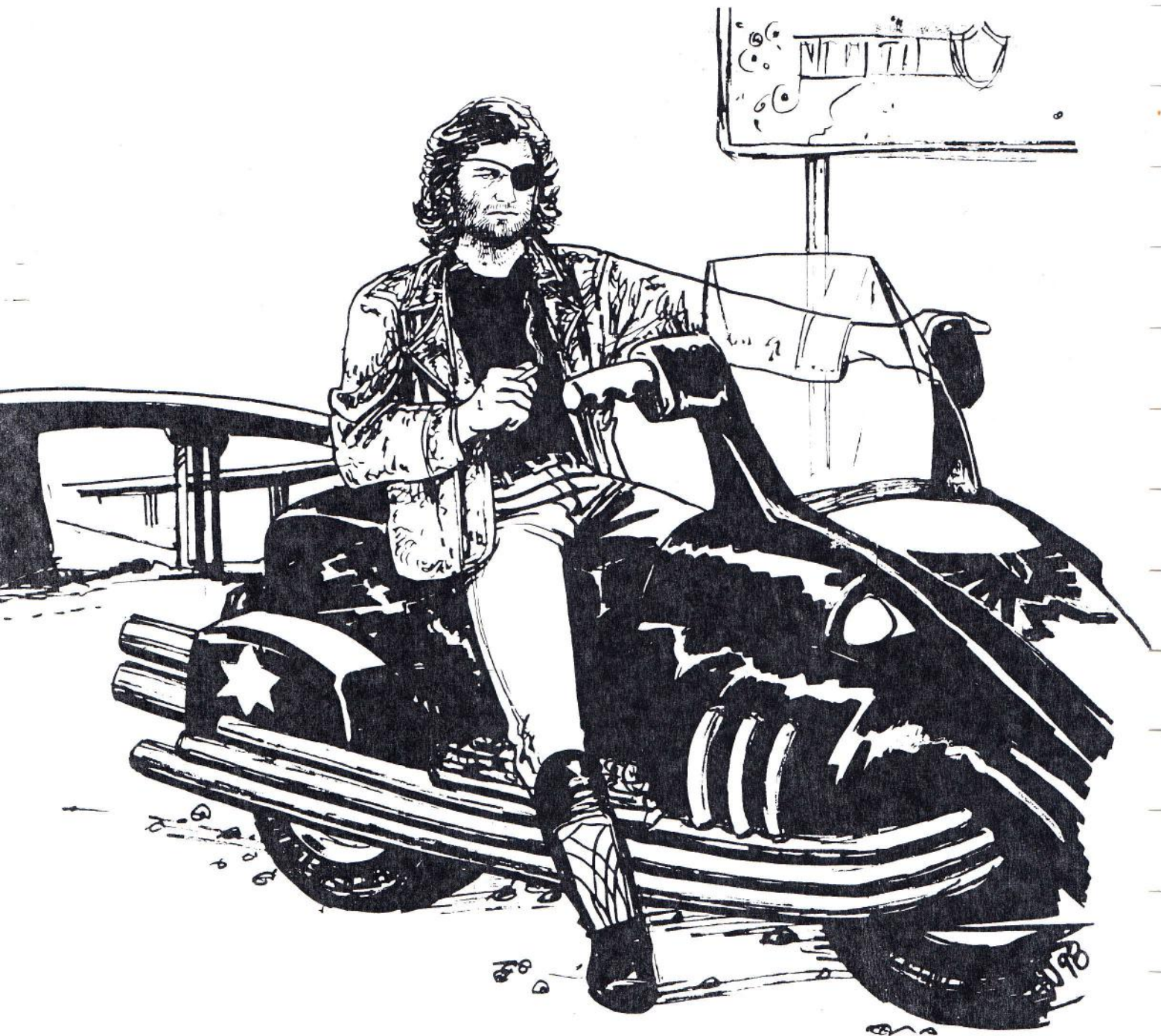
Snake drove for half an hour, his heart racing as fast as the bike. Sweat soaked his shirt under the jacket, in spite of the frigid wind. He felt panic grip him the way it had six weeks ago inside New York Max and he struggled to push it down.

He'd been an asshole to think they were done with him, that they'd really let him go. They'd only been waiting for time to pass, for him to drop his guard and think that he was safe. And if he wasn't going to give them a reason to throw him back Inside, then they'd just make one up.

No, not they.

He.

The hate and anger that surged through Snake finally found its focus. The combination was powerful and dangerously comforting and in its presence his panic faded, like pain melted away by a narcotic.



A crossroad materialized in the distance and Snake slowed as he approached it. He coasted to a stop on the shoulder and sat back, stretching his legs and giving his pounding heart time to quiet. Ahead of him a green road sign with faded and missing letters, offered him a choice of destinations. But Plissken had his own choices to make.

He'd been heading west. There were friends there. Friends who would help him. Friends who would hide him if necessary. On the bike, he could make it in less than a week. But he'd made a promise before he left New York, a promise he hadn't kept. And he'd just seen the consequences of that mistake.

No, Colorado would have to wait. Snake took a deep breath and eased the bike back on to the highway, then roared off, heading north.

He was going back to keep his promise.

He was going back to kill Bob Hauk.

* * * * *

He picked out the woman as she left the bar. There was a man with her, of course, but he expected nothing less from a slut. He could tell by the way they giggled and teased their way down the snowy, empty street that both of them were drunk. So much the better. It would make tailing them easier. He smiled. And later, she'd be easy for him, too.

The two patrolling USPF morons weren't much problem, either. They'd passed his position twice already, but they were too busy complaining about the cold and their work assignment to spot him. He gave them a fair shot, he thought, waiting until they were nearly on him before ducking back into the alley to hide. He shook his head as they strolled by him a third time. Hopeless.

Coming here was risky. He knew that. But then he never did like playing it safe. The line he walked was razor sharp. On one side was the game and the sweet, delicious rush of winning. On the other, the heart-pounding fear of discovery and capture. Each sensation fed off the other and he no longer knew which he enjoyed more. Or needed more.

When the cops were gone, he slipped across the street and entered the building through the back door, as the woman had. He followed her to the second floor, quick and silent as a panther.

She let herself and the man into her apartment, leaving the dimly-lit landing deserted. Alone, he slipped a knife from inside his boot and tapped the handle sharply against the ceiling's single bare bulb. With a pop and a soft crunch of glass, the faint light disappeared entirely. Sheathing the knife, he positioned himself in sight of her door to wait. It wouldn't take long.

Less than half an hour later, he heard the sound of her voice again. His body tensed automatically and his breathing turned slow and shallow, waiting for the snap of the door lock. Light spilled out into the landing, framing the woman's silhouette. He held his breath then, and stood flat to the wall, becoming one with the darkness...

...The woman followed her customer out, leaning over the stair railing to watch until he was gone. But the dark landing made her nervous and she hurried back to the warmth of her own place.

The man sprang from the shadows as she reached her open door, grabbing her from behind. A scream rose up in her, but he choked it off, clamping an iron hand over her mouth. He pushed her forward, into the apartment.

Panic cut through the whiskey fog in her brain, sobering her up instantly. The woman squirmed and clutched at him, digging her nails hard into his hand. He moved his face close to her ear.

"Easy ..." He drew the word out like a lover's caress, holding her tight against him. "... easy, babe."

He backed up, closing the door with his shoulder. Then he released her and braced himself for what was coming. She whirled on him, hand raised. He blocked it easily, catching her by the wrist. Her eyes widened in shock and recognition.

"Plissken!"

Lilah Connelly jerked her hand from his grasp and leaned back against the wall. "Jesus!" she gasped, hugging her shoulders to stop the shaking. "Jesus Christ! Couldn't you just knock?"

Snake rubbed the marks left by her nails. "Didn't want to interrupt anything," he said. He walked past her to the window and stayed carefully hidden as he checked the outside. A pair of blackbellies continued their endless loop around the empty block, ignorant of the fact that their quarry was right under their noses. He exhaled, relieved and stepped away.

Lilah was still standing where he left her, and he gazed at her appreciatively. She wore a short, black skirt and a tight sweater that sat off her shoulders, leaving them bare. Her hair hung loose and full and she shook it back as he watched. The picture brought back a rare, pleasant memory.

"Nice," he breathed.

Lilah stared at him uneasily, keeping her distance. "What are you doing back here?" she asked, more sharply than she meant to.

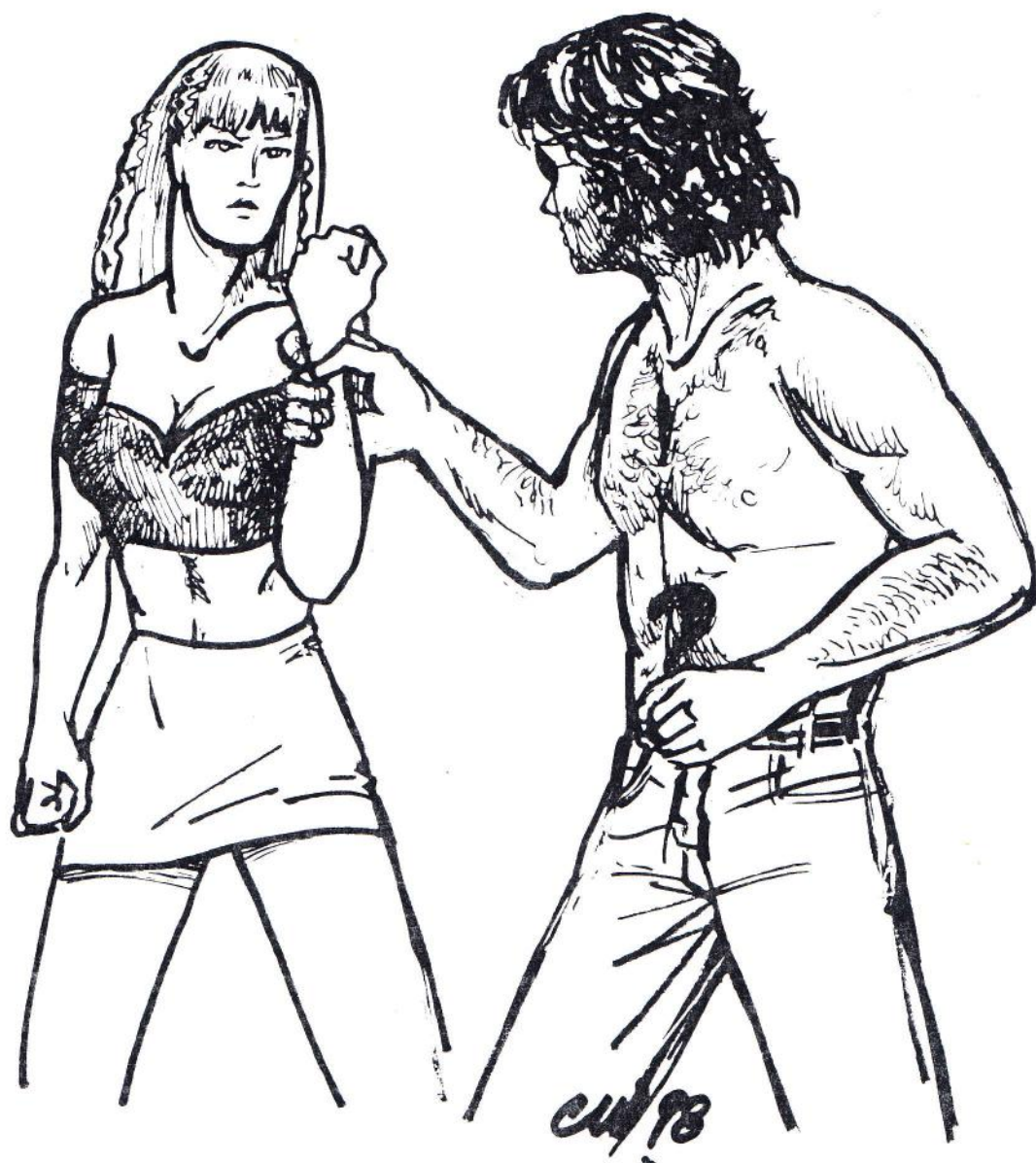
Snake's good eye narrowed. There was something in her voice. A cautious edge he recognized immediately. The truth hit him hard. She was afraid of him.

Well, shit, why not? By now, she'd probably heard a dozen different versions of "his" crime from a dozen different blackbellies, all of them guilty of worse and crazy as hell.

And she believed them.

He looked away, laughing bitterly. Chalk up another little victory for Hauk. Let the bastard enjoy them while he could.

Lilah approached him slowly, keeping the kitchen table between them. Seeing him again had



triggered memories in her, too. Memories that conflicted with the horror stories she'd recently been told. She wanted badly to hear those stories were lies.

"They're looking for you everywhere," she said. "The whole place is lousy with blackbellies."

Snake's mouth curled into a defiant sneer. He peeled off his leather jacket. Then he sat and leaned his chair back, tossing the jacket on the table and propping up his booted feet beside it. "Business must be great," he said sarcastically.

She watched as he reached behind him to open the cabinet beneath her sink, remembering exactly where she kept her liquor. Grabbing the first bottle he touched, he twisted off the cap and took a long swallow. Then he punched the door shut and smiled when she jumped at the sound.

Lilah held her temper. Snake Plissken's reputation as a dangerous man was not unfounded. She knew first hand that he was volatile and vicious when wounded. Trading barbs with him was not only useless but could even be suicidal -- like throwing gasoline on a fire. He once had a gentler side, a side Lilah knew from the past. But it was buried deep and trying to reach it was as risky as reaching out to pet a mad dog. Still, she'd done it before and not that long ago.

"What happened in Linvale, Snake?" she asked softly.

He glared at her, his face full of hate. "Startin' to believe what all those horny cops whisper in your ear, baby?" he snarled. He swallowed again, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and grinned coldly. "I thought whores were smarter than that."

Lilah felt her cheeks redden. Patience lost out to her own hurt and anger. "Fuck you too," she spat. She turned away, but he was out of the chair in an instant, grabbing her arm and pulling her to him. He held her face an inch from his own.

"You offerin'?" he hissed. He spun her around and pushed her against the refrigerator. It rocked from the impact and a glass jar rolled off the top to smash on the counter.

In spite of her pounding heart, Lilah didn't even blink. She'd dealt with more than her share of madmen in this room and she was good at it. All too often, her survival depended on it. "You want to work something out of your system here?" she said, her voice perfectly even. "It costs. You are *not* my personal charity."

Plissken's jaw tightened. A muscle in his cheek twitched with barely controlled rage. His eye never left hers. He put the bottle aside to dig into his pocket and pull out two crumpled bills. He held them up so she could see them, then slowly pushed them into the cleavage created by her skin-tight top.

Lilah shivered as the same hands that caressed her gently a few weeks before now pawed at her without conscience. She swallowed down her revulsion and raised her eyes. He was still staring at her. Watching her misery. Enjoying it. He closed both fists in her hair.

Still, she held his angry gaze without flinching. "I don't want your money. I want the truth. Tell me what happened in Linvale," she demanded.

Snake slid his hands into her hair and pulled her head to him. Lilah held her breath,

expecting to feel a skull-splitting pain when he slammed it back against the refrigerator. "Can't do that, sweetheart," he growled. Suddenly, he released her with a shove and stepped away. "Cause I wasn't there."

Lilah's breath escaped in one long sigh and she felt her strength go with it. Relief that he hadn't committed the Linvale murders suddenly took second place to her relief that he hadn't broken her neck. Her legs were weak and she fell into a chair as Snake took back his bottle. It was a long while before her heart began to quiet.

"Well," she said finally. "The USPF sure thinks you were. The buzz around here is that they have positive I.D. -- including the tattoo. These guys are foaming at the mouth at the idea of slapping you back Inside."

The pain in Snake's bad eye pulsed like a drum, as all the ugly memories of New York Max flooded his brain at once. He answered without looking at her.

"Fucking cold day in hell," he said, chasing the visions away with another pull of the whiskey. He reached for his jacket and groped through the pockets for his cigarettes.

Lilah shook her hair off her face and gave him a sideways glance as he lit one. "Got another?" she asked. She reached between her breasts. "I'll give you --" She looked at the bills. "-- forty dollars for one."

Snake looked at her. Most of the anger was gone from his face and in its place, suspicion and mistrust. He held the pack out to her. She took his hand with it and held tight.

They locked eyes for a moment, but his expression never changed. He pulled his hand away, and went to stand at the window. He was good at a lot of things. Forgiveness was not one of them. But then, most people didn't deserve any. He glanced back and found Lilah watching him. Maybe she was one who did.

Lilah tapped a cigarette free. Leftover adrenaline still lingered in her and it took two tries before she lit up successfully.

"Someone's setting you up," she said after a drag.

"No shit."

"Who?"

"Take a guess."

Lilah sighed wearily. That wouldn't take a genius. Only one person could have maneuvered Snake back in this direction, gotten him this close to New York again.

"Hauk," she said flatly.

Although she'd never known him personally, Lilah remembered Colonel Bob Hauk from her Army days. From what she'd seen, he was a stand-up guy, different from the rest of the officers who spent more time kissing ass than they did bombing the Russians. She shook off the wave of memory. The war had changed her and everyone she knew. Why should Hauk be an exception?

Still, she was surprised to find the thought disappointed her.

"But he's the one who fixed the pardon for you, why would he --"

"I don't know," Snake said, cutting her off. He moved to the sofa and ground the smoker out in a nearby ash tray. "But I'm sure as hell gonna find out." *And this time, I'll keep my promise.*

Suddenly Lilah was before him, her warm, familiar body against his. She leaned up to softly touch his lips with her own. Her hair brushed his face and the combination went to his head like a drug, overloading his senses.

"Not tonight," she whispered.

He studied her face, looking for the same hint of fear that he'd seen in her eyes before. But now it was gone. Now there was only welcome and longing. He hesitated only a second, then closed his arms around her in a fierce grip and kissed her hungrily. She responded with a fervor he hadn't had time enough to forget. And as they connected, he knew why he'd come back, to this place, to this woman. He needed her warmth as strongly as he needed her passion. Needed it to fight off the pain and anger he carried within him, before it consumed him completely.

He eased her to the couch and swallowed hard as she bared herself to him. Then he lowered his body to hers, crushing her beneath him ...

... He got to his feet and took a step backward, still panting. As soon as he moved away, the woman curled up on herself. The sounds she made were whimpering moans, and she inched her way further into the corner where he had trapped her, trying weakly to get away from him.

There was nowhere she could go now. No way she'd ever forget him. He'd seen to that. The razor in his hand was stained red with her blood. The same blood that oozed through the fingers she held over her ruined face.

He'd made each slash like a twisting, curling serpent. That was a nice touch, he thought. The boss would be pleased. The woman had screamed with each cut and he had savored every sound. When he was done with her face, he was more than ready to have her body.

Still, he'd taken his time with her, leaving the lights on so she'd get a good look. That's what they wanted. Witnesses. And he liked it fine. It was him but not him. It made him untouchable. Invisible. Like a ghost. The image made him smile. A ghost had nothing to fear. Not even death.

Hauk had stopped telling time with the clock. Now when he took a break from his study of the reports on Snake Plissken, he judged how long he'd been at it from the rising pile of cigarette butts in his ash tray and the dropping level of coffee in the pot on his file cabinet. The second batch of coffee was nearly finished and the ashtray was badly in need of emptying and still he hadn't found what he was looking for.

He wasn't even sure what that was anymore. When he'd first dropped the stack of papers on his desk earlier that evening, he thought he knew. Somewhere in that thick file was a clue to where Plissken had disappeared and Hauk intended to find it -- and Snake -- before dawn. But

with each page read and every old crime of Plissken's rehashed all he'd discovered was his own growing disbelief that the outlaw was guilty.

Not that the file wasn't full of evidence to support the claim that Plissken was a cruel, ruthless and dangerous man. But all of Snake's prior crimes had been motivated by one of two things: survival or revenge. The more ambitious of them, like the Federal Reserve job that had been his undoing, had been in the name of both. Nowhere in Snake's colorful criminal history were the kind of cruel, unjust acts like those currently under investigation.

So, what had happened? Had something pushed him beyond reason, to where he saw even innocents as the enemy? Was only twenty-four hours inside New York Max enough to send him over the edge of sanity?

The commissioner sighed and stood up to stretch his aching back and refill his coffee mug. Once again, he gave himself the speech he'd been repeating since that morning: *This isn't personal. Don't make it that way.* But it was a waste of his time and energy just as this search was beginning to be. Snake had betrayed him, betrayed his trust and his faith in his own judgement. So, *it was* personal. And it would stay that way until Plissken was back Inside or dead.

Or until Hauk could prove his innocence.

But that didn't look likely. All Hauk had was a feeling and that didn't count much when the entire goddamn country up to and including the president was out for your ass. And the amount of collected evidence was large and overwhelming, even Hauk had to admit that. But although eyewitness testimony seemed to excite and satisfy his masters, it only made him more doubtful. Plissken wasn't known for his sloppiness or his generosity to the USPF. Leaving eyewitnesses was like giving them a damn Christmas present. Maybe the sonofabitch really had gone nuts.

He lit another cigarette and closed the lighter with frustrated snap before sitting down once again to the files. Flipping open the most recent case, he read the cold, clinical report one more time.

Suspect description: Sex: male. Race: Caucasian. Age: approximately 25-35. Height: 5' 10". Weight: 170 lbs. Eyes: Right eye blue. Black patch covering left eye. Hair: brown, long. Distinguishing marks: Left facial scar extending from nose to jawline. Tattoo on torso, black cobra snake in attack position, extending from upper abdomen to just above the pubic symphysis.

Hauk blinked. *Tattoo..upper abdomen ... pubic bone... just above.* He read it again. And again. *Just above ...* A soft chuckle escaped him with an exhale of smoke. Well, there it was. Not much. A hunch at best. But it was a hunch based on instinct and knowledge of his enemy. And Hauk still trusted his instincts.

The chuckle became a genuine laugh. He was going to have a hell of a time explaining his thinking to Shaw in the morning. He'd be lucky if he wasn't in a straight jacket by lunchtime.

And that's if he wasn't believed. If he was, the rumors of how he knew would keep the whole base chattering for weeks. But hell, it'd be worth it just to know he'd been right those six weeks ago when he'd set Plissken free.

Finally, he looked at the clock. Nearly four a.m. Satisfied at last, he traded in his coffee for two fingers of scotch and stretched out on the office couch. He sipped the drink slowly to its end, set the empty glass aside and fell asleep smiling.

The insistent knocking brought him to his feet hours later, well after eight. He ran his hands through what was left of his silver hair and threw the door open. Shaw stared at him, surprised.

"I'm sorry sir," the aide said. His gaze drifted beyond Hauk to the room beyond. Papers littered the desk and in the center of them was the bottle of scotch. "Reception said you were in the office. I didn't realize you'd been here all night."

"S'all right. Just doing some light reading," he said wryly. He stepped back to allow Shaw to enter. "Glad you're here. I've got something to show you."

"I'm afraid I do as well, Sir," Shaw said. Hauk automatically frowned. Shaw always addressed him in a voice formal enough for the White House. Another thing the commissioner was having trouble with. Especially when the man usually delivered bad news, the proper speech sounded almost distasteful, like perfume layered over the stink of an unclean body. He spied the dispatch in Shaw's hand and snatched it up, scanning it hungrily.

"Same description as before," he said after finishing.

"Exactly, Sir."

Hauk grinned. "Good. C'mere." He retrieved the Linvale report from the pile and handed it to Shaw, gesturing at the two pages. "Both of these women told the investigation team that their attacker's tattoo ended just below the abdomen. Sound like Plissken to you?"

Shaw smiled patiently. "I wouldn't know, Sir. I've never had occasion to see him undressed."

"Neither have I," Hauk said, unshaken by the slightly snide tone. "I don't need to. I know him. You've seen pictures of him. You think that tattoo doesn't go all the way?"

"You mean all the way down his --"

"-- dick, Shaw." Hauk finished the sentence for him. "Yes, that's exactly what I mean. Right down to the very tip of that prick's prick."

Shaw shrugged. "Not necessarily."

"Then why do it? Or, more accurately: Why do it there? That position implies only one thing. And if that's not true, then he's a bullshit liar."

The aide smiled. "Of course he's a liar. And a thief and a killer. An anti-social psychopath who lives to break the rules. Any rules."

Hauk reached for the nearly empty pack of cigarettes and lit one up. "No, Shaw, not just any rules. Other's rules. *Our* rules. Not his own."

Shaw's response was a short burst of sarcastic laughter. "Are you telling me that there are

rules he respects? Some kind of honor code he lives by that would prevent him from lying about the placement of a tattoo? I hardly think -- "Hauk glared at him and he halted the speech. After a moment, he took a breath and began again.

"Are you suggesting that because of the location of a tattoo, he's above a certain sort of crime? I would think it just the opposite. Anyone perverse enough to mutilate themselves that way would have little reluctance to hurt another."

"You're missing the point, Shaw. Two witnesses ID'd that tattoo-- where it started and where it ended. If it doesn't match Plissken's, then he's not our man."

Shaw's smile turned kind enough to border condescension. "Sir, weren't you and Plissken in the same air squad?"

Here we go, Hauk thought. "No." He exhaled. There hadn't been a day since his enlistment that a civilian hadn't annoyed him to some degree. When the hell was Rheme due back, anyway?

"Both Special Forces, different units." He turned and looked at his aide. "Something on your mind, Shaw?"

The man rubbed his forehead nervously. "With all due respect Sir, I think you may be letting the fact that you were both soldiers together color your opinion of the man. I appreciate your feelings, but the evidence is clear."

"Not to me," Hauk said quietly. He moved around the desk, collecting the scattered papers and replacing them in the file as he spoke. "Look, I'm not denying what Plissken is, but he's not a fraud." He tapped the latest reports with a long finger. "This bastard is."

Visibly disturbed, Shaw threw up his hands. "So, what are your orders? Call off the search?"

"Like hell. If Plissken's nearby, I want him. And I want him before some promotion-hungry rookie blows his head off. Just make sure they don't look so hard for snakes in the grass that they miss a copycat right under our noses."

The aide nodded rapidly, still trying to assimilate the commissioner's new frame of mind. Hauk hefted the file under his arm and headed for the door.

Shaw caught him before he could leave. "Uh, and you, Sir? Where will you be?"

"Home," Hauk said, indicating the file. "I think the answer to where Plissken's holed up is in here. I'm going to keep looking."

Shaw waited until the Commissioner was long gone, until he was sure Hauk wouldn't be returning. Then he locked the office door and took a seat in the soft leather chair behind the desk.

It was more than comfortable, it was almost luxurious, as was the power that Police Commissioner Robert Hauk commanded. It would be nice to have that power, this office, this

chair. Only that wasn't going to happen if he allowed the commissioner's perverse concepts of honor and duty to gum up the precision-ground cogs of this exquisite scenario. Where yesterday stealth was important, now it was speed that had become essential.

He picked up the receiver and dialed a memorized number. A groggy, rough voice answered. There was no return greeting.

"Noon," Shaw said. "And be on time."

The abandoned warehouse had once a skylight. Shaw supposed it was intended to add a touch of cheer to the place, to please the menial workers as they loaded and unloaded trucks. But as he stood waiting in one of the corners the sunlight couldn't reach, he wondered if it hadn't had the opposite effect -- making them resentful of what they could see but not share in while trapped inside by their tedious jobs. Certainly he would have seen it that way.

The afternoon winter sun this day wasn't at all cheerful. It was thin and bright and harsh like the unflattering glare of a cheap fluorescent light. Shaw wasn't pleased. It would afford him a much better look at Rankin than he ever wanted.

He heard the scrape of boots on the concrete floor and stepped out of the shadows to make his presence known. The sooner he concluded this meeting, the better.

The man who approached him looked disheveled and still half asleep. Hungover, no doubt. Shaw forced himself to meet the man's eyes. Like Plissken's, they were blue, but unlike the outlaw, both of them worked perfectly. The patch -- which was not on now -- was merely part of the costume. As was the tattoo that Rankin had been paid to have done. The facial scar was merely a fortunate coincidence. His build and physique were a close enough match, although Shaw had no doubt that, put to a real test, Plissken could best his lookalike easily.

But Rankin's walk was nothing like Snake Plissken's. It was slow and nearly shambling and Shaw was reminded of the prisoners he dispatched into NY Max every day. There but for the grace of God -- and others who worked their miracles with influence and cash --- that's exactly what this man would have become. But Eric Rankin, former USPF, had the good fortune to be just what the doctor -- or rather, the President --- ordered. Not only did he possess the physical characteristics for the White House's "special assignment", he was a certifiable psychopath as well. It was a quality Shaw had assured President Harker they could put to good use.

Rankin stopped about ten feet from Shaw's position, as if there was an invisible barrier set up between them. Shaw was neither insulted or particularly sorry. For a long moment, silence stretched between the two men.

"Enjoying your work, Mr. Rankin?" Shaw asked finally, with a tone of mocking cordiality.

The man before him shrugged indifferently. "It's a living," he said. His voice was husky from whiskey, too little sleep and something else. Shaw thought it might be the shiver of a dark memory that he didn't have. And didn't want to. Reading the account in the morning paper had been enough.

"And quite a profitable living, too," he said. "But if you continue to allow your peculiar pleasures to interfere with your objective, the profits might just disappear."

Rankin stiffened slightly. *Speak English, you pompous prick.*

"Meaning?"

"Meaning you were hired to impersonate Snake Plissken, not Jack the Ripper. Attacking cheap trash in bad neighborhoods is hardly going to worry Mr. and Mrs. Middle America much, don't you agree?"

"Just keeping in character." *At least the character Plissken should have been,* Rankin thought. If there was one thing he'd learned these past weeks, it was that Snake Plissken was like a sleek, balanced knife that was used for nothing better than to open the mail. His power, his skills, his reputation — Plissken had wasted them all.

Shaw kept his disgust for the man before him from showing on his face. This was an association made in hell, that was certain. There were more reasons than Hawk's sudden concern for justice for bringing it to a close as swiftly as possible.

He drew a deep breath. The air nearly reeked of Rankin's perversity. "Nevertheless ... The goal is to erode Plissken's folk hero reputation, to convince the average citizen that he's a danger to them and that Commissioner Hawk's generous pardon should be revoked immediately."

Rankin's smile was chilling. "So, what are you saying? I should stick to jailbait?" He thought back to the pretty kid at the convenience store. Plissken would have let that one get away. Some badass outlaw. That just proved he was nothing but a poser — a loser, deep down.

"Or maybe I could pay a visit to a few officer's wives?" Now there was an idea that interested him. He could pay back some of the "buddies" who had supported his discharge. Plissken could take the heat. "Everyone knows Plissken hates Blackbellies --" he finished the thought aloud.

"No, no," Shaw cut him off impatiently. "There's no more time to be coy. Hawk is becoming suspicious. I have no idea whether he wants to salvage his own reputation or if he's actually convinced that Plissken is a post-apocalyptic Robin Hood, but it hardly matters either way. They both have to be stopped."

Rankin looked annoyed. "And just how the hell do I make sure of that?"

"Relax, Mr. Rankin, I'll tell you. You said Plissken was in the city?"

"I followed him in myself. Don't know where he is now though."

Now it was Shaw's turn to smile. He knew. Buried in Plissken's file, among the names of the people questioned after the New York incident was a woman who claimed to have spent the night with him. If a simple background check had been run, it would have been revealed that she had been stationed overseas during the war -- at the very same base as Plissken. The sloppy

oversight only confirmed Hauk's incompetence — he'd been assigned there as well! But now that the commissioner had taken home the files to study again, the lead had to become a dead end even sooner than Hauk became a dead man.

"I'm fairly certain you'll find he's taken refuge here," he said, producing a slip of paper with a scribbled name and address on it.

Rankin squinted to read it. "Lilah Connelly. Who's this?"

"An unsavory street tramp who's made herself available to Plissken in the past. Pay her a visit -- in your USPF uniform. Show her the consequences of befriending dangerous fugitives. And let her think that Hauk is responsible for ordering the lesson."

"Why not just take her out?" Rankin asked. "Then Plissken's got no bolthole." He grinned and hummed a few notes from an old song. "Nowhere to run to, baaaby," he sang softly. "Nowhere to hide."

"Your thinking is very limited, Mr. Rankin." Shaw said patiently. "I want to do more than eliminate his safehouse. I want to provide him with motive for committing such a heinous crime as the murder of the commissioner."

Rankin laughed in disbelief. "You think Plissken will go after Hauk because his girlfriend got hassled?"

"Hardly. But he may begin to think that Hauk is responsible for his recent troubles and that it's time to end those troubles. Then you will step in and do exactly that. And the country will believe it to be Plissken."

Rankin took a step backward, shaking his head. "No way, not a chance. Close enough to be ID'd is close enough to get caught. Hauk wasn't part of the deal. Forget it."

Annoyed, Shaw sighed and bent to the floor, retrieving an object wrapped in canvas. He tossed it to Rankin. "Keep your distance if you must. But use this. It will remove any doubt as to the perpetrator."

The younger man undid the straps for a look. Inside was a compact Enfield automatic assault weapon.

"Don't touch it without gloves on!" Shaw snapped, stopping Rankin from laying a bare hand on it. "Plissken's prints are all over that."

Rankin studied the gun a moment. It was standard USPF riot gear. Now, instead of reluctance, there was a glint in Rankin's eyes. Killing such a prominent target with virtual carte blanche would be a hell of a rush. And wasting Hauk would be a pleasure. After all, Hauk had been the one to order his dismissal from the service. He looked back at Shaw, impressed.

"How'd you manage that?" he asked.

A soft chuckle escaped Shaw. "That is not information you require, Mr. Rankin. You already know exactly what you need to know."

"Fine. Then *exactly* when do I get paid and get the hell out of here?" Rankin asked, re-wrapping the weapon. "After I take out Hauk?"

"No. When they drop that arrogant miscreant Plissken inside his new home," Shaw said calmly. "That's when your service to your president will be over."

And my life with it, for sure, Rankin thought. Like there's enough money on earth to make sure I stay quiet about this setup. Like you bastards would really pay up even if there was. One thing these guys didn't count on — Eric Rankin wasn't stupid. He had a pretty good idea what they'd do with him when this was over. He'd used his time as Plissken to collect enough to let him slip away on his own. If he waited around, all he'd get from them was a bullet in the head. No, as soon as Plissken was picked up, Rankin was going to take his new identity and disappear. After all, they couldn't search for him as Plissken when they'd just announced the outlaw's capture and imprisonment in NY Max. It was a damn good plan.

He grinned. It was better if they kept on thinking they were playing him. "Now it's service, huh? Well, you and my president better both remember that my service ain't voluntary. We agreed on one million, remember."

"I remember."

"Fine."

Rankin turned to leave, then grinned over his shoulder. "Keep the Police Channel on," he said, gesturing with the rifle. "It'll save me a phone call."

And it will be the last time you see me.

Rankin watched the apartment over the bar for nearly two hours before he was certain the woman was alone. If she was a hooker, she obviously worked at night. No one entered or left and the high-powered binoculars he had revealed no one inside but a slender, long-haired blonde.

Still, he needed to be absolutely certain that he didn't stumble onto Snake Plissken. Not that he'd mind a confrontation. He'd enjoy showing that fuck a thing or two. But it would have to be on his own terms, in his own time. Maybe before this was over, he'd even get the chance. But for now he'd have to settle for Plissken's little whore.

He tucked his long hair up under the regulation USPF cap. They'd taken his shield when they busted him out, but the rest of the uniform he kept. The gun in the holster on his hip wasn't the standard issue service revolver either, but he didn't think the woman would know the difference.

Outside her door, he straightened out the uniform jacket and knocked. By the time she answered, he was smiling politely.

"Lilah Connelly?"

Lilah looked him over quickly. He was no one she knew, unlike the other two cops that had arrived early that morning to question her. She'd sent them away satisfied that she knew

nothing about the whereabouts of Snake Plissken. So, why was this one here now?

"Yeah. Can I help you?"

Rankin pointed to the phony badge on the jacket. "I need to ask you a few questions about the assault last night. It'll only take a few minutes."

"I already answered questions today."

He smiled. "I'm sure you were very cooperative. I'm here on Commissioner Hauk's personal order. We're just trying to re-canvas, follow up any possible leads that might help us find Snake Plissken. It's for your own safety, Miss Connelly. May I come in?"

Lilah sighed. Arguing was useless. Better to give them what they wanted and keep suspicion to a minimum. There was no danger anyway. Snake had left long before she awoke, taking all traces of his presence with him. He wouldn't be back before nightfall. If he came back at all.

But it wasn't a good idea to be too agreeable, either. She shrugged and opened the door. "Like I have a choice," she said. She studied the officer's face as he entered. No, she didn't recognize him.

"You guys should start talking to each other," she said, slamming the door closed as he stepped inside. She moved into the living room without looking back, and never saw him slip the chain and turn the deadbolt, locking the door behind them.

Snake only knocked once, a light, private, double rap that faded off unanswered into the silence. He hovered in the shadows only a moment before slipping the keys to the triple locks of Lilah's apartment from his pocket. He eased the door wide open and waited a moment before entering.

He expected Lilah to meet him. He'd scoped out the bar downstairs and she hadn't been there. But the apartment was soundless and grey, the only light coming from far off in the bedroom. Cautiously, Snake stepped in and crouched to retrieve his boot knife from its sheath. He held his breath, resisting the urge to call Lilah's name aloud and made his way down the short hall. As he moved, he listened for the sound of an intruder in the small apartment. At the bedroom, he readied himself for the possibility of attack and pushed the door open.

Lilah was on the bed. Sprawled on her stomach, one arm cradled her head while the other hung limp over the edge of the mattress. On the floor by her hand, a bottle of whiskey lay in a puddle. Her hair covered her face. She was naked to the waist, where her worn khaki army shirt bunched up around her middle.

Bruises, some of them as big as a man's hand, darkened her hips and angry red welts circled her wrists. Dried blood streaked the bed's white sheets and her ivory skin. Snake shot a last, wary glance over his shoulder and crouched down beside her, relieved to feel her warm breath against his face. But breathing didn't mean conscious.

"Lilah?"

When she didn't move, he set the knife aside and held up the bottle to check the contents. She'd

swallowed more than she'd spilled. It was no wonder she was out cold. He reached out and pulled her hair back, then sucked in a breath.

"Ahh, shit."

The entire right side of her face was puffy and beginning to turn a deep purple. Her eye was nearly swollen shut. Strands of her hair, caked with blood and matted together were stuck to the spot where her lip had been split. This close, he could see more bruises on her neck.

Snake let his breath out slowly, reigning in his anger. Some bastard had taken more than he'd paid for tonight. He called her name again and when she didn't respond, he moved to sit beside her on the bed. He pushed gently against her shoulder and she came awake instantly, crying out in pain and alarm.

Lilah rolled to her back, and swung at him with clenched fists. He ducked a vicious kick, caught hold of her arms and lifted her up close to look at him.

"Hey ... hey," he whispered as she struggled wildly.

She finally focused, but not before he got a good look at the terror in her eyes. Once she recognized him, she relaxed and quickly pulled out of his grasp.

"M'okay," she said, tugging at the open shirt to cover herself. As she fumbled with the buttons, he studied her battered face and body -- the same body he'd held and touched and used to soothe his own wounds not twenty-four hours ago.

Lilah caught him staring and her eyes began to fill with tears. She turned away, climbing stiffly off the bed as he got to his feet. "C'mon now Plissken," she said. "Tough guy like you musta seen a woman slapp'd 'round b'fore. You're not gonna get all squeam'sh on me, are ya?" Her voice was thick from the swelling and the whiskey and she swayed unsteadily when she stood. Fresh blood oozed from her swollen lip and she dabbed at it with a fingertip.

Snake felt a surge of emotion, familiar childhood feelings of frustration and impotence. Yeah, he'd seen women beaten before, starting with his own mother. But Lilah wasn't his mother. Lilah was tough and strong and self-reliant. But even that hadn't saved her tonight.

"You need a doctor?" he asked.

Lilah laughed. It was a strangled sound with no pleasure in it. "Wha' for? He'd jus' tell me th'sis n'occupashun'l haz'rd an' I shouldn't have let m'self get corner'd." She leaned toward Plissken and her fattened, distorted grin was ghoulish. "Prob'ly tell me he thought *whores* were *smarter*'n that."

Spotting the half-filled scotch bottle at Snake's feet, she stepped toward it and stumbled, falling to her knees. He dropped down beside her, reaching out to steady her but she pushed him away.

"Leav' me 'lone."

"Look, I'm trying to help you, goddammit!" he swore, gripping her arms again.

His touch was all it took to push her over the edge. A deep, frightening growl sounded from her throat. "Take ... your ... fuckin' ... hands ... off ... ME!" She twisted free and struck him hard in the



face, then began to hit him again and again.

Plissken's reflexes were lightning quick. Stopping her would be easy and defending himself was a natural instinct. But Lilah's cries were wild with pain and rage so raw, he did neither. He dodged the open hand slaps to his head and face, but let the body blows land unchecked.

Even without resistance, the onslaught only lasted a few seconds. Panting, Lilah dropped her hands to her lap and sagged back against the bed. She rested her head on the edge of the mattress, saying nothing. Snake waited for her breathing to ease, until he was sure she was calm.

"Tell me," he demanded.

She drew a deep, shuddering breath. "Blackbelly. Name's Rankin. I didn't r'member at first. Got a reputashun. Thought he got bust'd out 'bout a year ago for 'nacceptable conduc'." She laughed again, a high-pitched hysterical squeal. "Shows whad I know."

Unacceptable conduct. That was nothing more than the USPF's gutless way of saying that the guy was gas-crazy and on the wrong side of the wall. Snake knew personal opinion didn't matter much in Lilah's line of work but she could afford to be choosier and usually, she was.

"Why'd you bring him up here?"

Lilah raised her head to look at him, her face twisted hatefully. "I didn't *bring* him up here," she hissed. "He came lookin' f'you."

Snake's good eye narrowed. "What?"

"He said Hauk sen' him to follow up the 'nvestigashun'," she said, speaking with difficulty. "But all he ask'd 'bout wass you. If I'd seen you, if you'd been 'round lately. I tol' him th' same bullshit I did th' others -- it was only that once, las' fall. Only Rankin didn't buy it. He start'd t' get weird. Said he knew you'd been here, he could smell you on me. Outlaw's whore. You wanna see what happens when you take in wanted criminals?, he said."

Lilah lifted one livid, swollen wrist and stared at it. Her manicured nails were broken and bloodied. Plissken watched her gaze lose its focus as her mind replayed events he couldn't see.

"Firs' I thought he wass takin' me to Lib'rty f'questioning." She laughed shortly. "Fuckin' stupid. I tried t' get 'way then bu' it was too late. He cuffed me t' the bed frame. Hit me, held my face down on the bed. I couldn't move, couldn't see him. But I could hear. *Does he make you scream, bitch? Do you cry for him?*

"He mov'd behind me, grabbed me ... knew he wass gonna fuck me ... but not like ... not with ... He drew his gun ... click'd the hammer wh're I could hear it ... ever play Russ'n Roulette? Gotta speshul version f'you, cunt ... Then he took it an' he --"

She broke off suddenly and her voice dropped to a whisper as numb and lifeless as her stare. "Now I wanna hear you scream, he tol' me. Now *I'm* gonna make you cry."

Snake listened in silence, as each brutal image she called up burned itself into his brain, fueling a murderous fury. This was no routine investigation. By his own admission, this crazy was Hauk's man, following Hauk's direct order. There was precious little justice anywhere, anymore, but before this was over, Plissken was going to personally see that the Colonel tasted some.

Still, it hadn't been Hauk who'd put Lilah in harm's way.

He reached out to wipe a trickle of blood from her mouth. Lilah knocked his hand aside with a grunt of pain, like a frightened, wounded animal. For a moment, her gaze raked over him, suspicious and hateful. Then it softened. She turned her head away but he reached for her again, ignoring her resistance. Her shoulders shook as she struggled to stifle the anguish given license by his small gesture. Tentatively, as if the kindness might hurt even more, she gave in and rested her cheek in his outstretched palm. He cradled her face a moment, then drew her toward him but she pushed herself away.

"I-I n-need to clea'nup," she rasped.

She clutched the army shirt to her and this time, allowed Snake to help her to her feet. Her walk was stiff and slow. Outside the bathroom, she stopped and looked at him.

"He knows you were here. *They* know."

"No they don't. All they have is one asshole with a hunch."

But it was a good hunch, he had to admit. An obvious one. Inside him, a small voice cried panic. Plissken ignored it as he usually did. It was too early for that. The street had been quiet and nearly empty of life when he'd returned to the apartment. If they'd really expected him to be here, they'd have had an impressive welcoming committee waiting.

So, why hadn't they? If one of them knew, why not all of them?

What the fuck was going on?

He shook it off and moved past Lilah into the bathroom. Over the chipped enamel sink, a small medicine cabinet sat recessed in the wall. He opened it wide and left it that way, sparing Lilah the reflection of her face in the worn mirror. Scanning the contents a few seconds, he snared a bottle of painkillers and one of tranquilizers and handed them to her.

"Take these," he ordered.

He knew that combined with the whiskey, they promised hours of sweet oblivion. After this night, she could use a little. His tone did not invite argument but Lilah was too drained to offer any. She emptied a few pills into her hand and swallowed them down dry.

Satisfied, Plissken left her alone. He waited outside the door a moment until he heard the burst of the shower and left before her renewed sobbing grew louder than the sound of the rushing water.

When she finished and came back into the living room, she saw Plissken at one of tall windows, staring out at the street. He held a cup of coffee in one hand. Another cup, freshly poured and steaming hot sat on the table beside an new ice compress and an opened pack of cigarettes. Lilah helped herself to a cigarette but her mouth couldn't close tight enough to get a decent drag. After two half-hearted puffs, she gave up, ground it out and settled for the coffee.

Curling up in the corner of the sofa, she pressed the ice pack to her face gingerly. The cold and pressure brought tears to her eyes once again. "Shit!"

Snake turned to look at her and the slight wince in his good eye told her everything her mirror hadn't. She choked down a sob.

"You're a thief," she reminded him. "Got a ski mask I could borrow?"

His mouth curved slightly, more out of relief that she'd made the joke than any pleasure with it. "Sorry, babe," he said.

He was quiet a long minute. "He said Hauk sent him?" he asked finally.

Lilah sighed. The booze and the drugs had taken the edge off her pain and fright. Now, all she wanted to do was sleep. "So whad? Hauk sends them all, doesn't he?" she said bitterly.

"Yeah." Snake moved away from the window to take a seat at the table. "So why announce it? And why do that?" He tipped his chin at her.

"Because he could?" she sneered sarcastically. But the question made her think. "Because we're c'nnected. Maybe the Commiss'ner knows that. You said he's setting you up. Maybe now he's baiting you too."

That would be sweet if true. Like an invitation to an old-fashioned gunfight. Snake had to admit he'd enjoy the confrontation, enjoy keeping his promise and watching the old warhorse crumple at his feet. Too bad wearing notches on your gunbelt was a custom that belonged to a different time. He shook the pleasurable image out of his head. Something about it felt wrong.

"Why bother?" he thought aloud. "If he knows, then why all the fucking drama? Doesn't make sense."

The pills were getting to Lilah. The ugly pictures that continued to run through her head were began to fade. And Snake's voice sounded distant, his rough whisper swirling with images of him from her memory. She yawned and stretched out on the couch.

"Maybe it doesn't mean anything," she said wearily. "Maybe Rankin was just fuckin' with my head, too. I tol' you he's crazy and vicious. Like the psycho who did the things they're tryin' to hang on you." Her eyes closed. Rankin's face surfaced from the miasma, then melted away.

"Yeah. The psycho that looks just like me," Snake said.

A painful flashback seized Lilah. *Blue eyes, inches from her own ... Rankin's body, heavy on her back ... the brush of his non-regulation length hair on her shoulder ... perversely familiar ... the turn of his face into the shadow, only one eye visible ... his mouth, revoltingly close ... close enough to see the scar that ran from nose to chin ...*

She sat straight up, her eyes wide. Recognition slammed into her like a shockwave.

"He did," she said. "Oh my God, he did. He did look like you!"

That's impossible, Snake thought immediately, but he knew it wasn't. He opened his mouth to ask her more, but she never gave him the chance.

"God, I didn't see it -- th' uniform -- but his hair was too long for regs -- it was tied back -- 'til later -- but he did -- his eyes -- his build -- ohhhh -- God it was him, that sick bastard -- it was, Jesus, it was!" And he'd been with her, close enough to hurt her, close enough to maim and disfigure her, rape and kill her as he had the others. The thought of how close she'd come to his

perversion sent a flood of adrenaline through her that even the drugs couldn't combat.. Her stomach rolled and her whole body shook. She moaned aloud.

Snake came and crouched before her, taking her gently by the arms. "Look at me," he ordered. He knew what she was thinking, feeling. The sonofabitch had taken her to hell and now they'd discovered she'd gotten off easy. "It's over. Just calm down." After a moment, she nodded but he didn't let go until he felt the tension drain from her. He handed her back her cup of coffee and waited as she took a sip.

She looked at Snake with liquid eyes. "Why? Why would he do this?"

In a tight voice, he tossed her own words back to her. "Because he *could*."

"But then why not finish it? Why didn't he --"

She froze as a knock at the door choked her words back into her throat. The cup dropped from her hands and she clutched at Plissken's shirt. Terror replaced the confusion on her face.

"It's him," she breathed. "Snake, God -- it's *him*."

"Quiet," he said firmly. He listened a moment for the sound of someone picking the locks as he had done. But there was nothing. They waited in silence until the knock came again. Plissken met her eyes and tilted his head at the door.

Frightened, Lilah shook her head frantically. "No," she whispered. "I can't --"

"Do it," he said. Suddenly, he was as anxious as she was afraid, as eager as she was reluctant. The idea of paying back that sick fucker was almost too satisfying to imagine. He stood, drawing her to her feet with him. From inside his boot, he produced the knife again.

"I'll be here," he breathed in her ear. He eased away from her side, soundlessly taking up a position that would leave him hidden behind the open door.

Barely able to take a step, Lilah moved after him. With trembling hands, she undid all the locks except the heavy chain. For a moment she was numb with fear, imagining Rankin's cruel face on the other side, red with rage and looking for blood.

"W-who is it?" she asked thickly. She tried to keep her voice from shaking, but couldn't.

The voice came back, deep and authoritative. "Police Commissioner Hauk. I want to talk to you."

A different kind of fear shot through her like an icicle down her spine. She looked beside her quickly. If Plissken was surprised, he didn't show it. He placed a finger to his lips and then held it up a brief second before gesturing in the direction of the apartment beyond. When Lilah nodded that she understood, he disappeared without making a sound.

She paused to take a deep, calming breath and then opened the door a crack, giving Hauk a glimpse of her battered face.

"Sorry," she said. "We're closed for renovations." Lilah moved to close the door, but it wouldn't budge. His massive hand held it firm.

"I said talk," he repeated in a tone she hadn't heard for years. "Now, *Lieutenant*."

Her mouth went slack at the use of her old rank. *He did know! God, he knew all about her.*

Everything they'd just realized was true. He was in collusion with Rankin, had enlisted Rankin to frame Snake, to seek her out. In spite of that, she hesitated, her fingers hovered over the chain, knowing that if she let him inside, he might never leave alive. Finally, she slipped open the lock quickly, before she could change her mind.

She'd forgotten how tall he was. He towered over her, still an imposing figure after all these years. She did remember his steel blue eyes. There was warmth there when the situation warranted it, but most of the time they were hard. All business. Like now.

He looked tired. Not physically, although that was part of it. But this was psychic fatigue. Lilah was looking at a man who was tired of life. It only made him colder, more remote. He was an easy man to be afraid of. She seemed to attract them like magnets.

Hauk stared at her, blatantly studying her bruises until she looked away. She watched him survey the apartment as she picked up the coffee cup from the floor and mopped up the spill. When she was done, he retrieved her ice pack and handed it to her.

"Who did that?" he asked.

He sounded sincere. As if he really didn't know. For a moment Lilah was almost swayed. But the throbbing in her face and the ugly memories in her head reminded her that he knew damn well who was responsible. He was. Him and that monster he'd sent to her.

She snatched the ice from his hand. "Fuck you," she spat, amazed at his audacity. Hauk's eyes widened slightly and she felt a rush of satisfaction. It withered quickly under that relentless gaze. She looked away, carefully pressing the ice bag to her face once again.

"Just trying to help, Lieutenant."

Lilah winced. The title stabbed at her soul. And he probably knew it. He was one infuriating bastard. Almost as bad as Snake. Maybe it was something in the water or the air over Helsinki. Maybe the gas they were exposed to didn't make you crazy. Maybe it just made you a pain in the ass.

"What d' you want here?" she demanded, refilling her coffee cup. She didn't care what his answer was. But she would keep him talking, keep him distracted until Snake made his move. In a moment, it would all be over. She sat at the table. Without asking, Hauk sat opposite her, his back to the hallway where Snake was hiding. Inwardly, Lilah tensed.

"Snake Plissken. You can contact him," Hauk said. It was not a question. "Do it."

That did it. The officious, commanding tone in his voice snapped her final, thready hold on restraint.

"What happened, Colonel?" she sneered, shaking as she spoke. "Your psycho messeng'r boy screw up his assignm'nt that you need t' come down here and handle it yourself?"

Hauk's sharp eyes narrowed in confusion. "What--"

Even though she knew it was coming, Lilah jumped as Snake appeared behind the commissioner, circling an arm under his jaw, cutting off Hauk's words and his air. Plissken yanked his head back roughly, stopping Hauk's attempt to break free with a knife against the man's throat.

Hauk's immediate panic was tempered by a rush of satisfaction. His instincts, it seemed were

still in good working order. Now he was about to learn if his decision to come here unarmed was a smart one or the last one he'd make.

"Hello, Snake," he said calmly. "Figured I'd find you here."

"And here's your reward." Snake pressed the knife blade deeper, breaking the skin. Hauk felt the warm trickle of blood inch toward his chest.

His voice was strangled. He was losing air. He brought his hands up to tug on Snake's arm but made no other move to break free. "Let me ... talk to ... you. Can ... always kill ... me later."

Lilah watched in breathless silence as emotion flickered over Plissken's face like the flames of a fire. A muscle in his arm twitched from strain of his effort and his rage. He was equally capable of both reason and mindless fury, equally capable of backing off or cutting Hauk's throat right in front of her. And though she knew him, she didn't know which he would choose. She closed her eyes and turned her head away.

The action brought Snake up short. He hesitated. She'd been though enough tonight. Hauk may need killing but she didn't need to see it. He tore himself away, moving to the far end of the room, not trusting himself enough to stay within striking distance of the commissioner.

What Lilah heard was not the muffled scream of a dying man or the sickening gurgle of blood but a sudden desperate gasp. When she gathered up the courage to open her eyes, Hauk was still in the chair before her, coughing and drawing in deep lungfuls of air.

"I made a mistake not keeping that promise last time," Snake said with deadly menace. "I won't make it again." He caught Lilah's eye. "Move away from him."

She did, sliding into the corner of the sofa. Still keeping a wide safety zone, Snake positioned himself away from the windows, between his enemy and his friend.

"Talk," he ordered Hauk

Hauk pulled a white handkerchief from his pocket and held it up to the small cut on his neck. He checked the bleeding and replaced it, keeping the pressure up.

"I'm here to help," he said simply.

"Bullshit."

"Straight. Just like before. I know you didn't commit those assaults."

Snake made a sound of mixed disbelief and disgust. What balls! It took a smart man to score a pre-emptive strike on Snake Plissken and that's just what Hauk had done to him in New York. The charges he'd ordered implanted in Snake's arteries were one hell of a deterrent to Plissken's plan to take the Gulffire north to freedom. Angry as Snake had been then, he was still impressed that Hauk could read him so well. But that was only going to happen once. Evidently, Hauk didn't know that.

"You oughta," Snake said. "You're pulling the strings of the puppet that did."

"Plissken, what the hell are you talking about?"

Snake lunged at Hauk, the knife aimed straight for the older man's heart. "Don't fuck with me!"

he breathed, enraged. The knife point stopped an inch from Hauk's chest. "He was here. Just like you are now."

Ignoring Plissken and the weapon, he turned to Lilah. "Is he the one who did that? The copycat?"

With difficulty, Lilah sat up straight, meeting his penetrating gaze. At least they all agreed there was a double. But someone still wasn't telling the truth. "Yeah. And he said you sent him to teach me a lesson about harboring fugitives."

Hauk's hawk-like eyes narrowed in a mixture of anger and confusion. At least that explained the warm welcome he'd gotten here. He checked the handkerchief one more time. The bleeding had stopped. He stuffed it back in his pocket, shaking his head. "No. I gave no such order. You have my word."

"That's real comforting," Snake hissed.

"It's the truth. I only just made the connection between you two an hour ago."

Snake studied the commissioner, looking for any hint of deception. Not that Hauk wasn't a practiced liar. He'd have to be, to command the position he did. For a second, his mind wandered back to their army days. Had Hauk known about the real purpose of the Leningrad Ruse and lied to his own men about it? Or had he been lied to along with all the rest of them? On what side of the line had he stood then? Now?

He held his temper. Maybe letting the bastard think he was convincing them was a way to get him to drop his guard and let go some proof that he was behind this whole nightmare. Or proof that he wasn't.

"Then where did this asshole get his information?" he asked, backing off with the knife. "And the blackbelly uniform he was wearing?"

"What?"

Lilah nodded. "Regulation USPF."

Hauk held up his hands. "Hold on a minute. You're not making sense. I thought you said the guy was Snake's double. Are you telling me you think this copycat is a cop?"

Plissken snorted. "'Bout time you caught up," he said. He swung an empty kitchen chair around and straddled it.

Hauk considered a moment. He had to admit the idea had merit. "Yeah, could be," he said. "That would explain how he got hold of enough information to pull off a credible impersonation." He reached into his shirt pocket and as he did, Plissken tensed. Hauk pulled out a pack of cigarettes and held them up before Snake.

"Just a smoke." He grinned. "Help yourself," he said, taking one and tossing the rest to the table. "And for crissakes, relax, will you?"

The suspicion and distrust in Snake's features never mellowed. He slipped his own smoke from the pack, without ever taking his eyes off Hauk.

"Like hell," he whispered.

The commissioner took a deep drag. "You can describe this guy?" he said, addressing Lilah.

"Don't have to," she said coldly. Her thinking was getting fuzzy around the edges. She stretched out on the sofa, resting her head on the arm. "I ripped his I.D. tags off his neck. He thought I didn't see anything but I did." She paused. "Rankin," she murmured. Just saying the name, she could taste the blood in her mouth all over again. "His name was Rankin."

"Eric Rankin?" Hauk shook his head again. "He was dismissed about eight months ago."

"You give him a little work off the books, maybe?" Snake said, lighting up his own smoke.

Hauk sighed. Plissken adamantly refused to believe him, refused to trust him. He supposed he could understand it, but that didn't make it any less frustrating.

"Look, Plissken," he began again. "I'll say it again. I'm not involved. If they can pin these incidents on you, you're going back Inside. I already told you that's not what I want. Why would I set this up?"

"Simple. Payback."

Hauk smiled. "Payback is a luxury, Snake. And it's usually pointless. You're much more useful to me free to operate."

"Leverage, then."

"You're giving me too much credit," Hauk said with amusement. "Even I couldn't deal you out of New York after crimes like these. Public opinion wouldn't let me."

Snake dragged on the smoker in silence. The old bird was right. He'd figured Hauk had orchestrated this set-up to get him back to the bargaining table. But these crimes went beyond the boundaries of what was necessary for that. And if he was caught and sent back Inside, it would defeat the purpose.

His only concession was a grunt that said: *maybe*. He followed the line of thought. "Okay, so if it isn't you, then who? Where's this Rankin getting his information from? Who's running his interference?"

Hauk shrugged. "Don't know. Buddies, maybe. But I don't even know how they knew you were in the area. We've been looking for you for weeks now. Nothing."

"I'd say New Hope was something. Almost had me there."

The commissioner looked confused again, but this time there was an edge of anger to it. "You were picked up in New Hope? When?"

"Day before yesterday. Wrecked a van and stole a bike getting away."

The information — like most of what he'd learned since he'd arrived was news to Hauk. And not good news from the steely anger in his eyes. "There a phone here?" he asked.

Lilah had finally fallen asleep, so Snake answered for her. "Bedroom." As the commissioner got up, Snake got up with him, following him the whole way. He watched Hauk's expression turn grim as he surveyed the telling condition of the room. Without comment, he found the phone and dialed Liberty Island Security HQ. Snake listened from the doorway.

"Yeah, this is Hauk. I need you to run a file for me." Pause. "Arrest reports from yesterday."

I'm looking for anything that went down in New Hope." He was silent a long moment, listening to the distant clicking of a computer keyboard as the officer called up the file.

"There was, huh?" Hauk said, frowning. He glanced over to where Snake waited. "A John Doe, you say? And he was questioned and released. Good, that's good Lenny. Now, one more thing — who signed off the report?"

"I see. Thanks." He set the receiver softly back in the cradle with a bitter laugh. It wasn't that he was surprised, really. He was too damn old and jaded for that. Men took their opportunities where they could these days and even loyalty was a negotiable commodity. But he was disturbed at his own gullibility. Maybe he was just too damn old and not jaded enough.

"Well?"

Snake's impatience jerked him out of his self-pity. "Yeah. It was in the log. But it didn't mention you or the stolen bike. Somebody wanted to keep that information to themselves."

"Any idea who?"

"Yeah." *Good old, by-the-book Shaw.* Unflagging loyalty to his superior. Unfortunately, that superior wasn't Hauk. And evidently, it never had been. *So that's what Rheme's sudden assignment was all about.* "The arrest report was signed off by a Sergeant Shaw. He's been heading up the search for you."

"And keeping you out of the loop." All at once, Snake remembered the leader of the arrest team, the one whose face he couldn't see. *...don't talk dirty to the Sergeant ...*

"There was a Sergeant in charge that night," he added.

"Looks like he's been *in charge* a while now. Time to end that." Determination replaced humiliation he'd been feeling a moment before. He smiled slyly at Snake. "Ready to take that job I mentioned after New York?"

"Maybe." He studied his enemy, who now wanted his help, his trust. If the commissioner was acting, then he deserved an award. Snake couldn't put his finger on when or how, but somewhere over the last hour, he'd begun to believe Hauk. And there was one fact that even Plissken couldn't argue. Without him, Snake had no chance of beating this set-up and staying a free man.

"What'd you have in mind?"

Hauk talked as they moved back into the kitchen. "There's only one reason why this sonofabitch would drop my name every chance he could."

"He wants me to kill you," Snake said. He looked at Hauk and the corners of his mouth lifted. "Somebody shoulda told him he didn't have to try so hard."

"Save the jokes, Plissken. I figure if you don't do it for him, he'll do it himself --"

"— and blame me," Snake finished sourly.

"So, I'm gonna hire you," Hauk said. "As my bodyguard."

That drew a genuine, astonished chuckle from Snake. "Gettin' feeble, Hauk. You want me to watch your back? I'd just as soon stick this in it." He flipped the knife up before the commissioner's face.

Hauk didn't even blink. "No you won't, Plissken. You see, like or not, I know you. I know how

you think. You may kill me but it won't be by stabbing me in the back. If you kill me, you're gonna want to look in my eyes when you do it."

Snake was silent except for a snort and a knowing smirk. He hesitated before answering. Bodyguarding Hauk was the last thing he wanted to do. If he was being set up again, he was walking right into it. But it was the only sure way to keep the man within sight and reach.

His gaze fell on Lilah who was mercifully asleep. If they were wrong... If Hauk wasn't the target...

No. The best way to keep her safe was to catch this psycho sonofabitch. He moved to the window and took a long look outside. A light snow was falling again. No one was hovering around on the block. There were only a few cars and they appeared to be empty. It was no guarantee, but then how often did he get those?

All right," he said finally, resigned. "What next?"

"My place. I need my terminal to access more files. See if I can get the jump on Shaw before he figures this out, too," Hauk said.

"We shouldn't leave together," Snake said. "Keep them off guard, if they're watching."

"Black Lexus," Hauk told him. "Parked a few stores down, by the bodega."

Plissken snorted again. *Lexus. In this neighborhood.* Maybe if Hauk was lucky it would still be there in one piece.

"Give the driver the night off?" he said.

"Something like that, yeah."

Snake collected his jacket and slipped it on, giving the apartment a last glance. He wouldn't be back now that Hauk and the rest of the USPF had discovered it. Too bad. He'd miss the safety it provided. And everything else that went with it.

He crouched down beside Lilah and quietly called her name until her eyes fluttered open.

"Hey," he said. "I gotta go. You need to lock up."

Lilah dragged herself to consciousness. "Go? Where? Why?" she asked when his words finally registered.

"It's okay," he told her. Just lock up behind us." She nodded.

Hauk saw Plissken's hesitation. Loyalty, it seemed, wasn't for sale everywhere. "I'll make sure," he said.

Snake got to his feet. "You better," he growled. Then he slipped silently out the door.

Lilah sat up, yawning and running a hand through her tangled hair. It took a few seconds for her to wake up completely.

"Think he'll run out on me?" Hauk asked conversationally as she got up to refill her coffee cup.

"What do you think?" She shrugged, indicating she didn't care much one way or the other. Taking a sip she faced the commissioner. "How'd you know?" she asked.

"Know what?"

"You said you knew he wasn't guilty. How?"

"Witness descriptions didn't match," he said simply.

"That's not what I heard."

Hauk shook his head. "Tattoo they described ended on the abdomen. S'that where Plissken's ends?"

Lilah caught her lower lip between her teeth to keep from smiling. But for the first time that night, there was amusement in her eyes.

"You didn't hear it from me," she said slyly.

Hauk listened for the soft thunk of the deadbolt before heading out of the apartment and back down to the street. Outside, his sharp eyes scanned the area, seeing nothing out of place. Plissken was nowhere to be found. Briefly, Hauk wondered if he'd been a fool to put his trust in the outlaw. He smiled wryly to himself. He'd know in a moment, when Snake did or didn't show up.

A light coating of snow had dusted the sleek black car and he paused to brush off the driver's side window, using the moment to search for Snake again. The block was riddled with tiny storefronts and residences, separated by long, narrow alleyways. It was a throwback to earlier times and not upscale enough to warrant any kind of urban renewal. There were a dozen different dark corners Snake could have disappeared into. Hauk expected him to appear as he approached the car, but he didn't. Frowning, he pulled the remote laser key from his pocket and unlocked the door. There was a chirp and soft clicking sound as the sophisticated alarm system disengaged. He swung open the door, looking around one more time. Nothing moved in the stillness. Hauk felt a swell of anger and humiliation.

Plissken, you sonofabit --

The thought was cut short as a figure appeared from the darkness, tackling from the side. As he went down on his knees, head first to the front seat, the loud, staccato blast of an automatic assault rifle cracked the stillness. The grey-tinted window he'd just cleaned off exploded into a mass of glittering fragments. The heavy body on top of his whispered in his ear.

"Worried?"

Plissken.

"A little," Hauk said, heart pounding.

"Good."

Plissken's weight lifted from his back. "Stay here." Snake ordered. Before Hauk could even turn for a good look, Snake broke into a run, heading for the spot where the weapon's muzzle flash had lit up the darkness.

The elements were on his side. The snow had accumulated just enough to take a shallow impression of footprints that could only belong to Rankin. Snake followed them, from the building doorway where the assassin had hidden, around the corner of the block where they disappeared into a service alley.

In the alley, he slowed his pace slightly. The buildings on either side blocked the light and made

the trail harder to see. Precious seconds slipped by as he made his way to the end where it turned and narrowed to an even smaller passage.

There was only enough room to walk two abreast here, and the collection of trash and debris cut that space considerably. But at the far end, the passage opened up to a street one block over. From there, it was open territory. Snake picked up the pace, straining in the dark to keep the trail in sight.

The footprints stretched past the service entrance to one of the stores on the street and then stopped. Snake looked around rapidly, searching for where it began again. The snow was falling harder now and the wind had picked up considerably. Could the rest of the trail be obscured already?

"Fuck," Snake cursed under his breath. He stared at the ground again. At the end of the trail, there was a wide patch where the snow had been swept aside. As if something had been dragged those few feet.

Or as if something had deliberately obscured another set of prints.

The service entrance beside him was basement level. He studied the railing and the few steps down to the door. The steps were clear but the railing's snow had been disturbed and so had the snow on the landing before the door. He smiled coldly.

Silently, Snake descended the stairs. Sure enough, the door was broken in. He yanked the knife from his boot sheath and eased his way inside.

The storage room was completely dark. Precious seconds crawled by as Snake's vision adjusted. And when it did, he still could see nothing more than indeterminate shapes and shadows, none of them moving. He held his breath, not wanting his own breathing to confuse his only working sense — his hearing.

For what seemed like an hour, Snake waited for a sound that would give Rankin's presence away. But nothing came. Just as he was about to admit that maybe that bastard had managed to slip his grasp, the faint sound of fabric against wood touched his ears.

Snake turned just in time to avoid the butt of the Enfield against his head. It connected with his shoulder though, sending a deep, dull pain through his arm and back. His hand with the knife came up, making contact with something soft, but solid. Clothing certainly. But flesh? The harsh curse he heard a moment later told him he had hit his target, however minimally.

He spun, trying to anticipate Rankin's next move. He heard footsteps scraping the concrete floor and used the sound to gauge his opponent's location. He hefted the knife, ready to lunge when the overhead lights came on, flooding the room.

Plissken swore, squinting in the sudden, painful light. Rankin's form materialized from the colors dancing behind Snake's good eye.

"Enough slap and tickle," Rankin said. "Come on, if you want a piece of me."

Snake finally focused. They were in a tiny storage room, surrounded by stacks of crates and cartons. The figure opposite him was a damn credible double. The build, the outfit, the hair all

were similar. Add an eye patch and it was easily enough to convince the average stranger that this psycho was the oh-so-legendary Snake Plissken.

"Looks like you're the one who wants a piece of *me*," he rasped.

Rankin laughed. "I already have it. You weren't using it anyway. Time for you to fade away and let someone who knows what to do with the reputation put it to good use."

Good use. True, there were some things connected to the name Snake Plissken that Snake himself wasn't very proud of. But that bitterness was part of who he was and he'd learned to accept it. And though his name didn't call up the classic image of a righteous man, it was the only thing that fate and circumstance hadn't taken away from him. And now this asshole thought he could?

His voice was barely audible, animated by cold fury. "Don't think so" he said.

Rankin jumped at him, but Snake stepped aside, following up the dodge with a blow to the back of Rankin's head. Rankin went down, clipping the back of Plissken's legs, knocking him to his knees. He drove a clenched fist into Snake's side, ramming his kidney, then pulled back quickly and did it again. Groaning, Snake dropped the knife as he hit the floor face down. Forcing himself to move, he twisted away from the third punch. He rolled to his back and swung his heavily booted foot at Rankin's skull connecting with his temple. Rankin fell back as blood from his split scalp ran freely down his face.

Snake pressed his advantage with a tackle that pinned Rankin to the ground where he was. He pounded at the man's face -- the instrument of his deception -- intending to turn it into a bloody pulp. But Rankin freed one arm and thrust it up at Snake's chin, snapping his head back and forcing him off.

Pain rocketed through Plissken's jaw. *Broken?* There was no time to dwell on it. Rankin was coming at him again. He scrambled for the discarded knife, but Rankin kicked it away before he could reach it. He was too late pulling his hand back and Rankin stomped on it. Snake cried out loud.

"You scream almost as nice as she did," Rankin taunted. He raised the foot and kicked, catching Snake in the head. Nausea and dizziness swept over him and he struggled to stay conscious.

"I'd like to stay and play some more." Rankin's triumphant voice was saying. "But I have work to do. By the time I make it back, the cops will have you. Guess I'll have to settle for finishing up with that little cunt of yours."

Snake got to his knees and raised his head in time to see a wooden crate coming straight at him. He tried to duck but his brain couldn't process the message in time. Crashing pain and crushing darkness took him at the same time.

Hauk circled the block again, moving the car at little more than a crawl. He peered into each and every doorway, alcove and alleyway, searching for Plissken. All he found were a pair of drunks arguing over a ball game that had been history for ten years and a working girl and her customer, braving the elements for a quick buck and an even quicker thrill.

Damn it, Plissken. Where are you?

He was afraid he knew.

Snake Plissken was one of the best trained hand-to-hand combat fighters he'd ever seen. But Hauk had worked with Eric Rankin, watched him in action, too. Both men were capable of ruthless cruelty but there was a perversity to Rankin's that was undeniable. It was one of the reasons he'd been dismissed from the USPF. In spite of what the country thought, what the Force thought -- what Shaw thought -- Rankin was a lot farther down on the humanity scale than Snake was. And Hauk didn't think that would be a put the odds in Plissken's favor now.

Still, Plissken had plenty of incentive tonight. And if the way Hauk had been nearly decapitated earlier was any indication of his resolve, then he didn't have a thing to worry about.

He snapped out of his reverie. A long-haired figure was making his way down the street toward the Lexus. He looked weary and out of breath but confident, not bothering to hide his presence or look over his shoulder. He was in no hurry and he carried no weapon.

Snake.

Hauk eased the car to the curbside, leaving the engine running. He opened the door and stepped out into the snow.

"Plissken!" he called out. He waved a hand to signal.

The figure looked up and paused, then headed toward the car. Intent on the man coming toward him, Hauk never sensed the presence of the one who appeared from nowhere to stand behind him.

"Hauk --"

The commissioner turned and looked into Snake Plissken's battered face. Shocked and confused, he whirled for another look at the first man. Now, there was an assault weapon in his hands, aimed at Hauk.

"Plissken, what the hell --"

Without another word, Snake plowed a fist into his gut. As he doubled over, Plissken took his head and slammed it against the car's rear passenger window. Hauk blacked out instantly.

Plissken stood up just as Rankin got to the car. He never flinched as Rankin swung the assault weapon around to aim at Snake. Snake held up his hands in a gesture of truce.

Rankin approached him slowly. When Snake made no threatening moves, he slowly lowered the gun. Not getting close enough to give Snake an advantage, he peered through the blown-out car window to see snow falling softly on Commissioner Hauk's unconscious body.

"I thought you were working for him," Rankin said.

"I don't work for anybody," Snake replied quietly. He leveled his gaze at Rankin and the corners of his mouth turned up slightly. "But I do work with people if it suits me. If they're smart. And if they can handle themselves." He rubbed the swelling at the side of his head where Rankin's boot had left an ugly bruise.

"Like you."

Rankin laughed. "Well look at this. I got Snake Plissken sucking up to me."

Snake kept on smiling, unperturbed. "Just complimenting talent when I see it."

Taking a step closer, the former USPF officer studied Hauk's body. He wasn't even close to waking up. Plissken had done the job right. "I'm supposed to kill him," he said casually.

Plissken gave the commissioner an indifferent glance. "Go ahead," he said. "Doesn't mean shit to me."

"You'll go down for it, you know."

Snake sighed. "That your agenda or the one who pushes your buttons?"

"Nobody controls me. I make my own decisions."

"And you think getting me back inside New York is gonna work for you?" He shook his head. "No way. Your masters might pay you, but they'll never forget what you know. They can't brag about putting me away if you're out there being a bad boy. You won't have much of a chance to enjoy being Snake Plissken. One day they'll get you. When you're not even looking. You're smart. You know that's not bullshit."

Rankin stared at the man before him. He'd beaten the absolute shit out of him less than half an hour before and now Plissken was making nice. What the hell for? He tried to make the intense curiosity he was feeling appear as indifference. "You got something in mind?" he asked.

Now Snake grinned. "Yeah. Snake Plissken fucks the government, right? Work with me and we can make it a regular gang bang. The goddamn government wouldn't know which end they were getting it in from one minute to the next."

Rankin breathed a short, disbelieving laugh. "You want us to work together?"

"Why not? Two men working as one. It would send them scattering across the country like cockroaches. And it would make us rich."

Even in the dark, Snake could see Rankin's eyes lighting up with the idea. He looked around them. No one was outside but who knew how many were watching from behind their blinds. He didn't care, really. But they'd been talking too long already.

He gave Hauk another glance. He was gonna come to any minute. He nodded in the commissioner's direction.

"Finish him," he said. "Then let's go someplace and have a drink."

He stepped around the car door to Rankin's side, moving in close. Rankin slid the assault rifle to his hands and took aim.

"Been waiting for this," Rankin said, stepping back to get a clear shot at Hauk's head.

Snake slipped his right arm in the gap between his double and the car. He dropped it down and from inside his jacket sleeve, his knife fell neatly into his palm.

"Me too," he breathed. Closing his hand around the hilt, he drove it forward, plunging it into Rankin's belly.

Illuminated by a nearby street lamp, the pain and shock on Rankin's face was almost horrific.

"Motherfuck--" he started to say but the words dissolved into a sickening groan of pain. He swung the gun in Snake's direction again but the twist of his body only forced the knife in

deeper. Untouched by his suffering, Plissken jerked the gun from his grasp and tossed it aside. He grabbed a handful of Rankin's hair and yanked his head back roughly, turning his face so that he could see it clearly.

"You gonna scream, tough guy?" he said calmly, forcing the man to look at him as well. He turned the knife and Rankin's eyes rolled to white. A mouthful of blood gurgled up from his throat and spilled over his chin. "C'mon, asshole. Now it's my turn to see *you* cry."

Plissken kept the knife moving until Rankin's body became too heavy to support, until the last flicker of life had drained from his eyes. Unsmiling, he let the body fall to the street. With the edge of his shirt, he wiped the handle free of his fingerprints then circled the door to where Hauk's unconscious form lay. He took the commissioner's limp hand, and pressed it firmly around the hilt before plunging it back into Rankin's still bleeding corpse.

Then, he turned his back and walked off into the storm.

Four days later, Bob Hauk was back in his office recovering from a concussion, nursing a headache and a very bad mood. The headache he could take care of with a few aspirin. The mood was a little harder to dispel. The rest of the USPF troops on Liberty Island were at a loss to explain their commander's foul temper. After all, hadn't he figured out who was really behind those assaults and murders and hadn't he pretty much single-handedly taken out their old buddy Rankin, who had gone gassed on them? He was a regular old-fashioned hero, he was. And if he heard congratulations from one more man, he was going to order them shot on the spot.

But the memo on top of the pile of mail on his desk did give him real reason to smile. He read it over twice to make sure his knock on the head wasn't giving him hallucinations, then notified his aide to send for Sergeant Shaw.

Shaw arrived promptly, in a mood even less jovial than Hauk's. Hauk would have liked to call the slimy traitor on his bad humor. He wanted to have the personal joy of informing him it was only going to get worse. What he wanted most was to kick his ass out of the world and into the hell of New York. But he couldn't do that. And Snake Plissken was the reason.

He supposed it was a bit ungrateful to be angry at a man who had saved your life. But in doing things his way, Snake had seen to it that there was no one alive to interrogate about this entire incident. And without Rankin's statement, they had nothing on Shaw. Even the tampered computer files had been mysteriously lost. Hauk himself had spent hours searching for them, for anything that could incriminate the Sergeant, all for nothing. And Plissken, of course, had once again disappeared like a mirage.

He looked up as Shaw entered the office. "Good morning Sergeant," he greeted politely and

with little warmth.

"Good morning, Commissioner."

Hauk retrieved the memo from the pile. He spoke as if it were an ordinary meeting. "Got a transfer notice this morning, Shaw. Tom Rheme's coming back here effective Monday."

The Sergeant's eyes widened for just a moment. He cleared his throat and asked: "Will I be staying on here?"

"--Sir," Hauk finished for him.

"Sir, yes, or course."

"No, I'm afraid not. You have new orders. They're here, too." He snatched another memo from the pile and smiled again.

"Seems you're wanted in Maine, Sergeant. You're being assigned to the new base they're building up on the Canadian border. Beautiful country up there, still. Not a human in sight for miles and miles."

Shaw's face reddened. "Maine? But that's impossible --"

"That's impossible, Sir," Hauk finished again. He kept his tone serious.

"Commissioner Hauk -- Sir -- I have some rather influential friends who might be disturbed to see me stationed in such a remote area. I'm certain that if you let me contact them--"

"No can do, Shaw. And I doubt they'd be much help. These orders have been okayed by the President himself. Can't get more influential than that." His eyes narrowed.

"Can you, Sergeant?" he asked pointedly

Shaw laughed bitterly. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

"Aren't you, Sir," Hauk corrected yet again. "You bet your ass I am, you backstabbing sonofabitch."

The shock in Shaw's eyes was edged with fear. "I beg your pardon?"

"You ought to, you traitor. And not just mine. But thanks to some very smooth backpedaling you won't have to. But let's get one thing straight --" He stood up and came out from behind the desk, standing toe to toe with Shaw.

"I know it was you. You found him. You set him up. You gave him instructions. You paid him. And if the day ever comes that I can prove it, I'll send you to hell right along with him."

Shaw stammered. "I-I have no idea what you're talking about --"

"--SIR," Hauk barked. He stepped back and took a seat on the edge of the desk. "Save your hot air, Shaw. You'll need it where you're going. Now get the hell out of here."

Defeated, Shaw turned on his heel and left. Hauk returned to his desk, savoring the delicious satisfaction. He smiled.

His headache was gone.

Plissken gave them a week to stop looking for him.

He figured it would take that long to rehash the story a thousand time in the newspaper and

on the Police Channel, At least that long for Hauk to give up spending money and manpower searching for a man who wasn't even legally wanted anymore. So, for seven long nights and days, he stayed hidden, moving from one dark corner to another, waiting them out patiently.

When he finally did emerge from his short hibernation, he did so in broad daylight. They wouldn't be expecting him then. And still, he watched Lilah's apartment for over an hour before climbing the stairs to knock on her door.

Still cautious, she left the chain on and looked to see who it was before letting him in. "I thought you'd be long gone by now," she said.

"I'm figuring the blackbellies will think that, too."

Worry crossed her face. "They still want you? I thought --"

"It's finished," he said.

Lilah let go a breath. Dark memory flickered in her eyes. "Good," she whispered.

Snake looked around the apartment. The curtains were gone, the cabinets were open and empty. A pile of short skirts, shorts and dresses sat on the sofa, along with clusters of costume jewelry. On the table, a moss green canvas duffle bag with faded US ARMY lettering lay open.

"Get evicted?" he asked.

She laughed, going back to her packing. "Are you kidding? I'm probably the only tenant who pays their rent on time. Or at all. No, It's just time to go. I've had enough of this glamorous life." Nodding at the counter she told him: "There's still one extra mug in there."

Snake took the hint and helped himself to a cup of black coffee. He leaned against the counter, watching her. The smaller bruises were gone and the worst of them had faded some. The swelling was minimal.

She caught him staring. "Yeah, I'm coming along," she said. "No permanent damage."

Nothing visible, anyway, Plissken thought. "Good," he said. He smiled at her.

But Lilah wasn't ready for even that much emotion. She looked away quickly. "Hey, if there's anything you could use in here --" She made a sweeping gesture. "I'm leaving everything that doesn't fit in the duffle."

"Wher're you going?" he asked.

"Somewhere," she said. "Anywhere not here."

Snake recognized the feeling. After Leningrad, the tragedy at home, he'd felt the same way. He still did. "Been there," he said.

"Yeah? How'd you like it?"

"It's okay." He sipped the coffee. "Not for everybody, though."

"Really?" she said, annoyance creeping into her voice. *What the hell was this all about? Snake Plissken was advising her on life choices?* "Well, I'm gonna try it anyway. Maybe I'm one of the people it is good for."

"Maybe."

She left him alone to gather some things from the bedroom. For the most part, the room was still trashed and disheveled the way it had been the last night Snake was there. She hadn't slept in that bed since that night and knew she never would again. Back in the kitchen, she jammed a couple of pairs of jeans and a sweater into the bag. There was still plenty of room. Over the last week, she'd realized how little there was here that she wanted to hold on to.

Snake waited a long moment before he spoke again. "Need a ride?" he asked quietly.

Lilah looked up from her packing to stare at him. On the surface it was a simple request. But she knew he made his way alone and he preferred it that way.

"Snake --"

"What? What's on your mind, babe?"

"Look, I'm grateful, but -- What's this ride going to cost me? I'm done trading off pieces of myself."

"No trading," he said. "No obligations. No promises. That's the deal. Interested?"

"Maybe. How long?"

"Long as it works."

"Yeah, but what'll I do after tomorrow?" she teased. He snorted a laugh. She studied him, remembering the young pilot she knew years before. He wasn't the same person but then, neither was she. If he was willing to take the risk, she supposed she could do the same.

"When?"

"Tonight. Around six. Six-thirty I go, with or without you."

"Understood."

He nodded, set the coffee mug on the counter and headed out the door without another word. Lilah locked up after him and then went to finish packing.

New Year's Martini.

by
Sylvia Stevens

January 31 2000 11:30 PM

Snake was stretched out on the couch, his booted feet resting on the arm, head turned to watch the television. The year 2001 was only an hour away and Plissken was getting slowly wasted in a Phoenix hotel room. He stared moodily at the television, deciding his vision wasn't nearly blurry enough to consider himself properly drunk yet.

He should've gone with Carjack to watch the celebration, but he wasn't in the mood for the other man's strange ideas of fun. One year, one day was like any other to Snake. Dates were arbitrary, anyway. The alternative, it seemed, though, was to die of boredom in a damned hotel room. Snake narrowed his eye at the screen. Images of his parents, sitting just like this, vicariously ushering in each year, struck him and Snake shook off the idea: *getting to be just like my folks...* The thought snapped him out of his lethargy. Never! At thirty-three, he was in far better shape than his father had been. *Let's go, Plissken!*

He rose to his feet and made a quick inventory. The remains of Snake's share of the cash from their last bank job was still in his gunbelt. He finished the glass of scotch in one swallow and enjoyed the fiery burn of the liquor. Grabbing his jacket, he made a quick check of gunbelt and pockets. A glance at the mirror and he was out the door.

The cold dry air hit him as he strode from the lobby of the hotel. There was a nightclub he wanted to check out two blocks from the Holiday Inn they were at. He moved through the light crowd of pedestrians, watching people and buildings. The alcohol in his system gave everything just the right amount of fuzz and damped his habitual anger to comfortable levels. As he approached the nightclub, he saw a woman standing at the corner. Her skin was the creamy dark velvet complexion that Snake liked. She had a leather shoulder-bag and a tight red dress, spike heels and dark stockings. She was obviously a prostitute, from her dress and attitude. Snake hesitated and watched her. He scanned the street for the backups that would be in place if this was a police sting. What better way to end the old year than with a good roll in the hay? He circled the block, looking for the plainclothes car that would tip off the game. There was none. He retraced and checked the other approaches. No police car, no casually waiting plainclothesmen. After nine years in the criminal underworld, Snake Plissken could almost smell police, whether state, local or USPF. There was no backup. The girl was legit.

He sauntered across to the girl, stopping in front of her. He looked straight at her and let a slow smile cross his face. "Want a lift?" he asked.

"Maybe I do, maybe not, Baby." Her voice was musical and she emphasized the last word with a little body movement that accentuated her curves. "You got a car?"

"No." Snake said.

The girl laughed. "Well what you offerin' me a lift for, you got no car?" She put a tone of mock offense in her voice.

Snake's smile broadened. "I'm not driving and you're not waiting for a ride. So how many miles gets us to where we're going?"

"Well that depends, Honey. Fifty miles gets you ahead, but for the whole distance, we travel two hundred long ones."

"And an overnight trip? Scenic route?"

"Mmm, Baby you're talking one thousand miles, easy! But the gas mileage is unbelievable and I guarantee, you'll never forget the trip!

Snake cocked an elbow and looked at her "Get in."

The hooker curled her hand around Snake's offered arm. "I just love a gentleman who holds the car door for a lady.... You a good driver, Sugar?"

"The best." Snake said as he led her back to the Holiday Inn.

Back in the room, Snake shed his ratty leather jacket. He turned and kissed the girl lightly. "I like to know my passenger's name..."

"Martini. Up front, Honey." She held out her hand, expectantly. Snake nodded.

"Wait." He stepped into the bathroom and quickly fished out two five-hundred dollar bluebacks from the gunbelt. He stepped back out and handed the money to her.

"Now we're talking. What do I call you?"

"Snake." He waited for the reaction.

"Ohh! It IS Snake Plissken! Honey, I wasn't gonna say anything, but I've heard some tall tales 'bout you..." She came over and stroked a hand across his face. He slid an arm around her waist and kissed her, putting force and heat into it. She molded herself to him. "Snake, you as hot as they say, this is gonna be a long trip."

"Yeah..." Snake breathed into her scented hair and slid hands up and down her body.

She was spectacular. Long silky strawberry blonde hair flowed over her shoulders and the tight red sheath dress accentuated her ripe, rounded body.

Snake laid the gunbelt where he could get it quickly and nodded. "Let's go, baby!"

"Call me Martini." She came over, set the bag on the floor and kissed Snake again. "I hear you enjoy pissin' off the President. Want to give it a shot?"

Snake chuckled. The President For Life was howling for the new laws that would stifle all forms of immorality. Sex outside of marriage would become an illegal act, as would drinking, eating red meat and other things, as of midnight, January First 2001.

"So, Snake -- you want to do it now, or wait and break that new law?" She reached out and ran a manicured hand lightly over Snake's shoulder. He responded by placing both hands on her hips, pulling her toward him.

"How 'bout both?" he pulled her to him, gently pressing his body against hers. She turned her face up and he kissed her deeply. He felt the heat start to build. He guided her to the bedroom and began slowly running his hands over her body. They kissed again, trading fire. Snake's hands ran through her hair, combing its heavy length through his spread fingers. He caught a thick curl and ran it over his lips and then buried his face in it.

Martini arched her body against his, feeling the long hard bulge of his erection pressing against the tight fabric of his pants. She ran a hand along it and kneaded his cock. He gasped and began unzipping the back of her dress. She stepped back and slipped the garment over her head revealing red satin bra and panties. She started to remove those but Snake's peremptory gesture stopped her. "Slow, baby..." he rasped softly. "Slow." He removed his sleeveless shirt and unzipped his pants. She caught the waist and began gently tugging them over his hips. He stopped her, sat down and removed his boots.

Finally, he was clad only in the black briefs he usually wore. Martini bent and nuzzled the cloth stretched tight over his hard cock. She smelled the heat of him, the thick delicious smell of maleness as her lips brushed the tiny damp spot forming on the underwear.

Her fingernail traced the cobra on his belly right down to the elastic band of the briefs.

She purred under her breath at his growl. Snake took her arms and turned her, laying her flat on the bed. He slowly began kissing her body. Finally, he slipped her bra off, burying his head between her breasts. Their soft contours entranced him. Reaching up, he took a handful of her hair and scattered the gold silk across her nipples. Kissing her breasts through her hair, he felt himself become almost impossibly hard.

She arched up and slithered out of her panties, holding them up against his face. He breathed in the musky scent and growled again. He slid a hand under her hips and lowered his body to nuzzle between her spread legs.

His tongue found thick red-gold curls and he parted her lips to lick between them. She was hot and wet. He rubbed his face against her flesh and breathed in her smell in long gulps. Finally, he slid out of the black underwear and she sat up, taking his cock between her hands, caressing him. She slid her mouth down onto him in one easy motion. He cried out under his breath. Her hair cascaded over his belly and he nearly erupted at the sight and feel of it.

Finally, she sat up, leaving his hardness and gently stroked the side of his face. "Snake..." she whispered. "We can do this straight... or I can show you things you've never seen before! Your choice."

"What?"

"Wonderful things! It'll take all night, Honey." She rose and went for the bag she had left in the front room. Returning, she unzipped it and set it on the chair near the bed. "Lie back, Baby, and feel good!"

"Yeah, OK..." Snake breathed. He stretched out on his back, erection pointing skyward. The cobra rippled with his breathing.

Martini bent over him, dragging her hair across his body. Snake gasped in reaction. She reached into the bag and drew out a pair of mittens made of fur. She slipped them on and slowly began caressing his body with hands and hair. Her touch was feather light and the fur barely grazed him. Snake felt like he was going to explode. He reached for her and she backed away.

"No, baby! Lie still. We're just starting..." Snake gritted his teeth and stretched back again. She began stroking his shaft with the tips of the furry mittens. Snake shuddered, wanting her harder. Finally, she closed one hand very gently over his cock. The sensation was unfamiliar. Tiny points of almost pain flared in his genitals. He jumped and she released him at once. He half sat up and grabbed her hand.

Pressing against the fur revealed the source of the sensation. Tiny sharp points, embedded beneath the fur, met his fingers. "What the fuck?!" He snarled holding her hand in a viselike grip.

"Hey, Snake, I told you, I'd take you on the ride of your life. Don't you trust me?"

"No!" he started up angrily. "I don't buy that kinky crap!"

"Have you ever tried it? Snake, why don't you go get that cannon of yours and set it on the table where you can get it? Then just relax and let me show you a whole NEW way to fly."

Snake stared at her, startled. Finally, he shook his head. "No need." He looked over at the dresser where his gunbelt and other Magnum lay. Within easy reach. He slowly stretched out again, only partially trusting her. "And take those things off!" he snarled.

She shook her head. "Snake, Honey, just go with it. You felt good, you'll feel even better. Easy..." She began stroking him again, across his taut belly, inner thighs, her lips following her fingers under the fur. Snake was never certain when the tiny points would appear or when the stroke would be silky. The very uncertainty, combined with the slowness of her approach, began to actually get to him, firing his senses. The sensation was never more than the very

lightest of scratches. Just at the edges of something deeper.

Finally, again, she stroked his hard cock. The barely felt teasing pricks of the fur mittens seemed to melt into a fire of ecstasy. Finally, unbidden, he closed his eyes.

Martini finally removed her furry tormenters and reached into the bag. She took out a pair of padded clips and flexed the springs carefully. Her teasing fingers and hair tickled his nipples, hardening them into small points. He shivered in delight as her fingers played with them. Eyes shut, he felt her lovingly pinch one nipple and then the other. The gentle pressure seemed to communicate directly with his groin sending lines of electric pleasure up and down his body. He shivered again, rising into the gentle pinch. For a moment, he lay still, feeling her weight shift as she moved. She flicked something lightly over his forehead and he opened his eyes. She held up a short length of heavy velvet cloth. She trailed it across his face and then laid it, untied, across his eyes. Irritated, he shook his head, jostling the cloth aside. "No."

The head gesture brought his view down to his chest. Two clips were in place, sending those delicious sensations through his nipples. "Hey!" he started to rise and she gently pushed him back.

"You enjoy it. Flow with it." She stroked his cock which was almost painfully hard. "I promise you, only as far as you want to go, Baby, but trust me!" In answer, Snake tossed the velvet aside and lay back. With irritated fingers, he pulled the clips free and tossed them out of her reach. She acquiesced to the removal.

"At least close your eyes, Honey," she cooed. "Let your body enjoy itself." She stroked and massaged his body, running warm hands over him until he began to ease again. Periodically, she flicked his pinched nipples lightly sending little shocks through him. His nipples tingled with returning sensation. She rolled him over onto his stomach and began massaging his back. Snake ached with the need for release, but somehow, she was making it perfect, the waiting and the hunger. She kneaded his buttocks with firm hands, digging in with a masseur's touch. She found and loosened knots in his back and shoulders, first rolling muscles under her fingers and then scratching the skin with nails to bring up the blood to the surface. "I heard about your war record, Sugar. You were in Finland." She said softly. "Did you use the sauna baths over there?"

"Yeah...." Snake breathed, too relaxed to wonder at the question.

A pause and then light flicks across his back began. "Then you'll remember the birch twigs." She explained. Snake relaxed at her words. The light flicking definitely reminded him of the way they switched their skin with flexible birches before running out to dive into the snow. It felt good. Kinky, but definitely familiar.

The light stinging sensation traveled up, down, across his back, sometimes across his buttocks, tingling, heightening into a strong sheet of warmth. His flesh warmed to the feeling and he wanted more. It wasn't exactly pain, but rather sensitivity. He arched toward it and heard her low laugh. She stopped, laying the implement to one side. He opened his eyes and stared. She had been using a small soft thonged leather whip! Before he

could jump, she leaned forward and drew her long blonde hair across his sensitized back. Snake grabbed the pillow between his hands, strong fingers digging in. He could feel every silky hair traveling across his skin. The softness was magnified, intense beyond belief! He moaned, arching his hips forward, pressing his engorged cock into the bed.

"Roll over, Baby," she purred. "Let's do the other side, OK?"

"Oh god..." Snake moaned between clenched teeth. He rolled, his body sensitive and aching for release.

This time the tiny light flicks concentrated on his nipples. He opened his eyes for a moment, watching her flicking at him with the soft whip. She used a light, feathery circling motion that barely brought the tips of the thongs across his flesh. He couldn't even hear impact sounds. He closed his eyes again, not wanting to think very much.

The tickling stinging flicks traveled across his chest, belly, even teasing the tip of his cock. The sensation magnified and he strained upward, his hard erection growing harder. He felt his balls contract and knew he was on the edge of orgasm. She slowed at once, taking him back from the edge. He heard himself whimper deep in his throat, shivering with the violence of his lust.

She lowered herself between his legs and began licking his cock and balls. Her warm tongue bathed the skin touched by the whip and Snake moaned aloud. Again she backed off, stretching the sensations out. She began licking his nipples, chest and belly. Every inch of his body was charged with the hot urgent tingle of lust he once had thought only centered in the groin.

Snake could stand it no longer. He got to his knees and grabbed Martini, shaking her semi-roughly. His breathing was hoarse and heavy as he pushed her down onto the bed, pushing her legs open. She responded by throwing her arms around him and pulling him to her. He rammed into her hot wet cunt, feeling her tighten around him. She grabbed his buttocks in her hands and squeezed. Snake grabbed her legs and hoisted her onto her shoulders, her legs high over his. She wrapped her ankles around his neck and felt him ram hard into her, his thick cock forcing deeper, ever deeper.

"Snake..." she said "Let me on top!" He growled deep in his throat. "Please, baby!" she urged.

Finally, he turned, falling onto his side and rolling over. She slid over him and onto his cock, forcing herself down harder onto him. Snake was nearly frantic with the urgency. She leaned forward and very deliberately let her hair fall thickly over his chest and belly. Snake snapped into a spasm of pleasure, his eyes shut, his back arched. When it seemed he could endure no longer, she gently rolled his sensitized nipples between her fingers. Snake exploded. He spasmed hard, deep inside her, feeling her contract and pull him inward. She raked her nails across his chest and, as he arched, across his back, sending fire through his skin and forcing another explosion.

Snake flew in the heart of the volcano. No clumsy aircraft between him and the hot wind of fiery pleasure. His body was raging, consumed, every nerve screaming in ecstasy. Faintly he heard his own voice joining the chorus. And hers. They rolled, tumbled, flew impossible distances locked together. He fell backward, down into the long black tunnel, heedless of all but the release, the long slow descent to land.

Snake opened his eyes. She was cuddled against him, hair spread across them both. She looked at him and began smiling. "Well, Honey, I think we just broke about ten laws!"

"Twenty." Snake mumbled. Slowly sitting up, he shook his head. "I never did that before."

"I know."

He thought of the leather bag, certain that it held other darker things, not wanting to know what they were. "Not that..." He felt utterly liquid inside. "I mean..."

She leaned up on an elbow, her hair fanning down to the bed. "What, Honey?"

"Came... twice..."

Her low chuckle surprised him. "I knew you'd do that..."

"Do what...? Suspicion edged his voice.

"Lose count! Snake, you must've come four times! I think you got kind of spaced there for a while."

"Spaced?"

"You better believe it, Snake," she smiled at him. "We've been at it for five hours. It's nearly morning!"

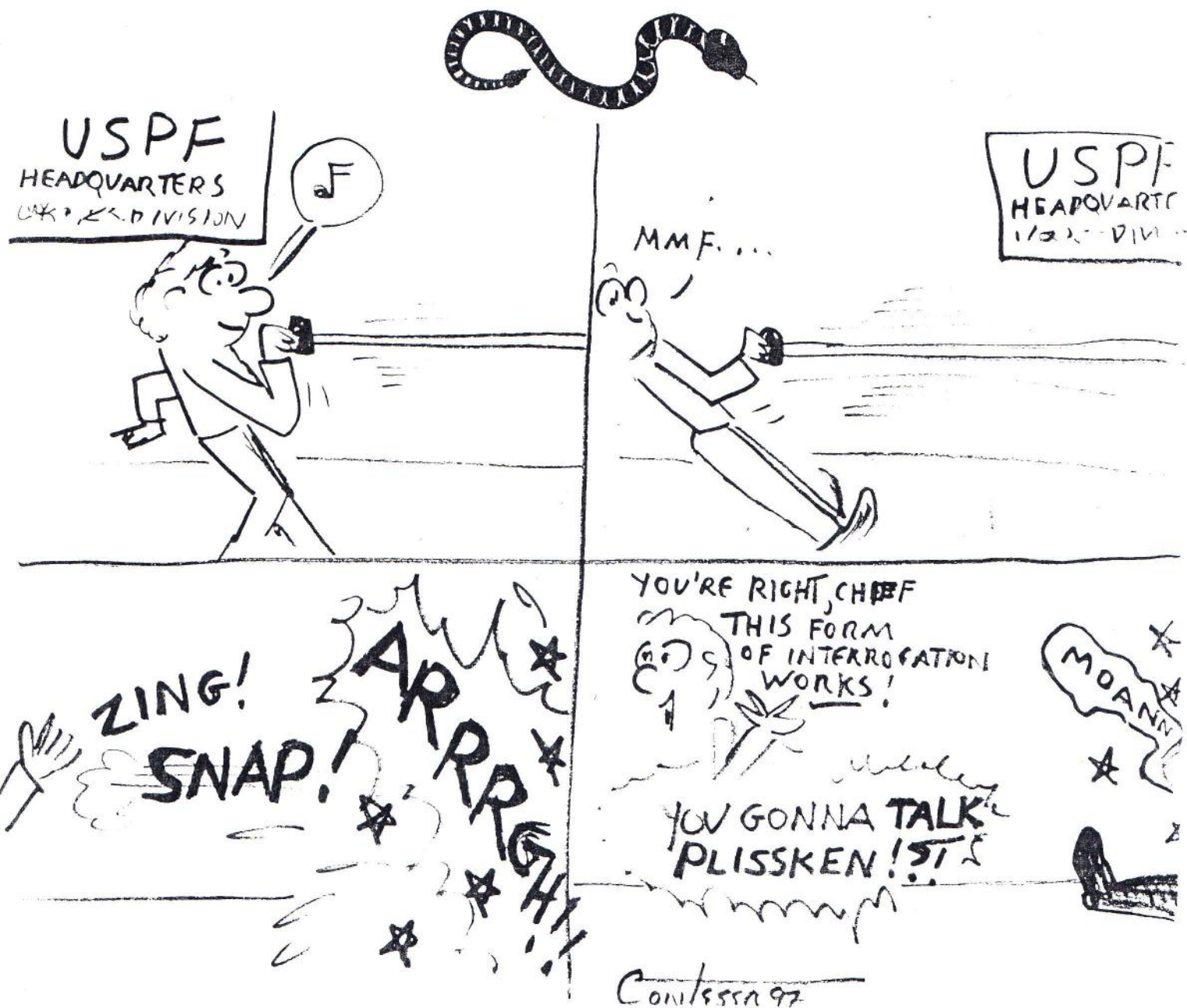
"Bullshit. I slept."

"You fainted, Baby, on that last come!" And I don't think you were quite conscious before that!"

"What'd I do? What did YOU do?" Snake looked around to find the room neatened, the bag nowhere in sight and all the 'toys' put away and gone.

Martini rose and began to slide the sheath dress on over that sleek luscious body. "It's all part of the service, Snake. Remember me, OK? And Happy New Year, Honey."

Snake's head dropped back to the pillow as she crossed to the hotel room door. Some things were better left alone. Dimly, he heard the latch click as Martini slipped out of his life.



THOUGHT YOU WERE DEAD

By
Mart Allard

Snake Plissken struck a match to light his smoke. Its flame illuminated his face for a fraction of a second before he shook it out. Back in shadow, he took a long drag on his cigarette, scanning the tiny bar for even a flicker of recognition. Out of reflex, his free hand drifted to one of the guns holstered at his side. You never knew when some asshole was gonna show up with something to prove, even here.

New Vegas was a city devoted to extinguishing the dark. Neon drenched most of the streets, overpowering the night. The sky ran pink with man-made light. It was a shiny, ugly wound chopped into the heart of the jungle.

But there were dark places in all cities that drew dark people like Snake. It hadn't always been like that. The war had taken away his old life and given him a new one, all in one eye blink. *But fuck it*, he thought, flicking ashes into his empty whiskey glass. He'd never been one to dwell.

The air changed suddenly. Everybody in the saloon shifted as the door swung open. A hint of fresh air curled around the new customer as he entered. Tall and lanky, he wore a long, light-colored pony tail that trailed over the collar of his duster. But it was the measured strides, the way he held his hands -- steady, but loose at his sides -- that drew Snake's notice and he reached to tip his own gun clear of the holster.

All conversation died as the stranger moved past the bar to Snake's table.

"You want somethin'?" Snake asked without looking up.

The other man hitched his long coat open to show his guns. "Just a few moments of your time."

Snake tilted his head to the side slightly so he could look the guy straight in the face. This one was young -- barely twenty, Snake guessed. His narrow face bore no scars, and neither did his eyes. He flinched away from the scrutiny. Snake had seen the same fear, the same recognition flash across other men's faces, when they met his eye and saw that everything they heard was true. Usually that was right before they died.

He pushed to his feet. "Outside, or right here?"

"L--look, Plissken --"

"Call me Snake," he interrupted smoothly, extinguishing his smoke in the whiskey glass. "See, I only ask 'cause all the other assholes come here to kill me always wanna die with an audience." He knew what the boy's answer would be and he let him lead the way.

Gunfighters become gunfighters for two reasons. Most came for the sound of the crowd, the show. If they lived long enough, they usually moved on. For others it was the blood. Snake wondered which it was for the boy. It was different for Snake. He did it because he was good at it. He was the best. When it came down to killing, most men hesitated before the shot. Somehow that part of Snake was missing.

They appeared as Snake stepped into the street -- snuff junkies, about fifty or so, sliding out of the shadows, or sewers or wherever they came from. *Assholes*, he thought, feeling his lip

curl as they strained for a glimpse of the legendary, unkillable Snake Plissken. Like carrion eaters, the snuff junkies hung close to Snake, knowing a meal was coming. He faced off, center of the street, feet set wide and shrugged out of his battered leather jacket. He let it drop to the dirt and spared one acid glance at an onlooker who made a move for it. Then Plissken turned back to his opponent.

The boy's face was white, but his hands were solid. Snake thought he should give the kid a chance to back out. Or walk away from it himself. But the war had been an exercise in lost causes for Snake, and he knew one when he saw it now. He'd given them up with his discharge.

"You call it," he said. "You want it straight up, or some bullshit rule thing?"

The kid met his eyes again and didn't flinch this time. "Straight up." He nodded at the nearest crowd member. "He makes the call."

The grizzly weasel from the sidelines cackled. Snake let his hands drop over his guns and tilted his head to the side. The kid took his stance about six yards away. He looked at Snake, and then nodded to the other man.

"Draw!"

Snake jerked his pistols free of the holsters and got them up in one fluid motion. Instinct took over and he squeezed off a round from each. The boy fell to the ground without getting a single shot off. Snake replaced his guns and stooped to retrieve his jacket. His name hissed through the tiny crowd. He turned and walked away without watching them pick over the body.

He headed into a dark alley. Something told him it was time to move on. He was too well-known, even here. Someday soon some asshole would finally get the drop on him.

"Hold it right there Plissken." A lone figure split off from the rest and followed him. Snake recognized the black uniform, the insignia on the belt. There was a gun in his hand before he realized it.

The cop made no move to draw. "Try it, scumbag. I've got 35 United States Police Force issue high-power rifles along these roof tops, all just waitin' for a piece of Snake Plissken." He smiled. "You're fast, but you're not that fast. If I give the signal, you're fish food." He folded his arms across his chest. "C'mon Snake you know the drill."

He did. Snake put his guns on the ground and kicked them away. He raised his hands. "If you were ready to bag me, why'd you wait until after the fight?"

The other man smiled tightly. "Consider it your contribution to the cleansing of society."

More blackbellies appeared. Two of them forced Snake's hands into a pair of manacles.

"I guess some shit never changes, huh?" he said.

"Not for people like you Snake."

"Call me Plissken."

THRESHOLD

by

Karen Winter & Sylvia Stevens

"Welcome to the party, Plissken. So glad you could make it," the uniformed figure's gloating voice came from above him. A boot connected solidly with his ribs, and Snake slid across the metal floor of the USPF transport into the opposite bank of seats. He shook his head, trying to clear it, nausea rising from an earlier head blow. He coughed, swaying to his knees on the floor of the jouncing van taking him in to blackbelly headquarters.

"You're OURS now, fucker!" The USPF officer pushed Snake roughly back down to the grimy floor. Snake gagged, tasting again the cobra venom he had drunk minutes before as part of the Three-In-One contest on New Vegas. Groggily, he ran his tongue around the inside of his mouth. Somehow, he had managed to avoid any cuts there during his capture and manhandling by the USPF. Good. Venom was fairly harmless when ingested; it didn't become deadly until it entered the bloodstream through a cut or puncture wound. Watching him drink it sure fucked with his opponent's mind and raised the stakes on the match, though. He swallowed hard, looking up at the six blackbellies crowded around him. God but he'd like to bite one of them, he thought. The lingering venom in his mouth would make at least one of the fucking assholes very sick indeed. *Cop dies of cobra venom from bite of Snake Plissken.* He saw the headline in his mind's eye and managed an internal ironic chuckle before abandoning the idea. He was better off avoiding any injury, if he could, until the poison had cleared from his mouth and throat.

He was hauled up onto the bench along the van's side, and the cuffs on his wrists fastened to the loop bolted to the wall. His ribs ached and he was covered with bruises. Trust the cops to take out their aggression on a helpless prisoner. He knew there was more of it waiting for him, and set his mind grimly to endure what was coming, feeding on his inner fury and hatred, fanning it into strength and drawing on it to survive.

At the end of the short ride, he was shoved into a holding cell and roughly strip-searched. They "found no money" ...*of course...* taking his jacket, winnings, and gunbelt from him before he endured the rituals of fingerprinting, laser and retinal scan, front and side photos, questions which he stubbornly refused to answer. That earned him a few more blows.

It had been sixteen years since he had been captured and sent to New York Max, sixteen years of freedom. Maybe, Snake thought, he had begun to believe the legend of the "uncatchable" Snake Plissken. Maybe he had grown careless and overconfident. *Back to New York?* Probably. Hawk wouldn't be there this time. Snake had read in the underground press that the Police Commissioner had resigned angrily after the new President had begun his "moral rearmament" of

the country. Snake, himself, was disgusted with it all. He was accused of "twenty-seven moral crimes against America," or so the public service spots blared on every vid channel; accused and convicted in absentia. Now they would have a real crime to pin on him. Gunfighting was illegal, even on New Vegas. He wondered if the USPF would bother with a trial, or just haul his ass back to the States and dump him in New York Max. Still, he thought, sixteen years wasn't a bad run, all things considered.

Footsteps sounded in the corridor outside his cell and the door slid open. An officer barked, "Come on, Plissken," and reached out a hand. Snake shrugged out of contact and stepped into the hall, raking the little squad of guards with his cool, contemptuous glance. He was marched down the corridor to a room containing a chair, table, and some kind of recliner that gave it the look of a medical exam room. Snake's mind brought up memories of the hospital at Helsinki, of the underground butcher who had patched him up after New York, and he felt an internal shrinking he hoped wasn't visible to his captors.

"Siddown," the blackbelly officer ordered. Snake considered refusing, but the numbers weren't in his favor. They were more than capable of injuring him, badly, and *then* forcing him into the recliner. He sat.

The guards strapped him down with bored efficiency, uncuffing his hands to fasten them to the chair's arms. Snake twisted, resisting, trying to pull his arms and legs free before the restraints locked home. One blackbelly backhanded him and cocked a fist for a harder blow; Snake subsided as the chair-cuffs snapped shut. He'd been beaten in restraints before. Not worth repeating for the satisfaction of making a useless gesture. He stared at the wall, trying to look unimpressed by the USPF's Finest. From the glower he got in return, he apparently succeeded. Two officers flanked him while a third snugged a rubber tourniquet around Snake's upper arm and plunged a hypodermic syringe into his brachial artery to collect a blood sample. The little group left, the blackbelly holding the blood-filled syringe aloft like a trophy, and Snake heard the sound of the door's lock engaging.

Cold fire burned the length of Snake's backbone, and he felt fear, like small, sharp teeth, nibbling at the edges of his self-control. Blood samples meant they would be questioning him under drugs, the interrogator trying to see if he had any other chemical in his system that would create a fatal reaction when combined with the truth-drugs. Snake reached back into his Army training, back to the techniques he had been taught to use under enemy interrogation, if he was captured. He brought up the faces of the fallen men of Black Light one by one, and, finally, the face of Bill Taylor, his partner. In Snake's mind, Taylor eyed him with a calm certainty beyond blame or doubt, a certainty without questions or reasons, without limits. For Taylor, he had always been a soldier, with a soldier's honor, even after his enemy had become their own government. Taylor had trusted him, believed in him, to the end. He saw the quick "thumbs up" and confident grin Taylor always gave him just before the hatches of their Gulffires slid shut, and they went up on a mission. He held on to the image.

Snake lay still, listening. He knew they were leaving him alone to stew and anticipate what they had in store for him, in hopes of breaking down his resistance. Deliberately, he turned his thoughts away from whatever was about to happen, and back to a replay of the last few hours before his capture, back to the Three-in-One Deathduel.

He had made his drop, passed the heroin safely to Paul Frees, his Dayglo contact, and

collected the first instalment on his cut of the take. All he had to do was wait until Frees made his connection and got paid in turn, then he could collect the rest and get out of there. In the meantime, he had signed up for a couple of Three-In-One matches. They made a good cover for his presence on New Vegas, and, if all went well, would pull in some extra money. A little backup plan, in case Frees ran out on him with the rest of his cut.

"Odds are stacking pretty well," the promoter observed, as the two of them cased the smoky backroom crowded with thrill-seeking high-rollers placing bets on Snake's upcoming deathmatch. Snake snorted softly. "Cobra venom. They fall for it every time." The advantage went to the man with cooler nerves and bigger balls, the man who could get the psychological drop on his opponent and outbluff him. Last time Snake had come away with \$500,000 for his cut of the take in the Three-In-One. Gunfighting alone was equally risky, and the payoff was smaller, but it was the adrenalin rush that drew him as much as the cash. That, and the kick to his rep.

He met Su Yan at the table. The Chinese man's fat bulk was squeezed into the metal chair, his eyes concealed behind mirrored sunglasses, his sweating face a mask. He had nearly as much of a name in the gaming underworld as Snake, but the word was he had never done the Three-In-One. As the announcer gabbled in Chinese, and the crowd yelled its bloodthirsty enthusiasm, Snake readied himself for the test, mentally focusing, creating a calm inner certainty by force of will. The objective was simple: out "gut" his opponent, and, if the first phase was a draw, go to the gunfight. Several thousand dollars for twenty minutes work...if Su Yan blinked first.

He didn't watch as a cobra was selected from the writhing mass in the holding pit. He knew the routine. The snake's venom was milked into a clear shot glass, displayed to the cheers of the crowd, and set down with a flourish on the black lacquered tabletop between the two men. Expectant silence settled as eyes focused on the little cup mirrored in the table's shining surface. The smack of a cleaver behind them announced the death of the cobra. Its blood was squeezed into a second glass, the heart and liver poured into a third, and the two other shot glasses lined up beside the first. A flick of his fingers started the small floating cylinder in front of the announcer spinning. Snake tipped his head back with a calm sigh, and, as the pointer slowed, the faint breath nudged its tip into stopping in front of the Chinese man. Good, Snake thought with a inner smile. Su Yan paled slightly.

Sweating, Su Yan took up the glass with the cobra blood and downed it grimly. The cylinder spun again and settled on Snake. He could drink the venom now, but that would spoil the show, and bets were still being placed. Raise the stakes, take the gamble, and hope he could fake out his opponent, Snake thought to himself. Snake pretended to hesitate, manufacturing an apprehensive expression. With an infinitesimal tremor visible in his fingertips, he lifted the glass with the liver and heart, tossed it back with a long breath, and set the empty glass down sharply on the slick black lacquer. The click of its impact was dramatic in the silence as the crowd around them watched in intent expectation.

Time now for the psychological deathblow that would decide this contest. The cylinder spun a third time. Snake let it go its full rotation, until it finally stopped, pointing to Su Yan. The other man was pale and sweating, hesitant, and Snake could read the apprehension in him. Snake leveled his coldest stare at his opponent, his good eye fixing Su Yan with deadly menace. The Chinese man reached out a shaking hand toward the remaining shot glass. Snake caught his eye, putting all of the force of his personality into the look, and Su Yan slowly withdrew his hand. Psyched by Snake's feigned apprehension and the very real threat in his glance, Su Yan was defeated, his fear of the venom magnified beyond his control.

Swiftly, Snake's hand moved. He picked up the clear glass and drank the contents in one

gulp. The bitter taste at the back of his throat told him he had not managed to get it all down completely. Whatever you do, don't bite your tongue for the next twenty minutes, Snake, he thought grimly. The crowd whooped and yelled.

Now for the rest of this. Snake rose from the table, keeping his eye fixed on Su Yan with intimidating menace. His opponent got uncertainly to his feet, and the two men moved to the open area in the center of the room as the crowd melted back out of the path of the impending shots. One man was shaking, the other outwardly calm and icily elated. At the signal, both men drew and fired. Snake felt the light breeze as Su Yan's bullet passed his shoulder, missing him by a millimeter. His own guns found their mark, and the Chinese man crumpled to the floor, dead. Snake drew a deep breath and holstered his Magnums, his heart slowing gradually from its fast heavy rhythm as he rode the crest of his body's reaction, surfing the adrenalin rush back down. He strode to the promoter's table, swept his share of the winnings into a pile, tapped the blueback into a bundle and shoved the wad of paper into the pocket of his came pants. Tonight, he thought, there would be steak, a bottle of good scotch, and a high-priced whore for dessert.

Ignoring the cheers of the spectators, avoiding the proffered claps on the shoulder and requests for autographs, Snake made his way out onto the deck of the rusted tanker moored off the Thai coastline. A cigarette girl approached him, and he passed her a bill for a pack of real smokes. As he stood at the railing, smoking, faint, steady drumbeats began to echo in his head. *Shit*, he thought... *the venom!* He knew the effects of the cobra venom could start with mild hallucinations. The steady, throbbing sound grew louder, and Snake looked up, searching for the source. No, not the poison...a USPF chopper. He heard the steel net before he saw it, felt it whistling down, slamming him to his knees as a lead weight bounced against his skull, stunning him. *ShitshitSHIT!* Blackbellies swarmed him and bore him to the deck as a blow from nowhere in particular took him out of the waking world. Snake was brought back to the present by the soft, heavy thud of a door closing. He looked toward the sound to see a slender man in the crisp uniform of USPF Medical entering the room. Snake took a breath. Gritting his teeth, he reached far down into his past and called up the phrase that would activate his programmed military conditioning.

The pale, blond interrogator with the dead eyes and the cold expression came through the door, alone, closed it carefully behind him, and stood sizing up his subject. The man on the medical restraint couch turned his head to glower at him, hatred and defiance in his face. Dr. Anderson smiled slightly to himself. "Snake" Plissken. This one should be an interesting challenge. If he could break Plissken, it would mean a commendation, and an article in the USPF journal under his byline.

"Plissken. Good to have you with us at last." Anderson pitched his voice low, making it soft and deceptively innocuous, making the captive have to strain to hear him clearly. He stepped over and gripped the subject's chin, turning the man's head to study the bruises. The prisoner twisted his head free, glaring at him. "I see you sustained some damage during your capture. Unfortunate. It makes my job a bit more difficult," he said. The prisoner gave him an icy stare and nothing more, stubbornly silent.

Anderson crossed to the other side of the room, laid his case on the table, and opened it, shielding its contents from the subject's view with his body. When they didn't know what he would use, what was coming, it always gave him an advantage. He spoke over his shoulder as he set up his instruments. "I've been following your career, Plissken. You've led us a merry chase, but we

have you at last. Now we can...make up for lost time."

He took the gunbelt the man had been wearing when he was apprehended from the case, and hung it over the back of the chair, the buckle facing the prisoner. "Nice work. These mean a lot to you, don't they?" He laid fingertips lightly on the black strap. "I never saw the use of firearms, myself. I've always found other methods...more effective." Anderson producing a cold smile he had always found useful in unsettling those he was interrogating, but got no visible reaction from the one currently across from him.

When he heard a knock, Anderson opened the door, accepted the printout the orderly handed in to him, then shut it again. He read through the sheet. "Your labs are back. No drugs in the bloodstream, no alcohol. Clean living, Plissken? I wouldn't have expected it of you, but it does give us a better baseline to start from." He set down the flimsy pink sheet, the snap of thin latex gloves being pulled on sounded in the air, and when he turned back from his case, a hypodermic needle gleamed in his hand. "Now. We shall begin."

The prisoner lunged violently against the restraints, twisting and fighting. Anderson waited him out. "That will do you no good, you know," he said in a patient, slightly bored, tone. "You belong to us now, and anything we want to do to you, we will."

He glanced at the paper. "Your chart says you have a problem with needles." In one quick move, he pinned an arm and jabbed the needle home, then held the hypodermic in place, injecting slowly, ignoring the subject's struggles. Not much different than the monkeys in his lab experiments, he thought: the same futile struggles subdued by a fast, firm grip. At least this animal had language. "Fight me and it will only be worse," he said. He withdrew the syringe and studied the figure on the examination couch. He was hiding his fear well, but Anderson could tell it was there, under the burning hatred in the one cold blue eye.

Anderson stepped away from the subject, who had subsided into a rigid quiet, and sat down in the office chair next to the table, consulting his watch. He picked up the paper, read through it again, rearranged the contents of his case, and waited. When the time was up, he came over and laid a hand against the prisoner's face, testing reactions. The man pulled away, more slowly now. "Still there? Yes," Anderson said. His hand touched the face again. This time, the subject stayed motionless, blinking at him with unfocused, half-open eye.

The doctor returned to the gunbelt on the chair back. "Yes. Very nice workmanship. Must have set you back quite a bit." The buckle glinted in brightness from the ceiling fixture overhead. The subject's dull gaze turned slowly toward the shining metal. "Feeling tired? Try to stay awake, if you will." Anderson toyed with the belt, turning the buckle slightly back and forth to catch the light. Anger and hatred had faded out of his blank expression, but the prisoner seemed to be struggling to stay awake, concentrating on the moving flash from the buckle.

"When I touch your hand, you will hear me clearly. You cannot hear my voice now," Anderson said softly. The subject stared dully ahead. "Close your eyes now." He watched the face opposite him intently, but no flicker of awareness crossed its features. He brushed his fingers across the back of the other man's hand. "Close your eyes now," he repeated. One unpatched eye fell shut slowly, and Anderson smiled inwardly. As he had expected, the subject had proved quite easy to hypnotize. The criminal mind was simpler, more childlike, easier to manipulate, than that of normal people.

The doctor reached down and unzipped the fastenings on the prisoner's tight fitting black shirt and pushed it down, exposing the chest, to monitor the breathing more accurately. He glanced at the oxygen container with the resuscitation gear beside the enameled storage cabinet. The drug dosage had been calculated carefully, based on body chemistry and estimated weight, but the

possibility of suffocation was still present. If he lost this one, it would set his career back and displease his superiors. He frowned. The subject's breathing was almost too shallow now, and he seemed asleep.

"What is your name?"

Silence.

"What is your name?"

"Snn'k...." The sound emerged grudgingly, almost a voiceless breath.

"State your full name!" The doctor's voice became a sharp, almost military, bark.

An almost imperceptible shudder passed over the prisoner in the restraints, and something in the slack face changed, shifted, then faded from the doctor's view.

"H'z'kn...Sssn...."

"Again."

"Lt...Sss..vnn H'fd...Plllzk'n...."

Too deep. Anderson felt a stab of alarm. Had he miscalculated the dose that badly? Perhaps, or, more likely, the subject's reactions were slowed by genuine fatigue. He took a bottle of glucose drip from the case, inserted tubing and a needle. In a moment, he had the IV going, the bottle hung from a hook at the top of the recliner. He hoped that a slow, steady infusion of glucose would prevent further damage.

"Your name." Once again, there was silence. Exasperated, Anderson tried another tactic. "You are Steven David Plissken. Is that correct?"

A faint shake of the prisoner's head. The doctor laid a hand on his face again, and this time he offered only slight resistance. "Relax, Plissken. Nothing you can do will have any effect on what is going to happen to you. Resistance can only make it worse." The man in the restraints had been handsome once, Anderson thought. Cleaned up, shaved, with the surly snarl removed, the face might even have looked boyishly wholesome. But now the rough features were marred by moral degeneracy.

He was a criminal, a killer, a psychopath, totally socially unredeemable, and it showed, stamped into the scarred flesh. The man's mind was undoubtedly as filthy and defective as his body.

He returned to the attack. "Who were your contacts in New Vegas? Give us the names!" The subject turned his head slowly, as if trying to evade the question.

"You were arrested for gunfighting for profit. Who set up the match? Answer me!"

The man in the restraints twitched, his face tensing. "Nnnnooooo...."

"ANSWER ME!"

"S.D. Plis-sken...Lieu-tenant, U-nitedStates Ar-my, Serial num-ber...." The raspy, nearly inaudible whisper droned on, reciting old information. Anderson scanned the printout with the prisoner's file and an item caught his attention. Special Forces. That would explain the strength of the resistance. A specific name: Black Light.

"Black Light." That was the last mission the young Lieutenant Plissken had completed before he had suddenly gone renegade. It wasn't what he had been told to question the prisoner about, but sometimes indirect approaches proved fruitful. If nothing else, it might throw him off track and confuse him into providing some kind of answers. "What about Black Light? Tell me...."

"Lied to us. Suicide...mission. Di'n't...pect us t'come back. ...Trusted me... trusted me.... Dead. All of them...." The man's voice trailed off. Somewhere within him a door seemed to open and raw pain flooded the blank face. "Nooo...."

He was reaching some inner place, something of emotional significance to the subject, Anderson thought with satisfaction. The resistance was breaking down. "Where are you now?"

What is happening?" the doctor said, watching intently. "Tell me: where are you?"

Instead of the response Anderson hoped for, the prisoner lunged against the straps, fighting the restraints violently, thrashing wildly in the recliner. The straps held, and, after a moment, he collapsed onto the chair, quieting. His expression turned dull again, emotion fading. "No..." he mumbled, and fell silent. He seemed to be losing contact with the other man, the doctor thought, the subject drifting farther away from him, retreating into whatever surprisingly strong defenses this unusually resistant criminal mind had constructed to frustrate him. Abandoning the sideline, Anderson turned back to the immediate question. "Who was working with you in New Vegas?"

Stubborn silence from the prisoner.

Anderson put an imitation of concern into his voice, trying a different tactic. "Snake, you have to tell me. Your friend is in danger. You have to tell me, so I can warn him." The doctor watched the prisoner's face intently. "Who was with you in New Vegas? Who was your contact? Who?"

"No." The subject's voice was faint and hoarse, a weary rasp, but determined. His eye was closed, his breathing all but stilled. "No," he whispered doggedly.

"Your contact, Snake. Tell me. Snake, talk to me!" Anderson was becoming concerned. Even under Versed and the other drugs in combination, the man was still resisting. This was dangerous. He had lost prisoners before, when they retreated too far and simply died in the chair. If that happened, the USPF would never get anything out of this one. Time to back off temporarily.

The subject's lips moved silently, then he breathed out a long sigh and fell still, slumped limply in the recliner. Anger and the fear of failure in this important interrogation, galvanized the doctor, and he slapped the prisoner's face, hard. The head rocked to one side, but there was no other response. Alarmed, Anderson lowered the recliner flat and began CPR. Several moments went by before the prisoner took a ragged breath. Anderson quickly activated the oxygen and put the mask over the subject's face. The man lay utterly still, barely breathing. The doctor injected a strong stimulant into the IV line, and, as the drug slowly took effect, the subject stirred and raised his head fractionally.

One blue eye slowly focused on the interrogator. A low, relentless voice, muffled by the mask, grated "Fuck you...." The eye closed again and the expression smoothed into a blank, solid wall of resistance, conceding nothing.

Annoyed and frustrated, Anderson stepped back a pace and contemplated his uncooperative subject. This was not going well. Evidently, if they were going to get anything useful out of this one, they were going to have to rely on less subtle methods than drugs and hypnosis. He would turn the prisoner back to the guards for more traditional methods of persuasion. Sometimes sleep deprivation, hunger, and plain, old-fashioned physical force were still effective.

With the subject sullenly unresponsive in the restraints, Anderson began collecting the rest of the information he wanted for the prisoner's file. In the last few years, the study of medicine had once again turned its attention to the bio-genetic basis of criminality, and S.D. Plissken was an unusual case: a war hero and former American patriot lost to immorality and insanity. The doctor took precise measurements and a complete body scan before moving on to the specimen samples. He would run a detailed program on all of them later. There was no telling which, if any, of these would unlock the secret of Plissken's unexplained degeneration. As he had expected, the subject was uncooperative, but Anderson continued with brisk efficiency, no longer concerned with the prisoner's mental condition.

With surgical scissors, he clipped a generous lock of hair, and dropped it into a specimen container, labeled it and set it aside. He added a scraping of tissue from the inside of the mouth, and

samples of blood, skin, saliva, and a muscle biopsy, each with a meticulously detailed label, before finishing the examination by collecting a final sample that got more reaction from the subject than the rest.

The drugs were wearing off, and the prisoner was beginning to come around, fighting the restraints again. Anderson ignored the futile thrashing, concentrating on extracting a good sample of sperm. "Stop that!" he said sharply, "Be grateful I'm not using electrodes on you." The doctor noted, with disgust, that the cobra tattoo on the subject's belly ended in a tail inked down the shaft of the penis. What strange twist of the man's perverted mind had led him to have *that* done, Anderson wondered. Carefully, he removed his damp surgical gloves and dropped them into a hazardous waste container. Even through latex, he felt contaminated by the contact. He packed his samples and equipment, and closed his examination case with a firm click. "You know, Plissken," he said, "It's almost too bad you won't remember any of this." He gave the subject a final disgusted glance before turning away. "You're nothing but a symptom of the moral rot we're cutting out of the body of America."

He left the examining room, nodding absently to the guard outside the door. "I'm finished," he said. "When he revives completely, take him back to his cell." The guard saluted.

When he returned to his office, Anderson picked up his digital recorder, spent a moment organizing his thoughts, and then began dictating into it: "Subject: S.D. Plissken. Date: October 11, 2013; 1640 hours. Subject responsive to Versed and Sanlaxene combination, but massively blocked mentally. At levels deep enough to cause asphyxia and cessation of breathing, no useful information obtained. Further interrogation under drugs may prove fatal. Subject was revived, but remained uncooperative. Tissue and fluid samples for genetic research project taken. Suggested course..." He closed his eyes and rubbed them. Constant contact with the degenerates he was required to interrogate was tiring and unpleasant.

"Suggested course: termination or revocation of citizenship and deportation."

He shut off the machine and leaned back with a tired sigh. It had been a very unsatisfactory afternoon, and he was not pleased with forwarding this inconclusive report to his superiors. Perhaps a more thorough analysis of the recording and the samples might give them better answers, or perhaps they might never know what motivated the criminal in Room 16, and who his accomplices were. A mental image of the prisoner's repulsive tattoo surfaced, and the doctor's mouth twisted slightly in disgust. It was a perfect symbol of the pathology of the criminal class: diseased bodies, degenerate minds. The president's policy of removing such sources of moral contagion from American society was right and necessary. The country was lucky to have such a man in charge.

He looked out his office window at the bustle of organized activity below, the neat rows of barracks, military vehicles, uniformed men passing by, and a familiar pride rose in him. His service, the USPF, was his commander in chief's strong right arm, the means by which the president's plans to regenerate and purify this great nation once again would be achieved. Plissken was an example of the problem; they were the solution. The doctor glanced at his watch. It was almost time for the president's sermon from Lynchburg tonight. Anderson pointed his remote at the office video and activated it.

Snake returned to awareness in his cell, half-slumped against the hard bedshelf, stiff, aching, and exhausted. He levered himself up onto the flat surface and surveyed the room, rubbing absently at an annoying, burning itch on the inside his arm. He looked down to see a fresh

puncture-mark over the vein, surrounded by faint bruising. He stared at it, sorting through his memory: the USPF capture, the van, the search, booking...the rest was hazy. He lifted his head, the cell swam dizzily, and he caught himself on one outstretched arm to keep from falling over. This wasn't the lingering effects of the cobra venom; it had to be something the blackbellies had done to him. The confused image of an officer in a medical uniform came back to him. He must have been interrogated under drugs.

Shit. What had he said? Snake wondered, trying desperately to remember. He cared little for Frees, and less for the men behind him, but he had been paid to do a job and keep his mouth shut. His reputation, and far more important to him, his concept of himself, the last ragged remnants of his soldier's honor, lay in his reliability. Had he kept his word, or had he broken? There was no real defense against truth-drugs except to go deeper than the drugs could reach. He had been trained and conditioned to resist under interrogation, to push himself down into that armored redoubt inside him, but that had been twenty years ago. Had the fucking blackbellies violated him even there, in the inner reaches of his self? In the end, he owned nothing, could hold on to nothing, could count on nothing, except the integrity of his mind. If they had taken that from him, mere survival, now, would be pointless.

He rose to his feet and unsteadily paced the featureless grey space, listening intently. There was no sound but the faint hiss of the air circulation system, nothing visible beyond the blank wall of the prison corridor outside the barred thermoplane barrier of his cell. He returned to the bedshelf and sank down onto it, drifting restlessly within his mind, searching for any memory of what had happened during the interrogation. Time slid by slowly.

"Hello, Plissken. Enjoying your stay?" Snake's eye snapped open to see a tall, heavysset guard in USPF uniform on the other side of the cell barrier. The door opened to admit the speaker and three other blackbellies, then clanged shut again behind them. "We thought you might like a little company before you're transferred,"

They grinned sadistically at him. "You owe us for Cleveland, *Snake*." The voice was heavy with sarcasm.

Two of the officers grabbed Snake's shoulders and upper arms, and held him while the larger man buried a fist in Snake's belly, driving the wind out of him, and followed it with an uppercut and a crashing blow to the side of his head. Slowly, methodically, the guards took turns beating him. After the first few punches and kicks, Snake sagged in their grip, making them hold his weight upright. They dropped him to the floor, and he curled as best he could to protect his most vulnerable organs. Fists, feet, elbows, nightsticks and handcuffs smashed into Snake, and he yelped, grunted, cursed and gasped, unresisting, as the blows fell. False heroics and struggles would only infuriate them into hurting him worse and gain him nothing. Finally, the attack slacked off, and the big officer grabbed Snake by his matted hair and dragged him to his feet. Blood trickled from Snake's nose and a cut on his head as the officer snarled at him, "Next time you'll be a little more cooperative when somebody asks you questions, won't you, dirtbag?"

Snake stared silently at the other man, and a slow, cold triumph welled up in him. So the interrogation under drugs had given them nothing they wanted; that was why they had beaten him. He hadn't talked, they hadn't broken him, he had survived the worst they could do to him with his mind intact. He hardly felt the bruising impact as the blackbelly released him with a shove that slammed him against the far wall and sent him sliding to the floor. The group walked out and the door of the cell closed behind them, leaving Snake alone.

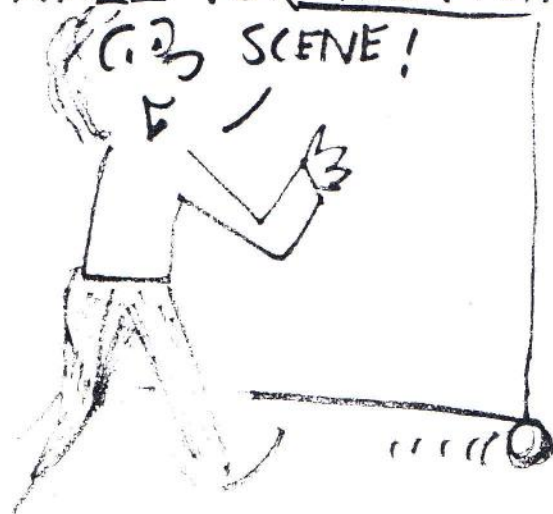
Snake slowly gathered himself together, considering. No, he hadn't talked, he knew that now, but would Frees and his men believe it? It was a common tactic for the police to leak false

information to the mob that one of their people had broken and turned snitch. With men like Frees and his bosses in Dayglo, that would be fatal. No matter where he went, in prison, New York Max, Los Angeles, they would find him and he would be maggot bait. No, he wouldn't make that rendezvous in Hollywood that Frees had set up for him now. If the USPF deported him, he'd fade into the L.A. crowd and try to disappear for good. Snake wiped the blood off his mouth with a bruised hand and smiled slowly, painfully, to himself with a new, calm inner certainty. Wherever he went, he would make it; he would survive. He was surer of himself than he had been for the last twenty years.

They held him in isolation for two weeks, while he endured the gawkers, the Police Channel camera crews, the periodic repeat visits from brutal guards, refusing to answer questions or give them anything, until the USPF squad came to transfer him to Firebase Seven for deportation to Los Angeles Island.



HERE'S THAT BREAKAWAY
WALL FOR THE FIGHT
SCENE!



VH
OHHH...

KURT?



FOR AN ACTION FILM,
EFLA HAD RELATIVELY
FEW ACCIDENTS...

DIRECTOR

Confessa 97

