SNAKEBIT



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ESCAPE PRESS, co-editors J. A. Raish, 1705 Virginia Place, Fort Worth, Texas 76107, U.S.A. and L. J. Ojard, 1218 W. 8th, Olympia, Washington, 98502, U.S.A.

#### TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	1
Editorial Page	3
Cartoon (Kayli Armstrong)	5
Fan List	7
"When Plissken Comes Marching Home Again Hurrah?" (Mitchell B. Craig)	9
Word Search Puzzle	12
"Nineteen Thirty-Six to Ninety-Seven" (Eva Albertsson)	15
"Stairwell" (Laurie Shanahan)	18
"Corellian Farewell" (Eva Albertsson)	19
Commissioner's Journal (Eva Albertsson)	21
"Poem to the Blue-Eyed Vision in Black" (Amy New)	27
Aftermath (J. A. Raish)	29
"War Hero" (Sheila Paulson)	33
"Sliding stealthily " (Barb Johnson)	35
"Rules" (Barb Johnson)	35
"New York Night: 1997" (Barb Johnson)	36
"Serpent, dear Serpent " (Amy New)	39
The Coldest War (J. A. Raish)	40
"Call me Snake " (Barb Johnson)	89
Young Man/Old Man (Linda Ojard)	90
"Nobody Said It Was Going To Be Easy" (Eva Albertsson)	124
It's Always Midnight Somewhere (Linda Ojard)	126
Running Out of Time (Sandy Goodall)	135
Unnamed Sequel (J. A. Raish)	140
"Recipe" (Gabriele Franke)	147
The Date (Babette Hahn)	149
PLSSKN (1976 Datsun B-210)	152
Word Search Solution	153
Advertising	

#### LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Cover illustration - Linda Title page illustration -		i
Plissken - Linda Ojard		2
Plissken - Sara Campbell		8
Plissken - Linda Ojard The Duke - Rick Lucey		14 17
Plissken - Linda Ojard		18
11 11	38°	19
Hauk - Linda Ojard		20
Plissken - Linda Ojard		26 28
11 11 11		29
11 11		31
Plissken - Rick Lucey		32
Plissken - Barb Johnson		34 36
Plissken - Linda Ojard		37
Plissken - Barb Johnson		38
Plissken (pre-Leningrad)	- Linda Ojard	40 47
11 11	11 11	56
11	" "	66
" " " T	11 11	76
Hauk (pre-Leningrad) - Lin Plissken - Linda Ojard	nda Ojard	82 85
Hilley - Linda Ojard		87
Plissken - Linda Ojard		88
Mac - Linda Ojard		90
Hauk (pre-Leningrad) - Li	nda Ojard	91 95
Jet engine graphics - Ster	ve Ojard	97
Hauk (pre-Leningrad) - Li		101
11 11	11 11	114 122
Plissken - Linda Ojard		125
Plissken (pre-Leningrad) -	- Linda Ojard	126
Plissken - Linda Ojard		131
Hauk - Sandy Goodall Plissken - Sandy Goodall		132 133
Maggie - Sandy Goodall		134
Plissken - Linda Ojard		138
Maggie - Sandy Goodall	0:	139
Plissken montage - Linda ( Hauk - Linda Ojard	Ojaru	140 144
Romero - Sandy Goodall		145
Plissken - Linda Ojard		146
Plissken - Sandy Goodall	20	148 150
Plissken - Linda Ojard	8	151



#### EDITORIAL PAGE

"You mean, you've finally gotten it finished?!?!?!"

Yes, folks, here it is, finally done. And, in terms of geological time reckoning, it's only been the blink of an eye. Does that make you feel any better? No, not me either, but what can I say? It's always something.

Snakebit # 1 should perhaps be subtitled as the "Pre-Leningrad" issue, since both of the longer works of fiction deal with the experiences of Plissken (and Commissioner Hauk) in the Army prior to the infamous "Leningrad Ruse". Believe it or not, this was not done intentionally. I have LOTS of fiction for the next issue(s) which will deal with Plissken's life just-after and long-after his phenomenal escape from New York. Issue # 1 is just the beginning!

Something else I noticed as I put Snakebit # 1 together is that it's an interesting combination of light and dark; hopeful and hopeless; past, present and future. It's amazing to me that such a wide range of interpretations can be applied so successfully to the same character(s), without creating contradictions. Snake is a prism whose colors can be viewed at either end of the spectrum, cool or warm, or any point in between, with equal enjoyment. Snake Plissken is a fascinating character, a study in contrasts, that still holds my attention and my imagination as firmly now as he did several years ago when he first made his appearance in our mundane world. I started writing my first EFNY story within a few days of seeing the movie for the first time, and am still being haunted by new story ideas right now. Now if that's not inspiration, I don't know what is.

Acknowledgements -

My gratitude and apologies to Lori Chapek-Carleton. She had originally given me permission to 'reprint' Eva Albertsson's "Nineteen thirty-six to Ninety-seven" and Commissioner's Journal, but since it turns out that Snakebit will be published BEFORE her EFNY 'zine, Call Me Snake, the 'reprint' statements would seem a bit ridiculous, therefore I have not included them. Just for the record, however, Eva did give me the go-ahead to print these piece's first. Both she and I wrote to Lori about it, hoping to avoid/prevent any problems or conflicts.

Heartfelt thanks to John Carpenter and his marvelous team for bringing the Escape from New York universe to life. Now - how about a sequel?

Thanks <u>again</u> to Mike McQuay, whose charming presence I frequently enjoy at Conventions, for filling in so many gaps (and adding fuel to our fires, so to speak), with his excellent novelization.

Special thanks to Kurt Russell for giving Snake Plissken life, for making him very real and very human. Well, this one could go on for pages and pages, so . . .

Thanks to all the fan/friends who have continued their patient support for all this time. I think/hope you'll find it worth the wait.

Love and thanks to my absent co-editor and best friend, who has graced so many of these pages with her beautiful and prolific artwork. We're all very thankful that the dam done finally busted for both your drawing and your writing. Give Snake Plissken another few points for bringing together one of the greatest friendships of all time.

"Who're you?"

I love that line. It is, of course, one of the more cordial exchanges between Snake Plissken and Bob Hauk. It's also a good question to ask of most any stranger, so, being stranger than most, I'll answer. If you happen to have an ESCAPE PRESS business card, I'm the one on the left. Doesn't help a bit, does it?

"'Been awhile . . "

You bet it has. It was STARLOG magazine (# 52) that really started all this, you know. I was so impressed with Escape from New York that I felt it was imperative that I tell someone how I felt, and I was somewhat stunned to find that my favorite magazine had printed an excerpt from that letter. Shortly afterwards, I began to get mail from around the globe. I was not alone in my - well, let's face it - lust for the characters, and I don't mean in just a sexual manner. John Carpenter has a rather annoying habit of putting too much life in his creations. He leaves one literally craving more information on the backgrounds of those mental images he's brought to the screen.

You'd never guess it from the longer of the two offerings I've made in this issue, but Snake was my first love. In fact, when I got home from the very first viewing of EFNY, I began to write a history on Mr. Plissken. That was several years (and countless times of watching the movie) ago. The history developed a complicated plot which grew into volumes of notes written on everything from a memory typewriter at the office to napkins in a restaurant. Well, somewhere along the line, I began thinking how much alike Snake and Hauk were, each being a younger/older version of the other. So, somewhere along that same line, I began watching some Lee Van Cleef material, most of which was made between ten and fifteen years ago. It was done mostly to make writing his character of Commissioner Bob Hauk a little easier. Done to find the subtleties that an actor exhibits of himself in every film. I needed to find the comfort zone of Hauk, but I soon found myself intrigued with the idea of writing about Hauk when he was Colonel 'Big Bob' Hauk.

To make a long idea short, what I wrote in this issue are only a couple of pieces of a longer story. But if Snake is your main love, fear not, for his fans have proved to be some of the most talented in fandom. You'll see. And I do hope you'll agree.

I still haven't answered the first question, though. Let's just say that, believe it or not, that letter to STARLOG saved my life, gave me a genuine best friend, pushed me to open up and try to use the loves of writing and drawing, that I'd hidden in closets for more than two-thirds of my existence, for a better purpose than just miscellaneous clutter in a disaster area.

Read on, McDuff, with hats off in humble respect to my best friend, though 2200 miles part us, for without Judi, I, quite literally, would not exist. Nor would this fanzine, for she's the brains of this outfit. And the typist. And coordinator. And slave driver.

Linda





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WHEN PLISSKEN COMES

MARCHING HOME

AGAIN ....

HURRAH?

\*\*\*\*\*

Off-the-cuff commentary

by Mitchell B. Craig

Way the hell back yonder in the Jurassic, somewhere between the cancellation of Star Trek and the equally shameful break-in at the Watergate Hotel in Washington, DC, a trio of songmeisters, Barry, Robin, and Maurice Gibb, known far better as the Bee Gees (yes, those Bee Gees), recorded a protest song.

Nothing special, really.

At that particular moment in history, protesting was quite fash-ionable.

Whether you sang about the shitty state of the world or stuck flowers in rifle barrels or threw various and sundry objects at the local constabulary (who would return the compliment by attempting to split open your skull if they could catch you), as long as you were protesting against anything, that was real cool.

I don't recall the content of the song in general (I do note that the patented castratoid chorus of the Bee Gees was prominent long before Saturday Night Fever), but there's a line in the tune which goes:

The world is/
A bad place/
A bad place/
A terrible place to live/
Oh, but I don't wanna die

Nice sentiment, innit?

It doesn't really fit in with the Woodstock Nation who tried to change the world by means of peace, love, and some of the most boring rock music ever heard by modern man.

However, my children, there's more than a grain of truth to it.

We all try to find a purpose in life, whether it be through religion, organized or otherwise, or striving to be a Famous Person, or even giving of ourselves to help those less fortunate than we are.

For a select few, the purpose of life is simple survival. Ask Snake Plissken.

#### 

Like many of the children of his generation, Snake was born into the era when the disaster that was taking place in Viet Nam was either in progress or winding down to its perverse version of a finale. I speak from experience, as I was born in the year of my Lord (and perhaps yours, unless the concept of God bothers you) 1958. December 5th, to be dead accurate. As a Viet Nam Baby, I was exposed to that war via the great glass teat, which would show the weekly body counts (would you be-

lieve that, in my innocence, I used to cheer when the enemy body count was higher than our side's?), the wholesale destruction of entire villages, firebombings, and other little pleasantries.

Of course, when the troops were called out of Nam and back home by Nixon in 1971 (perhaps his only act of honor... no, it was his only act of honor), people thought that the war in Viet Nam was over and done with.

Don' you believe it.

People tried to make out as though the was had ended, but it never did for many veterans. Some went openly crazy, others quietly collapsed in the privacy of their own homes. Not only were people reluctant to open up and relate their experiences, but the Viet Nam vets were branded as murderers by a liberal press engaged in a round of moral superiority as sickening as anything the Moral Majority has done.

For the children whom all this came into their lives, it was a subtle influence which took form much later in their lives.

For Snake, this influence is not really all that apparent.

You can't ask anyone who ever knew him, because most of those people are in terminal dreamland.

The people he encountered during his mission in the Manhattan Maximum Security Penitentiary didn't get much opportunity to study that influence, if any of them even bothered.

And if you pressed the man himself for an answer, he'd probably stare at you with his good eye, mumble something to the effect of "It's none of your business, motherfucker," and walk away.

However, the influence is there.

The key word is "survival".

When Snake was a member of the Black Lights, his unit was sent on a suicide mission of unknown intent. It was the kind of grandstand play military men like to perform to make a point known only to them. It also left Snake the sole survivor of a virtual massacre.

It wasn't the only horror he knew during his term of service, but it most certainly had the greatest effect on him. Somewhere inside him, he knew that the important thing in this war was not defeating the enemy, but just surviving. He didn't need the medals a somewhat fawning government lavished upon him as if in atonement for his rather embarassing survival. Living was its own reward.

Of course, when he got back home, he discovered himself out of one war zone and into another. This time, the social pressure which constantly threatened to blow up the United States in the 1960s was unleashed. But when the blast came, things didn't necessarily improve.

If it can be believed, things got worse.

When the national crime rate jumps up some 400%, things are bound to go to hell in a handcart. As in any desperate situation, only those who keep their wits about them survive. So, Snake became a criminal. Under less than logical conditions, it was the only logical choice offered him.

Of course, he wasn't alone in his criminal career. Another Black Light, Bill Taylor, who also managed to survive the unit, was his partner up until the failed robbery of the Federal Depository which left Taylor dead and Snake alone and Manhattan bound.

When he arrived at the moment President Harker took an unscheduled fact-finding tour of the facilities, chief prison guard Bob Hauk gave Snake an offer similar to one he had before, which involved the massacre of the Black Lights. Save the ass of our beloved Chief Exec and you'll be rewarded with the sweetness of your life. Refuse, and get ready to have a reunion with Bill Taylor. Given such lovely choices, Snake opted for life in the here and now as opposed to life in the hereafter.

Barring several obstacles, Snake completed his mission. But his destruction of an important tape Harker was carrying showed just how important he considered the mission. Having managed to listen to a brief portion of the tape, Snake managed to figure out why he was sent to retrieve the flaccid President in the first place.

One more grandstand play.

One more massacre.

This time, however, he managed to do something about it.

Survival, not just for himself, but for what was left of the world.

This is where the influence of Viet Nam comes in.

Snake, like the Viet Nam vets of a generation before him, had been shoved into an arbitrary situation where killing the enemy not for God or country or even baseball, hot dogs, apple pie, and Chevrolet, but just to survive was the goal. His physical loss was great, but his psychic wounds went far deeper. A child of passion, trampled on in every sense of the word, Snake began retreating inside himself, lest he sustain a permanent injury to what was left of his soul. This retreat was seen by many as a toughening. Snake, to the outward appearance, became a sullen, close-mouthed, single-minded killing machine. But the outward manner was merely a bandage on a festering wound long since infected and untreated.

Thomas Wolfe once said. "You can't go home again."

For Snake Plissken, home never existed.

Nobody offered him riches or fame if he rescued Harker. Doubtful indeed if he would accept bribery in order to schlep out a blubbering mound of flesh. No, Hauk had to deal with a currency closer to Snake's heart; i.e., his skin. Implanting explosives in his neck was insurance that he wouldn't have a sudden change of heart and renege on the deal. Still, given the chance, Snake would have attempted to pilot the Gulffire glider toward, say, Canada if he could.

However, some piece of honor inside him had managed to survive within him. It was that honor which directed him to carry out his mission, regardless of the cost or consequences. It was also that sense of honor which Snake buried safe and deep within him to protect what little self-respect he had. To protect it even more, he distanced himself away from anyone who might be able to reach him, risking their inevitable hurt. He couldn't risk being hurt himself.

He had to survive.

It was, and is, the logical thing to do.

ESCAPEAGNERVEGASWEMLIZYVUKMV SRIUFYRAGUECYHFSGPUCDGGFOALI CHUXRAYSYQEJEGESCAPESLODTAAF AYSATNEDISERPEHTCCCONHGNHADH PAAEFYRAEMBWAGGMHSXSASLPEFGA EPQSSONELKOBTSSTHEDUKEUPPPTH PCMCGYNIEFHICSEHRITDEUVOOYIS RPDARGNINELUHUEIUNPCPBRPDIWA ESAPHOMEHTZECZGALSEZLJANNKSS SEVEBUDQTXHTDADNILDFIGAFDBTD SRIHRVREPACSEEPACSEKSLUGNLUS JP D B S I I K U P D X T A X I B R D B S E O R N U N L TFFLBFFKTIXJWRLZYFLIKSOUABOS QOOOIUDFJUEHMSENDCNCECYLINLT MNUYXTSWLIIONFTEGAMUNAAERNLA XWRVUHCMMUGRJESKTBKPLPVLEBUG GOTNSEISPYGRWCPTDBCPGEAVBOFQ DBEKETHNAVANAKAAAIRKQFNJIRKK USEIZARCPRMPYHLDAECIXHURSECA CSNLDPTOUSEONRLRAGIWDDMXEMOE IOPOAEIBWLFAICPEKHSKIGBKNOHW SRGFLQBREHMEUPCCEGREBNENORCA LCLPIEPACSEOYIRANSERTFRTRJMA HELICOPTERSIXWNRKOWFHVOIVYMO NQXABIAAQCWORLDTRADECENTERTR AREDILGTESTFTOOTSJIRBEEIMLEY FYSWYUSTRNAMLLEHDLORAHLKABES IICDBOZOTZCYUMDNCWYSDPTOARQM ETAMHENOECROFRIANABRFOKERMBS UUPLYZGLSXGIBNHYKBSQDCSZFNZE

#### WORD SEARCH CLUES

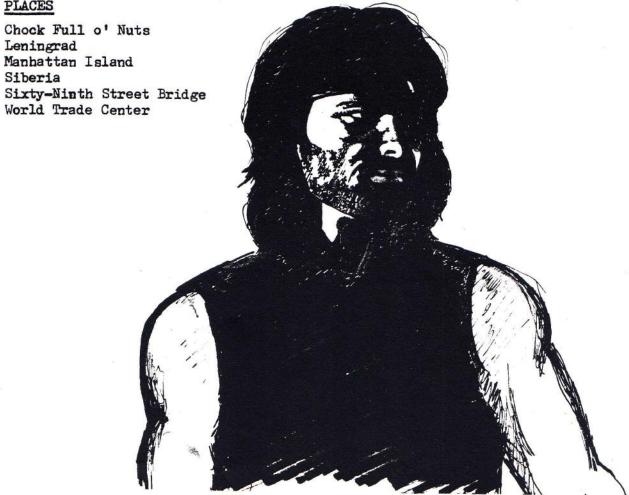
#### PEOPLE

A Number One Blackbellies Brain Cabbie Crazies Cronenberg The Duke Gypsies Harold Hellman Hauk Maggie The President Rehme Romero Snake Plissken Slag

#### THINGS

Air Force One Cobra Tattoo Crossbow David Fourteen Eyepatch Gulffire Helicopters Jet Glider Nerve Gas Pardon The Pod The Tape Taxi Tracer X-rays

#### PLACES





## Nineteen Thirty-six To Ninety-seven

- Some night! Must be a blizzard comin' up. Or two. I wonder . . .
  - Sssshhh!
- Who're you? I didn't expect anybody to be here. You gave me quite a start.
  - Sssshhh!
- Stop hissing like that. It makes me nervous. Where did you spring from, anyway?
  - I'm from the future. Yours, if you don't watch out.
  - Who are you? I can't seem to get a good look at you.
- Suits me fine. Now, will you keep your voice down? And quit stamping off snow in here. You're waking up the cats.
  - What cats?
- There's one asleep behind the typewriter. And I saw one pass by the door to the kitchen a little while ago. Fat beast. If they spot us, they'll tell . . .
- Oh, those cats. They don't tell. They're old friends of mine.

  I've been here before. Never saw you, though. What're you doin' here?
  - Just waiting.
- Well, <u>I</u> don't have time to wait. I've got the golden slippers of Ozymandias of Egypt lying out there in the snow, unguarded. Move aside from that typewriter, and let me leave a message.
  - Haven't you got other places to go?
- Sure. I've got ladies all over the world, writing for me. But I thought of this one first; I mean, after the heat of Egypt . . .
  - You're too late. This one's mine. She'll write for me now.
- Look, I don't know who you are, but I thought I told you to move away from that typewriter. I've got a message to deliver.
- You can take your message and shove it up the end you're thinking with. Didn't you hear me? She's writing for me now.
- So that's how it's gonna be? Seems to me you could do with a good whipping, boy.
  - I'm not the only one.
  - Maybe not. Only difference being, I happen to have a whip.
  - I am one.
- Well, hm, considering this being little more than a seven-byseven foot den, maybe we shouldn't fight in here. There's the cats to

consider. If you just let me leave this little idea for a plot, I'll be off at once, chasing Cleopatra's girdle . . .

- And if you don't, I could let you have the crown off the Statue of Liberty; she's coming down any day now.
- Don't mock our national monuments, young man. Nor anybody else's for that matter. I've been roaming through jungles full of mosquitos, caverns full of spiders, deserts of blistering sun . . .
- I roamed the streets at night; backyards full of rats and a Chock Full o' Nuts . . .
- . . . and I've seen the rise and fall, the grandeur and the vanity of many a noble culture represented in its arts.
  - What I've seen, I wouldn't wish on anybody.
  - Hey! What's happened to your eye?
  - Let's just say I gazed too far into the blue haze . . .
  - Of lost horizons?
  - Nope. Nerve gas.
- You've got one eye and a life in worse ruins than mine ever was, and you still think she'll write for you?
  - I know she will.
- I've brought her a wonderful plot here, of a sunken ship off the coast of Roslagen - laden with gold and a spell cast over it, says that anybody who touches it - what did you bring her anyway?
  - Just me. Good enough, she said. She'll take it from there.
- If that is so, maybe I ought to take my sunken ship elsewhere.

  I see she's into human wrecks now.
  - A little less decrepit than you, though.
- My value only increases with time. Well, I'll be off then. Into the setting sun, or wherever my kind should go.
- Why don't you? The wind's died down. There's nothing to stop you. Follow the stars due west from here; you might wind up with the Sword of Orion.
- You know what, kid? I don't think I like you. There's a certain chill about you . . . no, I definately don't like you. What did you say your name was?
  - Just call me Snake.

Eva Albertsson 82 - 03 - 02



## Stairwell

God, my leg hurts "From there on down, you walk." Well, what about going up, Hauk, you asshole Didn't count on an arrow wound Gotta rest a minute Only twenty-four flights to go Harold, you've signed your own death warrant Even if you do make it out of this I'm going to kill you Like I should have before What's that, gunshots? Shit C'mon leg I'll get their damn president out And they'll live to regret Jesus, my leg hurts

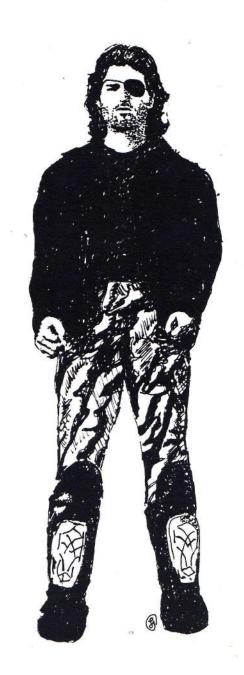
by Laurie Shanahan



## Corellian... Farewell

I'd fain have followed you. Solo but think I'll pass up this flight for the angry golden Reptile standing on your right. I thought I'd be content with your restless, wandering ways I know I said I'd love you till the end of all my days but night fell fast and heavy - Manhattan was so dark -I reckon I got lost there and I mislaid my heart. And all the Princess' horses and all the Princess' men will not suffice to bring it back to you again. Though you be versed in loving and he is but a child. though your grin is dashing while he forgot to smile. yet he's the one I'll look for when the sky begins to fall. Hey - you got a million women - that Snake's got none at all no hand to hold for comfort when the skies cave in. You're a lucky man, Corellian, but you cannot always win. I loved you dearly. Solo. and hope you won't be sore if I love him even better because he suffered more. You go and raise your ship now. I cannot come tonight. I'll be leaving on the Gulffire docked there on your right.

- Eva Albertsson





## Commissioner's Journal

March 17th, 2009 (0200 a.m.) I can't sleep nights. I never was a man of many words, yet now it's come to this; I'm keeping a journal. Because I can find no one sane - or mad - enough to listen to me. No one and nothing else.

It's been a hard winter. The ice around the prison only broke yesterday. There can't be many prisoners left. There'll be a few more at the end of summer, but the increase is negligible these days. We haven't dumped anyone new in there for over a year now. Criminals are becoming extinct. Same as everyone else. Our inmates must be down to less than 5% of the population we had back in '97 -

'97. It's because of '97 I can't sleep nights. I keep having these dreams. So, I'm staying up, writing about them instead. Makes no sense either way. I guess you could call them nightmares. Back when people lived as people, they used to have nightmares about what they feared the most. Me, I'm the head of a few hundred mental skeletons, in charge of the New York Maximum Security Penitentiary, and I'm having nightmares about a chance to a normal life. If that's what it was. Nightmares that plague me, not while they're there but as they go away, dumping me right back in the 2000's, where I belong.

Last night, he smiled at me. I don't think I ever saw him smile back then - maybe once, when I handed him all the hardware for his mission Inside, and told him it was just like Leningrad. I think he smiled then - but my memory might be shorting out. I'm an old man, and mental circuits are burning out fast these days.

I don't know why he should smile, last night. I doubt he meant to forgive me. I wouldn't expect him to. Nor ask him to, if that was possible. Back then, near as I can recall, he just looked surprised. As if to the last he never really expected me to shoot. Well, I always figured that boy's faith in mankind would be the death of him.

Maybe he thought I'd miss. With a riot gun at point blank range - how could I miss? Didn't have any explosive cartridges, but I didn't need any. At that range, one conventional bullet was enough. I never believed in overdoing it.

March 18th, 2009 Had to shoot one of the officers again, today. He thought he was back in Samarkand, where he lost his brother, one arm and two-thirds of his face. Went berserk in the guards' refectory. Or maybe I'm the berserk. They haven't said so yet, but I can see it in their eyes - the few that are not all blank. Sometimes I wish they'd pull themselves together enough to come and shoot me. But, they never do. Got a fellow stationed outside my door here; he's no problem. He just sits there, on the floor, crooning happily all night. God, why am I the last one sane around here! Maybe I sucked in too much gas over Leningrad. Worked up some kind of immunity. Or did I? Maybe I'm just as nutty as the rest of them, and just don't know it -

Had another dream this morning. Always do. He wasn't smiling this time. Sort of accusing, I thought, but I may be wrong. I never owed him anything, and he knew it.

Besides, what could I do? It was easy enough to figure who switched the tape. Harker was mad as a hornet, once he got off the telecast. Espionage, he said. High treason, he said. So, we went to get the tape in the first place, and Plissken in the second. Though for some of us it might have been the other way 'round. They

always feared him. Odd, that. I don't think I ever found anything in him to fear. He could be handled, 'long as you were careful -

We caught him just by the Jersey wall; he hadn't gone far. Maybe he was tired of running. I searched his body afterwards; didn't want to let those lunatics get their paws on him - don't know why. Guess they did in the end anyway. Of course he didn't have the tape. He'd already destroyed it. I remember I was pleased he had. Served Harker right, I thought. And by a freakish twist of fate, it might have even preserved peace - if that's the word for prolonged suffering as opposed to instant oblivion. If the Ruskies had heard that threat, they'd have struck first, no questions asked. Now they never heard it, so the chemical war's still on. We think. We don't get any news here anymore. Haven't for a long time. Just as well. The last piece wasn't very edifying. Trigger-happy politicians. We don't seem to have them around anymore. Can't be sure though. Nobody can. We just guard the prison. Maybe we're the last ones left -

March 19th, 2009 Sometimes I catch myself wondering what happened to the body. I gave orders not to touch it, then went to report to Harker and his crowd. When I got back to take care of it, it was gone. They looked a bit sheepish, said it'd already been disposed of. Maybe they dumped him in the Bay. Whatever they did, they'd sure been quick. They always feared him a lot, even then. Superstitious crazies, the lot of them. Maybe they ate him. I didn't ask.

There's the alarm. Some poor fool trying to escape. Could've saved himself the trouble. There's no grass on this side of the fence either -

April 21st, 2009 Seems I'm neglecting even this modest effort at record-keeping. I haven't been busy. Just didn't have anything to say. What's the use counting off time anyway? Till the gas gets me or a bullet? There's no retirement. It's the gas, or some crazy in my own ranks with a gun -

May 4th, 2009 It's getting hotter. The gases will rise - and spread. Maybe all the way out over the sea. The large oceans have been spared, so far. There were some islands that were free of gas, last I heard - wonder if they're still around. Deserters used to try for them. Better than the Badlands out west. Harder to reach though. Not many made it, if any.

Dreamt again this morning. He spoke to me. I couldn't hear what he said.

May 25th, 2009 Why am I keeping this up? This time count? There was a time when a calendar meant something. When a new day held a promise. When it could be the day I'd find my son - But the day never came, and I settled down. Content to live without time. Who needed it anyway? One year of war is just the same as the next, or the last. War has no time, holds no hope. War has no meaning, and no end -

I could have lived like that. In a world of gray and black vistas, and empty automaton with a label saying COMMISSIONER stuck to its back. I could have lived like that. But instead I was given a new focal point, a new straw to cling to, perhaps a new chance. And time started ticking again.

It's hard to find anything to compare it to. In a way, it was like falling in love. The color seeping back into the world, and when it departs, it leaves things twice as drab as before. Guess that's the part I couldn't take. I could live with no hope at all. But I was given a new one - and I had to destroy it.

June 1st, 2009 I heard comments back then, from the few that knew me well enough. Rehme said later I got mixed up, having 'someone in there' again. That I couldn't tell one from the other. Cronenberg said I let Plissken double for my son. But I was never confused about who was in there, and I never mistook the Snake for any son of mine. All I knew was I had to get him back out. Had to. Didn't want to spend the rest of my life wondering what happened to him -

He told me afterwards he'd met my son, that Jerry was doing all right. It was a damn lie; nobody does all right in there. Nice of him to lie though; he didn't have to do it.

Rehme and Cronenberg have been dead these past five years. 47th Street Raid, back in '04 - Nobody left to comment on my actions now.

June 15th, 2009 Time is slipping again. Soon I'll be able to give up my count altogether. Another dream early this morning. Could hear him now. He said he'd be back.

I'm taking sick. The gas or pneumonia; maybe both. Dreams getting more vivid all the time. I've finally given up coffee. No use tormenting oneself. Wonder why I did for so long. What was I trying to prove?

July 4th, 2009 He died so well. I guess some have to do that, but why him? Most people die in a fairly disgusting scene, leaving them twisted, gaping and empty-eyed after their personalities fled - He just gave me one surprised look and went down, composed, almost gracefully. Lay there, tousled hair half over his face, as if he'd been asleep, dammit. Only his blood on the concrete to tell a different story. His eye closed, not staring. Guess it opened later, as rigor set in -

I keep dreaming about that. Sometimes I see that intense blue eye open again, focusing on me. Sometimes he smiles -

July 31st, 2009 I'm definately taking sick. Had a spell of fever last month, didn't last long though. Takes more than a touch of pneumonia to kill off ol' Bob Hauk. This time, it is more. At long last, the gas. The creeping madness. Coming to get me too, in the end. Like it got everyone else. The staff is down to less than a fourth of what we had back in '97. The year that time finally stopped -

I told him once, he was all I had. To get Harker out, that is, but maybe he heard it differently. Sometimes I almost like to think he did. I placed some great hopes in him, I don't deny that. The only one I knew who'd been going through Leningrad and lived - besides myself - Guess I hoped he'd understand. I wasn't aiming to make friends with him, he was after all an inmate. Didn't want to sit around talking over old times with him, or anything like that. Hell, no. But when I heard he was coming, catch a glint of understanding in that single, blue eye -

But not him. "You stuck with it, didn't you, blackbelly?" he said. Cold steel. Hot venom. I sort of half held out my hand, and he bit. Well, I was a fool to expect anything else, I guess.

So I sent him in there. For a moment, I guess I hoped he'd die. But there was Harker. And the tape. And I actually wanted to give him a chance. Some chance! But I knew that to him, it might be just that. So then I got to hoping he'd be back. Not for Harker's sake, not after a while. He was worth a dozen Harkers. And he proved it too. He got back out. Then I shot him -

August 5th, 2009 Two more officers dead this morning. Gas. I'm

beginning to see things, myself. Blood mostly. Blood where there can't be any. On the carpet in my office. The walls. The chair where he sat that day -

I remember I was a little surprised to see him. I had known he was young, but I hadn't expected him to look it. He reminded me of a baseball player I used to admire way back in an earlier life - Was about to ask him if he knew the guy, but then I realized that he couldn't have been over three years old, when that player had to quit. Time flies. Anyway, it wasn't the moment for small talk.

- September 15th, 2009 Dreams are getting vivid again. Lurid colors. Fluorescent. Its the gas. Like when I was a kid and used to paint my father's fence for a dime a board. All swirling colors. And that eye.
- October 23rd, 2009 Today I saw him. I've felt it coming for a long time now. I knew that sooner or later I'd actually see him. From a distance, walking towards Security, just as he did this very day, 12 years ago. He was alone. No guards with him this time. He looked just the same. Same clothes, same long blond hair. I could only see his back. There were a few guards standing around. They didn't see him of course. And I didn't tell them.
- November 6th, 2009 Getting used to it already. I walk down a corridor; he's turning the corner in front of me. I go outside; he's standing in the shadows, waiting. I try to ignore it; so far nobody suspects, I'm sure of that. And he never speaks; I never see his face. But I know it's him.
- November 18th, 2009 What if it is him? What if he didn't die, back then? But no, I must retain some sanity yet. I shot him myself. I saw him lying there, his blood staining the concrete. I searched his body for the tape. And what would he be doing here, anyway? If I ever got away from here, it'd be the last place on Earth I'd maybe it is the last place on Earth. I wish there were some news. Any news. Ever.
- December 25th, 2009 It isn't him. It's the gas, I'm sure of that. Nobody else sees him. God knows what they see, they're lost in their dreams too. But it isn't him. I've seen his face now. He looks just the same as he did back then, hasn't aged a day in 12 years. Hasn't even changed clothes. And he never speaks. Just looks at me, sometimes smiles then he's gone.
- January 1st, 2010 Some New Year. I got out for a breath of air don't mind the gas now that it's done its worst anyway. Nearly stumbled over him. That is, I couldn't stumble over him of course, since
  he was not really there. But I saw him lying on the concrete like he
  did then, his hair covering the eyepatch, his good eye closed. His
  blood everywhere. I felt a sharp pain, same as I did then. Odd, I
  hadn't remembered that pain Guess that's when I realized he was the
  last fixed point in my life, and he was dead. Now, as I stood there
  looking at him, his eye opened, focusing on me just as in the dreams.
  I thought I heard him moan. Then suddenly he wasn't there anymore.
  We're into a new year. Wonder if I'll see the end of it.
- February 20th, 2010 I should have known. This time he materialized right in my office. Sitting there large as life, lighting his cigarette the way he did then, over 12 years ago. His lips moved but no

words came. None that I could hear anyway. But I know what he was saying. He asked me why we were talking.

Could there be kinks in time, playing us these cruel tricks?
Maybe the war disrupted time, plaguing the survivors with reflections of their past? But no, he should have been in chains. There were manacles on his hands, back then. There were none now. Other than that, he looked just the same.

March 7th, 2010 Today he was sitting beside me in the officers' cantina. If I had known back then, just how much it meant to me that he was still in the world, would I have let him walk out of here unscathed? I doubt it. I always knew. Always knew he'd haunt me, dead or alive. Guess I wanted him off my back. Must have known I'd live to regret it. But - could I have known how much I'd lose?

March 17th, 2010 This is the end. Now he won't ever go away anymore.

It was shortly before dark, as I took a stroll by the Jersey wall, same as I often do nowadays. He was there. I could see him from a distance, but I walked up to him. Thought he'd vanish. Leave me alone. But he didn't budge. He'd changed. Almost the way he should, over a dozen years. He was little more than a boy back then even if a nation feared him. He was all man now, wide-shouldered, muscular, a little leaner. He'd be close to forty now, if he'd lived - 37, 29, thereabouts - He was tanned too, the way they say people get on the islands. His hair was as blond as ever but shorter, and his beard longer, like he'd let it grow, not just neglected to shave it. But the eyepatch was still there, and the piercing blue gaze beside it was the same.

He moved a little, and I could see he still walked with a slight limp. That's true, he sustained a nasty injury in there; an arrow wound, far as I remember, a deep one. Odd, the things one forgets -

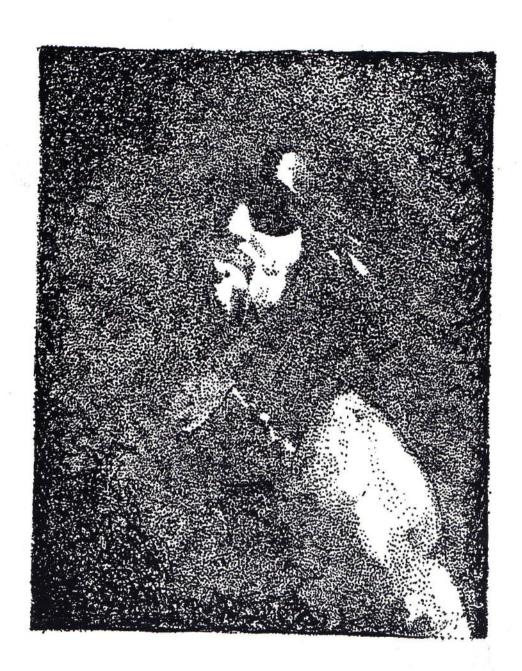
He was in civvies. Off-white pants and a sort of tan shirt, open halfway down his broad chest. I could see a crooked white scar, about where my bullet must have struck.

It wasn't possible of course. I had killed him myself. I had seen him with my own eyes, lying dead on the ground, bleeding all over the USPF's best concrete. A riot gun at point blank range. Nobody slithers out of that - not even Snake Plissken.

Yet here he was, large as life, and with all those changes my last remnants of sanity had always told me ought to be there after over 12 years; an SM-FPC 211 in his hands, but not pointed at me - yet.

"I thought you were dead", I said. What the hell else could I say?

Eva Albertsson 82-03-19-23



#### POEM TO THE BLUE-EYED VISION IN BLACK

It is you I seek to know, to understand.

It is you who haunts my dreams, both waking and sleeping.

I want to write this poem to help you, or is it an attempt to help myself?

I keep feeling pity for you;

it is a pity which you have no use for.

It is I who deserves the pity

for I love a man who does not yet exist.

Yes, there are those who care for you.

Even though you wish to be stone.

you are not as hard as you seem;

Yet you are not as soft as I would

make you out to be.

If only I could take you to a time before New York;

a time before Leningrad

or Siberia.

But where could we go?

For here there are wars

and rumors of war

and there has always been killing.

For now you continue to haunt me.

But one day when the time is right,

when you become more real,

and I become less so,

We will make our own escape.

Amy New 27 April 82



## Aftermath

Plissken had just thrown the cassette with its burning tape aside. He took a long drag off his cigarette and wished he'd been there to see Mr. President's face when the Cabbie's favorite song had begun to play instead of the President's own nuclear war blackmail tape.

But, since the President wasn't a stupid man, Plissken figured that he'd better make himself very scarce, before the shit really hit the fan.

He was wondering how the hell he was going to get from Liberty Island back to the mainland. There weren't exactly regular ferry runs back and forth these days. And he didn't really feel up to swimming. But he would if he had to.

Maybe he could "borrow" one of the blackbelly patrol boats. He limped through the relative dark-ness toward the marina.

He spun around suddenly, hearing the rapid approach of someone behind him. It was Hauk's secondin-command, Rehme. Plissken glared at him, but Rehme kept coming.

"Snake, I wanna talk to you."
Snake growled, "The name's

Plissken." Then he turned and moved on. He just wanted to put some distance between himself and that bastard, Hauk. And the rest of his blackbelly trash.

Rehme caught up and fell in step with him.

"Plissken . . . " The man seemed to be having trouble finding the right words, and Snake wasn't about to help him out. He just wished the man would disappear. Wished they would all disappear.

Rehme started out again. "Plissken . . " Then lay his hand on Snake's arm.

Plissken pulled away angrily and stopped to face the other man. "What the fuck do you want, asshole?"

Rehme balked and took a step back, as if burned by Plissken's oneeyed gaze. Then he looked away.

"There's a woman Inside - I was wonderin' if you might've seen

Plissken just stared at him; his bad eye was beginning to throb again. First Hauk, and now this jerk.

"What the hell do you assholes think I was doin' in there?" He turned away and moved again toward the water. Rehme's voice followed him. "Plissken - please."

Something in the man's voice struck an ancient chord of compassion in Plissken. He stopped once more and turned, a look of exasperation stamped clearly on his face. He was so tired.

"All right - what?"



Rehme was childishly eager and expectant. Not as bad as Cabbie but still it made Plissken uncomfortable.

"She's, uh, 'bout 35, long, wavy dark brown hair. Dark eyes. Real good build." He paused and took a breath. "Really a beautiful girl."

Snake realized that he was staring and looked away. The man was talking about Maggie. He'd described her perfectly. Then Rehme finished, confirming Plissken's dread.

"Her name's Margaret - Maggie." Then he waited, the same look on his face that Plissken had seen on Hauk's, waiting for news about his son.

Snake sighed but it came out as more of a tired hiss. "What's she to you?"

Rehme looked down at his feet. He'd always had a lot of respect for Snake Plissken and he had a lot more now. He knew how he must seem to a man like Plissken - weak, emotional, and worse - a hated blackbelly. But, he still had his pride - even after Leningrad. He'd have lost that too if he hadn't stayed close to a man like "Big Bob" Hauk. He'd have probably have been no better than the other half-crazy blackbellies without Hauk's strength to help him hold together. He stood up straighter and looked Snake in the eye.

"She's my little sister."

Snake's eye throbbed a little harder. Rehme went on, telling him things he didn't want to know.

"While I was away in the Army, Maggie got mixed up with a rough crowd. Things were falling apart over here, and I guess she did what she thought she had to. She always was a gutsy broad." The affection in his voice was clear. "There wasn't any other family; we just had each other. Last letter I got from her said she'd gotten married.

Never heard from her again. But when I got home, after Leningrad . . . "
The throbbing in Plissken's eye increased a little more. " . . . I got word that she'd been sentenced to . . . " He gestured toward Manhattan Island. " . . . there."

He stared over the water at the menacing, too silent prison is-

"They said she was in on an armed robbery/homicide with her husband and his gang. She was the only one made it alive. The black - the police killed the others."

Snake nodded without even realizing it, remembering back to the murder of Bill Taylor by blackbellies. He figured that the ones that took Maggie in did much more to her than their duty. He had a feeling that Rehme knew it too.

"I tried for a long time to find a way to get her out but her crime involved the wrong people. And Hauk wouldn't let me look for her said there wasn't any point."

Snake's sixth sense was telling him it was time to move. "Look, man - I gotta go."

Rehme glanced over his shoulder and smiled.

"I think you're right." Then he pointed toward the dock. "Try stall number 7 - here's the keys."

Plissken caught the keys and stared at the other man in amaze - ment. There was more to Rehme than he'd figured.

Once more, Snake Plissken was faced with a dilemma - to tell the man the truth about his sister or tell him a lie to save him the pain of knowing the truth, like he had Hauk.

Plissken opted for the truth this time. He decided that it would be better if Rehme knew what had really happened. Rehme probably had a good idea that Maggie wasn't crazy as Jerry Hauk had been. Snake doubted if Rehme would be quite as quick to accept the easy lie as tired old Hauk had been. He really doubted if Hauk had bought the lie, but either way, he had known it was over.

"I did run into Maggie. 's a matter of fact, she helped me get the President out."

Rehme thought about that for a second. His voice faltered.
"Was she with you on the bridge?" His own words from earlier
that evening echoed through his brain - 'The taxi hit a mine. Four
people on foot.'

Plissken nodded, hating the look of pain in Rehme's eyes. "Then she's . . ?"

Snake finished for him. "She's dead."

His eyes shiny, Rehme half-turned to go. "Well, thanks, Plissken. At least now I know. Good luck." He started off slowly, back toward the main buildings.

Plissken watched him go, then, on impulse, stopped him. "Hey!"

Rehme turned back. Snake saw tears on his face.

"It was her choice. Her death was quick - over in a second. She bought me the time I needed to make it out." Then he added. "She was a good friend."

It seemed to help. Rehme looked at him and smiled. "Thanks." Then he glanced around at the commotion behind him.

"You better get going, Plissken. Sounds like the party's really heating up."

Snake looked past him, hearing all the shouting. He thought he heard the President's voice, shouting hysterically. "Where's that fucking Plissken?!?!?"

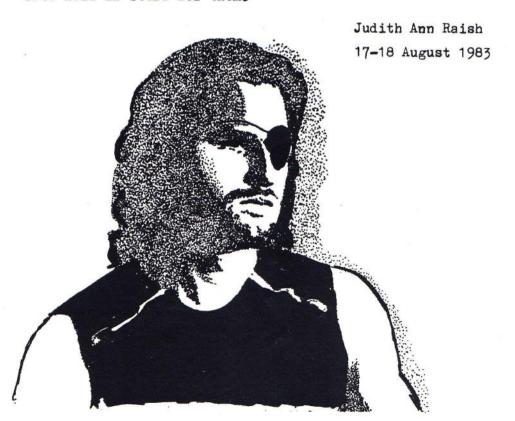
Rehme apparently heard it too. They both grinned.

"I think you're right."

"Goodbye, Plissken,"

Snake nodded. "S' long, Rehme."

Both men turned without looking back and moved on toward whatever fate held in store for them.





### WAR HERO

by Sheila Paulson

Glory . . . Now there's a word to laugh at, isn't it? That's all it is too, damn all, just a word. Something to psych up the kids, the stupid, trusting jerks. March away to war, be a hero. Be a sucker. There's no glory in war, no glory in anything, Just dirty jobs and suckers to do them. Go to war, and be a hero. Medals and glory and cheering. And it feels good for awhile, But cheering lasts about ten seconds. And all the safe, comfortable people. The ones that stayed home, fat and secure, The smart ones, the lucky ones, Well, they've got no memories. Medals and purple hearts - cheer for the wounded hero. Then sweep the remains under the carpet So that you can go on feeling safe and comfortable and secure. Pretend the hero doesn't exist any more, It's a helluva lot easier that way. They weren't there in Leningrad. They don't know what it was like in Siberia. Safe at home, waiting to cheer and forget: Damn them all to hell. And what's left for the sucker? Civilian life? No way the war hero belongs, nothing left. And what do you get from the grateful country that sent you off to war? That let you come home maimed?

That let you come home maimed?

A purple heart for an eye - yeah.

That's what Uncle Sam calls a fair trade.

So screw them all, the safe, comfortable jerks,

Waiting for the war hero to slither back under his rock

So they can keep things tidy and not have to remember.

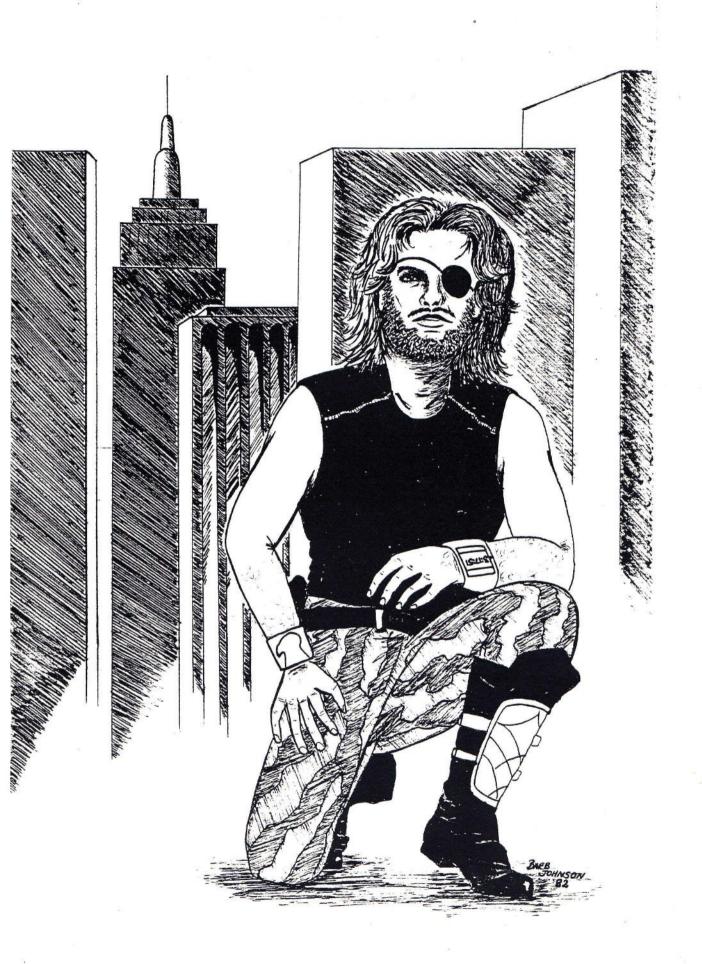
Yeah, screw them all,

'Cause the war hero learned something on the Russian Front

Far from everything safe and secure and comfortable.

He learned how to survive,

And somehow, he's going to win.



Sliding stealthily through the flame-stabbed Night; searching, finding, killing, hurting; Always on the look-out, always alert, Knowing one mistake could be the last, then no Escaping, no more running, no more living.

Barb Johnson

## Rules

Keep to yourself -Unless someone has a thing you need. Return like for like. Understand: you're on your own, Everything here is on the Level of "only the strong survive" and I plan on Lots of surviving. Always save yourself first, especially Since no one will do it for you. See to it; you're the best and No one had better try to say different . . . Any takers? Thought not. Kill or be killed, I guess, and try to Escape from this hell-hole with the President in tow. Luck's been on my side so far, but Inside this place is like Sliding down into a living death - not me, but Soon, the time'll be up and the world will be able to Keep its death wish. Either way, there's still a chance on getting out and Nothing's goin' to stop me.

Barb Johnson

## NEW YORK NIGHT: 1997

Stalking silently down
Now-deserted streets . . .
Avenging angel hovers near,
Kindred spirits crazed and
Enemies now appearing in shadows
Painted on the ruins of progress.
Life ebbing, love dying while
Invaded dreams
Swirl amid the unreal reality.
Sanity co-exists with insanity
Killing hope as well as life.
Enter in; abandon all;
New York, the proud, has fallen far.

Barb Johnson







Serpent, dear Serpent.

I have never asked for much if anything.

but please take me with you when you go.
Last time I saw you

you were headed somewhere, and any place is better than here.

At least your enemies can be seen for what they are;

Mine pretend everlasting love,

but the pat on the back

with dagger in hand

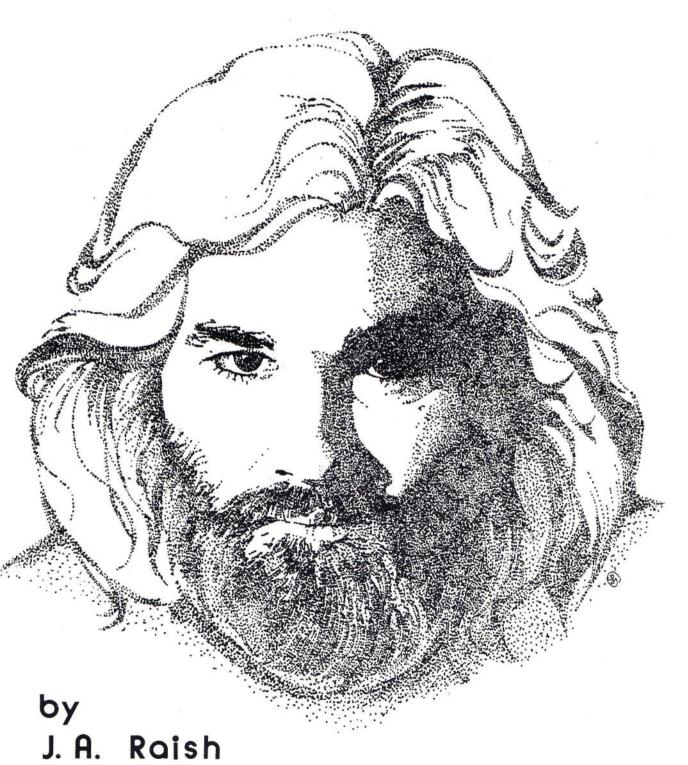
becomes everlasting pain.

Tell you what,

I'll make you a deal
even though you aren't fond of them;
"A little human compassion" doesn't come cheap,
but if you'll love me for a little while,
I'll find you some.

Amy New 21 Sep 82

## THE COLDEST WAR



"Come on, come on! Keep movin! The choppers are on the way!" Lieutenant S. D. Plissken was getting hoarse from yelling. but they still had a ways to go, and quite a few very angry Russians weren't too far behind.

Plissken was known to his buddies as Snake because he had a way of 'slithering' out of trouble, and because of the cobra tattooed down his belly. And it looked like he just might 'slither' out of this one. If his luck held.

The mission had gone perfectly. up until they'd headed for home. The huge hydroelectric dam at Bratsk in Siberia had been the target. It had been a beautiful sight from the air, had seemed almost a shame to destroy it.

But, destroy it they did, quickly and efficiently. Then, they'd headed almost due south for the American base at Darhan, just over the border into Mongolia. Mongolia had only recently been taken by the U.S. forces. In and out quick, as always, but then things had gone wrong somewhere near Lake Baykal. All hell had broken loose.

Two full squads, under Captain H. G. Booker, had been shot down by heavily armed Russian fighter jets. Booker's people just weren't prepared for dogfighting. Weren't supposed to have to be. But then, Plissken had never had much faith in Army reconnaissance. It was about as accurate as the weatherman.

Only the captain, and nine others including Plissken had survived. The other lieutenant, Jim Weatherby, had been one of the first to die. his small, lightweight jet exploding with a fiery glare as its fuel ignited.

The survivors weren't in much better shape. They'd been strafed by machine gun fire as soon as they'd hit the ground, some while they were still coming down. Wounds of varying severity and the intense cold of Siberia were quickly taking their toll. Plissken was badly hurt himself, and knew that none of them could last much longer.

He waved them on down the trail toward the clearing ahead. "Let's go, let's go! Not much further!"

The two men half-carrying Captain Booker were bringing up the rear. Plissken fell into step with them.

"How you doin', Book?" He looked bad.
"I'll be okay, Snake. Go on. Just get 'em back. Don't worry about me. Just get 'em all back."

Plissken nodded, "We'll get back. No problem."

The Captain had to chuckle at the absurdity of Plissken's remark, but it quickly turned into a coughing spasm. Snake Plissken was very worried. He was sure from the sound of the cough that the captain had caught a bullet in the lung.

As he hurried up to the front of the line, encouraging the others as he went. Plissken thought he could hear the rescue choppers approaching. Despite the cold, he threw back the hood of his heavy parka and listened, scanning the sky.

Then he saw them coming in, fast and high - ten dull-gray Russian helicopters, and he knew exactly where they were headed.

Plissken cursed silently - the Russians were no doubt homing in on the same beacon supposedly guiding the Americans to them. He raised his arm to call a halt and turn them back toward the denser forest, but another sound and sight in the sky made him hesitate, then smile in relief. As they watched, a full squad of flat-white American helicopters buzzed in to engage the others. One of them, a Sikorsky, larger, heavier and a little slower than the rest, flew on by, headed for the clearing. It dropped from the sky like a fat bird of prey, and landed somewhere

ahead of them.

Shouting back at the others, Plissken broke into a run, "Come on! Chopper's landed! Let's move!"

He burst through the trees and underbrush into the snow-covered clearing. He felt he'd never seen a more beautiful sight as that squat, dirty-white helicopter. The side doors slid open, and two men in dark parkas and sunglasses jumped out, gesturing for the group to hurry.

Plissken reached the copter first and turned to hurry them up. Without warning, Russian shells began exploding close by; the running men dropped flat in the snow.

Snake could see the oncoming heavy artillery tanks. Recon hadn't mentioned them either. And, since the other rescue choopers were busy chasing the Russian copters, they were on their own. He shouted at the men, "Get up and come on, dammit!" It didn't matter that no one could hear him over the roar of the chopper. He went back after them.

A few minutes later, they had all boarded and the pilot was signalled that they were ready to take off. They didn't move. Plissken looked at the corpsman wearing headphones. He angrily gestured up.

Listening to the radio, the man held up a hand for Snake to wait, then leaned close, "Pilot says there's another man coming."

Plissken spun around and scanned the group. They were all there. He shook his head at the man who got back on the radio. Seconds later, the man pointed at the figure limping towards them, obviously laboring with every step.

Snake stared, squinting from the snow glare, trying to figure out who it was. Then he looked toward the front. The pilot had the door open and was hanging out, waving the man on.

A shell hit close behind the wounded man. He fell, but got up again and continued on. The tanks were closing in and very soon the helicopter would be in range. The shelling was increasing and the pilot pulled back into the cockpit.

The next shell exploded too close. The chopper rocked wildly, throwing everyone down. Snake had recognized the man just as the bomb exploded. He scrambled up and looked out.

Little Charlie Scanlan, one of Plissken's own squad, was lying face down in the now-pinkened snow, covered with fresh blood. Snake had thought sure the man was dead before, his plane had gone down hard, exploding on impact. Must have ejected at the last possible second.

The tanks were much nearer now. Scanlan didn't move. Another shell hit, close as the last. Plissken glanced over at the captain who lay pale and silent, and made the decision. A decision hateful to him, but better, he figured, to leave one dead body behind than risk the lives of the survivors.

"Let's go! He's dead. Take 'er up!"

The corpsman nodded and spoke into the mike. Still, the chopper didn't move. Plissken looked wildly from the rapidly approaching tanks to the man who again leaned toward him to shout in his ear.

"Pilot says he's not dead and somebody better go get him fast."

Plissken hurried up to the cockpit, grabbed the copilot's headset and shouted into the microphone at the pilot, "He's dead. Take us outta here now, dammit!"

Face obscured by the visored helmet, the pilot looked over at him. Plissken's eyes were red-rimmed and wild, several days worth of beard growth darkened his face, and his long, once-white parka was spattered with blood, soaked in several spots. But the pilot wasn't intimidated, and shouted back.

"No! He's not dead. I'm not leaving without him, so I suggest you get out there and get him."

Enraged, Snake drew his pistol and stuck the barrel in the pilot's face. He spoke through clenched teeth, "Take it up now. Thant's an order, Captain."

The pilot smiled grimly, "Go ahead and shoot, asshole. Then you can fly this thing home." Then, the smile was gone. "When I make a rescue, everybody gets home!"

Plissken's "Shit!" was explosive. Helicopters were the one thing he couldn't fly.

He turned and hurried to the door, holstering his pistol. He'd go after Scanlan's body himself.

He got to the body in less than a minute and turned it over. The young private's eyes opened.

"Hi, Lieutenant." The voice was barely audible. Snake couldn't believe the kid was alive, and the mistake he'd almost made. Cursing quietly, he picked him up, slung him over his shoulder and hurried back to the copter. The pilot took it up even before they had the door shut behind him.

Plissken continued to curse as he watched the medic work on Scanlan, then he moved toward the front of the chopper. He knew he should sit down and rest, but the pain, exhaustion and anger had robbed him of logic.

The pilot was leaning slightly forward, looking out the side window intently. Snake again picked up the headphones and began shouting.

"I don't know what kind of an asshole you are, but when . . . "
With a grimace of pain, the pilot reached over and switched off
Plissken's microphone. Snake leaned down belligerently and switched it

Plissken's microphone. Snake leaned down belligerently and switch back on.

"I said, when you get an order . . . "

The pilot reached down and jerked out a wire, disconnecting the mike for good. Snake threw down the headset in disgust and stormed back to the others, vowing to beat the living shit out of the sonofabitch as soon as they landed. He sank down to the floor across from where Booker lay and closed his eyes. That is, if he could still move he'd beat the living shit out of the guy.

The flight to even the nearest American base was a long one. It was nearly sunset when they finally came within radio range of the base.

"Rescue V for Victoria 272 to Darhan Base. My ETA is about ten minutes. Requesting ambulances for ten wounded." A pause, then, "Make that eleven. Over."

The voice from the base responded with subtle sarcasm, "Darhan to <u>Victor</u> 272. We hear you, Hilley. Your ambulances will be waiting. Over."

The pilot had what some in air control circles felt was an unfortunate habit of creating original names for the call letters to stand for. Most were women's names unless a more whimsical mood prevailed.

Plissken awoke with a jolt when the helicopter's wheels touched the ground. The sun was setting fast.

Within seconds of touchdown, the offloading of wounded into the waiting ambulances began with brisk efficiency. When everyone was out and the most seriously wounded already on their way to the hospital, Plissken looked around for the pilot. One of his men called to him from the back of the last ambulance.

"Come on, Lieutenant - time to check out the nurses!" Plissken held up his hand, signalling them to wait.

The pilot was still inside, sitting motionless, leaning back. Visor up, it looked like he was watching the colorful sunset. Snake knocked loudly on the window and was pleased when the pilot jumped, startled.

He had to back off as the pilot pushed open the door and swung out of the seat, pulling himself clumsily out of the cockpit using only one arm. What seemed like deliberate slowness to Snake was pissing him off all over again. He jerked off his heavy gloves in spite of the cold.

The pilot hung onto the door for a moment as if his legs wouldn't support him. Plissken was too tired and angry to notice. He wasn't thinking very clearly.

Then, the pilot turned to face him. His left came up and, head bent forward slightly stripped off the heavy crash helmet. Then, the head came up slowly. Plissken found himself glaring into the most beautiful eyes he'd ever seen - dark-lashed and emerald green. Beautiful.

He stammered, "You're a girl!" Then, he felt very foolish.

She pushed at the hood of the parka tiredly, and drawled, "Well, thank you, Lieutenant. But, I haven't been a girl for a good many years now." She paused, sighing, "Now, what's your problem, Ace?"

Only momentarily stunned, Plissken's anger quickly reignited.

"I gave you a direct order back there."

She seemed totally oblivious to his anger, "So? I outrank you."
"Not in the field." He knew the regulations.

She knew them too.

"I had knowledge of the situation you didn't have, Lieutenant, therefore I disregarded your direct order. Do you mind if we . . ?"

Plissken, still glaring, interrupted, "Are you in the habit of 'disregarding' orders, Captain?"

A slight smile played at her lips, "Not generally. But, like I told you before - when I make a rescue, everybody comes home."

"But . . "

She ignored this second interruption and went on, "You thought your man was dead. It was a logical mistake - considering. I knew better. You were wrong. I was right. So what's the big deal? You don't like it - put me on report. It won't be the first time. Right now, I really don't give a shit." She started to move past him, but he blocked her way.

"How the hell'd you 'know' he was still alive?' His tone was sarcastic.

She looked deeply into his eyes, seeing nothing but blue ice, and answered softly, "I just knew."

It was almost dark by now. Cold and impatient, the man called again from the ambulance, "Hey, Lieutenant! Hurry up fercrissake! You can kick his ass later!"

Plissken turned angrily, "In a minute, godammit!"

A split-second later, the voice yelled, "Look out, Lieutenant!"
Plissken spun back around, half expecting an attack, as the pilot
fell forward against him. He caught her by the arms, wondering what
the hell was going on. Then, he felt the sticky warmth under his left
hand.

Sliding his right arm around her back to support her, he took his left hand away and looked from the blood on it to the wound on her upper arm.

"Je-sus!" he breathed in surprise, then quickly picked her up and carried her to the waiting ambulance.

After laying her carefully on the last available stretcher - the one meant for him, he helped the medics get her parks off so they could examine the wound more closely. He sat close by, watching impatiently.

"What the hell happened to her?" He spoke softly, to no one in particular.

One of the medics pulled up her left sleeve, ripping the fabric, then cutting through the thermal underwear to quickly insert an IV.

From the color of her face, they knew she was in shock. The other medic finally answered Snake's question.

"Looks like a big shell fragment's torn up her arm pretty bad." Plissken looked confused.

"When . . . ?" He was about at the end of his endurance.

One of his men answered, "She had the door of the chopper open when she spotted Charlie. Must've been a chunk of the same shell that took him out." He paused, then shook his head. "Damn!"

They were all silent, all thinking the same thing - she'd flown the copter all the way back, for hours, wounded and bleeding, and no one had even suspected there was anything wrong. Snake stared at the gray face on the stretcher. Even injured, she'd refused to leave without that last man. As he watched, her eyes fluttered open.

She lay quietly for a few seconds, then struggled to get up. She was obviously confused and her voice was slurred.

"What the hell's goin' on here? Lemme up!"

The medic pushed her back down, but she came back up.

"What are you doin'? Let me up, dammit!"

Snake leaned over and pushed her down again, and held her down. The green eyes focused on him, "You again!"

Before she could go on, he spoke softly, "You just shut up and

Before she could go on, he spoke softly, "You just shut up and lie real still. Your arm's hurt pretty bad, and the more you move around, the worse it'll be. Now, stay down or I'll have this man tie you down."

She glared at him. "Just try." But she relaxed and closed her eyes, and didn't try to get up again.

Plissken removed his hand, a slight smile on his lips. She was a real pain in the ass but he was almost beginning to like her.

It was a short ride to the hospital. When the ambulance was unloaded, Snake glanced in before they could slam the doors. Something had caught his eye. He yelled, "Hold it!" then climbed back in and stooped down to pick up a gold bracelet, an ID bracelet. He read the inscription as he walked into the warmth of the hospital.

"TO LOU WITH LOVE FROM JAMES"

It had to be hers. Couldn't belong to anyone else in that ambulance. He slipped it into his shirt pocket and buttoned down the flap, then gave himself over to the loving care of a nurse with the face of a horse and the body to match.

\* \* \*

The following day, very weak, his wounds bandaged but painful, Plissken slipped into her room, one floor below.

She lay asleep in the bed, looking even paler than before. Her right arm was heavily bandaged, the left arm secured with several IV's. He stood over her for a few minutes, watching her sleep, until a nurse caught him. She quickly pulled him out of the room into the hallway.

"What do you think you're doing in there, soldier?"

Plissken responded quietly, "She's the pilot who rescued me and my squad two days ago. I just wanted to be sure she's okay." Then, he added, "Well, is she?"

The nurse softened, "She'll live. But I understand there's nerve damage as well as the muscle damage and blood loss. I don't know how it'll go for her. You go on back to your own room now, Lieutenant. You look like you could use some rest yourself."

He nodded, "You take goo care of her, okay?"
She smiled and winked at him, "You can count on it."

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He went back the next evening, only to find a young nurse making

up an empty bed. He stared.

"Where is she?" His tone was angry and imperious.

The startled nurse backed away from Plissken's piercing gaze.

His voice softened, "The woman who was here yesterday. A captain, Special Forces pilot."

She relaxed. "Oh, you mean Captain Hilley. She's gone." Snake's mind was still not functioning properly. "Gone?"

She quickly realized he thought she meant Hilley had died. "Shipped out. Lieutenant. To the hospital in Tokyo." Snake blinked. "When?"

The nurse shrugged, "Some time this morning, I guess. I just haven't had time 'til now to change the bed."

Snake touched the bracelet in his robe pocket thoughtfully. What the hell - he'd tried. He looked up to find the nurse smiling at him.

"Can I, uh, help you back to your room, Lieutenant?" Her meaning was clear.

Snake returned the smile and held out his arm to her. "Can't think of anything I'd like better."

\* \* \*

## Part II.

Nearly six months later, Snake Plissken's wounds were healed and he was finally getting used to having the Purple Heart they'd pinned on him. And, he had all but forgotten about Captain M. L. Hilley. That is, until he walked into the Club the first night at his squad's new base.

It was very cold in Warsaw, but not nearly as cold as Siberia had been. They were more than happy at their transfer, even though it had meant that the Americans were about to lose Mongolia back to the Russians.

He'd have spotted her right away, even without the help of the man standing too close for Plissken's comfort. She was sitting at a table in the corner furthest from the jukebox, the only female in the poker game, one of the very few in the whole place. She appeared to be winning, but judging from the looks on the other players' faces, only a couple seemed to mind very much.

Even from across the smoke-filled room, she looked very good, but the cigarette hanging loosely from the corner of her mouth seemed oddly out of place in that beautiful face. Then, he noticed that she'd been busted down to lieutenant, and wondered what she'd done to deserve something as drastic as that. He had to smile as several possibilities came to mind.

He took the drink Sergeant Taylor was offering him and gulped it down. He nodded acknowledgment to the other man, then he and Taylor strolled casually toward the poker game, glad to get away from Jacoby's stooge.

Hilley had just finished dealing and was concentrating on her hand, when Plissken spoke.

"Is this a private game or can anybody play?" He smiled his most charming smile.

Hilley froze and looked up slowly, much as she had that cold evening on the landing field at Darhan. Plissken had forgotten how incredibly beautiful her eyes were - even as bloodshot as they were right now.



She exclaimed, "You!"

The men at the table grew suddenly quiet, some even looked decidedly hostile. All eyes were on Plissken.

Then, the surprised look vanished and was replaced by a slow. lazy smile. Very nice. He'd never seen her smile before.

"Lieutenant Plissken, isn't it?" There was the heavy drawl he remembered so well. He met her eyes.

"Call me Snake." He thought he detected a glint of amusement in her eyes.

"Buy me a drink. Snake?" He nodded, "Love to."

The man on her right protested. "Hey, Hilley - what about the game, your hand?"

She stood up and gestured to Taylor. "Sergeant, you look like a poker man to me. Play my hand for me?"

Taylor looked from her to the pile of chips in front of her and then to Plissken who nodded. Taylor loved poker and was an excellent player. He suddenly felt even happier to be in Warsaw.

"Yes, ma'am. I'd be de-lighted to."

As she moved through the crowd of tables toward the bar. Hilley had to smile at the older man's childlike enthusiasm.

Snake and Hilley sat down at the bar, silent until the drinks arrived. Hilley was the first to speak.

"Congratulations, Lieutenant, I heard you got a Purple Heart outta that little deal at Bratsk."

Snake chuckled, "Yeah, sure did." He paused. "I heard your C. O. put you up for a Purple Heart and they turned you down."

She nodded, "That's the Army for you."

He shook his head, "That's too bad - you deserved it."
She smiled thinly, "Thanks, but I haven't lost any sleep over

it." "And your captain's bars?" To his surprise, she laughed out It was a nice sound. loud.

"What's so funny about losing your rank?"

She calmed herself and shook her head.

"Nothing really. I lost my bars because I said 'No' to the wrong colonel."

Snake had to chuckle, "That's it? That's all it took?"

She studied her half-empty glass. "Welllll . . . not quite. He wouldn't take 'no' for an answer. Actually tried to order me to . . . Well. anyhow. I'm afraid I had to get a little rough with him."

Snake stared at her. "How rough?"

"Not too. Just a broken arm, dislocated shoulder and a minor concussion. You know."

"No. I didn't know - but I do now. I'll have to remember that." She nodded once, curtly, then gave him a lazy smile. "You do that, Lieutenant."

Still staring. Snake cleared his throat and changed to what he thought was a safer subject.

"How's your arm?"
Her smile faded. "It's okay, I guess."

He nodded. "That's good."

"It will be - as soon as I can convince the Board."

"Whaddaya mean?"

Hilley looked into her drink. "I've been grounded permanently. Or, at least until I can prove I'm really fit to fly again."

"Grounded? Why?" A pilot himself, Plissken was aghast.

"Some fool of a doctor classified me with a sixty per cent dis-

ability. They ground you with anything over twenty, put you behind a desk. I've been through two appeals already, but this next one ought to get me back in the air again."

She swallowed down the rest of her drink and held up the empty glass for a refill.

"It'd better anyway. Hell, they've been trying for years to ground me. Lotta these macho types don't think women belong in a combat zone. That's how I pulled helicopter rescue duty and ended up commanding my little band of rejects."

Plissken had only heard rumors about Hilley's squad. "Rejects?" Hilley grinned. "According to the Army. We're all 'discipline problems'. Actually, they're all good men. Army tried to punish them by putting them under a woman's command but things worked outa little differently than they expected. My squad has the best rescue record around." Her pride was obvious.

Snake smiled. "So I've heard." He was remembering back to a very specific rescue.

"Any real problem with your arm now?" Snake was genuinely sympathetic.

She shook her head. "It's still a little stiff - they said that wouldn't ever go away." She smiled smugly. "But then, they also said the nerve damage would probably never heal, and the arm would be useless. Doctors don't know shit. Ya know?"

Snake grinned and agreed, "I sure do know."
Her eyes lingered on him, her expression unreadable.

"Well. I'd better get back to my game." She moved to get up. He put his hand on her arm to hold her back.

"By the way, I have something of yours - back in my quarters." Hilley looked down at his hand and her eyes narrowed. But, she kept smiling.

"'Said the spider to the fly!" She laughed. "I'll just bet you do! Don't you guys ever think up new lines?"

Snake released her arm. "It's not a line. I really do have . . ." She interrupted rudely. "Come off it, Lieutenant. What of mine could you possibly have?"

He answered coolly. "Gold ID bracelet."

She froze. Her voice softened, but there was still a trace of doubt and suspicion in it.

"The inscription?" She stared at him, waiting, her look skeptical. Plissken gazed into his nearly empty glass.

"'TO LOU WITH LOVE FROM JAMES'".

He looked over at her. "It is yours, isn't it?"

She looked away quickly and nodded, but he thought he'd seen the shine of tears in her eyes.

She gulped half her drink, then spoke, her voice almost a whisper. "I thought I'd lost it for good. How'd you get it?"

"Found it in the ambulance after they took you in. Catch was broken. They shipped you out before I could get it back to you. Guess I kinda forgot about it after that - until now."

She looked over at him and smiled. It was the first genuinely friendly smile he'd seen from her. She was remarkably beautiful when she smiled like that. But it looked seldom used, as if she was uncomfortable with it. too vulnerable.

She swallowed down the rest of her drink, then asked, "Would you mind if we go and get it right now?"

Snake returned the smile graciously. This was going better than he'd ever expected.

"No. I don't mind at all."

He escorted her into the room. He hadn't done much unpacking yet.
"How about another drink?" He poured himself one.

"Maybe later." She moved away from him toward the small, thick-glasses window. "Have you really got my bracelet, Lieutenant Plissken?"

Snake nearly choked on his drink. "What the hell does that mean?

You can't think that was a line."

She smiled, but it was a rather sad smile. They were back to square one.

"Could've been. It's no secret that I've been looking for that bracelet."

He shook his head, "I hadn't heard a thing about it."

All but ignoring his denial, she went on. "And there's also the fact that there was somethin' goin' on in that bar, between your people and Jacoby's. I'm not blind, Plissken, and I'm certainly not stupid."

He stared at her. She was sharper than he'd thought.

"If you had doubts, why're you here?"

"Several reasons, Lieutenant. One - I really want that bracelet back. It's of great sentimental value to me, and I figure there's a chance that you may really have it."

A minute of silence passed. He watched her.

"You mentioned that there were 'several' reasons?"

She sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Well, Lieutenant, I figured if there was some heavy action goin', maybe I better get in on it too. And this is a much better place to discuss it."

He found himself staring at her again, incredulous. Then, he burst out laughing.

"You really are something, you know it?"

Hilley smiled politely. "I'll take that drink now."

Still chuckling and shaking his head, Snake poured the drink and handed her the glass.

She met his eyes. "And the bracelet?"

He moved to the small dresser and opened the top drawer. He was ploughing through it when she spoke again.

"There was one other reason I came, Lieutenant."

Snake, trying to remember where he'd put the small box containing the bracelet, listened with half an ear.

"What's that, Lieutenant?" He dug into the second drawer.
"You."

After several seconds, it registered.

"Huh?" He stared at her reflection in the mirror.

She stared back at his, smiling.

"You interest me."

He turned to face her. "I 'interest' you?"

Kicking off her shoes, she lounged back against the headboard of the bed comfortably and smiled.

He hadn't seen this smile before. It was provacative, lazily

"Yes, Lieutenant. You definately 'interest' me." She paused and held up her glass, gazing at him through the amber liquid. Her tone changed slightly.

"What did they tell you about me? Jacoby's bunch, that is."

He sat down in the only chair in the room and leaned back. This wasn't going exactly as he'd planned.

"Just the usual bullshit. That you're either frigid, a dyke, or you're fuckin' your whole squad and don't have time for anyone else."

She laughed and nodded knowingly.

"And your stake in this? A couple weeks' pay to get me down?"

He grinned. "A months'."

She chuckled and shook her head. "I'm flattered. And just what do you have to do to prove you nailed me? My bra? Is that the trophy? Or, more to the point - my panties?"

He nodded, his grin widening, "You got it!"

She tossed down the rest of the drink and sat up to pull off her socks. She stood up slowly, undid her belt, unzipped and removed her khaki uniform pants. As she smoothed out the wrinkled khaki shirttail, Plissken found himself wishing it weren't so damn long.

Then, as he watched, mouth agape, she pulled down her bikini panties and stepped out of them. Kneeling, she picked them up, walked to him and held them out, just out of his reach.

"Here you go, Plissken. How much are they worth to you?"

Snake couldn't think of a thing to say but "Je-sus!". He stood up and moved closer. His eyes held hers. His breathing was rapid.

She grasped his wrist and shoved the panties into his upturned palm.

He looked down at the smooth, black wisp of nylon and lace, and dropped it to the floor with a smile. He looked back up to find her smiling. Again, it was a look he hadn't seen before - this time excited and expectant.

She reached up and began unbuttoning his shirt. He unbuttoned hers and was surprised to find she wasn't wearing a bra, but a black camisole instead.

She looked down and shrugged. "Not too regulation undermeath, am I?"

He shook his head.

Her eyes widened as she took off his shirt and got her first glimpse of his cobra tattoo.

"My god, that's beautiful!"

He grinned, "That's not the half of it."

She smiled, her eyes twinkling. "I can imagine!" He thought she probably could.

"This must be why they call you Snake, right?" She undid his pants, eager to see the rest of the tattoo, but was momentarily distracted when his arms slid around her waist and pulled her close.

"Not entirely."

Their first kiss left them both breathless and eager for more. Snake slowly peeled off the camisole and kissed her again, running his hands up and down the full length of her bare back. As they kissed, she worked his pants down slowly until he could step out of them, then she pressed her body solidly against his. Still kissing her and holding her tightly, Snake backed them up to the bed, and lowered her slowly down until they were both stretched out full length on it.

That first time together lasted only minutes, with both climaxing explosively, simultaneously. Afterward, they rested, talking and touching. Then, Snake suddenly jumped out of bed and went to the closet. Hilley propped herself up on her side and could see him kneeling down, pulling something out of his duffel bag.

She smiled, thinking - God, he's got a beautiful ass. And, she was still smiling when he turned around and came back toward the bed. He stopped when he saw her look and smiled.

"What're you grinnin' about?"

"I was just admiring your beautiful body, Lieutenant." He loved that low, sexy drawl.

"And I would purely love to see that snake 'a yours angry again. It's a mighty fine specimen."

He chuckled and shook his head as he sat down on the edge of the bed. facing her.

"Where the hell are you from anyhow? Georgia?" He took her right wrist and fastened the gold bracelet around it. Then, he began kissing her palm, working slowly up the inside of her arm. He ran his fingers lightly over the still-sensitive new pink skin on her upper arm, then kissed it lightly on his way to her neck.

When she finally remembered to answer his question, she was breathless.

"Born and raised in west Texas." The drawl faded a little as her breathing quickened. "Thought you said the catch was broken."

His other hand, resting on her hip, began pulling the sheet down slowly. He took a brief time out from kissing her neck to answer her. "Had it fixed."

The hand on her now-bare hip pushed gently, signalling her to lie down flat, so she could open herself to him. As she shifted position, she reached out, murmuring, "Now where's that ol' snake?"

Their now slower, more sensual exploration lasted for hours. Sometime in the early morning, they finally fell asleep, exhausted and still joined, snuggled close under the blankets, warm despite the chill of the small room.

\* \* \*

At 6:00 AM, Hilley awoke as always, and with a mental groan, dragged herself out of the bed, being careful not to disturb Plissken. She almost cried out as her bare feet hit the ice cold floor on the way to the bathroom. She hurried back a few minutes later, and put on her socks.

She studied his face and hidden form as she dressed quickly and quietly. Then, leaving him a note saying simply 'Later!' tucked in the top of her neatly folded panties, she kissed him lightly on the lips, touched his hair and let herself quietly out of the room.

As she hurried through the below-freezing weather toward her own building, she thought about the night, glad she'd finally been able to enjoy herself with a man again. After what had happened before, she hadn't been sure she'd ever feel really good about sex again. She smiled tiredly. She did feel good and looked forward with great anticipation to being with Snake again - and again.

Hilley was so intent on her thoughts, that she failed to notice her sergeant running towards her, waving his arms frantically, shouting her name.

"Hilley! Lieutenant Hilley!"

He got closer; she finally looked up.

"Jesus Christ, Pete! What is it?" His face was flushed red, his breath billowing out in great clouds of vapor, as he fought for air.

"Come on, for cripes' sake! We got transfer orders late last night."

"For when?" Still groggy, she felt confused and annoyed.

He looked at his watch. "We got exactly ten minutes to get to
the transport, for cripes' sake?"

She broke into a loping run, Sergeant Marks beside her. She thought about Plissken back there in his warm bed, and all she could say was. "Shit. Pete." The disgust in her voice was obvious.

He added, "Foley already packed your gear. Cripes - we been lookin' all over for you."

She glanced over at him and smiled, "Thanks, Pete. 'Preciate it." She'd have reached out to touch his shoulder but her hands were cold enough stuck deeply in her pockets.

He looked away without returning her smile. "What is it, Pete? What's wrong?" She had a pretty good idea already.

"You can tell me straight out it's none of my business, but I care about ya', Hilley, so I'll ask anyway."

She assented, "Go ahead."

"You spend the night with that Plissken?"

"You're right, Pete - it's none of your business. It's mine - and his. And what if I did? Have you got a problem with it? They were nearing the landing field. He grinned reluctantly.

"Not personally, ma'am, but . . . " he looked uncomfortable.

"Well, there was this bet."

"You mean the one between Plissken's squad and Jacoby's apes?" Pete stopped short and stared. Hilley slowed to a walk. chuck-He caught up with her. "You knew?"

"Well, hell yes, I knew. Have you ever known me not to be in on the really heavy action?"

Pete looked relieved, "So you didn't . . ?"

"As a matter of fact, Pete, I did." His look of confusion was comic.

"But . . "

"I assume you bet on me?"

He nodded miserably. "We all did."

She dragged her hand reluctantly out of the warmth of her pocket and placed it on his shoulder, stopping him.

She kissed his cheek. "Thanks, Pete. But don't worry. Plissken and I made a deal on the bet. I gave him the proof Jacoby needed, and he and I'll split the money. I'll be damned if I know how I'll collect now, but one way or another, I'll pay you guys back whatever you lost."

Pete still looked confused, and a little indignant. "But . . " She met his eyes, "Look, Pete. The business with the bet, that's just what it was - business. Whatever else happened had nothing to do with it." Then she added firmly. "And that's entirely my personal business. You got that?"

He nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

She stopped him again. "Pete - you know me."

He interrupted, "I thought I did."

"Then give me a break. I'm no ice queen and I'm not a lesbian. A long time ago I had a real bad experience and it's been very hard for me to get physically involved with a man. I finally met someone I really wanted. Can't you understand that?"

"What about your own squad?" He looked childishly resentful. She smiled and shook her head. "Come on. Pete. I love you guys like brothers and I always thought you felt about me like you would a sister. You know - protective. I just can't see sleepin' with a man I love like a brother. Do you understand that?"

He looked at his feet, then up at her, "Yeah, I guess you're right." Then, with more emphasis, he added, "Cripes yes, you're right."

A harsh voice barked from the waiting jet, telling them to move it or lose it.

As they started up the stairway, she asked, "Is everything straight now? We still friends?"

Pete grinned and slapped her on the back, knocking her forward. "Well hell yes!"

She laughed and worked her shoulder painfully.

"Pete, you explain it to the others after we take off. I just don't feel up to it right now, and besides, I'm gonna go up and check out the pilot. Make sure he can really fly this thing." She winked

\* \* \*

Later, as she drowsily watched the clouds outside through her tiny window, Hilley wondered if this sudden departure might not be for the best after all. She knew it would be far too easy to get really hung up on a man like Snake Plissken, maybe even fall in love with him, whatever the hell that was. Once upon a time, she thought she'd known, but now, with death waiting around every corner, that kind of involvement was pointless and emotionally dangerous. But, he had reopened a phase of her life long closed, and for that she would always be grateful.

When the young corporal nudged her with the flask of whiskey they were passing around for warmth, Hilley made a silent toast to Plissken, then drank enough of the liquid fire to make her eyes water and her stomach burn. Then, taking another, smaller swig, she passed the bottle on and resumed her reverie with the clouds, thinking of the blue-eyed, long-haired, handsome young man, and the rearing cobra, with its hood spread, ready to strike, tattooed on his marvelous body. It had never even occurred to her to ask where they were going. It didn't really matter much anymore.

\* \* \*

Snake woke up after 8:00, when Sergeant Taylor began banging on the door, shouting, "Wake up, Lieutenant Plissken."

Snake finally growled an answer, "Whaddaya want, dammit?" Then, he noticed that Hilley was gone.

"The C. O.'s looking for you. Snake."

Distracted by her disappearance, Plissken answered more civilly than he normally would've after being so abruptly awakened.

"Okay, Sarge. Thanks. Be right there."

He got up and dressed quickly. Then, he spotted the panties and the note sitting on the tiny excuse for a desk. Reading the note, he smiled as he stuffed the panties in his pants pocket and put on his parka.

'Later!' He was definately looking forward to 'Later!'. He'd been with a helluva lot of women in spite of his youth, but this was unique - beautiful, intelligent and the most incredible lay he'd ever had.

He spent most of the day with military business, first with the base C. O., getting chewed out for being late. Then later, he joined a meeting with a large number of other squad leaders to discuss personnel, equipment and strategy.

Finally, late in the afternoon, he got away to the Club. His squad and Jacoby's were all there, waiting for him. He looked for Hilley or anyone from her squad, but none were there. Strange. He figured her people would have gotten in on the bet when they found out about it. He shrugged mentally. Maybe they were out on a rescue.

Keeping a straight face, he walked up to the table. He hadn't realized just how huge Jacoby was until now. Jacoby spoke out loudly.

"Well, Plissken? How'd it go last night? We saw you leave with the bitch. So . . . ?"

All eyes were on Snake. A slow grin spread across his face.
"Piece 'a cake, boys. There isn't a frigid bone in that beautiful
body. Not one inch a lesbian. That is one . . " he paused to take a
deep breath, " . . . very sexy, very horny lady. In the right hands, of
course."

Plissken's squad cheered and applauded. They'd never lost money betting on him. Even Jacoby's men seemed happy. But not Jacoby.

"Big talk, Plissken, but what about the real proof? Your word don't mean shit to me."

Plissken's eyes narrowed to slits, but he kept smiling.
"Right, Jacoby." He reached into pocket and pulled out Hilley's
panties, dropping them on the table in front of Jacoby. Now all the men
cheered.

Jacoby glared at Plissken as he picked up the panties. He held them close to his face - Snake knew the man could smell Hilley's perfume on them - then wadded them up in his clenched fist and dropped them as if in disgust.

He looked up at Snake and a malicious smile crept to his lips. Snake wondered why he hadn't noticed it before - Jacoby was one crazy son of a bitch.

"Not quite good enough, Hotshot."

"That was the agreement, asshole." Snake was beginning to get really annoyed.

Jacoby's tone changed suddenly, becoming almost apologetic, but Snake knew better.

"Just one little thing, that's all. No big deal - really."

Plissken hesitated, then nodded, curious about what the man was up to.

"You notice any distinguishing marks on that 'beautiful body'?"

Snake thought back over every inch of her. It took quite a while.

"Yeah, she's got a small mole on her left cheek."

Jacoby nodded impatiently. "Yeah, yeah, but I was thinking a little lower."

Snake didn't like the way the conversation was going. Jacoby's tone offended him. And the gleam in his eyes . . .

"Okay, she's got an odd birthmark on the inside of her upper thigh." His voice was dangerously quiet. Taylor took a step back without even realizing it.

"Right there below the honey pot, right Plissken? Notice the shape of it?"

Plissken was getting very angry, but it didn't show - yet.
"What're you getting at, Jacoby?" He spoke through clenched teeth.
"Come on, Plissken, the shape. That's all I want. Then the money's all yours." He smiled.

Snake thought back, trying to remember. "Kind of hook-shaped, I guess, about an inch and a half long."

Jacoby nodded, satisfied, "Okay, Plissken. I'm convinced." His smile was sly. "Money's all yours."

Plissken picked up the money - and the panties - without another word and headed for the bar. His men followed after collecting their own winnings. Snake had a bad taste in his mouth that needed a lot of whiskey to wash it out.

After several drinks, Plissken felt better. He turned to Taylor. "Sarge, have you seen any of Hilley's squad today?" He wanted to talk to her - real bad.

Taylor looked upset. "You didn't hear, Lieutenant?" Snake stopped in mid-sip. "Hear what?"

"That whole unit got transferred out early this morning."

Snake slammed the glass down on the bar, shattering it and cutting a finger.

"What? When?"

"Early - 'bout 6:30, I think. Uh, didn't she tell you? I saw her running toward the landing field about 6:15 with some guy from her squad." Plissken cursed silently. Surely she hadn't known.

"Do you know when the orders came through?"

Sarge shook his head. "Don't know for sure, Lieutenant, but none of her guys mentioned it last night, so I don't think they knew then. And if she was with you all night, she probably didn't know herself."

Taylor chuckled. "That's probably why she was running this morning."

Snake laughed at the thought, in spite of his anger and disappointment. If she'd missed the transport, they'd have both been skinned alive. But his humor vanished as Jacoby's words came back to haunt him. She had inferred that she disliked Jacoby, but obviously they'd been close enough for him to be intimately acquainted with her body. Had she just been playing him to get at Jacoby? It was hard to imagine, but Snake knew that anything was possible. He sighed as he realized that he might never find out the truth. Oh well. He didn't figure to have much time to worry about it.

Still, it was a real shame . . .



Part III.

Barely five months later, Snake Plissken was running for his life once more, but this time he was all alone and in a Russian staff car. He'd accomplished the goal of his one-man special mission, but his jet glider - his means of escape - had been destroyed before he could get back to it.

And, now, the Russians were hot on his tail, in their sharp-nosed helicopters, firing their missiles occasionally, hitting just close enough to shake him up. They were obviously playing with him, and the odds were definately on their side - he was almost out of gas. He fired his own missiles when he had the time, just to keep them back and let them know that he wasn't giving up without a fight.

A missile hit the front end of his car at about the same time the engine sputtered and died. The car rolled twice, and as soon as it stopped, Plissken was out and running, blood flowing from half a dozen minor wounds. He wiped the blood and sweat from his eyes as he ran toward the cover of the forest ahead. But it was a long way off - too far.

Machine gun bullets spattered the ground around him, narrowly missing him. He turned and fired his own weapon, without breaking stride. The pursuing copter cut away sharply.

As he ran, he could hear them coming back, even though the roaring

of the blood in his ears. They were closing in. He turned to fire again, but after a half dozen shots, the clip was empty. He dropped the gun and ran even harder, his lungs already aching.

Suddenly, the air was filled with the roar of more incoming choppers. He looked up and immediately recognized the Special Forces emblem on the helicopters now engaging the Russians. He grinned. The cavalry had arrived!

One, smaller than the others - and unarmed - came in last and landed nearby. He ran for it with renewed energy. Relieved as he was to see them, he was finding it hard to believe that the Army would send a whole squad out just for one man.

The small door of the copter flew open as he neared, and he jumped inside. The pilot took it up sharply, leaving Snake's stomach back on the ground.

He could barely make his fingers work to fasten the safety harness. Finally secure, he closed his eyes and leaned back in the seat to concentrate on catching his breath and slowing his pounding heart. He could hear the sounds of the skirmish behind them growing fainter and fainter.

Then Snake heard the not-so-muffled sounds of machine gun fire, and felt the vibrations as several bullets hit the skids of the copter. He cursed under his breath. It wasn't over yet!

He braced himself and hung on as the pilot began evasive maneuvers, and, Snake hoped, calling for assistance. Then without warning, the copter dropped sharply, and before Snake could recover from that, sudden hard acceleration forced him back against the padded seat. When he could move again, Snake glanced back to see the Russian helicopter left far behind, its American counter-part closing on it rapidly. It was all over almost as quickly as it had started. Once more he leaned back, relieved.

The pilot glanced over at him, then reached down to turn up the heat. Plissken smiled weakly as the warm air hit him. He tried to shout his thanks to the pilot, who tapped the headphones, then pointed at the extra pair hanging on the back of the seat. Snake slipped them on painfully over the still-bleeding scalp wound.

"Thanks for the heat, Lieutenant" Then, he added, with a weak grin, "Matter of fact, thanks for the lift. That was some mighty fine flyin' back there."

A familiar drawl, low and sexy, hit his ears like a physical blow. "Christ-in-a-sidecar, Plissken! Seems like I'm always pullin' that gorgeous ass a' yours outta one crack or another!"

Snake's head jerked around, a very painful move in his condition. "Hilley?"

"Well, hell yes it's me! Who the hell else would be crazy enough to come out here after you?"

She reached over with her left hand and wiped some of the blood from his face with her glove. He flinched at her touch.

"You sure are a mess, Lieutenant. You gonna be okay? I mean, you're not hurt anywhere real important, are you?"

He smiled a little but didn't answer. Jacoby's words and look came back to him, as if the incident had just happened yesterday.

She looked over at him. "Snake - you are okay, aren't you? All trace of humor was gone from her voice.

He merely nodded and relaxed back into the cushioned seat, eyes closed. She glanced over at him again, concerned and hurt. Something felt very wrong.

When he finally spoke, his voice was flat and lifeless. "Where're you flyin' from?"

She answered without looking over. "Helsinki."

Surprised, he turned toward her again, more slowly this time. "Why're you here then? Why didn't they send . . . ?"

She interrupted, "We've lost Warsaw."

He was instantly concerned, "My squad . . . ?"

"Relax, they're already in Helsinki, probably gettin' drunk right now."

Sitting back, he pulled off the headphones carefully, then settled into the padding, trying to get comfortable. Hilley put her hand on his knee and squeezed gently. He didn't have the strength left to respond. She squeezed again, then slipped her hand away, back to the controls. Worried that he might be hurt worse than it seemed, she accelerated a little more, pushing the jet helicopter to the limit. They didn't speak again.

\* \* \*

Snake spent three days in the hospital. He wasn't allowed visitors, due to military security, but Taylor, who could always find a way to sneak in anywhere, told him that Hilley had been there to see him several times every day, and had been caught and thrown out every time. Though the stories amused him, Snake was relieved that she hadn't made it in. He didn't feel up to a confrontation just yet.

When he was released from the hospital in the afternoon of his third day back. Snake was taken to Army Intelligence for full debriefing.

The morning of Lieutenant Plissken's fourth day in Helsinki, Sergeant Taylor was walking along the road leading back to the American base. He'd been in town picking up a few specialty items he knew his youn lieutenant would appreciate. He heard the jeep coming uo fast behind him, but wasn't too hopeful about catching a ride since only officers had vehicles these days and an officer wasn't very likely to give a non-com a lift.

The jeep stopped suddenly beside him, throwing up a thick cloud of dry road dust, and a female voice called out to him.

"Say. Sergeant. care for a lift home?"

Taylor stared at her, mouth agape. She smiled. "Jump in, Taylor. I'll run you back to the base." Still he hesitated. "Come on. I promise I won't bite." That brought a nervous grin to his face, and the sergeant hopped into the jeep.

"Uh, thanks a lot, Lieutenant Hilley, ma'am."

She drove far too fast for Taylor's liking, like Plissken. But also like Plissken, she was a damn good driver, at ease behind the wheel, and after a few minutes, he began to relax. They traveled along in silence until Hilley finally spoke.

"What the hell's goin' on, Sarge? First Plissken, now you. Is there somethin' goin' on I should know about?"

Taylor fidgeted in the seat. "Couldn't rightly say, ma'am."

Hilley glanced over at him and sighed, "All right, Sergeant.

We'll play it your way, but will you at least tell me if he's really okay? He looked pretty bad when I picked him up and those assholes at the hospital wouldn't tell me damn thing."

Taylor looked uncomfortable. "He's fine, ma'am - just minor injuries." Her relief was apparent, though she said nothing.

But, as they neared the front gate, Hilley spoke again.

"By the way, Sergeant, where will Lieutenant Plissken be quartered?" Her voice had a strange quality to it that Taylor couldn't figure. The relief he'd been feeling disappeared in an instant.

"Somewhere in officer country, ma'am. I'm not really at liberty to . . . "

She interrupted forcefully, "Come off it, Sergeant. Plissken owes me for this one. You tell me where he's stayin' and I'll figure

he and I are even."

Taylor was confused, "Why does he owe you? You were just doin' your job, followin' orders."

Hilley laughed, "Not exactly, Sergeant."

Really curious now, Taylor persisted, "Whaddaya mean, Lieutenant?"
"They weren't gonna send a rescue, not for one man, not even one
as good at his job as Snake Plissken. When I heard he was in trouble, I
did some mighty fast talkin', called in a marker somebody owed me that
I've been savin' for some really 'rainy' day. That's what I mean, Sergeant. You savvy?" He nodded mutely.

"Now . . " she took a deep breath, " . . . where's he stayin'?"

Taylor didn't hesitate. "Barracks J. room 27."

Hilley smiled, "Thank you kindly, Sergeant Taylor." Conversation halted briefly as they stopped at the guardhouse, then passed through the gates of the base.

"Where can I drop you off?"

Taylor pointed toward the mess hall. "Right over there'll be fine, Lieutenant, ma'am."

The jeep rolled to a stop and Taylor jumped out. "Thanks for the ride, ma'am." He backed away from the jeep, wondering if he should salute or not.

Hilley smiled at him again, and Taylor could see why Plissken had been so upset at Jacoby's implications.

"Thanks again for the information, Sergeant. I do appreciate it. I would also appreciate it if you wouldn't mention this little conversation to Lieutenant Plissken - any of it."

Taylor grinned back at her. "No, ma'am. I wouldn't dream of it." He paused for only a second before adding, "They oughta be cutting him loose later today, if you're interested, ma'am."

Hilley, surprised at this free bit of information, smiled broadly, "Well, thank you very much, Sergeant. I certainly am interested."

She was still grinning as she drove away, leaving Taylor wondering what would happen next. He had no idea how to deal with a woman like Hilley. She was too pretty and far too smart. That wasn't how he liked 'em. No sir.

\* \* \*

Plissken was exhausted by the time they finally let him leave. He headed straight to the Club for a drink with his squad. He hadn't seen any of them but Taylor since he'd left Warsaw on the mission. Surprising even himself, he left the Club after only two drinks. He hadn't slept well in the hospital, and debriefing, more like an interrogation than not, always left him drained. He had to get some sleep.

He hadn't even been to his new quarters yet. Taylor had brought his gear with the squad from Warsaw when they were transferred, and had dropped it off here when they had finally assigned him permanent quarters.

He was too tired to argue with the corporal who insisted on escorting him personally. It seemed that The Snake's reputation was growing. He did get peeved when the corporal unlocked the door and opened it for him - like a bellboy wanting a big tip.

"Thank you, Corporal. That'll be all." He was trying to be firm but polite, but if the kid didn't disappear in five seconds . . .

The corporal was groping for the lightswitch, saying something about helping him unpack when a sleepy female voice from within the dark room stopped them both cold.

"Plissken? 'Zat you?"

Both men stared. Their eyes adjusted quickly to the dark and with the dim light from the hallway, the interior of the room soon became visible.

"Hilley?" It was a stupid question. He could see her in the bed, on her stomach, her bare back exposed. He realized that she must be nude and felt a twinge. He pushed it away.

He turned quickly to his flabbergasted escort. "That'll be all, Corporal." Still staring, the young man didn't hear him. With a growl, Snake shoved him roughly on his way. He stepped into the room and shut the door, unaware that his reputation had just grown even more.

The only light in the room now was the moonlight coming in through the small double-paned window. It was enough to see her fairly clearly, but the blue light made her skin look very pale and cool, sharply contrasted wherever her hair touched it.

"What're you doin' here, Hilley?" That was a dumb question too. He heard her moving around under the sheet, turning over onto her back. She sounded more awake now.

"I've been worried about you. They wouldn't let me in to see you at the hospital. Some crap about military security." She sat up and turned on the bedside lamp.

He took off his parka and hung it over the back of the chair.
"Yeah, security. Speakin' of security - how'd you get in here?" Then, he looked at her for the first time in the light and felt another twinge, stronger than the last. She held the sheet up carelessly, draped over her breasts. Her dark hair was long, loose and mussed from sleeping. She was watching him closely through those beautiful green eyes. He looked away and pulled out his cigarettes as he sat down heavily in the chair.

"What difference does it make? What's wrong, Snake? What the hell's goin' on?"

"Whaddaya mean, Lieutenant?" was his casual reply. Them he lit a cigarette and took a long drag.

"Can I have a cigarette? He tossed her the pack, then his lighter. She watched his face as she lit one.

"You've been actin' like we were complete strangers since I picked you up."

He responded indifferently, feeling anything but. "So?"

She flushed red, giving him yet another twinge. He saw her hand move to the bracelet on her wrist. He hated the look of accusation in her eyes.

"Then it was all for that damn bet before? You really didn't . . .?"
He interrupted angrily, showing his true emotions for the first
time.

"That fuckin' bet has nothing to with anything!"

"Then what the hell is wrong with you?" They were both shouting by now.

Drunk and tired as he was, he blurted out the truth loudly.
"Jacoby!" Then, regaining some control, he lowered his voice,
"Jacoby - said some things."

She paled. "And you believed him?"

"He knew about that hook-shaped birthmark of yours, Hilley. The one . . "

Her voice was quiet, "I know which one, Plissken."

"I guess I've wondered if you were just using me to get back at him. I don't know . . " She wasn't listening.

Without a word, she stripped off the sheet and jumped out of the bed. He'd been right - she was nude.

Snake stared in surprise. It was obvious from the way she pulled on her clothes that she was enraged. Dressed in record time, she headed slowly for the door, still buttoning her shirt, and tucking in her shirt-tail with short, sharp jabs. Snake had spoken her name several times trying to get her attention, but she hadn't responded at all. Getting

angry himself, he got up to block her way.

"Where're you goin'?"

"Get outta my way!" She struck out at him clumsily. He grabbed her arms and shoved her back against the bed.

"I want to know about Jacoby, dammit!"

She glared. "Oh, you do, do you? Well, tough shit, Lieutenant! Sounds to me like you've already got it all figured out!" She tried for the door again.

This time he grabbed her and held her at arm's length.

"I want to know the truth, Hilley." He couldn't read the look in her eyes, and she couldn't read his.

She relaxed suddenly in his grasp, but he didn't trust her enough to turn her loose. He knew too much about the training she'd had.

She nodded, her breathing rapid and shallow. "All right, Plissken. I'll tell you. But you'd better listen real good, because it'll be the last time I ever speak to you." She took a deep breath.

"I knew Jacoby back in Seattle, about 8 years ago. I was just out of boot camp when I met him. He made it pretty clear that he wanted me - to everyone - but I just wasn't interested. He really made me nervous. His eyes . . . " she searched for the right word, " . . . frightened me even then."

Snake started to protest but she cut him off.

"To make a long story short, that's no birthmark on my thigh, Plissken. It's a scar. Jacoby knows about it because he put it there, cut it into me. Right after he beat me up and raped me, in the rain and mud, behind a barracks in Seattle." She paused to take a breath.

"That's not a hook, Lieutenant, it's a 'J'!"

With that, she jerked violently out of his grasp and pushed past him toward the door, grabbing her parka.

He found himself shouting at her. "Where're you going?"
The volume of her voice was increasing again to match his.

"Away from here!" She pulled the door open violently and stormed out, shouting, "Away from you!"

Snake stared after her, feeling light-headed. He'd known the son of a bitch was crazy, but he'd had no idea . . .

He slammed the door, then lay down on the bed, figuring he'd better give them both time to cool off before he tried to talk to her again. He lit another cigarette, took one drag, then mashed it out angrily.

He was exhausted but knew that he'd never sleep until he and Hilley had straightened things out. He would never admit it to anyone, but he'd thought about Hilley a lot since that night. He dragged himself off the bed and into the shower. About an hour later, he entered the Officer's Club. He was totally unaware of the change in the tone and mood of the conversations in the room his presence had evoked.

Hilley was sitting at the far end of the bar. Her bottle was already half empty. He ordered a double and went to join her. Without asking permission, he sat down on the conspicuously empty barstool next to her. She looked over drunkenly.

"Get the fuck away from me."

He took down half his drink in one gulp. "Nope. Not til we get thin thing settled."

He looked terrible. His face was pale and unshaven, covered with cuts and bruises; his eyes were bloodshot and red-rimmed. But, Hilley was too drunk to notice.

"'s settled, Plissken. Leave me alone." She grabbed her bottle in her free hand and staggered over to the nearest unoccupied table. Snake hesitated, then followed, sighing deeply. He wanted nothing more than to call a truce and go to sleep for a week or two.

"I said leave me alone, damn you!"

"Hilley, I'm sorry. I never imagined . . . " She laughed loudly. "'Never imagined' what, Plissken? That I wouldn't jump into bed with an animal like Jacoby?" Her tone dripped with sarcasm.

He felt like slapping her, but managed to keep his tone calm.

"No, Hilley. That a man could do something like that to a woman."

She stared up at him, her expression unreadable, then she spoke softly.

"Know why you can't imagine a thing like that, Plissken?"
Wanting her to talk it out, he shook his head, and whispered,
"No. Hilley. Why?"

"'Cause you're too damn decent. You know?" She looked away as the tears began to roll down her cheeks. "He hurt me, Snake, hurt me bad. Mentally and physically. I've never told another living soul - until now."

Snake realized then what had prompted her to become an expert, almost a legend, in martial arts.

She was crying openly now and it made her angry. "Dammit! I don't want to cry! It's, it's . . . stupid. Just like a dumb female, always crying at the least little thing."

She lay her arms on the table and hid her face, sobbing into her uniform sleeves. Snake reached over and smoothed her hair. He felt helpless.

"Hilley, would it help if I told you I'll kill the bastard if I ever see him again?"

She raised her head. "Huh?" She was drunk enough to be honestly unsure whether she'd really heard what she thought she heard.

He wiped at her tears with his fingers. "I said that if Jacoby and I ever cross paths again, I'll kill him with my bare hands. Will that do?"

She took his hand and looked at the fingers, wet with her tears. Then, as she kissed the fingertips, she whispered, "For a start." and with that, she burst into fresh tears.

He moved his chair closer and put his arms around her. His attempt at comforting her just made her cry even harder.

The bartender, mildly annoyed at his numerous failed attempts to convince Hilley to sleep with him, yelled at her irately.

"Dammit, Hilley, either quit that bullshit or get the hell out of here. You're ruinin' my business."

He knew that many of the men spent more time here than they normally would because of her presence. A good-looking woman with an easygoing personality like hers was a real draw on a base like this. It was worth all the fights that had erupted over her, always after she left. Since she'd come here, hundreds of dollars had changed hands in speculation of Hilley's sexual activity and even her sexual preferences. In the months she'd been there, as far as anyone knew, she hadn't slept with anyone, male or female. Of course, smart as she was, she could have fooled 'em all.

And now, she was tolerating this stranger! Of course, it was obvious from his long hair, emblems and general cocksure attitude that he was one of those Special Forces hotshots - like her. And, from their heated argument when the man first came in and sat down next to her bold as hell, it was obvious that they!d met before.

He imagined that even more money would change hands with this new development. Weighing the factors carefully, he tried to decide how he would bet. She was very drunk and obviously in a highly emotional state. On the other hand, she'd been very upset when she came in, and from her initial reaction to the guy, he was probably what had upset her.

He decided it could go either way. So far, he'd won every time he'd bet against the guy trying to get into her pants, but he thought that this one just might score. He made his bet, then decided to push the odds a little further in his - and the newcomer's - favor.

"Hilley. I mean it!" He looked at Snake. "Lieutenant - get her the hell outta here. Or I'll call the M.P.s!"

Hilley pulled away from Snake and snarled at the bartender. "Can it. Frisco! I come and go as I please. Call the fuckin' M.P.s. Then there'll be somebody here to take you to the hospital!"

Beginning to really enjoy himself. Frisco matched her threat. "I'll kick your ass, you drunk bitch! Now, out!"

Hilley started for the bar, ready to do battle. She probably would have won. even as drunk as she was. Snake stood up and moved toward her. She swung at him, a little wildly.

He ducked the blow easily, grabbed her and slung her over his shoulder. As he turned toward the door. Hilley grabbed the neck of her bottle. She looked up at Frisco and grinned slyly, then winked and gave him a wave as they went through the door. The bartender stared after her. mouth agape. She'd done it to them again!

Once outside, the frigid arctic air hit her face like a cold, metal door. She began to struggle.

"Let me get my coat, dammit! It's freezing out here!" Snake kept moving: he'd left his parka there too. He pulled a cigarette out of his breast pocket and lit it.

"Put me down, Plissken!" Her tone was demanding but changed quickly to a plea when he failed to respond.

"Please put me down, Snake. This is making me sick."

That stopped him. He didn't want her puking down the back of his clean uniform.

He slid her forward, down his chest until she stood unsteadily on her feet in front of him. He didn't let go of her; he was just too tired for any more fighting.

"You gonna settle down now?"

Starting to shiver violently, she nodded. He took the bottle from her and drank deeply, then slid his arm around her pulling her close, and headed them toward his quarters. She reached for the bottle, but he held it out of her reach.

"You've had enough."

She pressed closer to him, "But I'm cold."

He grinned tiredly. "Not for long!" Then he leaned down to kiss her as they hurried toward shelter.

Hilley was shivering uncontrollably as Snake undressed her. But it didn't stop her cold hands from slipping in under his shirt. His own cold fingers were having trouble with the buttons of her shirt.

"Dammit, Hilley! Stoppit!" He pulled her hands out of his shirt and held them tightly. "Hilley, I've got to get some sleep, and I want you sober before we, uh, go any further."
"I'm sober now." She tried not to giggle.

Snake shook his head. "Oh, sure you are." He sat her down on the bed, and backed away slowly. "You get your own damn clothes off and get into bed. I'll be back in a minute." He escaped quickly into the bathroom.

When he came back out, wearing only his shorts and t-shirt, Hilley was already asleep. She'd managed to get her shirt and boots off, and had started on her pants. She lay curled on her side, again wearing the black camisole. Snake had to smile as he thought about the last time.

He finished unzipping her pants and tried to get them down. Finally, in exasperation, he flipped her over onto her back and pulled them off. She groaned in protest, mumbling something about being cold, and curled back onto her side. Snake crawled into the bed beside her and pulled up the covers over both of them. As soon as his body contacted hers, Hilley turned toward him and cuddled closer, laying her head on his chest and draping one leg over his. He tightened his arms around her and closed his eyes. He fell asleep quickly, breathing in the sweet scent of her hair.

\* \* \*

He awoke several hours later to the sound of a toilet being flushed. He sat up in the bed and stared into the darkness, confused and disoriented. Then, he remembered where he was and realized that Hilley was gone. Thinking - oh no, not again! - he called out sharply, "Hilley!?"

The bathroom door opened and Hilley came back into the room.

"Snake, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you up." She stood near the bed, looking shy and a little uncomfortable. Snake was just staring, thinking how beautiful she looked, even with her heavy sockes on. She fumbled with her words.

"I'm sorry about last night. I mean about getting so mad and being unreasonable. I just don't like to talk about what happened, and I was so tired and worried about you. And . . . "

Snake interrupted, his voice quiet and cool. "Why the hell are you standing on that cold floor?"

She looked down at her feet. He could tell she was still about half-looped. "Well, I've got my socks on."

Snake chuckled and opened the covers, gesturing with a nod of his head for her to join him.

She smiled, still shyly, and climbed into bed with him. Snake pulled her close and began running his hands over her arms, and up and down her back under the camisole.

"I never did apologize for not saying goodbye before. There just wasn't time. I felt really bad about it, 'specially since I knew you were back there in the bed, all warm and . . . "

"Dammit, Hilley. Will you stop apologizing? I figured you couldn't help it."

"I know. but . . . " Snake put a finger to her lips.

"Shut up. All that's important now is that you're here and I'm here and the door is locked."

"You're right, but . . . " This time he stopped her with a kiss. His lips against hers, he whispered. "You talk too much."

She responded by moving up on top of him as they kissed. Then, she sat up, straddling his waist and began massaging his chest, working the t-shirt up.

Snake sat up, face-to-face with her and stripped off the t-shirt, then her camisole. He lay back down slowly, holding her close. After some grunting and giggling, both were finally nude, and it was time to get serious.

\* \* \*

By the time they were ready for sleep again, it was time to get up - at least it was for Hilley. Snake would have another few days off, if his luck held. Hilley, however, had to report for roll call, hang-over or not. Smoking a cigarette, Snake watched as she dressed.

"You won't disappear again if I let you outta here? He was grinning, but they both knew he wasn't really joking.

She was tucking in her shirttail carefully. "I hope to tell you I'll be back. Besides, they're runnin' outta places to transfer us to."

He laughed. "I heard that!"

Ready to go, she glance at her watch, then sat down on the bed, leaning across him. She ran her fingertip down his chest.

"Can you think of anything we can do in seven minutes that won't wrinkle my uniform too badly?"

Grinning, he stopped her hand just before it disappeared under the covers, then lay back, pulling her up on top of him.

Exactly seven minutes later, he reluctantly sent her on her way. After she was gone, he went back to sleep for another hour, then got up, dressed and went to find his squad and some breakfast. Then, still stiff and in some pain from the minor wounds he'd received, he headed for the gym to check out the sauna and whirlpool facilities. He hoped they might even have a Swedish masseuse he could try out.

Late that afternoon, Hilley finally found him in the Officer's Club, in a poker game. He glanced up when she hurried in and felt instant concern at the look on her face. He gave her a big smile, hoping.

" 'Afternoon, Lieutenant. How's your day been?"

She smiled dryly. "Great, Lieutenant, just great." Her eyes were incredibly bloodshot.

"Join the game?" He offered her a cigarette as he spoke.

She sighed and turned down both offers. "I'd love to, Lieutenant, but my squad's got a rescue."

Then, Snake finally noticed the flight suit under her parka. His smile faded. "Shit! When?"

"My preflight check starts in about ten minutes. We leave in less than half an hour."

"Why the hell didn't you tell me sooner?"

She smiled sweetly, "I would've, Lieutenant, but I couldn't find you."

Snake stood up abruptly and gestured to Taylor who was standing at the bar.

"Sarge - play for me. I'll be back in a while." Taylor grinned and nodded.

Everyone at the table watched the couple leave the club hurriedly. After they were gone, one of the men shook his head and chuckled. "Now what the hell can they do in ten minutes?"

Taylor grinned and looked over at the door his Lieutenant had just exited.

"You'd be surprised, sonny, you'd be surprised."

\* \* \*

Once outside, Hilley grabbed his arm and jerked him to a stop.
"All right, Plissken, what's the deal? Did you tell your men to send me on a wild goose chase all over this fuckin' base?"

Snake stared at her. "What the hell are you talkin' about, Hilley?"
"Your boys sent me from place to place, each time I'd 'just missed'
you, 'couldn't have been gone more than five minutes', you know the routine!"

"Hilley, I . . . "
She wasn't finished.

"Nobody sent me to the club. I figured I'd check one last place - just for the helluvit. After all, I had ten whole minutes left. Too damn late to get any sleep. Godammit, Plissken, if you didn't want to see me again, all you had to do was tell me!"

She stood glaring at him, hands on her hips.

Checking his watch, Snake spoke quietly. "You finished?"

"Not really, but I'm running out of time." She started off toward the landing field. Snake grabbed her arm and hauled her back.

"Well, now it's my turn." She tried to pull away, but couldn't without using real force.

"Go right ahead, Lieutenant!"

"I didn't tell my men shit. I don't know why they did it but I'll sure as hell find out as soon as you're gone." He paused and checked his watch again.

"Now - you've got about five more minutes. Anything else you want to say? Or can I kiss you now?"

She stared at him. "Huh?"

"You heard me, Ace."

Hilley threw her arms around him, holding him tightly.

"Dammit, Plissken - we could've had an hour."

He ran his hands up and down her back under the parka.

"Well, we've still got three minutes."



After walking Hilley to the landing field, Plissken hurried back to the club. He was mad as hell, but it didn't show when he sat back down at the poker table. Only Taylor, who quickly vacated Plissken's chair knew that his lieutenant's joviality was an act, his smile forced.

As he picked up his newly dealt hand, Snake gestured to Taylor over his shoulder. Taylor bent down close to him. Snake grabbed his shirt and pulled him down further. His voice was a sharply whispered hiss.

"Did you have anything to do with it, Sarge?"

Taylor tried to shake his head. "No, Snake, I swear. I didn't know nothin' about it or I would stopped 'em. Hell, Snake, I just found out about it myself."

Snake released him, then pulled a cigarette out of his pocket and lit it. He asked the dealer for two cards, then gestured to Taylor again. "Sergeant, I want you to assemble the squad outside the club in

fifteen minutes. Come in and get me when they're there."

Taylor took off in a hurry. An angry Snake Plissken was not a pleasant experience, especially when you were the focus of that anger. He felt sorry for the other members of the squad, knowing that they'd done it thinking they were doing him a favor, and wondered if he should try to intervene in their behalf. They worked too closely as a team to let something like this come between them.

Then Taylor realized that Plissken was well aware of all these things and would probably use good judgment. Still, he was awful mad.

Exactly fifteen minutes later, S. D. Plissken's Special Forces squad was assembled in front of the club. Taylor had known better than to warn them, but the other senior members knew from the sergeant's look that whatever was going down was not good. And there was also the fact that Plissken had them assembled outside the club instead of inside where it was warm.

Taylor bustled into the club and went to stand beside Snake. "Uh, Lieutenant, they're all out there, waiting."

Snake was now smoking a cigar he'd gotten from the bulky captain sitting next to him. It was clenched in his teeth and Taylor thought it looked as if Plissken had been chewing the hell out of it.

Without answering, Snake finished the game casually, then stood up to put on his parka.

"Gentlemen, time to take a break. Next round's on me. This won't tale long, not long at all." He headed out the door, chewing the cigar vigorously, with Taylor following close behind.

Plissken approached the group rapidly, grinning around the cigar.
"How ya' doin' this afternoon, boys? I hear you been pretty busy"
Someone snickered. It was one of the younger men, still unaware
that they were in trouble. Plissken heard it.

"You think that was a pretty funny trick you pulled on Lieutenant Hilley, do ya'?"

Several of the men nodded. "We had that broad runnin' all over the place. She never did figure out what was goin' on." Plissken chuckled.

Taylor groaned mentally. The dumb kid was cutting his own throat. Then another one spoke out.

"We figured you'd need a good, long rest and wouldn't want some broad hangin' around, so we pulled the same thing on her we did on that little nurse in Ulam Bator."

It was that remark that finally cooled Plissken off, but not completely. He had asked them to help him out with that pesky nurse. His grin faded.

"All right, you guys. Listen up!" The sharp tone of his voice got their full attention.

"I realize that you thought you were helpin' me out, but that's not how it is - at all. You have deprived me of an hour or so of . . . " he paused, " . . . relaxation with Lieutenant Hilley."

He caught himself before letting his voice rise any more and took a deep breath.

"So, in the future, I would appreciate it if you would check with me before you do anything like that again. Otherwise, I will be forced to kick ass. Is that perfectly clear?"

For effect, he waited for each man to answer before continuing.

"As for Lieutenant Hilley, I believe you gentlemen owe her an apology. How you go about it is your business." He was silent for several seconds as if thinking. "Well, that's it for now. And just so you'll remember this, and so I'll feel better about missing out on my relaxation, you gentlemen can spend the rest of the day in the gym, then go to bed early. Dismissed!"

He turned and hurried back inside to his poker game, not caring to hear the complaints. Better to let Taylor take care of it. It wouldn't take much at all to get him going again.

As soon as Plissken was out of hearing, the grumbling started. Taylor stopped it quickly.

"Don't bother bitchin'. In fact, consider yourselves real lucky.
He let you off easy. He was a lot madder'n he let on."

One of the younger men whined, "Shit, Sarge, we were just tryin' to help. Why the hell . . . ?"

"Can it, Slidell. He figured that out, that's why you got off so easy." He paused for a minute to let it all sink in. "Now, somebody better start thinkin' about that apology."

\* \* \*

Hilley got back close to midnight the following day. It had been a very rough but successful rescue. She dragged herself reluctantly past her bed toward the tiny bathroom and started the hot water tap hopefully. She had decided that she just felt too dirty after being encased in her flightsuit and parka for over 24 hours to go looking for Plissken straight away.

For the past hour since they'd touched down, she'd been trying to decide between getting some badly needed sleep in her own bed, and taking her chances in Plissken's. But, every time she thought of her own cold, empty bed, the memory of the warmth of Plissken's body would crowd out any thoughts of sleeping alone.

She struggled tiredly out of her parka and dropped it across the bed, then slowly pulled down the long zipper of the heavy flightsuit. She eased herself out of the suit, then rubbed several spots where creases in the fabric had irritated. As she stumbled toward the bathroom, she flexed her long-cramped muscles.

She was stopped short of the shower by a loud, persistent banging on her door. Sighing, she turned off the water and hurried to answer it, figuring it had to be Plissken. News traveled fast on this base. Wearing only her camisole, bikini panties and a smile, Hilley threw the door open wide.

Plissken's entire squad - except for The Snake himself - stood in the hallway, gaping at her. Hilley was too tired to be modest; more disappointed than embarassed.

"Ah, shit!" Then, she sighed and began to get annoyed at their staring. "All right, you guys. What the hell d'you want now? More tricks? Maybe later. Right now I'm too damn tired and I have other plans." As she moved to shut the door, Taylor finally snapped out of his trance and spoke out.

"Lieutenant Hilley, ma'am?"

She looked at him and realized that they were all shit-faced drunk.

"Yes, Sergeant Taylor?"

Taylor shook his head again and spoke. "The boys here are real sorry about what happened the other day . . " He was interrupted by several overeager, apologetic voices agreeing. " . . . and they've brought a little somethin' for you to try to make up for it."

Hilley eyed the group suspiciously. "Oh yeah?"

A tall man standing at the back shoved a parcel through the crowd toward her. She took it nervously and mumbled, "This really isn't necessary." But the looks on their faces made her accept the box with a smile. They all grinned back at her. It was a little unnerving. She tore open the box quickly. Her eyes widened in astonishment

She tore open the box quickly. Her eyes widened in astonishment as she lifted out a short, kimono-type robe of pure Japanese silk. The silk was a creamy ecru color with delicate oriental flowers beautifully embroidered on it, just perfect for her hair, eyes and coloring.

She ran her hands over the smooth fabric and felt like crying.
"I haven't had anything so beautiful in years. Not since . . "
She looked up at them. "Thank you. Really. Thank you."

Taylor grinned broadly. "You really like it, doncha ma'am!"
Nodding, she smiled, sending the men's temperatures up another
degree or two. "Oh yes, Sergeant, I really do like it. In fact, I love
it." That satisfied them all.

"Then the boys here are forgiven?"

She laughed, "Of course. I quit bein' mad soon as I found out Plissken had nothin' to do with it."

A shy voice called out. "Would ya put it on, Lieutenant?" She grinned mischieviously.

"Ya know, I think that might be a real good idea, Corporal."
She quickly slipped on the robe and stood back a step. "How's it look?"
There was a loud chorus of compliments.

Again Taylor acted as spokesman. "Well, ma'am, we'll be goin' now, so you can get on to your other business."

Hilley smiled again at his emphasis on 'other'. "I do appreciate that, Sergeant. By the way . . . "

"He's in his quarters asleep, ma'am. He's still a little tired."
Laughing, Hilley blushed in spite of herself. "Thanks, Sergeant.
That'll save me some time - I hope."

They all laughed and began to back away slowly, not wanting to lose sight of her. She edged the door shut slowly.

"See ya later, guys." It was like watching an old comedy as the men moved away, drunkenly tripping over each other. But, finally they were gone and Hilley raced for the shower.

\* \* \*

Forty-five minutes later, Hilley let herself quietly into Plissken's quarters. She crept to the bathroom and emerged a few minutes later, wearing only the new silk robe.

Plissken was sprawled across the bed on his stomach, facing the door. One foot was sticking out from under the blankets and he was snoring softly. Hilley sat on the other side of the bed and eased the covers down. She ran her fingertips over his bare back and then leaned over to kiss his neck, brushing his back with silk-covered breasts. He began to wake up instantly.

As he turned over slowly onto his back to face her, Snake let out a low moan of pleasure. Her fingers traced intricate designs on his chest. His voice was a sleepy whisper.

"When'd you get back?" His hands went up her arms inside the

loose sleeves.

"Couple of hours ago."

"That long?" Then he noticed the fabric. "What the hell are you wearin', lady?"

She laughed, "Present from your squad. Their way of apologizin'."

He struggled to sit up and reached for the bedside lamp. "Oh yeah?

I gotta see this!"

She stood and modeled the robe for him. He stared, then broke into a broad smile.

"I'll be godammed! That's beautiful. I don't believe it - those slobs actually have good taste."

She sat back down on the bed, laughing. "They sure do." She hesitated and went on more shyly, "They really care a lot about you, you know. A whole lot."

He pulled her across his lap and ran his hands over the silk, quickly realizing that she wore nothing under the robe. "Yeah, I know. That's what I mean - real good taste."

He untied the sash and put his arms around her bare waist, pulling her close. He studied her face for a few seconds then whispered, "You look beat. When was the last time you slept?"

Tired as she was, Hilley had to think about it awhile before answering. "I got a couple of hours before you got here and found me in your bed, and then a couple of hours more later on."

"That was about forty-eight hours ago."

She was indignant. "So?"

"So - crawl in and get comfortable."

She protested. "Snake, I'm fine, really."

He eased the robe off and lay it carefully on the table.

"Sure you are. Think how much finer you'll be after a few hours sleep." She couldn't honestly argue with that, and crawled under the covers with him. She pressed against him full length and got comfortable - very comfortable. His arms tightened around her as they kissed. He had never felt anything so good in his life.

When they broke off the kiss, Hilley lay her cheek on the pillow next to his, and was asleep within seconds. He could feel her breath warm on his neck.

Now wide awake and aroused, Snake wished he hadn't insisted on her getting some sleep first. He kissed her hair and tried to relax.

\* \* \*

They had a few days together before Snake had to leave on another mission. By the time he got back, Hilley was gone on one of her own. This was how their lives went on for several months. Hilley had been right - beautiful Helsinki was their last stop. The Army had run out of places to dump them. They all felt very lucky. And, in spite of all the separations and disappointments, and the constant possibility of sudden death, the relationship between Snake and Hilley flourished.

They had occasional disagreements which Taylor had aptly described as 'knockdown/dragouts', but always managed to 'kiss and make up' within a few hours. In wartime, it didn't pay to stay mad at anyone for very long. You never knew . . .

The members of both squads began spending a lot of time together and became close friends. When time and transport were available, they would take off for a 'weekend' in Stockholm, Oslo, or occasionally even Copenhagen.

After about six months, the war began to escalate. The frequency of the missions increased, but with less time in between for badly neæded rest and relaxation. On top of that, the chemical warfare being waged

70

was slowly filling the atmosphere with gases of varying effects and toxicities. Some days on the base, anyone wanting to go outside was forced to wear a gas mask. But, Hilley swore that half the base personnel was already affected. Erratic behavior was becoming commonplace.

\* \* \*

Part IV.

Hilley almost cried when she found out that Snake's squad had left on a mission just a few hours before her squad had returned. She needed him - badly. She needed his strength, the comfort of his arms around her. Until now, she hadn't realized just how much she depended on him.

Her mission had gone as usual, with one small hitch - the men they'd been sent to rescue were all dead, long before the choppers had ever gotten there. She had landed in the midst of a fire-blackened clearing. Against all regulations and good sense, she'd gotten out of the chopper to see for herself what had happened.

In spite of her heaving stomach, Hilley had helped her two corpsmen load the charred bodies. They couldn't see her tears through the goggles but knew her well enough to know they were there.

The smell in the copter had been horrible, and Hilley had wanted to open the windows despite the cold, but there had been too much gas in the air. Thye'd been trapped with it for hours.

As she trudged through the snow toward her quarters wearing her gas gear and goggles, Hilley was still haunted by the sight and smell of the bodies. But, the sudden thought of the lonely room, the empty bed, sent her back toward the Officer's Club.

In the outside hall, she struggled out of the soiled, smelly parka, and then hurried on into the main room, straight to the bar. The bartender eyed her curiously as she sat down tiredly on the barstool. He'd never seen her in there looking anything but impeccable. Now, she was here in an ash-blackened flightsuit, with soot streaks on her face. Her hair was coming down, mussed from being inside the hood of her parka for so long, and from the goggles and gas gear. He brought her a full bottle and glass without having to be asked.

"Rough one, Lieutenant?"

She looked up at him, a haunted, glazed look in her eyes.
"Yeah, Frisco. The worst yet. All dead - before we could even get to 'em."

He touched her hand. "It's not your fault, Hilley. You can't blame yourself."

She smiled thinly. "Yeah, I know. But I can't..."

"No buts! You have a couple of drinks and get some sleep. You'll be okay."

She nodded. "Yeah, I'll be okay." She tossed down the first shot and poured another, whispering, "I'll be just fine."

\* \* \*

She quit before she got really wasted, and staggered toward her quarters, less worried now about nightmares. Replacing the memory of the day was worry about Snake. She was suddenly very much afraid that he wouldn't come back, or that she might be sent out on another rescue and find him the same way she'd found the men earlier that day. She tried to tell herself that she was being silly and paranoid, and that it was just exhaustion, shock and the booze causing her fears, but the bad feeling was persistent — and strong.

She stripped quickly and took a long, hot shower, hoping to wash away the smell and feel of the mission. After the shower, she did feel

better. She put on one of Snake's t-shirts and her panties, and fell into bed. Sleep came more quickly than she'd expected, but it wasn't undisturbed. The day's mission haunted her sleep as well as her waking hours.

\* \* \*

Hilley was rudely awakened a few hours later by rough hands grabbing and holding her down firmly on the bed. A hand was clamped tightly over her mouth. She was completely immobilized. Completely helpless.

She felt blind panic at being once again totally helpless, but it passed quickly. On a brusquely spoken signal, she was pulled off the bed to a standing position, her back against the cold wall. Painful arm locks and the two men's similar grip on her legs, still held her absolutely immobile. From the way they held her, she figured that they must know about her training, and were taking no chances. Hilley tensed, waiting for any opportunity to move.

The bedside light was switched on suddenly, blinding her momentarily. The hand over her mouth was replaced by another gripped tightly around her throat. She recognized the man instantly. He was one of the many who'd lost big betting they could sleep with her. She had a feeling that she would recognize the others there as rejects as well. She pushed the panic back again and forced herself to speak through the pressure on her throat.

"Whadda you assholes want?"

The grip tightened, threatening to strangle her.

"Don't talk, bitch - just listen." He eased his hold only slightly.

"A lot of us around here have decided it's time you started sharing the wealth, so to speak. There aren't too many women left on the base, none as good-looking as you, and the whores in town are getting way too expensive. So, Miz Hotshot Pilot, it's time for you to serve your country in another way."

She couldn't help herself. Her voice was a strained whisper, "You're crazy!"

The grip tightened painfully again.

"Shut up, bitch!" From the way he smiled, she knew she was right - the gas had affected him. The man was psychotic.

"We're fair men, so we'll give you a choice. You can either be nice and put out willingly, and have a real good time yourself. Or, we'll take you however, whenever, wherever we want. And I guarantee, it'll be more fun for us than for you." He paused to take a breath.

"And, if you tell anyone about this, you'll get it anyway, and whoever you tell just might get hurt besides." He paused again and grinned.

"As for Plissken - he doesn't ever have to know. Hell, he might not even mind."

Foolishly, she started to giggle. It was so ridiculous.

The man turned livid with rage. Hilley felt a hard fist plough deeply into her stomach. Her body tried to double over, but couldn't. Tears of pain stung her eyes as she glared at him. He glared back.

"We could take you right here, right now. You know that, don't you, bitch?" He ran his finger roughly down the t-shirt over her right breast, then across the top of her bikinis. A thin line of flesh showed where the shirt was hiked up. He hooked the finger in the elastic. She could sense that, in spite of his words, the rape would start now if she didn't do something.

Almost as a reflex, she spit in his face. Their eyes locked for a split second, and Hilley knew she'd gone too far.

Her next sight was his fist coming at her face as if in slow motion. When it hit her cheek and mouth, her vision exploded into bright-hot comets of light. She felt herself falling.

Miraculously, the hands that had held her released, and Hilley crashed hard into the corner and slid to the floor, onto her side. Blair bent close and his harsh voice hit her ears like a hammer.

"You've got twenty-four hours to make up your mind, Lieutenant."
Groaning, she twisted around and kicked out, burying her bare
foot deeply in his crotch. Then she rolled onto her stomach, trying to
get to her feet.

But before she could do more than raise herself a few inches, the toe of his boot caught her left side hard enough to lift her well off the floor. Groaning, she doubled, then rolled over onto her back and collapsed unconscious, sprawled out on the cold floor. She didn't see the others drag Blair out of the room before he could kick her again. If they hadn't, he probably would have killed her then and there.

\* \* \*

Hilley came to a short time later, wishing she hadn't. She crawled painfully to the bed and pulled herself up slowly. Then suddenly feeling very sick, she staggered to the bathroom and threw up.

When she was finished, she straightened slowly and leaned on the washbasin for support. As she turned on the faucets, her image in the mirror caught her eye.

Her right eye was already blackening, and swollen nearly shut, the cheek bruised and her lip bleeding and swollen. A sob caught in her throat.

She bent quickly to splash her face, but the pain of her ribs stopped her short, bringing real tears. She remembered to move more slowly after that.

A loud knock on the door startled her. She toweled her face gently as she stumbled to the bathroom door, and called out, "Who is it?"

A familiar voice, a little slurred, answered. "'s Pete, Hilley." "Whaddaya want, Pete?" She was relieved it wasn't Plissken.

"Just wanted to be sure you're okay, ma'am. You looked so awful earlier."

She almost smiled at that. "I'm not feelin' too good, Pete. Do me a favor?"

"Sure, Hilley, anything. You know, you don't sound so good either." The swelling was distorting her voice.

"I've got a real bad headache. Would you get me some aspirin - something stronger if you can find it. And some ice, too. Do that for me, Pete?"

"Sure, Lieutenant. Be right back."
She heard him whistling down the hallway.

\* \* \*

Hilley had finally gotten comfortable on the bed when Pete came back. He banged on the door.

"Here's your stuff, Lieutenant Hilley, ma'am." He was pretty drunk.

She struggled to sit up. "Thanks, Pete. Just leave it outside. I'm not dressed."

"Okay. Lieutenant. Anything else I can get you?"

"No thanks, Pete." Her head was throbbing, and she wished he'd just shut up and go.

"I'll check with you in the mornin' then, ma'am."

She'd agree to just about anything to get him to leave. "Fine,

Pete. G'night."

Listening to his footsteps, she waited until she was sure he was gone, then opened the door. She was straightening up, holding the tray with one arm and her side with the other, when Pete reappeared.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant, I forgot to tell you . . . " His voice

trailed off when he saw her face.

"Cripes, Hilley! What the hell happened to you? Who hit you?"
Turning red, she glared at him. "I fell in the shower. Now, go
away."

"But. Lieutenant . . . "

"I said disappear, Sergeant. That's an order!"

"Lieutenant. I can't just . . . "

"Sergeant, if you don't haul your ass outta here right now, I swear I'll bust you to corporal. You got that?"

He nodded, looking miserable. She stepped back into the room with the tray, and slammed the door.

Pete walked away slowly, suddenly sober and very concerned. Then he remembered that he still hadn't done what he'd come back to do. He had wanted to tell her that he'd found out when Plissken was expected back.

<del>\*</del> \*

The next morning, barely able to move, Hilley dragged herself to the hospital's clinic to have the damage checked. The x-rays revealed that her ribs were badly bruised but not broken, and there were no broken bones in her face. The doctor, once finally convinced that she really wasn't going to tell him who had beaten her, finally gave her pain pills and instructions to stay in bed for at least a day, and sent her on her way.

As she trudged slowly back toward her quarters, Hilley was unaware of the eyes watching her from a nearby barracks.

Her entire squad stood at the windows. They were all angry and upset.

"Dammit, Pete, what're we gonna do about it?"

"Nothin' we can do until she tells us who did it. And it don't look like she's gonna. You know how stubborn she is. She's got more pride than anybody I've ever known. We can listen around. Maybe somebody'll say something about it, you know, like braggin'. Otherwise, we'll just have to wait 'til Lieutenant Plissken gets back and see if can get it outta her. Cripes - the sparks are gonna fly then!"

\* \* \*

Plissken heard about Hilley's tragic mission as soon as they landed, and hurried to her quarters straight from the field, knowing that she would be pretty upset about it.

Having taken extra pain medication, Hilley was sound asleep when he started banging on her door. Startled awake, she called out sharply, her words slightly slurred.

"Whoizit now?" He thought she was drunk.

"Hilley, it's Plissken. Lemme in."

She sat up - too quickly - and held her head in her hands 'til the spinning stopped.

"Not tonight, Snake. I'm not feelin' too good."

He thought he knew why.

"I know, Hilley. I heard. C'mon, lemme in. Maybe I can help." She realized suddenly that he meant her mission, that he hadn't heard about the other yet.

"No, really, Snake. I think I have the flu and I don't want you

to get it. Go on and have a few drinks with your squad, and I'll see you in a day or so."

Snake stared at the door - a day or so! He was getting angry. "C'mon, Hilley. Open the door."

Hilley spoke more sharply than she'd intended. "No, Snake. Not tonight. Now go away and let me get back to sleep."

She had a sudden flash of memory of how badly she had wanted him there just twenty-four hours ago. It was like a physical pain. She had a strong urge to let him in, tell him everything and let him deal with it. but she forced herself not to.

Her words pissed him off. "All right, godammit. I'm gone!" He stalked off. muttering angrily.

Relieved, Hilley lay back down and closed her eyes.

\* \* \*

Snake entered the club angry, but resigned. Coming away from the bar with his drink, he immediately spotted Hilley's squad and his own sitting together in the back of the room. He headed their way, hoping Hilley's sergeant might be able to enlighten him.

As he got closer, he noticed that they were all silent, staring at him, their looks too serious and gloomy.

"Hey Pete, what the hell's wrong with your lieutenant? She on the rag or something?" He had meant it - about halfway - as a joke. No one smiled.

"Siddown, Lieutenant Plissken. There's somethin' I gotta telly a and it ain't gonna be easy to take."

\* \* \*

Snake didn't even bother to knock this time. He just kicked the door open. Then he walked in and hit the lightswitch with his fist. Half-blinded, Hilley sat straight up in bed, drawing her pistol out from under her pillow, and aiming reflexively.

She was exerting considerable pressure on the heavy trigger before she was awake enough to realize who it was. Heart pounding, she lowered the weapon immediately and slammed it into the holster hanging on the chair beside the bed.

"Godammit. Plissken, you stupid bastard! I could've blown you away. What the hell happened to knocking?"

She was shaking as she got up and stood with the bed between them. Snake moved forward slowly, just staring at the bruises on her face. Eventually, he noticed that she'd been sleeping in her sweatsuit, something he'd never known her to do.

"Well, take a good look, Plissken, then get the hell out."
Snake's voice was hard and cold. "Who did it, Hilley?"

She shook her head. "No. It's my affair. I'll take care of it my way."

"Not good enough. Who did it?"

She had to look away. "I'm sorry, Snake, but I'm not gonna tell you."

He moved around the bed toward her. "I want to know, Hilley."
Unable to read his expression, Hilley backed away, contacting the cold. smooth wall in only a few steps.

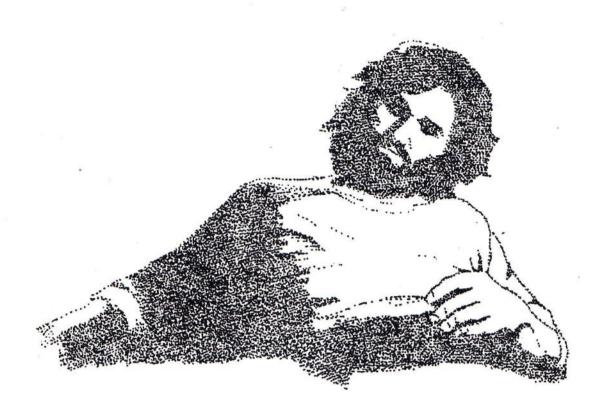
He grabbed her arms roughly and jerked her towards him. "I mean it, Hilley. I want to know who hit you."

She sneered at him. "What're you gonna do, beat it outta me?"
He released her suddenly, shoving her back into the wall, and
turned away. He went to the desk and sat down heavily in the metal
chair, sighing.

"Why, Hilley? Why won't you tell us? Your men are really wor-

ried about you."

Holding her side, Hilley sat down on the edge of the bed.
"I'm really sorry, Snake, but you've got to try 'n' understand.
I can't let you or my squad fight my personal battles for me. What happens when you're not around any more? Then the wolves'll move right in. If I take care of it now, my way, they'll leave me alone now and maybe for good. I have to do it myself, Snake. I just have to. Or I'll never have another moment's peace."



He stared at her for several seconds, then leaned back to look at the ceiling. He sighed again.

Hilley got up painfully and went to stand behind him. She laid her hands on his shoulders and leaned down to kiss his forehead.

"Snake, I understand. It's your pride too - and theirs. But for just this once, you've got to think of me not as a woman or as your squeeze, but as an individual. Just one of the boys."

His eyes closed as he thought about it, then he began to chuckle. "'One of the boys'. huh?"

"Um hm."

He reached up to take her hands and pulled her around into his lap. She tried not to grimace as the movement jarred her ribs. He wasn't fooled.

"What're you hidin' under that sweatsuit, Hilley?"

She looked defensive. "Whaddaya mean?"

"Don't give me that crap. Show me."

She figured she might as well get it over with. With a deep sigh, she pushed out of his lap and stood up.

She untied the pants and took them off. Before going any further, she warned him.

"Snake, it looks a lot worse than it really is."
"Go on."

She took the sweatshirt off slowly, carefully and stood before him wearing only her panties and a huge black and red bruise that nearly covered her entire left side.

Snake stared for several seconds, then leaned his head back and closed his eyes again. He was fighting an almost overwhelming anger.

Hilley felt miserable and wished that there was something she could do - within reason, of course.

She slipped on the silk robe to cover the bruise and sat down in his lap, putting her arms around his neck.

"Snake, please. It could been a lot worse. Just be glad they didn't damage anything important."

His head came up. "'They'?"

She put a finger to his lips. "Never mind."

He began sucking her finger. "Yeah, never mind."

They kissed and after awhile, Snake broke it off, saying, "Do you feel up to . . . ?"

She laughed. "Snake, I always feel up to that. Besides, the doctor did tell me to stay in bed for a day or so."

\* \* \*

Several hours later, Hilley eased herself out of the bed and dressed quickly. She left her quarters quietly, glad that Snake had been tired enough to fall asleep so quickly. As she walked toward the club, Hilley forced herself to relax, to forget the warm body in her bed and concentrate on what was ahead.

She entered the club, ignoring the curious stares. She'd almost forgotten the bruises on her face.

Standing just inside the door, she scanned the room, spotting all but one of them at a table near the back. The other was at the bar, getting the drinks. Happily, no one from her squad or Plissken's was there. She was unaware of the thin smile that had crept to her lips.

One of them spotted her and elbowed the man nearest him. Within seconds, the whole group was leering her way. They assumed that since she'd come alone, they'd won.

Hilley stopped a few feet from the table. The leader, sitting facing where she stood, spoke first. "Well, well. Good evening, Lieutenant."

He felt uncomfortable with her cold stare, unsure of how to read it.

"I take it you've decided to see things our way. Join us for a drink before we get started?"

Hilley's eyes narrowed and her smile changed ever so slightly. Her voice was like the whisper of an arctic breeze. It sent a chill right through them, and most knew they hadn't won anything.

"You take it wrong, Blair."

He glanced around suspiciously, as if expecting a surprise attack.

"Then why are you here alone? Where's Plissken?"

She had to smile. "S'matter of fact, Plissken's in my bed - asleep. I told him this was my problem, and he understood. I just came to give you a little warning."

Blair sneered. "Oh yeah?"

She nodded. "Yeah. I want to be sure you understand a few things." She began to move around the table slowly.

"I just wanted you all to know that if any of you, ever, even so much as touch me again, I'll kill you."

As she passed each man, she touched him, applying just enough

pressule to a different nerve center - as she had been taught by her sense: the venerable oriental martial arts master - to cause extreme discor ort but no permanent damage. She stopped behind Blair and placed both hinds on his huge shoulders.

"No talking, no fighting - you'll just be dead. That's it." She began o apply slow, steady pressure on Blair.

She let the others watch Blair pale and stiffen as he lost all feelir in his arms, rendering him all but helpless.

"I don't like being threatened. No, I don't like it at all.

You can ght me off guard once - it won't happen again. I guarantee."

She released Blair a split second before the other man attacked her from behind. Unhampered by the heavy parka, Hilley spun around, kicking high, catching the foolish man in the jaw. She could've easily broken his neck, but didn't. In fact, it had probably hurt her worse than in had hurt him.

The others, but for Blair whose arms were painfully beginning to regair some feeling, rose from their chairs, but made no move toward her. They c uld see that she was wearing her service revolver, but she made no move to draw it.

"Anyone else care to try?" No one moved.

Her eyes glittered. "Don't like the odds when it's a fair fight, do you Yeah, six against one, that's more your style, huh. Cowardly bastar s!"

She paused a few seconds to regain control of her emotions.
"You'd better not ever pull this kind of shit on any other woman on thi base . . . " Then she added, a wicked gleam in her eyes,
" . . or any man, for that matter. I've got a real bad attitude towards ullies. Know what I mean?"
She moved behind Blair again.

"We got everything straight now, Blair? Do we understand each other? Hmmmmm?" She had laid her hands on him again, but when she felt him to se, decided that no further demonstration was necessary.

Gritting his teeth, Blair nodded, "Yeah, bitch, we understand each cher."

Hilley smiled coldly. "That's Lieutenant Bitch, to you." She turned to leave and stopped, half-turning back. She rested her hand on the but of her pistol.

"By the way, I'm not averse to shooting a man. Doesn't matter to me. I little less satisfaction, but either way, you're still dead. And in cas you haven't heard, I'm good with a gun too." She winked and walked away.

One of the men pulled out his gun and aimed at her slowly retreating be k, but Blair stopped him angrily. "Don't be stupid, Yates. Look around you."

They all looked. Every eye in the room was on them, glaring. Hille, had been so secretive about the incident that very few on the base knew  $\varepsilon$  out it — until now.

They all sat back down and joked nervously about what happened. Blair ubbed his still-tingling arms.

"Guess we underestimated the bitch."

"What're we gonna do about it, Blair?"

"Nothin' - now."

"But what if somebody tells Plissken?"

Blair sneered, "Fuck it - they can't prove a thing - no witnesses."

The other man glanced around nervously. That wasn't what was worrying im.

A few minutes later, there was a commotion at the door. Blair and the of ers looked up to see Snake Plissken enter, flanked by two full squads of America's best - and all were very angry. Only Plissken him-

self looked calm and undisturbed as the group moved through the room toward Blair's table.

As they approached, the other men stood up, waiting defensively. Blair glared at Plissken.

"That fuckin' bitch lied!" He spat out the words, his voice full of hate.

Snake looked at him coldly. "About what, Lieutenant?" His voice was a low, menacing hiss.

For a second, Blair looked flustered.

Snake helped him out. "You mean you think she told us who roughed her up?"

Then he shook his head. "Naw. I followed her here. She doesn't know a thing about it." He chuckled. "In fact, she's gonna be pissed as hell when she finds out we're here."

A worried voice called out from behind the bar. "Hey, Lieutenant. N rough stuff in here, okay? Hilley already decked one of 'em. It's bad for business."

Snake glanced over at the injured man whose jaw was already darkening where Hilley's boot had hit him. He chuckled and shook his head.

"Well, gentlemen, my friends here and I have a few things to add to what Lieutenant Hilley had to say, so if you don't mind steppin' outside . . ?"

Blair held his gaze. "And if we don't want to?"

Snake's eyes narrowed and he shrugged. "One way or another, you're goin' outside. Through the door or through the window - doesn't mean shit to me." He heard the bartender groan.

Blair feinted, then lunged at Plissken. Snake sidestepped and slammed an elbow into the back of the man's head as momentum carried him forward.

Blair lay groaning and dazed on the floor. Snake looked down at him, then back at the others.

"Anyone else want to argue about steppin' outside?"

No one did. They started for the door, escorted closely by Snake's entourage.

Snake hefted Blair up by his belt and shoved toward the door, still smiling. He grabbed the man's coat and threw it to him.

"Wouldn't want you to catch cold!"

\* \* \*

Hilley had felt tired but relieved as she hurried through the darkness back to her quarters, eager to rejoin Plissken. Her side ached and her head was throbbing, but she felt fairly confident that the matter was closed - at least for now. Of course, if people continued to go progressively crazier, all the rules would probably change. These days there was no way of knowing. For these men to have even considered doing what they had just done was really pretty damn crazy.

When she found Plissken gone and realized that he must've followed her, Hilley felt a chill, then a surge of almost violent anger. How dare he!

And, she was willing to bet that her own men had violated her direct orders and were in on it, and Plissken's too. She was going to kick ass in the morning!

Turning to lock the door, she remembered that Plissken had broken the locks earlier. She went down the hall to another female officer's room. Receiving no response to her knock, Hilley finally remembered that Lieutenant Brett was off on a mission. Knowing the other woman wouldn't mind, Hilley went ahead and got the few things she would need for the night from her own room and moved down the hall for the night. She was just too tired and mad to deal with any of the sneaky bastards tonight.

Making sure the door was secured, Hilley lay down and forced herself to relax. It wasn't easy.

\* \* \*

A while later, when they were finished their "mission" and a couple of celebration drinks, Plissken returned to Hilley's quarters to face her. Even half drunk he didn't really want to, knowing that she'd be madder than hell, but he felt he owed it to her. He understood how she felt just as she had said she understood his feelings, but it had forced him to play it her way. He'd allowed her her own style of revenge, then had taken his. She would just have to understand. It was a matter of pride for him - and the others - too. Chivalry was not quite dead.

This time he knocked on the door first, then, receiving no response, walked on in. Finding an empty room, he felt a momentary confusion. He'd expected to find her waiting to jump down his throat. The confusion turned quickly to annoyance - he'd wanted to get it over with. Besides, it made him nervous when people, particularly women, didn't act as he expected them to.

After a few minutes of nearly coherent thought, Snake went out into the hallway and began banging on doors and yelling her name, trying to find her.

He was rewarded with a chorus of angry female voices telling him to shut up and get the hell out, or they'd call the M. P.s.

He replied loudly and angrily that he wouldn't leave until he'd found Lieutenant Hilley.

All the commotion outside had waked Hilley but she kept quiet until he hit the door she stood behind. Her voice was a harsh, loud whisper.

"Godammit, Plissken - get outta here! I don't want to talk to you."

He tried the door. "Hilley, come on. We need to talk about this."
"No! There's nothin' to talk about. What you did was . . ."
She was too angry to think straight. "Just go away, Snake. I'm too mad to even try to talk to you right now."

"Hilley, you've got to understand. We had to do it."

She caught the subtle note of pleading in his voice, and knew he'd been drinking.

"Go sleep it off, Snake." She hesitated, softening only a little. "Maybe we can talk tomorrow. Not now."

His fist hit the door, startling her.

"No, dammit, now!"

Her anger flared again. "Haul ass, Plissken!" She turned and moved back toward the bed There was no reasoning with a drunk.

A second later, another door succumbed to Plissken's booted foot. Hilley spun around, her eyes wide with astonishment.

"Christ, Plissken, you gonna make a habit of this shit? I told you I don't want to talk to you. Now get out." Her voice was cold and even.

"Hilley . . . "

She moved toward him.

"No, Snake. Get out." She was prepared to try throwing him out physically. She'd always wondered if she could take him. He had quite a reputation in hand-to-hand combat himself.

His expression changed. It was as if he'd read her mind.
"You gonna make me go?" His smile was thin and cool, his voice

"You gonna make me go?" His smile was thin and cool, his voice held a distinct challenge. Their eyes locked.

"If I have to, Snake."

His smile slowly faded as he realized that she meant it.

"Hilley . . . "

She looked away and shook her head.

"No, Snake. We'll talk tomorrow. But don't expect too much."
He turned and left the room, smashing the door with his fist as
he went.

Hilley closed the door softly and lay back down. It was all of ten seconds before the tears began.

\* \* \*

Hilley awoke to a violent pounding on her door. "Go away, dammit!"

Pete's excited, frantic voice reached her through the fog.
"Lieutenant Hilley, I'm sorry, but you've gotta get up. All the
Special Forces units have been called to roll call. Somethin' big's
goin' down."

\* \*

She was dressed and had joined her squad in the roll call room in just over ten minutes. She glanced around the room, but was unable to find Plissken or anyone else from his squad. It was puzzling. With a sigh, she tuned in on the C. O.'s words. It was incredibly early, still dark.

Colonel "Big Bob" Hauk spoke solemnly.

"One of the Allies' top intelligence agents has been taken prisoner and is bein' held in Leningrad. Because of it's excellent combat record, Special Forces unit Black Light has been chosen by Special Projects to go in and get 'im out before the Ruskies can get anything important out of 'im."

Hilley felt a cold rush that made her shake her head to clear it. It was the strongest warning she'd ever gotte. Then, she forced herself to concentrate on Hauk.

"The Texas Thunder unit and several attached units will fly air cover for Black Light. I'll be leading the assault myself."

That caused a lot of murmuring in the crowded room. Hilley stared at Hauk, knowing what she had to do. When the meeting broke up, Hilley pushed the crowd toward Hauk.

Hauk had always impressed her from a distance, and up close, his commanding presence was almost overwhelming.

"Colonel Hauk?"

Hauk turned to reprimand whoever'd had the balls to interrupt him, but, when he saw who it was, he felt a little flustered. Former-Captain M. L. Hilley had always impressed him too - in more ways than one.

"Lieutenant Hilley, isn't it?"

Smiling, Hilley nodded. Hauk couldn't help but smile back in spite of his mood.

"What can I do for you, Lieutenant?"

"I'd like to volunteer to fly air cover with your group, sir." Hauk stared at her, then shook his head.

"Out of the question, Lieutenant. We're flyin' slant wings. You're a chopper pilot. I'm . . . "

"Colonel Hauk, I haven't always been a chopper pilot. I'm fully qualified to fly the slant wing. Hell, they haven't invented an aircraft yet I couldn't fly!"

Before Hauk could argue further, she rushed on. "Please, Colonel, it's important that I go." He eyed her curiously.

"Why?"

She looked down at her boots.

"It just is. sir. Please."

"What about the rest of your squad, Lieutenant?" She glanced over at them on the other side of the room, and shook her head.

"I'm just volunteerin' myself, Colonel. I can't speak for them this time." She caught his eyes again. He looked deep, fascinated by the color.

After several seconds, he nodded reluctantly.

"All right, Lieutenant. I don't like it, but I huess I can use all the help I can get on this one. Besides, I doubt if we'll be needing you to fly any rescue missions on this one." His words seemed ominous.

"Preflight check starts in thirty minutes. See Captain Stewart

on Field Five."

Hilley felt weak with relief. On impulse, she gave him a brief, hard hug. Then, realizing what she'd done, she blushed and backed away, grinning.

"I'm sorry, Colonel. But, thank you. Really. Thank you." Hauk found himself blushing as he tried to ignore the grins and snickers around him. But, he had to admit, it was one of the nicest hugs he'd ever gotten.

"By the way, Lieutenant, how'd you get the bruises?" He wasn't really surprised when her grin faded to a thin-lipped smile.

"Ran into a door, Colonel. Thanks again." She turned and hurried off before he could tell her what a crock he thought that was.



He glanced over a few minutes later to see her talking animatedly to her squad. Then, she hurried out, leaving the group just standing there, looking stricken.

Pete looked over at Hauk, a pleading, almost accusing look in his eyes. He started toward the colonel.

Hauk caught his eyes and merely nodded his permission. He knew all about Hilley and her squad of misfit pilots. Every one of them had been jet pilots once. Pete stopped, a relieved smile splitting his face. Then, the whole squad hurried after their lieutenant. Hauk watched them go, wishing he hadn't let any of them go. Wishing no one had to go. He had a very bad feeling about the whole damn mission.

\* \* \*

So did Plissken.

"I don't like the feel of this, Sarge. Sounds too damn much like suicide."

Taylor agreed, but was resigned. "Yeah, and that damn Berrigan. There's somethin' about that guy."

Snake grunted as he pulled on his flightsuit. "Yeah, I'd sure like to see him just once without that damn gas mask on. I'll bet he's got a real good reason for hidin' behind it."

Taylor chuckled nervously. "Don't guess there's anything we can do about it, is there?"

Snake patted the older man on the shoulder. "No. Not one damn thing. Sarge." Then he turned toward the others. "Let's go. boys."

As they approached the field, Snake felt a chill. He slowed to a stop.

"I wonder if there's time to find Hilley."

Taylor shook his head. "'Fraid not, Lieutenant. Look, there's Captain Berrigan - motherfucker's waiting for us, probably wants to be sure we show up."

Snake sighed and moved forward.

Taylor draped his arm across Plissken's shoulders.

"Don't worry, Lieutenant - you can talk to her when we get back.
I'm sure she'll be here."

Snake nodded, but didn't speak. He concentrated on Berrigan. The man was always smiling; they could see it, even through the gas mask. There was just something wrong about a man who always smiled.

\* \* \*

A month later, Plissken was lying in his hospital bed in Helsinki, trying to recover from the nerve gas that had gotten to his left eye through a crack in his goggle. The eye was ruined; the pain in his head from the nerve damage had finally begun to ease - but only slightly, just enough to let sanity creep back in.

That is, until Sergeant Taylor, the only other survivor from unit Black Light, had told him the truth about the mission.

The whole thing had been a trick, a clumsy ruse to try and give false information to the enemy. And, worst of all, it hadn't worked. Not for a minute. The Russians had seen through it from the beginning. All those lives wasted, thrown away. Plissken was very angry and very bitter.

On top of that, neither he nor Taylor had been able to find out anything about Hilley and her squad. The doctors and nurses kept telling them both to just relax and quit worrying, everything would work out just fine. But, both knew better.

\* \* \*

Several more weeks passed before Snake was released from the hospital. His knee shattered in the crash landing, Sergeant Taylor still had many weeks to go.

Not yet used to the constant pain and the drastic change in his

visual field, Snake felt discriented when he walked out of the hospital. He noticed a figure approaching him rapidly, waving. He squinted. His good eye ached from trying to compensate. It was Pete, Hilley's sergeant. Snake started to grin, but the movement of his facial muscles caused spasms of pain through his eye. The smile turned instantly into a grimace and stayed that way.

"Lieutenant Plissken! How are ya?"

The voice was too loud. Snake cringed. His own voice seldom rose above a whispered hiss these days.

"Where's Hilley, Pete?"

Paling, Pete stared at him. "Oh my god, Lieutenant - you don't know? Nobody's told you?

Snake felt his bad eye twitching painfully under the black eye patch. He spoke through clenched teeth.

"Told me what?" He was afraid he already knew. But it wasn't possible.

Pete fidgeted and swallowed several times as if trying to speak but unable to. Snake swore there were tears in the man's eyes. He grasped Pete's arm roughly.

"Tell me, Pete,"

"Hilley's dead, Lieutenant. And the rest of the squad too, 'cept for me and Bill Oswalt - but it don't look like he's gonna make it." Snake felt dizzy. He leaned back against the building. His voice was barely audible.

"How did it happen?"

"She talked Bob Hauk into lettin' her fly with his slant wings. The rest of us wouldn't let her go alone so we volunteered too. She tried to talk us out of it but there was no way we weren't goin' with her." He paused to look at the sunset.

Snake tried to look too, but the bright colors hurt his head.
Another of life's simple pleasures down the tubes.

"Why the hell did she do a stupid thing like that?"
Pete's answer shocked him.

"On the way to the field, just before we took off, Hilley said somethin' about havin' one of her 'feelings' about the mission." He paused and looked at Snake. "She said if she wasn't there, you wouldn't be comin' back. It was almost like she thought she could trade her life for yours. I never saw her look like that. Her eyes were sorta faraway. You know?"

Snake nodded, setting off a new spasm of pain in his head.

"Are you sure she's dead? Couldn't she have crash landed or . . ?"

Pete shook his head. The tears ran down his cheeks freely now. He made no attempt to hide them.

"No, Lieutenant. I saw it happen. A shell hit her full on. There just wasn't nothin' left." He gulped back a sob, then continued, "I tried to warn her she was too low but her radio was out. I don't know if she heard me or not. It all happened so fast."

Snake looked at him. "Her radio was out?"

"Yeah, right after the last instructions before take-off. We were about to go on radio silence anyway and there wasn't time to fix it, so she gave the thumbs-up and we went on. I think maybe she could receive, but not transmit, but I'm not sure."

Snake shook his head, much more gently this time.

"There just wasn't nothin' left." He seemed to be fighting for control. "You wanna see the grave, Lieutenant?"

Plissken didn't want to.

"Yeah, Pete. I guess I'd better."

\* -



Lieutenant Snake Plissken stood in the field crowded with hundreds of small, white rectangular grave markers. They walked in silence through the rows. Occasionally he would recognize a name. It was like being in a nightmare. He knew his own squad was there somewhere too, but couldn't bring himself to find the markers. He didn't really need to - he'd seen them all die himself. One by one.

They stopped at a spot indistinguishable from any other. Snake recognized the names in front of him, then hers caught his eye. The words burned deeply into his memory as he read them.

"IN MEMORY OF

MARY LOUISE HILLEY LIEUTENANT, U.S.A.S.F.

453-02-6425

HE DIED IN LOYAL SERVICE TO HIS COUNTRY"

Snake shook his head.

Pete shrugged.

"What'd you expect from the Army?"

Snake grunted in disgusted agreement.

He unzipped his parka and reached into his breast pocket. He pulled out the new Purple Heart they'd given him while he was in the hospital - his second - and knelt down in front of the marker. He draped the long ribbon over the corner of the stone and positioned the ornate chunk of bronze.

He traced the engraved letters of her name with his fingertips.

MARY LOUISE. He'd never been able to drag that out of her the
whole time they'd been together. He smiled a little. It'd been a sort
of running joke between them. She'd never been able to get what the
'S. D.' of his name stood for either. In fact, besides his family,

Taylor was probably one of the few left alive that did know.

A single tear fell from his good eye as he wished he'd told her after all. It didn't seem quite fair that he knew her secret now, and she would never know his. He wiped his face and stood up.

"Let's go, Pete. I've seen enough."

\* \*

They got back into the jeep, but as Pete reached for the ignition, he exclaimed suddenly.

"Cripes, Lieutenant! I almost forgot. I found this on Hilley's desk when I gathered up her stuff - afterward. It was addressed to you."

He pulled a small brown envelope out of the pocket of his parka and handed it to Plissken.

Snake's hands shook slightly as he tore open the envelope and dumped out the contents. It was Hilley's beloved gold ID bracelet and a note.

He fingered the bracelet, then opened the folded paper and read the hurriedly written words.

"SNAKE - KEEP THIS SAFE FOR ME.

YOUR LUCK SEEMS TO BE BETTER THAN MINE.

HILLEY

## BY THE WAY - I LOVE YOU."

The last three words shot bolts of pain through his eye, through his brain. He stared back and forth from the paper to the bracelet. She'd somehow known all along that she wouldn't be coming back - maybe even before she'd talked to Hauk. He didn't notice when Pete put the jeep in gear and headed back toward the base.

During the ride back, Snake was quiet. The pain was beginning to calm slightly as he tried to relax. He thought about home.

He was scheduled to leave in less than twenty-four hours, but it wasn't soon enough for him. He had wanted to find Bob Hauk and tell him what he thought about letting chopper pilots fly fighter jets on a suicide mission, but Pete had informed him that Hauk had resigned his commission and gone home himself right after Leningrad. Apparently, he'd had enough too. Snake thought that he just might look Hauk up when he got home.

Home. He could hardly wait. It seemed like forever since he'd left.

He squinted at the brilliant colors in the sky. The sun was almost gone now.

Yeah, he really missed his parents. And his old dog, Rogue.

He leaned back in the seat and closed his eye. Yeah, he couldn't wait to get back to the peace, solidity and security of home and family. He needed it now more than ever before in his life. Home.

Snake Plissken sighed.

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call me Snake . . .
walking these streets of New York.
wondering why I'm here . . .
they know why I'm here . . .
one mistake -
and they got ya.
how I got talked into this I'll never know . . .
the reward's not bad, though - a full pardon . . .
ya know, maybe there's streak of good.
in me somewhere -
but, then again,
maybe not.
and they all thought I was dead . . .
they can talk a good line
but right now, it's up to me -
ya can't count on them, or anyone,
not at all.
god, all these crazies runnin' around . . .
(damn. what a place)
time's running out . . .
ya know, that broad, Maggie, really cared for that
'friend' of mine . . .
good ol' Harold . . .
and that crazy cabby . . .
time's almost up . . .
gotta get this joker out somehow
. . .5 . . .4 . . .3 . . .
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And the name's Plissken.

- Barb Johnson



U. S. A. F. B., Helsinki, early Spring, 1990 . . . . . .

Air Force Colonel Robert Allen Hauk was pacing, reading a report and ignoring the constant shower of comments from the paunchy figure seated at the conference table.

"Very impressive . . . " Hauk finally announced as he dropped the papers onto the well-waxed surface, " . . . but what's this got to do with me?"

The eager, boyish face of General Baker-Greene became a roadmap of enthusiastic lines as he told the colonel, "I'm attaching them to your unit."

Hauk was not pleased. He sat down on the edge of the table, folded his arms and disregarded their differences in rank as he frowned. "What the hell for?"



Somewhat taken aback by the obvious displeasure, the general glared back at him. He was, in truth, more puzzled than angry.

"You read the report, man. I thought you'd jump at the chance to have them as part of 'Texas Thunder'."

"We fly slants, General. The L. A. R. S. is a great piece of machinery, don't get me wrong, but it has two-thirds the fire power . . .

"... and three times the maneuverability, five times the speed and suborbital capabilities, not to mention roughly seven times the range," the general finished with a grin.

The deep breath Hauk was holding came out in a slow sigh. He shook his head, then met the general's gaze. They'd been friends for a long time; since Viet Nam, as a matter of fact, when the general had been his C. O. They'd walked through hell once and come out alive. But it seemed that neither had the good sense to get out while they were ahead, so they were together again, waiting for yet another walk through that hot place.

"Rusty," the colonel smiled, "you're makin' me feel like an old man who won't give up his model 'T'."

Baker-Greene stood up, grabbed his friend's shoulder and squeezed it, "Ya still got a ways to go, kid. What are you, forty-four? You're a babe, Hauk. Just a babe."

"Yeah, sure. D' you realize I'm old enough to be the father of most of my unit?"

"Well, hell, Bobby, maybe you are! Or have you forgotten how to do that too?"

Hauk retorted with, "Don't tell me you're still hittin' on those sweet young things right out of basic?"

The verbal war was declared a draw and the general headed for the door, but he turned back for a few final comments.

"You'll have four of the L. A. R. S. arriving tomorrow. We'll give you a couple of months to work them in with the rest of the group, then we'll see about sending a few more. And Hauk, I think you'll real-

ly like the pilots. They're, uh, unique. I left their personnel files on your desk. They may seem a little on the misfit side, but they're good people. Don't go too rough on 'em." He winked, laughed and left.

Hauk smelled a rodent, but with the general, he never knew in what form the 'rat' would show up. Then, again, the man was notorious for setting his friends' teeth on edge and watching them squirm, all the while knowing that nothing was going to happen. Just the same, Hauk took the files to bed with him and thoroughly studied each and every word. All he learned was that he was adding four, textbook perfect, ex-NASA shuttle pilots to his 'family'. Each had earned a fistful of medals and commendations while attached to various allied units. There was absolutely nothing wrong and Hauk finally fell asleep, content with the fact that Baker-Greene was being an ass - again.

At oh-nine-hundred hours, the word came down that the fabulous foursome were about land. A request by the flight leader was made to give a brief demonstration of the aircrafts' maneuverability. Permission was granted by Hauk with a warning that it was a military base, not an air circus, and that one fly-over was all he would allow. It proved to be one too many.

The formation of the planes was so tight as they buzzed the tower that he could have sworn their flat black finish would need retouching. With no verbal or visible instructions, all four headed straight up, separated and a moment later were diving for the runway. Abruptly, no more than one hundred feet from disaster, three of the incredibly small craft slowed, then hovered. Everyone began to relax - too soon.

The fourth hybrid jump-jet was nowhere in sight, but Hauk had a feeling of impending doom when he heard the rumbling of its engines as they picked up power. The noise was distracting enough that he nearly missed noticing the tight, inverted 'V' position the other three craft were forming approximately thirty feet off the runway.

With a sonic boom, the missing Light Attack and Reconnaissance Ship appeared at the far end of the field. No one cared to hazzard a guess as to the speed it was traveling, but Hauk knew that if it were to so much as brush anything while moving that fast, there would be several thousand pieces to pick up. Suddenly, he realized what the demonstration was to be, but it was too late to stop it. He only hoped that the pilots were really as good as the brag sheets had said they were.

All within sight of the airfield watched in morbid fascination as a bluish-black blur streaked past. It was a hairsbreadth above ground when it rolled onto its side and blasted through the tight window formed by the others. Then it was climbing, looping and diving again towards its companions. Within seconds, the jets were together in the diamond formation as in the first moments of their appearance on base. Eventually, one graceful, eight-winged, twelve-footed beast settled to the runway.

Colonel Hauk's comment was muttered louder than he had intended, "Remind me to kick a certain general's ass."

The radar operator next to him looked up, "I beg your pardon, sir?"

"Never mind." Hauk told him as he left to go meet his newest re-

When he arrived on the field, only one pilot was out of the cockpit. The lanky figure in the black helmet and spacesuit didn't just look other-worldly, it was. This was a former astronaut who had taken to flying a modified spacehip in a computerized war. Despite his anger at the dangerous stunt, Hauk was impressed. But then, the ultra-warrior tugged off his helmet, and Hauk got angry all over again.

A pair of black-brown eyes met the colonel's. Matched with the long, hard features and deep bronze complexion, it was easy to see the man was a full-blooded Amerindian. Braids and all. He had to be the five-times-decorated Captain M. J. Redhawk. Although Allied and American special units had relaxed regulations on hair length somewhat, due to arctic missions required of the men, no one had relaxed the rules that far!

Hauk prepared himself for trouble, yet as he drew nearer, the challenge went out of the captain's eyes and a warm, genuine grin lit the handsome face. Then, the man snapped to attention and greeted his new C. O. with a sharp, strictly-business salute.

"Captain Mike Redhawk, sir." the sky warrior verified as soon as his gesture was returned.

Hauk nodded, "Captain." Before he could continue, two more of the pilots appeared and approached him with the same proper military manner.

Mike 'Chief' Redhawk did the introductions, "Sir - Lieutenants Jerry Dineum and John Foss, Baton Rouge, Louisiana," he drawled through a well-practiced accent.

The pair were obviously related. They looked enough alike to be twins if it hadn't been for the slight differences in blue eyes and blond hair coloring.

"Cousins," Dineum voiced softly before the question could be asked. "First cousins. sir. Our mommas are twins."

asked. "First cousins, sir. Our mommas are twins."

Mike jokingly warned, "Don't try to separate these two, sir.

Can't get 'em apart with a crowbar. I know. I've tried."

Can't get 'em apart with a crowbar. I know. I've tried."

Tension was rapidly fading. Hauk allowed himself a quick laugh before he asked. "Which one of you birds made the suicide run?"

All three newcomers smiled and shifted uneasily as they glanced at each other. It was John Foss who spoke. "That was Mac. The suicide maneuver's called, uh, 'Up Your Ass', sir."

It might have struck him funny if Hauk hadn't seen the fourth member of the elite group step out from behind the furthest plane, pull off the shiny black helmet and start towards him. His eyes locked on the figure as it crossed the scant ten yards. Hauk didn't realize he'd said anything until he noticed the others cringe ever-so-slightly. Actually, it was more of a prayer than a curse as he whispered, "Oh, Jesus."

Again the grandson of a medicine man made the introductions. "Colonel Hauk, this is our stunt coordinator, Captain Mac Kern."

The expression on Hauk's face was not unique for a man who had just fallen into an outhouse. Unfortunately, it was not becoming an officer meeting new personnel and he was well aware of its presence. Yet he couldn't quite get rid of the shock fast enough to hide it from the others.

Chief cleared his throat, rubbed his nose to hide his grin, then stared at his boots. Dineum and Foss, with hands behind their backs, did slow takes of the sky, the planes, the ground, anything but the two people greeting each other.

Hypnotized, Hauk focused on a long-fingered, pale hand as it saluted and held that position for an extraordinarily long time. He finally remembered to return the gesture and the hand dropped from the forehead to an extended pose.

"Colonel," came the deliciously low tone.

His brain was screaming at him to make some derogatory remark, however, Hauk had been an officer too long to put his foot any further into his mouth. All he allowed himself to say was, "Captain." Then he studied the stunt pilot as the stunt pilot studied him.

He felt it immediately, a commanding strength like his own, emanating from the other. He stared hard into the silvery, gray-green eyes and found a stubborn, self-assured, rather arrogant soul in the unlikely guise of a 5.6, 110 pound, dark-maned female.

The colonel took a slow step back and ran through his usual, brief welcome-to-the-unit speech, took another appraising gaze at the woman, nodded a curt, "Gentlemen," and in one fluid motion, turned and ate up the space between the runway and his office in long, even strides.

Captain 'Mac' Macarra Kern stood with her helmet and gloves tucked under her left arm as she watched the colonel make his all-too-polite exit. She cocked her head slightly in thought as she scratched the end of her nose against the back of her hand. The gesture didn't hide the amused expression she wore.

John and Jerry flanked her on either side and took in her look, glanced at each other, then at the rapidly disappearing C. O.

"Well," John sighed, "Whatcha think?"

Jerry shrugged, "He don't look like much of a legend to me."
Both men turned their attnetion to Mac. Her only comment was,
"Polite old bastard, isn't he?" But it was easy to see that she found
him more than just amusing. No one had caught her interest in a long
time, not like he had.

"Ya know something," Mike/Chief began, "he's the first C. O. that hasn't come unglued at the thought of a woman in his unit."

But Jerry was shaking his head. "Don't bet on it."

"Yeah." John agreed. "Give 'im time."

## 1 1 1

Four aspirin and two shots of Scotch later, Hauk still had a headache. In fact, the pain was increasing with each passing minute as he
waited for General Baker-Greene to show up. But, as if forewarned, only
a note was delivered from the man. It seemed he'd gotten involved in a
high-level project and had to leave for the states. He regretted having
to turn down Hauk's kind (kind?!?) invitation to meet the new recruits
in person. Perhaps some other time, he'd said. Hauk swore the entire
time it took him to turn the note into confetti.

His anger was easy enough to understand. The U. S. military had certain rules about women and war zones. It was all right for a woman to work as a nurse near front lines in M. A. S. H. units. It was fine for one to be a rescue pilot who took a helicopter into semi-secured areas. A woman could do just about anything on the whole damned base as far as he was concerned, but he would not allow (the government, he thought, would not allow) a woman to become a warrior. It didn't seem right to send one into enemy fire. Not that he was old fashioned, but he thought it somehow took away the enthusiasm, the rallying point for what they were trying to preserve. Women represented home, kids and country; all the good things. They weren't supposed to go out with the men and get their shit blown away. Surely, despite her previous record, that's what would happen. Or, worse yet, someone would die trying to protect her. Yet Hauk had no idea how to undo what the upper echelon had done.

For the next few weeks the colonel became one large, frayed nerveending as he waited for Kern to make or break her place in 'Texas Thunder'.
He went out of his way to make his own dealings with her as brief and
business-like as possible, but it was the reactions of his men that he
watched the most. He thought he sensed resentment during the initial
introduction of the L. A. R. S. pilots. To his surprise, the uneasiness

was due to the fact that the planes were to serve as escorts and completely take over the reconnaissance flights. The only objection to a woman flying in the unit was that she would be part of the fighter escort on raids. As one lieutenant put it to him, it was a little like being a quarterback and having your mother on the field running with you. They were afraid she'd get crushed in a tackle. And yet, two weeks and five flights later, she'd proved she could hold her own. It got quiet, calm and back to normal. If there were any further adjustment problems, Hauk was never made aware of them. He didn't have a reason to think of her much at all until an accident three months later.

/ / /

John Foss was dead; Jerry Dineum was in critical condition and not expected to live.

Hauk was furious. It was one thing to lose men in battle, but when the loss was due to either mechanical failure or pilot error, it made him sick. He handled the hurt and anger the only way he knew how. Hauk buried himself in a backlog of never-ending paperwork to be filled out in triplicate. Folders were piled high on his left and a bottle of twelve-year-old Scotch sat off to his right. For over an hour, his right hand had been considerably busier. It was the first time in months he'd felt like having a drink and it was rapidly going to his head. But, his office was quiet at night. Most of the pencil-pushers and paper-shufflers worked a day shift. The only ones around the business sections after curfew were the Air Police teams. They knew he was in his office and they knew he often slept in it. The big, black leather, over-stuffed couch a few feet from where he sat, provided just as good a place to toss and turn as the bunk in his quarters.

Hauk was staring blankly into the amber-liquid-filled glass locked between his hands when the door opened. The lamp on his desk did little to illuminate the figure in the doorway, but the size and characteristic slouch told him who it was.



"Whaddaya want, Kern?" he politely sighed into his drink, even though she was the last person on base he cared to see.

She moved into the room just enough to shut the door before she answered, "I have to talk to you. 's important."

Only his eyes moved towards her as he lifted his smoldering pipe and filled his mouth with the sweet smoke. Though he hadn't spoken to her all that often, he thought she sounded odd.

With another few steps forward, she gathered her bravado and spoke again. "How does the brass handle somethin' like this, Hauk? I mean, seriously, how does it feel to play God?"

He knew the answer. "You're drunk, Kern," he said slowly, not daring to lose control just yet. "Go sleep it off," he ordered as he recalled how close she'd been to Dineum and Foss.

"I'm on R & R, Colonel. Aren't I lucky? If I hadn't asked for a few days . . . " her voice broke, but only for a second. Suddenly, she was next to the desk. Her fist hit the hardwood so violently that the glass in his hand vibrated from the force.

"Damn you! That was no less than murder. You sent them up to die. You and your damned slipshod security!"

Hauk rose menacingly out of his chair as he hissed, "Lady, you are two seconds away from a court-martial. Get outta my office - now!" But surprisingly, or stupidly, he couldn't decide which, the woman didn't flinch.

Her voice was soft and sad when she spoke again. "Don't you understand? It should've been me up there. Something was wrong. I could feel it all day. Maybe that's why I missed the transport..." she drifted off for a moment, then began again. "I've lost friends before, Colonel, but we were ... we were special ... invincible. Nothin' could touch the four of us, ya know? I don't understand who'd want to ... " Mac sniffed loudly.

Damn woman, Hauk thought to himself. This one was tougher than titanium in battle, never a ruffled feather under full fire, the coldest cookie he'd ever met. Now, suddenly she dissolved into a helpless little girl right before his very eyes.

Against his better judgment, Hauk walked around the desk and gently laid a ham-hand on her shoulder. He tried to sound like the towering figure of authority he was supposed to be, but his being half drunk made it next to impossible.

"There's a war on, Captain. Better than sixty per cent of us will never see home again. You're gonna lose a lot more friends before this is over. We all will." He let go and perched on the edge of the desk.

She faced him suddenly and so close that he could smell her perfume, heady, sweet and spicy, mixed with her own warmth. It made him uncomfortable. His thoughts began to drift off the grim subject as he realized why he hadn't been alone with her before. He'd purposely avoided it at all costs. She was too much of a distraction.

But Mac didn't seem to notice his discomfort and went on talking. "I know what war is, Colonel. I've had a gut full of it, but what happened today wasn't the result of any battle. Somebody messed up."

"It may be logged as pilot error," he replied as he forced his mind back to the matter at hand.

Those pale eyes bored holes right through him. "How the hell can you say that? There hasn't even been time for an investigation!"

He didn't want to be the one to tell her, but she was bound to hear it sooner or later. "We have several eye-witnesses that say Foss was either drunk or loaded."

She glared him down. "Foss hated drugs, and he never drank on

duty! Godammit, Hauk, I know . . . knew him. He'd never screw up a run no matter how routine." The captain moved closer almost touching his legs. "I've seen Dineum and Foss fly their way out of tighter spots than that one."

"You saw it?"

"Hell, yes. I told you, I was on the field. I had a perfect view of the whole thing. Believe me, Colonel. That explosion was no more an accident . . "

He interrupted, "Explosion? As they collided?"

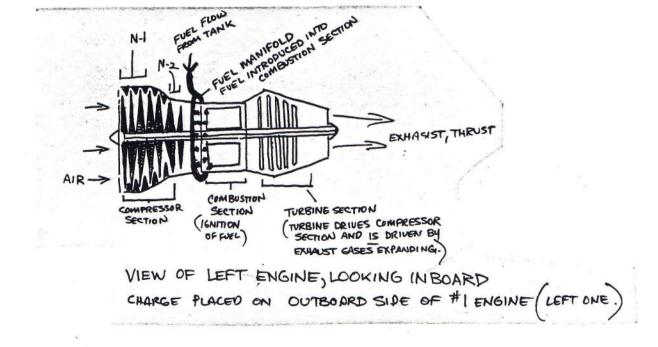
Totally frustrated, Mac growled through clenched teeth, "No, before that. I mean like a bomb, something rigged up to . . . " she hesitated, fanned her fingers at the air as if the answer could be obtained in that manner, then hurriedly searched the desk. She came up with a pen and paper and began to draw. The sketch was quick, but more than accurate enough to serve it's purpose.

Hauk stood beside her and both of them bent over the desk to study the detailed illustration more carefully. As interested as he was in what she had to say, the colonel had also become acutely aware of the sexual temptation she represented. He felt as though he was standing next to a transformer whose voltage increased in direct proportion to his proximity. And he was getting an overwhelming desire to be electrocuted. Hauk stuffed his pipe back into his mouth and nervously chewed the stem.

Although she appeared oblivious to his turmoil, Mac was also more aware of him than she cared to be. She noticed everything about him as though it were magnified; his hands, the line of his jaw, the curve of his mouth, his voice. The only way she knew of getting away from the subject her well-oiled mind mind was racing toward was to keep talking. Her low, gravelly voice became slightly higher-pitched and her words were clipped as she overcompensated for the alcohol.

"I've been thinking about this all day, Colonel. The way I figure it, there had to be a pressure sensitive charge set in about here,"

she pointed to a rear view, left engine, fuel manifold.



"Why pressure sensitive?"

"Because of the circumstances. I saw a flash, then the engine went sour. There was that cannon fire," she emphasized with her fist, "that goes with a compressor stall, then I heard and saw John try to compensate, but he was thrown into an upward, counter-clockwise spin," she gestured with her hands again, "and a second later, his aft slid into Jerry." Her eyes suddenly glazed over as she recalled the roaring ball of flame as the planes collided. "They didn't stand a chance. I still don't know how Jerry managed to eject . . . is he gonna be okay, Colonel?"

For the first time, Hauk noticed her flight jacket was open. The light on the desk reflected off its zipper, which in turn, brought his attention around to the standard issue, blue-gray, jumpsuit underneath with its main zipper that ran from collar to crotch. He would have sworn that the sudden shine was an invitation to open it up and peel the cloth off like a banana skin. Immediately, he tried to rub some sense into his eyes as he finally answered her question about Dineum.

"They don't know yet. He's pretty broken up inside," he said, then leaned stiff-armed on the desk and studied the graphics again.

He tapped the page, "It could have been mechanical failure that caused the stall."

Macarra had circled to the other side of the desk and slouched down into his chair. She took a swallow out of the bottle he'd left open and hoped that it would numb the awful urge she had to unbutton the shirt he was wearing. The collar was open just enough to let some of his dark chest hair peek out. It made her keenly aware of the way the cloth stretched out tightly across his shoulders and arms.

Surprising herself, she kept up with the conversation. "The only logical conclusion to me is that it was a preset explosive. I mean, whoever set it wouldn't want it to blow on the ground. The damage would be minimal. An engine, maybe. But compression isn't that high on lift-off. That detonation hit during transition. They were just going into horizontal flight. Something set on the fuel manifold would pick up on the power increase, blow, cut the fuel supply, and you'd get an immediate stall. Then, you're left with one engine wide open." It was truly a phenomenal speech considering she'd become engrossed in the color and the power that radiated from his eyes.

He was drifting in thought, "One plane might have stood a chance to regain control."

Mac cut in, "But not two. They couldn't get out of each other's way. Whoever set that up was probably hoping to take out both of them."
"What did you mean about it being 'your turn'?"

As she slid lower into the chair, she relaxed so much that she forgot herself for the moment and propped her feet on the desk as she took another swig out of the bottle.

She shrugged, "If you hadn't approved my leave, yeah, it would've been my flight this morning. Me and Chief, but it wasn't my plane. Hell, it wasn't even the right hangar."

"You know what's going to happen if somebody starts yelling 'sabotage'?"

Her bottom lip pouted slightly as she nodded, "Yep. I also know what it'll do to morale if you try to cover it up. 'Cause I can guarantee I won't keep quiet about it. You've got the authority to press for a full investigation, Hauk. And that's what I suggest, " she said carefully, "that you do."

There was no way he could stop himself from smiling at the femi-

nine body in the masculine pose. Judging from the rough edges, it was evident she'd been around men much more of her life than women. It seemed acceptable behavior for her. At first glance, it would've been easy to mistake her tomboyish manners for some latent desire to be male. But, when he saw the look she wore as her half-closed eyes did a slow take of him and the way her full lips parted slightly while she absent-mindedly rubbed them against the rim of the bottle, he knew there was no mistaking her sexual preference. Still, the unconscious move did nasty things to his train of thought. He reached out and snatched the container out of her hands before continuing.

"Your suggestion reeks of blackmail. Captain."

Mac's concentration wandered back from the fit of his pants to the growing tension around his eyes as she noted they were extremely dilated. "No," she whispered, with a knowing grin, "I wouldn't dream of tryin' to put ideas into your head, Colonel." She was giving the idea of flat-out launching herself at him serious consideration when there came a light tapping on the opaque glass of his office door. In a flash, her feet hit the floor and she grabbed Hauk's arm. She was terrified and silently pleaded with him to keep quiet.

Hauk didn't know what to make of her reactions until he thought to glance at his watch. It was past curfew by several hours. He glared, plucked her fingers loose and watched her scramble for cover as he opened the door.

Two security guards saluted him. "Everything secure in there, sir?"

The colonel nodded once, "Yeah. I'm just catchin' up on some paperwork. I'll be sleepin' here tonight."

"Yes, sir. Just wanted to make sure, sir. 'Night."
"G'night." Hauk sighed.

He was tired, upset and in no mood for games when he finally shut the door and faced her. As soon as he was sure the police were well out of earshot, he demanded, "All right, Kern, how the hell did you get in here?"

Macarra gave the question considerable thought and decided to ignore it. She was noticing how much taller and more heavily muscled he appeared to be now, while he stood so close, as opposed to a moment before when he hadn't been so mad. She nervously groped the air behind her, found the couch and sat down on the arm, then offered, "I had to talk to you," as her only defense.

The restraint in his voice was minimal, "I've been in here all day, Kern. It's after one AM. Don't you know what happens when you're caught in a restricted area after curfew," he leaned over her, "I mean, if you're not shot on sight.?"

She clutched at the back of the davenport as she bent backward. "But I wasn't caught and I won't be unless you turn me in. Sir," she added with a hint of sarcasm.

That headache was back. Hauk inhaled slowly and deeply while he ran both hands through his rapidly graying hair in a gesture of frustration. The angelic look on her beautiful face was enough to drive him crazy. He was half tempted to throw her out and let the trigger-happy guards have at her. But, he only sighed, then lectured gently, "All right, I'll let it go this once since I know what kind of shit you've been through today. But, so help me, Kern, if I ever so much as hear a rumor that you've pulled this kind of stunt ever again, I'll personally do the shooting myself, ya hear me?"

Mac appraised the sharp, angular features as they softened with

fatigue and alcohol. She noted that the tough, relentless leader of 'Texas Thunder' had momentarily lost his superhuman aura. She was wondering what it would be like to make love to a man like Hauk, to wake in the middle of the night and find his body close to her own, to hear his deep, tantalizing voice softly moan with passion for her. She swallowed hard as the room grew hotter.

"You know," he mused, "I've been in the service twenty-two years. All that time I've been taught to go by the book, follow the rules. Now you come along and blow every damn one of them to hell." There glowed a serpentine, diabolic quality in his smile and his dark, foreboding eyes. Maybe he meant it as temptation or as a dare to discover who and what he really was. Then again, it could have been disgust.

Without so much as a blink, she observed, "You hate my guts, don't you?"

His right hand rubbed across his eyes, then pressed the bridge of his hawkish nose as he chuckled to himself. There it was, the question he'd waited three months to hear. "I think I could learn to," he eventually growled.

She seemed to be talking to herself as she recounted, "You move to the other side of the hall when you see me coming. An' at briefings you won't even look at me. Dammit, Hauk, you even ignore me up there," she motioned with a jerk of her thumb as she stood up.

From his 6'3" vantage point, she seemed to have grown suddenly fragile as he glared down at her. He felt himself being sucked into those long-lashed, sagebrush eyes again. "Whadda you want from me, lady? Special treatment?"

"I just want to be acknowledged once in a while out of common courtesy, that's all! I want the same respect and consideration you lavish so freely on the rest of your team, Hauk! I've busted my ass to try and impress you. I've tried to be the best sky warrior in this damned outfit. And, by God, I am! I've got more missions, more recon flights and a better strike record than even you, mister!" She poked him in the chest for emphasis.

"I know," the colonel told her as he took her hand.

In stunned silence, she studied his face. The hostility was replaced by confusion. Her small fingers clenched his thumb. "Then, why . . .?"

He reached out and brushed a stray strand of hair away from her eyes. It was a little too fatherly when coupled with his words. "Kern, you're a damned good officer, a good pilot and you usually stay out of trouble. I've got no complaints. Except one."

She stiffened, ground her teeth and finished the thought for him. "You just don't want a woman in your outfit."

He wanted to yell, but he knew the security team was probably on its way back. He thought about strangling her, but he decided instead to give her the speech she was pushing to hear.

"You're right. I'll be honest with you. When I saw it was a woman that pulled that circus stunt the first day you arrived, sure, I wanted to kick your butt all the way back to wherever it was you came from. I resented the hell out of your being assigned to me, not that I doubted your ability. They don't drop just anybody into a Special Forces group. I've seen you in action often enough to know you've got every qualification it takes to be here. But dammit, Kern," he stopped to compose himself, "have you ever taken a good look at yourself? You look like a sixteen year old kid; somebody's little sister who should be home getting ready for a high school dance. You should be back in the States, married to some . . "

She was deadly calm as she advised, "Don't say it, old man! The only concern you have is with my performance in this place." She moved closer until she was right under his nose. With her hands planted on her hips, she hissed up at him, "I don't give a shit if you are a colonel, sir! You've got no right to tell me I can't be here because my pants happen to fit a little different than your! And don't give me that too young bit either. I respectfully remind you that I am a good two years older than any other of your hotshot pilots!" She paced away then spun back before he could comment, "And one more thing, Hauk, if you even suggest my looks had anything to do with my commission, let's get it straight right now. I don't play those kinda games. I found out early on that screwin'around with anybody in the service brings nothing but trouble, an' I got three bodyguards that feel exactly the same way."

She was referring to her relationship with Redhawk, Dineum and Foss.

"Had." he corrected.

Her fists clenched and she folded her arms, took a deep breath, shut her eyes and nodded. "Yeah."

Hauk was sitting on the edge of the desk again. His head was lowered, eyes up, like a bull about to charge. "Are you finished?"

Macarra slowly rubbed her knuckles against her mouth, then covered her eyes for a moment in thought before telling him, "All I've ever wanted to do is what I'm doing now. I wouldn't know what to do with a dress, a kid or a stove, for that matter. But, I could take that plane out there, tear it down and put it back together again in my sleep if I had to." She said it quietly. "I broke my neck to get here, Colonel. Don't tell me I don't belong. I don't belong anywhere else."



There were half a dozen comebacks he could think of, but her intensity suggested that when push came to shove, this delicate little damsel would use a bulldozer to get her point across. A verbal battle

was pointless. They could spend the entire night arguing and nothing would ever be resolved. She didn't seem to understand that although he did resent what she did, he admired her ability to do it. He just wished she'd do it elsewhere.

"Get some sleep," he ordered after a lengthy pause. She started for the door.

Hauk snapped his fingers and pointed to the couch. "You're not going anywhere until morning."

"Won't it look kinda strange if I'm found in here?" She sat on the very end of the soft structure and curled into an uneasy knot.

He yawned, yanked off his boots and stretched out as best he could in the space she'd left him. As he folded his arms and shifted his wide shoulders into a more comfortable position, he remarked, "It would look a helluva lot stranger for you to get your brains blown out while sneaking out of my office in the middle of the night." He set the alarm on his watch for 5 am, then dozed off. But the quiet time didn't last long.

Mac awoke with a start. It took her a long time to remember where she was and who she was with, but when she did, she bolted. Her feet never touched the floor because Hauk, like most war horses, woke at the slight sound and yanked her back. His forearm was wrapped around her shoulders and he slapped a hand over her mouth before she could protest. Suddenly, she heard the footsteps that prompted his action. The door was tested, then the guards moved on. Crisis over, Mac relaxed, her back against his chest. She didn't realize she was shaking until he asked if she was all right.

"Yeah," Mac assured, but she was hesitant to let go of his arm she was clutching with both hands. Finally, though, she relaxed and twisted toward him. "Almost blew that one, didn't I?"

Nose to nose with her, the colonel smiled back, "Almost."

The silence took on a deafening roar as Macarra listened to the horribly loud pounding of her heart. The urge that had plagued her only a short while before came back even stronger, as the heat of him melded with her own. It was embarassing, yet so stimulating to be touching, smelling, drinking in everything about him. She wanted to drown in those eyes, be swallowed up in those massive arms and feel herself crushed under that chest.

Hauk's smile increased to a lecherous grin as he read her pleading gaze. He knew what she wanted. He didn't argue. He couldn't.

For some reason, it seemed he'd forgotten how to breath, or maybe he'd sucked all the oxygen out of the close space. Either way, it was as though someone sat on his chest. And he was hot, but his hands were fumbling as though they were frozen as he reached up and pulled her face to his. As he went backward, tugging her with him, he kept thinking how good it felt to touch and be touched, yet how much he seemed to ache all over.

He made love to her, much to his chagrin, like an inexperienced kid in the back seat of a car at a drive-in movie. It was even more perplexing that she didn't seem to mind at all and fell asleep in his arms only minutes later. Admittedly, it had been awhile. There were too many other things that took precedence over physical pleasures, which more often than not, included such luxuries as eating and sleeping on a semi-regular basis. But still, he had always thought himself to be a mature adult, well-versed in the art of romance. It was humiliating as hell to come so totally unglued at the touch of a twenty-six year old, opinionated antagonist.

He made up his mind quickly as the scent, taste and feel of her was electrifying his senses. Although he wanted nothing more than to

keep the sensations coming, he told himself it was a purely chemical attraction, a one-time accident that would never happen again. He assured himself that he was making the right decision as his grip tightened around her shoulder and he woke her up to do it all again.

1

It was a quarter to five when a soft rapping startled him awake. But it was a slow process to peel his bare, damp hide off the cool leather. He clutched at the olive drab blanket that was rapidly sliding to the floor as he called out, "Yeah, just a minute."

He yanked the door open wide.

"It's just me, sir, Donaldson. You requested that I wake you early to give you time to pack."

"Huh?" He stretched again, rubbed the sleep out of his eyes with the heel of his hand and mumbled, "Oh yeah. I already did it." Then as idea slipped into his mind and refused to go away.

"Would you, uh, see that my things are put on the plane?" He hesitated for a second, then added, "And do me a favor, Corporal. Notify the pilot that there'll be one more passenger and that he might have to wait a couple of minutes. Okay?"

"Uh, yes, sir. It is a V. I. P. transport, though. I'll have to clear it through security."

Hauk was chewing his lower lip and smiling as his memory of the past few hours crept into his mind's eye. "I'll take care of that. You just tell the pilot that I may be a little late."

"Yessir."

With a wide yawn, Hauk turned back and hoisted the blanket across his shoulders to ward off the chill of the room. He noticed that his uniform that he'd unceremoniously dumped on the floor had been folded regulation style and piled neatly on the desk just inches from where he'd slept so soundly. The bottle of Scotch he'd left out was nowhere in sight and had been replaced by a filled water pitcher. He also smelled coffee coming from the brewer that had sat so long unused in the cupboard.

He yanked on his pants and shirt, poured a cup of the rather weak-looking liquid, and settled in behind his desk to fill his pipe. For the next few monutes, he concentrated on the time he'd just spent with his sawed-off Amazon warrior. Then, he sighed and stood up, stretched, and buttoned and tucked in his shirt. Finally dressed presentably, he tugged on his parka and left his office. As if going for a leisurely stroll, he sauntered across the flight line and down into the underground maze of quarters. There were people everywhere, but he scarcely noticed, and was only vaguely aware of the salutes he returned, but all who saw him were conscious of the odd smile he wore smashed behind the stem of the rosewood pipe.

Several minutes later, he sat of the edge of an unmade bed and dropped two large tablets into the glass of cold water. The hissing sound
managed to rouse the occupant hidden under the tangle of covers, but only
enough for her to issue a few profanities and stuff her head further under the nearest pillow.

He stroked her bare arm, then took hold of her shoulder and pulled her towards him onto her back. Immediately the pillow was shoved aside and two wide, bloodshot eyes peered up at him. When the brightness of the bedside lamp hit her eyes, she groaned in agony and once again dragged the pillow over her face.

"Headache?" he teased.

What she grumbled, he didn't care to translate.

"Come on," he ordered, as he helped her to sit up. "Drink this.

It'll make you feel better."

"Oh, shit. Gettin' hit by a truck would make me feel better," she uttered hoarsely, but took the glass and downed the entire contents.

"I hope you don't make a habit of drinking like that, Kern," he called from across the room as he opened the closet door.

As she folded forward, drew up her knees and buried her face in the cool cloth of her sheet, she realized that she'd left every stitch of clothes in a trail from the bathroom to the bed, and that the only thing between her and Hauk was a threadbare sheet. She twisted it tighter and dragged some blankets up under her chin while she leaned back against the headboard.

"What the hell are you doing in here? How did you get in?"

Hauk pulled her dress uniform out of the dark cupboard and studied it carefully. "The same way you got into my office."

"Bull," she yawned, "you'd never fit in the airshaft." Then she realized that he'd tricked her into spilling a secret she never intended for him to learn.

His eyes blazed for a moment, but then he sighed heavily and shook his head. "Come on, get dressed. You've got twenty-three minutes to get outta here."

She didn't move.

"I said move it, Captain!" He took a few steps toward her.

Mac clutched the coverings tighter. "Look," she pleaded, "If
this is about last night... I admit it was my fault, Colonel, but if
you think it merits kicking me out..."

He waved her silent, "You asked for leave. You want to spend it in this cave, or would you rather spend it in Glasgow?"

"What?" She rose to her knees.

"There's a V. I. P. transport headed there in less than a half hour. It's up to you."

She felt there was something more to it than good will between friends. "Why're you doin' this?"

He found the still-packed duffle bag and dropped it into the middle of the room. He thought about saying something sarcastic, but his sharpness faded as he looked into the eager, child-like face. "I have to attend a conference. Lots of brass, heads of state, that kind of thing. For security's sake, they scattered us around, and I drew a twenty-eight room manor up the coast."

"Just you?"

He laughed, "Just me and the servants. Waste of money, if you ask me, but it's all mine." He turned and opened the door, glanced over his shoulder and ordered again, "Move it!"

Despite the heavy cloud cover, Mac wore mirrored sunglasses during the entire flight. She also slept part of the time. When they reached the air base, Hauk arranged to have her driven to the estate, while he headed in the opposite direction for his first of several high-level staff meetings. In reality, he was just as hung-over as his companion, but he had no choice except to do what duty dictated.

It wasn't quite 10 AM when Mac arrived at the massive stone hall. She was greeted at the door by a shriveled old man in formal attire. He escorted her to a frilly room that was bright, cheerful and had a balcony that overlooked the sea. For Mac's taste it was much too fussy, but she was a guest of the U. S. government. If they wanted to treat her like a lady, that was okay by her, even if it did make her uncomfortable. She was even more uncomfortable when she caught a glimpse of herself in a free-standing, ornately-framed mirror. Hauk was right. She did look like a sixteen year old kid, in this case playing dress-up. The dark

blue dress uniform was positively depressing, even though it fit like a glove. She'd pinned her hair up off her collar like the old regulations demanded, but she'd done it only because it was still wet when she dressed. She wasn't particularly thrilled with her looks undressed either, as she stood in her plain white underwear and studied her reflection. She didn't wear a bra, not that she didn't need one, but the pressure/flight suit she wore just about every day was support enough. Off-duty, if she wore anything at all, it was a skinnystrapped undershirt and panties. She was thoroughly disgusted with herself by the time she put on civilian garb - threadbare, faded jeans, never-been-polished cowboy boots, a cable-knit sweater and her favorite coat. It was a genuine, Navy-issue pea jacket.

She walked for miles on the cliffs and hills around the manor. Eventually she found a way down to the shoreline and added another few hours to her day-long trek. It was late afternoon when, with an armload of rapidly wilting wildflowers, Mac started back. It was time well spent, time alone that she'd desperately needed, not only to mourn for her dead and wounded friends, but also to get back in touch with herself. She was worried about the things she'd said to Hauk, but more worried about what they'd done after the arguing.

The object of her concern stood on a bluff about a quarter mile from the house. His hands were shoved deep into the pockets of his arctic jacket and the collar was drawn up against the back of his neck to ward off the wind. His expression was as gloomy as the gray sky, and for that reason, Mac disturbed his solitude.

Hauk was watching the gigantic breakers slam against the cliff below. He was thinking how insignificant one man appeared when pitted against that much raw power, and yet how much of that power men could destroy for all time with a minor thing called war. He wished for all he was worth that something would happen and that that three letter word would refer only to verbal battles or fist fights. The best news that anyone could have brought to Colonel Robert Allen Hauk was that he was out of a job.

As if becoming aware of her for the first time, Hauk glanced in Mac's general direction, then shifted uneasily. The sigh that followed told her that something was drastically wrong.

The man they had nicknamed 'Big Bob' tipped his head back, inhaled the tangy sea breeze and let the breath out slowly before he told her, "They're gonna do it. The stupid bastards are gonna do it, both sides." He looked at her worried expression. "Nerve gas, instead of nukes."

"That's good," she said blankly.

He studied the stubby, dry grass at his feet and nudged a clump over the edge with his boot as he sighed and shook his head. "No, it's just as bad. Maybe worse. It's the heavy stuff, Mac."

She shivered at the thought, then lost herself in feelings for the man. He wanted to talk, she could tell, but not here, not like this, on such a gruesome subject.

"All this will be gone. A couple of months from now we won't be able to move without full gear. The stuff will eat right through street clothes. Those idiots kept insisting it isn't like that. It's classified information. Maybe they're not supposed to know, but God, I wanted to tell 'em. Somebody has to."

He looked down at the captain, her arms still wrapped around the dozens of brightly colored, dying things. He pulled a pink, rose-like flower out of the bunch and tested the fragrance, then with a half-smile, Hauk brushed it against the alabaster cheek of his friend.

"You wanna run away?" he asked.

Mac echoed the look. "I thought we did?"

His amusement was nothing more than a quickly exhaled, "Huh." He tucked the flower behind her ear, ran a thumb across the side of her face, then turned and wandered off in the general direction of the buildings.

When the captain found him again he was in the library. He had removed his jacket, sweater and boots and piled them high onto a nearby chair. His feet were propped on a table, and glassy-eyed with exhaustion, he gazed into the flames that danced in the great stone fireplace about ten feet away. He was on his third 'neat' drink.

"You missed a great sunset."

He didn't answer. He frowned and swung his long legs onto the satiny material of the antique, narrow couch, wriggled himself comfortable and stared at the ceiling.

She tried to draw him out of his depression again. "Hey, they gave me a really great room," she laughed as she poured herself a brandy. "It looks like something out of one of those sappy romance novels." She took a sip and overcame the urge to cough at the strength of it before going on. "Honest-to-Pete, all I need is a long, white gown and I'd be all ready for the guy in the armour." But, silence fell like a wet sheet over the room.

Since it was clear that he didn't care to socialize, she left, ate dinner and crept back in to find a book to keep her company until she could fall asleep. She picked several interesting titles and settled onto the arm of the couch, where Hauk now napped, to choose one. Mac became so engrossed in the literature that she failed to notice that her constant flipping of pages had disturbed him.

Without moving, Hauk watched her as he'd never had the chance to do before. She resembled a pixy as the firelight bathed her fine features and wild, wavy hair in a red-gold glow. Her body was long and made her appear taller than she actually was. Although she was in the lean, hard-muscled condition her job required, Hauk recalled that he hadn't noticed any hardness about her. There were all the right curves and angles on that frame.

Eventually, she felt his inspection. He seemed unaware that he was staring, nor was he cognizant of the fact that he was wearing a very readable grin - until she moved. Without warning, she was coming at him, sliding up his body without really touching him. She hovered face-to-face, balanced on her arms and whispered, "Was last night a mistake, Colonel?"

If the situation came about again, he had intended to say yes. It was wrong and it was over, but he already needed her touch. He no longer cared if it shouldn't have happened. His eyes locked onto hers and his mind let go of all that plagued him. Still, he vowed not to make the first move. He knew that last night had not only been uncalled for, but a fiasco. He'd keep his wits about him this time. He'd maintain his composure. But her mouth was pure fire against his skin; gentle, delicate, teasing fire that began on his lips and burnt a sweet path right down to his bare toes.

Cool air washing over his bare skin dragged him back from overwhelming drowsiness and he opened his eyes to find her sitting between his feet. For awhile he thought he's dreamt what she'd done, but the devilish smile on her face let him know better.

Oblivious to his nakedness, Hauk rose towards her like a King Cobra ready to strike. With each inch forward, she seemed to grow more wary, but he found the fear stimulating. It meant that he had the upper hand this time. He was scarcely a foot away when he reached out and took her face in his hands. From the startled gaze, his light, thoughtprovoking kiss was not what she had expected. With a deliberate, slowmotion move he stood, picked her up and carried her down the hallway to his room.

During the night, Hauk told himself over and over that he was asking for real trouble. There were rules and regulations about such affairs, let alone the moral issue. He was married, not happily or unhappily, just married. Being a career serviceman, away from his family for months at a time, he couldn't say he hadn't strayed. He wasn't above looking for occasional company when he wanted it, but this was an entirely different situation. Mac wasn't some bar-fly selling favors. She wasn't some bored, officer's wife that he'd never see again. Nor was she just a non-com looking for a quick promotion. Mac was one of his own crew. Someone he'd see everyday. Someone he couldn't ignore. But, he pushed that dilemma out of his mind and concentrated on the lust of the moment.

The next morning he returned to Glasgow, gave his speech, then found himself in another world as he sat and watched the men around him. Their faces appeared almost comical as they tossed out names of weapons and the cities they meant to level. He'd never noticed it before, just how idiotic the whole thing appeared. It made him feel like an outsider as he watched the characters out of some sick imagination strut around in their tailor-made uniforms and thousand dollar suits. Hauk couldn't conceive of the fact that he was actually one of them. He knew damned few had any real concept of what their decisions would mean. They would see results in the form of printouts, reports and pats on the back. They didn't have to look at the casualties, nor would they have the lousy duty of writing some kid's parents to tell them that there wasn't enough left of their pride and joy to ship home in a thimble, let alone a coffin. Parents like those of John Foss.

He hated the place, the people, the meeting. His mind wandered back to Mac. Immediately, he felt as though he'd stepped into a safety zone. With a little help from his daydreams, he'd make it through another day.

During a lull in conversation, Hauk was approached by one of the quieter braggarts. He recognized the man as the one the others had rudely nicknamed 'Mousey'. But as Hauk looked into the eyes of the senator from New York state, he sensed that the mild-mannered, soft-sopken man wasn't one to malign. An underlying power that one could easily miss, a spark that would take the little man far, was clearly visible in those beady little eyes.

"It's Colonel Hauk, isn't it?"

He nodded, stood and shook the man's hand.

"I've heard so much about you, Colonel, nothing but praise for your part in the war effort. You've become quite the legend, you know. A genuine folk hero."

The shallow flattery only emphasized the first impression Hauk had gotten of the senator. He was a slimy character, all right, and Hauk didn't like him, but that didn't stop him from being polite. After all, the 'mouse' carried a lot of clout. Besides, he had to feel a bit sorry for the man since everyone else at the elite grouping went out of their way to ignore this man, John Harker.

"You know, Colonel, I had a great deal to do with those new fighters assigned to your unit." He stopped and sipped at a glass of bloodcolored wine.

"Did you?"

It was more an enlargement of his slack, thin-lipped mouth than

a real smile as Harker told him, "Oh yes. I fought long and hard for those appropriations. Of course, the real difficulty was finding suitable pilots. I sincerely hope you've found them to be satisfactory."

"They're fine." He thought about just how fine.

"No problem with the woman, then?"

Hauk was shocked. All the phone calls he'd made about her those first few days had turned up no one else who knew Mac Kern was a woman. He felt as though Harker wanted to probe him for some malicious rumor. Hauk's only comment was a sincere, "No." She was no problem to him. He could lay her out any time he chose.

"That's good to hear," he droned dully. "I was afraid that she might pose a problem to the other women on base."

He only asked out of boredom. "Oh? Why's that?" Harker told him - he'd heard she was gay.

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Mac had a mouth full of tea when the colonel repeated what ol' Mousey had told him. She coughed, sputtered and choked, then started to laugh until she noticed that Hauk hadn't joined in the joke.

"I suppose you didn't try to defend me?" She stomped towards the balcony, turned and rested her elbows on the railing as she frowned at her C. O./lover. "'Course not. It would be cutting your own throat, wouldn't it? After all, it's not nice for the upper echelon to go around screwin' their subordinates!"

He didn't say a word.

"Quit looking at me like that! You can't possibly believe that little runt!"

"You know Harker?"

"Unfortunately. I know a lot of those guys. It was part of the soft-soap job for NASA to send in the more," she winced, "personable astronauts to fight for more money for the space program. 'Course, that was before I knew much about politics. Those bastards looked on me as a prostitute in a spacesuit and helmet is all. I was just some freak they figured the government would add for the entertainment of those all-American super jocks. You know, give the boys something to play with on those long missions. They didn't know shit about my job."

Hauk noticed a growing chill in her tone.

"Harker wanted to check out my qualifications for himself. I had to tell him something, so I said I was a lesbian. I hate that man. He makes my skin crawl." She hesitated and hoped for some soothing remark that never came. "You don't believe what he said, do you? You can't!"

The colonel turned his back and smiled as he shrugged, "You could be AC/DC." A second later, he stumbled forward as a cushion off the chair hit him in the back of the head with a bone-jarring jolt. He faced her again.

Shaking a finger at him, she shouted, "You deserved that, dammit! If you believe that old coot, you deserve a helluva lot more!"

He came at her slowly, calmly. "Come 'ere."

She shook her head, warned him back and laughed. Then she was up on the four inch wide cement railing of the balcony. It was a hundred foot drop to the rocks below.

That move was the last thing he expected her to do. His dark eyes widened, then narrowed as his temper flared for real. "Get down off there before you break your neck!" He lunged for her.

Mac simply reached up and grabbed an outcropping, swung past him and ran. Her flight continued for a good two minutes as she raced up and down the maze of halls. She glanced over her shoulder once or twice,

but Hauk was nowhere in sight. Still, the run was exhilarating, so she continued. She dropped down a flight of stairs, two at a time, rounded a corner, shoved aside a door and burst into the kitchen. Several of the staff were there, gathered around the main table.

"Excuse me," she puffed, "I didn't mean to interrupt your tea. I was just, uh, getting some exercise. I run. Sometimes." She backed up. "I'd better go now."

No one said a word; they just kept staring.

As she took a second step backwards, the door swung wide open again and knocked her off balance. She stumbled and fell against the table. In the middle of a turn, she saw Hauk reach out. The next moment, the world went topsy-turvy as he dropped her over his shoulder.

With his usual charm, the long-legged man in the blue uniform nodded a greeting, caught sight of a young woman roughly the same build as the load he held, and asked, "You - do you live here?"

"Yessir. We all do, 'cept for Jimmy. He's the gardener."
"Do you own anything formal?"

#### / / /

She certainly did. It was a deep, jade green, floor length tube of silk held up by two thread-thin straps and a lot of prayer.

"You've got to be kidding," Mac frowned at the image in the mirror. "I feel like a logger in drag. I can't go to any fancy dinner in this thing."

"You can and will. That's an order, Captain."

Hauk sat in the high-backed brocade-covered chair and tugged thoughtfully at his pipe. The smoke from it curled lazily around his head and forced his eyes to squint as he exhaled a fragrant cloud. He liked what he saw. He liked it a lot more every minute, so much so that he was thinking about liking it right off of her, when she did an abrupt about face.

"It isn't gonna look good, ya know, me showing up with you. The rumors it could start . . . "

"Maybe dispel a few, too. You want to get even with Harker, or not?"

"Not. I don't want to be anywhere near him." She looked at him pleadingly. He wouldn't bend an inch on the issue and she knew it, unless she could change his mind about either one of them attending. Mac sidled up to him and braced her hands on the arms of the chair. She leaned toward him until she, or rather two of her better assets, had the colonel's undivided attention. "Aw, come on, Hauk . . ."

His gaze wandered up from her cleavage to her sweetly smiling face. "It won't work, Kern."

She swore, kicked the chair with her bare foot and yelled at him, "You're impossible!"

"No, I'm not," he whispered as he pulled her onto his lap. "I'm easy."

But, her arguing began again after the brief interlude, and continued even as the limousine pulled up to the heavily guarded hotel. Hauk, however, had turned a deaf ear to her complaints. He didn't understand nor did he try to, how she could fly into the face of death on a regular basis, not show a sign of fear, and yet become terror-stricken at the thought of facing a benign group of brass.

The fright was too real to her and she gulped three strong drinks within the first few minutes of their arrival.

"That's enough, Captain."

Mac wanted desperately to fight him on the issue, but one glance at him changed her mind. The fuse on his temper was shorter than usual, and one more drink on her part would light it. She picked a quiet corner, chewed her fingernails and watched Hauk as he tried to mingle. She thought about joining him, but felt foolish for leaving his side in the first place. She refused to crawl back. Being nervous and uncomfortably exposed in the dress, Mac could think of nothing to do without drawing attention to herself, until a tray of hors doeuvres glided by. Greedily, she snatched two of the snacks and had almost gotten them into her mouth when a husky, heavily accented voice sounded in her ear.

"You're going to get terribly fat if you eat those thing," the Frenchman warned.

From across the room, Colonel Hauk saw a man he thought seemed familiar say a few words to his captain, hug her fiercely, then speak again. As he watched, the man laughed, then, in a grand gesture, bowed low and kissed her hand. To add insult to injury, John Harker, who had also witnessed the reunion, chose that moment to greet Hauk.

"I'm so glad you decided to attend out little gathering tonight, Colonel. I see you asked Miz Kern to be your guest." He glanced at her and commented, "She seems to have overcome her, uh, problem with men, don't you think?" But reading Hauk's intense expression, "Or are you the one responsible for her change of heart?"

Hauk would have loved to wring the senator's sweaty little neck but he decided to ignore him and find out about Mac's relationship with the unknown mystery man. However, before he had crossed half the room, someone tugged at his sleeve. He looked down to find the wife of the European Theater of War's commanding general vying for his attention.

She smiled adoringly, crushed his arm to her bulky self and tittered, "You're Him, aren't you? You're Colonel Hauk."
"Yes. ma'am."

"I knew it! Oh, I just knew you were. I could tell by your eyes. Suzy told me all about those eyes."

"I beg your pardon, ma'am? I don't believe I know . . "
"Oh, of course you do. General Waylon's wife, Suzy Waylon."
That got his complete attention. His nervousness must have showed as she led him toward a large group of women.

"Don't worry, Colonel, Suzy isn't here, but I am and there's so much I'd like to talk to you about, say, a little later when we can be alone?" Before he could answer, she blurted, "But first I'd like you to meet some friends." She didn't give him much choice.

Hauk had been through the same kind of thing quite often, but not since being stationed at Travis Air Force Base in California. They'd been ordered to throw a bash for some Washington D. C. brass who were adding something or other to the air museum. He'd hated that party almost as much as he was beginning to dislike this one. Still, by all outward appearances, the colonel was the perfect guest. He smiled, nodded and joined the idle chatter, all the while keeping one eye on his wayward date for the evening who had drawn yet another admirer. There was something even less likeable about him, though he couldn't quite figure out why that was so. The intensity of the newcomer bothered him most, that and the fact that he looked vaguely familiar.

Too late, Hauk recognized the second man, as both men drew out guns. Most of the guests were paralyzed by the action, and the overzealous M. P.s were nowhere to be found. Luckily, only a few warning shots had been fired. It seemed that no one wanted to provoke a massacre with so many civilians present.

The terrorists were part of a new Middle East faction that was just looking for attention. They'd definately come to the right place. Every one of the heavy-weights, the head honchos had made a point to attend this supposedly highly secure gathering. And Mac was standing right in the middle of it.

Hauk shoved several people aside to get closer to her, but he hesitated momentarily as he saw the second 'friend' of the captain put a gun to her head as he shouted for everyone to stay back. The trio cautiously backed toward the patio that led out onto a wide lawn. Hauk could hear a helicopter winding up for takeoff. Instinct and experience told him that any hostages the men held would never be released alive.

Not yet to the patio, the Frenchman shouted, reached out and pulled the daughter of one of the U. S. senators out of the crowd.

Hauk didn't hear the exact words, but the two men started to argue. Macarra was eventually tossed aside as they continued on with their new hostage. Neither they, nor anyone else noticed Hauk's steady push forward. At the edge of the crowd, he cooly reached under his jacket for his handgun.

Like a helpless flower in a hailstorm, Mac lay twisted on the cold, wet cement. Hauk felt suddenly weak in the knees, but as he took another look, he realized that, although she had been struck, she was only down to kick off her shoes. Then she was up and running towards the soldiers. He came to his senses and bolted after her for the sole purpose of dragging her back out of danger.

The raging captain halted at the top of the stairs and shouted to the Frenchman who Hauk had finally recognized as Phillip Dureaux. That could only mean that the man with him was David Hine Isaacson. These men were not so fondly thought of as the Frank and Jesse James of the Mideast malcontents. And damned if Mac wasn't threatening one of them with a gun.

"Dureaux," she yelled above the noisy chopper, "let the girl go! If you want a hostage, take me."

But Dureaux, still moving backward, still dragging the crying young girl with him was calling back, "I am most sorry, my sweet, but you are worth nothing! No one would mourn for your loss as they will for this one! Go away, mon cheri. Go back inside with the others."

Isaacson wasn't nearly so polite about his request to her. He fired several rounds from his AR-15. Mac stumbled, dropped to her knees, lifted the pistol and fired. Dureaux collapsed with a well-placed bullet between the eyes.

By the time Hauk reached her, Mac was struggling to stand again. He grabbed her arm, helped her up and shoved her behind him, then turned his full attention to the retreating men. He emptied his gun into their midst. The last bullet caught Isaacson in the leg and he had to have help climbing into the aircraft.

Confrontation over, the colonel turned to his companion. She was breathing hard as she leaned back against the building. She was wet from the now-pouring rain and blood matted her hair, but actually she was more exhausted than hurt.

"Get the kid," she ordered.

If they'd argued on the way to dinner, the argument back to the manor had it all beat.

"I don't give a damn what your motives were! You could've been killed, or didn't that ever occur to you?"

Mac pulled the damp gauze off her temple and glared at him. "I don't know what the hell you're so het up about. You're the one that thanked when you carried that girl into the house. It was your gun that killed the pilot. All I did . . . "

"... was go charging out there like a damn fool! What were you trying to prove?" He shoved the cloth back onto her still-bleeding forehead and held it there as he hollared into her face, "You're not a combat soldier, ya know! Your place is ..."

"Don't you dare start that shit again! I chose my place! If you hadn't conned me into going to that goddammed party in the first place, none of this would have happened! Maybe it's just your male ego that's bothering you."

"My ego has nothing to do with your asinine behavior! You don't have one ounce of common sense when it comes to your own safety. You act like you're indestructible. Well, listen up, sweetheart. If you think I'm going to spend all my time pulling your ass out of the fire, you're wrong!"

"All your time!? I got myself out of that scrape as I recall.
You came along after the fact. I can take care of myself just fine,
thanks! I don't need you or anyone else doing me any favors, you got
that, old man? And from now on," she threatened, " any dealings between
you an' me are strictly business."

Hauk held her gaze for a long time before he finished the argument with, "What made you think they wouldn't be?"

His coldness cut her to the core. The last thing she wanted was to lose him, but she was too stubborn to apologize. It had never occurred to her that his anger was a display of affection, something brought on by the fear of losing her. He only appeared to her to be that man who stood at the podium, pointed his almighty hand and shaped the destiny of all those around him, all because of some tell-tale markings on his uniform. She mumbled something about high-ranking bastards, then stared out the window for the rest of the long drive.

Hauk was thoroughly confused. The first time he put his heart in his hand, she bit it. It took the possibility of losing Mac to slam it home to him that he cared a great deal for her, the bullheaded little bitch. He knew he liked her, but the sudden urge to bash in the skull of any other man that came near her had caught him completely off guard. He hadn't felt so deeply about a woman in a long time and he wasn't quite sure what to do about it. Especially not with her left—handed reaction to him. Relationships in his lifestyle didn't lend much time for a lot of depth or forethought. They'd always been hit and run, bluntly speaking. Come to think of it, he'd spent more time with Macarra in the past couple of days than he had with his wife in the past year. Or was it two?

In his room, Hauk peeled off the stifling uniform and stretched out across the bed. With his hands tucked behind his head, he tried to unwind from the evening's events. Thoughts of his wife and two sons filled his mind. It seemed ironic that it took Mac to jolt his memories of home, yet she had. And in some ways she reminded him of Ann, not so much in looks as in their independent natures. Of course, he hadn't given Annie much choice in the matter. The boys were born eleven months apart, Jerry first, being named after his dad, and Walt second, being named after hers. Both sons had made their entrances into the world while he was off galavanting around the Far East, as she's put it, when in actuality, he'd been in Viet Nam. It seemed like a million years had passed since he'd flown at tree—top level over those jungles. He was just a kid himself way back then. Now, Jerry and Walt were in college, and he was still buzzing trees for a living. Ann did what she'd always

done, run her life as she saw fit. He never had to worry about her. She'd bought the house, the car, put both kids through school all by herself. Sometimes he wondered why she had ever bothered to marry him, or better yet, why they bothered to stay married, except that they loved each other in a nice, easy-going way. It was always the same. She was always the same, ever beautiful, ever efficient, ever loving. It made him sick with guilt while he was there. The only thing he could do was leave again, let her life go back to normal, let his own become the same. Sometimes he longed to go home, but he'd never quite learned how.

Hauk dozed and dreamt of Ann with the doe eyes, deceptively shy smile and long, long legs. He dreamt of warm sun, hot sand and cool sea, of picnics in wide fields that seemed to go on forever, and days when he knew how to laugh. He dreamt of things smothered by war. Until someone touched his shoulder and his heart stoppped.

"I'm sorry to startle you, sir. I knocked several times, but you evidently didn't hear me. This telegram just arrived. The man said it was most urgent," he rattled.

Hauk took the message from the withered hand, thanked the man, then tore open the envelope with his teeth. He spit the paper out and started to read. He vaguely noticed Mac, dressed in a t-shirt and jeans, as she stood just outside the open bedroom door, but he didn't acknowledge her until after he'd read the note. He wadded it into a tight ball and tossed it at her. His blank expression gave no clue to the contents.

Mac caught the thing in flight, uncrumpled it and read it out loud, "'Investigation complete. Sabotage confirmed. Lieutenant condition listed improving'." It was signed in the proper order by all the right people, but she didn't notice. Mac was too busy smashing the paper back into a haphazard lump. Then she tossed it up and batted it across the room.

"I told you it wasn't pilot error!"
"Yes, you did," he agreed quietly.

The sheet had slipped to his waist and Mac took in the sight of powerful arms, wide shoulders and the broad, heavily muscled chest. A black diamond of hair began at the base of his throat, fanned out over the well rounded flesh and began to narrow as it shot down his belly and disappeared beneath the covers. The easy movement as he righted himself a little more into a sitting position snapped her out of the lusty gaze.

She curled her toes in the carpet and locked her hands behind her back as she spoke with her head down, "Colonel, I've . . . I've been kind of, uh, well, not very military lately."

"Obnoxious."

Squelching her temper with visible effort, Mac forced a smile. "That bad, huh?"

But Hauk didn't see any need to answer. He just kept watching, knowing she was trying to say something else. He saw the tension mount as she paced a moment, froze and started to speak. She changed her mind and mumbled, "Forget it," at the floor. She flashed a quick, meaningless smile and nervously backed away, then turned to go.

He thought he could read her mind. "You want to talk about us?"
With a hand on the door frame, she stopped, but didn't face him.
Hauk trusted his instincts enough to continue. "You're trying
to tell me it's over."

She showed him her profile for a split second, then her head snapped straight again as her jaw clenched and unclenched. Her knuckles stood out white as her grip tightened and her whole body vibrated with anger. She wanted to rip the wooden moulding off with her bare hands and beat him over the head with it, she hurt so bad. She'd come to ask him to forgive her. She'd come to him to swallow her pride and beg him

to never let her go. But not any more. She was bound and determined not to give him the satisfaction of seeing how much he'd gotten to her. It took more strength than she realized to nod and answer without hint of emotion. "Right."

Yet, when she turned to close the door, their eyes made brief contact and Hauk was surprised to see that the pale green eyes of the captain had turned flat, hate gray. Mac shut the heavy wooden door all right. The thunder from it fairly echoed through the entire manor.

Hauk decided to have a long talk with his instincts.



It was well after midnight when his stomach forced him awake. He sleepily sifted through his clothes until he found a pair of pajama bottoms, yanked them on and wandered out to pillage and plunder the kitchen. Unfortunately, someone else had had the same idea and had beat him to it.

He walked in and came to a dead halt when he saw the captain at the far end of a long work table. Her feet were on the white, thickly painted surface and she was still dressed as she had been hours before. There were various plates and bowls of food scattered close by, but her attention was on a bottle of Scotch which she had upended and set back on the counter as he entered.

On seeing him, she swallowed wrong, coughed and made a half-assed attempt to hide the container. "Whadda you want?"
"Food."

In a cocky gesture, she rocked the chair back on two legs and took another gulp. She was well beyond pain and the normally firey liquid made no more impression on her than a sip of cool water. Her face, however, glowed from the added warmth.

"Anything interestin' to eat around here?"

She shoved a sloppily carved ham and some cheese at him. Then, Mac picked up a meat cleaver and whacked off a piece of rolled, smoked meat and tossed it to him. The smile on her face was savage.

Hauk looked at the wide blade in her hand and the long salami on

the table. He grinned as he asked. "Social comment?"

She slammed the knife down again and buried part of the blade a full inch into the wood, then fell back into her chair. Still smiling.

Hauk quietly built a sandwich with more mustard and lettuce than meat. He peeled a few cold potatoes and concocted a mass of potato salad to which Mac added the other half of the small bottle of hot mustard. From the look on her face, she thought the move would annoy him, but it didn't. He further ruffled her feathers when he politely handed her a fork for the first bite. She glared, snatched it out of his hand and took a gigantic mouthful of the sticky, lumpy mess. The mustard brought tears to her eyes as she winced to get the overload down.

"Well?"

After a lengthy pause, she licked her lips, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and gasped, "You forgot the onion."

"You wanna talk?" His tone was low and gentle.

The reply was lightning-quick. "No." Then more slowly, "Not particularly." She rubbed her hands sleepily across her face. "There's nothing to discuss - is there?"

He started to answer, but she interrupted.

"I mean, it's be suicide to keep this game goin'. We've got nothin' in common." She picked up an onion and sliced it in half with great accuracy considering she was beginning to have some difficulty in just sitting on the chair. Then she made another pass at the yellowish bulb, popped the rings apart and dropped one and only one onto the salad. While standing on shaky legs, and sailing the rest of the thing into the sink Frisbee style, she told him, "I hate onions."

The colonel pried her mind back to the problem. "Is that why you tried to take the door off its hinges?"

It was like a volcanic eruption as she cried out, "You make me crazy!" With a thud, she sat down again, snorted her disgust and went on. "I can't think straight any more. My . . . my mind goes to mush when I look at you. I trip over my own damn feet. I look like shit. I feel like shit unless . . . " she drifted off, then started up again with, "Do you realize that in the last 48 hours," she counted off on her fingers, "I have lost one friend to sabotage, another might die, and I've shot and killed a third, and to frost it, I've lost a months pay on a celibacy pact Jerry and I had going as a joke, " she covered her eyes and shook her head, "Some joke."

He couldn't stop the smile.

"It's not funny! Mac yelled. But the humor of her priorities was infectious and she had to laugh. Finally, she met his gaze and slowly shook her head as she leaned forward and rested her elbows on the table. With her chin craddled in the heel of her hand, she sighed. "I dunno, Hauk. Lovin' you is as comfortable as crawling around on broken glass."

Only the hum of the refrigerator intruded on the silence that cushioned the space between them. This time as they locked eyes, the truth and depth of their feelings for each other was evident.

"It's wrong, ya know. We'll never hear the end of it," she whispered across a sea of vegetables.

"Nobody'll know unless you tell 'em." he promised.

/ / /

The discreet affair went on uninterrupted for nearly five months. It might have lasted even longer if idle conversation at a poker game in the officer's club hadn't shattered the illusion.

"You gonna call or sit there all night, fly boy?" the soldier grumbled. He was one of the hundreds of specialty teams that had suddenly appeared on base. They had come with a rumor that something big was going down soon, and everybody who was anybody in the combined Special Forces units would be taking part in it. But, like they said, it was only a rumor. Most of the personnel involved had a running joke that the whole thing was just a plot to see which branch of the service could throw the most bull. To hear it, there were more heroes per unit than actual members. Tall tales and colorful names were plentiful.

"Okay, I'll call. And raise ya ten. Now Chief, say that again. How do you guys pick names? I want a real good one." the replacement for John Foss, Jojo Riescho prodded. "I need somethin' with class."

The replacement for Jerry Dineum slapped him on the back. He was what the squad referred to as a Gray-wall, a mid-thirties, old timer. "I got a good name for you, Jojo. How about Garlic Breath? Or better yet, Ol' Rotten Socks. I swear you got the stinkin'est feet this side 'a the Atlantic!"

"Funny man!" Riescho laughed as he burned his knuckles against the bristles of his friend's pincushion-short hair. "Charlie 'Graywall' Bo, that's who you are!"

But, the slightly built sergeant named Taylor fidgeted impatiently with his cards. "Are you gonna play that hand or not?"

"What's the matter, Sarge? Gettin' nervous?" Macarra asked without looking up.

Jojo dropped his voice an octave, "We don't allow no non-coms in here, boy. You better behave yerself or we'll sic a tall M. P. on ya! Besides," he finished soberly, "It's not my turn. It's Mac's."

"Sorry. My mind was elsewhere. I call. Let's see what you're so excited about, Chief."

The stern-faced Lakota tribesman laid out his hand with a grand gesture and just a hint of a smirk. His chest barrelled out further than usual and his straight, blue-black hair fanned out across his wide shoulders as he glanced sharply at the others around the table.

"Three ladies."

"Aw, balls," Gray-wall pouted and threw his cards down. "That leaves me out," Jojo yawned.

Sarge glared and tossed his hand aside, then turned his attention to the little lady on his left. "Well? You gonna get scalped too?"

For the first time the entire hand, Mac looked up. She stretched, yawned and gazed innocently across the table at Chief's magnificent form. Then, a slow, satisfied grin began to spread across her face.

The unflappable male frowned, then laughed. "Okay, Zee-t-kahla, let's have the bad news."

"Wha'd he call her?"

"Shhhh," Taylor hissed at Jojo.

Charlie interjected, "It means Little Sparrow, or chicken, I guess. Some kinda bird. Whatcha got, Sweetcheeks?"

Mac shot him a glance and burst out laughing. "WellIlll, I got two pair. I got one pair 'a aces . . "

Everyone else chimed in together, " . . and she got another pair of aces."

The wild-eyed lady scooped up the money in the pot and dumped it into her pockets as she giggled deeply, "It's mine, all mine, I tell you!"

With a pitiful whine, Jojo put his head on the table and pretended to cry. "Lordy, lordy, I'm broke again. Won't some kind soul take mercy on this poor, pitiful body and feed me, hug me," he smiled and winked at her. "take me home?"

"Not for all the money on base, honey. An' I got it," she told him.

He put both elbows on the table and rested his chin on the heels of his hands. "Little Sparrow, huh? Okay, I wanna be a bird, too. How about a hawk?"

"It's already taken. The old man has that one."

"The colonel?" Charlie yawned, then quickly slapped his hand over Jojo's mouth before he could continue the yawning contest.

"We call him Pi-shko. Nighthawk."

Taylor stood up and massaged a knot out of his shoulder. "You're all nothin' but a bunch of mechanical birds. I'll see you later."

None of the others acknowledged him as he left.

"Speaking of the old man," Jojo began, as he shoved Charlie's hand aside, "He sure was in a good mood today. He finally got a letter from his wife. I feel kinda sorry for the guy, ya know? Both his boys all grown . . . "

Only Chief saw the shock in her eyes and the stunned way in which she stood, picked up her jacket and headed for the door. He followed, although he said nothing until they were well away from the club and alone in the underground tunnels headed back for their quarters.

"How long have you been screwin' him?"

Mac swung, but he caught her arm.

"I thought we had a pact? You broke it, didn't you? We agreed, all four of us. Nobody would step inside our circle until we got home safe."

"It's a little late for that, isn't it, Mike? Johnny's dead. Jerry might as well be, with only one arm and no hearing. He can't fly anymore. That'll kill him for sure, too. I needed somebody. I had nowhere else to turn. Nobody else I wanted to turn to, Mike. Do you understand me? I wanted him."

"He's old enough to be your father. Hell, for all you know, he could be."

She walked away slowly with Mike still following on her heels. "How can you trust him? You can't go back to him, Mac. Mac, answer me. What're you gonna do?"

Tears welled in her eyes as her emotions ran from rage to agony. Finally, she shrugged. "I don't know. I just don't know."

## / / /

Hauk had rented a special place in town for several months. They had met every chance they could. Now, he stood outside the door and fumbled for his key. Once found, it didn't want to work. He was mumbling under his breath, when it finally decided to cooperate on the fifth try. He went inside and gave himself a moment for his eyes to adjust to the semi-darkness before proceeding. The only source of light was coming from the bedroom off to his left. Hauk shoved the key back into his pocket and moved on.

Her back was to him as he filled the doorway with his bulk. She was yanking open and slamming shut drawer after drawer in a tall dresser, and tossing the contents in the general direction of an open suitcase on the bed. A silk robe he'd given her lay in shreds at her feet and instead she wore a dusky maroon kimono she'd bought for herself. It stuck damply to her lithe form as closely as her wet hair did to her head. The room was steamy from her recent shower, the fog being most heavy towards the bathroom door to her immediate left. The stronger light from there painted a sharp-edged block of white onto the dark carpet.

As usual when upset, Mac had a bottle close by. She seemed to take great pleasure in feeding her furnace of anger with 86 proof 'gas-oline'.

Whether she sensed his presence or he'd made a sound, he didn't know, but she called out over her shoulder, "Get outta here, Hauk."
"I came for an explanation."

"What's the matter, you forget how to read?"

"'It's over. Go to hell.' What kind of a note is that? Would you mind making it a little clearer to me just what you're so pissed about? Just a simple reason or two would be nice, he hissed as he tore the bottle away from her and threwit aside. It shattered and stained the powder blue wall with a smear as dark as his mood.

Mac came around slowly. "I'll give you three good reasons. How about a wife and two kids you seem to have forgotten to mention to me." There was another of the gifts he'd given to her in her hand. It was a nickel-plated, pearl-handled .38 special. She waved it towards the exit. "Get away from me!"

The occasion had never arisen for him to warn her, but he had a thing about looking down the barrel of a gun. It made him mad, so mad that some tended to call it crazy. Like a cat, his muscles began to draw in, coil for attack. And his light brown eyes began to darken. The pit of his stomach began to burn with acid. He wanted to warn her, while he was still lucid enough to talk.

"Use that thing now or put it away."

Her subdued, husky tone held just as much deadly control as his. "Don't try to threaten me, Hauk. That tough-guy act may work with the others, but not with me. You and I are too much alike."

Very slowly, he began to straighten until his spine was ram-rod stiff. His head was high at such an angle that he had to stare down the end of his hawk nose to watch her. To Mac, it appeared as if he had suddenly grown several feet higher and wider in stature. It was intimidating, and she felt as though he had become a great stone wall that was about to fall on her if she didn't make a move. And fast.

She tried to break his concentration as she nervously stepped back and bumped into the dresser. "I'll bet you got a lot of laughs out of all this, didn't you? Just a way of marking time. Relieve a little tension now and then for you, did I?" Then her expression echoed his own. "You used me. Hauk. I trusted you and you used me."

The words penetrated the barrier and he caught a glimpse of the hurt that fueled her reasoning. Mac hadn't given him too much of a hint on how deeply her feeling for him ran. While alone, she was tender, warm-hearted, yet unpredictably passionate. He was never quite sure whether sex with her would be slow and sweet, a hasty attack or hours of delightful torment as he put up with her lust for teasing. But on base, near anyone else, she became just one of the guys. There was not so much as a suggestion of familiarity on her part. Sometimes it bothered him to watch the way she could change personalities in the moment it took to close a door.

When he came back to the present, she was still waving the weapon under his nose. He finally took time to inquire, "Is that what you think I was doing? Just using you?"

"What else was it, then? Hmmmm? You lied to me. You know me well enough, Hauk. I don't play second fiddle to anybody. You're married. That makes you nothin' but slow poison in my book. Get away from me."

He was silent. And he didn't move a muscle.
"Damn you! Say something!" She cradled the pistol in both hands

and pointed it squarely at his chest. Every time she thought she'd reached the limit of her anger, he seemed to push it a little harder. The pistol was only to scare him, but she was rapidly changing her mind about not using it.

"Deny it, you bastard! Deny it, defend it, I don't care any more, do you hear me? I hate the sight of you!"

He reached out.

Mac pulled the trigger. The silencer puffed once, then once more. Mesmerized, she watched him fall. The impact spun him and caused him to land face down. He landed hard, arms thrown wide to stop his fall. He tried to rise, failed and tried again.

The weapon seemed to drift to the floor as it slipped from her hands. She never felt it go. She was too terrified to think of anything except that she might have killed him. Then he moaned. The sound prompted her into action and she made a desperate grab for the suitcase. She squeezed it shut and started to run in terror for the door. A plan was rapidly forming in her mind, an insane plan about going back to the base and stealing a plane, then flying off to some warm and gentle place that had never heard of war. There was no such place left, of course. And, she didn't make it to the door.

His prone body lay between her and freedom. Clutching the case against her breast, Mac crept closer, then cautiously stepped over him, right leg first. As her left foot touched the floor, something happened and she stumbled. The fully stuffed, soft-sided bag flew out of her hands and dumped its contents in a long trail as it fell. At first she thought she'd tripped over Hauk, but as she twisted back she saw and felt the cause.

He was balanced on his knees, bent forward. One hand was closing on her ankle and the other grabbing for a better hold. He was dragging her closer towards him. In the faint light, his bloody appendages looked like monstrously deformed claws. They left dark drops and streaks whereever they touched.

Mac couldn't bring herself to look any further than those hands. She rolled onto her stomach and latched onto the doorframe. It stopped the backward momentum long enough for her to free one leg, draw it up and kick. Her foot connected hard, though she had no idea where she'd struck. It didn't matter. He'd let go. But, only for a moment.

She stood and ran. As she reached out for the doorknob, she also glanced over her shoulder. He was there and caught her by the shoulder and the back of the neck before she could stop him. She turned and ducked at the same time to get away, but his fingers tangled into her hair and her head was jerked painfully backward. He spun her around and slammed her against the nearest wall.

"I didn't mean to hurt you," she blurted. Her eyes were squeezed shut as she waited for his next move.

With his fingers securely fastened around her throat, he paused, caught his breath and glanced at his chest. His shirt was gaping where the second bullet had burned past and deflected off a rib. The first bullet hadn't been so kind, although the impact, as it drilled through his upper arm, had probably saved his life. If he'd met the second shot straight on, it would have found his heart.

Hauk gingerly laid a hand over the rib to probe the damage as he asked, "Is that it? You didn't mean to hurt me? Or are you sorry you missed?"

Her eyes were still closed.

"Look at me!" he shouted. His breath was hot against her face.
"Look! What's the matter? It's not like you've never shot anybody be-

fore. You do this all the time, 'course you don't get to see it so close, do you? Well, "he yelled again, "take a good look!" He held his blood-stained hand inches from her eyes. "That's the real stuff, babe. Mine! And you put it there!"

"You lied to me." Her voice was calm, but she was shivering and

he could feel it. She wouldn't, didn't dare look at him.

"How do you figure that? Because I didn't talk about a family I haven't seen in two years? Or maybe because I didn't promise forever. Didn't I give you enough of what you wanted? That is all you ever wanted me, isn't it, Mac?" His bloody hand slid from her neck down inside her robe.

It made her skin crawl. She inhaled sharply as her eyes finally opened wide. "Don't!" It was exactly the wrong thing to say.

"Why not?" Hauk untied the belt and pushed the cloth aside. His

hands were rough, deliberately so as he pawed at her soft skin.

The smell of the sanguine fluid was strong enough to make her sick. She had to get away from him for that reason and for another she hated to admit. She couldn't recall ever having been as afraid of anyone as much as she was of Hauk. The fear was paralyzing. It took all her willpower to fight again. She hit him and ran in the only direction left open. It was a dead-end.

As she reached the bedroom door, she scooped up the pistol, turned to warn him away, but was knocked off her feet by a tackle as his shoulder caught her in the stomach. She lost her grip on the gun. It slid across the floor, coming to rest well out of reach of either of them, under the bed.

Mac found herself pinned under the heavily muscled madman of her worst nightmares. He wasn't about to let her go and she wasn't about to quit fighting.

In the end, she called it rape.

Hauk called it settling a difference of opinion.

## / / /

Captain Kern put in for a transfer, but since the paperwork had to cross Hauk's desk, it was pointless to ask. The icy relationship they'd had in the beginning became the norm, although the colonel did enjoy showing up in some of her favorite haunts to try and jog some old memories. He only succeeded in driving her into the arms of a man he would not meet until many years later.

As for the explanation of his wounds, the official file stated that while cleaning a .38 caliber, personal weapon, the gun slipped from his hands and misfired. The doctor didn't buy it, but he couldn't drag any other story out of him.

The man Hauk frightened the captain into running to, happened to be playing poker with the regulars in the officer's club one night. Mac, over a period of weeks had taken to getting drunk as her number one favorite pasttime. On the particular night in question, she had curled up in a dark corner of the underground watering hole and was beginning to get numb around the edges when she noticed a commotion near the entrance. Right under a sign that declared 'Officers Only', stood Sergeant Taylor.

He still held his full gear in his hands which meant he'd been outside in the nerve-gas permeated air. The poker night was a big event in his life, or at least it was from the way he went on about it. Unfortunately, some smart-ass, greenhorn lieutenant didn't want 'his kind' in their club. Mac saw no one else going to the man's defense, so she decided it was her duty to help him. She shoved her way through the crowded, smoky room.

"Got a problem. Lieutenant?"

The man came around sharply. "Yes, 'um. This here non-commissioned, I mean, this, ah, sergeant was trying to elbow his way in here, ma'am."

Mac gazed at Taylor, squinted up at the sign, then looked at him again. "'zat true? You tryin' ta elbow," she snuggled up against him, "your way into this exclusive hot spot, little man?" She rested her forearm on his shoulder, rested her chin on it near his cheek and whispered, "Well?"

Taylor, a full inch taller and thirty pounds heavier than the woman at his side, bowed his head and nodded shamefully. "Yes, 'um, I surely was."

Mac patted Taylor on the chest and sighed, "Oh, you poor thing. Tell ya what I'm genna do. I'm genna make you an honorary officer." She started to tug off some of the brass on her collar.

Both Taylor and the lieutenant stopped her with the warning that it would only get her into serious trouble. She had to agree with their logic in the matter, so she thought for a moment more, climbed onto the bar before anyone could stop her and ripped the sign off its chain. She ordered the lieutenant to take it into the men's room and put it to good use. As she started to leap off the bar, the drinks she'd had earlier decided to hit all at once. She quietly asked for a chair before she fell. Instead, a pair of strong hands urged her forward. Mac slipped into a set of powerful, unfamilar arms and stared wistfully into pale blue eyes. She'd wrapped herself around him to ensure her safety, but when the stranger tried to put her down, she wouldn't let go. It took Taylor's comment to bring her back from her daydreaming.

"Looks like you made a friend, Snake."

As soon as both feet hit the floor, the beautiful, drunk officer blushed like she hadn't blushed in a long, long time. She nervously tugged at her uniform and backed up, right into Taylor.

"Whoa," he said softly as he caught her, before she could lose her balance. "It's okay, hon, he takes all the ladies that way," he laughed.

Blue eyes extended a hand, "Lieutenant Plissken."

Mac looked at the wide, all-American boy, handsome face, the too-long-for-regular-service blond hair and the heavy athletic build. By the time she met his eyes again, her hand had been locked in his for a very long moment. She was smiling a smile she would never use had she been sober. It said quite simply that she was impressed and had thoroughly enjoyed the view.

His reaction to her scrutiny was to laugh softly, glance away with a hint of nervousness, then glance back. "Can I buy you a drink, . . . " he hesitated.

She took the hint. "Kern . . . uh, Captain. I mean, Mac. Macarra." His disarming grin widened, "Okay, Carrie, what would you like?" Taylor cleared his throat. "Uh, in case anyone wants to know, I'll

Taylor cleared his throat. "Uh, in case anyone wants to know, I'll be back there playing poker." Nobody answered, so the little man walked away.

"I don't go by that name," she told the Snake.

"You don't look much like a 'Mac' to me. I suppose I could call you 'Sparrow'."

Her enraptured gaze slid from his mouth to his narrow eyes. "I've been set up."

The Snake shrugged. "Yeah, well, Sarge talks about you a lot. Mostly how you take every dime he puts on the table," he laughed again as he gently steered her back to her corner.

As she slid into the booth, Mac told him, "He's got a lousy poker face. Can't hide a thing."

Plissken sat down beside her, brushed her leg with his own and pretended not to notice when she jumped at the touch.

"Taylor's a little too honest for cards. He says that you and that Indian friend of yours have some kind of a secret code worked out. If you don't take him to the cleaners, Chief does." He nodded at the bottle still sitting where she'd left it.

"Go ahead," she waved. "What else does ol' Shorty have to say about me?"

He took a long swallow of the Scotch, shrugged and off-handedly mentioned a few more things. "Nothin' much. He says you've got a bad temper, a foul mouth an' you drink too much."

"Oh really?" Her jaw was clenched.

"Yeah," he sighed slowly as he watched her take an angry gulp straight out of the bottle. "He also thinks you've got hot legs and a tight ass."

She swallowed wrong.

"I'm a tit man, m'self."

Mac began coughing violently and laughing at the same time. When she finally caught her breath, Mac whispered hoarsely, "Jesus! You're a live one, aren'tcha?"

"I'm honest. You wanna get outta here?"

After a moment of consideration, she started to say no, but about then the crowd parted and she found herself staring directly at Hauk. She remained frozen with apprehension as his face and form burned into her memory. His head was titled downward, but his eyes stared unblinking into hers. And, as she remembered, he leered and rubbed his fingertips over his damp, partially-open mouth, then across the tip of his tongue and across his lower lip again. She remembered that hot mouth touching, teasing, driving her crazy as she tried to fight him off. And his hands, rough, wide hands that had held her down as his body moved like a gold-brown sea in waves against her. His eyes, those goddammed eyes, smiled on the edge of laughter when her body had begun to ignore her mind and responded to a deeper need. He was pulling her down, sucking her into that hellish night all over again.



"Are you in some kind of trouble? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I gotta get outta here," she told him. "Please. It was nice meeting you," Mac mumbled as she pushed him out of the booth. But as she stood up, so did Hauk. He made a subtle 'after-you' gesture, then waited.

Macarra turned to Plissken again and tried to smile. "Can I ask you for a favor?" She gazed deeply into his eyes. "Will you walk me home?"

### 1 1 1

Snake Plissken was the opposite of what she allowed herself to recalled of Hauk, yet as the battles wore on, he began to lose the cocky boyishness that had attracted her to him in the first place. With each assignment, each day apart, he changed, hardened and grew slowly colder, more demanding. They had talked endlessly in the beginning, but that too ended and although his passion for her remained, it too changed into something dark and sometimes foreboding.

Perhaps it was the constantly increasing stress as their respective units prepared for the heaviest assault yet on the enemy, that drove the stake between them. It was only a small argument, but it had roots in her fear of Hauk and the duplicate warrior Plissken had become. The fight was verbal, bitter and brief. He figured he'd let her cool off for a few days before he'd bend a little and saunter back into her dreary-without-him life. He'd teach her a lesson or two. Unfortunately, the few days spanned over a battle later called the Leningrad Ruse.

He never had the chance to go back and teach her a lesson, for he spent an entire month after the skirmish in the hospital. Out of fifty men he'd led on the mission, only he and Taylor had made it back. It cost Taylor a knee and he would limp for the rest of his life. But it had cost Snake Plissken much more. He lost forty-eight friends, his left eye, and his soul.

While in the hospital, Taylor had given him the news that the glorious raid had been nothing more than a distraction to add authenticity to a joke of a plan to feed the enemy false information. Taylor had also lost his soul there, but their survival had bonded the two men as fast friends until Taylor's sudden death years later.

The little man also had one other duty to his friend that he felt he had to perform. It was Sergeant Taylor who told him that Mac was dead.

In that hell they called a morning sky over Leningrad, Mac Kern flew with the rest of 'Texas Thunder' into battle. In performance of her duty, she and the other L. A. R. S. pilots ran interference for the heavier fire power, namely, the slant-winged craft of Hauk and his squad. It seemed ironic even to Hauk that her plane was hit by a barrage meant for him.

As written before, Hauk took an early retirement immediately after the fiasco. He forgot to pack his medals. He forgot to take anything and everything that could possibly remind him of Helsinki. He left it all behind. Except for a nickel-plated, pearl-handled .38 special that used to belong to a friend.

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#### NOBODY SAID IT WAS GOING TO BE EASY -

I see you walking down the street like so many times before. I want to reach out and touch you let you know I'm there, but I cannot because I'm not; not really.

At Grona Lund they've got a screen that's a quarter bubble wide.

If they had that here now,

I'd be standing right on the street with you, but still I could not touch you.

I trade in dreams because of you by night and otherwhen.
The only method I know how to blend the levels of existence and dissolve that see-through wall.

My soul is rising from this chair, drawn to share your sorrows. You almost smile, assist me in to follow you, to the door of death leaving but an empty seat with my popcorn-munching friends - well, it was only a thought.

Your every word and every breath
I know, and dare not blink for fear
of missing the smallest gesture
that I've seen ten times before.
"'Little human compassion" - I know, that's where my heart breaks.
The first time.

I hope that I'm not hurting you by watching you time and over being put through taxing escapades you must long to see an end to.

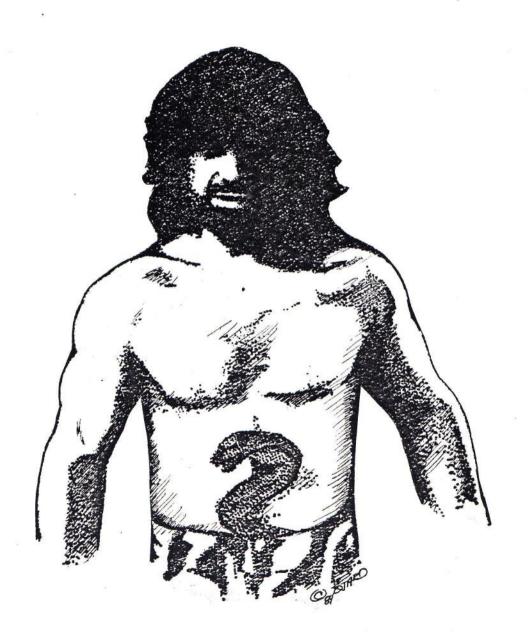
You're wounded now, they strike you down - to my right somebody laughs.
There'll always be people you know, some of these and some of those.

Seeing you lying still and stripped I'm lost now, and I wonder - after you've been in the picture 90% of the time - why they don't show more of you.

You won the battle, spectators roar - I'd like to roar with them; to call your name till my throat dries up to shout for what I want.

They freeze you as you walk away - would that they froze me too.
But lights come on, and life goes on as best it can, till next time.
Someone drops a popcorn cone, turns to me and asks, "What did you think of the film?"

Eva Albertsson August 1982





Snake Plissken knew he was in dire need of sleep, but he didn't want to go to his quarters just yet. Instead, he slipped past the guards near the hangars on the Helsinki air base and made his way to the entrance of the underground housing of an Air Force unit. Plissken, of course, was Army, a lieutenant in a Special Forces unit. And he was, for all intents and purpose, breaching security enough to get himself shot if he was caught. But, he'd done it before and would probably do it again. He enjoyed the game too much to quit.

Just outside the cement bunker he stopped and listened for a moment. The sound he waited for came almost immediately and he made himself part of the wall and shadows despite the bulk of his winter gear. He held his breath until the time was right, then the Snake made his move. In one swift, smooth motion, he stepped into the light and spoke one word.

"Michaels." he hissed softly.

The reaction was immediate as two military policemen came to rifleready stance as they spun towards his voice. It was clearly written on both their faces that he'd startled them. Snake came close to laughing.

"Dammit, Plissken! You outta know better than to go sneakin' around here like that! I could blown your ass into next Tuesday! Jeez, Snake, you're gonna give me a stroke one of these days, ya know?" the taller of the team grumbled. But he finally sighed, shook his helmeted head and smiled as he shoved his rifle back over his shoulder. It was then that he noticed his young partner was still frozen in the alert position.

Michaels knocked the rifle barrel toward the ground, "Aw shit, Bayers. put that thing away. The Snake's no threat even if he isn't supposed to be at this end of the base at two o'clock in the morning without a damn good reason. You do have a damn good reason, don'tcha, Snake?"

Lieutenant Snake Plissken smiled broadly, reached under his parka and drew out a full bottle of Vodka, then set it on the ground and backed away.

Bayers sputtered to life, "He's tryin' to bribe us, Sarge!" "Nah." Sergeant 'Red' Michaels assured him "It can't be. I just found this thing sittin' here all by its lonesome." He scooped up the fifth for closer inspection. "See? Some poor soul just lost it, is all." Michaels laughed, then he directed his speech to Plissken.

"Mac's been looking for you, ya know. Been away quite awhile, haven't ya?"

"Yeah," he nodded as he pushed back the hood of his snow-white parka and lit a cigarette. "Yeah . . . " Snake said again, " . . . quite awhile. How do you know she was looking for me?"

"Now who else would Mac be lookin' for?" Michaels smiled slyly, then continued more seriously, "She put the word out in case you showed up while she wasn't here. The kid's unit's been on alert status since that satellite was shot down a couple weeks ago. Brass has been running those jet-jockies ragged on recon missions, but I think they got the 'stand-down' order last night. But then, I also heard she has to be on the flight line at five this morning. I'll tell ya. Snake. she looks damn near as lousy as you do."
"Thanks." Plissken frowned as he ground the smoke out with the toe

of his boot. "Later."

"Hey . . . " the guard called after him, " . . . you'd better consider gettin' a haircut and shave before one of the officers sees you like that. We don't allow no long-haired malcontents on this base, mister." He winked.

Snake threw a smile and a one-finger salute over his shoulder just before the shadows swallowed him up again.

Bayers looked at his sergeant for a long moment before asking.

"You kinda like him. don'tcha?"

Michaels stuffed the unopened fifth of alcohol into his black parka and shook his head, "Nah. He's a real pain in the butt, but the man knows his liquor. Come on, kid. We still got four hours to pound out before breakfast."

\* \* \* \*

Three minutes after leaving the air police, the shaggy-haired, bearded, blue-eyed warrior picked the lock to his lady's room with no more sound than a cat creeping across a carpet. There were no lights on, but the darkness didn't hamper him in the least. He knew his way around her room only too well. As he stood near the door, he debated whether or not to crawl into bed with her and sleep for a week or two, but the bottle of Scotch he was carrying under his coat was urging him more towards the table and single chair to his left. It wasn't that he liked to drink alone, it was just that he wanted to enjoy the silence and sanctuary of this place for awhile before waking her up. He wanted to forget the past three weeks as much as possible before remembering how good it felt to hold her in his arms.

Snake sat down with an exhausted thud, uncorked the bottle and took a mouthful of the amber liquid. He held it for a moment, then swale lowed hard. The Scotch burned all the way down his throat, but he found the discomfort mild by comparison to what he'd been feeling lately.

Slightly over a quarter of the bottle later, Snake Plissken was not only well on his way to drunk, but vaguely aware that he felt lousy for some reason other than just exhaustion and booze. He chose to ignore the ever-growing aches and pains, and instead, just slouched lower in the stiff-backed, wooden chair and lit another cigarette as his thoughts turned more and more to his sleeping companion. Unwittingly, he set the bottle in his right hand down with a loud clunk.

Other than being just plain tired, the woman, Air Force Captain Macarra Kern by name, had slept through the break-in because she had buried herself under several pounds of blankets, none of which were tucked in, but rather piled in a lumpy heap over her. It made it almost impossible to tell where she began and the covers ended. At Plissken's accidental noise, however, she sat bolt upright, pistol in hand and grabbed for the lamp.

As light flooded the room, Snake realized he was too tired to play any romantic games. "Go back to sleep, Mac." he ordered quietly.

For a time, she didn't move, but eventually her eyes closed and she collapsed face first into the mound of white and khaki coverings.

Plissken too, shut his eyes and let his mind drift. He wanted so much to relax, to forget the awful battles; the hideous sights of dying men, the explosions so loud and near that just their sounds caused pain. The smells of sulfur, napalm were the worst memories and the hardest to forget. The more he tried, the more he drank. The more he drank, the worse memories became until he found himself back on that snowy battle-field. His chest felt tight and his heart was in his throat as he watched his men falling all around him. The white ground was turning red in smears, stripes and puddles around their bodies. The frozen field was beginning to burn. Hell couldn't have been any worse than that mission to Siberia. It couldn't have devised better nightmare material, but this was no nightmare, it was memory. It had really happened.

He saw the new kid, the know-it-all with the puppy dog face, standing in front of him. The idiot was half-naked. Fifteen degrees below zero and the dumb bastard was standing there bare-ass naked on the whole left side of his body; while the right side was . . . was gone, blasted away by enemy fire. As hideous as it had appeared, Snake had

been unable to stop staring.

The kid reached his one remaining hand, not for help, but to lure Snake to his death. No matter which direction the Snake turned, the kid was there, waiting for him.

Macarra came awake enough to realize she wasn't alone. With great effort, she climbed over the blankets and stood beside the bed, trying in vain to work a knot out of her lower back. She muttered to herself, then swore a couple of times as she strained to get her two uncooperative arms into two uncooperative armholes of her robe. Finally, having warded off the chill of the room, the woman crouched beside her friend.

"When'd you get in? she asked in a husky voice.

With a start, Plissken inhaled sharply and straightened up in the chair. Sweat was soaking through his clothes and without thinking twice about it, he tipped up the bottle and began swallowing the alcohol as though it were water.

Mac watched him for a moment, then shoved her shoulder length brown tangles out of her face in a gesture of worry and frustration. A frown knit her brow as she studied his ashen color and feverish gaze. She felt helpless. He wasn't the easiest man to try to babysit. The very fact that he'd come to her stated quite plainly that he didn't choose to be anywhere else. Mac knew only too well that any attempt to get him out of her room would be futile. Bringing help in would get them both hung for ignoring regulations and security.

"Lieutenant, what am I going to do with you?" Mac sighed as she rested a hand on his knee.

A slightly tilted, 102° reality let him focus on her face and form long enough to take in the startling silvery sage green of her eyes, the darkness of her hair and lashes, the fullness of her soft, inviting mouth and the paleness of her skin. But more than that, he became keenly aware of how little she had on under that robe.

"Look, hero . . . " she said, scarcely above a whisper, " . . . will you at least let me get you into bed?"

At that moment, nothing would have pleased him more. He made an all out effort to help her as she pulled him to his not-so-steady feet. He recalled making one step before he blanked out, and came back to find himself shoeless, shirtless and about to lose his pants as he reclined, propped on his elbows on the bed.

Mac had undressed him before, but usually he cooperated. This time he had jumped from helpless, to stubborn, to lecherous. She was trying her best to ignore his drunken rumblings and suggestions. She was positive that in his condition he had to be dreaming of past conquests; long, hot nights past when they'd spent hours more or less in competition to see which one of them could exhaust the other first. In spite of herself, Mac smiled at some of his crude references.

Snake ran an icy hand up under her robe and was rewarded with a sharp blow to the shoulder.

"Quit!" was all she said.

He tried again and this time when she swung at him he caught her off-balance and yanked her against him as he stretched out across the mattress. He saw her fist pull back then slam into his ribs where only a faint discoloration gave a clue to the internal damage that had already been done. It hurt him. The hurt turned into anger. The anger mixed with the fever and Scotch, and he remembered nothing of his actions that followed.

A split second after hitting him, Mac regretted the move. She found herself pinned under him. There was no way that she wouldn't fight him, for she'd found herself in this kind of predicament once before; but like that other time, the more she fought, the more determined he became

to hold her down.

Being bullheaded and a poor loser, it took Mac several minutes before resigning herself to the fact that she couldn't win any contest of strength with a madman, especially not a highly-skilled, hand-tohand specialist. Had she given up the fight sooner, she might not have become the enemy. Her determination not to be pinned down turned the game into a bitter assault.

Snake was rough, uncaring, unconcerned and unaware of whom he was venting his anger on, but the skirmish was over for him almost as quickly as it had begun. He lay quietly for a moment as the sweat rolled off his body in rivers. Then, the chills hit and his breathing changed to ragged gasps.

Macarra, more stunned than hurt had crawled to a far corner of the bed where she sat and watched him as she debated what to do. She knew of his hallucinations. She knew what they were and why they haunted him, but for some reason, Mac had never found the time to tell him that she'd been there too, not on the battlefield as he had been, but above it. The satellite that usually kept close tabs on missions such as his had been destroyed by lasers, so the reconnaissance teams were sent out to find, photograph and give aid in the form of air cover if necessary. until the rescue helicopters could arrive. Mac had flown one of the two jump jets that had stayed around, that had taken turns actually hovering like guardian angels over the ground troops. Mac had had to report what she saw as a back up to the pictures that were instantaneously transmitted to base - body count, approximate number of wounded, how many still fighting and where they were all located.

That flight was one of the toughest she'd ever had to make, because she knew most of the men involved. She had spotted Plissken right away from his gestures and movements and with all her heart had wanted to land and carry him away to safety. She'd gone a little crazy at first, unloading sixty per cent of her missiles at anything that moved outside the secured area. The tundra for half a mile in all directions looked like a moonscape when she'd finished. She'd been ashamed of herself for losing control, but Plissken meant more to her than even she cared to admit.

The lieutenant was curling into a tight knot when she persuaded him to lay his head on her shoulder. It felt good to hold him and she relished every moment of it, for had he been awake, Snake would never allowed such mothering. Mac, under any other circumstances wouldn't have given in to such luxury, but something about the current situation called for drastic measures. Snake would never recall any of it, she knew, so she allowed herself one other rare moment of self-indulgence. For the first time in months, Captain Macarra Kern cried.

\* \* \* \*

Lieutenant S. D. Plissken was reported missing shortly after his return from the Siberian mission. He was known to have sustained some injury or unjuries, but the extent of the wound(s) remained unknown for approximately seven hours. He was eventually found wandering in a restricted area. Said lieutenant was suffering from a mild concussion. high fever and internal bleeding. He was taken immediately to the base hospital, treated and released back to his unit fifteen days later.

Because of the circumstances that led to his breaching a security area, it was suggested by the reporting officer, Colonel R. A. Hauk, that charges not be filed, but rather that the restricted areas of seven through nineteen be re-evaluated and additional precautions taken.

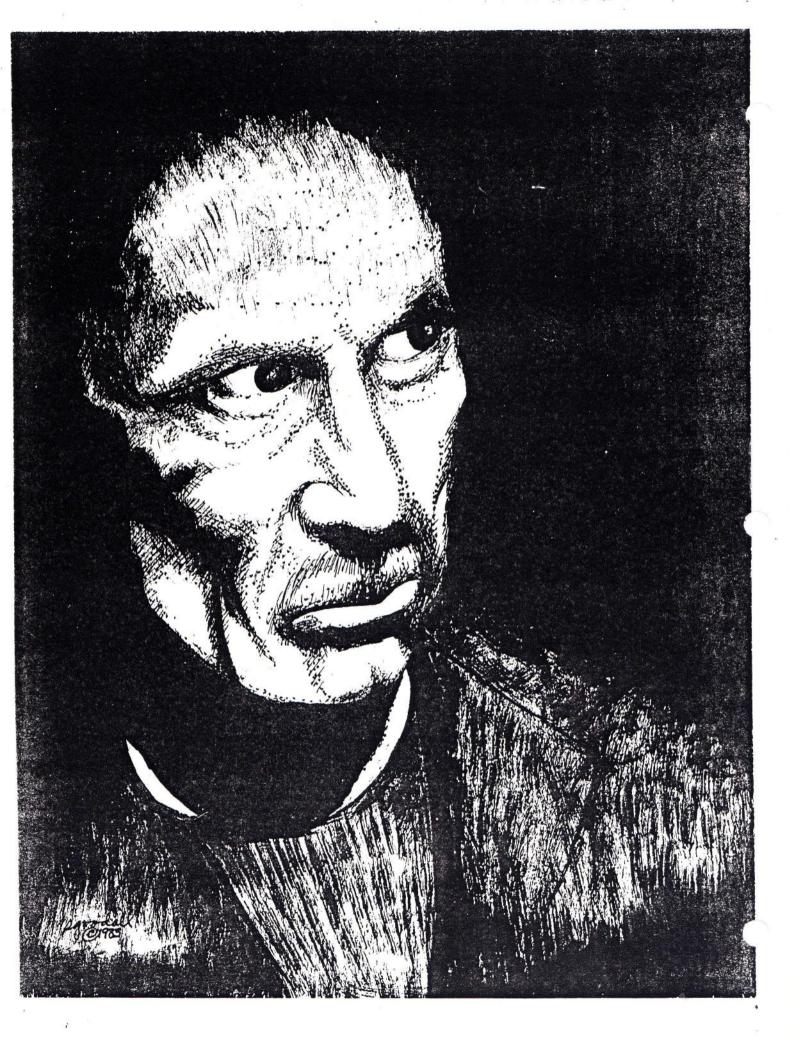
For his meritorious conduct on the field of battle, the man his friends called 'Snake' was awarded the Purple Heart and the Distinguished Service Cross after it was learned that he had been responsible for saving the lives of nine members of his unit, 'Black Light'.

That, however, is another story.

by Linda Ojard

\* \* \* \*









# Running Out Of Time

By

#### Sandy Goodall

"Maggie!" Plissken's voice was rasping from exhaustion. The sound of the oncoming car was growing louder with each passing second. The woman he called stood frozen with shock. Harold 'Brain' Hellman lay where the explosion had thrown him . . . arms and legs akimbo. He was very dead.

"Maggie," Snake called for the last time, "Come on. We've got to keep moving."

Plissken's world centered on pain, from the arrow wound in his right thigh, his bad eye, and just about anywhere else on his body. The hard push to bring the President out of the New York Maximum Security Prison was catching up with him fast. The artificial stimulation from the amphetimines only lasted so long. Snake knew that if he didn't have the cassette tape and the President over the 69th Street Bridge within seventeen minutes, his troubles would be over forever. The microscopic pellets injected into his neck arteries would explode and he would be just as dead as Harold Hellman.

A voice in Maggie's head screamed at her to go with Plissken, but her body refused to respond. She had been with Brain longer than any other man and he had seemed to care for her — in his own way.

Snake limped forwards and struck her sharply across the face. "Look, lady," he snarled, "I don't give a damn if you live or die, but don't throw yourself away over Brain - he's dead, Maggie. Dead."

He turned towards the end of the bridge with as much speed as his leg would permit.

Rubbing her stinging cheek, Maggie had been snapped back into reality. She looked at Brain one last time and ran after the receeding figure of Snake Plissken.

The lights of the Duke's automobile were visible on the end of the bridge. He was coming in at full speed, regardless of the hidden mines along the concourse of the bridge.

Plissken heard the sounds of Maggie following him and allowed a fleeting smile to cross his face. She was a smart woman - a survivor like himself. He caught up with the President, whose captivity and torture had proved him to be a survivor also. His strength, however, was rapidly coming to an end. Plissken grabbed the President's shoulder and helped him over to the debris piled against the towering wall that stood between them and freedom. Maggie caught up with them and lent her support to the older man's sagging figure. "Hurry, Mr. President," Maggie gasped, "It's not much further."

Plissken saw a black strap being lowered from the top of the fifty foot wall. The security team had cut the coils of barbed wire that lined the walkway to expedite their escape. Snake reached for the strap and quickly slipped it around the President's shoulders. He gave the line a sharp tug and the man was slowly raised by a winch from the other side of the wall.

The Duke of New York, A Number One, drove the big Caddy onto the bridge off-ramp. It exploded as it hit one of the booby-traps. Snake dived behind the nearest heap of rubble that offered his body protection. He knew that if the Duke survived the bomb, he would kill them all if he got the chance. He had Plissken's automatic jet rifle that he had taken during the aborted rescue of the President.

Maggie stood in the open, not believing that the Duke would really

harm her. She wasn't sure that Snake would take her out and she didn't want to close all her options. Christ! Snake thought and pulled her down beside him. "He wouldn't hurt me." Maggie hissed furiously at him.

"The hell he wouldn't." Snake hadn't taken his eyes off the smoking heap of twisted metal. "Maybe you're not as smart as I thought you were."

She began a retort but he waved her to silence. He had seen some movement from the back of the wreckage. The Duke was still alive. Snake carried the modified .357 magnum that belonged to Maggie. The ammo magazine was nearly empty.

The whir of the winch lowering the strap could be heard again. Snake was out of time. The Duke made his move. Putting his finger to the trigger he fired a deadly stream of the exploding pellets around the area forcing Plissken to stay low and unable to return fire. The Duke ran to the tantalizing strap. The sound of the winch stopped. Plissken knew that he could simply let Hauk's little experiment run its course, or be shot by the Duke. Either way he was dead - as long as he stayed on this side of the wall. He sent a quick shot at the tall, black man. It sent chips of concrete flying but didn't stop the man from going for the strap.

Plissken moved into position and checked his weapon again. He was stopped by Maggie's hand on his arm. "Don't go, Snake. He'll gun you down."

"I'm a dead man anyway," he answered and with an ironic twist of a grin. "So long, baby." Snake darted up and to the side emptying the gun at the Duke. His luck hadn't run out yet. A shot took the man between the eyes. He fell backwards from the impact, eyes not seeing the dangling winch line over him.

Without a glance at the Duke's body or Maggie, Snake ran to the strap and his life. "Snake! Don't leave me here." Maggie cried out as she realized that he was going to go over the wall. "Take me with you, please." Plissken wasn't listening to the woman's pleas. He could only hear the rushing of his blood and feel the seconds ticking away his life with every heartbeat. He looped the strap around his arms and tugged on the line. The winch carried him towards the top of the wall.

"For god's sake, don't leave me here." Maggie's voice followed him as he slid over the top and out of view.

Snake slid and fell his way to the bottom on the other side. His shuffling gait carried him over to the medic's van. The young doctor had the electropads ready to neutralize the pellets' charges. A tall, commanding figure interjected himself between the two young men before the doctor could activate the paddles.

"The tape, Snake." Hauk demanded

Snake glared at the police commissioner with his good eye. The burning fury was met with a bland stare. Plissken fumbled in his pockets and handed Hauk the tape. The tape which threatened the Russians and Chinese with ultimate destruction from a devastating new nuclear warhead if they didn't concede defeat to the United States.

Hauk nodded at Cronenberg who immediately placed the paddles on each side of Plissken's neck and neutralized the charges with a short burst of x-rays. Only then did Plissken look at the chronometer as it counted the last three seconds and then he knew with certainty that it was over. He heaved an inward sigh of relief.

"The President wants to see you." Plissken was told by one of the political aides. He limped over to the area where the President was being readied for a live broadcast to the Summit Meeting. "What can I do for you, young man, in gratitude for saving my life and perhaps that of this great nation?"

Plissken looked at the reviving politician, his cloak of authority regained outside the prison. He was now in a position of control instead of the younger man. Plissken's presence served as a reminder of his humiliating experiences of the past twenty-four hours. He wanted to be rid of the man as soon as possible. Snake had served under men much like this leader. He knew what he was thinking. Somehow, Plissken had wanted him to be more than a glorified bureaucrat - someone who did give a damn about what was going on in the world. So Plissken asked his question, already knowing what the answer would be.

"How much is a life worth, Mr. President? A lot of people died bringing you out of there. How do you put a price on that?" His voice was low.

"Mr. - er - Plissken, isn't it? This nation owes you a great debt. When this war is brought to an . . " he dabbed at the makeup on his face.

"Cut the bullshit, Mr. President. You don't owe me anything. But that woman on the other side of the wall is partly responsible for your being here tonight. What are you going to do about it?"

The President was only moments away from one of the greatest personal triumphs that a public figure could achieve, world-wide peace after years of a bitterly fought war. This criminal and the whore in the Prison meant less than nothing to him, but he could afford to be generous. He whispered to the waiting aide, who hurried away to section 19 to have Maggie brought out of the prison. In a few minutes, she appeared, hurrying to the only familiar face she spotted. Snake took her arm and guided her out of the lights and away from the area.

"I didn't think I'd ever see you again, Snake. Thank you for bringing me out."

"The President brought you out - not me." Snake told her and put a cigarette to his lips. He exhaled. "But I wouldn't thank him yet. Listen. Suddenly, instead of the President's voice, they could hear loud music playing over the speakers. Cabbie's tape.

"You switched the tape." she said incredulously.

"Keep moving. He's going to be after both our asses." he wasn't sure where he was headed except away. There were always places to flop when you were on the run.

"Why don't you give it back to them for a price?" she asked.

"No wonder Brain kept you around." he grunted. Snake had never been in doubt as to who the guiding influence had been between the pair. "It's gone. But they'll get another. They always do . . . " He threw the smoker away into the darkness. It glowed briefly before dying. "This is where we part ways, baby." He was away from her before she realized that he meant to leave her.

"Wait!" she commanded. He stopped and slowly turned to her.

Plissken's face was unreadable as she came to him. He watched
the provacative sway of her torso and the long, lean lines of her body
barely concealed by the long dress she wore. He knew that she was going
to offer her body in exchange for his protection. It was her means of
survival - he understood, he just wasn't ready for that. But, after all
they had been through, something wouldn't let him leave her either.

"Take me with you." she breathed into his ear as she wound her arms around his neck and then began kissing him. She pressed her body tightly against his and knew that he was not as indifferent as he wanted to appear. She glided her fingers downward but was caught by a firm hand and pushed away.

"Why?" she asked, puzzled.

"You don't have to do your number on me." he told her. "I don't give a damn if you come or not - just understand, baby. You're on your own." He didn't know why he had stopped her. Yesterday, he would have used her and walked away. Tonight he couldn't. Maybe he was just too tired to think straight.

"I can take care of myself." she said proudly, determined not to ask him for anything ever again.

"I just bet you can, baby." He lit another cigarette as they continued to move away from the command center.

"Snake?"

"Yeah."

"I think you're a hell of a guy."

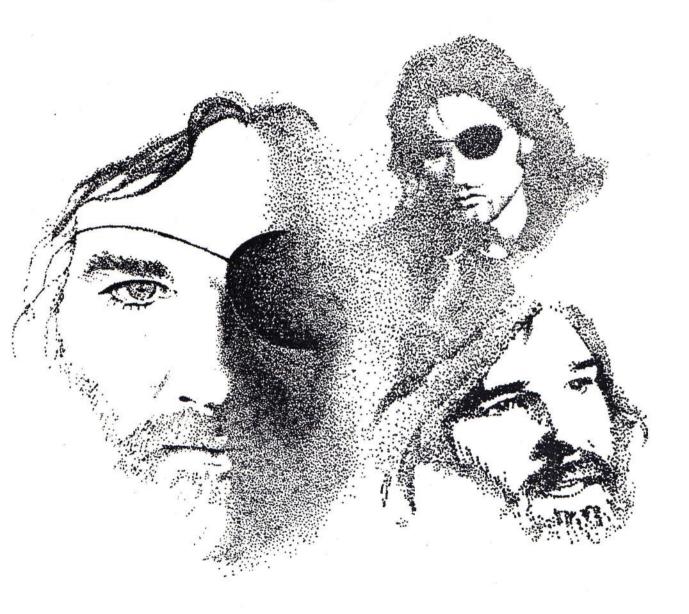
He looked at Maggie's magnificent body in the dim light. He inhaled deeply on the smoker and blew a cloud of smoke towards the stars. "I'm an asshole."





# Unnamed

# SEQUEL



J. A. Raish

"All right, Hauk, I'm here. Now whaddaya want?"

Snake Plissken had come to Bob Hauk's hotel room very reluctantly. He had decided not to come at all, but then something in the Police Commissioner's tone had made him change his mind.

"Siddown, Plissken. Make yourself at home." Hauk's voice was

Snake looked around at the posh surroundings of the Presidential Suite, and answered sarcastically.

"Sure. Hauk. Right at home."

Bob Hauk was beginning to doubt his judgment on this whole thing. Being in such close proximity to a man who hated him as intensely as Plissken did was making him wish he had stayed in retirement. It hadn't been all that long since he'd sent Plissken into the nightmare he called a prison to rescue the President. Not that it would matter. He didn't figure that a hate like Plissken's was likely to fade with time.

Hauk sat down tiredly on the overstuffed sofa and gestured toward

the opposing chair.

"Just sit down, Plissken."

Snake eyed him suspiciously, then moved slowly to comply. "Thought you retired, Hauk." He couldn't resist a little dig at Hauk's age.

"I did."

"Just couldn't stay away, could you, blackbelly?" Another dig. Hauks' eyes narrowed.

"Something like that, Plissken." His voice remained even. Snake grunted in disgust, then, to Hauk's surprise, added. "From what I've been hearing, the inmates weren't doin' so well after you

left. Food cuts, and I heard a lot of 'em weren't even makin' it Inside." Hauk grinned.

"Why, thank you, Plissken. I'll assume that was a compliment." It came out more sarcastically than he'd wanted.

"Forget it, Hauk. It wasn't that much of a compliment." They glared at each other briefly until Hauk broke the silence. "I've got another job for you, Plissken."

Looking angry and indignant, Snake started to get up.

"I told you before, I'm not . . . "

Hauk interrupted, "I think this one just might interest you, Plissken. Siddown."

Snake relaxed back down into the chair.

"All right, Hauk, but it'd better be good."

Hauk smiled.

"It is, Snake, it is."

"The name's Plissken."

Hauk nodded impatiently, then continued.

"About six weeks ago, a prisoner was brought in. When Rehme saw her, he called me right away."

Plissken interrupted, "'Her'?"

Hauk nodded and continued.

"They'd already dropped her Inside before I could get there to check it out. But, we checked the records on her - what little was available and . . . "

Snake interrupted again, more rudely than before. "What the fuck does any of this have to do with me?"

Hauk ignored the younger man's impatience.

"We dug a little deeper - back into what was left of old Army records."

> Plissken felt a chill. His voice came out as a hiss. "What're you getting at. Hauk?"

"Rehme got a pretty good look at her before they took her in, even tried to talk to her, but she wouldn't answer him."

"Hauk . . . ! "

Hauk could hear the warning tone in Plissken's voice.

"All right, Plissken, all right." He had to smile. "Despite all the dirt and blood on her face, Rehme swears it was Special Forces Lieutenant M. L. Hilley."

Snake stared at Hauk in disbelief.

"That's impossible. Hilley died at Leningrad - because you let her go on a mission she had no business goin' on. Her own sergeant saw her jet explode when a shell hit it full on."

"Her own sergeant may have seen her plane explode, but it sure as hell looks like she wasn't in it!"

Snake was stunned to silence. Hauk went on.

"Rehme was with me in Helsinki, in fact, he was sitting right there when she asked to go along that day. He got a real good look at her then. He told me that prisoner even moved like her."

Snake was remembering how she moved. It was hard to speak.

"What'd she go in for?"

Hauk frowned, "Murder. Several of 'em."

Snake sat back, starting to relax.

"Then it's not Hilley. She's no killer. Couldn't be her."

"There's more, Plissken." Snake had figured there would be. The knot quickly reformed in his stomach.

"Like I said, Rehme and I checked back through all the Army records we could find for Helsinki just before and after the Leningrad Ruse. As I expected, there was never even any record of her goin' with Texas Thunder on that mission. According to the Army, Hilley was last recorded on days off on the base. Nothin' after that at all. We couldn't even find any trace of her death bein' recorded, but that's not really too surprising."

Snake nodded. Nothing the Army had ever done had really surprised him, including cutting off his veteran's disability benefits within six months after he got home because he still had one good eye.

"What we did find was what has been a mystery for years, not that there's anyone else left who gives a damn."

Plissken was getting impatient again. "Can't you ever get to the point, Hauk?"

Hauk smiled and ignored the remark.

"Turns out that the evening we were all limpin' back from Leningrad, a woman was found beaten nearly to death in a storage shed at the far side of the landing field. No clothes, no ID. Her face was cut and bruised and swollen up so bad that she was unrecognizable. The doctors said she almost died of pneumonia from bein' out in the weather all that time. There was also some vague mention of possible nerve gas damage. And then, when she finally came out of the coma, she had total amnesia. So, her identity remained a mystery. Hell, there was a major foul-up with the records due to all the evacuations, and they couldn't even match her fingerprints. She disappeared from the hospital before she was fully recovered and nobody saw her again - until she started killin' people."

He pulled a folder out of his briefcase.

"According to the medical reports, she had a fractured skull, both arms and half her ribs broken, numerous cuts, bruises and abrasions all over her body. Some of the cuts were pretty bad. Whoever did it, really worked her over."

Snake looked pained. "While they raped her?" Hauk nodded, "'Fraid so."
Snake breathed a single word. "Blair."

Snake was staring at nothing.

Hauk repeated his question. "What'd you say, Plissken?"

Snake shook his head to clear the red haze that had blurred his vision, and answered.

"Blair. He was a lieutenant - regular Army - back in Helsinki. He and a bunch of his friends tried to push her around a couple of days before Leningrad. She pushed back." He failed to mention what he and the others had done after Hilley was finished.

Hauk was remembering the bruises on her face that day; then he remembered the hug and kiss she'd given him. Finally he noticed that Plissken had suddenly gotten very quiet.

After several seconds, he spoke, his voice quiet, but not the menacing hiss as before.

"You people keep records of the inmates' crimes? Like who they kill, say?"

Hauk's face split in a knowing smile as he realized the implications of Plissken's words.

"We sure do." He stood up and walked to the phone. Snake stood up and moved slowly toward the window. He had been sitting long enough that his leg had stiffened, making his usually slight limp more pronounced. Watching him, Hauk had to look away. He didn't need any more reminders of what he'd put Plissken through before.

Snake heard Hauk ask for Rehme. Then, when the second-in-command answered, Hauk told him what information they needed. Because the computer was down, the wait was a long one. Some things would never change.

Lighting a cigarette, Snake stood looking out the plate glass window, thinking about Hilley. Could it be possible that she was still alive after all these years? And the amnesia — if she remembered enough to go after Blair and his people, would she remember him too? And, would she remember the last fight they'd had? Would she blame him for what had happened?

He glanced over at Hauk who was watching him again. Was it even her? Or was this one of Hauk's tricks?

He looked away, back out the window, mumbling, "It's the only way I'll know for sure it's her."

Hauk heard him and wondered how Plissken would feel about going back Inside. At least this time there would be no time limit, no death-threat in his neck waiting to explode if he took too long.

"Yeah, Rehme, I'm here. Just a second." He called out to get Snake's attention. "Plissken."

When Snake looked over at him, Hauk indicated the extension. Snake moved to pick up the receiver.

"All right, Rehme, go ahead."

Hauk watched Snake's face for some clue as they listened to Rehme's report. When it was finished, Snake hung up the receiver gently and turned away from Hauk.

"Thanks a lot, Rehme. I owe you on this one." There was a brief pause. "No, I'll be back later today. Any problems?" Another pause. "All right then, see ya later."

He waited a few minutes then asked impatiently, "How 'bout it, Plissken? I didn't hear any mention of a 'Blair'."

Snake moved back toward the window. He shook his head.

"No, not Blair, but the others were all there. They must've caught her before she got to him." He looked over at Hauk. "I mean you must've caught her."

Hauk ignored that one too.

"Well, Plissken - you interested in workin' with me on this one?"

Snake crossed his arms in a subtle gesture of belligerence. "Just what've you got in mind. old man?"

Hauk bristled, but let the remark pass without comment.

"Very simple, Plissken. I want you to go Inside, find her and bring her out of there."

Snake stared at him suspiciously. "Why?"

Now, Hauk looked uncomfortable.

"If everything we've found out is true, no matter what she'd done since Leningrad, she doesn't belong in there. She deserves better. Maybe I can help her. I don't know."

Snake smiled thinly. "You feel responsible too?" It was more of a statement than a question.

Hauk nodded. "I guess so. I really liked that lady. She had a lotta class."

Snake agreed, a faraway look on his face.

"Yeah. A lotta class."

(TO BE CONTINUED IN SNAKEBIT # 2!!!!!!!)



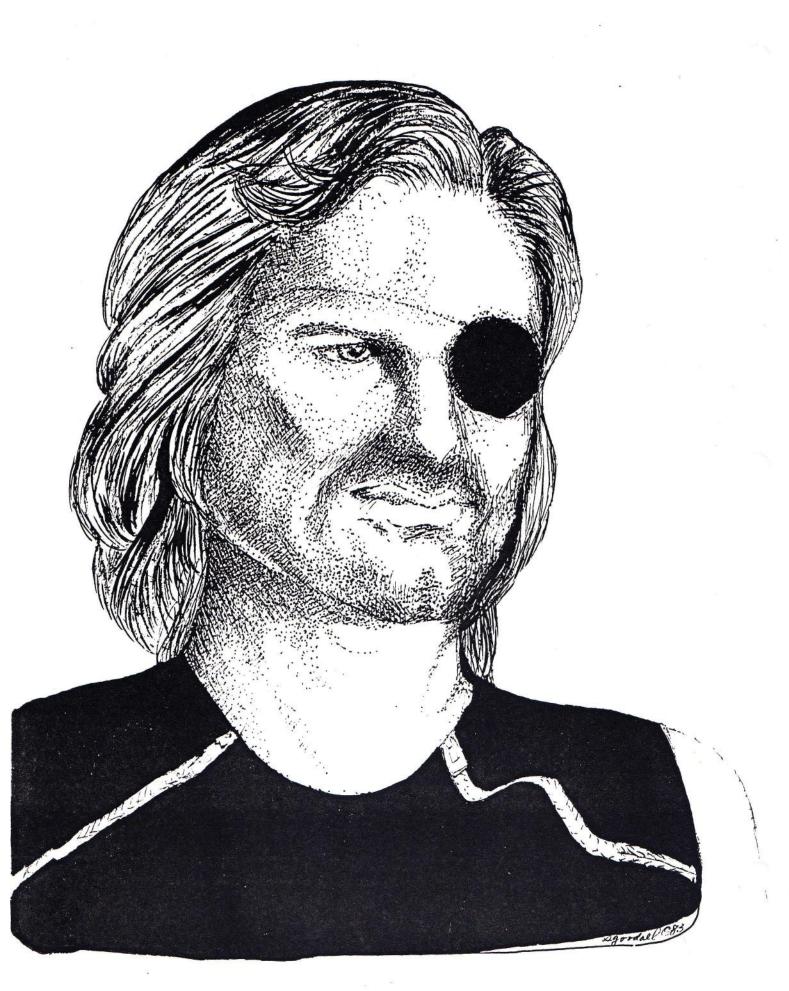




### RECIPE FOR THE TOTALLY MAN

TAKE:

SNAKE PLISSKEN'S ROUGH LOW VOICE, HIS WALKING, HIS FIGURE, HIS FIGHTERNATURE MACREADY'S HAIR, HIS FULLBEARD, HIS BITING IR ONY, HIS ROGUISH EYES AND ALSO A BIT REALITY KURT RUSSELL'S SENSE OF HUMOR, AND HIS LAUGHING TO ALL THAT GIVE A LITTLE TENDER= NESS, MIX-THE WHOLE FIGMENT INGREDIENTS AND NAME THIS AS YOU LIKE, LIGHTA CANDLE, AND TASTE A HEAVENLY COMPOSITION BON APPETIT



### The Date

by

#### Babette Hahn

It seemed to be a day like any other. The alarm clock rang, he stood up, took a shower, put on his clothes, had breakfast, and went to work. Only just arrived, he already waited impatiently for 5 p.m. to go home again, where Chris waited for him. When 5 finally came, he was the first to leave the building. Seeing his house from far away made him happy. He opened the door and called for her, though he knew she'd be in the kitchen.

It was the usual welcome, but never-the-less, Chris knew he was not himself today. He had dinner with his family, took his children, Justin and Patricia, to bed and told them a fairy tale. After they fell asleep, he went to sit down in the living room in an arm-chair near Chris. He picked up the newspaper, but Chris felt he wasn't reading, only turning the pages. Yes, it was always the same on this date. He was nervous, irritated and incalculable. She'd recognized the signs long before, but still he wouldn't talk about it. Then he sat down beside Chris on the couch and they talked about the day as if it would end like any other. But, he was hiding something. She was afraid to risk asking him; she thought he wouldn't tell her anyway. Maybe everything would be okay.

After they went to bed, she intended to ask him for the date tomorrow. She thought so hard about how to ask him, that she couldn't sleep. Beside her, she heard her husband, restless, his breathing uneven.

About 3 a.m., his breathing became faster. He rolled from one side to the other, then, terrified, he awoke. Standing up, he put on his dressing gown, and looked at his wife, thinking how beautiful she was, even in sleep. Then he went into the living room where he sat down on the couch. Totally confused, he stared into the darkness of the room, wiped the sweat off his face and let his head fall into his hands. His breathing and heart calmed down slowly. He was feeling better when he heard steps behind him. Frightened, he turned around and saw Chris moving towards him. Seeing his still-confused look, she said nothing now, only sat down next to him. She had felt that he should decide himself if he would tell her or not. But when he said nothing, she finally asked what was wrong with this date - October 23 . . .

She knows something - was his first thought, But what, and how much did she know? His spirit fought with itself - should he pretend like he hadn't heard her? But surely she'd noticed his reaction. He had to tell the truth. He told her of his special unit and the orders, his return, his parents murdered and buried in a cemetary for poor people, of his oath, Hauk, the hell-command and of his pardon.

When he ended, Chris sat pale next to him. She couldn't think at all; she still heard him telling of these cruel things. She couldn't believe what had been done to her husband. It seemed like one of his fairy tales that he always told Justin and Patricia. Like a fairy tale...

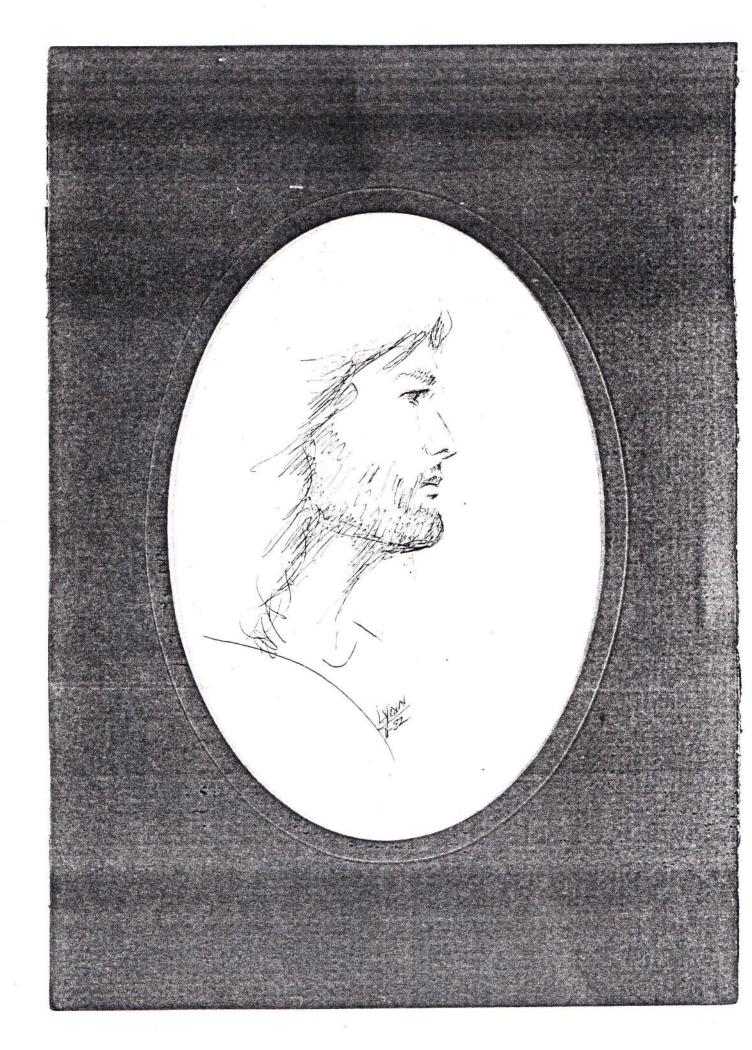
The fairy tales!!! They all told his stories, she knew it at once. He only had packed them with fairies, bad witches, sorcerors and the such. Yes, they were all his stories. And, as she understood all that, she looked at him, and knew how much he needed her. She wanted to

be strong for him, but when she looked longer at him, she couldn't help herself. Tears ran down her cheeks as she began to cry, and she fell into his arms helplessly. He bent nearer to her and stroked her hair, trying to comfort her. After she'd calmed down, she still didn't want to be let go. She wanted to lay in his arms, safe, though the situation seemed to require it the other way. Chris couldn't decide if she should be happy now or not. Happy in the sense of his sharing his misfortunes with her: or not happy to know what people do to each other.

They stayed on the couch, lost in their thoughts. There was no time; it was like being in a Trance. But, when Chris started shivering, they finally reacted. Together, they went back into the bedroom, to spend the rest of the night with sleeping. But there was no chance now; their thoughts were working. She knew now how much they had lived for their own in the past seven years of marriage. They clung to each other like never before and didn't need words to tell what they felt.

After that night, he never had the hallucinations and nightmares again. He had defeated his past. His love for Chris and their children had proved stronger and had won.





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## ROAD WARRIOR REVISITED



Road Warrior Revisited was the first fanzine devoted entirely to the characters and concepts introduced by George Miller's movie, Mad Max, and further explored in the continuation of Max's story, Road Warrior. And soon to be concluded (?) in Mad Max 3.

Issue # 1 is NOW in print - \$7.25, 1st class - and submissions of art, poetry, fiction, ETC. are now being considered for issue # 2. The editor is requesting letters of comment from fans interested in voicing their opinions on anything related to the Mad Max/Road Warrior universe, including issue # 1 of RWR.

Submission specifications:

Artists - artwork should be black & white line drawings only, 7" X 10½" or smaller, and the drawings should be recognizable. Very good copies or originals, please (will be returned upon request).

Writers - all quality material acceptable, up to and including quality R-rated. Readable copies only; material will not be returned without sufficient postage included.

To reserve a copy and receive price information when it becomes available, please send a S.A.S.E. to:

Mail submissions to:

Send inquiries about/orders for RWR # 1 with a S.A.S.E. to:

### ESCAPE PRESS

J. A. Raish, editor 1705 Virginia Place Fort Worth, TX 76107 (817)732-5865

you can run but you can't hide!

# THE SNO ESCAPE

SNAKEBIT # 1 IS NOW IN PRINT!!!!

Snakebit is the first fanzine published featuring only material based on John Carpenter's movie, Escape from New York, Mike McQuay's novelization, and Kurt Russell's portrayal of Snake Plissken, the greatest American anti-hero.

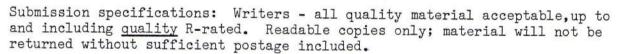
Now considering submissions of art, fiction, poetry, etc, for issue # 2, including letters of comment from fans interested in expressing their opinions on any aspect of the Escape from New York universe.

Material for # 2 so far includes:

Much more marvelous artwork from Linda Ojard.

The exciting sequel to The Coldest War by J. A. Raish, as sneak previewed in issue # 1.

More exciting fiction by Linda Ojard, J. A. Raish and, hopefully, other authors from # 1.



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Mail submissions to:

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# SNAKEBIT!



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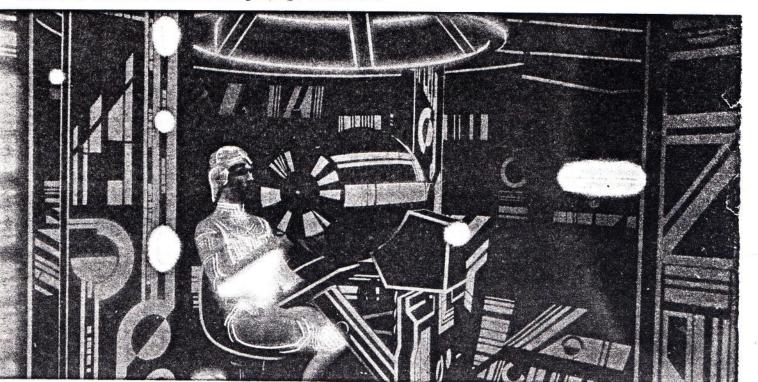
This new fanzine is based on the great Walt Disney film, TRON. Material will involve the characters and concepts presented in this movie. Deadline for submissions has been set for Oct. 1st, with tentative publication date of Nov. 30th. Mild R-rated work is acceptable (it is Disney, after all). Artwork is needed desparately.

Work accepted so far includes: stories by J. A. Raish, Laura Ruskin, Phyllis Milby and a comic strip style story by Tim Eldred; a "Recognizer" program and TRON graffiti by Laura Michaels.

#### Submission specifications:

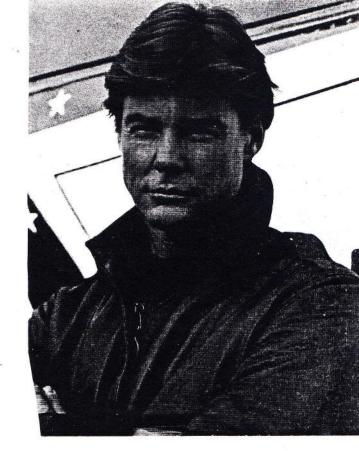
Artists - artwork should be black & white line drawings only, 7" X  $10\frac{1}{2}$ " or smaller, and the drawings should be recognizable. Very good copies or originals, please (will be returned upon request).

Writers - all quality material acceptable, including mild R-rated, but no graphic sex or violence, please. Readable copies only; material will not be returned without sufficient postage included.



# Of The

Tales



AHA! There is a lot of interest out there!

I've heard from several AIRWOLF fans, and about two other proposed AIRWOLF fanzines.

Nevertheless, ESCAPE PRESS is still planning to make a go of this one.

So, submissions of fiction, art, poetry, etc. are now being considered for issue # 1.

A tentative deadline has been set for December 31st, 1984, with publication planned for as soon as possible after that.

Submission specifications:

Writers - all quality material is acceptable, up to and including quality R-rated. Readable copies only; material will not be returned without sufficient postage included.

Artists - artwork should be black & white line drawings only, 7" X  $10\frac{1}{2}$ " or smaller, and the drawings should be recognizable. High tech artwork very welcome also. Very good copies or originals, please (will be returned upon request).

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ESCAPE PRESS presents -

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If you particularly liked any of the drawings by Linda Ojard in SNAKEBIT and ROAD WARRIOR REVISITED (only 2), or Sue Krinard in ROAD WARRIOR REVISITED, how would you like them gracing your stationary? Or printed on white Bristol board, suitable for framing?

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