

how do you like your blue-eyed boy how do you like your blue-eyed boy

BY
DEBORAH JUNE LAYMON
AND
DEBORAH KAY GOLDSTEIN



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"...and what I want to know is
how do you like your blue-eyed boy
Mister Death"¹

one

November 1, 1997

Toledo, Ohio

Snake leaned on the footboard of the bed. He needed the support. The fresh stitches in his thigh pounded like a blinding migraine. Thanks to Bob Hauk and the Max, he came out of New York with an infection, a fever, and surgery. If this "boarding house owner" hadn't known an unregistered doctor, he'd have left a trail wide enough for somebody stupider than Bob Hauk to follow, though this trail seemed wide enough.

Knew they'd be after me about that fuckin' tape, pardon or no pardon.

The safe house owner, having dropped her bombshell {*One of the local Federales caught it on the radio. Sounds like the whole U S P F's realized you're here and wants your autograph, up close and personal....*}, spun and headed for the door. Her black hair belled out around her shoulders.

"Where you going?"

That stopped her with one hand on the doorknob and one foot through the door. "What do you mean?"

He managed a step forward and left the sarcasm in his voice. They were after him, not her,

but he knew them well enough to know... "I meant, where you going?"

"I've got friends," she said.

"You got nothing."

She flinched. He got the slanted dark eyes over her shoulder.

"You think," he said, "anyone round here'll hide you?"

Her lips parted; he suspected the thought and tromped on it.

"The doctor," he said, and shrugged. "Yeah, the doctor, she'd take you in—got that sort of softness, she does. Harboring a fugitive... well, maybe if she argues she didn't know you were a fugitive..." He let that trail off too, and gave her a sort of half-smile. "'Course, I heard they treat doctors pretty well in The Max. Her being a woman; that'll keep her alive, at least."

Her color faded.

"Nobody else'll stick his neck between you and the blackbellies," *no, not even your drug-dealing boyfriend, baby, believe it*, "and I'm—grateful—to the doc. Just thought you might want to think about it a little."

¹ "how do you like your blue-eyed boy, mr death" e e cummings

Low and soft, "Fuck you, Snake Plissken," and she shoved the door open hard.

He hit her with the kicker. "I've got a car."

The door banged off the wall, the echo bouncing around them. She stopped it before it cannonaded back into her. This time she didn't turn.

"So?"

"Need a driver." He gave it a beat, and added, "You want a ticket out or want to wait for them to get you one into The Max?"

Her head turned just a little. "Just a driver?"

He looked at her back, from the black hair to the t-shirt and worn jeans, the battered practical sneakers, comparing her to the polished hooker from the second floor: the one with the cropped blonde hair, the blue eyes, the hot pink dress, and the fuck-me heels. "You're not my type."

Her shoulders went rigid. She said tonelessly, "Good. It's a deal."

He took another step and nearly fell. She was there, in that second, her shoulder under his arm propping him up and out of the door.

In the hallway, she said, "Wait," and disappeared up the stairs to the attic. She came down in five seconds flat, wearing a four-sizes-too-big denim jacket with a ratty sheepskin collar, sleeves rolled up to her wrists, lugging a soldier's khaki duffel bulging at the seams.

Each time the shock of his foot touching a step racketed up his bad leg, Snake felt his stomach heave. His eyes, good and bad, watered. He bit his tongue before they were halfway down and nearly swore. Instead, he said, "You got a name?"

"Lee," she said.

"Anything else besides that?"

"Short for Natalie."

"Anything else?"

"Marcus," she said, clipping it off short.

"Watch that step, soldier. It's cracked."

"Call me Snake," he said, just as short. Soldier, hell.

They went out the back, at his direction, and stumbled through the dark towards the garage where Fresno Bob's Chevy Aztec was still cached.

Overhead, the chatter of chopper blades sounded faint, far-away, coming closer.



No street lights helped the dark; the guttered stalks stood almost-invisible, bordering the streets. Fifteen years ago it had been a good uptown neighborhood; five years after that, not bad; five years later, downscale, and lowering all the time. Dust smelt heavy in the air, thickened by old garbage and newer droppings.

The Apaches came in blind; most if not all of the USPF pilots were Army-trained and could land on a copper penny in a hurricane. They touched down in the street, between the rubble of fire-bombed stores and battered apartment buildings, their rotors whining like hungry vultures.

Bob Hawk stepped out into the man-made whirlwind. He checked the dark around himself, the cop and the soldier's automatic scan. In the dark, he was indistinguishable from his legalized killers, not Police Commissioner Hawk, just one more black-uniformed cop.

He waited for the maelstrom to settle.

The pardon might cover the tape. The tape wasn't worth more than a couple of bucks, but the information was priceless. *The theft and destruction of the tape counts as treason—if Snake did it deliberately. The pardon was granted as of the moment he came over the wall with the President.*

Hawk bared his teeth in the choppers' dying gale. *Pretty legal question, that.* But close enough, excuse enough, for the President. Even the President couldn't rescind a pardon. *But the time question: ah, there's the loophole.* Enough to send Hawk off after the one that got away.

The men started to spread out. He whistled through his teeth, pulling them up into formation. He knew them, felt them straining at his control. They eddied around him. *No—unintentional—errors on this. None.*

"You go in," he said, spacing the words, snapping them out, "You find Plissken." He let his eyes sweep from one mask to the next. "You take him alive. Repeat, alive. Understood? Any man who kills or injures him..." He let it hang. "All right. Move out."

The house was right where the informer had said. Hawk fingered his pearl-handled revolver, remembering Plissken's boy's tough face and his old-man's gas-raspy voice. *Surprise, war hero.*

His men vibrated on the leash. His radio cut in, one quick squawk of static, and then the sergeant's faint, gluttonous whisper finished it.

"In place, sir."

He jerked his head in response, raised his arm and swung it in a circle, a silent "move in." *Toodamnquiet. Nobody around. They knew. Toodamnquiet.*

The night exploded. The men burst into the apartment building, blowing the front door in a painful shout, lobbing short-burst no-shrapnel grenades to the second and third floors to force the window bars inward with the screech of abused metal, shattering glass tinkling and crashing. Men rappelled upwards, swung inside. Lights cut open the dark. Rats scurried through the swaths of artificial day, their dismayed squeaks a undercurrent in the thunder.

Hawk went in last. *Toodamnquiet.* He went in cursing Plissken silently. *Toodamnquiet.*

"Sir." The sergeant's voice shook slightly, squeaking like a boy's.

"I know."

"Sir?"

"He's gone."

"Yes, sir."

He nodded. "Take a squad. Check outside for heat traces." He glanced around, pointed to three men. "You, you, and you—Lafferty, with me—search the house. Any traces, video and seal."

The three split up, each grabbing a partner on the way out. He and Lafferty ran the fast-scan, guessing on number of inhabitants.

Cards lay scattered on an old deal table in the center of the lobby, whiskey from an overturned glass still dripping onto the worn flowered carpet.

Pots still sat in the kitchen sink, soaking in cold soapy water now filmed with grease.

The radio crackled again. "Sir. Guzman and I think we've found Plissken's room. Second floor, at the back."

"On my way."

A spaghetti-strap dress, in neon-pink polyester, lay crumpled on the stairs. He kicked it into a corner. At the head of the stairs, a cop carrying a spotlight turned and led the way to the room.

The bed had been slept in; the blankets lay over the footboard, half on the floor. A zippered muscle shirt and a pair of camouflage fatigue

pants, both crumpled, stinking of male sweat and blood, had been tossed on top of the blankets.

"Found 'em on the chair, sir," said Guzman. His voice carried the remnants of a Dominican accent. He moved his rifle barrel forward, poked around in the wastebasket, and lifted a long strip of Ace bandage, stiff with dried blood, bits of cotton and bandage and tape still adhering. A USPF stamp marked the bandage.

Plissken's.

"Anything else?"

Guzman's head swiveled. His partner came forward. "Sakawa, sir. Nothing on this floor."

From the top of the stairs to the third floor, another voice interrupted. "Sir—Found some personal items here. Looks like one apartment, belonged to a woman."

Hawk took the stairs two at a time. *Plissken was wounded. How far could he get alone?*

Most of the drawers dangled from the chest and the bureau. The closet doors stood open, hangers and discarded clothing on the floor. Nothing like that neon-pink hooker's dress. *Hooker would be more Plissken's type.*

The wastebasket had a couple of Tampax tubes and an empty oval box. *Birth-control pills. Tampons. Not an old woman. A hostage?*

A frame, face-down on the floor, caught his attention, and he whipped out a handkerchief to pick it up by one corner. A graduation photo of a young man, about twenty, in the black dress uniform of the USPF, stared back at him. The breast ID was visible.

Hawk pulled out his reading glasses and peered at it.

Marcus.

"Lafferty. Tell the Sergeant to check computer records for a cop named Marcus."



"On your journey 'cross the wilderness
From the desert to the well—
You have strayed upon the motorway to hell—"²

"Turn that shit down, will you?"

Lee shifted her gaze to study him.

Plissken added, "And for chrissake, keep your eyes on the road."

She took one hand off the wheel of the Aztec to clicked the volume control of the Discman

² "Road to Hell" Chris Rea

down two notches. "It's almost dawn," she said. "I'm tired."

He muttered beneath his breath, and moved his injured leg for at least the twenty-eighth time in thirty minutes. "It's raining," he said, in a normal tone. "I don't want to stop in the rain."

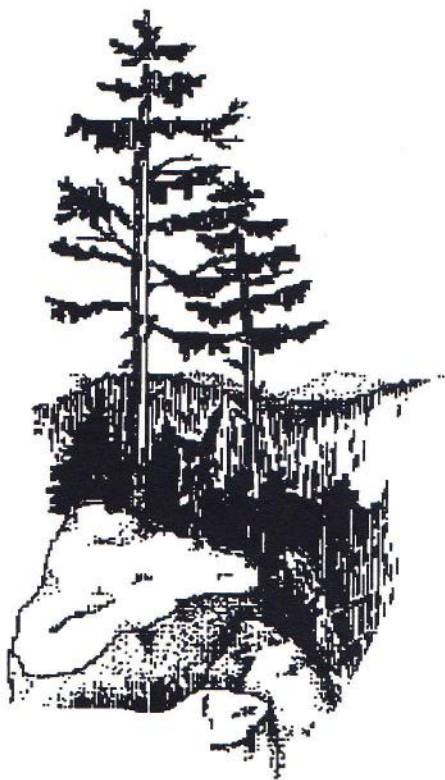
"There's no place much to stop between Cincinnati and 57," she said, flicking her glance down to the AutoMap displayed on the dash.

In the dark, the Aztec hit another stretch of torn-up asphalt. She thumped the brake too late. They bounced over chunks of concrete and tar. In the glow of the dash lights, she saw his face grey.

"Besides, this stretch of road is so bad, I'm not sure what we're going to come up on," she added.

Between his teeth, Snake said, "Got a point. Try for the next rest stop, if it isn't barricaded. Maybe there'll be some trees."

The barricade at the next rest area was no more than a couple of police saw horses. Lee shifted into Neutral, set the parking brake, and got out, stiff with the hours of sitting and holding the accelerator at as high a speed as she dared. She moved the sawhorses, got the 4WD through, then moved the barricade back, as she tried to peer through the dark. *A lot of highwaymen along this area, Beejus said.*



Bumping up over the curb, she steered the big 4WD past the concrete bathrooms into the picnic area, behind a clump of trees. Thanks to the Aztec's matte-dust finish, they were well-hidden.

"Plissken," she said, but got no answer. "Plissken." Still nothing. Flipping on the overhead light a moment, she saw that his head lolled back against the seat. *Passed out cold.*

No better than a goy yourself, Natalya Petrovna—you don't have to stay on his level. She switched off the overhead light, then pulled the inside curtains. The last was the curtain on the passenger window, and Lee hesitated, unwilling to reach across his body.

Let sleeping soldiers lie.... She took a long gulp of air, then stretched for the curtain.

His hand clamped down on her arm. She almost jerked back, then thought better of that. After the first involuntary flinch, she held still until his head came fully, woozily upright, and he glared around himself.

"What?" he said.

She motioned with her free arm. "The curtain. Wanted to turn on the lights."

The fingers let go. She pulled back. He drew the curtain.

Lee crawled over into the back and got as far away from Snake Plissken as possible. "I'll take care of that leg now."

He swung around in the seat, easing his injured leg over the gearshift. His jaw tightened, the lines creasing around his good eye and the eye patch. "It's all right."

"Doc said to change the bandage daily and put the antibiotic on it. You want to risk an infection?"

"Do it, do it. Just do it quick."

"Can't." She took another breath. "You'll have to get the jeans off."

"I know," he snapped, and fumbled for the zipper. The jeans had belonged to someone a little larger than he was; the zipper stuck twice before he got it undone. Snake stood, nearly cracking his head on the roof. "Shit," he muttered. Crouching, he worked the jeans down with shaking fingers. In the glow of the generator-fed interior lights, his face looked greyer, his lips white with pain. Sinking back on the shelf bed, he reached for his boots. The boots didn't give. He fumbled with the buckles, but couldn't reach far enough down.

"Let me," Lee said. She shoved his hands out of the way and unclipped the buckles. Pulling them off brought tight-lipped pain back to his face.

Her sewing scissors didn't lay smoothly against the skin, like Doctor Al's. The old bandages stuck to the edges of the wound.

Snake's fingers dug into the seat. She heard his teeth grit.

Lee paused to let him get his breath, and got her first look at him naked. Not that she hadn't seen men naked, but...

She understood now why Alice Edelman had stopped when she'd gotten **her** first look at Snake Plissken naked. Even a doctor used to war wounds wouldn't have expected that tattoo—or **that** tattoo carried **that** far. For the first moment in several days, she felt an urge to—giggle. Chuckle.

Snake Plissken. Right.

At last she could dump the old bandages into a bag, to be buried—*when it's light*. The edges of the cut, puffed around the stitches, were swollen but not the angry red of infected tissue.

The 4WD came equipped with a shelf bed, a pull-down shelf for a bench or another bed, and a skimpy, tightly packed kitchen. In the half-dark of the generator-powered lights, Natalie boiled water, boiled the bandages, sponged the incision, and smeared antibiotic ointment over the area. When Snake cursed at the ointment, the pressure of her fingers, and the bandages, she bit her lip and tried not to sympathize.

He couldn't stand long enough to lift the pop-up, so she did it. But he took the sleeping bags away from her to spread them out. He almost fell once. At the end, he dropped onto the shelf, breathing like an asthmatic and his legs trembling.

She warmed packets of irradiated stew in the remaining boiling water. Once she took the packets out, she made coffee.

She dropped one steaming hot packet into an insulating wrap and handed it to him. He ate neatly and quietly—somehow she'd thought he'd eat like a pig. She pulled down the bench, sat down, and tore open her stew container. *How'd I get myself into this? Why the hell did I agree in the first place? They might have accepted me as just a woman running a boarding-house. I listened to him and I panicked. That's all it was.*

He looked up from the stew. His good eye glared at her. "What are you looking at?"

"Nothing. Daydreaming."

"Shit," he said, voice dripping derisive laughter. "Daydreaming."

"Better than thinking about this," she snapped, holding out a bag for the garbage. *Bury it in the morning.*

He stuffed the polypropylene envelopes into the bag, then handed it back to her. For a moment, he stared at the curtains, at the dark around their edges, and then ran a hand through his long hair.

He unbuttoned his flannel shirt.

He said I wasn't his type. She chanted it to herself. As soon as she thought it safe, she moved to sit sideways in the driver's seat. She turned on the AutoMap. It was a little newer than the 4WD, a 1995 edition. Red and blue road lines danced in front of her eyes. Her stomach wound into knots.

From the corner of her eye, she saw him fold the flannel shirt and put it under his pillow. He struggled into the unzipped sleeping bag. Zipping it obviously came under the 'impossible' heading. He didn't ask. She didn't offer.

He'd picked the inside of the shelf. She sat in the front of the Aztec, studying the old map. Roads changed year to year, some kept up, some deteriorating, some impassable even in good areas. The map had little notes on it, in many different colors, many different phrasings.

Hidden in her duffel was her OctoganXLC laptop. With the wireless antennae set up, she could talk to the outside world, see how close the blackbellies were to them, how much Authority knew about them.

The laptop had been the biggest bribe "Sam" had to offer after the safehouse. *Not simply a bribe, of course. It also marks me. I'd have a hell of a time explaining a laptop—with a modem and an Internet address, yet—to a cop. Much less to this one, if he found out I had it.*

She left the computer safely put away.

Plissken's even breathing suggested he might be asleep.

Might.

She flipped off the auxiliary generator. The early November chill poked slender fingers through the vents. Standing there in the pop-up, chewing her lower lip, she unzipped her jeans and stepped out of them. She laid them over the edge of the sink, near the shelf, and sat down on the very edge of the bed. Still movement by movement, she eased her bare legs into the sleeping bag, and then rolled on her side, away from him. With the bag up over her shoulders, she fumbled for her shirt buttons, and stripped the shirt off over her head. By reaching out, she got it on top of the jeans—and nearly rolled off the bed.

"Lie still, will you?" grumbled Snake.

"Give me a minute," she snapped.

He muttered something else, and the shelf creaked as he snuggled deeper into the bag.

After a bit, she relaxed, and thought, with sudden relief, that for once she wouldn't have to worry about Arkady—about Sam—coming back to the safe house and demanding—his perks. In fact, he'd come back to the safe house and he wouldn't find her at all. Her stomach unknotted. She smiled to herself in the dark. *Sam won't like that at all.*

In her sleep, she heard familiar words, a familiar language—

"Kudah? Atkudah? Kak dalyeko?"

Lee raised her head from the pillow, remembering the scent of her father's work shirts, remembering Moishe's aftershave—a *little bit of a dandy*—and blinked, not sure of where or when she was. *"Shtoh? Kotoryi chas?"*

A hand on her throat choked her; the weight of a body pressed her against the shelf, smothering her. The sun had risen. Light filtered through the chinks at the edges of the opaquing curtains. Near her face the glimmer reflected off a steel blade.

Plissken. Plissken choked her? Plissken held a knife—was cursing her in Russian and English?

"Ktoh vi?" he said, and said it again, 'who are you', his fingers winding into her hair, ringing her face up near his. His good eye glared with hate, with the dazed loss of reality she'd seen in the camps—*"Lying bitch... We trusted you, I trusted you, and you... I'll see you burn in hell for this..."*

Gas. He's had gas poisoning.

"Shtoh vi khatyitih? Pahzhawstah, Snake, mayoh imyah Lee. Natalie Marcus. Yah

Amerikanski!" She fell back into English. "I'm Lee, Plissken, you're dreaming, it's not real, will you listen to me, you're dreaming, *vi punimaitih minyah?"* God, please let him understand me..."

The maniac light faded from his eyes; he pulled back, and caught his breath in a high-pitched wordless bark of pain. He shook his head, and blinked. "Sonya?"

"Lee," she said, trying to sound more confident. "I'm Lee, Plissken. Natalie Marcus," *in English, speak in English*, "Remember? Do you understand me? You're having a nightmare, a nightmare, damn it, listen to me!"

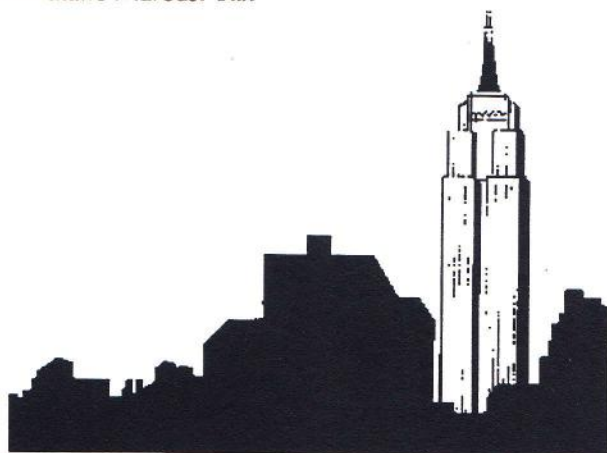
The next second, he rolled off her, then sat up, on the edge of the shelf. He rubbed his eyes, before he twisted, sliding the knife back under his pillow. She heard a click of knife in sheath and knew the danger gone for the moment. He sat upright again, burying his head in his hands, sucking in great gulps of air.

Her skin stank of musty sweaty fear. She pulled her legs out of the bag, and reached for her shirt. Her hands shook as she mishandled the buttons. She got to her feet; her knees wobbled, but she stiffened them and stayed upright.

"What're you doing?" He didn't sound as hard as usual.

"Daylight," she said. "Might as well make some coffee."

Maybe he'll think it was all a dream. Maybe he won't believe I spoke Russian. Maybe there's a man in the moon.



two

me and you
 God only knows
 it's not what we would choose
 down and out
 it can't be helped
 but there's a lot of it about
 with—without
 who can deny
 it's what the fighting's all about³

The USPF controlled the East. In the Midwest, only the largest cities had direct offices for the United States Police Force; it was assumed that the local guard had been subsumed or swallowed by the USPF. The local cop shops pretended to welcome the Federales, the price of all the new technology, the better weapons. The Toledo Commissioner never met Hauk's eyes; he muttered all the right cooperative phrases, gave up his Command Center to the black-uniformed officers, sent in food and coffee and cigarettes—and avoided them like Gas.

Hauk stubbed out another cigarette. A familiar voice alerted him. He took his feet off the desk as Jase Rehme came through the door. They gave each other the brief nod of non-hostile colleagues.

Dogs in the same pack.

Hauk put his feet back up and lit another cigarette. The smoke from the ten-per-cent tobacco stung his eyes and caught the back of his throat with a raw flick like a whip.

"Weather bad across Pennsylvania?"

"Local thunderstorms," Rehme said. He glanced around, moved a pile of papers, and sat down on the tabletop next to the terminal. "Couldn't get permission to clear Canadian

airspace and cut across Lake Erie." He sneezed. "Feels like rain."

Hauk nodded. He drew the pack of cigarettes out of his breast pocket and offered.

Rehme pulled one out of the pack, took the lighter, and wiggled a hand in "thanks".

The Macintosh brayed like a donkey. Clint Eastwood's voice came on with "Go ahead, make my day." On the screen, the bitmap of a little postman appeared, carrying an E-mail envelope.

Bob Hauk glared at the screen, and rubbed his fingers across his forehead. "Damn cutesey hookups." *Who was it used to sing about "spending a week in Toledo one day"? Denver. He was right. This better not be Mr. President again or I'll—*

He clicked on the envelope. It opened up, filling the screen, and a small digitized face popped up in the upper left corner of the message: a blonde woman, her hair pulled severely back into a French twist, her chevrons exactly two and a quarter inches above her left breastpocket. *Message from—Central Communications: Lieutenant Amanda Kenney, Systems and Research.* He put his reading glasses on again.

 Central Communications, Boston
 Greater New England Sector
 November 2, 1997

To: Police Commissioner Robert Hauk
 Re: Photo Evidence Exhibit 112-9090-A711T0L0HI

Identified.. Paul Joseph Marcus, ID #9357-744-9910
 Age: 35.
 Occupation: Sergeant, USPF, assigned SouthEast Sector, Greater

³ "Me And You" Pink Floyd

Carolina.
 Term in Service: 9 years.
 Previous Employer: United States Armed Forces
 Demolitions, 3rd Squadron, 7th Cavalry
 Term in Service: 3 years-Honorably Discharged.

No Criminal Record.
 Security Clearance Level: Four.

Parents killed during Albany riot, 1992.

Marcus identified
 address in Toledo Apartment building belonging to his cousin. Cousin
 daughter of father's brother.

Cousin: Female, age 32. Natalie Leah Marcus, formerly Natalya
 Leah Petrovna Markov.
 Parents Shul and Galina Markov. Russian emigrants.
 Natalie Leah Marcus attended college Chicago, Illinois
 1984-1990. MA Secondary Education, Computer Science
 major, Languages and Mathematics minors. Married Moishe
 Gorodetzky 1990. Markovs and Gorodetzky's interned in
 Bangor, Maine Isolation Camp 1991-1993. Parents deceased
 in camp December, 1992. Natalie Marcus listed in records
 as escaped, January, 1993. Husband shot during escape,
 deceased. Pardoned by Senate Act #1811436.

No criminal record.

Physical description: 5'5". 110 lbs. Black hair. Brown eyes. Internment number
 upper right arm: NMG7982F. Mongolian cast to face. Half-
 moon scar below left eye. Surgical scar, abdomen,
 appendix removal: "bikini incision".

No further information available at this time.

Further information on Paul Marcus follows.

"Shit," Hauk said softly.

He'd stopped believing in innocence during
 the war; stopped believing in justice when he lost
 his son and his wife. *She's not Plissken's type. Not
 Plissken's style, either.* But Plissken had been
 injured during his little mission into Manhattan,
 and if the wound had been re-infected...

If he'd been warned that his bolthole had
 been sprung...

*Natalie Marcus. No criminal record. Would
 she go with him? Offer to go with him? Think she
 might be in danger because she was Russian?*

"Hell," he said aloud to Rehme, "Plissken
 wouldn't **take** her if he knew she were Russian."

"He's used the tubes before," Rehme said.
 "Maybe he did again."

"Where'd he get the cash? As far as the
 scanners could tell, he didn't have any stash, or
 any stolen chitcards, on him. If he could get
 cash—" Hauk frowned and lit another cigarette,
 sucking in on the smoke while he thought. "We
 still got a line on that CIA account he's supposed
 to have access to?"

"I'll check," the younger man said, and started
 out the door. He paused, though, with one hand
 on the door frame.

"Well?"

Rehme turned his head back. "Would he take
 the woman as a hostage?"

"Maybe." Hauk grimaced.

"Might kill her then, if we got too close."
 Jase's voice said he knew it didn't really matter.

In the now-silent room, with the words and Lieutenant Kenney's picture still on screen, Hauk said, "Shit," again, just for the sound of a human voice. He zoomed on the upper left corner of the colored screen, and stared at Amanda Kenney's attractive face, to counteract the ugly thoughts running through his head.

He had plans for Plissken, once he found him. Nobody beat Bob Hauk, especially not a loser like Plissken. *Only losers get caught.*

He paged down the screen information again. *A hostage?*

The radio beeped. He took his heels off the desk so he could lean over and pick it up. "Hauk."

"Lafferty, sir. No heat traces. No signs of Plissken or the woman. Located a resident who admits to performing first aid on a man answering Plissken's description two days ago. Says the leg was infected—he was in no shape to travel."

An unregistered doctor. Sounds more like him. "Right. Plissken may be using the woman as a hostage. Possibly a car, with her as driver. Do **not** force him to use her against us. She is **not** to be harmed. Get descriptions from Rehme and distribute them to all available personnel. Clear?"

"Do the instructions about Plissken stand?"

"Everything stands unless I revoke it **personally**, Lafferty."

"Yes, sir."

Hauk put the radio down and rubbed his eyes again. "Damn you, Plissken."

●

*everybody's playing the game
but nobody's rules are the same
nobody's on nobody's side
never take a stranger's advice
never let a friend fool you twice⁴*

"Where'd you learn to speak Russian?"

He'd been silent all the way to Highway 57, silent through breakfast, through the bumps and the detours and the transition from older, ill-kept road to the smooth false newness of 57 North.

Her heart hit the back of her throat, and then the back of her eyes; she went blind and deaf a second, with the cool of the air conditioner like icy Maine blizzards on her bare forearms, and the buzz of it whining in her ears like rifle bullets.

The steering wheel bucked in her hands. The Aztec slewed sideways, skidding across the empty

road. She stomped on the brake but missed the clutch.

It lurched and died, choked in the grass at the side of the road but still in gear.

"Jesus to hell and gone!" Lee clutched the hair at her temples, then banged a fist against the wheel. "Are you trying to give me a heart attack? What the hell do you care if I speak Russian?"

"*Yah Amerikanski*," he said. "I may have bad dreams, but I know when I'm awake. Are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Don't *fuck* with me!"

"Stop shouting at me! *Yah Amerikanski, dah, vi pravi — ktoh vi?*"

His hand slid downwards, as he were reaching for something.

She yanked her right sleeve up. It was a short-sleeved t-shirt, but long enough to cover the tattoo. **NMG7982F.**

Plissken looked at the number. He looked at it for a long while, and whatever he thought didn't show on his face. "I thought it was all disinformation," he said.

"What?"

"The Russians. Said there were camps, in America. Land of the free. Home of the crazed—" He started to laugh: a long, hacking, edgy laugh.

"Stop it!"

After a moment, he said, "*Ktoh vi?*" again.

"Natalie Marcus. I was born Natalya Markov."

"You don't look Russian. Don't sound it, either."

"Mongolian in my background. My parents were emigrants, just before the **pogrom**."

He looked at her a moment, the good eye narrowed and his lips folded together. After a moment, he fumbled for a cigarette and shoved the cigarette lighter in.

Lee flinched.

The blue eye opened wide, the pupil almost absorbing the iris, and then he said, "I just want to light the fucking cigarette. Take it **easy**, *jesus*," and lit the rank ten-percenter before ramming the lighter back into its niche.

"Pogrom," he said. "Your folks Jewish?"

She nodded. "Didn't make any difference. Russian's Russian."

He held out the pack of Winstons.

She shook her head.

After he tucked them back into the breast pocket of the blue-checked shirt, he took another long drag off the smoke. "How long were you in?"

⁴ "Nobody's On Nobody's Side", from **Chess**

"Two years." The air-conditioning smelt like snow, too. She punched in a lower setting. "Two years after I got out of college." *Two years after I got married....*

"College?" he said. "I didn't think your people went to college."

"Orthodox does not mean isolation. It means a different way of life." She clasped her hands in her lap; her fingers trembled. "I graduated from Illinois State with a masters' in teaching. You learn to speak Russian in Army Intelligence?"

He turned his head slowly. This time she saw the imprint of his teeth on the cigarette when he took it out. "Learned it in college."

She looked at the motorcycle boots and the eye patch.

He grimaced horribly. "Yeah, sure, I was a real hotshot college asshole. Didn't even have to fucking **draft** me."

Paul changed his name and passed all the security tests, right down through the psychoanalysis. Didn't help Mata and Atyetsi any.

"How'd you get out?" he said.

"Cut the wire, crawled under in the middle of a blizzard."

"Your folks make it?"

"They died a month earlier. Pneumonia. They stopped giving us medicine when winter set in and they couldn't get supplies up into the camp."

He rolled down the window and tossed the butt out. After a moment, he rolled the window up and lit another cigarette. "Got to stop in St. Louis."

"Why?"

"You always ask so many questions?"

"Only way to survive."

A long pause, while he stared out of the window. He blew the smoke out in a long thin blue stream. "Good point. Got to have some cash—car'll be dry soon."

She glanced at the needle, hovering near the quarter-mark.

"Gonna sit here all day?" he said.

Natalie smoothed her shirt sleeve down, put in the clutch, and turned the key in the ignition. The 4WD coughed, then caught.

"Why don't you turn your player on?" he said.

She looked over at him a second. *Why's he being nice?* After reflection, she decided she really didn't care. "Thanks."

*You can shatter glass with your heart of stone,
But you won't get far on your own—
You've been running hot and blowing cold...
And everything you hold
Just falls apart like shattered glass—⁵*

Snake suggested they stop for dinner in St. Louis, having crossed the Mississippi River and put one more obstacle between themselves and Bob Hauk. At the diner, Snake showed her how to set the car alarm and the ignition cut-off. *Lee. No point in calling her 'her'.* He made a point of the teaching to cover the fact that he did it in order to make sure he had the car keys.

Got no intention of being stranded here.

The waitress motioned towards the back, where the fluorescents flickered and left the tables only dimly lit.

He tried not to limp.

The menu was written in chalk on the board above the grill:



Hamburger	\$6.35
Cheeseburger	\$7.50
Fries	\$4.00
Horn and Eggs	\$9.00
N. Credit - Don't Ask	

He stopped reading and rubbed his good eye. When he glanced up, he saw that the woman—that Lee was easing some credit chips out of her pocket.

He shook his head at her.

"I have money," she said, very stiff, sounding very Russian all at once.

He bared his teeth at her and said, "I can buy your dinner if you can bandage my leg."

Lee sat there. A faint pink flush lightened her face. Then, the corners of her mouth just lifted, the first near-smile he'd gotten out of her. "Fine. If I can bandage your leg, you can buy me dinner."

It sounded—different—that way. He cocked his head at her, but had no time to speak because the waitress had come back.

⁵ "Shattered Glass" Laura Branigan

He paid up front: thirty-five dollars, including a large tip.

She brought the food, slapped the plates down in front of them, and said, in a low monotone, "Blackbellies check this strip pretty frequently. I wouldn't go back through Kansas City. Locals will leave you alone."

Snake nodded, said, "thanks", and handed over another twenty chip. "Going to need some supplies. Liquids."

She took the chip, slipped it in her pocket, and nodded. She pulled out her pad, said in the same toneless voice, "More coffee," scribbled something on the pad, and slapped it down on the table. Then she went away.

It was an address. Not the same one she'd given him last time he was through St. Louis, but he knew her well enough—even if he'd never heard her name—to know it would be straight.

Lee continued to eat, and drank the coffee as if it didn't taste like it had been brewed from battery acid. After a moment, she said, "Not Kansas City?"

He had a brief flash, like under Gas, of the Federal Reserve in Denver with its rabbit warren halls, of Kansas City, of Fresno Bob's contorted face, of blackbelly masks and a black-gloved hand holding a black-hilted knife..."Not Kansas City."

Her almond-shaped eyes flicked up as the waitress poured them more coffee. When the other woman moved out of earshot, Lee said, "Where then?"

She's driving. She has to have a route. Snake grimaced. He brought up a mental picture of the AutoMap, looking down at the countryside in 3D bas-relief. *Stay away from valleys—shouldn't be in St. Louis, then... Stay away from too much rain—though you have to head for the mountains to get to the Coast...* "Going to the West Coast. Have to avoid Kansas City." And Denver.

She nodded. Her eyes went blank, and he recalled that she had spent a couple of hours with the AutoMap the other night—*avoiding me, as if I'd have... well, maybe I would have, in Russia, maybe I would have, before the Max...*

Natalie Marcus frowned. "Southwest," she said. "Tulsa to Oklahoma City. The road through there is still interstate, and there's some military bases in through there, so they keep up the roads."

"There's a big USPF facility in Fort Smith," he said, to see her reaction.

"I know." She finished the third cup of coffee and grimaced. "What do you think?"

He rubbed his good eye again. "Roads out here aren't good. You're right about the interstate. I don't want to dump the car to take the tubes, and we'd have to do that." He ran the possible routes through his mind. "Hell, no one would believe we'd go right through the middle of them." *Except for Hauk. Hauk would think I'd do it because it was crazy.* "Down through Albuquerque."

Her dark eyes widened. "It's pretty empty down there. I thought we'd swing back up..."

"Indians keep the area free of bandits."

"Like you?" Lee shot back.

Plissken blinked, then grinned. *So she does have a tongue.* "Like me, yeah. Only I'm with you, so that makes me not a bandit, doesn't it?"

Both of her eyebrows went up, and her mouth quirked for the second time. "Funny," she said, "you don't look Jewish."

Plissken almost started to answer, then noticed the way the waitress stood, her head rigidly facing the door. "C'mon. Let's go. I think we're about to get a visit from the heat." He hadn't limped in KC. That might throw them off a few minutes. As they passed by the waitress, she glanced at him. He gave her a real smile.

Her lips twitched, and then she smiled back. "Next time you come through," she said, barely above a whisper.

"Don't forget me, baby," he said, and kept on walking.

The black armored 4WD pulled into the parking lot as Lee got the ignition and the alarm switch off. Snake twisted, nearly impaled himself on the gearshift, and fell over into the back, shielded by the seats. He swore. "Go on, move out slow."

The Aztec rolled forward, made a lazy turn, not too wide, not too sharp, and rolled past the 4WD, passenger side to driver side, not too close and not too far, from his vantage point.

He climbed back up into the seat when they were down the street, and dug the waitress' note out of his pocket. "Left at the first light," he said.

Lee's eyes flicked from the road to the side view mirror to the rear view mirror. "Okay."

"They following us?"

Her eyes did the flick-flick-flick again. "Don't see anyone."

He watched the road. "Right at the third street."

"Fine." She made the turn. "Snake." She said it as if she were swallowing his name.

"What?"

"What happened in Kansas City?"

"What the hell business is it of yours?"

"I'm driving."

His leg twitched under the stitches. He rubbed his good eye again. "You saying you won't be?"

"We have a deal. Nothing changes that. But I need to know how badly they want you."

"Why?"

Her knuckles whitened a little, and she started to talk like a teacher, one precise word at a time. "So I'll know whether they're going to shoot first or say halt."

"Blackbellies always shoot first."

She slammed a hand against the wheel again and the Aztec sashayed back and forth across the street. A car hooted at them and climbed the curb to get away.

"Take it easy."

"It's my life too. I have a right to know why I'm going to get shot!"

"Robbed the Federal Reserve in Denver," he said, staring out the window. "Another right, two streets up."

"Okay."

"They shot my partner, in Kansas City." He stopped, thinking of a time before *that*, thinking of Harold and his fast talk and his disappearing act. *Didn't save you from the Max, thought, did it, Harold? Brain. Huh. You went in there before I did. You were in there a lot longer than I was. You died in there, too, asshole, and I'm still here.* "The one that didn't run out on me. And they skinned him. He was still alive."

Lee made the turn mechanically, and her fingers were shaking.

"Get 'em to shoot you first," he said. "Make it good. Don't let 'em take you alive."

"They took you alive."

"They wanted to dump me in New York." He said nothing for a second, thinking about the bus trip into the entrance facility and the taunts he endured because he wouldn't let them win a reaction. "Wanted to let my own kind kill me, I guess—or maybe they wanted me to beg for it."

"You wouldn't," she said.

He looked over at her, her thin face sharper in the afternoon light. "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"You're welcome," she said. "That's why they're chasing you? You escaped?"

He mulled it over, wondering what to say, how much to say, why he should say anything..."I got a pardon for all that. I did them a favor..."
God, I would have loved to see his wormy little

face when Cabbie's tape started playing. 'Grateful to all of them', huh? 'Did the nation a service', huh? Shit.

"You did **them** a favor?"

Hauk's voice bounced off the inside of his head. *'We'd make a great team, Plissken.'* Like hell we would. "In a way. I got to the Processing Center, and they hauled me into the Police Commissioner's office. Bob Hauk."

"I know the name," she said.

He nodded. "Some brain-burned terrorist had sent Air Force One down into New York Maximum Security Penitentiary. Hauk wanted me to go in and get the President out."

She looked at him.

"Don't believe me?"

The 4WD jounced over a pothole, and she jerked her attention back to the road. "It's too crazy not to be true."

"You got a weird kind of logic, lady."

"I was a computer nerd," she said. "What do you expect?"

"Make a left at the end of the road. We're almost there."

"I wish I knew where 'there' was," she muttered. "Go on. You went in to get the President out. Why?"

"The pardon," he said.

She nodded. "You got that leg in the Max?"

"Yeah." He took a deep breath, and then he told her at least half of the rest of the story.

Her teeth clenched. She stared straight at the road ahead, making the turns when he told her, slowing down for lights even when no one else was around.

He trailed off after telling her about the tape, trailed off and sat silent, thinking about the stench of the Hudson River.

Lee shook her head. "You're just as crazy as I heard you were."

He cocked his head at her, distrusting the sound of the words.

"It's a compliment," she said.

"Not going to fade off into the night?"

"If I had any sense, I would," was the tight-lipped answer. "I never expected to end up a moving target."

"So why don't you?"

"We have a deal. Besides, what would I do in St. Louis?"

"There's always the Strip," he suggested.

The 4WD slewed to a halt, as she stood on the brakes, and she shoved it hard enough into 'park' to make the gears grind.

"What the hell..." he got the words half-out and she turned on him.

"I've fucked about as many people as you have," she said, in that deliberate precise word-by-word voice. "But they didn't pay me for it."

"Touchy, aren't we?"

In Russian, she said to him, "And how many babies did you kill, soldier?"

He found himself half on his feet, snarling, and then caught himself. It was an old insult. It didn't have any teeth. But...

"We're even," he said. He managed to keep his voice level. "Okay. We have a deal. That's why you're here. It's the brown brick on the corner. Pull in the driveway and around to the back, and do it very slowly. Don't say anything, don't get out of the car, just sit there."

Lee followed his instructions to the letter. A lot of the angry color faded, and she looked dull and practical again. He kept a wary half-eye on her, not sure what other reactions might lurk around inside her head.

The Aztec made the curve into the driveway, and stopped. Lee left her hands on the wheel.

Good. Snake lit another cigarette, and blew out a stream of blue-edged smoke. Under the fillers, he could just taste the small amount of real tobacco allowed by law. He waited.



He'd gotten used to waiting.

The back screen door creaked. Only the screen; the inner door had been open.

No air-conditioning? Snake cast another glance around the yard, identifying the flipping of fan blades. Fans. Getting into the backwoods now, where it wouldn't be safe to suggest you might have more than a greedy neighbor.

A man stepped out of the house. He put his broad flat feet firmly on the ground; from the looks of him, he had to be careful.

He was an immense man: a grotesquely, quivering obese man, who looked them over like some Chinese Buddha let loose on American soil. His head and eyes were as immense as his body, his bald skull gleaming in the sun, faintly

sheened with sweat in spite of the seventy-degree temperature. The sweet scent of "Prairie" hashish clung to his clothing—and his clothing was impeccable, a spotless white shirt and spotless white trousers curving around his huge belly like an outer skin over the tan.

His enormous blue eyes narrowed and he moved slowly around the Aztec, checking it out. Checking them out.

Snake took another drag off the cigarette.

The man's broad nostrils wrinkled. "Could get you better smokes than that, son. Brand's no good—all paper and shredded seaweed."

"I can agree with you," Snake said, adopting a semi-drawl that fit the man's pattern.

"Here, take one and try it out." The fat man offered one cigarette from the pack in his breast pocket. Snake accepted and lit it. This one had to be at least a quarter real stuff. He dragged in deeply on it, savoring the burning tobacco.

With a nod, but not turning his head, the fat man called to someone inside the house. "Marie! Marie, bring me a pack of those rolls, huh?"

Plissken laid a bet on whether the woman would match the man or be his exact opposite. When "Marie" appeared, he thought he'd lost his bet—and then realized he'd won.

A woman taller than Lee and not as tall as himself shuffled out of the house. Lank mud-colored hair hung down over her eyes. Her down-at-the-heel moccasins matched the dry dust of the back yard, two shades lighter than the mousy grey dress. She vanished so utterly into the landscape Plissken almost thought she was imaginary.

Underneath the stringy brownish hair, she glanced up at the car. Snake did not jump; he didn't even flinch. He stubbed out the fresh cigarette. "Yeah, that's better, all right. Have a couple of packs I could—" he let the right amount of time linger, "borrow?"

The woman's very pale eyes hadn't missed a thing, not about him or about Natalie, or about the truck.

"Sure, sure, no problem." The man accepted a credit chip, looked over the thin gold plating that made it worth twenty dollars, and handed back four packs of cigarettes.

"And maybe you could tell me how to find this place; seems we took a wrong turn back a ways." Snake proffered the waitress' "bill".

The fat man took the slip of pink paper delicately between thumb and forefinger. He drew a set of granny glasses from his pocket, balanced

them on his nose, and peered at the paper for several minutes.

"Fine, fine. I can tell you how to get there. No problem at all. Like to pull your truck into the garage and set a spell? Marie, get us some iced tea, would you? And tell Bobby he might could come and go over the map for this gentleman."

Inside the garage, some light seeped through chinks in the board walls and cracks in the shades covering the windows. A pimply youth with a receding chin followed them into the garage. He picked up a common garden hose, attached to a spigot, and started to feed it into the Aztec's tanks.

Snake put thumb and forefinger on the hose, pinching it off. "If you don't mind," he said, and tapped the other hand against the hose end. His fingers stunk of gasoline. He looked at the fat man.

The fat man grinned. "Turn on the hose, Bobby boy."

Bobby flushed. He stooped over, keeping to one side, his eyes trying to watch both the fat man and Plissken at the same time.

He thumbed over the spigot, and drops of clear liquid, gleaming with an oily sheen, leaked out between Snake's fingers. The pungent odor of real gasoline, apparently not cut as much with moonshine as usual, spread through the building.

Lee climbed out of the 4WD, wrinkling her nose at the stench. She hefted her duffle, and slung it over her shoulder. From the corner of his eye, Snake noted that the duffle caught on her pocket and she had to swing it free.

He jerked his attention back to the boy filling the dual tanks. With the dual tanks full, they could go nearly a thousand miles.

When gas started spilling over the edges of the tank, Bobby shut off the faucet. He said, "Fifty," to the older man, and got a genial nod in response.

"Hunnerd and fifty dollars," the fat man said.

Snake thought about the cards still hidden in his boot. Might be necessary to stop here and get cash—not wait until they got to the tube station at Oklahoma City. He counted out enough twenty-credit chips to make one hundred-sixty, and said, "Keep the change."

Still with the oily smile, the fat man said, "Maybe if you gave me the rest of that, I'd forget Snake Plissken was on his way to Kansas City. Hear the blackbellies're mighty interested in you, Mr. Plissken."

His hand closed of its own accord; Snake took a deep breath, his vision blurring with red. His

muscles tightened, and the thigh wound stabbed him with new pain.

The duffle moved again.

Lee, in that reasonable, word-by-word voice, said, "Maybe if you were dead, nobody would bother to worry about Snake." A second's pause, and she said, "Don't even think about it, Bobby—I can move my finger twice before you finish taking that step."

The boy backed into the wall.

Snake let out the breath he'd been holding. He might have handed over the money. *She's right. He'd tell anyway. He will tell unless we kill him.* "You want to shoot them?" He said it casually, and saw the pimply boy wet his pants.

The fat man's eyes shut to a point where he seemed unable to see.

"You've got it all wrong," he whined. Just enough of a tremor shook his voice to make it clear he believed he was about to die. "Man's got to make a living, Mr. Plissken..."

Snake said, "Give me the gun, Lee."

No hesitation. He had it in the next second.

"Go on, get in and back it up."

She climbed into the Aztec, swung the duffle back hard enough to knock over the beige woman before a grasping hand could reach her leg. Natalie had the car in gear in the next second and rolled it back beside him. He got up by using the good leg, swinging the bad one in while the 4WD continued out of the garage.

He saw the fat man's slitted vengeful eyes all the way back out onto the road. "Move," he said to her, and leaned over to tuck the automatic back into her duffle. "Don't stop unless you absolutely have to. Go north till—"

"They can't see us and then go west."

"Why west?"

"South is too obvious. There are some back roads that lead into Tulsa. Can we wait that long?"

"The gas was okay. But we need money."

She nodded.

"Where'd the gun come from?"

"Meet a lot of people running a boarding house." She shifted up and made the turn west. "You complaining?"

"I'm crazy," said Snake. "Not that crazy." He lit one of the better cigarettes and leaned back in his seat. "You did good in there."

Natalie Marcus looked at him a moment, then turned her attention back to the road. He saw that half-smile relax her mouth. "Thanks. You're not so bad yourself."



three

take me only for what i am
you've got a right to speak your mind
got to take a stand—
no one has the right to say
this is right or that is wrong
it isn't just one way...⁶

Hauk heard the ping from the communication console and was on his feet before the screen lit up. He stumbled across the room, in the dark, and stubbed his toe on a misplaced chair. From the other corner of the room, where Rehme slept, sounds of someone trying to find their feet in a unfamiliar room echoed.

"Hauk." He left his video off; he knew what he looked like at—3:30 in the a.m.—and he didn't need the rest of the USPF to be as familiar.

Amanda Kenney came on screen.

"Commissioner," she said, in her precise Boston Irish accent. "Patrol spotted Plissken in St. Louis."
"St. Louis!"

Behind him, Rehme said, "Shit. He wouldn't be stupid enough to go back to K.C., would he?"

"Might think we'd forgotten. Give me the specs, Lieutenant."

"Patrol stopped for dinner at a local hangout on the Interstate. One of the rookies saw an unfamiliar Aztec leaving. The waitress inside seemed a little nervous, more than usual... He called it in to check, just on the off-chance. Was registered at one time to a Bob Czuba, a.k.a. 'Fresno Bob'—"

"Plissken's partner in the K.C. robbery."

"Yes, sir."

"They question the waitress?"

There was a pause. For the first time, Kenney did not seem so calm. After the pause, she said,
"Yes, sir."

"Get anything out of her?"

"Admitted she'd seen Plissken. Not a coherent statement, sir. I have the tape, if you want video."

"Send it through."

A minute into the tape, Rehme turned away and lit a cigarette. He stood there with his back to the screen, incongruous in his shorts and t-shirt.

Two minutes into the tape, Hauk straightened and lit his own cigarette. Ten minutes later, he said, "Shut it off, Kenney."

"Sir."

"Have the patrol disciplined. Unnecessary force."

"Yes, sir."

"I know. It won't do any good. Do it anyway."

"Yes, sir."

Hauk swung back to the screen, forgetting for a second that the Lieutenant couldn't see him.

"Kenney!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Send it out as a priority. Put flashes and bells on it, whatever you have to do to make it stick. Warn all the patrols. There is a woman travelling with Plissken. Neither one of them is to be harmed. The woman is most likely a hostage—"

"The Marcus woman, Mr. Hauk?"

"Good, Kenney. Yes, her. I want it clearly understood that the woman is not to be touched. If so much as a strand of hair is disarranged, the man or men who do it will answer to me. Personally. Got it?"

"Got it." No sir this time, but definite approval.

"Get us in the air in twenty minutes, Kenney—I want to take a look around St. Louis myself."

"Twenty minutes. I'll buzz you."



Relax, don't do it—
When you gonna go to it...
Scheme those schemes,
Dream those dreams,
Hit me with those laser beams....

⁶ "Oye Mi Canto" Gloria Estefan

Relax...?

"We'll have to stop," Plissken said. "I didn't have that much on me when we got the gas. I haven't got enough now."

"I have some," she said.

He glanced over at her, and then almost smiled. "Hang on to it, we may need it. There's a branch. Stop there, but—"

"Leave the car running. I'm not stupid, Plissken."

"Snake," he said, and after a second, she said, grudgingly, "Snake."

She parked, and set the emergency brake. He swung as far around in the seat as he could and pressed down on the wound as a counter-irritant to the pain.

"Pull my boot off," he said.

Lee looked at him.

"I'd do it myself," he said, annoyed, "but I have this problem..."

"Oh," and that faint color came up in her face. "Right." She climbed over the seat, trying to avoid his leg, and knelt down. The buckles gave her some trouble—they had last night, too—and she finally pulled the boot free.

Plissken turned the heel and shook the shielded packaging out of the little space. He fixed the heel back in place and said, "Put it back on."

"Try please."

He grimaced. "Please."

"Thank you. It's a pleasure."

He swallowed his retort, and waited until she got the boot buckled. Then he swung his leg back over and got the car door open. He put as much of his weight as he could on the good leg. With the door still open, he said, "Don't talk to strangers," and then shut it.

She had a bad habit of trying to get the last word.

By the time he made it to the top of the platform, he knew just how weak he was. The door answered to the magnetic strip on the first card, and he stepped through it. It slid shut after him, raising puffs of dust in the stale air.

He inserted the first card. He had the numbers in his head—it wasn't safe to have them anywhere else—and he punched in the first set.

Linda's name came up on the screen, and the machine's rote female-patterned voice said, "Good morning. How may I help you, Linda?"

Even the machines get personal, these days.

He keyed in the request.

In the same even soprano, the machine said, "You have three hundred dollars available in your account at the moment. Your thirty thousand dollar deposit was made November 1, 1997, and is not yet available for withdrawal."

"Damn." He rekeyed in the request for the three hundred.

He got sixteen tens and seven twenties. The chips clanked together as he dropped them into his shirt pocket.

"Do you wish another transaction?"

No, of course not. That card slid back out and he put it in the other pocket. Mark Paretsky's card gave him trouble. It had the most money available at any time—but sooner or later, Paretsky would kick off in that fancy asylum, and the card might just freeze up the machine.

They had to make it to Los Angeles.

He put Paretsky's card in the slot, keyed in 9-4-5-1-1-7-0, and waited.

Paretsky's card let him have the full daily withdrawal, one thousand.

Last card. He'd have to risk it.

He held the silver card with its hologrammed eagle in his hand a second, because its price had been highest. It fed into a leftover secret petty cash account, one of the Irangate accounts still kicking around after Oliver North's headlined sacrificial run into Libya and Qaddafi's death in that mini-nuke explosion that put North into the legends.

He'd bought the card and bought the account from the nerd who wanted far out of the remnants of the CIA.

The nerd hadn't even lived to tell about the account's existence. Not when the President—or whoever was acting as Commander in Chief at the time—decided the rest of the listed CIA personnel needed to be purged.

The special screen came up.

He fed in the code words—*pacify * pesticide * pity*—waited, and keyed in the twelve-digit-code, waited while the machine whirled.

>Login due to expire 12-1-97.

Please change login code now.

He took a minute or two to come up with a new code, while the machine blinked patient green buttons at him.

>New login code accepted. Please proceed.

The machine gave him the limit, \$1000.

He noticed, all at once, that the machine seemed to be running slower and slower.

⁷ "Relax" Frankie Goes To Hollywood

It hesitated on the logout.

He frowned and pressed the exit key again.

>Waiting for access to SkyNet.

His back itched. *Running way too slowly.*

Nobody knew about the account.

What if they do? A worm, maybe, running through the system to check access?

>Access completed. Logoff.

The little silver card slid back out.

He got down the stairs somehow, got down as fast as he could make it, the impact of foot on concrete jarring his wound and his stomach heaving at each step.

Limping across the plaza, he listened to the deadness around them. Were those engines?

Something screeched, far off in the distance.

He yanked the door open.

Lee looked at him and her eyes widened. She turned the key in the ignition and the engine caught as he shut the door harder than he should have.

"I think something's weird," he said. "Do you hear anything?"

She hit the power switch for the window, and shifted the Apache into gear with the other hand.

"Cars. No, it's too loud for cars."

"Head away from them."

The car leaped forward, and as it rolled, she said, "But I can't tell from which direction they're coming!"

"Just try."

She nodded. She made a left at the next street, then a right at the next corner, because the cars seemed to be coming from that way as well.

As if they were converging on a target.

Us.

The engine roar sounded right next-door as she barrelled down that street, and she turned left at the next junction.

The lead jeep was two blocks away. The leader wore a red beret—Special Forces—visible because he stood.

Lee hit the brake, and Snake braced himself with a hand on the dash. She threw the shift into Reverse and charged backwards down the narrow one-way, missing the garbage and nearly creaming three or four screeching black rats.

Another jeep came up on them from behind, closer than the front.

She twisted the wheel, bumped up over the curb, and took off down the sidewalk, still backwards, till she made the corner, where she swung the Aztec around, the back wheels two inches from a lamp post. She burned synthetic

rubber as she sped forward, turned hard right, and cut across a plaza.

The Aztec bumped down the steps of a decorative pit, skidded alongside the fountain. Water splashed down over the windshield.

He turned and squinted, in time to see the jeep behind them not make the narrow passage. It cracked into the fountain and the spraying water began to fill it like a flowerpot.

He grinned.

They bumped up the other side, and she made another left, squeezing out through the opening between two walls. The red-beret's jeep had lost another block. She took the 4WD down over the curb and back into the street.

"There," she said.

"What?"

"Entrance to the interstate."

"May be barricaded."

"What do you want me to do if it is?"

He grabbed the dashboard as she went across another curb and down the sidewalk, then back down, avoiding a pile of rusting scrapped cars. "You're driving. I don't want to spoil your instincts."

Lee almost looked at him, almost and then didn't. She shook her head and muttered something that sounded like "*Yobaynnye mat*," and then added something else, not in Russian, but in some other language, something that sounded as if she might be praying.

The 4WD careened down the on ramp, and then onto the divided highway. No blockade.

Snake stopped grinning.

A line of canvas-covered trucks and soldiers with M16Ds crossed the road in front of them. A double line.

"*Gavno*," said Lee, and she yanked the wheel again. "I'm getting **tired** of this."

The Aztec whomped up over the median edge, climbing the center ridge, where the vegetation had been burned black. She took a quick look around, then ran the vehicle down the median strip.

A bullet pinged, ricocheting off a fender. Snake ducked.

She swung the wheel, skated down the incline, and proceeded the wrong way down the deserted expressway lane.

Two miles down the road, she went over the median again, and then up the on ramp, zipping past startled oncoming traffic—a USPF truck that spun and slammed into the overpass, two civilian

cars of so-called normal people who honked and screeched into the median themselves.

On the connector road, she went south, did a few more turns, and sped down a deserted dirt road. Dust flew around the Aztec.

"Where are we?"

Lee shook her head. "Going south again. I don't know anymore than that."

"Good enough." He eyed her thoughtfully.

"You did a hell of a job back there, baby."

She smiled, just a twist of her mouth. "Didn't do so bad yourself. No backseat driving, no getting sick, no nothing."

"Smartass."

"Coming from you," she said, "I consider that a compliment."

Ten or twenty miles later, with the shadows growing darker across the barren land, they came across the interstate again.

Snake swore.

"What?"

Ignoring her question, he fumbled in the bottom of the passenger well, under the glove compartment. The radio was still tucked away where Fresno Bob had so carefully installed it. "All that time," he said, "and I completely forgot..." He flicked the 'receive' on the handset and ratcheted the volume up. Static scratched across the air.

A faint voice said, "...Lost them..."

A pause. A fainter answer whispered, "...Kill us..."

He nodded. "They're behind us all right. What is this?"

She turned her head, scanning the road. "I don't see—no, wait." She eased the Aztec down the incline and paused by a pitted and scarred state road sign.

"65," Snake read out loud, paused, squinted, and said, "South."

Lee nodded. She punched it into the Automap, which whirled and finally came up with a frame. "East of Springfield."

"Stay on this?"

She frowned, and tapped in the query. "It'll take us down to 40W. That'll get us through Little Rock."

"They'll expect us to head the other way. Better stick with this. The mountains aren't so high the South end anyway, and we're heading for El Lay."

Lee nodded.

When the shadows lengthened into darkness, he said, "Maybe we should pull off. We might come up on them in the dark."

"Okay."

She flipped the headlights to 'bright', and swivelled them back and forth. After a moment, she crossed the median once again, and then left the highway completely.

A wire fence once blocked the land from the highway. She eased the Aztec over the remnants and chunked across the dry fields. A farmhouse stood in the middle of the weed-choked land. It had been a nice farmhouse, once, with the double front doors of an earlier era. The doors and windows had been removed; the front doors gaping widely, empty, the windows eyeless and blinded with boards.



A set of wide concrete steps led up to the yawning entrance. Rats scurried in small trickles away from the headlights. Nothing showed inside.

"I think I can," she muttered, and eased down on the gas. Splinters scraped the sides of the Aztec. They just fit through the open frame. The Aztec stopped in the front room.

"I've heard of drive-ins," he said, opening his door. Rats squeaked and ran. He grimaced, taking the flashlight out of the glove compartment.

The front room was empty. He stood out of the way while she jockeyed the 4WD into the end of the room still sheltered by boarded windows.

Lot of places like this along the highway. They could have taken the barn, of course—but anyone would know to look in a barn. She was good, all right. He had to give her that.

Natalie climbed out of the 4WD. She came within a quarter-inch of putting her booted foot square on a rat's back. It squeaked. She jumped, and hopped on one foot a moment, glancing frantically around herself.

"It's only a rat," he said.

She looked up at him, still wild-eyed. "I hate rats," she said.

He remembered the little brown bastards in Russia, quick and vicious, taking bites out of unwary sleepers. "Yeah," he said. "Come on, let's see if there's anything that hasn't been taken."

Upstairs, there were five rooms, two on each side of a narrow hall, and a fifth at the dead end. The fifth was the bathroom.

A low pool of discolored water, covered with brownish scum, floated in the toilet. Lee reached out and pressed down the handle. The flushing mechanism roared.

"Shit!" he said.

"Sorry."

"Don't **do** that." The muscles in his overstrained leg twitched in reaction, and kept twitching. He rubbed his leg against the pain.

She tried the tap, and a slow trickle of orangy water dripped out of the metal spigot. "I didn't think anyone had iron or lead pipes anymore."

"Rats don't eat iron or lead," he said.

"Usually. They will eat PVC."

Lee looked at him. In the glow cast by the flashlight, her expression wasn't clear. She shook her head.

When she reached to turn off the tap, he said, "Let it run a little. We ought to get as much water as we can. We'll be crossing the desert."

She nodded.

The bathtub had cobwebs in the corner. That tap also worked, and she let the slightly stronger stream of water spill out as well.

In one of the bedrooms, they found a brass bedstead, the brass peeling away from the base metal. Snake tested the mattress gingerly, waiting for squeaking rats to race out of it.

Nothing.

He poked it again, then sat down on it.

Still nothing.

Fucking weird.

He played the light over the mattress, then checked the hole near the end of the mattress. Still nothing. He went to the closet and flicked the light beam around it, looking for sheets or anything possible to wrap up in for the night.

The beam caught on a red reflection of eyes, low down against the baseboard, and a growl stopped him.

"It's a dog," Lee said. "It's a **little** dog." She crouched down and held her fingers out. "Poor baby. Scared? It's all right. Come on, sweetheart, it's okay. Come on..."

A whimper answered, followed by a hesitant growl, and then another whimper. After a few more moments of coaxing, a sleek but dust covered black and tan body crawled on its belly out of the closet and crouched in front of her, the tail swishing side to side in abject surrender.

She scratched behind the ears, and the tail thumped frantically against the floor. She picked it up, and rubbing behind the ears as she did.

The dachshund was dirty, thin but not starved.

"That's why there aren't any rats in here," she said. Her fingers stopped on one of the ears when the little thing whimpered. "Poor thing. One of them got you, didn't they?"

Curious, Snake examined the dog in the flashlight, and saw that a ragged triangle had been bitten out of the right ear, near the head. The red nylon collar carried jagged edges also, and a furrow ran down one of the flanks.

"Tough for a housepet," he admitted.

"Great mousers. They used to use the big ones to hunt badgers."

Yeah, he remembered reading that in the Encyclopedia Britannica, in grade school. "Water ought to be clear enough to fill the reserves with."

The dachshund followed them from room to room, and even down the warped stairs. Where it went, the rats scattered, but it continued to swing its head back and forth and growl.

Fresno Bob had believed in planning ahead. *What he always said to me, 'Snake, you gotta plan for the unexpected.' Poor bastard never expected to die like that.* His reserves were six ten-gallon containers, tucked underneath the bed in the 4WD. Lee filled them and staggered down the stairs with them, one at a time. The camper sink in the Aztec had a reservoir tank as well, a five-gallon one that pumped water up into the tap. She filled that, and the truck's radiator, and the two canteens, and then her own personal canteen.

He tested the stove in the kitchen. *Nothing. Hadn't expected anything, really.* In one of the cupboards, he found a few unrusty cans, some Sterno, and a hibachi complete with half-burned coals. He opened a can of Sterno and scattered chunks of it onto the coals.

In Russia, he'd eaten rat meat when he had to, but he didn't like it.

The labels had long since gone from the cans, but he found two of the tall were hash—one roast beef, one corned, two of the squat cans were corn, and one of the larger sloshed: tomatoes. He got another thin trickle of water from the tap, scrubbed out a pot with a slightly rusty SOS pad, and set the damp pot over the flames. When it stopped sizzling, he figured it might be sterilized, and dumped in the whole selection of cans.

One of the drawers had four half-burned candles. He lit one with his cigarette lighter, held it until wax dripped on the kitchen table, then set

the candle end into the hot wax. He did the same for the others.

Rat shit encrusted the table and the chairs. He used a spatula to scrape the worst of it off, and found a couple of not too badly gnawed oilcloth tablecloths to cover up the rest.

Lee came in from the water hauling with her hair and face wet and smelling clean. She held the dachshund, which shivered and smelt of wet dog.

He looked at the dog. It looked at him.

"Dogs eat a hell of a lot," he said.

"This one eats rats."

"They bark."

"Good warning system." She tightened her grip on the small animal, and it squirmed, trying to lick her hand.

"Lee—"

"Please, Snake."

He glared at her. The words echoed in his head. *Please, Snake.* "Okay. You feed it."

"Her."

"It. Its food comes out of your share."

"Fine."

She split her dinner carefully in half, and the dog gobbled it up as if it hadn't been feasting on rats for however long it had been left here.

Snake muttered to himself and refilled her plate. "Don't overfeed the damned thing—after all this time, it might get indigestion."

She didn't look up from her plate. She did say, "Thank you."

He grunted. "Think I might go try to clean myself up a bit. Maybe I need to check that bandage."

"I'll check it," she said. "I'll need to boil some water."

"I saw another can of Sterno in the pantry. That and a bag of charcoal. If the charcoal's not too damp..."

She nodded.

He made a slow and painful journey up the stairs, cursing Hawk to himself with each step. Next time, he'd fucking well make them kill him before he let them send him into the Max.

The trickle of water seemed stronger than earlier, but it was as cold as the weather outside.

Snake stripped off his shirt, unbuckled and unzipped his pants, and shut the door before letting them drop to his ankles. Lee had obviously found soap and a small dab of shampoo: the worn cake smelt of baby oil and perfume, the shampoo of citrus.

He grimaced, then took a dry dusty washcloth from the rack and rinsed it under the tap. He

shivered at the touch of the cold water on his skin, shuddered when he wiped off the soap, but scrubbed himself as well as he could.

Pulling the pants back up, he zipped them halfway and decided to make it an all-out effort.

He had water from the sink to the door by the time he finished, and shampoo suds on the window, the mirror, and the radiator. His jeans were spotted with suds and water, and his bad leg ached and quivered with overstrain. He towelled his hair one last time, and hunted for something with which to comb it.

Should have thought of that when you got in here, Plissken.

He settled for raking his fingers through the tangled strands.

Can't remember the last time I felt clean.

He came out to find Lee sitting in the bedroom, on the warped bay window seat. She had moved the candles and the hibachi to the bedroom, as well, along with an oil lantern that looked a hundred years old at least. The sleeping bags were laid out on the bed, and a sheet covered the battered mattress.

"Some of the sheets aren't too bad," she said. "And the blankets. Might take them along."

"Fine."

A steaming pot sat on the remains of the dresser. He glimpsed himself in the cracked dull mirror over the dresser, and grimaced.

Was a time I'd have cared how I looked.

He sat down on the bed and she stood up from the window seat. The dog jumped down from the corner and came over to watch with what seemed almost like intelligence. The ritual was the same: undressing, bathing the incision, smearing on some ointment, dressing the wound again. He swore steadily through the process.

With it finished, he turned and lifted the leg—as if it belonged to someone else—onto the bed.

"Shit," he said, again.

"It'll get better," she said.

"And how do you know?"

She didn't answer, she just shook her head at him, with that quarter of a smile. She carried the pot down the hall to the bathroom, and he heard her pouring the water away. She spent longer than dumping water demanded, but he'd noticed a Playtex wrapper in the trash bin next to the toilet, and figured that was the explanation.

She also had a comb. "Let me see if I can get the tangles out."

He bit back a rude answer, and winced at each snarled knot she unraveled. *Like some damn*

kid after a bath. And she doesn't look anything at all like my mom.

They settled down, and Snake leaned over to blow out the candles. That meant he had to lean over her, and he felt her tense again.

He wondered for a minute just what her life had been like—most safehouses and their owners were sacrosanct, even among the underground. Safety meant enough to anyone running from the blackbellies, that blowing a safehouse meant a death sentence to the man who did it.

Pity he wasn't there to help with the one who blew the Toledo bolthole.

Maybe I should have headed for Canada.

Beside him, he heard her breathing slow and settle. Cautiously, curious, he reached out and touched her hair. The strands slid away under his fingers, soft as powder, fine and thick. He ran his fingers along the length of it. She stirred, in her sleep, and he pulled his hand back to safety.

He closed his eyes and felt darkness come in. Something went off next to his ear.

Four

the lengths that I will go to
the distance in your eyes
that's me in the corner
that's me in the spotlight
losing my religion
trying to keep a view
and I don't know if I can do it
oh no I said too much⁸

Kenney was as good as her word. Hawk squinted as the down draft from the Apache sent dust devils whirling around the top of the building. The pilot did a fancy little swirl before setting down on the heliport, totally unnecessary, and Bob Hawk frowned.

He felt a little oversensitive these days about people doing totally unnecessary flourishes.

He motioned. Rehme popped his helmet on and spoke into his radio. The squad behind him formed up; they trotted forward to the chopper.

Hawk was the last one in; he yanked the door to and found a seat as the Apache lifted off into the darkness. Just about two in the morning, Eastern time.

Might lose him. Somebody might jump the gun.

It would be a long trip into St. Louis. Bob Hawk settled back and closed his eyes.



Snake sat upright, jarring the bed and his leg.

The dachhund leaped onto his thighs, balancing wobbily. She shrieked at the top of her lungs, barking in a hysterical, furious soprano.

"What—!"

The bedroom door shook.

A deeper note echoed the dachhund's hysterical voice. She jumped off the bed and melted into the darkness, snarling in between the shrill angry yaps.

"Christ!" His feet hit the floor. His bad leg almost crumpled under him.

Lee ran to the door and threw her weight against it. The wood creaked alarmingly.

He joined her. "I can hold it," he said. "See if you can get that dresser over here. Hurry, damn it!"

She tripped over something; he heard her fall. She scrambled in the dark and he heard wood scrape on wood. He blinked again, and his eye adjusted, catching the bits of moonlight filtering through the chinks in the boarded windows. Lee shoved the dresser across the room. The mirror rattled. He heard bits of glass crackle on the floor.

He moved out of the way. The door gave a little. The heavy thunder of the outside growling took on an excited whine. Snake threw all his leverage against the dresser and heard it skid into place against the door.

A disappointed howl answered. Claws scraped against the wood: dogs digging for prey.

⁸ "Losing My Religion" REM

Snake dived back for the bed and fumbled under the pillows. He grabbed the guns. The box of bullets slipped out of his grasp and he wasted precious seconds fumbling for it. He tossed her the smaller Smith and Wesson. She missed and had to scramble for it. The dachshund bristled and snarled, standing stiff-legged and threatening in front of them.

The wood at the bottom of the door splintered.

Snake backed up a step, feeling for secure footing. The wood cracked.

A huge furred form crawled forward, coming under the dresser legs. He remembered the big collie who'd been his childhood pet crawling towards him in apology.

He fired.

The dog screamed. The dachshund leaped forward and snapped. The big dog snarled and bit at the smaller animal.

Snake swore. He shot again, trying not to hit the dachshund. His bullet creased the bigger animal's skull; it flattened its ears and tried to lunge forward.

From his left, Lee took three quick steps forward.

The dog got to its feet, growling. In the faint light, it looked as tall as the dresser.

The dachshund sprang and magically attached itself to one pointed ear, swinging back and forth. The other dog yelped and shook its head. The little dog went flying.

Lee shot.

The big animal staggered sideways. Sounds of yelping and claws scrabbling down the stairs punctuated the growls and snarls. The dachshund whirled back in and bit at the other dog's feet.

Snake pulled the trigger again.

A second shot came just on the heels of his. The bullets sounded like signals. The big dog staggered drunkenly and fell.

Lee stepped forward.

It still twitched. It snarled at her as she moved a hand forward, and then whimpered. He heard her catch her breath, and then another deafening crack.

The dog lay still.

The dachshund marched stiff-legged around the bigger animal, growling and biting at it. Finally she turned her back, kicked her back legs as if marking territory, and came back to them, tail high.

"Yeah," he said softly, scratching behind the tattered ears. "You're one badass little dog, aren't you?" He glanced up at Lee. "Fine. She goes."

"Should we? Go on, I mean."

He limped over and peered out one of the cracks. "It's about midnight, I think. We'd better wait." He shoved the stiffening body under the dresser, blocking the hole. "That might keep them away. If nothing else, it'll occupy them long enough for us to get the advantage."

"I don't know if I can sleep," she said.

He made an effort to sound gentle. "Try." Something else was needed... "We've got a long run ahead of us in the morning, and we'll have to be rested. We can't out think the blackbellies if we're too tired to think."

She nodded, and got back into her sleeping bag. The dachshund crawled in it beside her, and Snake heard the soft rumbling growl that said the dog still considered herself on guard. Lee shook. He could feel the bed quiver.

Cautiously, ready to pull back at the first negative reaction, he draped one arm over her. For a second, nothing at all happened. Then she sighed, a long heavy sigh, and her body relaxed.

Slowly, moving with extreme care, he stroked her hair once again. She moved back a little against him, and lay quiet. He closed his eyes as well.



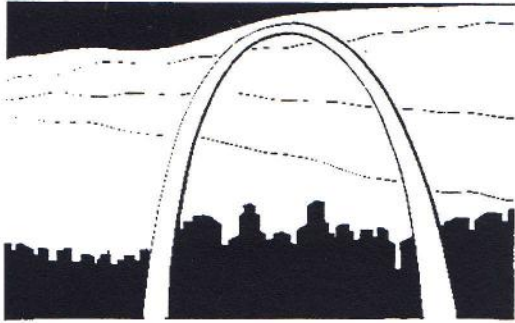
I haven't said enough
I thought that I heard you laughing
I think I saw you cry
every whisper every waking hour
I'm choosing my confessions
oh no I said too much
that was just a dream?

Below them, the depopulated miles spread out in the sun. The beaten-in lines of compass-laid-out roads still showed through the grass, bisecting the United States into neat squares. Bob Hawk stared down at the open fields, noting each small town.

Some had more activity than others. He could quote the statistics as well as the President himself: *seventy-one percent of the towns with populations between ten and one hundred thousand still maintained vital links with the remainder of the country; forty-nine percent of*

⁹ *ibid*

those under ten thousand still existed as units, with water, TV, police departments, movie theaters; twenty-three percent of those under one thousand still kept together as primitive communities, throwbacks to the eighteen-hundreds.



Nobody mentioned, of course, that the population of the United States was less than half what it had been at the beginning of the nineteen-eighties. They did mention that the population of Russia had been reduced by one-half. That was a victory.

Hauk wasn't certain why. He looked down at wisps of smoke crawling upwards from the houses scattered below.

There had been smoke from his house in Los Angeles, that last morning, when he stood outside the ruins among the shattered bricks; the smoke curled up into the rain and vanished. It rained in Los Angeles almost constantly these days. City of Our Lady the Queen of the Angels. City of Constant Rain. He carried a small picture of Janine in the back of his watch; he touched the bezel now, with two fingers, as if he could touch her.

They set down in St. Louis before sunrise.

St. Louis still kept a sizable population; most of them ordinary citizens still living normal lives. The gas only touched down here in rain. Hauk ducked under the whipping blades of the Apache's dying rotors. The yellow circles and cross of the heliport glowed under his black boots. He looked at the honor guard drawn up at the elevator doors, and slowed his walk to a deliberate pace. The elaborate formality suggested somebody'd screwed up, and he was going to have to decide how pissed he was about it.

It was the bit with the waitress that bothered him most at the moment.

One thing most liberals tended to forget was the average citizen only cared about rights when they were his. Mister and Miz Smith wanted, more

than anything else, safe streets, safe homes, and stability. Most people would exchange a little freedom if it meant they could be safe.

Especially now.

The Watch Commander in charge of the St. Louis sector needed to lose thirty pounds. He also needed to brush his teeth more often. He needed, more than either of that, a bath.

Hauk straightened to his full height, taking his time about it. He eyed the Watch Commander and counted the beads of sweat on the man's face.

The Commander tried a smile. It stopped about halfway. "Pleasure to have you in St. Louis, Commissioner."

"Pleasure to be here, Captain." He eyed the man another second and then examined the office. "See you're running a little short on janitorial staff."

The Captain scooped the debris of a donut and coffee breakfast into the nearest trash can.

"Plissken," said Hauk. He knew the answer here as well.

The Captain coughed. The words dissolved in the middle.

"Didn't quite catch that."

"We—lost him, sir."

Hauk cocked his head a little to one side. Near him, Rehme took a step forward, but the Police Commissioner ignored it. "What? I thought you said you **lost** him, Captain."

"We lost him, sir."

"You had reinforcements in from Fort Smith?"

"Yes, sir." The Captain now stood at full attention, sucking his beer belly in as far as possible. Acrid fear sweat wafted up into the overhead fans, blowing back out into the room.

"You blocked the highways and the clear streets?"

"Yes, sir."

"You had his location?"

Damp patches grew on the black uniform shirt. The Captain coughed again. "Yes, sir."

Hauk took a breath and let it out, then said, very quietly, "And you tell me you fucking lost one goddamned man in a Chevy Aztec? Now how could that happen, Captain?"

"Sir—the woman was driving, sir."

"Yes?"

"We had orders, sir—your orders. Not to harm either one."

"You couldn't blow out a tire and stop them?"

"Sir—no, sir. Those Aztecs had real touchy gas tanks, sir. One miss and there wouldn't have been anything to question."

Hauk glanced over at Rehme. Rehme nodded and lit a cigarette.

"All right. The waitress?"

The Captain unfroze, clearly lost in the haze. "Sir?"

"The waitress from the diner. The one your men questioned."

"She's dead, sir."

"I know that!"

The man stepped back.

Rehme said, "Commissioner—"

Hauk cut him off with a slash of one hand, but dropped his voice into a lower, flatter tone. "Your men killed her, Captain Tocklin. I saw the tape of the interrogation. You have that much trouble with discipline here?"

"Sir—"

"Those men will be reassigned to New York. Understood? I'll have better-trained troops placed here until yours have gone through retraining."

"Yes, sir."

The office door opened, with the unsteady speed of someone not sure whether to open it in one quick rush or to simply edge it open and shove in a note.

Hauk said, "What is it?"

"Call, sir, from Apache Base George Walter 107." The man wasn't much more than seventeen and trying not to fidget.

"Go on." *Couldn't have been lucky enough to have found Plissken.*

"Message from the pilot of Apache SLM89-ParisTango. He's dropping a passenger from Headquarters Boston."

"Boston?"

"Lieutenant Amanda Kenney, sir."

"I know Kenney," Hauk said. He looked at Rehme and Rehme shrugged 'I-don't-know'. He turned to the Watch Commander, changing his tone. *No arguments in front of the troops.*

"Captain, you have an office I can use?"

"Absolutely, Commissioner." The Captain swung to the boy at the door. "Brisette. Take the Commissioner down to 2A."

"Yes, Captain." Brisette nodded to Hauk and Rehme. "If you'll follow me, sirs..."

The corridors echoed with the sound of their boots. Hauk could hear the normal tone of conversation, punctuated by laughter, by the smell of coffee and the riper scent of dirt. As their little group stalked past the open doors, the conversation died and then started again, low and not quite so cheerful. Possibly more respectful.

Certainly the rookie kept up with the pace he and Rehme set.

They waited for the elevator. Brisette tried to stand still, but teetered on his toes. The elevator lights flickered, progressed up a floor, paused, went up another...

Brisette cleared his throat. "One of the elevators is out, Commissioner. We're on the repair list, but we're short on techs out here."

Hauk glanced over at Rehme.

Rehme nodded. "More techs."

Bob Hauk did not smile, more than to himself, sourly. Rehme didn't comment, of course, that they needed more techs nationwide. The higher technology: computers, medical, warfare—those they had in abundance. Fresh out of training, the rankest commissioned man could repair his computer links and the infrasightings on his gear; could field-strip and cannibalize other units to keep his weapons loaded and powered; could act as an EMT. Basic things got lost in the system.

Brisette's com unit beeped. He paused, but as he pressed the receive, the elevator door opened.

Hauk checked for the floor before stepping inside the small box. He'd lost a sergeant three months earlier when the man had stepped into a dark elevator and the car wasn't there.

Brisette said, "4396."

"Passenger's in. Where do you want her?"

"Office 2-A."

"Is it true the Commissioner's really here?"

Hauk half-swung to stare at the com unit in Brisette's thin hand. He wasn't sure how to interpret the tone in the voice, blurred as it was by the metal and the static.

Brisette flushed. "Standing right next to me, Del."

There was silence, and then a low, awed-sounding "shit".

"Over and out, dispatch," Brisette said, trying to sound business-like.

"Over and out."

The woman in 2A turned as they entered.

She brought her shoulders into a brace, her fingertips just reaching the hem of her jacket, the hands resting in perfect textbook fashion. Not a blonde hair out of place, either, in spite of her trip.

"Kenney," Hauk said.

She said, just as precisely, "Commissioner," and saluted.

Over his shoulder, he said, "Thanks, Brisette. You might ask somebody to get us some coffee."

When the door shut behind the younger man, Hauk added, "I don't know if it'll be safe to drink,

but it'll keep him out of our way a while. Kenney, something I don't know about back East?"

"President's asking for daily updates on Plissken. At least he was when I checked out of Boston Metro last night." She hadn't relaxed from attention.

"Christ, Kenney, relax."

"Sir," she said, and took a deeper breath. "But the Russians want to come back to the table—or at least they want a face-saving reason to come back—and that may keep him out of our hair."

"Good." Hauk lit a cigarette and offered one to Rehme. He didn't offer one to her because he knew she didn't smoke. "Kenney? Something else you need to tell me?"

"Need to tell you, sir?" she said, in that deliberately dense fashion.

Some of the tension of the past couple of days started to unknot. Kenney could always get a laugh out of him. "Kenney, you want me to drag it out of you with a winch?"

She blinked at him.

Hauk shook his head and swore under his breath. "C'mon, Lieutenant. What are you doing here?"

"Communications past Chicago aren't trustworthy, sir. I'm getting too much interference through the modems. I think we might have hackers monitoring our systems."

"And so you came out to St. Louis."

"You need somebody out here to handle your communications," she said. "And you aren't supposed to post off Liberty Island without two—"

"Bodyguards," he finished. "I know the rule, Kenney. I wrote it."

"Yes, Commissioner."

"Who's running Boston HQ?"

"Bashemath Singh. Sergeant. Training her myself, sir. She's gas-resistant and she'll do."

Hauk nodded. He took a longer puff off the cigarette. "You're more use to me in Boston, Kenney." He said it mildly, curious to see how she reacted.

Amanda Kenney's brown eyes met his directly. Kenney rarely looked him in the eye; he wasn't sure about the reason, whether she didn't want to, or whether she thought it was bad for discipline. But the brown eyes didn't falter. "I want to be here, sir."

"Rehme, you figure we need an extra set of ears?"

Just as surprising, Rehme said, "We can use Kenney, sir."

"Hell of a lot of sir's around here lately," Hauk muttered, and lifted his upper lip in a half-smile when their simultaneous "sir" answered.

Kenney had the grace to look ill-at-ease.

"I can tell you one thing," Hauk said, glancing over the room. "If I'm spending any amount of time in this room, someone's going to get it clean. Afraid to sit down—might catch something."

The blonde woman snorted. "Germs wouldn't dare come near you. I'll get some janitorial staff." She strode out, walking naturally for the first time.

Hauk brushed the edge of a table clear and settled down. "I need a computer, first off. With a modem for Kenney, naturally. And then I want any relevant tapes of what happened."

"Got any idea where he might have headed?"

He stubbed out the cigarette and lit another. "Not now. Not when he's been spooked. Those tapes might give us some clue."

Rehme nodded. "I'll get on it."

Bob Hauk moved to the window and smeared a spot clean with the side of his hand, grimaced, and wiped the hand on his trousers. Sunrise showed over the horizon.

Plissken was out there, somewhere.

The one that got away. The one who quit. *If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem. Deserters.*



when i get to the bottom, i go back
to the top of the slide
then i stop and i go for a ride
till i get to the bottom and i see you again
helter skelter
tell me the answer —
you may be a lover, but you ain't no dancer¹⁰

Dead rats, their bodies half-eaten, littered the floor around the Aztec. Lee grimaced and yanked the passenger side back door open, checking the inside with her brow furrowed.

"Supplies are safe," she said.

Snake nodded. The leg hurt this morning, hurt enough to make the world red-tinged.

"I'll make coffee," she said. "I think I saw a can last night."

He grunted. He drank the coffee—and it was the real stuff, too—and watched her make breakfast. She wouldn't necessarily win any beauty contests: average in every way; but he'd begun to like the view.

¹⁰ "Helter Skelter" The Beatles

And wouldn't that send her screaming into the distance.

Getting the Aztec out of the house was a lot more difficult than getting it inside. The dachshund crawled to the back of the 4WD and underneath the bedshelf, curled up and whimpered.

She flicked the AutoMap on, and scanned for their location. He rubbed his bad leg, trying for a counter-irritant to the pain, while he put the police radio on 'scan' and listened for any sign of pursuit.

"You're not bad with the gun," he said.

A frown furrowed her eyebrows. "I'd only shot in practice."

He straightened, which shot a jolt of electric agony up his thigh, and grunted. "Shit. I'm glad you didn't tell me that back there. What would you have done if you'd had to shoot?"

Lee said nothing at all for a moment. Then she took a deep breath and let it back out. "I'd have shot. Why didn't you have your gun?"

"We needed the gas. I made the mistake of thinking the bastard would be straight with me." He checked the scan again, hearing a whisper far away. "I won't make that mistake again."

The whisper sounded louder. He stopped and concentrated on tracking it down.



"All right," said Amanda Kenney. "What's going on, Jase?"

Rehme ran a hand through his hair and lit another cigarette. She took it out of his mouth.

"Stop that. You can't hide from me in a cloud of smoke. How'd you let him get out here?"

"Christ, Kenney, you think I can stop him?"

"Yes, usually. He listens to you. You're one of the few people he **does** listen to."

Rehme took a quick look over one shoulder to be sure the office door was still closed. He

snatched the still-smouldering butt from the Lieutenant's fingers and dragged in the tobacco-flavored smoke. "Not on this one."

"I heard something weird went down on Liberty Island."

"We got Plissken."

"I heard that, too." She stood hipshot, arms folded and the butt of her pistol sticking out over her hip, obviously not going away until she knew what was down.

He gave her the scenario, hastily, sketchily, and seven times she stopped him for the details of something or other.

When his voice finally trailed off, she said, "What was on the tape?"

"Shit, I don't know." He looked nervously at the door again. "President looked like somebody stuck him up the—"

Kenney interrupted the vulgarity. "I heard something from an RA type about a new bomb."

"So did I."

She made a grotesque face. "Can't they ever come up with something else? How long we going to keep going on with this? We got enough problems **here**."

It had been almost ten years ago now, that terrorists had found out where Bob Hauk lived in L.A.; found out and acted on the knowledge. They'd thought he was home. He should have been—would have been, if he hadn't been picking his wife up at the airport.

He hadn't found her, though. Her flight had come in early, and she went to the house to surprise him. Rehme remembered that morning. He'd been the only L.A. cop to come East with Hauk, after it.

The guttered house, the blood, the smell of burnt flesh... Hauk's face reflecting in the dying flames and the life going out of him as he stood there. His son had gone two years later, after committing a cold-blooded, never-explained murder.

It had only been the job then for Bob Hauk, the job going after the criminals, the terrorists, the chaos tearing the country apart. A job. No emotion in it, just the job.

Until now. Until Plissken.

Rehme took another drag from his cigarette. "It's personal here. Amanda, I don't know what's going on his head. I used to think I did—but I don't now. He needs—something to distract him. Can't you think of something?"

Her blue eyes slit shut. "Jase," she said, in her clear level voice, "I'm a cop. Just like you."

"No. You're a female cop. He might trust you. Kenney, you and I both know you—"

She put a hand over his mouth. "Jase, you and I are friends. Don't spoil that now."

"Kenney, we have to do something. He's not like he was on the others. This is—I don't know. Different. Personal."

The blue eyes stared through him. "I'll assess the situation," she said, straight out of the manual.

But he felt some of the weight lift. Kenney believed him.

The 4WD stuttered.

He felt no pain this time. "What the hell?"

"Acts like we're out of gas, but that can't be..."

The dachshund jumped off the back shelf. Her toenails clicked on the uncarpeted metal floor of the 4WD, as she paced back and forth, whining.

"I'll cut his heart out—" Snake muttered.

Lee switched the tank control. The engine stuttered again, then smoothed out into a normal purr. She pulled over to the side of the road and got out. He followed, and watched as she crawled under the car. He saw then drops of liquid on the cracked asphalt.

She wriggled out from under the 4WD and sat up. "That bullet that creased us—it or another one—punched as nice a hole through the primary gas tank seam as you could want. About two-thirds of the way down. Keeps the gas in except while we move; then it starts sloshing out."

"Need to get it fixed."

"Where?" she said. "And how?"

"Can we get to Oklahoma City?"

"We've got enough gas." She got back in the car and went through the AutoMap, using the Aztec's internal compass and paper and pencil. Snake climbed back up into the passenger seat, seriously contemplating not getting out of the car again.

"We'll have to backtrack about a hundred miles," she said. "But I can get us there."

"I've got a contact," he said. "In Oklahoma City. Mechanic. This one I know."

"Fine." She considered the map again. "The roads back and through aren't good. And the blackbellies patrol the Oklahoma City area pretty well, according to the note on this."

"We'll have to risk it. After Albuquerque there isn't much left until you get into California."

Lee nodded. She turned the ignition key over, and waited until the engine caught. With another

nod, she put it into gear and made a one-eighty. "We won't make it there before dark."

"Fine. We'll sleep on the road. Can't be any worse than wild dogs."

Hauk paced back and forth in the borrowed office. The walls gleamed faintly blue, the fluorescent light glinting off fresh paint. His nostrils held the sharp odor of the paint mixed with the pine-disinfectant smell from the cleaning.

Hadn't known Kenney was that much of a slave driver. Have to hand some of those retrainings over to her section.

Rehme stepped into the room and hauled his coat off with a long sigh.

Hauk waited.

"Nothing yet. Northeastern swing."

"Damn it, Rehme, he has to be out there."

"I know that!"

"Then find him, goddamnit!"

Rehme glared at him, about ready to snap back; then the younger man spun on his heel and stalked out of the room, slamming the door.

Hauk rubbed a hand across his eyes, then sat down heavily in one of the padded chairs that lined the new bank of communications equipment. Blinking in the corner of one of the Quadras was the cartoon icon of the mailman. Below that was the code listing for the electronic mail: the President's code.

Just the little man being officious again. Hauk poured himself a cup of coffee from the thermos. Still hot. He sipped it, grimaced at the bitter strength, and rubbed his temples again.

The door opened.

He glanced over, about to apologize to Rehme—

Kenney ran a eye over the bank of computers and trackers. She walked across, her boot heels clicking on the bare wood. Once her heel skidded on the fresh varnish, but in the next second, she went on normally.

She brought up the latest negatives, compiled, and updated the screen map on one of the Quadras. Then she opened the E-mail.

As he'd expected, it was a peremptory whine accusing him of dereliction of duty, stupidity, and several less likely things.

Kenney grimaced. She keyboarded several commands, fed in something called "report November 6, 1997", and sent it.

"What was that?"

She glanced sidelong at him. "Our latest report. Mostly garbage, but he doesn't know enough about our work to recognize that."

Hauk snorted. "Smart, aren't you?"

"It's my job," she said. She walked around behind him and rested her hands on his shoulders, then pressed her thumbs into the worst of the knots. He felt the whole extent of her strength in her hands, seeking out and dissecting his tension. He could smell the clean scent of her above the odor of paint and disinfectant.

Not like Kenney to come this close. Unless... Lazily, in a half-mutter, he said, "Kenney, if I didn't know you better, I'd say you were trying to seduce me."

Her hands stilled a second, the thumbs pressing into the nape of his neck. "That would be rather silly, wouldn't it, sir?" She worked her hands up the sides of his skull to his temples. In spite of her notorious poker-face, he could hear her voice quiver around the edges. "You're legendary, you know, sir. Can't be bribed, can't be distracted." She massaged his temples in a slow easy rhythm. "Symbol to the force. Isn't that what the Police Commissioner should be? The one incorruptible man?"

"You've got good hands, Kenney."

The sweep sensor beeped. She stepped away to check it. "Thank you."

Another northwestern section heard from: negative. As she leaned over the console, her uniform trousers tightened around her buttocks, outlining the soft curves.

"You also add to the view," he said, to check her reaction.

Kenney glanced over her shoulder at him.

On base, she wore an equally regulation uniform skirt. He suspected no one on base would dare run a hand up her skirt; she'd have bitten it off.

"I wouldn't think it would be much of an addition," she said, with only that suggestion of a tremor to say that she knew what they both meant. "There's not much to see."

"True," he said. "Not here, anyway, and not now. In—other cases, I'd hope for a better—view—later."

"Not here, of course."

"No." He eyed her, considering. Her eyes never wavered. "You think there might be a better view in my quarters?"

"You want to specify a time? I work better with as much data as possible."

"Nine." He thought about it, and added, "I wouldn't want this to be considered duty, Kenney."

For the first time since he'd met her, her full lush mouth softened out of its normal hard line, opening into a secretive, teasing smile. "Don't worry. It won't be."

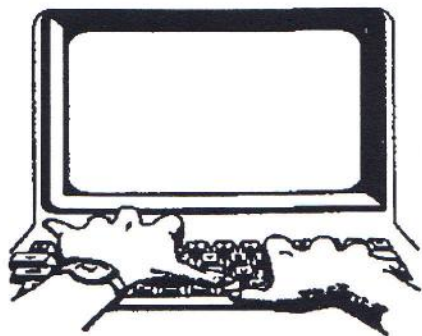
He almost said something else, something more explicit, but the door opened, and Rehme came through it.

"Jase," she said. "You get anything else from the search teams?"

"Only that they're disorganized as hell. This place needs a thorough overhaul."

They both obviously realized that the boss was right there and glanced at him, with guilty expressions.

"Don't worry," he said. "We'll take care of it."



Five

maybe i'm on nobody's side—
 never make a promise or plan
 take a little love where you can
 never stay too long in your bed
 never lose your heart, use your head
 nobody's on nobody's side"

S nake lay awake in the dark, not really certain why he'd awakened. He lay still in his sleeping bag, listening, breathing, peering into the darkness. Lee was asleep; she sounded asleep. Lying on her back between their bags, the dachhund made deep snuffling noises, hunting rats in her dreams.

Outside, the wind blew dust around them. The grit spattered against the windows. The echo of it sounded like rain.

Rain. He'd been dreaming about rain.

Lee sighed and rolled over on her other side, her face inches above the dachhund's nose.

This had been the trip he and Fresno had planned, back out to whatever remained of the California valleys, hills and gulleys and canyons cut off from the rest of the U.S. by geography and culture. A place to hide out in, make forays from, use as a safe home base.

We never talked about what we'd do when we got there.

Worst of all, he knew that he didn't have any more idea now than then what he'd do.



Hauk flipped on the light and examined the room. Someone'd cleaned in here, too. Smears of dust showed a hasty attempt at cleaning, and the sheets had the sleepy scent of well-washed cotton. Whoever'd made the bed didn't know how.

He stripped and remade the bed, checking the mattress for unwelcome partners. He laid the blankets and spread back on the bed. One corner was crooked. He pulled them back off and tried again. This time the covers looked square, so he left them.

Guest quarters. Someone else—Rehme? Kenney?—had set up a coffeepot and some basic supplies: cups, coffee in filterpacs sealed in plastic, creamer and sugar in neat ration

envelopes. He found that the tap in the bathroom gave clean sweet water, and made a pot of coffee.

Had he told Kenney to come to his room?

He sat down on the bed, rubbed a hand across his eyes, and tried to decide what he had been thinking when the conversation happened.

Her hands, rubbing his shoulders. When Janine had wanted to talk him to bed, she had always started with a backrub. She worked on down...

Hauk stood up and paced across the room. It was one pace too short for comfortable brooding. He tested the long way, and found it one pace too long. Settling for long instead of short, he walked back and forth through the room, leaving nothing but quick glimpses of memory intertwined with fragments of thought.

Maybe I'm just afraid. Afraid someone else might completely wipe Janine's face from his mind. The picture in his watch helped... Once he'd woke sweating in the night because in his dreams she came to him with nothing but a blank tan oval where her features should have been.

A tap came at the door.

He hesitated with his fingers on the doorknob.

The tap came again, a little stronger this time.

Won't you look like a damn fool if this is

Rehme?

Kenney swallowed when he opened the door; he saw the cords in her throat move.

Hell, she's as scared as I am. He stepped away from the door. She slipped inside. As if she were on patrol, she checked out the room, looking for—well, probably for the usual things—bombs, bugs, bogeymen, one of his instructors in Special Forces used to say.

From somewhere, she'd come up with a wine-colored silk sheath, skimming her body, hinting at the curves, stopping just above her knees. The blonde French twist now hung loose to her

¹¹ "Nobody's on Nobody's Side" from *Chess*

shoulders, in blonde waves, completely different from Janine's tightly permed long black spirals.

I can't do this. I don't know how any more.

"Kenney..." he said.

She swung around to face him. The sheath fastened with a single black 'frog' on the left shoulder, and she reached up to it before he could say another word. "You said you'd be interested in a better view." She flipped the knotted fastener out of the loop, and slid the silk off the opposite shoulder. The whole dress fell. She stepped out of the muddle of silk, completely nude and her pale skin almost gleaming in the dark room.

"Is this better?" she said.

Hauk took a sharper breath, startled at his immediate reaction. *Been too long without that kind of contact...* With each breath, his arousal made itself known, the friction of skin against the metal teeth of his zipper irritating, almost painful.

Her nipples tightened under his eyes: the chill of the room? nerves? or was she really aroused, really interested? Her fingers twitched a little, as if she wanted to cover herself from his gaze.

He dropped his eyes to the floor. "Amanda..." Stare her out of the room? that wasn't what he wanted. If he knew what he wanted...

The tips of her bare toes came into view. She had come into the room bare-footed. He drew another harsh breath.

Amanda's hands settled, flat-palmed, on his shoulders. Amanda's mouth touched the underside of his jaw. He shifted his head, on instinct, and she eluded him, kissed the other point of his jaw, ran her tongue down the side of his throat. He moved again, to try and catch her mouth, and she slipped away before he could, always one step ahead of him.

Finally he grabbed a handful of her blonde hair, winding it in his fingers, holding her head still so that he could kiss her.

She bit him.

He jerked back, startled, and saw her eyes glitter, read the challenge. With the other hand, he lifted her off her feet, found one of her nipples—and bit her, just hard enough.

She yelped, jerking in his grasp.

Overbalanced, he fell back on the bed. They rolled over in the sheets until the blankets tangled around them into a straightjacket. One of them kicked the bedside lamp, and it shattered on the floor, leaving them in the dark.

In the dark, her hands explored him, teasing, eager, unembarrassed.

He searched her with a blind man's touch, groping under the sheets and blankets, the warm sweet scent of her filling the space between them. He could see her face, even in the dark, could imagine the smile that brightened her face when she laughed with him.

Some time later, they untangled themselves and half-straightened the bed. He got what remained of his clothing off and shoved them in the direction of the chair by the bed. She made an abortive suggestion that she go back to her room.

Hauk curved his fingers around her breast and tugged at her nipple, pulling her forward. He returned her earlier tease, kissing her throat, her cheekbones, her eyes, until she shoved him back on the bed.

Nothing more was said about her leaving.



Lee leaned back against the wall, near the door. She glanced out at the sunrise and swallowed a yawn.

Snake did the bargaining. He seemed to know this man well enough; better than he'd known the fat man with the gas in Kansas City.

Oklahoma City wasn't Kansas City, after all. This was a legitimate gas station of the usual kind: ration books up front, pumps rigged for the right person or the right price. Repairs done, no questions asked.

Snake paid half of it up front. A ragged kid—not much over fifteen or sixteen—came out of the back office and put the Aztec up on the rack to look at the tank.

"Simple welding job," the kid said. "You want me to put some extra metal in here? These early Aztecs, they were like really touchy. One spark near the tank, one leak, and the whole thing went up like those Ford Pintos they used to make, back in the sixties and seventies. Ancient history, like, you know? I can put a little extra shielding in around these duals and take care of the problem."

"How much more?" said Snake. He shook his head at the first price.

His friend groaned. "Snake, you're killing me. Man's got to live."

Snake looked up at him and smiled that non-smile. "I got a long way to go, Dix. Not like I got money coming out'a my boots, you know."

The haggling went on, while the kid started the welding. He welded in the shielding, packing protective steel around the aluminium tanks at the same time that he took care of the puncture in the

aluminium. Aloud, absently, he said, "Pretty lucky that bullet didn't take you out, actually."

Dixon and Snake finished the bargaining, and the other man stepped back into the office.

The smell of hot metal made her a little sick. The dachshund stood up at the window and stared down at the mechanic, her brown eyes wide, her nose twitching, her forehead wrinkled and her ears cocked forward to listen. Lee looked away from the dog, at the plate glass of the office door's window, and watched the owner.

He picked up the phone. He looked out, not at her, but at Snake.

Odd look on his face.

Her hands felt itchy. She wiped them on her jeans. They both needed baths, she and Snake. Once with cold water wasn't enough.

Spoiled. You spent two years with one bath in cold water every two weeks.

And promised herself that the first thing she'd do if she got the chance was take a two-hour bath in scalding hot water.

The sound of the welding torch reached a painful pitch. Then it sputtered, and the boy lifted his welding mask and nodded. "Ought to do it." He stepped back and lowered the hydraulic shelf. "Back it out and I'll fill 'er up."

Lee backed the 4WD out of the garage, and parked it by the pumps. "Stay," she said to the dog, and got out, leaving the door open.

The kid dropped the mask inside the garage, then whistled to himself as he pumped the mended tank full of gas. He seemed calm enough.

Dixon, inside the office, looked—worried?

Snow swung around.

She heard it too, then.

Plissken shoved back so that the 4WD shielded them. "Lee, get over here—hurry, dammit!"

She rushed around to him. "Should we... "

"They've got a clear shot if we get in the 4WD," he said. "Get the door open. Lay flat on the seat and pull the driver's door shut. Hurry." With his left hand, he pulled the bigger of the two handguns and pointed it at the office window.

She slid over and got the edge of the handle with two fingers, yanked, and yanked again, until the door creaked and shut. The dog yapped.

"Hush, Girl, hush," she whispered.

Wriggling back out, Natalie pressed herself up against the side of the 4WD, watching through the corner of the window at the vehicles pulling up on the other side of the street, the men crawling out of the vans and the armoured police cars to hide

behind them, the assault rifles bristling from corners and windows. Her stomach roiled. She tasted acid at the back of her throat, the bitterness of fear climbing up into her gut.

Dixon practically threw himself out of the office. "Shit, Snake, you don't understand! They got warrants out on you clear across the country—what am I supposed to do? I got to live here—you can walk in and walk out—man, I **got** to cooperate with them—"

Snow's lips compressed into a thin line. "Well," he said, "go on out there, man. Tell them you're cooperating."

"I can't—they'll kill me—"

Snow bared his teeth in an imitation smile. "You wanted to cooperate with them, Dix—go on." He pulled the hammer back on the revolver with his thumb. "Unless you want to wait around." He was still safe, away from view, at the junction of wall and wall inside the garage.

The kid mechanic scrambled behind a metal locker, huddling there. Lee smelt the sickly-sweet stench of fear. The dachshund threw herself against the Aztec's window, barking hysterically.

Snow watched, unmoving, as the gas station owner stumbled out into the lot.

"Snow?" she said.

"Don't rush anything," he told her. "They might have orders not to shoot you. If I draw their fire—" He edged out, using the 4WD as a shield, his good eye intent on the tableau across the street. Dix disappeared into the crowd of USPF uniforms. Snow cocked his head, obviously gauging his next move.

She took a breath, then took a hold on his free wrist. His head jerked; he scowled at her.

"Use me as a hostage," she said.

"What?"

"You're assuming they have orders not to shoot me. They must think you took me as a hostage. So use me, dammit!"

"You're crazy," Plissken said.

Lee closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and said between her teeth, "It's the lousy company I keep. Will you do what I tell you to do?"

"Plissken," came a bullhorn voice. "Throw down the gun."

He glared out at the voice. Then he motioned to her. With something almost gentle, he wrapped one arm around her shoulders. The barrel of the gun touched her throat; she shuddered.

"Good," he said. "Look scared."

"I **am** scared."

A bass rumble shook him. Laughter? "The safety's on," he said. He stepped around the front of the 4WD, pushing her forward until they were both visible.

A low roar from the crowd of USPF uniforms shook her. The man in front held up a hand. His "nobody shoot—you've got your orders—nobody shoots!" was clear even from their position. She sucked in air and prayed that Plissken was right.

"Let the girl go," the foghorn said. "Plissken—we can work out a deal. Let the girl go."

Snake said in her ear, "This is the test, baby. Back up with me. Slow. Don't trip." The arm around her shoulders supported them both. He edged them both towards the 4WD, her body in front of his.

She caught a blurred glimpse of the assembled police, of black uniforms. In the corner of her eye, a small light shape scurried away. One sharp crack interrupted the silence. The shape fell.

This time Plissken snarled. The passenger door still stood open. He put a hand under her *derriere* and shoved. "Up you go," he said, "into the driver's seat. **Move**, baby."

The dachshund whimpered.

She couldn't see how he got in, but she heard him swear, and she twisted her head to see him fall over the stick shift again and lie in the back of the 4WD, with his arm outstretched, and the muzzle of the gun pressing hard and tubelike into her side.

"Move it out," he said.

She put the 4WD into forward, eased the vehicle forward. Her hands slipped in their own sweat, and she tightened her grip on the wheel. She eased the Aztec out between the lines of assembled blackbellies.

She didn't look at faces. She passed the light shape—Dixon, his head turned sideways and a rigid dead grimace distorting his face, rivulets of blood running into the gutter—and kept going.

A low rumble, like a dog's growl, echoed around them as she drove down the middle of the road. She felt her spine prickly, waiting for the shot, some shot, something. She went on driving.

"Shit," she heard Plissken's voice. "Dog, quit licking my face. This has to look **serious**."

She bit back a hysterical giggle. She kept driving, taking roads at random, simply looking to get lost and out of town.

Three hours later, hopelessly lost, she pulled the 4WD over so that Snake could get back into the passenger seat.

He leaned over near her to look at the AutoMap. That close, he looked up at her. "They wouldn't have shot you. You could have gone back to Cleveland."

"If they didn't dump me into the Max on principle," she said, dodging the question.

"Why didn't you?" He ignored her evasion, as he always did.

"I'm not like them," she said.

His face was very close to hers. For one suffocating second she went blind and deaf and floating. His mouth almost touched hers.

Then, instead, his fingers touched her hair, one brief stroke so light she thought she might have imagined it. His hand fell back to his thigh; he winced, rubbing the line of the injury.

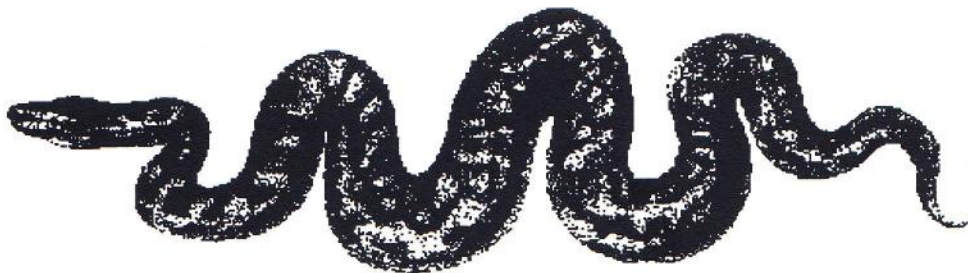
Then he leaned back against the seat. "I think you need to make a right here."

"I think you're right," she said, and did.



The knock shook the bedroom door. Hauk sat up, momentarily shaken, and just as quickly alert. "Amanda," he said, and reached over. She was already out of the bed and grabbing for her dress.

Then Rehme opened the door and threw a uniform at her. "They got him sighted in Oklahoma City. I've got a chopper in here in five."



six

And the outside temperature rises
 And the meaning is oh so clear
 one thousand and one yellow daffodils
 begin to dance in front of you oh dear
 and they're trying to tell you something¹²

The chopper drifted a little out of flight path. Hauk's head came up. He frowned and looked out of the window. The Apache swung a little wider. He stood up, and caught himself on the wall when the helicopter slipped into a spiral. Amanda stood up also, her hand going to her sidearm. Rehme came forward, and Hauk put a hand out to stop him.

Moving forward, Hauk leaned forward to listen. He heard the pilot singing.



"Relax, don't do it, when you gonna go to it; relax, don't do it, when you wanna come? Relax..." The croon slid off into a hum.

He turned slightly, and motioned to Kenney.

She eased along the wall. The Apache made a lazy loop, and she grabbed a handhold to keep herself on her feet.

Hauk jerked his head at the pilot's seat. The word 'crazy' was taboo in the USPF. "He's sky-happy. See if you can get into the assistant's seat."

She nodded. Then she moved forward, balancing herself against the swaying motion of the chopper. "Hey there, Paco. How's it going?"

"Asì, asì," he said cheerfully. "Beautiful day out there, beautiful day." He started to hum again, the same rhythmic few notes over and over.

Kenney dropped casually into the copilot's seat and swung her legs under the control panel.

"Hey," he said, mock-reprovingly, "you know you ain't supposed to be up here, *chica*."

"Oh, well..."

"Got to keep the bosses asleep, don't we?" He started to weave the helicopter back and forth, as if rocking a baby. The hum changed to 'Rock-a-bye Baby'.

Amanda rested her hands on her thighs.

Hauk took a minute to plan, weighing 'fast or slow?' in his head. He glanced out of the window and saw how close the ground looked.

Paco sent the chopper into a downward spiral.

No time. Hauk made it two fast steps, bringing the side of his hand in one quick motion across the back of the pilot's neck.

Paco's hands fell away from the controls.

Hauk grabbed neck and jaw and twisted, hauling the sudden dead weight backwards over the seat.

Kenney caught the controls, and struggled to bring the chopper back to the proper motions, the proper direction. He heard Rehme bang against something and swear, and then he slipped and fell himself, his head thudding against metal. Lights exploded in front of his eyes. The heavy corpse fell over him and clung.

He shoved the body away. When they went crazy, the body odor changed; the oozing sickly sweet stench made him gag.

"Kenney," he said, holding back the nausea. "get us down." He rolled over and boosted himself up on his knees. "Rehme!"

"M okay," said a slurred voice, and Rehme appeared in the doorway, his hand pressed against his temple. A thin trickle of blood ran down the side of his face.

"Medikit's in the service cupboard," Amanda said, her eyes trained ahead on their flight path.

Hauk made Rehme sit in the second co-pilot's seat and found the kit. The cut looked not too bad; head wounds always bled like waterfalls anyway.

Rehme's eyes shut. "Falling apart," he said, below his breath, in a lifeless worn whisper. "Whole damn thing falling apart."



Two hours out of Oklahoma City, running the old side roads, Lee found a vacant barn and pulled

¹² "I'm Slightly Mad" Queen

over into shelter. "I should have thought of this before," she muttered.

"Thought of what?"

She looked at him, took a deep breath, and said, "My bag of tricks." Crawling over into the back seat, she dug around in her duffel, avoiding the dachshund's tongue, and dragged out the laptop. Even with feather-light ROM chips, lightweight active-memory cards and chips, and the lightest of a fully-loaded gigabyte of RAM, the laptop weighed nearly ten pounds. She grounded it with a clip fastened to the metal frame of the 4WD, extended the antenna, dropped the secondary antenna line out the open window, and powered on the system.

When it came fully up, she keyed in the communications software and waited to see if she could hook into the net. She was a year ahead on costs...

She tapped in her password, and the BBS screen blinked at her.

"Yes."

Plissken came over to sit on the shelf beside her, staring at the screen with his good eye.

She stopped to think how to phrase what she needed.

//Comrade here. Anybody got information out west?//

For several seconds, no answer. Then words appeared on her screen.

//Yo, Comrade. Spinner here. Long time no contact. How's the town John Denver hated?//

//Not there anymore.//

//Dionysus on line. Comrade, hear you had some heat. How's tricks?//

//Split T-town.// She took a breath.

//Heat on my tail. Need some tracking.//

//Can do.//

//Who's that?// Lee keyed it in, unable to tell who was who.

//Spinner. I got some contacts in the Lady.//

//Dio. Can give you names out west. Call T-S-T-Y-M-N-A. Got it?//

//Got it.// She knew how to interpret the letters into numbers. //Thanks.//

//J's been asking if anyone's heard from you. You want your local passed along?//

Sam—looking for her? Well, of course he would be... The thought of Sam finding her made

sudden sweat bead up on her forehead. Lee swallowed.

//Comrade?//

//Not safe. Better wait on it.

I'll contact you later.//

//Stay off the main roads. Try the back. Heat's less likely to track you.//

//2&2// She finished the conversation, and logged off.

"Two and two?" said Snake.

"Thanks and talk to you later."

"Will they help?"

"We're old-style hackers. They'll keep a watch on anyone tracking us, and they'll leave it in my mailbox. I don't think anybody's broken my password. We ought to be safe."

Snake nodded. "Who's I?"

"Sam Jefferson." She stared out of the window a moment. "His name's Arkady Peczacek."

"Your contact."

She nodded.

"We'd better get a move on," said Snake.

"We've got to drive as long as you can stand it."

"Right." Lee put the laptop back into the duffel and got back into the driver's seat. "Then what?"

"Then hope we can find some cover. I don't like sudden midnight surprises."

"Neither do I," said Lee.



*you're missing that one final screw
you're really not in the pink, my dear,
to be honest, you haven't got a clue¹³*

The escort asked no questions, did no more than pile the three of them: Rehme, Hauk, and Amanda, into an armoured limousine, and head hell-for-leather towards town.

Hauk ran a hand over the pearl-handled revolver still in his pocket, staring out the window. He caught a breath of perfume as Amanda shifted, and turned his head to look at her.

Their eyes met. She flushed, looked away.

Covertly, so that no one else in the car would notice, he slid the hand out of his pocket and along her thigh. Amanda's fingers twitched. She interlaced them, tucked them neatly against her legs, and sat quite still as his fingers eased along the fabric of her correct uniform trousers.

¹³ *ibid.*

He stared ahead, as if unaware of his right hand's motion. He felt the muscles below his fingers quiver, and then finally, as if she could no longer bear the stroking, she slid one hand down between them and grabbed his fingers.

He left it.

Another black-uniformed commander, this one standing in the middle of a street, across from a gas station/auto repair shop, met them. A tarp covered something in the middle of the street, man-shaped, man-sized.

Bob Hauk's stomach lurched. *Not—dead?* No, he wanted Plissken alive.

The commander looked at his face and paled. The patch above his breastpocket said *Rivera*, and the lettering jerked and bounced with his faster breathing. "Sir—he pulled the girl in front of him. We couldn't get a clear shot to stop them—"

"Sniper?"

"Couldn't get to the roof before he got into the 4WD with her."

His stomach went flat. The street blurred in front of him. "You mean he escaped."

"Sir—yes, sir. You wanted them alive—"

Putting a fist through the pale Hispanic face might have helped. The commander took a step back. Hauk matched it with one forward, and then suddenly spun, and altered his swing.

The bulletproof window popped inward, like a cork, in one smooth piece, exploding through the inside of the limo.

He heard a bone crack in one of his fingers, but felt no pain, nothing but the hot metal taste of cold fury.

"Commissioner!" Rehme's voice.

Amanda grabbed his hand in both of hers, and he twisted his hand in hers and closed around her hand like a vise. Her face lost all color, and she bit her lower lip.

He made himself let go. "Rehme," he said. "Go over possible escape routes with them."



Not until nearly dawn did they find an empty farm with a ramshackle barn still standing. Lee pulled the Aztec in as far as possible, hiding behind a rusted tractor and a combine more in scrap than usable metal.

They ate dried meat and bread, drank some lukewarm coffee, and took turns outside to relieve themselves.

She slept in fits and starts, dreaming of Moishe and Arkady, dreaming of the blinking letters on her laptop. Snake woke her about seven, when she came awake because he sat upright and still, listening to the sound of cars passing by in the distance.

"We better go," he said.

She nodded blearily and focussed on driving.

seven

there's no time for us
there's no place for us
what is this thing that builds our dreams
yet slips away from us
who wants to live forever....¹⁴

Snake shifted again, and Lee snapped at him. "What in the **hell** is the matter with you?"

He looked at her for a long moment. In spite of their truce, she felt sweat bead up on her palms. *Don't forget the gas.*

"Pull over," he said finally. "I want to drive."

"Doctor Al said you were supposed to stay off that leg—"

"I've been off it a week."

"She said two."

"I'll manage. Pull over." He looked at her again, and this time he sounded like he wanted to be placating—he was bad at it, very bad. "You'll be able to get a little more sleep."

"I've slept. I sleep fine."

¹⁴ "Who Wants To Live Forever" Queen

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw his eyebrows raise. "Bullshit."

Well, you have nightmares, too, mister, so don't look at me in that tone of voice. She stopped the 4WD, in the middle of the road, and got into the back so that he could crawl over the stick shift.

Sleep didn't sound like such a bad idea. She went back to the shelf and laid down, dragging a pillow from the net holder in the corner and lying down in the warmed area left by the sun.

Just loud enough for him to hear over the engine, she said, "I liked you better when you were sick and you slept all the time."

He said, equally clear, "I liked you better when you smiled."

She sat up for a second, and met his eyes in the rear-view mirror. He grinned. Lee snorted and laid back down. After a few minutes, she got used to the bumpy ride and fell asleep.



Hauk swung his leg back and forth, perched on the hood of the limosine while a technician worked on setting the plexiglass back into the passenger window.

Kenney had her laptop open on the hood of one of the USPF vans, and was typing into the modem connection, checking possible routes and logical moves. "Sir, he must be going west. It wouldn't make sense for him to head back east."

"North or south?"

She shook her head. "Roads aren't good either way. US Forty's the only decent road through these parts. Most of the others are Indian-barricaded."

"I thought we had a treaty."

"From what I read here, we've had some problems with violations." Forestalling the question, she said, "Ours. The Indian Territory police have taken to patrols and barricades." She hot-keyed the electronic map, and rolled the mini-trackball with her thumb to check some routes. "I think we'll be best off following Forty for the next few miles. We should come across some traces, at least infrared if nothing else. They have to come back to Forty or head into Navaho and Hopi territory. If they drop into Apache territory, there won't be enough of them left to worry about."

"Let's find them first," Hauk said. He seemed calmer now.

The commander, three feet away, still kept a cautious eye trained on him.

Amanda watched him from behind her goggles, her head tilted to cover both her screen and his face. He had, in the slang, "gone ballistic" when he found that Plissken had slipped between the nets again. She rubbed her hand, below his range of sight, wondering if the fourth finger was just bruised or actually broken.

The blow-up worried her.

It looked like Jase might be right. And Jase couldn't be right. They needed Hauk too much.

I need him too much. He didn't mean to hurt me. He was just—at the edge over this thing with Plissken. He's just not himself. It'll be fine as soon as we catch up with Plissken.

We have to catch up with Plissken.



Lee was still asleep, in the back of the 4WD, in spite of his more and more erratic driving. He had to find a good reason to stop. *Don't need for her to know she was right. She's right about too goddamn much too goddamn often.* If he couldn't find a good reason to stop, he was just going to have to pull over and tell her that he couldn't drive any further.

This was a three-lane road. Not much of a three-lane road, but a three-lane road still. There should be **something** along here.

Yes.

On his right, he saw a long, low building. There was a weatherbeaten steel sign, ten or twenty years old, hanging in front of it, but the name was wind-eroded, illegible, only an em and an on still visible. Smoke trailed in sooty spirals from a chimney. As he came closer, he saw that someone had spray-painted "Food and Lodging" on the sign. He took a deep breath and pulled over near a wooden rail.



He leaned back in his seat and began to work the cramps out of his leg, knee to hip, up and down. He could hear the dachshund snoring in the back, and when he glanced back, saw that Natalie still slept, her face hidden in the pillow.

Cramps gone. He breathed deeply and slowly, relaxing the abused muscles. Then he said her name, a little louder than necessary.

She sat upright, almost tossing the dog off the bed. Grabbing for the animal, she looked blearily and bewilderedly around herself. "What? Where are we? Snake?"

"About half-an-hour out of Arizona. Thought we'd stop for lunch. Maybe we can get a few more supplies."

"We've got the whole section under here filled," she said, still sleepy.

"Can never have too much," he said.

"Right." She swung her legs over onto the floor, stood, and cracked her head on the ceiling. "Ouch."

Snake started to ease himself out of the 4WD, putting as little weight on his bad leg as possible. He froze.

A man stepped out of the building's front door.

The stranger limped; his knee seemed to be stiff, locked in place. He was nearly as tall as Plissken himself, but a tight line of some sort of tension left his mouth a thin nervous line.

It put a very bad taste in Snake's mouth.

The man's smile stopped short of his eyes. "You folks stopping long?"

"Lunch?" Lee said, now fully awake and alert to her usual role.

"Fine, fine. But you can't park here. You'll have to park a little further down. There." He gestured along the length of the building to a railing about thirty feet away.

Snake shrugged, slid back in, and restarted the truck. Lee crawled into the passenger seat. He knew she watched him when he had to set his teeth to put in the clutch, and then to let it out. He told himself that if she said a word, he'd knock her sideways.

She said nothing.

He got the damn thing into Park and switched off the engine. He sat there, just breathing for a moment, and Lee got quietly out of the 4WD, after telling the dog to stay, and came around to his side. He stepped off, stiff and awkward, and she eased her arm under his. As if they were a pair. He could lean almost all of his weight on her, looking as if he were playing, being affectionate.

The man walked back with them, moving no more quickly than they did, with his limp. All the way, his head twitched from side to side, nervously. His polite chatter sounded shaky, as if he expected to have someone come out of the corners at him.

Not even local bums haunted the corners of the restaurant. Snake hesitated, feeling the danger like something oozing out of the walls around him. If only he hadn't given way to the urge to have control back...

It would be a good half-hour before the pain settled enough, even with a pill, for him to stand the jarring of the Aztec.

Lee offered him one of the white pills now—not one of your little innocent looking things, but a horse pill, big enough to choke an unwary swallower. He took it with a glass of water, and chewed the chili and cornbread that the man offered as today's special.

Not bad food. Not bad ersatz coffee, even if the chicory in it did taste a little strong. He ate and drank slowly.

She did her best not to look at him, not to watch him maternally.

He couldn't have handled that at the moment.

Finally, the pill kicked in, and the red at the periphery of his vision faded to white. He felt the blurriness settle in as well, the foggy distance he hated in the pain medication. He drank more of the bitter coffee to moisten his mouth.

"Kin I get you anything else?" the man said.

"Can you sell us food?" said Snake.

A gleam came into the man's nervous eyes. He straightened a little and a sort of smile relaxed the lines around his mouth. "Depends. What'cha got in mind?"

"Ahh—" Snake glanced at Lee, but she was obviously waiting for him to finish it. "Basic shit. Dried meat, beans, dried vegetables or canned goods—some of this coffee if you got any to spare."

"I got enough. You want to bring your truck around to the back? I'll hand you out the goods."

Snake started to stand; Natalie put a hand on his arm.

"If you want to wait and pay him, I'll move the 4WD," she said, making it a suggestion. "I need to walk the dog anyway."

The muscles in his leg throbbed as he put weight on them. The pill didn't take away the overexertion; and the wound and his bad eye stung with his own sweat. He nodded. As she went out, he waited. When he heard the Aztec

turn over, he limped to the front counter, and waited again until the man came in from the back.

"Can you take chips?" Snake said.

The man frowned. "I don't get much of those in here," he said. "You wouldn't have it in silver?"

He had a couple of real quarters, and some half-dollars, worth more than the chips they equalled. "I've got a quarter and a half-dollar. Not much more than that, though."

"Gimme me the half-dollar and twenty-five dollars in chips."

That would bring it up to about fifty dollars. *Not bad.* Snake dug out the money, making it look as if he dug for each individual piece, as if his pockets were nearly empty.

As each chip rang on the desk, the man's eyes flicked to the front door. He kept wetting his lips with his tongue.

The small hairs at the back of Plissken's neck began to prickle.

Then he heard the guttural roar of several motorcycles. Old ones, and not well-kept, either.

The roar died. The front door opened. The man cringed.

Plissken knew, before he turned, that trouble'd found him.

There were six—no, eight of them. Two girls trailed in like afterthoughts. The oldest, apparent leader, missed Plissken's height by three inches; he had a round, boyish, punk face. At his heels, a thick-faced kid dwarfed him. The bigger boy might have been eighteen if he'd reached real hard. He wore that vacant vicious look Snake knew. The other four ranged from early twenties to possibly a late fourteen. The older of the two girls didn't have enough tits to fill a hand, nor enough ass to squeeze, and she peered at him through greasy, stringy hair coated with dust. The younger might have been twelve.

As a group, they eyed Plissken. As a group, they sneered. The leader glanced from the vacant-faced boy behind him, then moved towards the back door as if he meant to just brush Snake aside.

SNAKE blocked him.

He was surrounded.

The bully giant grinned. "Where'ya goin', **cripple?**" He had three visible teeth, all black, and breath that would kill a moose at twenty feet. The others shifted to let the giant in front.

He wore the same sort of toe-spiked motorcycle boots Snake himself wore.

SNAKE stepped warily away from the boy, alternately watching the big vacant face and the

leader walking confidently towards the back door. He needed to shield his bad leg...

Jesus, baby, what are you waiting for? He thought at Lee, wishing he could shout to warn her. **Get out of here now!**

A leg swung out at him. He twisted away, spinning on his good leg, and slammed the side of his hand into the boy's gut.

The kid staggered back, gasping and retching, and the others moved away, their faces twisting in rage. They taunted the kid, called him slow.

SNAKE knew who was slow here. The pill affected his reactions. He should have gotten the bully in the solar plexus and finished this.

When the boy got his breath back enough to curse, he came back for seconds. This time he expected trouble. Once within range, he immediately kicked out straight, the sort of pointed-toe ballet move discouraged by Plissken's combat instructors.

The spikes headed for Snake's knee.

SNAKE moved. But the pill fogged him, and the wound unbalanced him. The kick connected, the spikes digging hard into his injured thigh, maybe two inches below the incision. The weakened muscles buckled and gave. The spikes tore down his thigh.

He screamed in spite of himself.

He went down.

Somewhere at the periphery of his hearing, he heard the gangleader saying, "And what's hiding in here?" with a heavy-handed playfulness. The back door squeaked open.

He heard the Aztec's engine. *Lee can outrun those old bikes with the car, if she just gets going...*

The spikes came at him again; he rolled away. But the giant had long legs; the spikes jabbed into the muscles of his calf.

He cursed the scream torn out of him.

Beneath the waves of pain, the girls started to chant, soft and ugly, "In the knee, in the knee, in the knee..."

So that's why he limped... He fought to stay awake, fought to roll away from the boy, fought to get up. Too soon after the surgery, too soon after New York and Hauk's damned deal.

He was going under, into darkness.



no this ain't no technological breakdown
oh no this is the road
this is the road
this is the road to hell...¹⁵

For a moment, hearing the motorcycles, she felt the urge to run so strongly, she was in the driver's seat with her hand on the gearshift. Then the dachhund whimpered, and she took the hand away to pat the animal's forehead, furrowed in worry. Reaching further, she popped the glove compartment and got the nine-millimeter. She checked the magazine—full—and chambered a round in before crawling out of the 4WD.

They might have split up.

She threw herself across the driver's seat, hunting in the glove compartment for a second magazine. She found it, stuffed it into her breastpocket and jumped out of the 4WD.

The dachhund tried to follow.

"Stay, Girl," she said, and shut the door against the animal's whines.

She'd have to risk leaving the 4WD running. They might need to make a run for it.

Crouching below the level of the windows, she crabbed for the open back door.

At the far side of the supply room, she saw the owner, huddled behind boxes. Rats scurried around his feet. He stood rigid and icy-pale; he didn't even move when one of the little brown bastards bit him in the ankle, drawing blood.

Footsteps.

She shoved herself behind the door, where it would open and block her.

"You will learn to shoot this gun, Natalya Petrovna." Arkady's wide flat face met her like a stone wall. He seemed, as always, so sure she would do as she was told that the idea of disagreement never entered his mind.

"I'll never need a gun!"

"Since when did you learn to tell the future? Don't argue with me, comrade."

"No, sir."

"Tovarisch, Natalya. We are all good Russians here, are we not? Comrade is a better word."

"I am an American, Arkady— an American and a Jew."

"Was it an American and a Jew your Uncle put into a camp? Was it Americans and Jews your Uncle left like garbage—to die or live as the guards willed? Is it an American and a Jew who takes my little Russian pills?"

"Yes, Arkady. I will learn to shoot the gun."

The flat planes of the face widened and opened into a smile. "That's my intelligent little comrade." Arkady patted the side of her face with hard smooth fingers. "You will soon see how easy it is."

She heard Snake scream.

For a moment, the sweat on her arms felt like ice, the wind blowing over her from the open door as cold as snow blowing about her on a Maine night.

Moishe screamed when the machine gun tore him apart.

Mata and Ayetsi died in silence.

"And what's hiding in here?" said a young voice, a voice that broke incongruously on the last gruff note. The door swung open, and she braced herself, stopping it from slamming into her with one flat palm.

She took a breath and settled the automatic into both hands.

Snake screamed a second time.

Moishe, Moishe...

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," the boy sing-songed, giggling to himself.

He stepped past her, into full view.

Fucking cocky amateur.... She shot him.

The bullet shrieked and thunked into his back, throwing him forward. On his belly, he whimpered in shock, trying to lift himself on rubbery arms.

Can't waste another bullet. Don't know how many there are.

Moving around him, avoiding legs that might scissor and bring her down, she shoved herself against the doorjamb.

They weren't even looking at her.

A big young man raised one foot, balancing precariously, and showed black teeth in his grimy face as he aimed for Snake's lower legs.

A spray of blood soaked his shirt when she fired. He tottered and fell, his blank eyes widening and childishly shocked. She shot again, and blinked at the ruin of his face.

¹⁵ "Road to Hell" Chris Rea

One of the last four boys broke for the door. She was more accurate this time; Arkady would have approved.

Two of them tried to jump her. She took two running steps and landed on a rickety center table, which collapsed as she sprang off. She stumbled, came up, fired blindly, saw them dive for cover, and picked them off.

The last one dropped onto his knees. He said, "Don't shoot, don't shoot," and when she lowered the automatic, rolled and came up with a knife, running towards her.

She missed on the first shot.

He threw the knife.

Her wrists began to cramp from the recoil. She missed a second time.

The knife skimmed her forearm. She dropped the gun, scrambled for it, and got him less than two feet from her, blood and bone spraying her face and chest.

"Butch?" said the boy's light voice, and she swung around, saw the boyish face appear around the back door as the leader dragged himself into the front room.

The gun went off again, and then again. Her finger jerked convulsively, and the automatic clicked, then clicked again.

Empty.

Bodies littered the floor; in the center lay Snake, unconscious, maybe dead himself.

Motion at the corner of her eye. She ejected the empty clip and slammed home the fresh one from her breastpocket with the heel of her hand.

The motion froze. Two underage underfed girls clung to each other, staring at her, their eyes spoked wheels bulging from their sockets.

"You two," she said, "pick him up."

They shook so they nearly dropped Snake.

"Put him in the 4WD, out back. And be nice about it. I might get pissed."

The shopkeeper stammered something, stuttered in his haste to get out words. It couldn't be important. She ignored it.

She kept the gun trained on the girls.

The shopkeeper pulled the side door of the Aztec open, and nearly fell in his haste to get away from the furiously yapping dachshund.

Snake's body flopped limply into the 4WD.

"On the shelf bed," Lee said. "Hurry, damn you both!"

They struggled with his dead weight; they puffed like old women, dragging his bleeding body onto the mattress. They turned slowly,

shaking, to face her. She gestured with the barrel. "Get out of here. Go on!"

They fell over each other, fell over the edge of the open door, and she slammed it shut behind them. It locked.

The dachshund gathered herself and leaped onto the mattress. She began sniffing Snake anxiously, licking at the bleeding wounds.

Lee slid into the driver's seat again, and floored the 4WD into Reverse, spinning the wheels, spraying sand as she spun a semi-circle and sped away from the motel.

*What do I do if he's dead? He **can't** be dead. It's not fair. I don't know where to go from here. If I went to Seattle, I'd be able to find Arkady; I have a name for there. Arkady would take care of me... Damn you, Plissken! What do I do now?*

She punched Play on the Discman.

*one pill makes you smaller
and one pill makes you tall
and the ones that mother gives you
don't do anything at all
go ask alicia
when she's ten feet tall...¹⁶*

I shot four men, Arkady. He would have reminded her that his name was "Sam Jefferson". I shot four men, and what did that get me?

The car jolted suddenly over a rock. Snake groaned, and she glanced quickly around. The Aztec almost went off the road.

Hastily, she faced around and took a little weight off the accelerator.

Up ahead a sign pointed right, with the faded black letters of 666 North dripping down the white-enameled metal.

She smiled to herself, thinking of Jerry Falwell and Jimmy Swaggart and all the corner preachers in Toledo talking about the mark of the beast.

She turned right.



¹⁶ "White Rabbit" The Jefferson Airplane [later Jefferson Starship, and later than that, Starship]

Rehme appeared out of the motel, dragging an older man by the arm. "Commissioner, we got a witness."

Amanda shaded her eyes a moment, then put her goggles back on, before adjusting the microphone on her laptop.

"But I told the other man," the man whined.

Hauk stalked forward, away from the Apache, and stared at the smaller man. "Hauk," he said. "Police Commissioner, United States Police Force. I'd like to hear your story again." He gave it a beat and a half-smile. "Sir."

The man swallowed. His eyes dropped to the dust. "I—I own this place. We don't get much—I don't get much business here. These kids came in—well, they wasn't much kids anymore, you know, but—they sort of ran this town. Folks that could get out did. Those that didn't—well, we didn't do much about them, you know. There weren't much we could do."

"You recognize the people we're looking for?"

The man glanced back at the motel. "They showed me some pictures. That guy, him and the girl, they came in to eat. He asked me if he could buy some supplies, and I had extra stuff—I know it's against the law—"

"I'm not interested in ration violations," Hauk said. "You got a right to support yourself. I'm interested in Plissken and the girl."

"That who he was? *Snake Plissken*?"

Hauk bit back a smile and looked down at his dust-spattered slacks. "That's right."

"Shit. Well, if it's them in the pictures, then that was them here. And those kids—well, I don't know what they wanted. Maybe they just wanted to rough them up. The big kid, they called him Butch. He wasn't too smart, but he could fight. He went after Plissken. The leader, called himself Quirll, he went on to the back..." His voice died away there, and then he said, "I was hiding. I couldn't do nothing, I knew I couldn't, and I was... I was scared. The girl came in, and she got up behind the door. When Quirll passed in by her, she shot him. Then she went after the others. Shot till she didn't have no more bullets. Quirll wasn't dead—he dragged himself out around the door and she shot him again. Just kept shooting. It was a fucking big automatic."

Hauk blinked.

Amanda interrupted. "Where was Plissken during all this?"

The man's face whitened to nearly paste. "On the floor. Butch—Butch kicked him—in the knee..." He glanced down at his own stiff unbending knee.

"Shit." Hauk turned away.

Amanda went on with it. "Then what, Mr. Ebata?"

"He screamed—he fell, and Butch kicked him again—" Ebata shook himself. "She left the two girls alive. She made them get Plissken into the 4WD. And then she drove away."

"Which way?"

"West." He gestured. "There ain't much out there but the Navaho and the Hopi. And the Apache, but they don't mix much with anyone. If they get onto Indian Territory, they're dead anyway."

"The truck," Amanda said. "A Chevy Aztec?"

"Yes, ma'am, Shivy Aztech, kind of mud-colored, with Ohio plates. Looked to me like a '94 or a '95."

Hauk lit a cigarette and motioned to her.

Rehme answered for both of them. "Mr. Ebata, I'd like to get this in writing. Come with me, would you?"

"Wait." Hauk turned. "There a doctor anywhere west near here?"

"Four Corners. Jesus D'Ovidio."

"Maybe," Hauk said to Rehme, "those girls. They might have noticed something else. Can you pick 'em up?"

"One's still around," the man said. He sounded bitter. "I got the address. She's my daughter, Annie. She's almost fourteen." He turned away and limped back towards the motel with quiet dignity.

Hauk said, "Shit," for no particular reason, and ran a hand over his hair. "Kenney, I need a squad to comb the area. And somebody to talk to the Navaho, if possible."

"Yes, sir." Kenney hesitated. "Sir?"

"Yes, Kenney?"

"She killed for Plissken. She's no hostage, sir. Not any more."

"I know that, Kenney." He looked off at the cloudless sky. December in the mountains. They'd be snowed in if they didn't get out of here. "I don't want either of them injured. Not in any way." He smiled a little to himself. *Killed for him. He's doing her, maybe? Maybe Plissken finally has a price.*

eight

well, look out world
 look who's down here
 you must learn this lesson fast
 and learn it well...
 this ain't no upwardly mobile freeway
 oh, no—this is the road
 this is the road to hell....¹⁷

The road began to narrow about thirty miles along. Lee slowed the 4WD a little, searching for some kind of civilization. She saw nothing at all around her.

The barrier came up ten miles further. She stopped the 4WD and stared at the crude fence blankly, trying to adjust to it. Drive around it? Drive back? No, she couldn't go back. The scent of blood would have brought Hauk down on them as quick as a hound.

Dark shapes came up over the horizon. She started to put the 4WD into reverse, but saw other shapes in her rearview mirror.

Horses. Men on horseback. Horses?

A big chestnut came so close to the window she flinched. The rider tapped her window, gestured for her to roll it down.

She hesitated. He tapped the window again.

She rolled the window down.

"You—go back," he said. "No further."

"I can't go back," she said. "I just want—"

Snake groaned from the back, and she swung around, forgetting the man for the moment.

"Snake?"

He mumbled something. The dog whined.

She turned back to the man. He peered past her, twisted on the saddle, and said something to another man, who rode up on the other side.

"Engine, you turn off," said the first man.

She obeyed, because the horses ringed her, and she would have to go through them to escape.

One of them tugged at the side door.

She went for the gun, but the man reached through and grabbed her hand.

"Door, you open," he said.

She stared at his black narrow eyes, at the white hair knotted on the back of his neck.

"Door," he said. She heard an unusual sound in his voice: kindness. She'd forgotten, over the past few years, what kindness was. The only recent kindness in her life had been Doctor Al. "You open."

Lee slid into the back and unlocked the door. A tall black-haired man, wearing a hat with a feather and a fringed leather jacket as worn as Snake's jacket, stepped inside. He looked the 4WD over, then went back and checked Plissken over, taking a pulse with a professional manner, examining the torn flesh.

The man still at the window asked something in a language she didn't know.

"T'óó baa'ih," the second man said.

"I have to get him to a doctor," she said, trying to put her desperation into her voice, not sure how much English any of them spoke. "It's the second time he's been hurt like this, and I don't know what else to do. We won't stop—just let us drive through..."

The feather nearly brushed her face. She pulled back a moment, and the black narrow eyes studied her face a moment.

"I'm Coyote," he said. "I'm the doctor in these parts. Follow us to the hospital."

"A hospital?" She sagged back on her heels in relief, and then the panic set in. "I can't take him someplace where—" *I can't say that.* "We don't have papers—" That was safe enough.

Coyote smiled. "I'm not going to turn you into the authorities. You're on Dinétah land—You'd call it the Navaho reservation. You've been on our land for the last twenty miles." He leaned out of the 4WD and said something, finished with "T'óó baa'ih," again. Another man collected the reins of his horse. Coyote shut the Aztec's side door, then went back and sat on the bed, holding Snake still.

¹⁷ "Road to Hell"

"Go on," he said. "Follow One-Eye. The old man. He'll lead us to the hospital."



Coyote let her sit in the room while he poked and prodded Snake. He nodded, finally, and said, "I'm going to have to stitch him up. That muscle's torn." He frowned. "Your husband's not going to be really back on his feet for some time. We can get him a cane, that's no problem. But he needs time to heal."

"I have some money," Lee said.

His frown disappeared. His face went to smooth marble. "We don't use the white man's money here."

"The truck," she said, in desperation. "We need the things inside of it—but I could give you the truck for his care."

The dark Navaho face, with his sharp narrow nose and the flat high cheekbones, showed no expression at all. "That's a lot," he said finally. "One of the old houses near here is empty. Family built a bigger one and left the other for someone else to use. Doesn't have any land with it, of course. But no one's died in it. You could stay there. I think there's a few bits of furniture left."

She nodded. "Thank you."

He shrugged. "You better wait outside. I'll have to set up for surgery." He turned towards the inner room. "Mary! Get the sterile kit!"

He'll be all right. He's got to be all right now.

Coyote turned back, saw her face, and a softer expression broke through his reserve. "I'm the best in these parts," he said. "Graduated from Harvard fifteen years ago."

"And you're here?"

He bent over the leg and cut the jeans away from the wound. Not looking up, he said, "My people are here. I belong here." He glanced back up. "My people are my family. Your husband will be all right. I'll see to that."

It felt as if he'd been trying to wake up for a very long time. Snake forced his eyes open.

Something fairly heavy settled itself beside him. The dog? But that meant that.... Well, it must mean something. He rolled his head to the left and found a large striped cat lying beside him.

Dachshunds don't turn into cats.

"Cat!" Lee's voice. He felt the air swish around him, and then her thin pale hand reached out in his view space. The cat lazily laid himself over on his back.

Snake lifted his left hand.

Lee gasped and stepped back, then said, sounding annoyed, "Why didn't you tell me you were awake?"

All he could get out of his throat was a strangled, dry cough.

"Sorry," she said. "Should've thought—" Glass clinked against glass. He tried to raise his head and felt it expand like a balloon. He dropped it back.

"Don't. I'll help you sit up." She sat down next to his head and put an arm behind his shoulders. In a moment, he lay back against her shoulder. She put a glass of water against his lips.

He gulped a mouthful, took a breath, then gulped again.

"Easy," she said. "You've been out a while."

He swallowed water again, and tried the cough one more time. This time it felt as if he could talk. He braced himself against her thigh, trying to sit up by himself, and felt wool under his fingertips.

She wore a black wool skirt and an embroidered blue velvet shirt. Her hair had been brushed neatly back and pinned up.

"Where are we?"

"In Arizona. Not quite to Four Corners." Her voice crackled with sarcasm. "Off Route 666."

He grimaced. "Where off Route 666?"

"A Navaho hospital. What used to be one of the Navaho reservation hospitals."

He put his head back against her shoulder and considered this. "How long?"

"Three days. The wound got infected; you've been running a fever."

He closed his eyes, tried to remember—and got one sudden clear picture. "What happened?"

Under his hand, her muscles stiffened. He felt her swallow. She inhaled, then said, "I had the gun." She gave him an odd twisted smile and said, "I told you I could shoot if I had to."

He patted her leg.

Her hand tightened on his shoulder. "I didn't know which way to go. I saw 666 and thought—"

He matched her twisted smile "Kind of appropriate."

"I got met by three Navahos on horseback. One was the doctor here— They call him Coyote—" All at once she relaxed. "I had to trade them the Aztec."

The truck? He went blank a moment. Then he said, "Okay."

"There wasn't anything else."

"No." *Money doesn't mean all that much to the Navaho, I've heard.* "What about you?"

"Me?"

He twisted his head a little. The dizziness hit him again, but when his vision cleared, it occurred to him that she was dressed like a Navaho woman.

"I used to be a teacher," she said. "I still know computers. And they have an old one and only Coyote knows how to use it. So I'm teaching. I— we have a house. It's not a castle, but it's got trees." She lifted her head, and he caught the edge of a smile. "We have a horse. An old horse. One of the families gave it to us."

He looked down at himself, at the woven blanket covering him. He had on some sort of long tunic and nothing else. And there was a needle in his arm, attached to a tube attached to a—plastic Clorox bottle? He reached for the tube. Lee grabbed his hand.

"Out," he said.

"It's antibiotic drip. For the infection."

"Don't like needles," he said. "Take it out."

"No," she said, with more force.

He glared at her, and she gave him glare for glare. He reached for the needle again, and this time she slapped his hand.

"Stop it!"

A man appeared in the doorway. Snake stopped, caught by the intruder. Medium height—about his own—hair in two long braids, hat with feather—Navaho.

"Problem?" The Indian stepped inside and looked at them both. He smiled at Lee, in a way that made Snake's instincts sit up and pay attention.

Likes her, does he? His hands better stay where they belong.

The Navaho checked out the tube and the clear bottle, and nodded. He looked down at Snake. "I'm Coyote. Doctor in these parts. Glad to see you're back with us."

"Take it out."

Coyote calmly took out paper and tobacco pouch, and rolled a cigarette as he looked at Snake. He offered the cigarette; Snake accepted it. Coyote rolled a second for himself, lit both, and sat down on the nearest chair.

"Shame to waste all that work sewing you back together," the Navaho said. "You want to die, it's your business."

"I don't like needles."

"Don't like 'em myself. Only use 'em on my patients when I have to. Whatever tore up your leg was pretty filthy. Lot of damage there." He rested a hand on Snake's head, with a cool professional manner that made the gesture inoffensive. "You're still running a fever. Keep it down for two days, and I can safely take the drip out. Or I can take it out now and let you go through it natural."

"How's my leg?"

Coyote frowned and drew in on the smoke. "You're gonna limp a long while, man. I think you'll heal up pretty good."

Well. Snake reluctantly nodded.

The doctor relaxed, and so did Lee. "Good," said the doctor again. "Your wife has been worried about you. I'd like to get you well before we take any chances."

My wife?

Lee flushed. As the doctor left, she edged towards the door, and seemed about on the point of bolting out as he did. Plissken stopped her with one word.

"Natalie."

"Hmh?"

"My wife?"

"I had to tell them something," she said, sounding defensive. "and they assumed I was your wife, we were traveling together, and—" she ran out of breath and said nothing for a moment. "It didn't seem to hurt anything—" She looked at him over her shoulder.

He motioned her to come closer. She did. He pointed to the pitcher, and she sat down on the bed to give him another glass of water. After that, Snake Plissken grinned at her and said, "Well, at least they'll say I've got good taste."



To Snake's shock, he didn't heal overnight.

Not that I expected to be up and around...

But he had.

Instead, he wavered in and out of fever for a week. Coyote let him up twice, after the third day, and then let one of the assistants, an older

toothless Navaho woman, help him onto the side of the bed to pee, and finally onto a commode instead of a bedpan.

The leg wouldn't hold his weight. Coyote gave him crutches.

Coyote watched Lee, and talked to her, and laughed with her.

Snake stared out of the window in his hospital room. *A week. Took a week to get here. Middle of November, high north New Mexico, Navaho reservation, high country.* Thursday he saw a few brief flakes eddy by the glass. *If I—we don't get out of here soon, we'll be stuck till spring thaw. And we had to trade the car; how the hell are we going to get out of here?*



They had been having the same argument for some time, or so it seemed. Each time it had come up, she had cut it short by walking out, and that ended his protests because he could not get up to go after her.

Today, though, Snake faced her, balanced on the handmade crutches, still arguing the same point.

"No," she reiterated, "I will not help you leave. Coyote says you aren't well enough to walk on those things and I've got no intention of helping you. You **meshuggeneh**, that—that putz broke your leg, you can't even walk on it, and I should think you'd be grateful to stay put a few days!"

"I don't like hospitals. And I don't like doctors. And he didn't break the leg, he chipped the bone."

"Same difference."

He essayed a none-too-steady step. "I can manage."

Lee racked her brains for the proper Yiddish insult, and couldn't come up with it. Finally she stalked over to him, and prodded him sharply in the chest with one index finger.

He swayed and fell backwards, landing in the chair behind him and catching himself at the last minute, cursing.

"You can manage, huh?" she said.

Snake Plissken glared at her.

Even though she was out of arms'-reach, she stepped back anyway.

And then he said two words, and two words only. "Get out."

She started to snap at him, but didn't. She got out. *And why, Natalya Petrovna, are you crying?*



Lee drew her heavy woolen shawl more snugly around her head and shoulders as she traversed the distance from the reservation school to "her" hogan. She tucked her books on the Navaho language up under her arm so that she could bundle herself into the jacket and the woolen square even more securely.

At the turnoff, she paused, peering down through the early duskfall to the hospital. *I could go and see him... No, he's the one who kicked me out. It's not as if I care to see him. He wants to see me, he can just send for me.*

It hadn't started to snow, yet, but for all the good being in Arizona did her, she might as well just have stayed in Toledo and frozen. She shoved open the rickety wooden door and the wind blew her inside.

The dachshund, wriggling and tail wagging, met her at the door. After a brief pat, the dog headed back towards the warmth of the fire.

The firelight's flickering made the room seem cozy—*Firelight?! Natalya Leah Markov, did you go and leave the fire built up, you idiot?*

Snake was sitting near the fire; his bad leg, still casted, propped up on a kitchen chair. He looked across at her, then leaned forward and lit a cigarette with a straw lit from the coals. The doctor must have gotten him a pack—it was the distinctive blue of the reservation-made paper.

The dog sighed, turned around three or four times, and lay down on the hearth rug.

"You're later than the doctor told me you would be." Snake took a long drag off the smoke.

Her heart started beating again, and to her surprise, her cheeks were burning as if frostbitten. She bent over to untie her boots. "Had to test a couple of my students on the computer. You could have **told** me you were getting out of the hospital today."

"Hard to do when you haven't been in to see me in a week."

"You could have left a **message**," she said crossly, setting the boots next to the fire. "You told me to get out. I know when I'm not wanted. And four days is not a week, and it's only been four days since I was to the hospital."

His good eye narrowed, and he drew in on the smoke. "It's real bright of you to come waltzing in here and the fire built up. What if I'd been—"

"What? A rapist? burglar? criminal? There's no rapists on a Navaho reservation, and there's nothing worth stealing here—and a burglar wouldn't hang around if he had stolen something. And you are a criminal, so where does that leave me?"

"What about blackbellies?"

"Hell," said Lee, "if it'd been blackbellies, the whole reservation'd be buzzing with it."

"You're rationalizing."

"So?"

"So what the fuck are you—suicidal?"

"Sui—" Her voice failed her. Then she threw the only thing handy at him—her glove. "If I'd been suicidal, I'd've stayed in Toledo until the blackbellies came bursting through the damn front door. If I'd been suicidal, I wouldn't have killed six men for you—six, you son-of-a-bitch! I'd have just let that **putz** use me as the centerpiece of a gangbang, and let you bleed to death on the floor. I can see what it got me anyway—stuck out in the middle of the American Sahara with a crippled genius I can't even turn my back on! What do you think I'm here for, college boy—my health? If I had any way out of this—any way—believe me, I'd take it!" She threw the shawl around her shoulders, grabbed the jacket and boots, and headed for the door.

The dog whined, and frantic toenails clicked on the floor.

The chair went over with a thump as he stood up. "Where are you going?"

"Out. Crazy. None of your business, **Mister Snake Plissken**. Don't wait up for me. There's stew on the stove if you get hungry and you can be bothered to serve yourself."

"Lee—"

Her grand exit stalled as she pushed the dog back inside and shut the door hard. The wind chilled her back to ice in the next moment, and she hastily donned the boots and jacket. *I forgot my gloves. Tough—I'm not going back in there.* She tucked her bare hands under her armpits and began to pace up and down to get some warmth into herself. *This is bright. Now if you go back in,*

it looks like you're giving up. He's not damned likely to come out after you, not on crutches and unfamiliar ground. If he'd come anyway. The wind picked up. It clawed its frigid way through the shawl, and jacket. Her feet were damp, and colder by the moment.

The stable was no more than a lean-to, but she curled up in a corner of it, and drew the shawl over her like a blanket. Her fingers looked a little blue... she flexed them, and pressed them between her knees.

A voice startled her. She looked up at one of the older women, with a vaguely recognizable face—Listening Woman, was that what Coyote had called her?—and the woman said something again, in Navaho—Dinetah? what was the language called?

"Fight?" the woman said finally.

"Yes. Fight. Oh, yes."

The woman frowned up at the sky, and then at the hogan, and stooped to pat Lee's shoulder and motion that she should get up.

Glancing at the hogan, Lee shook her head.

The Navaho woman scowled. "You come. We go there—" She pointed to where a faint plume of smoke could be seen.

After a moment, Lee nodded and wearily obeyed. In a few minutes, she found herself sitting crosslegged on a carpet, sipping something hot and bitter. The strange woman—yes, it was the one Coyote called Listening Woman—was rubbing her bare feet and telling her off in no uncertain or understandable terms.

Lee set the cup down. "He's a **goy**," she said, as if it should explain everything. A sudden gulping sob startled her; it was her own throat making those... She buried her face in her hands, the ragged gulps tearing her lungs apart.

Listening Woman clucked and made exasperated noises, and finally settled down across from her, saying some soothing-sounding phrase over and over again.

She hadn't cried this hard since her parents' deaths and Moishe's suggestion of escape. When she heard her voice dwindle off into harsh gasps, she dragged her sleeve against her eyes and nodded at Listening Woman.

Listening Woman pantomimed something.

Lee frowned and squinted, and tried to remember what, if anything, there had been in her Comparative Cultures seminar about Navaho customs. The older woman was pretending to bundle up something, and to set it outside a door—to bundle up Snake's clothes and put them

outside, wasn't that a form of divorce among some—? "Oh, no! I couldn't!"

The older woman said something exasperated again and shrugged. Standing up, she motioned then that Lee should go. "Home," she said, in that battered English.

After a moment, Lee nodded. *Kick him out or keep him.* What would she do to survive out here without him? Injured, he wasn't much good—but he knew the way to Los Angeles, and she didn't. *And this country's bad country now...* "Home," she agreed, sighing.

The frigid wind froze her on her way back to the hogan. She fumbled with stiff fingers to get the door open, and the dog whined at her feet and licked her hands when she stooped to warm them at the fire.

The fire had been banked, with some skill. The dishes had been put away, and the curtains were drawn around the bed. She paced through the main room once, before curling up in front of the fire still fully-clothed, with the dog cuddling next to her. It wouldn't be comfortable, but it would be warm.

The curtain rattled back. "You'll catch a cold if you stay there," said Snake.

"So what do you care?"

His voice took on that drawn-out sweetly sarcastic note that made her want to shake him. "You might die of double pneumonia and then the guilt would haunt me the rest of my life."

"I hope you die of—lead poisoning," she retorted. "I should have listened to Listening Woman when she told me to divorce you."

For a satisfying instant, he looked stunned. He recovered quickly, though. "You can't divorce me. I haven't asked you to marry me yet."

"Well, don't bother. The answer's no."

A long pause. "Don't worry. You can't keep me in the manner to which I'm accustomed."

"The manner to which you're— The Queen of England couldn't do that."

"Will you get your ass into this bed?" He sounded as if he might get up and grab her.

Lee hastily stripped off her outer clothing. She picked the dachshund up and dumped her on the bed first, as a barrier between them. She crawled under the covers. "That fire's going to go out," she said, rolling over away from him.

"No, it's not. I know what I'm doing."

"If you knew what you were doing, we wouldn't be here."

His voice came out of the dark. "Next time, remind me to pick somebody with permanent laryngitis when I pick a driver."

She sat up.

"And prettier," he added.

She threw herself down onto her half of the bed, narrowly missing Girl, and turned her back to him. *Prettier? You—*

By the time she fell asleep, he had been comfortably asleep for a long while.



Balanced on his crutches, Snake stared out of the open door. The dog stuck her nose out, then went all the way out to perform dog business. The wind blew sharp and chill. Tail between her legs, the dachshund scurried back inside and settled in front of the fireplace, licking her paws, and noticeably shivering. A few scattered snowflakes fell like flies out of the greyly lit overcast skies. It occurred to him, again, that they could be stuck on the reservation for the whole damn winter. He told the thought to mind its own business.

"Shut the door, will you? It's cold in here!" Lee said.

He glanced over his shoulder at her. She was sitting up in bed, the covers drawn up around her shoulders, and shivering. The cold was making his leg ache. He shut the door and made his way back to the bed.

"What's the weather like?" She yawned.

"Snowing."

"Snowing! You're not serious!" Lee hopped out of bed and came over to pull the door open. There was a blast of cold air, and a flurry of white flakes; she shivered again and shoved it shut.

He caught one of the flakes whirling about the room on a forefinger and held it out to her. "See? Snow."

She looked at it cross-eyed and thoughtful for a moment, then bit his finger.

He swung at her.

The dog jumped to her feet and barked.

At the last minute he realized it had been a joke, of sorts, and pulled the punch. The swing missed, ruffling her hair, throwing him off-balance and backwards. She grabbed him. He held on to her shoulder until he steadied himself.

"Hey," she said, "I thought that you could stand on your own two feet."

"Don't be smart," he told her.

"Occupational hazard. Born that way."

"I'm surprised you've lived this long."

There was a pause while she checked to make certain he wouldn't fall if she let go. Then she turned away, reaching for her clothes. When she finally spoke, the words were deliberately casual. "So am I."



The White House stood like a shell above the "new White House", which extended several stories below-ground, shielded from accidents and Gas by air-scrubbers, generators, recycling systems, and tons of lead shielding.

Outside the "windows" of the Oval Office, computer-generated murals showed a cold late December day, almost exactly as the view would have been from true outside: snow drifting in whirling eddies past the window, grey and overcast, the trees visible in the distance hung with snow as fluffy as cherry blossoms. The room even echoed, faintly, with the hiss of old-fashioned radiators, the heat coming and going in the cycle of the ventilation system.

Hauk had not been invited to sit. He sat anyway. The President winced at the acrid smoke of the unfiltered Camels Hauk smoked [perfectly legal ten-per-cent tobacco, cut with shredded cedar and tobacco-flavored dried seaweed]; he hadn't been invited to smoke, either, but he lit a second Camel with every evidence of enjoyment.

"This is not what I expected to hear," said the President.

To himself, Hauk smiled. Outwardly, he focussed his eyes over the short man's head and replied with a straight face and a relaxed voice. "It's the only conclusion that we can come to, Mr. President." *'President of what?' And I told Plissken*

'not funny'—he had it more on the mark than I wanted to admit.

"You've botched this whole thing from beginning to end," the little man said, tapping the four remaining fingers of his left hand against the desk. "From the beginning—"

"You want to fire me, go ahead," Hauk said, narrowing his eyes and slouching in the chair.

The other man froze a moment, the color draining out of his face, leaving the faint blue shadow of his beard like pepper scattered over his jaw. "Now, Commissioner, I never said—"

"You said you were dissatisfied." Hauk took a hit off the cigarette, knocked the ashes neatly off into the desktop ashtray, and stared at the smaller man from the forward-leaning position.

"Mousey" shifted uneasily in the chair. After a second, he coughed and changed the subject. "You're certain it was his body?"

Playing his trump card, Hauk laid the photo down on the desk in front of the man. The little man was squeamish, if he remembered correctly—and the Russian girl, if not an accurate shot, was at least a thorough one. "The description the shopowner gave us fits, sir, but as you can see, the bodies aren't exactly identifiable."

The little man gagged. But only for a moment, and then he turned away, gathering some sort of dignity around his dwarfish lumpy body. "Very well, then. Finish up the paperwork."

"Right away, sir." Hauk smiled to himself.

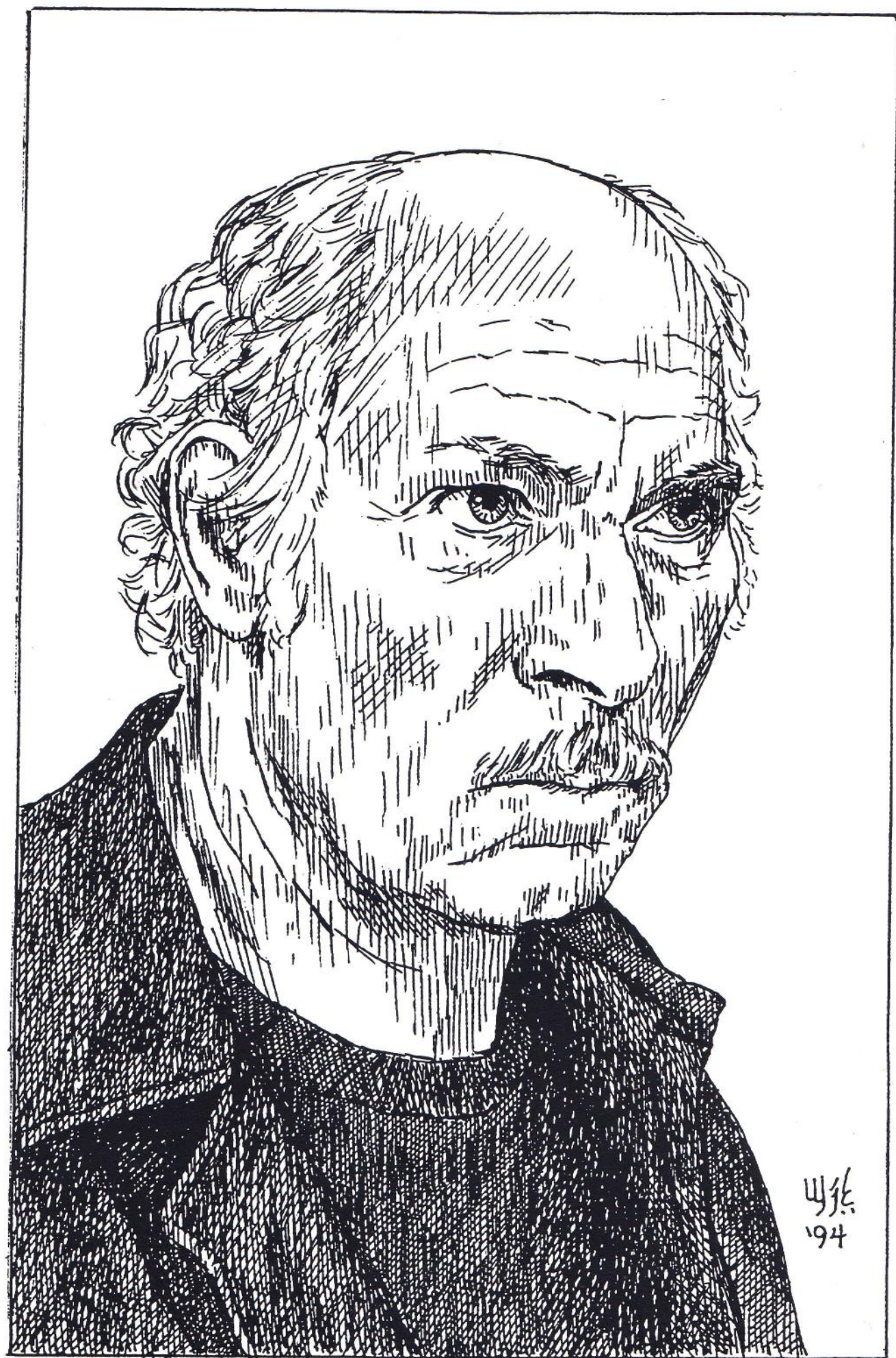
Rehme and Kenney stood in the hallway, trying not to look out of place. Rehme stuffed the butt of his cigarette into the nearest ashtray.

"That's it," Hauk said. He started humming.

Amanda Kenney frowned. "That's it? He accepted it was Plissken?"

"Pictures tell the truth, Kenney." Hauk led the way into the elevator, then cut off the rest of the conversation by drawing a hand across his throat. He would bet "Mousey" would have the elevator bugged.

Once in the limo, with Rehme sitting next to him and Kenney facing him, leaning forward, Hauk went on with the conversation. "Winter's coming soon. Plissken's injured. They'll have to hole up. Logically, going cross-country, they'd be heading for either Seattle or San Francisco. Somewhere in there, we'll find them." He had to find them. There was no possibility for failure.



nine

We turn the wheel and break the chain—
 put steel to steel and laugh with pain—
 We dreamers in castles made of sand...
 The road to Eden's overgrown—
 Don't you sometimes wish your heart was made of stone?¹⁸

Snake leaned against the bed a moment before pushing himself off and limping painfully across the room to the kitchen table. It was a satisfaction of a peculiar and distinct kind that after two and a half weeks of practice, he could make it completely across the small hogan without having to stop or having the damned crutches trip him up at every other step. Holding onto one of the two chairs a moment so that he could get his breath back, he then eased down onto it. *Great. At this rate, I might be able to take on a wet paper bag in a week and win.*

From behind him, unexpectedly—she was too damn quiet, he didn't like it that she moved so quietly—Lee said, "The rocker's better padded."

He didn't turn to look at her. It hurt too much. "I don't want padding."

"And aren't we in a pleasant mood this morning," she said, almost mocking, unaffected by his bad humor. Dragging the other chair over, she put a pillow on it and propped his bad leg up on the pillow. "Okay?"

He nodded. She went back to the bread dough she was kneading. As she pushed, folded, and turned, her body swayed back in forth in rhythm, and her hands slapped with the same steady beat, like a slow kind of drumming. After a minute or two, she stopped and wiped the back of her hand against her sweaty forehead.

"You want some coffee?" she asked.

"Yeah, fine."

She covered the dough with a wet cloth and stopped to wash her floury hands.

When she brought him the cup of coffee, he reached out to take it, before she could simply set it down and walk away. Snake slid his fingers around hers as well as the cup, then skillfully got the cup away with one hand while remaining in possession of her with the other. "I thought," he

said, "that you liked me when I was sick," and stroked his index finger up the back of her warm work-roughened hand.

She flushed, jerking her hand free. "I said I liked you when you were sick and sleeping. You're up and bitching at me right now."

Snake smiled. Leaning back in the chair again, he swallowed some of the hot liquid. "I like your coffee," he said, and went on smiling at her.

Turning away, she yanked the cloth off the dough and shaped it almost viciously into loaves.

A knock at the door caused them both to jump. Girl leaped to her feet and yapped.

"I'll get it," said Lee. She sounded relieved. "It's probably Listening Woman."

Navaho names. After Lee'd explained, he'd laughed at what he was called—One-Eye, Limpy, Snake (of course), and He-who-falls-off-horses. He had fallen off. No excuse that it was two days after the doctor'd removed his cast, as well as his first time on a horse since summer camp.

The only name she admitted to was "Teacher". One morning, though, Listening Woman had called her "Clever Fingers" in front of him. Lee had turned bright red. He kept it in mind, just in case.

He slid the magnum onto his lap, and covered it with the tablecloth, his hand on the trigger, cocked and ready.

A broad-faced narrow-eyed man with sun-bleached hair came in. Lee stopped cold, her hands still half-raised and covered with flour. "Arkady!"

"Sam," the man said warningly, but then smiled and stooped to kiss her. The dog backed up to Plissken's feet and growled at the stranger. As Lee disengaged herself, "Arkady" looked over her shoulder at Snake.

¹⁸ "Heart of Stone" Cher

For one instant, Plissken's finger tightened on the trigger, bringing the gun around under the tablecloth. The dog seemed to sense his reaction, and her growls turned even more threatening—hair bristling on her back, she stalked three stiff-legged steps forward and laid her ears back.

He's alone—I could shoot him safely enough—right. And explain to the Navaho militia later. The gun went back down on his lap; he let go of the trigger.

Arkady—"Sam"—smiled again. "So this is how you escaped Toledo, Natalya Petrovna!"

Russian. The man's Russian, all right. "Sam", my ass. Fucking "Jascha Bondshevski" would be a better name.

"I am impressed," continued the Russian, with his damned-shark-smile. "I've heard quite a bit about you, Mister Plissken."

"Call me Snake." *Been saying that to a lot of people lately.*

"Snake." Arkady put a predatory hand on Lee's shoulder.

The dog leaped forward and bared her teeth, still growling.

"And I see you've acquired a watchdog," the Russian said. He did remove his hand, and eyed the dog warily. "Such a big terrifying animal too."

"The little ones tend to bite harder," Lee said, lightly. "When you're small, you have to make it count." She pinched off a piece of bread dough, dropped it into the hot coals, then raked the embers down and set her bread loaves in the oven. She kept her back to them, stiffer than usual.

The Russian continued, "I want to thank you for looking after my—friend here." The unsmiling dark eyes went back to Lee. "And, Natalya Petrovna, if you can tear yourself away, I would like to speak with you."

Plissken shifted. Lee's eyes met his, and he was surprised to see that she looked almost pleading. He settled back.

"In here?" she said to Arkady.

"But it's such a lovely day. Why don't we walk around your—house?" He ran a glance over the whitewashed interior and lifted his upper lip at the place.

She flushed again. "Snake, we won't be long."

Plissken nodded, liking this less and less.

The dog tried to follow her, whining, but she coaxed the animal back inside and shut the door.



The back window by the kitchen area was open. She claimed baking made her too hot. He heard the two sets of feet against the hard-packed snow, and the feet stopped in front of the window. Deliberately? Arkady spoke to her in Russian. Would Arkady know that he spoke Russian?

"The police were after your reptilian friend in there, not you, Natalya Petrovna."

"They'd have taken me if they'd found me. Why should they be after him?"

"Why should it matter to you? Would I tell you lies?" A long pause, and then he laughed.

"One would think you wished to stay among the savages! Lia, I have another house already arranged for you. A month on my route and we will be in Boston. Yes, Boston! And we will be sure to keep any hint of underground from your cousin Pavel. Now, isn't that a fair offer? Come, let's walk on."

After a second, Snake dug into his pocket for a cigarette. He drew in the smoke with a sigh. Then he just sat, staring at the doorway. The tip burnt his fingers. He dropped it and lit another.

Lee came in alone, saying over her shoulder, "A half-hour, Sam. I won't be late." She was pale, except for two burning spots of color high on her shallow cheekbones. Her hands shook, and her eyes had the red-rimmed look of someone wanting desperately to cry.

Snake barely watched as she stuffed clothes into her backpack. He sucked furiously on the cigarette, thinking of what he'd like to do to this 'Arkady', if he were well enough to fight.

On the other hand, the Navahos wouldn't let her be forced to go, I don't think... and there's the gun... "Lee."

On her knees, she paused and looked up.

"You're not going with him," he said. "Not unless you want to. And I don't think you do."

For one long moment she sat poised on her heels, staring at him. Then she began to cry.

"Christ," he said, "I'm an invalid. If you want me to hold you, you'll have to come here so I can do it."

He caught the edges of something like a cross between a sob and a laugh. Then she did come to him, and he gathered her into his arms and set her

down on his good leg. He had stroked her hair when she was asleep, often; but now she was awake, and even though the softness of the black strands was familiar, it felt odd to feel her head against his shoulder.

"Thank you," she murmured. With an embarrassed cough, she added, "But I already told him I wouldn't go."

"What?! The clothes—"

"He does his business at the laundry. It's the only decently-sized place besides the community hall. I figured if I was going into town then I might as well wash our clothes. Unless you've some real objection—?"

"Stupid bitch," he growled, and pushed her head back down on his shoulder.

Her voice sounded muffled. "If you're in such a good mood, can I borrow some money?"

"No. But I'll **give** you whatever you need. What's it for?"

"Bi—ah, pills."

"Pills?"

Long pause. "Ah—birthcontrolpills," she said, all in one breath.

He didn't laugh. He wanted to. Instead, he dug out his wallet, gave it to her, and set her on her feet before slapping her ass and telling her, "You'll be late and your boyfriend'll be pissed. Better move it, baby."

"He'll be pissed anyway." She hoisted the backpack and whistled to the dog, who came gaily leaping from the fire and out into the snow.

Snake lit another cigarette, looked at the diminishing pack, and carefully smoked this one down to the filter. Then he moved to the rocker after all.

After a bit, he made coffee, and took the bread out of the oven to cool. He decided to cut into one of the hot loaves, and stood tossing the hot piece back and forth until he could eat it without burning his mouth.

When the coffeepot was half empty, he began to worry.

He made a fresh pot of coffee when the first was gone and began to consider looking for her. Then he heard the crunch of boots on the snow, and the dog's excited yapping. He relaxed. *Shit. Better get back into the chair before she thinks I was worried about her.*

He settled back into the rocker, cup in hand. When she came through the door, he said gruffly, "It took you long enough."

"Worried about me?"

"Hell, no."

She smiled.

Girl rushed over to the fire and dropped down to clean her pads, biting out packed snow. From her pack, Lee dug out six flat oval yellow boxes, and put them in the back of the cabinet. "There were a lot of people there. He only comes in once each six months."

"What a shame."

"I knew I shouldn't have let you two anywhere within a mile and a half of each other. What my sociobiology prof used to say about male territorial urges was right on the mark."

"What did he say?"

"**She** said nothing suitable for mixed company."

He snorted.

"I told him I'd meet him in Seattle but it would take me six months to get there at least, and he handed me the boxes... He thinks I'm having a fling. He said I'd get over it."

"You going to meet him in Seattle then?"

Plissken drank his coffee.

"That's what I told him."

"That's no goddamned answer."

"No. It's not."

"Shit," he grumbled. After a minute more, he limped over to the coffeepot and got her a cup of coffee. She was sitting at the table folding clothes, and as he put the cup down, he leaned over to watch her face as he said, "Did he ever tell you that the Senate passed through an unconditional pardon to all the Russians and Russian descendants who were in the—sanctuaries?"

Her head came up so fast she nearly hit him in the chin. "That's straight? No shit?"

"Straight. No shit."

"Then Moishe—Then we didn't—Moishe didn't have to—"

"Coyote tells me not all that many came out of the camps."

"Flu and food poisoning. And malnutrition."

"That's what I heard."

Her brows had knitted together. With something like a smile, she said, "Oh, you had to be there to understand."

"Moishe?"

"My husband."

"Oh." Snake turned away and limped back to the chair.

After a minute, she said softly, "We and five other people decided to make a break. It was the middle of winter, with a heavy snow falling... My parents had died the day before. Moishe was shot just as we reached the last barrier."

"Wonderful thing, democracy. Shoot 'em here or shoot 'em there doesn't make any difference. Arkady—he get you the safehouse?"

"No." He saw her shoulder muscles ripple under her blouse. "Man named Lesyna. Runs an— an organization of sorts. You know the kind. Needed a place for his people to stay on their way through. In return I got protection. It sounded like a good deal to me. Outside was no place for a nice Jewish girl."

"You pay for your protection in whatever coin suits him?"

"What do I look like?" she said angrily. "You ought to be in my shoes for a day or two and see how long you'd hold out. If I wanted what he had, I gave him what he wanted. Simple business transaction."

"You never brought it to anybody upstairs?"

"Why should they believe me? Or what if they didn't object? He wasn't rough, he didn't smell bad... I've done worse things to stay alive."

"Hey," he said. "Don't cry—"

Lee raised her head to look at him, with wide bleak empty eyes. "I don't cry about it. Not anymore."

"Come here," he said.

"Look, it's all right—"

"Natalie," he said. "I don't care if it is all right. Come here anyway."

She was warm and smelled of yeast and smoke. And she wasn't crying. He hoped that he'd meet Arkady—anywhere—when he, Plissken, was well. It'd be a pleasure to beat the hell out of the Russian...

Her mouth was very close to his, with her head on his shoulder. He knew better, after what she'd just said, but before he gave it a decent amount of thought, he brushed her lips with his.

She went stiff. Under his breath, he cursed; then he let her go. She didn't run. She put her head back down on his shoulder and talked into his sleeve.

"Look, Snake, I don't—I mean, if that's what you want—"

He shoved her away. "Goddamn it! You think I'm gonna beat you up because you don't want t'fuck me? What the hell do you think I am anyway?"

The little dog huddled near the fire and whined, her pointed nose turning back and forth as she glanced from one of them to the other.

Halfway across the room Lee turned on him, her face red and her dark eyes narrowed. "I don't know what you are! What I think you are doesn't

matter. I've said I'd stay here, and now I'm **stuck** with you. And if you get rough with me because I don't want to screw you then what do I do about it?"

Plissken stared at her. One of these days she'd say something in an argument that he could snap back at...

Lee went behind the curtain that screened the bed from the rest of the hogan, yanking the curtain shut with the kind of frustration that said she wished she had a door to slam. There was a sound as if she had thrown herself down on the bed, but she didn't sound as if she were crying. He wasn't sure what he'd do if she started crying. Well, he wasn't sure what he was going to do anyway.

He lit another cigarette, his third in an hour, and crumpled the empty pack into a small blue heap. *Have to get another out of the cabinet...* The dog padded near him, and heaved herself up, front paws resting on his good leg. He lifted her into his lap, and stroked the fine short black hair, then scratched behind her ears. She sighed and settled herself into his lap, but her brown eyes watched the curtain.

What do I do now—The cigarette ash trembled with its own weight. He stubbed it out, carefully, setting the unused half aside later for consumption, and set the dog back on the floor. She looked up at him, turned away, and curled herself up in front of the fire. He eased himself up and out of the rocking chair.

Lee lay across the bed, huddled up with her face turned to one side and her fist against her mouth. Her fine black hair was spread fanlike over the pillow. She didn't move, not even when he dropped heavily onto the bed's edge.

"Natalie."

Her shoulders went rigid. Plissken out a hand on the nearer shoulder and rubbed it absently.

"Take it **easy**, Jesus. You asked me a question... I'm Snake Plissken. I'm running from the blackbellies."

She interrupted. "We're running."

"I know what I said. **I'm** running. I said earlier you didn't have to go with Arkady. And you don't have to go with me. The Navahos would take you in, I think." He grimaced at that. Coyote wouldn't mind a bit if she stayed behind. "Or you could go back to Ohio. Or to Boston, to that blackbelly cousin of yours. Or to Seattle. I can get you on the tubes, if you want. I'd rather—I want you to stay here." He stumbled, lost the words, and then found them again. "Listen, I wouldn't come on to

you if I didn't want you. But nobody's going to make you. Hell, I'm not into rape."

She rolled over onto her back and stared up at the ceiling. He didn't move, in spite of the tightness between his legs, in spite of her scent and the way she looked, lying on her back.

Lee sat up, slowly, and with an almost wild-animal sort of caution. Plissken kept himself as relaxed as possible. She turned to him, still motion by motion, and scrutinized him. She put a hand against his unshaven face, then slid her fingers through his hair. He shifted his weight back a little, keeping himself level. Precisely, she rested both hands on his shoulders, then bent over and kissed him.

He put one hand on her left hip. She pushed at his shoulders, and he let himself down onto the bed. With one hand free to break a fall, she eased down after him.

He rolled onto his side, sliding his bad leg into the most comfortable position.

"An honest man," she muttered.

"Shh," he said. "You'll ruin my reputation."

She let out a cross between a snort and a laugh. "Not much chance of that."

"Don't talk," he said. He ran a finger across her lips. *This has to be right. I'll ruin all of it with the wrong move. Have to be sure what she wants.*

Lee kissed him.

He lay with her a moment, his right arm draped over her shoulder, his left under her hair and her hair wrapped around his fingers. They traded tentative and innocent kisses. Then she tugged at his shirt.

He sat up, and let her unbutton the front while he got the cuffs. She pushed the shirt from his shoulders, and he pulled it away from his back and dropped it on the floor.

His indoor shoes and the pants were next. He heard her catch her breath, before she traced the tattooed cobra with her nails and he flinched at the sensation. She glanced at him; her eyes crinkled with laughter.

She traced the cobra all the way down to the tip, circling him with her index finger, the nail making excruciating little forays around the tattooing detail. "I bet every woman you—meet—just dies to know where this ends."

She sounded so easy with it, so natural. At least some of her shyness seemed to have been scoured away; or this was some of the camouflage she'd taught herself over the last couple of years with "Sam" and whatever people frequented the safehouse.

She flicked the hair back over her shoulder with one hand. Then, as if it were perfectly normal, perfectly expected, she bent over him and took him in her mouth.

He hadn't expected it. He froze for a moment, struggling to understand her action and his reaction. And then he got a picture of just how Arkady must have used her. *Next time I meet the bastard, he's fucking dead.*

He lay back against the pillows, and got a handful of the blankets in his fist to help him not to grab for the back of her neck and shove her head down.

Lee teased him a little, with teeth and tongue, playing him on the edge. The strands of her black hair brushed against his thighs, against his balls; he shuddered and closed his hands on her shoulders, fighting the urge to force her head down on him, to thrust upwards, deeper... He was on the edge of spilling over, and he slipped a hand under her chin, lifting her head in the cup of his hand. *Not going to treat her like he did—like she was any woman.*

Her eyes questioned him.

His voice sounded rough in his own ears.

"Your turn—c'mere." He pulled her up along the bed, beside him once more, and undid the blue velvet blouse with its bone buttons. Her skirt took less time than his pants, and he rolled carefully over onto his side, adjusted the bad leg, and slid his hands down her soft skin, parting her thighs.

Probably never had any of them—and there must have been several; she was too good for it to have only been "Sam"—*give her back what she gave them*. The musky female scent curled into his nostrils, and he reminded himself, again, to go slow, to give her time.

Lee gasped.

"Easy, baby," he whispered, and found the right spot again with his tongue. She tasted warm and musky and exactly the way she should. He drew it out, played with her, teased her.

"Snake—"

He propped himself on his elbows a second. "Want me to stop?"

"No—"

He grinned. "Then don't worry; I won't."

Her fingers wound into his hair. He had to hold her hips still while he worked her over, and still, when she came, she arched her back and her heels dug into the mattress, lifting both of them off the bed.

He rolled himself onto his back, and sat up against the headboard, getting his breathing to

normal while she lay there, her eyes wide and dark in the lamplight. Then she slid up onto her knees, and shifted, easing herself astride his legs. One of her hands found him; her other braced against his shoulder.

Just like I wanted her... She came alive against him, all the fire and the passion set free, her tasting sweet in his mouth and against him. They kissed again, with one of his hands wound in her hair; he pulled back and rubbed his thumbs over her cheekbones before she leaned into him again.

Her hips began rocking, sliding him deeper into her, and he pressed his head into the headboard for a moment, eyes shut, sure he knew exactly to the second how long it had been since he'd felt a woman that wet and eager on him.

He clenched one hand on her ass, cupping her left breast with the other, rolling her nipple with his thumb.

Her hair fell against his face and his throat as her hips moved for the both of them. He could barely move the leg without the pain interrupting. He gave her the control; or she took it.

Got her, he told himself, and kissed her again, kissed the side of her face, and then the side of her throat as she pressed her face into his shoulder. Her hips rocked faster, and he urged her with his hands, wanting the release, but wanting to be sure she hit it again with him.

Then her teeth closed on the skin of his shoulder and let go, and she put both hands against the headboard, arching her back. He let all of his breath out in one smothered shout, and felt no pain at all, nothing but the rush.

She lay still against him, the sweat mingling with his, and then she sat back on her heels, as if to swing off his thighs. He grabbed her hips.

"No."

"I'm too heavy," she said.

"Stay with me," he told her, and pulled her back to him.

Somehow they slid down in the bed, with her still lying over him, and he stroked her hair, her back, and found every spot on her body that reacted to him all over again.

She pulled the covers up over them, and turned her head to lie sideways on his chest.

"Yeah," he said. He closed his eyes; the pain seemed less, in leg and eye. He curled his hand around the inside of her thigh, and said it again, with contentment. "Yeah."

He could her breathing slow; felt her fall asleep.

He turned his head, and turned the lamp down until the light flickered out and left them in the dark.

ten

*i believe in love, but with no conditions,
and even that sometimes doesn't make it sufficient...
oye mi canto¹⁹*

Something other than the creaking of the wind blowing ice and snow against the window woke him, and Snake sat up. The dog, from her nest of blankets on the floor, sat up and yapped. Next to him, Lee tried to snuggle down into the quilts and furs—and then sat up just as abruptly as he had, rubbing her eyes with one hand while she tucked the bottom quilt up around her bare breasts with the other.

The sound repeated: someone thumping at the door. The dog jumped up, hair bristling on her back, and barked.

"What the hell—?" he muttered, and grabbed his clothes from the floor. Pants, shirt, gun. "Okay, okay, Girl, I heard it. Enough!"

The dog looked back at him, but went on barking.

The thump came a third time, and this time Snake shouted that whoever-the-fuck-it-was should hold his goddamned horses, for chrissakes, he was coming. As he started for the door, he glanced back at her bare shoulders and scowled. He picked up a handful of her clothes up from the

¹⁹ "Oye Mi Canto" Gloria Estefan

floor and tossed them at her before he pulled the curtain shut. "Stay put."

It had started snowing again. He wondered if the Russian had gotten caught by the snow, and hoped the other man froze to death. It must have been snowing for some time; the snow spilled inside the outer entrance. Two young Navaho men on horseback sat there, one carrying something like a long walking-stick. The stick-holder gabbled something at Snake, but it made no sense at all, since it was most likely in Navaho, and what Snake knew of Navaho would have fit on the head of a pin.

From just behind his shoulder, Lee said, "They want us to go with them. There's a community Sing, and as long as we're here we're part of the community. He says it's important."

"I can't sing."

"Not that kind. It's a—curing ceremony."

"A what?!"

"Don't ask me. I know the word, that's all. But I know it was how they used to cure their sick, and I guess they still do the same thing."

He hesitated, weighing the ridiculous notion against the serious expressions on the Navaho's faces. "Okay," he growled. "Tell 'em we've got to get dressed."

Over his shoulder, she said something in gibberish to the two Indians, who nodded and settled back as if to wait. Snake pushed the door to and turned away. She was already at the bed, finishing with her clothes.

As he hauled the shirt over his head, Snake said, "I thought I told you to stay put."

She blinked. "Did you? I was putting on my clothes; I must have missed hearing you."

"Don't hand me that shit!"

Stepping back as if she expected him to belt her—and he was considering it—she said, "You can't speak Navaho. What good was I back here?"

"When I tell you something—"

"Damn it! Last night I never promised to love, honor, and obey you the rest of my life!"

"I didn't fucking ask you to." He put one hand on her shoulder and shook her. "But there's only one of us going to be in charge around here and let's get that straight right now."

She looked down; her mouth set in a straight sullen line. After a minute, he shook her again and bent down to fasten his boots. "You ready?"

She pulled her shawl up over her coat and hood. "Yes."

Plissken buttoned his coat. "Good." He opened the door, started to step out—and cursed. The snow was up past his knees.

The second Navaho led the old horse that Lee'd brought him forward. The first one held out the walking stick, indicating that Snake should use it to get to the horse.

As he plowed through the snow, feeling the wound in his leg throb and burn, Snake reminded himself that he had said a week ago they ought to be leaving, and had put it off. That yesterday he had told himself they could get stuck here over the winter, and here they were, in the North Wind's pocket. And here was the horse. If he fell off the beast this time, he was going to... He didn't fall. He urged the animal close enough to the hogan door that she wouldn't have to walk in skirts and leggings. Wrapping one hand securely in the reins, he held a hand down for her, and with far more agility than he'd have given her credit for, Lee mounted. Didn't even pull him off this time—she was improving.



Lee acted as if she didn't want to touch him. Impatiently, he took her arms and put them around his waist. She stiffened. She'd fall off if she stayed that stiff; he slid his fingers around hers and squeezed, gently. After a moment, she relaxed and scooted closer to him, resting her face against his back.

The community-house was still a good distance, even by horse. It was a good thing that they had guides: the blowing snow hid the trails, even the marked ones, and dizzied any possible direction-sense.

As they neared the community-house, he could barely hear the wavering sing-song of someone chanting above the whine of the wind. They were directed to the stables, and Lee bedded down the horse while he watched. He hadn't done that since summer camp, either. She followed him towards the long low building.

Halfway there, she stumbled. He heard her fall, and turned back. She was kneeling in the

snow, panting. He pulled her up, and brushed the snow out of her face and hair.

"Here, hang on to me."

She nodded, having no breath to speak.

The only light in the hall was the flickering eerie twilight of a good-sized fire in the main fireplace. By that red glow, he could see that all the activity was centered around the middle of the room. There were a brace of half-clad men there, and one man between them, trussed securely, and held down on his knees. There was something odd about that man... As he peered at the bound man, Plissken saw him twist, throw back his head, and laugh.

It was a high-pitched, senseless, staccato laugh. A—crazy—laugh.

Plissken stiffened, digging his fingers sharply into Lee's arm, and she yipped. "Shh," he said. A crazy.

"What's wrong?"

"He's—a crazy. I've seen them—" Vivid memories of stinking hands breaking up through a wooden floor, giving off the hot humid stench of human excrement sent the bile churning in his guts. "What are they doing to him?"

"I can't be sure," she said. "I had some of this in my cultural-anthropology seminars in college, and some of it I got from Listening Woman, but there are things they don't talk about to outsiders, and so I don't ask. But this is some kind of Way—that's a ceremony. I don't know what kind of Way it is, but I suppose they're trying to cure him. Maybe it's a—an Enemy Way. I think that's something to do with witching."

"You're putting me on."

"I am not. If you don't want to believe me, then don't. Make your own explanation then."

"You can't cure gas sickness with chants and—and sand sprinkling—"

"Sand paintings. I think they made a kind of picture of the reality or the illness."

"They can't believe it works," he said, keeping his voice soft, so no one else would overhear. He'd learned a long time ago never to knock someone's religion in their hearing.

"You have something better to offer?" retorted Lee. "If they think it works, then maybe it does. And if it doesn't work, where's the harm in it anyway? Anything that holds a community and a family together nowadays is good in my way of thinking."

"Well, what do we do?"

She glanced around them. "I guess we sit down. I don't think we're supposed to drink or eat, and we probably shouldn't be talking."

The man in the center of the room during the chanting was the doctor, Coyote. Beside him was the plump older woman Lee called Listening Woman. Coyote was dribbling sand from his clenched fist into some kind of complicated pattern: it looked like a stylized kid's drawing, stick people and clouds, or stick people and a house, or something.

Sweat began to drip down Snake's back; the air in the room lay hot and heavy with heat, smoke, and the smell of unwashed bodies. He shrugged off his coat. Lee had slid hers off earlier, and draped her shawl over her feet. Her skirts were spread out around her, drying in the heat radiated from the great fire.

The doctor's chanting never stopped. In the close thick air, it must have been torture on his throat, and Snake wondered how the man could remember such a long formula—or was he making it up out of his head as he went along? But it was a long thing, obviously, and such a long speech, in a language he didn't know, done in that slow bass drone, began to put him to sleep. He felt himself drift off, and hastily jerked his head upright.

How much of this did Lee understand? He'd laughed at her for her study of Navaho, and her defense that it kept her busy; but she was a lot better off with these Indians than he was. He looked across at her. She was still sitting upright, with her arms around her shins and her head on her knees, staring broodingly at the ritual.

Pills and Russians. She watched the ceremony, wishing that once she could hear the see-saw chanting of a *minyán* again. These people at least had the comfort of a religion, of an established order. She had—

Little blue pills and an arrogant Russian supplier. Relics of a war that looked likely to go on until there was no one left to fight it. Every morning, every night, when she recited her prayers—though she was a woman and it didn't count—she said, in parody of her father, 'Thank the God who made me that I was not born a man.' If she'd been a man, she might have been in the first few struggles of that war. But she had gulped one of those little blue pills that morning before Snake opened the door, trusting in Russian science.

Russian science. An antidote to gas poisoning. One pill a day... funny kind of multivitamin. This time I have to find a chemist. Somewhere there

has to be a chemist I can bribe or threaten into telling me the chemical composition and how to make these pills. And then I won't have to go to Arkady any more and I can really be free and safe—if there's anywhere left in the world that you can be free and safe.

In the center of the room, Coyote performed a Way that had come down to him from generations of grandfathers. He believed it would work. She believed in her pills.

Where's the difference—the God you make or the God that made you?

An arm eased around her shoulders, and she rested her head against his arm. Her father would have had a stroke—the man was a gentile, after all... and that brought her right back to the question from which all the drone and smoke of ritual and ceremony could not distract her.



Kenney's face looked out of the screen at him. She looked—not-serene. Her eyes were wide and the pupils contracted, her generous mouth as tight as a whore's haggling price.

"We can't get men in there," she said. "It's been snowing for twelve hours. If Plissken and the Marcus woman are on the reservation, they'll be there till February. The winter storms have set in; the roads are blocked. The main highway in, past Gallup—a landslide cut it off completely yesterday." She put all her willpower into the next sentence; Hauk could feel it. "They're there for the duration, sir. And we're here."



*god is alive, magic is afoot—
god is afoot, magic is alive—
alive is afoot, magic never dies....²⁰*

Nine days the ceremony took, Listening Woman's granddaughter had said to them. The last two days the entire community participated. That was part of the "magic", she said. He had looked at her serious face, and the crop of red hair she hadn't washed or brushed for the last nine days, and said nothing about his lack of belief in "magic".

Good thing they left plenty of food and water for Girl at all times.

They had been sitting for hours. Snake's legs had begun to cramp, to the point where simply shifting weight and position no longer helped. The floor was hard—his jacket padded it a little, and Lee had insisted he use her shawl as well. When she shivered, he put an arm around her and pulled her against him. To his surprise, she had not pulled away; she had wriggled closer to him.

Not once was there any hint of the sun outside. When he listened, he caught the creaking of the wind, the spattering sound that the snow made against the walls and roof. Hadn't stopped snowing at all that day.

He took another quick, wary glance at the crazy—Stopped and looked again.

The crazy was looking at the doctor. **Looking.**

Coyote nodded, and gave the 'patient' a bowl of something. The man made a horrible face, but drank it—and promptly vomited back into the bowl. The doctor took the bowl away and threw its contents into the fire, then broke the bowl and threw that in as well.

The brace of guards unbound the man, and he stood up slowly, like someone who'd been sick for a long time. Had been sick, but was well now.

Snake watched it, unbelieving, forced to believe, and for a long time he said nothing, nothing at all.



"All right, so we can't go in." Hauk paced back and forth. "And the Indians won't tell us anything. They must trade with someone. Find out who they trade with, Kenney."

"Sir—"

"What?"

"Those databases are the restricted ones. The CIA's old files, the FBI's—is that what you want?"

He looked back at the screen. "I need those codes, Kenney." He could use their relationship to coax her. He shoved the thought aside.

"Yes, sir," she said, and he heard something like satisfaction from her.

Maybe satisfaction that he **hadn't** coaxed her? "Kenney, this is not an order—but you treat it like one. If anyone asks questions, you send them to me."

"I trust I know my job, sir," she said, cutting him off at the knees, and then cutting the connection.



²⁰ "God is Alive, Magic is Afoot" Leonard Cohen, sung by Buffy Sainte-Marie

*many hurt men wondered, many struck men bled...
many weak men wondered, many strong men thrived,
though they all stood solitude, God was at their side...*²¹

A quiet Snake was not a restful thing.

Very slowly, Lee rolled over on her side in the bed. He was on his back, with his good eye closed, and the lighted cigarette drooping from the corner of his mouth. Over the time that had passed before they'd—made love—she'd learned not to move suddenly, even in her sleep. (Was it just last night that Sam had gone and she had given herself to Snake? Old euphemisms die hard. It had been last night.) She didn't think it safe to touch him.

His eye flickered open abruptly, and he looked up at her. No expression; his mouth was still slack and peaceful, as if he were not quite aware of his surroundings.

"Nickel for your thoughts," she said.

"Nickel?"

"Price of inflation."

He snorted. Then he pinched the cigarette out, and tossed it into the wastecan beside the bed. One arm slid under his head, and he regarded her steadily, with blank mouth and eye, until she squirmed uneasily and drew the covers up over her naked breasts.

His free arm moved then, lazily, reaching up behind her head to draw her down so that he could kiss her. The other hand came down, and he rubbed her cheekbone with his left thumb, with the same uncharacteristic gentleness with which he stroked her hair when he thought she was asleep.

"I don't know what was in that fire, but it must have been a damn powerful drug," he said.

"You don't believe what you saw?"

"I can't believe what I didn't see."

"You did see it," she answered, patiently, "because I was with you and I saw it."

"We must have been high."

"Don't be stubborn. I've been wasted, and I know when I'm wasted, and I wasn't. And neither were you."

"How can you believe that some Indian's mumbo-jumbo could reverse gas poisoning?" He sounded furious.

"I saw it. I did a lot of study into the power of the mind to cure cancer once. And I'm not too

convinced of 'what is reality' anyhow. And I'm an orthodox Jew and used to believing in six impossible things before breakfast. And... they believe in it."

"But it can't have happened. Damn it—Witch doctors went out of style a century ago!"

"What makes more modern medicine so powerful," she said, "but the fact that we believe it'll work? And what are you so upset about anyway—the fact that it worked or the fact that you want to believe it worked?"

"You talk too damn much, you know that?"

"You wanted my opinion and you got it. Now do you want me to go to sleep, or do you want to go on talking?"

He glared at her. She was wise to that by this time, and met the glare without flinching. Finally, he rolled his head back and sighed heavily through pursed lips. "How can you believe in it?" he said, as if the former discussion had never taken place.

Lee began to trace the cobra tattooed on his abdomen. "I don't know if 'believe' is the correct term. Here, I have no trouble accepting it. It fits into the society, it feels right, and I believe in it, I suppose, in much the way that they believe in it. I don't know if I would, if I had your background. And if I were outside, not involved in them the way I am, I'm not sure I'd believe it then." His muscles were twitching under her fingers, and she slowly traced the snake down to the shockingly realistic scales tattooed at the tip of the tail. *Pun there; whoever talked him into this had a bizarre sense of humor.*

Snake's breathing took on a more erratic rhythm. His left hand slid up her side and cupped her nipple, his thumb circling the nipple and sending odd jolts of electricity through her.

"Do you want to believe in it?"

"I can't," he said.

And then he wrapped both arms around her ribcage, pulling her over on top of him, and did nothing but hold her, with his eyes shut, his mouth a thin grim line, and every muscle in his body as taut as bowstrings.

Lee let every bit of her body go limp. She rested her head on his chest, and regulated her breathing to the slowest possible rhythm.

His head shifted, and he turned down the oil lamp. In the dark, his lips brushed across hers, moved down her throat to the hollow at her collarbone, then tracked back to her mouth.

He said her name, once, low and huskier than usual, and she twisted to help him enter. The leg

²¹ *ibid*

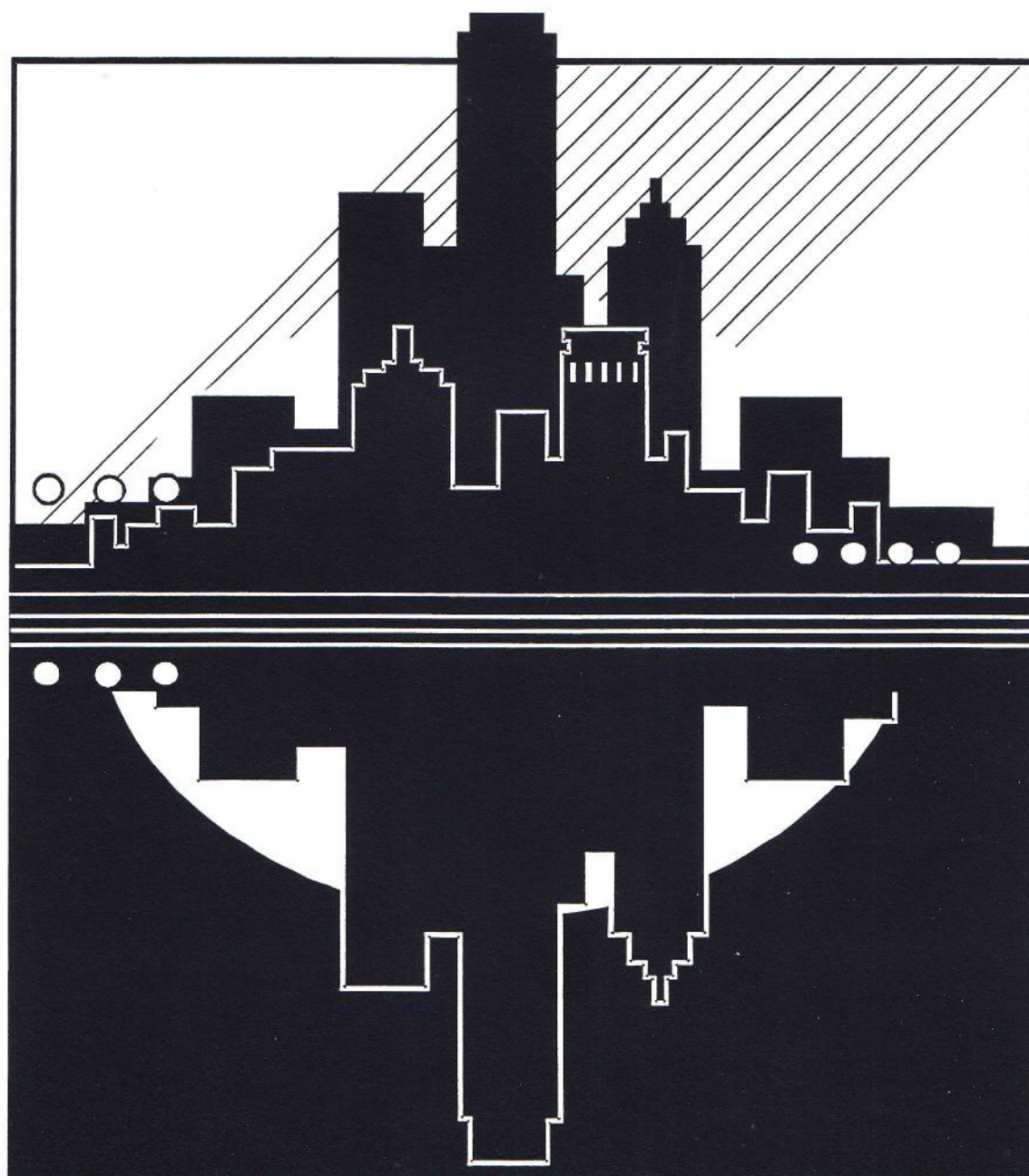
still hurt; she knew that because he caught his breath with the thrusts. She moved onto her knees, rubbing her nipples over his, and rocking her hips into him.

At times like these, she thought she meant something to him, maybe even something more than a woman's body. She thought, once in a while, that she might even mean almost as much as she meant to Coyote.

Coyote never said anything of his interest, but she knew that look in a man's eyes.

Snake grunted, and his body bowed upwards as he pulled her down against him. Then he lay back and held her there. Eventually she felt him relax, and not too long after that she slid over beside him and went to sleep herself.

*many men drove magic, but magic stayed behind,
many strong men lied—
they only passed through magic
and out the other side....²²*



eleven

And the outside temperature's rising
 and the meaning is oh, so clear...
 One card short of a full deck,
 I'm not quite the shilling,
 one load short of a shipwreck,
 I'm not my usual top billing...
 I'm going slightly mad...
 Just very slightly mad...²³

The ashtray on the desk was full, and overflowing. Hauk had stopped smoking an hour ago; Rehme had not. The Police Commissioner was leaning back in his chair, his feet propped up on the desk, and his eyes closed as if sleeping. Rehme was pacing. Six steps one way and twelve the other, back and forth.

"You'll wear a track in that carpet," Bob Hauk commented, not opening his eyes.

"I don't like fooling with the computers."

"A—Kenney knows what she's doing." *Don't call her Amanda in front of Rehme.* He wanted that separate from the job. The memory of Amanda kneeling in the center of the bed, naked, the blonde hair loose and curling around her shoulderblades; of Amanda's teeth tugging at his earring; of Amanda's husky voice whispering things he could not imagine Lieutenant Kenney saying; of the scent of her passion; these he could indulge himself with while waiting. It kept the memories of Janine at bay. It made everything but Plissken and the job seem less painful, less real.

"Of course she is," Rehme said irritably.

"And she's loyal to—us." Loyal even more than the remainder of the USPF soldiers; Hauk sometimes wondered about the quality of their loyalty: to an institution? a license to kill? a man?

"Something could go wrong. What if someone catches the tampering?"

"Who?"

"The Pres—"

"Mister President doesn't know his ass from a hole in the ground. His advisors are too scared for their political lives to notice something that he didn't. And anybody else will be looking for clumsy tampers. Not experts."

"What's so important about a set of fingerprints anyway?"

Hauk had refused to answer that question the last four times it was asked. Now he opened his eyes with a grunt of annoyance. "I want to know what a pair of fingerprints that're on what used to be the CIA's restricted file were doing in that safehouse. I want to know whose fingerprints they are."

Rehme went paste-white.

With a shove of his foot, Hauk sent a chair in the man's direction. "Sit down before you fall down. The CIA are disbanded; their files were transferred to the President's restricted file. Relax."

"Terrific," was the sour reply.

After a minute, the older man reached into a drawer and drew out a tin canteen. He pushed it across the desk. Rehme picked it up, with hands that shook, and swallowed from it—and choked on the overproof bourbon.

"Jesus, what is that?"

"Jim Bean. Now if you've got your guts back, why don't you just sit and smoke quietly, and wait for Kenney to bring us our information."

Rehme lit another cigarette from the butt of his present. He emptied the ashtray into the basket beside the desk and field-stripped his left-over butt. It seemed to be an unconscious thought.

The workstation on Hauk's desk pinged once, then did a Big Ben chime, *bong-bong-bong*. Rehme stood up so fast that his chair went over backwards; at Hauk's snort of amusement, the younger man reddened, set the chair back on its feet, and dropped down onto it.

Bob Hauk leaned over the terminal and made a sound expressive of extreme pleasure. "I'll be god-damned. Take a look at this."

²³ "I'm Slightly Mad"

"I don't know that I want to incriminate myself," said the other, but he came around the table to take a look himself. "I'll be... Shit, what do you think of that?!"

The major note next to the fingerprints was simply a name: **Peczazek, Arkady Mikalovich, aka "Sam Jefferson"**. Further notes identified the subject as male, Russian, 40, lt. brown hair and blue eyes. The sentence that had grabbed both men's attention was as short and neat as all the information. **Known NVA agent for the Russian Federation, armed and dangerous.**

"The girl," Bob Hauk said abruptly. "With Plissken—we'll have to get her as well."

"The girl and Plissken? You don't want much, do you?"

The Police Commissioner quelled him with a glance. "That safehouse is out of commission. From what we know, she ran that operation; she'll know soon enough about—Arkady—that we can track him down. And he'll have the information I want, I think."

"I wish I knew what in the hell was going on around here."

"You will." Bob Hauk poured himself a shot of the bourbon and savored it. "You will."

"We don't even know where they're holed up for the winter."

"They couldn't have gotten far with his injury. The biggest community in that part of the country is the Indian Reservation. Covers three or four states, I think... Someone there's bound to have seen them. All we have to do is wait for the weather to clear enough that we can go in after them."

"You sure aren't in much of a hurry."

"What I'm after," Hauk replied coolly, "takes time anyway. The longer I have to wait, the more I'm likely to get." He thought for a second of Kenney, smiling at him from his bed, open and waiting. *Worth waiting for.*



Snake bent down to pull his boots from under the table. Behind him the covers rustled, and he paused, cocking his head to one side. Her breathing had changed.

"Snake?" she said, her voice thickened with sleep. "What are you doing?"

Well, killed any idea of leaving her a note. She'd never learned to be discreet; she was going to say something smart when he told her... "Hunting. With some of the men."

"Hunting?" The sheets rustled, and there was the sound of her feet against the floor. She came out from behind the curtain with one of the furs wrapped around her, covering her breast to knee. "This early?"

"You think antelope sleep all day?"

"No, but—what about your leg?"

"It was your friend Coyote's idea." Deliberately, he put a certain emphasis on the sentence, and heard her respond to that; even though it failed in its attempt to distract her.

"Don't sound so jealous. That's silly. What about your breakfast?"

"I had bread and cheese. I was trying not to wake you."

She looked at him a moment and then said, "You were trying to slip out so that I wouldn't hassle you. Beginning to feel like a henpecked husband?"

"Fuck off," he growled, with a smile.

Her eyes went to the window, and she frowned. "What about the snow? It's snowing out there."

He felt the emotional reaction stiffen his spine. He wasn't going to think about the snow. About Hauk's son, with the letters tattooed on his fingers: H-A-U-K. About crazies, gas, going crazy... "So what?"

"Isn't snow just as—"

"Shut up."

"Snake?"

Hands breaking up through the rotten boards.... A splinter of glass cracking his goggles, and the world filled with the sweet sickening odor of gas, and the burning throbbing pain of the invisible scalpel tearing at his eye... "I said shut up!"

"Snake, I didn't—"

He slammed the door behind him and stood in the falling snow while he tugged on his coat. For a second he thought he smelt that same sweet odor being carried on the snow and wind, and it bit its nauseating saccharine way down into his guts, mingling with the acrid fear of the gas poisoning. *Damn the snow anyway*, he told himself, and started off for the stables.

By the time he pulled the old mare up in front of the hospital where Coyote was waiting, the edges of dawn crept up over the horizon.

The doctor glanced at him and pursed his lips. "Trouble?"

"Nah, fight with the woman."

"Huh," Coyote nodded to the others, "All ready. The Way first, like I said before, and then we go."

Religious ceremonies before hunting—well, it made sense in a way. Not that much difference in hunting an animal and hunting a man; sometimes

there wasn't much difference between man and animal. As some people had occasionally pointed out to him.

He knew enough Navaho now, with Lee's help, to understand the words of the Stalking Way. He was expected to participate. He did. All through the words of the song, he watched the faces of his fellow hunters.

'Let me walk in beauty': these men he had smoked with, sat and listened to tales of 'the old days'. 'I take your life in beauty': how could killing be beautiful; it was just a way of survival. Sometimes killing was a tool, a governmental tool—here it was—beauty?

He could hear Lee saying reasonably to him, "Do you want to believe in it?" And he clenched his fist against his own answer.

There was no beauty in the world. Not anymore.



A rabbit darted out in front of him. He brought the bow to bear without thinking and shot. It leaped, and fell, blood spilling across the snow. After the antelope he'd missed, it embarrassed him.

Two-Fingers came up and nodded solemnly. "It's a very small antelope," he said. "But not bad for a first shot. Maybe now the other antelope will respect you for your skill and come to throw themselves at your feet, since even a white man can walk in beauty."

Plissken snorted. He knew when his leg was being pulled. They had nearly enough meat anyway; one or two rabbits would be enough, no need to kill more than necessary...

Why was it not necessary to kill more than was needed?

Was that the beauty they talked about? Balance?

Something to do with Lee's keeping a calendar so that she'd know when Yom Kippur was and she could say Kaddish for her parents?

He glared at the one skinny rabbit as if it could answer him, "A very small antelope," he said to the old man. "Coyote does better."

Two-Fingers grinned through a mouthful of rotting teeth and motioned for Snake to start on back. "Snow coming fast."

He was nearly out of breath; out of condition due to the leg, and as the snow began to fall, he gulped in the cold sweet air.

He was irritated by the bad taste the air had.

Further on he felt dizziness sweep over him, and he stopped the mare to catch his breath. His bad eye

was throbbing like a second pulse, and the other eye blurred suddenly, disconcertingly.

He couldn't see through the snow. He couldn't see where he was.

He couldn't remember where he was.

The gas was sharp and saccharine in the snow and air. Gas.

Leningrad. Russia.

Funny, it didn't look like Russia. And where was the woman—there had been a woman, he remembered a woman.

What was her name?

The old man beside him gabbled something at him. A peasant? Well, he wasn't in uniform, so he'd have to be a peasant. But it didn't look like any Russian village he'd seen, and he couldn't think of where he was supposed to be. *Leningrad? The bombs over Leningrad...*

He could remember a song. He was alarmed at the forgetfulness.

Maybe he had hit his head when his glider went down: maybe if he hummed a bit it would help relax him, even if he couldn't recall the words.

"Back in the USSR; you don't know how lucky you are..."



The dog bristled at the door and barked. Then she sniffed, and the quality of the bark changed to a welcoming, eager bark.

Lee opened the door before the knock. "Coyote?"

He didn't meet her eyes. He took off his hat when he stepped inside, and looked around the hogan. "Nice in here. Warm. Cold out there."

She shut the door against the rush of cold air, but the chill had already hit her bones. "Coyote—"

"He's not dead," he said. "He's not even hurt, exactly—"

She looked at the floor and then back up into his face. Many of the Dinetah didn't look you in the face; she supposed it was considered impolite. "It's Gas, isn't it?"

He nodded.

"He's been poisoned before," she said. "Before I met him."

Coyote's eyes dropped. "Thought as much."

"Is it—"

"It's not bad," came the quick answer. "He's not violent. He thinks he's in Russia. Seems perfectly reasonable to him that we're speaking something not Russian. Asks for a woman called Sonia—he seems to think that something may have happened to her. He's confused. He's not violent."

"He speaks in Russian in his sleep sometimes," she said, more to the oven than to him.

The dog whined around her feet. She picked it up, and Girl licked her face before settling into an uneasy rest. The dog's ears stayed pricked forward, though, watching and listening to Coyote.

"I thought as much," said Coyote. "I was in Russia, too. Thought that was where he got the first dose."

Maybe this will wear off—what now? How do I handle him now? "You need to bring him—"

"I need your permission to do a Sing," Coyote interrupted.

Lee looked at him. "We're not Dinetah," she said.

"You're part of the Community."

"He doesn't believe in—your ways."

"That doesn't usually make a difference." He qualified it, unconsciously, doctor-automatic qualifying.

She held his eyes this time. "You think it will work?"

The dark eyes below the flat-brimmed hat studied her. Coyote did not nod, did not move. "I know it will work."

"Do it."

He nodded. "We'll come for you when you're needed."

"Coyote—"

At the door, he turned and lifted one eyebrow in question.

"Thank you."

He smiled. He reached into his pocket, paused a moment, then pulled out a clean handkerchief and tossed it to her. "Thank you."

She dried her eyes and shut the door after him.



Once in college, she had gone so far against her father's teachings as to take a class in Tao, and another in Zen. It had been during the "Beatles revival era", and she had also taken up reading science fiction—Bradley, Cherryh, LeGuin, Lichtenberg, Lorrain, Russ, Zeek... A long list, topped off by the stories in fanzines, some philosophical, and some just simple escape.

Her knees were stiff. She tried to adjust herself more comfortably. Her mind kept running off on

tangents, phrases of Kant and Lao Tse, and—LeGuin, again—"Starlight asked Non-Entity, 'Master, do you exist? or do you not exist?' He got no answer to the question, however..."

In the center of the room, Plissken's curious mild eyes followed Coyote's hands, watching the sand painting's formation. Coyote had told her to answer him only in English, and not to acknowledge the Russian, "not to help the witch". This man she watched was so much less bad-tempered, so much more reasonable than the man she knew—and she wanted hers back.

How can it work unless Snake believes in it?

The packet of pills was hard and cold in her jacket pocket, uncomfortable. Maybe she should have told him about the pills.

The idea sent a shiver up her spine; she clutched at the small plastic box, then released it, almost ashamed of herself. She wasn't afraid of the rain, like he was, she was protected. *It's not as if the pills would have cured him. Arkady told me that. They're not an antidote, really, they're a—a prophylactic. And they won't reverse any present damage, he told me that, too.* Once, several months ago, Arkady had had an argument with another agent in the safe house—in the fight following, the other man had been beaten to death in front of her.

Arkady had said to her that the man knew too much. To his superiors, he had said the man had talked to the government—and she had been forced to back him up. *If Arkady would lie to me about allies, would he lie about the drug? What if it would have helped? Snake's not Navaho; he doesn't think Navaho. What if this doesn't work?*

The years before the safehouse—not so many, maybe, but long enough—she remembered with something like blank horror. Like being in a 'B' grade prison movie. Like being in a nightmare that you couldn't wake up from.

She wanted Snake to be all right because he was a way out. *I want him to be well because—I want him to be well.* And if he wasn't, then she'd have to figure something else out. *I could stay here. I think they'd let me. Coyote would take me, I think. It would be an answer.* She looked at the kneeling man again, at the uncovered eye. The milky color, with the ragged scar above and below it, gave him a sort of strange unreal look.

Listening Woman's married daughter, Red Hair, tapped her on the shoulder. She spoke English as well as Coyote, with only some of the accent that made it hard to understand. "It'll be a long ceremony, and you're worn out. Come and lie down. They'll be putting him in a sweathouse soon,

and you can't go in there anyway, it's only for the men."

Lee nodded wearily and followed the smaller woman to a pile of rugs and skins made into a pallet. She was exhausted all of a sudden, nauseated with anxiety and weak with reaction. There was a disoriented moment when she could see and hear his response to her.

"Do I know you? You look like someone I ought to know—Sonya?" It was the same name he'd called her by in his nightmares, this other Russian woman.

"No, I'm Natalie. Lee. You know me."

"Natalya." He said it with a Russian emphasis. His hand had touched her face lightly, turning her chin up so that he could study her better, and he had smiled that odd, civilized, puzzled smile. "I feel like I ought to know you."

I never thought I'd miss his nasty humor, but right now... Is there a prayer you can use to ask God not to take something away from you? Yes, probably, but I can't think of it.

"Go to sleep," said Red Hair.

Lee nodded obediently and shut her eyes.



Plissken was relieved to find the community hall so warm. The outside world seemed as cold as—well, cold, anyway. He watched the witchdoctor with interest. Odd: nothing in his training that he could remember mentioned rituals like this among Russian peasants. It seemed more like some of the Amerind rituals he'd read in adventure stories during his childhood.

'Where are we?' 'In Arizona, at the Navaho reservation hospital.'

He could almost remember... The memory slid easily away even as he clutched at it. Gone again, like his uniform and the glider and Sonya. The other woman knew him, but she wasn't Sonya.

'Natalya Leah Petrovna Markov.' He could hear her saying the name, even though he couldn't remember when she had said it to him. There was something connected with it, something to do with music. American music. No, not American. The Beatles weren't American. Like a vision, a picture

materialized in front of him, bright and sharp as a TV screen: a small pocket Discman with its solar battery glinting red in the midday sun. "Back in the USSR..." No. "I once met a girl, or should I say, she once met me..." Yes. That was it. Where had this Natalya met him?

She was sitting back in the front of the crowd, away from the doctor, and therefore away from him, Plissken. The clothes looked strange on her; he could see her in black t-shirt and faded blue jeans, with a dull blue scarf over her shoulder-length hair. Her hair was longer than shoulder-length now. He must have known her two or three months at least.

'You don't look Russian.' 'Mongolian. We called ourselves Russian. It was good enough for Uncle Sam.' The struggle to pull out the memories made his head ache. He buried his face in his folded arms. The odor of smoke and the doctor's low chanting sent waves of dizziness over him.

His two 'guards' helped him to his feet, then led him outside. The cold air hit him full-force; he shivered. Outside. He'd been outside recently. Big heavy flakes of snow fell, interlaced with the sickly-sweet stench of gas. There was a throbbing pain in his left eye. He touched his face, and traced the outline of a scar. He could not see the fingers touching his face.

What had happened to his eye? When had whatever happened to his eye? Sonya would know—Sonya wasn't there. Natalya. Would she know?

The guards bundled him into a small low building with an equally small but intense fire. One of them sprinkled snow onto some rocks at the fire's base, and steam rolled out over them. Sweathouses? In Russia?

In the sweltering heat, his head felt too heavy to hold up. He was logy, lethargic. The pain seemed to be dripping out of him, along with the sweat, all he wanted was to dissolve as it did, to melt into the heat and slip away with the pain and the memories.

His guards brought him back to his feet, assisted him in walking. The first bite of the cold air lashed through him, and he was awake. The sweat felt frozen on his skin.

The scene in the community hall hadn't changed. Coyote was still chanting, dribbling sand in a crazy pattern on the floor. Crazy...

'Sand painting. They make a picture of the illness.'

'Your friend, Coyote, suggested it.'

'Where did you learn to speak Russian?'

'I've got a car.'

'Fuck you, Snake Plissken.'
'I liked you better when you were
sick and you slept all the time.'
'I don't know what you are!'
'Do you want to believe in it?'

The Navaho reservation hospital. The Navaho reservation... Natalya. It had been snowing and he had been hunting. Natalya...

A bowl of something black and viscous was pressed into his hands, and he drank it without consideration. It was bitter, and muddy-tasting, and foul. Snake gagged. The doctor's hands held the bowl, and Snake vomited into it. Plissken retched until he was limp and sick with the action.

He heard the bowl and its contents splatter into the fire, just as it had when he and Lee had come for the Sing for the crazy.

Why was he in the community hall? Why was there a sand painting on the floor? It had been day. It was night. Coyote was crouched in front of him.

People were moving aside. Listening Woman pushed Lee out to him. Lee's hair and clothes were mussed; she was rubbing her eyes as if she'd been asleep. Then he stood up. Her eyes fixed on him, and he saw her go still, saw the color drain out of her face.

"Snake?"

"What happened? Lee, what am I doing here?"

She shut her eyes a moment. Open, her eyes were huge and dark with relief. "It's been two days. You thought—you were in Russia."

Gas. *I did smell gas.* He looked down at his feet, where he had heedlessly kicked the sandpattern into whorls of colored dust. "They did a—a Sing."

"Yes."

"That's impossible. It just wore off—" *But it doesn't. "It must have." But it doesn't...*

Lee wrapped her arms around herself; she was shivering. After a moment, he moved awkwardly forward and put his arms around her. She was stiff. As her muscles loosened, he heard her take harsh, sobbing breaths.

"I'm here," he whispered, patting the tangle of her fine dark hair. "I'm here." He saw, over his shoulder, Coyote's oddly blank face as the medicine man turned away and carefully swept up the sand.

*this I mean my mind to serve
till service is but magic moving through the world
and mind itself is magic, coursing through the flesh,
and flesh is magic dancing on a clock
and time itself the magic length of God...²⁴*

She had to move slowly while she put dinner on the table. Breakfast. Snake was hungry, and she was so weak with relief that her knees trembled when she walked.

He ate half the bowl of stew before pausing. "This isn't rabbit."

"No; it's antelope. Don't you like it?"

"It's good, I didn't say I didn't like it. But what happened to the rabbit I shot?"

"I traded it to Coyote for a piece of antelope."

"How come?"

"Rabbit's **traif**," she said. She didn't hear herself until the words came out, until Snake's eyes narrowed and he frowned.

"Traif?"

"Never mind," she said, flushing.

He gave her one of those 'what am I going to do with you' disgusted looks, and pointedly returned to his stew.

"Traif means—not kosher." She knew she sounded defensive. "I can't eat rabbit. It's not kosher." *When did I think about keeping kosher again? I haven't tried since Moishe died.*

Plissken shot her an incredibly startled look. Then he grinned. "Neither am I," he said. "I'm circumcised, but I don't think that counts, does it?"

"Oh, you," Lee told him, "you're a goy. You'll never change." *He is a goy, and I'm sleeping with him. And I'm not even married to him. Mata and Atyetsi would turn over in their graves if they knew. But how could I be married to him? There's no rabbi to give us a ketuba, and what would a marriage contract mean to Snake anyway?*

"Hey, what's wrong?"

She shook her head and smiled. He studied her intently, in silence, in the thoughtful, too-discerning way that unnerved her.

"I didn't thank you," he said. "For being at the Sing."

"It would have looked pretty strange, if I hadn't been."

Another long pause, while he frowned. "I can tell them we're not married, if you want."

²⁴ *ibid*

"That's not what I meant. Don't be so touchy. I wanted to be there." She got up and took the dishes into the kitchen.

Even that was no escape, because he followed her in and picked up the dishcloth, apparently intending to dry. "Worried about me?"

"You were born to be hanged. Yes, I was worried. What did you expect?" She put a glass down hard, and reached for one of the bowls, but at the last minute, Snake's hand slipped around and stopped her.

"Leave the dishes until tomorrow," he said. "Come to bed."

"That's no answer."

"No, it's not. It's not an order, either." He turned her to him, and held her face between his hands, stroking her cheekbones with his fingers the way he so often did. He watched her intently as he did, as if he wanted to memorize her face.

"Russia must have been awful for you," she said.

She felt the muscles in his hands tense, and then relax. "It was pretty bad," he replied. The hands shifted down, and he went after the buttons with his head back a little, watching her reactions as each button opened her more to him.

He slid his hands under her skirt, stripping the underwear and letting it drop, then lifted her up onto the counter. She unbuttoned his shirt, and he tossed it across the room. She heard his indoor shoes skitter on the floor when he kicked them off, and then the feeling of his hands again, under her skirt, fumbling for the right connection, the right angle to pull her body onto his. Lee caught her breath; the angle made him larger, as if she were stretched past her limits. She bit her lip and burrowed her head into his shoulder.

"Put your legs around me," he said into her ear.

She tightened her thighs and locked her ankles. "You can't carry me like this..."

He stepped back from the counter and she felt him sink deeper into her as she slid. His legs trembled and held her weight. He seemed to be forced impossibly deep; she grabbed at his shoulders, trying to pull herself up and not able to do much more than take some of the invasion away.

She must have made some sort of noise, because he grinned a little and lifted her with his fingers digging into her buttocks. "I only have to carry you as far as the bed," he murmured, and took the first step.

I am going to go out of my mind... "Snake—"

His hands shifted and the grip seemed to open her even further. "We only have to make it to the bed, baby."

"You're going to—go right **through** me—"

Each jarring step exploded in her. She dug her nails into his back. She couldn't see at all, couldn't talk, could barely breathe.

Snake somehow got them both down on the bed, driving himself in impossibly deeper, easing her legs back against her chest with his calloused hands, the roughness of his fingers catching on the backs of her legs. "Oh, no," he said in her ear, "not yet, anyway," and his hips drove into her. "Come on; come **with** me."

She heard herself, later, screaming at white heat, saying words that didn't make any sense. At the end, at the moment she went over the top, she thought she heard him laugh—a man's pleased, contented, **normal** laugh.

Snake lay there a moment, then pulled the covers over both of them. He rolled over on his back. She heard the scrape of a match. The smoke from his cigarette trailed across the bed.

If there was a rabbi within fifteen lightyears of this place, he wouldn't marry us. Snake's a gentile. I'd get the old lecture Mamma used to give me. We eat together, we live together, we sleep together... If I'm going to go back to the old ways, then I have to go the whole route, and to do that, I'd have to become a hermit, stay away from everyone else entirely. I don't think I could be Orthodox anymore. I don't think I'd fit into a Jewish community if I could find one. It's the community here, the feeling of family, and it was easy enough to slip back into some of the old ways. We're as good as married.... It's the first time I've been happy since I lost Moishe. If God means me to be unhappy, I'm sure it'll happen soon enough. I'm not going to give this up until I have to.

Snake shifted, rolling over to lay an arm across her. She moved to rest her back against his chest. He ran his fingers through her hair, in a slow repetitive movement.

Is a Jew alone still a Jew? Would it matter to anyone else that we weren't married? It doesn't matter to him.

"Go to sleep," said Snake.

"Last box." Coyote grunted and heaved it up with the others.

Snake sighed and wiped the sweat away from his forehead. Pulling the ever-present pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket, he offered the doctor one. Coyote took it and sat down cross-legged on the cement floor. Snake followed suit. There was a

lot more room in the hospital supply when the boxes were stacked.

"Trouble with the woman again?" Coyote blew out a long stream of smoke and stared at the wall.

"Huh? No, she's all right. She's just bothered lately."

"Huh."

"Yeah." Snake looked cross-eyed at the end of his cigarette. "We're not really married, you know."

"Huh. She want to be? By *biligaana* laws?"

"She's Jewish. Can't be real sure: she doesn't talk about it."

"Huh. No rabbis around here."

"Yeah, I know. So does she."

There was another silence. Snake squinted at the bit of sky visible through the supply room window. "Gonna be spring pretty soon."

"Looks that way," agreed Coyote.

"I think she's happy here. You think anyone'd mind her staying?"

There was a moment when Coyote said nothing at all, but Snake caught the minute tightness in the other man's voice. Coyote blew out more smoke.

"Can hardly see she's white any longer. Don't think anybody'd notice an extra woman." Coyote leaned back against the wall. "You plannin' to go on?"

"You're Dinetah: you don't like the white man's system. I'm white: I don't like the white man's system. So I'm gonna do something about it."

"Hard for one man to do much." The doctor blew a smoke ring. It dissipated somewhere near the ceiling.

"Every little bit helps. Matter of principle."

Coyote blew a second smoke ring. "Matter of honor."

Plissken frowned a second, thinking about the word. Not a word he used much anymore. "Yeah," he said, finally, tasting the phrase when he said it. "Matter of honor. I haven't thought much about that lately."

The Indian man nodded. "Russia took a lot from all of us."

"You there, huh?"

"Wasn't Special Forces. I was a medic, like you'd think. A field surgeon. After a while, you wonder about all of it." Coyote offered another cigarette, and Snake took it. The medicine man reached into his pocket, felt around, and pulled out a fresh box of matches. "Why I came back here. This is—not *safe*, exactly, but it has rules. It has order. Things mean something here."

Rules. Order. The words sounded antique, clichéd. No one in *his* world talked about rules and order in that way now. Rules and order meant the

blackbellies. Meant Mr. *They-did-it-for-their-country-and-their-country-thanks-them* President. Something to laugh at. He felt no desire to laugh at the Navaho.

Coyote lit a second cigarette from the butt of his first. "You talk to her about this?"

"No."

"Huh." Something like a smile hovered and vanished. "I'd talk pretty fast. Sometimes women get their own ideas, and once that happens, might as well forget yours."

Plissken stubbed out his cigarette. "Hadn't really thought about that." He frowned. "Lee'll do what I tell her to."

After another pause, Coyote's sole dry comment, "Sure about that, are you?"

Snake scowled. "It's not like she wanted to come with me from the beginning. I talked her into it." He looked at the ash on the floor. "You'd take care of her?"

The hat hid the other man's eyes a moment. "If she stayed—a lot of men would want her."

"She'd need a good man."

Coyote looked at him, levelly. "If she stays."

It was as much of an answer as you could expect. Coyote's desire showed on his face. Snake stood up slowly. His leg was only occasionally stiff, but all the same... "Hell. Guess I'd better get it over with."

He took himself home—odd, to think of someplace, *anyplace*, as "home". Lee was in the middle of her domestic routine, cooking dinner. The simple Donna Reed sort of thing seemed natural with her. Maybe it was what she'd expected out of life. He thought to himself that Coyote could give her that kind of life, in a way, and stiffened himself with the thought that for once in recent times he was doing 'the right thing'.

Shame nobody ever pointed out what a bitch it is doing the right thing. He moved one of the kitchen chairs and swung it around so that he could straddle it in comfort. He started the conversation carefully, telling her about his morning's so-called work. She liked that sort of domestic stuff as well, hearing about his activities. At the right point, he went into his talk with the Navaho doctor with more detail. "...so I asked Coyote if you could stay here after I left..."

"You *what*?" said Lee. She swung around to face him. The knife and potato she held jiggled; her eyes were wide and blank.

Snake had the uneasy feeling that this conversation was not going in exactly the way he'd planned it would go. He shifted the chair under his bad leg, trying to find a comfortable position. "I

asked Coyote if you could stay here after I left for Seattle. It's a nice place. You've been accepted by the Dinetah; you've got a house and a safe job—no more Arkady—"

"Yeah." Lee turned her back on him. He could see her hands, though, peeling the potato with short vicious slashes, the blade coming too close to her fingers.

"Natalie, what in the hell is wrong now?"

She threw the potato into the sink. "What's wrong—" She picked up another and started in on it. "—is that you could have asked me first!"

"Asked you first?"

"Yes, asked me first! I'm not Girl—you don't have to give me away to friends before you move! If you don't want me around—ouch!"

Blood trickled down her hand. Snake half-rose from the chair, but she angrily waved him back with her uninjured hand. The fact that her uninjured hand still held the knife was not why he stopped; it was the tears in her eyes. With her cut thumb in her mouth, and waving the knife in counterpoint, Lee went on, "If you don't want me around, say so, I can take a hint. I can take carra m'sel' too, so don't thin—"

"Oh, hell," he interrupted, "quit being so damn defensive."

She shut up.

Snake got up, this time. He moved as near to her as seemed safe, and leaned against the wall where the oven was. The banked heat felt good. He leaned back against the wall and crossed his arms, watching her absurdly nursing her wounded thumb. "Look, Lee, if I wanted to get rid of you, I'd tell you. I'm real good at that, in case you've noticed. I'm **not** trying to get rid of you; I'm trying to make sure you're taken care of. This winter hasn't changed anything. Hawk still wants me."

"You were wanted when you were in Toledo. I didn't see any great concern on your part then."

He sighed, and glanced upwards a moment. "I was injured in Toledo. And I didn't know you then."

"So you know me now? That makes a difference?"

"Don't be an asshole," he said scornfully. The phrase brought a sudden picture, of a blonde woman he hadn't even been able to keep from stinking grey hands breaking up through rotted boards. Not Lee. That was **not** going to happen to Lee. "Yes, it makes a difference! What the hell do you think?"

"You," she said, "don't seem to give a damn what I think." Lee put a hand up to rub her eyes, as

if they hurt. "You ought to be careful. You'll ruin your image."

He uncrossed his arms and clenched a fist, telling himself that he would be calm, he would be **reasonable**. "Say something that makes **sense**, goddamnit!"

"Do you want to get rid of me?"

"You like Coyote. He'd move in on you in a shot if I weren't here."

"Yes, I **like** Coyote," she said, and he felt a sudden queer twist in his balls. Lee's dark eyes slid away from his and then came back, steady and level. "I like you. I could have left you before this, if I'd wanted."

"What's that mean?"

"You first."

Snake straightened up sharply, and slammed a fist back hard against the wall, beginning to lose his temper in spite of himself. "Tell me what the hell **you** do want!"

Her face flushed. Staring down at the potato, she turned it over and over idly in one hand. Something came out in a mutter.

"I didn't hear you," he said.

"I said," in a louder tone, as she distractedly turned the potato into strips of white, "that I've never seen Los Angeles."

"That's no answer."

"It is too."

"Bullshit."

She slapped her hands down flat onto the countertop. The knife skittered out from under her hand and flipped sideways with a clatter onto the floor. He saw the great ragged breath she drew. Her voice shook. "I want... to go with you."

For a moment, he couldn't find anything to say. A great weight settled somewhere deep in his guts. This was nothing he knew how to handle. "I want you to be safe. You'd be safe with Coyote."

"Is any place safe now?"

Memories swelled up and burst out, the ugly little oozing pockets of the Max, the underground of Kansas City, being hungry on the streets of Denver, panhandling in St. Louis, building a reputation as an outlaw and then turning that into notoriety. The memories peaked as he remembered the great orgasmic rush of breaking into the Reserve, of the chips rattling through his fingers. The rush distended and then another blotted it out: Bill Taylor, dead on the platform; Fresno Bob and a black-gloved hand holding a Kabar.

He let a breath out. "Maybe not." *But—* "Coyote wants you. It's all over him when he looks at you."

Lee's eyes left him; she stared off into the corner. Then, slowly, each word dragged out of her, she said, "Are you saying you **don't** want me?"

"Don't want you—" he echoed, stupidly, staring at her bent head. Then he took the three short steps to her and grabbed her arms, hauling her to him, almost nose-to-nose. She did not look up, and he shook her. "Look at me, dammit!"

Her head lifted. Her eyes shone with tears, and she blinked hard, as if she could stop them from running down her face.

"I could kill Coyote," he said. "I like the man." He let go of one arm, and ran his thumb across her cheek, wiping the tears away. "But I could kill him for looking at you."

She flushed, and her eyes dropped a second. With an acid tone, she said, "And I'm supposed to be liberated." Then, suddenly, she laughed and looked up at him. "I **am** liberated. If you don't take me with you, I'll follow you."

"Shit," he said, adopting her tone. "You and Hauk. I won't be able to fucking **sleep**. I guess you've got me."

Her smile wavered, reacting to the change in his tone when he said the last three words.

Stooping to pick up the knife, he handed it to her. Lee laid it in the sink.

"I guess we have to keep an eye on each other then," she said. After a moment, she touched his cheek lightly with her fingertips, the first even slightly possessive move from her he'd seen.

He reached up and wrapped his fingers around her hand hard for a second, before he turned away, disturbed by the things for which he no longer had words. "When the snow stops," he said, not looking at her, "we'll head for Los Angeles."

"All right. When the snow stops."



The young Dinetah man leaned forward to check his work, then tapped in a phone number. After a moment, the modem hummed, and then the high spiralling tone of the connection kicked on, echoing in the small schoolroom.

Lee crowed. "Fantastic!" The logon codes came up, and she showed him how to make the connections for payment—using old accounts in this case, that could still be covered. "Now you can connect to the other tribes in this area."

He logged off, and sat back, flushed with triumph.

Coyote's voice interrupted. "Not bad at all."

The young man grinned, abashed, and slipped away. Open praise wasn't common among the men,

she'd noticed, and any praise would provoke embarrassment in the ones honoured.

She started to shut down the computer, and then paused. "Did you want that database lesson?"

"I'd thought about it." He reached into a seemingly flat pocket and came up with a package wrapped in waxed cloth. Many times he reminded her of David Copperfield, pulling rabbits out of his hat—his pockets, in this case. He pulled the strangest things out of his pockets, but always the correct thing for the situation. "Brought you some cactus candy. Listening Woman seems to think you like it."

"Thank you." She took it, and said, embarrassed herself, "I like sweets. I don't seem to get enough."

"I think the tradition among the **bilagaana** girls I knew was candy and flowers, but we're short on the latter."

She paused at that, her eyes flicking up to his. He was not smiling.

"You know, most of the men I know can't find anything in their pockets," she said, trying to keep it light. "You—I think you carry everything you own in your pockets."

"Not **everything**," he said, but this time he smiled. He walked across the small room away from her, to peer out of the window. For all the simplicity of life on the reservation, they still used the remnants of civilization: in this case, scrounged plexiglass for the windows. "Spring coming on. Probably have one, maybe two more bad snows before it clears."

"And then we'll be moving on," she said.

He nodded, more as if she'd answered a question she hadn't meant to answer. "Los Angeles, Snake says."

"I've never been to Los Angeles."

"Would it be different if it were Toledo?"

"No."

He nodded again, and turned back to study her. He had a such a solemn, **nice** face, even with the nose sharp enough to cut bread. "You could stay," he said.

Lee dropped her eyes. She felt heat climb up in her face, felt her tongue sticking to the roof of her mouth, dry and a little bitter. "Thank you. If—" Yes. *If things hadn't changed, if I didn't—If Snake weren't—* "If Snake had—I would be glad to stay, if things were different." She looked up again.

Coyote stood in front of her, his head bent a little, looking at her under the brim of his hat. His long hair gleamed in the shafts of sun. "I'm glad to know that." He took hold of the edge of her sleeve. "If you need to come back—"

"I wouldn't expect anything."

"You'd be welcome to stay," he said, calmly ignoring her hasty interruption. "If you need help, you're welcome to that as well."

"I never meant—"

His eyes never changed, never lost the still patience, even though he smiled now. "No. You didn't. I just wanted you to know." He let go of her sleeve. "I'll take you up on that lesson before you go."

A flurry of dust kicked up in front of her eyes; she blinked to clear her sight, and he was gone.



Hauk came into his office looking like a well-fed cat, smug and lazily alert. Rehme turned away from the window. A grey early spring sleet streaked down the plexiglass, half-obscuring the twilight scene of the New York City skyline reaching its bleached bare bones into the thick clouds.



"You look damn pleased," said the younger man sourly.

"I've found out a little more about our Russian friend."

Rehme thought, still gloomily, that Amanda deserved a promotion for all the work she'd put in on this. The databases she'd found to access might break all of them... He'd have to mention the promotion to Hauk.

"Oh? What?"

Hauk grinned. It was the friendliest expression he'd had on in days. "He's a peddler."

"A peddler?"

"A courier. Carries information and drugs. Just the man I've been looking for."

Rehme frowned. It still didn't make any sense. Trying to gauge the other man's mood, he diffidently inquired, "This have anything to do with why you've been spending so much time with the Doc?"

"You might say that." Hauk looked at him a minute; then a smile split his face into something horrible, and he leaned forward, clasping his hands

in front of him. "The Russians," he said, "have a drug that controls nerve gas poisoning."

Rehme sat down.

"And, our little friend Arkady has something for this Russian girl Plissken's travelling with. My informant says that in two weeks, Arkady's going after them, to get the girl."

"That doesn't do us any good if we don't know where they're holed up."

Now Hauk leaned back, interlacing his fingers behind his head. "No, but Arkady does, apparently—and I know where Arkady is." Hauk tapped the computer console at his desk, lighting up the map of the United States that hung on the far wall. He tapped it again, and a bright red light appeared in the Western section. "And Arkady will take us to Plissken and the girl."

"You sound pretty sure."

"I am."

"What if you're wrong?"

"It's empty country there. We'll be in choppers—all we have to do is keep an eye peeled

for the Russians 'Sam Jefferson' knows." Hauk grinned again. "He'll lead us right to 'em."

Rehme wasn't sure then if what he felt was relief—or weak-kneed revulsion at the pleasure on the other man's thin obsessed face. But for a drug against the gas poisoning....

Anyone would do an awful lot for that. Anyone. Rehme waited for Hauk to saunter back out of the duty room, and then picked up the phone. He punched for the scrambler, then dialed HQ Boston.

It took several minutes to locate her.

"Kenney," he said. "Kenney, we've got a real problem."

thirteen

*pass the word: it's a call to arms—
midnight man at your door...
light in the fixtures, come in the night
daybreak come to the floor²⁵*

As she put the books away in the schoolroom at the Community House after the afternoon's lessons, the sun was still high. Outside the building, she could hear the children going on their ways home—insults and laughter pelting back and forth. The dachshund whimpered at her, standing by the door, obviously ready to leave.

"Not yet," she said.

"You done yet?"

She started, and dropped a book. Snake stood in the doorway, with a sort of pleased look—possibly because he could finally move smoothly enough to sneak up on her. The dog sat in his arms, looking as if she were waiting for a treat. "What's it look like? Come on in, I'm just cleaning up. What are you doing here anyway?"

He sat down on her desk, swinging one leg back and forth, and scratched behind the dog's ears. "Got enough antelope to last a few days. Thought I'd go in and talk to Coyote about some packhorses."

The memory of her last talk with Coyote tightened her throat. All her encounters with him after that had been brief, and so innocent she almost thought she'd imagined his—non-proposal. "What did he say?"

Snake's expression said he knew more that she wanted him to about Coyote. "Don't worry, he and I understand each other. I think we can get enough together to get two packhorses and two decent to ride. We can pack light. If we get to Phoenix, I can get us on the Tubes."

"I've never been on the Tubes."

An almost-grin lightened his face. "Don't expect much. Anyway, I thought I'd walk you a part of the way home."

"Going to carry my books, too?"

His expression shifted a little, almost menacing, and he put the dog down on the floor before straightening. Taking a leisurely step forward, he said, "I could always carry *you*...."

Lee put both hands up, nerving herself against the flutter in her abdomen that cropped up when she remembered that. "Never mind, never mind."

He grinned. "You ready?"

"Yes." She pulled the door shut after them and started down the path towards the hogan. The dog followed in a desultory fashion, swinging off for a rabbit here or another fascinating smell there.

Arizona in the spring was tolerable: warm weather with cool winds, rain, and even flowers. Lee shrugged off her jacket, swinging it absently as Snake described the route to Los Angeles.

Where the path divided, he stopped. "I won't be late tonight."

She nodded. The dog wavered between the two of them, then finally decided to stay with her. Lee paused, watching Snake until he crossed over the ridge and she couldn't see him any longer. Walking on, she was almost to the hogan before she realized that it was too quiet.

There was no sound from the hogan. There were no children around. There was heavy dust in the air. There were fresh tire tracks, hastily brushed away, but not well enough.

²⁵ "A Call to Arms", Mike and the Mechanics

'Once is happenstance, twice is coincidence, third time is enemy action.' She was already in sight of the hogan. The curtains weren't thick; they could probably see her. Lee paused and bent down to 'examine' a cactus flower. Whoever it was might try to capture her if she ran back for either the hospital or the Community Hall—or he might just shoot her. Either way, she wouldn't make it to safety in time. Chances of anybody making it onto the reservation unobserved by the Dinetah were minuscule.

Maybe she was just going to have to trust God; though no one ever said he made it easy, even for the Chosen People—

Natalie Marcus went on up to the hogan, hesitated, went inside, and hung up her jacket. The dog bristled, her hackles rising, and began to growl.

There were six of them. A 'squad', in Arkady's terms. He was, of course, one of them.

"Natalya Petrovna! Come in, **tovarischa**, come in. We've been waiting for you."

"I can see that," She set her books down on the counter. The dachhund hugged her heels so closely she nearly tripped when she turned. "I hope you haven't drunk all the coffee."

"No, of course not. Do you think we are barbarians?"

She glanced at him. His thin mouth tightened.

"Where is he, Lia?"

"He's at the Community Hall. With several other men. Unless you want the whole reservation down on your heads, I wouldn't go there after him."

"But he'll be coming back here, won't he?"

"He usually does," she replied dryly. "Why are you so interested in him? It was years ago that he fought in Russia."

"He knows too much." Arkady's smile had developed a distinct edge.

"Too much about what?"

Now he looked at her as if she'd gone mad in front of him. "The pills, Lia. The **pills**."

"The pills? What does—" Arkady thought she'd told Snake. It was ludicrous. It was too funny for words... Lee started to laugh. "You idiot! As if I'd tell him anything of the kind. He thinks they're birth-control pills. We're sleeping together, after all."

A hard hand came sharply across her face, knocking her backwards. Arkady's handsome face had gone ugly. His men were smiling, at her amusement, laughing at him, and of course she should have remembered that Arkady didn't like to be laughed at.

There was a trickle of blood running warm down her chin.

The dachhund growled, and from the corner of her eye, Lee saw the flat black head snap forward.

Arkady yelped, and kicked out. The dachhund flew through the room, and landed with a thud against the far wall. One piteous whine echoed through the room, and then there was only silence.

He came back around, and Lee sank her teeth into his hand.

The Russian screamed. She could taste blood in her mouth. He swiped at her with his other hand, and she kicked him in the shins. He beat at her head, and she twisted, trying to protect herself, digging her teeth in deeper, twisting his skin and feeling the grate of something harder under her teeth.

He hurt Girl...

One of the others yanked at her hair, and she kicked backwards.

Arkady shouted at them in Russian, words that skidded past her, words about not pulling at her, that she would tear his hand off if they pulled...

Something hard came down on her skull.

Lee felt her teeth meet before the world went black around her. She felt hard dirt sliding along her face, and then something harder and almost pointed against her ribs. Her fingers dug into the dirt, and when something flat and heavy pressed down on her right hand, she grabbed at it with her left. Cloth rubbed against her fingers. She wound her fingers into the cloth and bit again. A satisfactory curse, and a leg banged against her nose.

Someone threw her into the corner. Another whimper told her where Girl lay. Lee huddled over the dog, protecting it with her body.

Arkady, screaming in Russian, called her vicious names, told her what a pleasure it would be to destroy her worthless Jewish whore's body....

She heard the click as he chambered a round into the automatic. Lee bent her head over Girl. **Mata—Atyetsi—**

In a suddenly calm voice, Arkady told her to beg him for her life, to tell him where the pills were and perhaps he'd let her live.

"May your children spit on your grave. May there be no one left who remembers your name when you die." Did she get the words out or merely think them?

He took hold of her hair, winding it around his hand and dragging her face near his. "Where—are—the—pills?"

And then the roof collapsed.

In the dust and clatter, she heard something hit the floor hard, and then something else slammed the hogan door open.

"Natalie!" Snake's voice. "For Chrissakes, get down and stay down!"

She couldn't see anything for the dust. She huddled over Girl, glad for once to do as someone told her.

Then hands grabbed her shoulders, and she struck out.

"Easy!" Coyote's head jerked back, out of the way of her blow. "Hold still." He poured cold water over the side of her head, and she could see again. Some of the cold liquid spilled over the dachshund, who cried in a breathy little whine.

"They kicked her," Lee said.

Coyote picked the little dog up in both hands, whispering to her, and someone handed him a sheet, which he fashioned into a carry-sling with safety pins—from his pocket, again. He touched her nose, and wiped blood away there, and then the corner of her mouth.

"I think you'll live," he said. "And so will she. Looks like a broken rib."

Lee took her first full breath, and the pain caught her like a second kick. "Make that two."

Coyote's fingers moved expertly along her ribs, marking out the break. "Three," he said, and turned to glare at the center of the room.

A sudden cry of pain startled her.

Snake bent over something or someone on the floor in the kitchen, with other men gathered around him. *What is he doing—"Snake! Don't!"* Lee, clutching Girl's carry-sling to her, got from one side of the room to the other in spite of nausea and dizziness, pushing between the Dinetah men.

The knife was at Arkady's throat. Snake looked as crazy now as he had in the Hall. His one good eye lifted to her, taking in her bruises, and she saw the rage arching up in him.

"If you kill him, the Russians will be after us as well! He's too important—Snake, for the love of God, will you listen to me?"

He looked from her to Arkady. Finally he dropped the man and turned to her. "Okay. For now. But I want to know—"

"The pills," she said. She knew what he must have overheard. "You want to know about the pills. I'll tell you—"

Overhead, something beat the air, coming closer. The roar grew above them like a storm with the thunder far away, searching through the sky for the lightning.

Snake stared upwards. "It never rains," he said softly, "but it fucking pours—We've got to get out of here! Coyote, we're sitting ducks—"

The sound of the choppers' whirring drone grew louder.

Lee ran to the clothes cabinet and dug frantically through it for the remaining two boxes of pills. The unused half of this month's was already in her pocket. Girl whined, and she petted her, talking softly and soothingly in a frantic mixture of English, Russian, and Navaho.

When she swung around, she saw Snake and Coyote hastily, expertly stripping the bodies of weapons: knives, ammo, the small deadly machine guns. The sight, even after all that Arkady had done, nearly made her retch, but she got control of her fickle stomach in time.

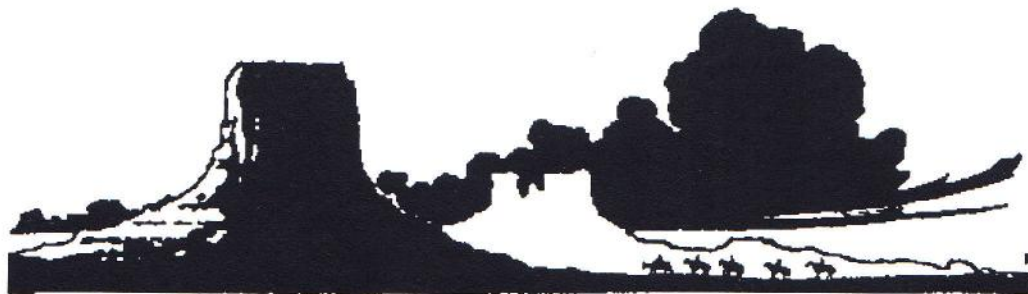
The guns were passed out among the other three Dinetah. *Guns...*

Lee rummaged through the cabinet and got the nine-millimeter and the .45 before she forgot. She stuffed the remainder of the fresh bread, dirt, dust, and all, into the knapsack with Snake's substantial lunch, and added whatever she could grab from the insulated cabinet—dried meat, a bag of beans—and then there was just time to grab the canteen they always kept filled before Snake seized her arm.

"Come on, come on!" He sounded as close to true panic as she'd ever heard him. The dog whined at him—he said, "good girl," as if he almost noticed she were there.

The others were on horse back already: Snake shoved her up onto the nervous animal. He took the knapsack, and flung himself over the back of another horse. Hers went into a flat-out run without any urging; that was good, since she was too busy hanging onto to do any nudging.

They went west across the flatlands towards the nearby hills. The sound of the helicopters was thunder behind and above them.



Fourteen

*All around us, chaos reigns,
buildings crumbling down...
Silhouettes in the fiery rain,
timbers crash to the ground...
you hear the drums
run for your life...²⁶*

Over the chopper radio, the voice sounded tinny and surreal. "Six people, sir, on horseback, riding away from the hogan."

Amanda's eyes flicked back and forth, blue flames in the afternoon sunlight. She pulled her helmet on, flipped the shield down to cover her face.

Hauk did not smile. He reached for his own helmet, and brushed his fingers across the pistol at his hip. "Go after them, Sergeant. Rehme and I will cover the hogan. **Take prisoners**, Sergeant."

"Yes, sir."

The air was thick and gritty with dust as the choppers settled to the clearing around the small and battered building. He shifted, impatiently, as the soldiers leaped out, spreading quickly into proper formation for the scene, rifles at ready.

Amanda made it out before him, and paused, covering him when he stepped out, her head moving smoothly back and forth, as her eyes had.

No sound. Probably no need to be so cautious, but...

Amanda went into what remained of the hogan before she would let him enter. "Clear," she said. She pulled her helmet off, breathing hard in the dusty air. Strands of blonde hair tangled in the backwash from the choppers' slowing blades.

Hauk felt the tension start in his guts again. *If we've lost him again, after all this...*

Of the seven men inside the hogan, three were beyond-any-shadow-of-a-doubt dead. Two were bleeding from skillful knife work and not likely to make it to the hospital. One had a concussion. And the remaining man—

"Well," said Hauk as he hunkered down to study the man more closely, "I'll be damned." He hauled off his helmet and dropped it to one side. With one hand, he delicately turned the mauled face from side to side, studying it with the relish of a gourmet. "Arkady Peczaczek."

At the sound of his name, the Russian stirred. He groaned, something low and not quite human. His eyes opened; they were bright blue, innocent, blank. Shockingly like Amanda's eyes.

"Sam Jefferson." Hauk smiled. "I'm Police Commissioner Robert Hauk. I've been wanting to meet you for a very long time." He saw the startled horror that went across the travesty of the man's face. The Russian understood. Good. That would make it so much easier.

"I've got a deal for you." Yes, *there*, the eyes changed: horror replaced by wary interest, wary hope. "The pills, Arkady, you know the ones I mean. The—"

²⁶ *ibid.*

"Prophylactic." The words were slurred. Speaking with the bruised and bloody lips would be exquisitely painful. *Plissken wasn't happy with you at all, was he, Mr. Jefferson?*

"Yes."

"The gas pills."

Hauk smiled.

"I don't have them with me, I can't get them now—my contacts will disappear." The eyes were still alive, half-panicked, sliding from side to side as if looking for a way out.

"Do you know the formula?"

The fear faded; it was replaced by a low cunning in those bright blue eyes. "No, I'm no chemist. But Natalya—the girl—she had the pills. She's got more of them with her."

"Patch him up," Hauk said. The medic jumped forward. For a second, Hauk was irritated, wondering why it was lately that everyone he spoke jumped as if they'd been shot. He brushed the irritation aside; the goal was within reach. "He'll go back to Liberty Central with us."

Rehme was in the doorway, beside Amanda. Hauk spoke to him, and Rehme did jump as if he'd been kicked.

"Get me the girl."

"And Plissken?"

Plissken did a hell of a lot for this girl. And she for him. "And Plissken. He'll be useful now."

"You know what he told you the last time."

"I didn't have the proper motivation then. Let's go." He stepped forward.

Amanda wavered. "Your helmet—"

"Let's go," he said again. He put a hand between her shoulderblades and pushed, gently, and she staggered a step before reluctantly preceding him.



*Bring my bow, fill my head with flames
we must let them know
that the torch is lit again
Crystallize the pain behind your eyes
Are you ready to fight?
Run for your life...²⁷*

When they finally pulled up, Lee slid, rather than let herself fall off the horse. She was more winded than the mare; she leaned on the animal and practiced breathing a few seconds. A few seconds was all Coyote gave her.

"Lead the horses. The cave's up the side of the arroyo. That tangle of rocks there. No time. Go."

She hung the carry-sling around her neck. The horse led her. In the sling, Girl whimpered and tried to shift herself into a more comfortable position. Lee slipped, then lost her balance entirely. She twisted to fall to her side, struggling not to hurt the dog any more than she'd already been hurt, and felt a sudden stab of heat in her ankle. She bit back a scream.

"Natalie?" Snake knelt down beside her.

"I think I twisted my ankle—I don't think I can keep up with you."

"Dammit," he said.

Someone took the reins out of her hand. Plissken got his shoulder under her arm. He wrapped the other arm around her, supporting the dachshund.

"Snake—"

"Woman, you say one fucking noble word about leaving you, and as soon as I get the chance I'll beat the shit out of you."

So she said nothing. He was taller than she was: she was half-carried. After a minute she got her breath back and put some effort into speeding up their pace.

He pushed her through a narrow opening. On hands and knees, the carry-sling swinging and scraping the floor, she crawled back out of the way while the others and the horses came through. The cave floor was cold and damp. Her ankle throbbed with its own peculiar fire.

Coyote knelt down next to her. He carefully eased off her boot.

He probed the wound with ungentle fingers, and she yelped. "It's not broken," he told her.

"I'm not so sure after that," she answered, rubbing the joint.

"Don't even think it's sprained. If we bind it up might be you could walk."

"Do it. It can't hurt more than it already does."

"You'd be surprised." He dug a roll of cloth out of a pocket, and started to wrap up the ankle.

"Since we've been here," she said, "I've seen you pull forceps, scalpels, bandages, candy, and I don't know what else out of your pockets. How do you always know what to have in your pockets?"

"Tell you my secret." He leaned forward and whispered into her ear, "I'm a medicine man."

Lee gave him a dirty look, but he just grinned and went back to work. "How's your lip feel?" he inquired, all business again.

"Sore. That knot on my head feels like they hit me with a hammer."

"Butt of a pistol, likely. Dizzy? Light-headed?"

²⁷ *ibid.*

"A little."

"Don't go to sleep."

"Here? Hardly."

He smiled, an absent smile. He lifted the dachshund out of the improvised bag. Girl cried, and Coyote soothed her, petting her head gently while probing the small black body.

"Broken ribs, like I thought," he said. "I can't see any evidence of anything internal. I've got something safe to make it easier on her. And we'll get some cool cloths to ease the pain as well."

Another voice broke in. "They gonna live?" Snake crouched down beside Coyote and reached out to touch the spreading bruise on her cheek.

"If they don't get in anymore fights with Russians," said the Dineh. "I'll bring water. Sponge that cut on her head off."

"Right. The dog's okay?"

"Dog'll be okay too. Tough, both of 'em."

"Yeah," Snake said, and brushed the hair out of Lee's face. He ran one hand over the dog's muzzle, and Girl licked his fingers.

Coyote nodded and left. Snake eased down onto the floor and pulled her head forward. She felt his fingertips pressing along the length of the swollen spot on the back of her scalp; the touch was too hard, and she said so, though her words were muffled against his dusty shirt front.

There were feet next to them, and then cold water making her head ache.

She complained, but the words were ignored.

Plissken released her head, and she tilted it back to a position where it didn't hurt quite so much.

"How's that?" His voice was deliberately casual.

"I'll live." She rubbed her jaw this time, wishing that Arkady had worse aim and a softer hand. Plissken looked like he was thinking about unpleasant subjects. It was going to have to come up sooner or later, but—"Somehow," she said, with a rueful smile, "I don't think we're in Kansas anymore, Toto."

He grinned, but it didn't last long. "What did Arkady mean about the pills?"

Lee took a long breath, let it out, and then gave him all of it. "The pills are why I went on working for them."

"Birth-control pills?"

She shook her head. That hurt too much. "You can put things in The Pill. The Russians have a—a prophylactic against the gas. You know what I mean?"

"A preventative?"

"Something like that. It stops you from reacting to the gas. I think it changes the key, or it fits into

that key better than the gas, like methadone and heroin—I't doesn't cure you. It holds you at the stage you're at. He thought it was funny to put a prophylactic in birth-control pills—"

"Yeah, he had a real sparkling sense of humor."

She looked away, and grimaced at the throbbing in her head. "I—thought once or twice of telling you about the pills, but—"

"You think I'd have told you if our roles had been reversed?"

Lee looked at him a long time. His face was as sincere as he ever seemed. Finally she shook her head. *No more jokes.* "No."

"You're right."

"So what do we do now?"

He frowned. "Getting out of here's first priority."

"Do you know any chemists in Los Angeles?"

"Yeah. Why?"

The cut had begun to throb. She closed her eyes a minute and opened them again. "I've still got some of the pills. Any good chemist with a semi-decent lab ought to be able to break the formulas down."

He looked as if it hadn't hit him yet.

"We'd have the pills then," she told him patiently. "Maybe it's not like here, but you might be able to keep from freaking out again. And maybe—we could sell the pills. Get both of the jerks on top at the same time."

A hideously grotesque grin split his face. "Wouldn't that pull the stiffening out'a his stick?" he murmured.

"Who?"

"That bastard Hauk. It was blackbellies after us."

"No wonder you said—Oh, no. Oh, no."

His good eye narrowed. "What?"

"I should have let you kill him—He'll have Arkady!"

"I thought you two were on the same side."

"Arkady," she said bitterly, "may be a good Russian by his definition, but I'll lay you any odds you like that he'd sell his mother to a whorehouse—his **grandmother**—if it would get him out of a jam."

"And he knows you've got the pills."

Very carefully, she lay back and put an arm over her eyes. "I wish we **were** in Kansas."

"Don't knock it; makes our job all the easier."

"How?" She raised the arm to stare up at him.

That gargoyles grin went across his face again. "They'll be trying to **keep** from killing us."

Lee looked at him again, doubletake, trying to tell herself that she had not heard what she thought she'd heard. She covered her eyes again. "I have," she said, "a very bad feeling about this."

But Plissken wasn't listening to her. He had already gotten up and gone over to the war council at the cave mouth, up to no good as usual.

"Where's Han Solo when you need him?" she muttered, and then shut off the thinking part of her brain, dozing in spite of herself and Coyote's warning.

Fifteen

once there was a way to get back homeward
once there was a way to get back home...
you're gonna carry that weight,
carry that weight a long time...²⁸

Hauk looked up at the setting sun. Unless his quarry had found an impossible way out the arroyo's other side, past the soldiers' expert eyes, it would all end here in a few hours. The pills—Plissken—and Plissken's piece. And Arkady Peczaczek as an excuse and a bonus. *Worth the wait.*

He paced irritably back and forth across the sandy ground in front of the chopper. It was taking too long. Plissken was going to escape him again. Why hadn't the infrareds picked up anything?

"Still sweeping," Amanda said, coolly, and he knew then that he'd spoken out loud. "We're getting no recognition from the Navahos. They're not happy with our presence, Commissioner."

Plissken among the Navahos—sounds like a book title. Like one of the many books on primitive cultures Hank's anthropologist wife had bought over the years. There had been walls full of nothing but obscure texts on obscure tribes and countries in the old house in Los Angeles. It was easy to forget, to think of the house as still being something that he could go back to in time. He could wake up in the mornings expecting the scent of Tabu and Secret, sounds of rustling cloth and running water.

He could wake up missing Janine. It was in the mornings that he missed her most; even more than in the nights. What had brought that up? Amanda Kenney's voice. And the Russian girl. Natalya Markov. Natalie Marcus. Plissken's piece.

Paul Marcus had supplied them with as recent a photo as possible, and it was seven or eight years old, maybe longer. A wedding picture, it was, of a solemn-faced almost-Oriental-featured woman in a surprisingly attractive black wig, and a long-sleeved, wide-collared, lower-calf length dress, and a thin

blond man with wide dark eyes and a challenging look. He stood with his arm around her, as if daring the world to take her away from him.

Hauk tried, for a moment, to imagine her standing next to Plissken, in that plain dark blue dress, to imagine Plissken's arm around her waist and his asymmetric killer's face staring out at the camera. He failed.

All the same, she had stayed with him while he was injured.

Before that, she killed for him. Now, she was running with him when she surely couldn't know that she was being chased as well.

And Plissken... Arkady's few reluctant comments had made "one thing perfectly clear": Snake had been willing and eager to kill the Russian for touching the woman. He had stopped when she protested.

Why hadn't the infrareds picked up traces? The rocks couldn't have been that warm from the sun, even if this canyon could hide damn near ten squadrons in full battledress.

"Try the usual diplomatic phrases, Kenney."

"Have been, sir." She bit off the end of the sentence, displeased. "We're being told to move off Indian land."

"Use something to throw static."

Her head came up. The blue eyes stared at him.

He tilted his head, narrowing his eyes in a glare. "Do it. Lieutenant, I haven't come this close to quit now because someone doesn't want me to piss on his grass."

"Yes, sir."

Was *that worry* in her eyes? Plissken was almost in his hands. With the girl, he'd have Plissken by the short hairs.

²⁸ "Golden Slumbers/Carry That Weight" The Beatles

"Sir," Kenny said, properly, correctly, the word a single sharp note. She pointed, and he followed the line.

The sergeant waved twice, careful wide sweeps. He had something. The spotters had picked up traces.

Hauk skidded across the rocks and sand, gauging pace and safety. Wordless, the other man handed him the spotter, and clear as daylight, the picture showed heat-traces, foot and hoof prints, leading up the side of the sandy arroyo. Where scrub grass and bushes began, the traces faded and died. Probably they were holed up in a cave. Caution urged one path; but Hauk was jumpy, too eager for the ending of this waiting to listen.

Amanda scrambled after him. He heard her breathing behind him, knew as well as he knew himself that she was as close to his heels as she could get.

"Okay. We split up. Go on up the hillside, look for openings. They must have a cave up there, to hide horses. I'll take this strip; Carlston, you go to the west...." He split them up, hastily, efficiently, grateful for the chance to do anything. Amanda added her few brief comments, her blue eyes threatening him with mayhem if he tried to send her away.

There had been small rock slides recently. The sand slipped under his hands, dragged his feet out from under him. He was fueled by the memory of Plissken's face, sneering, knowing; fueled by the sound of Arkady's voice confirming his suppositions about the pills.

He placed hands and feet carefully, forcing himself to move slower than he wanted. He was too close to lose it all in a stupid accident.

That was why he stumbled on them. He looked up to place a hand, and saw the gap in the rocks.

"Robert!" Amanda's voice, suddenly personal, suddenly high-pitched with fear.

He saw the face in the gap. The never-to-be-forgotten face, eyepatch, scarred cheek, saw him. Just beyond it was the woman's face, older, weary, much more frightened. Then all of that was blotted out, because the sunlight glinted off the gun barrel as Plissken brought it up to shoulder height.

The woman, too, had a gun.

He reached out for a moment, for the next handhold, as if they were close enough to touch. Her finger shifted on the trigger.

He was caught for a second, by the expression in her eyes. She seemed to be pleading with him; he saw her lips move, and thought the words were, "Don't make me do this—"

Plissken's lips pulled back in a snarl.

There was nowhere to move; no way to move in time. There was no time, only sound, only sound and pain; only sound, pain, and sensation as he arched backwards, flung away.

Amanda's hand grabbed for him; her fingers dug into his shoulder, fastened on his shirt. The shirt ripped. She cried out, something wordless, piercing, a soprano shriek.

He rolled, fell, rolled.

A rock at the canyon's bottom stopped his fall with a stunning blow. He heard small pebbles clatter down around him, and another kind of clatter as booted feet scrambled to his side.

He squinted against the sun and the pain, and saw Rehme's anxious face. One of the man's hands touched him, and when the fingers came back into view, they were red and dripping.

"Christ!" the younger man said. He said nothing else for a minute, bending down and patting along Hauk's side. Hauk could see the other faces, killer's faces caught unaware, slack and amazed. "Shit, he's bad," Rehme said. He ran a hand through his dusty blond hair, leaving streaks of pink-red. "Kenney?"

Kenney, her chest heaving, air dragging in and out of her lungs in little screams, bent over him. Her face was bruised, little scratches marring her smooth skin. "Oh, **God**," she said, and it sounded like a prayer. "Easy, there. Lift him carefully—where the **hell** is the backboard? Get him back to the medic and the other choppers. We'll have to get him to Fort Smith fast."

Hands came down, surrounding him.

No, forget me, you idiots, get them, get them! The words were only in his mind, he couldn't get them out of his sand-encrusted throat. *If they get away now, we'll never find their trail!* There was no urgency to his thoughts; he couldn't get his voice working.

And then he heard Amanda, answering him, under the sound of running feet. He must have gotten something out.

"No, damn you," she said. "He **doesn't** fucking matter. **You** matter. You'll live, you bastard, or I'll kill you **myself**." And then she said his name, "Robert," just the one word all by itself, and the intensity pierced through the pain.

One man shouldn't matter that much.

"You **remember** that," she said, still fierce. "He's only one fucking criminal. He's not worth this, damn you, don't you dare die on me!"

The hard wood of the backboard eased under him, and he felt his breath catch with the pain. There was only the sight of hands, the sound of

many voices, muted, rumbling, the pain lancing through him with a rhythmic pulse. Then there was only sound and pain.

Then there was only pain.
Then there was nothing.

sixteen

*Bring my spear, invest it with my youth
Let the children hear,
they must now be told the truth...²⁹*

The Magnum slid out of Lee's limp fingers, thudding against the stone floor of the cavern. To herself, she said the first few words of the Mourners' Kaddish, reflexively, before she heard what she was saying and stopped herself. Just as suddenly she felt the sharp throbbing of her injured ankle, and let herself slide sideways to ease the pain.

It was peculiar, to think that you could stop a man like Hawk with nothing more than a small steel-jacketed slug. It was wrong. It was wrong that a life could be ended with nothing more than a sliver of metal. There was a sick bitter slime at the back of her throat and she swallowed it down, staring at the empty sky between the rocks. The man had looked so alive—if he were dead, of course. He might not be. He might not be dead, he might be—Who had shot him, she or Snake? Did that even matter?

"Natalie." Snake's hands gripped her shoulders. It hurt, and she tried to protest, but nothing came out. "Are you hurt?"

"N-no." Her voice sounded rusty. She swallowed again, and it worked a little better this time. "Just my ankle."

He looked like he'd come through himself and out the other side, like something that had been half-haunting him was gone now. "He's not dead yet, you know. We'd better get back to the reservation. An old tactic, shooting the leader—a lot of times it takes the wind out of their sails. Can you walk?"

Her ankle had taken a lot of abuse, first in falling, and then in the mad scramble up the hillside. Some of the bright pain had dulled, but—"I can't stand on it, much less walk. Sorry."

"Think you can ride?"

"I'll manage."

"Good." He considered the way she was sitting; she could see the lines at his good eye deepen, and see his mouth thin with the thinking. He hung the sling around her neck again, then slipped Girl into it. "Put your arms around my shoulders."

She protested again. He wasn't in condition to carry her; she was too heavy to carry, especially with Girl added to it.

With exaggerated caution, he straightened, holding her easily enough that it belied all her complaints. "You can't ride until we get far enough down the hill that the horses are safe. We'll have to get the stuff from the hogan and get out of here. It won't take 'em too long to get back. I just nicked him."

"It was a pretty hefty nick," grumbled Lee. She decided to close her eyes and not pay any attention to how she was getting downhill.

Over her head, Snake spoke to Coyote. "You'll have to watch it; you may have to hide for a while or something."

"We've fought the **biligaana** before. You never forget how. They wouldn't be looking for Indians heading north."

"I don't look Indian."

"Put your hair in braids and don't speak English in town. Who'll notice? Man sees what he wants to see. Or—"

"Or what?"

"Nevermind," Coyote said absently. He swung up onto his horse and started off.

The hogan was a pile of earth and logs. It hurt to watch as Snake sifted through the immediate rubbish to collect what they had to have. She still couldn't walk: she made a pad out of blankets for the dog, laid the carry-sling on the pad, then folded and stuffed clothes and bedding into bags,

²⁹ "A Call to Arms"

tossing them aside until one of the other Indians could push them into place on a packhorse.

"My Discman, Snake! Do you see my Discman and the discs anywhere? They were near the bed—"

"We've damn near been killed by Russians and blackbellies and you want that fucking Discman?"

"Yes, I want my fucking Discman!" she snapped, louder than she meant to. He stopped, swung around, and stared at her.

After a minute, he turned away and dug through the rubble in a different spot.

She packed food into a smaller bag, stuffing it tightly. Her eyes blurred. She had to pack by touch. In the back of her head, she could see the total shocked surprise on Hawk's face as he fell backwards, see the odd graceful way that his body hit and rolled and hit. Snake had looked like something not human—the angel of death—*Now you're getting fanciful. Act your age, not your IQ.*

A shadow fell across her, and as she looked up Snake dropped the Discman and the packet of discs into her lap. "Here," he said. "That's all. We've got to go, Lee, no telling when they'll get their second wind."

"Let me braid your hair first."

"Natalie—"

"You want to look Indian or not? If you'll shut up and let me do it, it'll be a lot faster than if you stand here and tell me we don't have time."

Snake sighed. But he sat down.

She fumbled with his hair. He needed a bath. They both did, now; the chance for a pleasant hour or so in the sweat lodge and the bathhouse had long passed. She combed out the tangles, dropped strands and collected them, missed the pattern and started over more than once.

A shadow fell across them, and Snake reached for his gun in the same moment he tried to get to his feet.

Coyote said, "Friend. Sorry, didn't plan on startling you."

"Nearly gave me a fucking heart attack," Snake grumbled, "**christ**, man..."

"I brought the truck up," Coyote said, still calmly, "gas tank's full and ready to go."

"The truck's yours," Snake said.

The medicine man shook his head. "Been keeping it for you."

"We traded it for medical—"

"Don't have to trade for medical help," Coyote said. "Not our custom. Besides, you've

both paid your way. Truck's only going to mark your presence here."

"That's true." Snake's good eye squinched half-shut when he frowned.

"And it's something we've left to the outside world. We don't use engines for transportation. Better take it."

Snake, now standing, eyed the other man, then held out a hand. Coyote took it. They stood there for a second, hands locked, and then dropped the touch at the same moment. Snake turned away. "I'll get the stuff in the truck. Here, Lee, let me have the Girl; I'll put her where she won't fall and hurt herself."

The dachshund whimpered at him, licking his hand. He petted her with a gentleness he might not have shown six months ago, and took her to the Aztec.

"Can I give you an arm?" Coyote said.

Lee nodded. "Let me put these together." She stuffed Discman and discs into yet another sack, and reached up. Coyote got her to her feet, then stooped and got an arm under her knees.

"Hey! You shouldn't—"

"Don't argue with your doctor," he said mildly. Carrying her across the intervening distance, he set her into the passenger seat. Between the two of them, her ankle got safely propped on a pillow on the dash.

The sun had begun to drop towards the horizon. Driving would be no picnic in the dark, but time was still their enemy.

"I wish—" Lee stopped. She had made her choice earlier.

"You're always welcome," Coyote told her.

She brushed his cheek briefly with her fingertips.

"I will **miss** this place," she said.

"It'll be here," Coyote said. He smiled a little, just a quick lift of one corner of his mouth. "And, to use eastern philosophy, always with you. Try to keep that foot up. I put in some pain pills, in case of emergency, and some anti-pyretics."

"Thanks."

Snake got into the driver's seat, adjusting his bad leg. He nodded to Coyote, and turned on the low-level fog lights, trying to make it less easy to track them. The Aztec rolled away, towards the thin track of Route 666 North.

North out of Hell, she thought—then amended it with, *North out of Eden*.

From the back, Girl began to snore, the snores broken by occasional whimpers of pain.

Lee put her head back, shifting herself into a slightly more comfortable position. When they'd started this trip, **he** had been injured, and **she** had been driving.

"Go ahead and turn it on," Snake said.

"What?"

"The Discman. Turn it on." He was looking straight ahead, but she was on his right, and she realized he must have seen her fidgeting.

It took a minute to dig through the bag, find the Discman and get a disc going. Then, at a slower beat than they were travelling, half-muffled by the surrounding trees and mesas, the battered sound of the Beatles followed them.

*you say you want a revolution,
well, you know
we all want to change the world...³⁰*

"Snake?" she said, looking straight ahead and trying not to think of the hogan's rubble. Her mind veered off onto Coyote, left there; the Navahos, left to face the USPF.

"Yes?"

"Do you think we'll ever be able to go back there?"

"I don't know." His face twisted, the good eye as blind as the bad. "Depends on if there's anything left to go back to."

The night loomed around them, the cactus only shadows in the dark, shadows that the Aztec suddenly swerved to miss. Lot's wife had been turned to salt for looking back; she stared ahead, watching the ghostly effect of the fog lights in the darkness.

We've got the pills after all.

Snake looked over at her; with an effort, he smiled. "Going to miss Coyote," he said.

"Yes." She rolled her head against the seat.

"God, I hope they'll be all right."

"Like he said, his people are used to fighting white men. They'll survive." He smiled again, oddly. "We'll make it, too."

Lee nodded. "I know."

The disc went on, the solar battery glinting like a drop of blood in the sun

*you say you've got a real solution,
well, you know
we'd all love to see the plan...*

*you ask me for a contribution,
well, you know
we all doing what we can...³¹*

[to be continued?]



³⁰ "Revolution", *The Beatles*

³¹ *ibid.*

"How Do You Like Your Blue-Eyed Boy," by Deborah J. Laymon & Deborah K. Goldstein, illustrated by Jesse McClain. Call Me Snake, Special Edition #1, May 1994. T'Kuhtian Press, 200 E. Thomas St., Lansing, MI 48906-4047.

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