

SNAKEBIT



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ESCAPE PRESS

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ESNAKEBIT®



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Editorial Page

Dear Readers,

Finally!

Why such a long absence? Condensed: illness, deaths, taxes, new jobs, no jobs, money, lack of same...you get the idea. I think it's called life.

For those of you that I used to write to on a semi-regular basis, hello! Sorry about that, but enthusiasm (brain capacity?) waned when a great deal of my life became preoccupied with operations and medications. I'm currently writing a non-fiction piece about living with Crohn's Disease, tentatively (sarcastically) called **Quality Survival**.

I'm also writing five other stories--or is it eight? Also, I'm going to attend college. As much as I disliked school--back in the olden days--I'm looking forward to this. (Yes, Jenny, old people can go to school, too.)

Quite a bit of time (and film) has been taken up by my four-year old niece, Jenny Lynn, who was born at the same time I was--if you consider that I've had Crohns all my life and was finally given some control over it after thirty-six years. I feel as though her life and mine are intertwined for some reason beyond my own comprehension. She is, undoubtedly, a very wise old soul in a child's body, because she certainly has taught her old aunt to see life in a very energetic light. She's also pretty good at expressing her views. Who else could knock me over just by crawling up on my lap, throwing her arms around my neck and whispering sweetly, "Aunt Linda, when are you going to get rid of your green eyes so you can be a member of the family again?" Observant little twirp! If my eyes were translucent, powder blue like hers, her mothers, and her fathers, I wouldn't have tried colored lenses in the first place!

Haven't made it back to Texas yet, either. Ah well, who needs sunshine when you can row a boat around your front yard after a light rain shower? Lordy, I do hate wet winters, but the webbing between my fingers dries out with too much heat--or is it moss-backs that the world insists we Washingtonians are? Probably both.

My dishes still don't get done when I'm writing (and I'm always writing). I know there's a rug under the clothes on the floor. I still make damn good spaghetti and home-made bread, though the combination will probably kill me someday. And I don't do windows, though if I could get to them, I might think about it. My drawing and computer tables are the only clean spots in this house. I don't need a roomie, I need a bulldozer! Ask Judi. A few years ago, for a birthday present, she got to help me move. And she's still speaking to me?!? Now, that's friendship!

Well, to those who have been so patient with us, I thank you. For those reading **Snakebit** for the first time, welcome aboard. I'm sure you'll like what you see.

Take care.

Jinda

Editorial Page

HOWDY!

Well, here I am again, apologizing as usual for taking so long to get this fanzine to you. I am sorry it took so long. Most of you know why there have been so many delays. Those of you who don't know, just be happy it's finally ready. In fact, just be happy. Life's too short to spend being miserable. Believe me.

We had so much material for issue # 2 that we had to cut it down. Way down. But the neat thing about it is that in doing so, we automatically have almost enough material for # 3! And it's already typed up and ready to go. Therefore, **SNAKEBIT** # 3 will be out before you know it! No, I really mean it. Trust me.

The only problem with the quick turn-around is that the 'explain Snake's tattoo' challenge for writers, artists, poets, whoever will have to wait until # 4. But, that'll give all you creative, dirty-minded old ladies out there plenty of time to come up with (so to speak) something really great. Don't wait - get to work on it now! It'll keep you warm this winter. Works for me.

Hope you enjoy the Hilley sequel. Killing her off last issue really upset me. Bugged me for days. Then, one afternoon whilst cleaning the snake cages (I was still a student at U.T. Arlington), it occurred to me how I could 'resurrect' her, and hence, the sequel was written. What a relief! I could live with myself once again. You see, if there's one thing I believe in as a writer, it's got to be happy endings. Even Snake Plissken deserves to live "happily ever after". Maybe especially Snake. For all the pleasure he's given me, I'm gonna give him all I can in return. Mmmmm - doesn't that sound delightful?

"The Twelve Days of X-Mas: 1997" was also inspired during school hours. In fact, I was sitting in a seminar, supposedly paying rapt attention to the speaker, when the idea first came to me. The beginnings of the story were written on my paper napkin (I'd already finished the cookies). I still have that scribbled on napkin. As a side note, the ending of that story turned out to be a sort of set-up for "The Legend of 'Wild Cat' Lacey". I didn't plan it that way, that's just how it worked out. That story would've been in this issue, but it was part of what had to be cut. Otherwise, nobody would've been able to afford **SNAKEBIT** # 2. Not you, not me.

The novella I'm previewing, "Return to New York", is the result of the very first **EFNY** story idea I had, the one I started writing within a few days of seeing the movie for the first time. I think you'll really like it. I do.

Believe it or not, even after all these years, Snake is still Number 1 in my life. Others have tried to dethrone him and failed.

I'm dedicating this issue of **SNAKEBIT** to my father, Henry G. Raish (September 1, 1907 - October 31, 1986) and my little brother, Bruce W. Raish (August 11, 1960 - May 20, 1987). You never know what you've got 'til it's gone.

And I'd like to thank my mother, Raechel W. Raish, for not only fronting me the money to get this baby published, but also for having enough faith in me and my abilities to support me since I quit my job to try my hand at writing professionally. I can't say enough so I'd best not try.

BYE FOR NOW.

Judi

Columbia Pictures

March 18, 1985

Ms. Judith Raish
1705 Virginia Place
Fort Worth, Texas 76107

Dear Judith Raish:

Thank you for your letter of March 4, 1985, and for the complimentary copy of SNAKEBIT # 1.

I'm familiar with fanzines, having published one myself in the 60's (God, that dates me). I was very impressed with the quality of the writing in SNAKEBIT, as well as delighted and flattered that "Escape From New York" activated the imaginations of so many talented people.

Both Kurt Russell and myself are very proud of the film "Escape From New York", and we hope to eventually do a sequel centering around the character of Snake Plissken and his further exploits in this strange and dark future.

Thank you and your co-editor Linda Ojard, and everyone at Escape Press for this truly impressive labor of love.

My best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Carpenter". The signature is stylized and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

John Carpenter

Dear John,

I'd like to say thank you.

This **Escape From New York** fanzine was--and will always be--a labor done for fun. It also takes work, joy and an insatiable hunger to read more about the characters you've created, and to which some very talented actors gave much life.

EFNY, dear Mr. C., has given direction to otherwise mere existence, given courage to the fearful, and brought out talents in those who doubted they were here to do much more than use up oxygen. It's given us life-time friendships and revamped old acquaintances.

Your talent is great, that is undeniable, but more importantly, you have the ability to motivate. You are teacher and mentor to more people than you will ever know.

We've learned much about the world, others and ourselves since **Escape From New York** hit the screen. Maybe we would have learned some of it without your film ballooning our curiosity and giving us a common bond with those we otherwise might not have met. But it would have been slow, uninteresting progress, without half the fun it's been/will continue to be.

Thank you, sir. May health and happiness always be yours.

Sincerely,



Dear John,

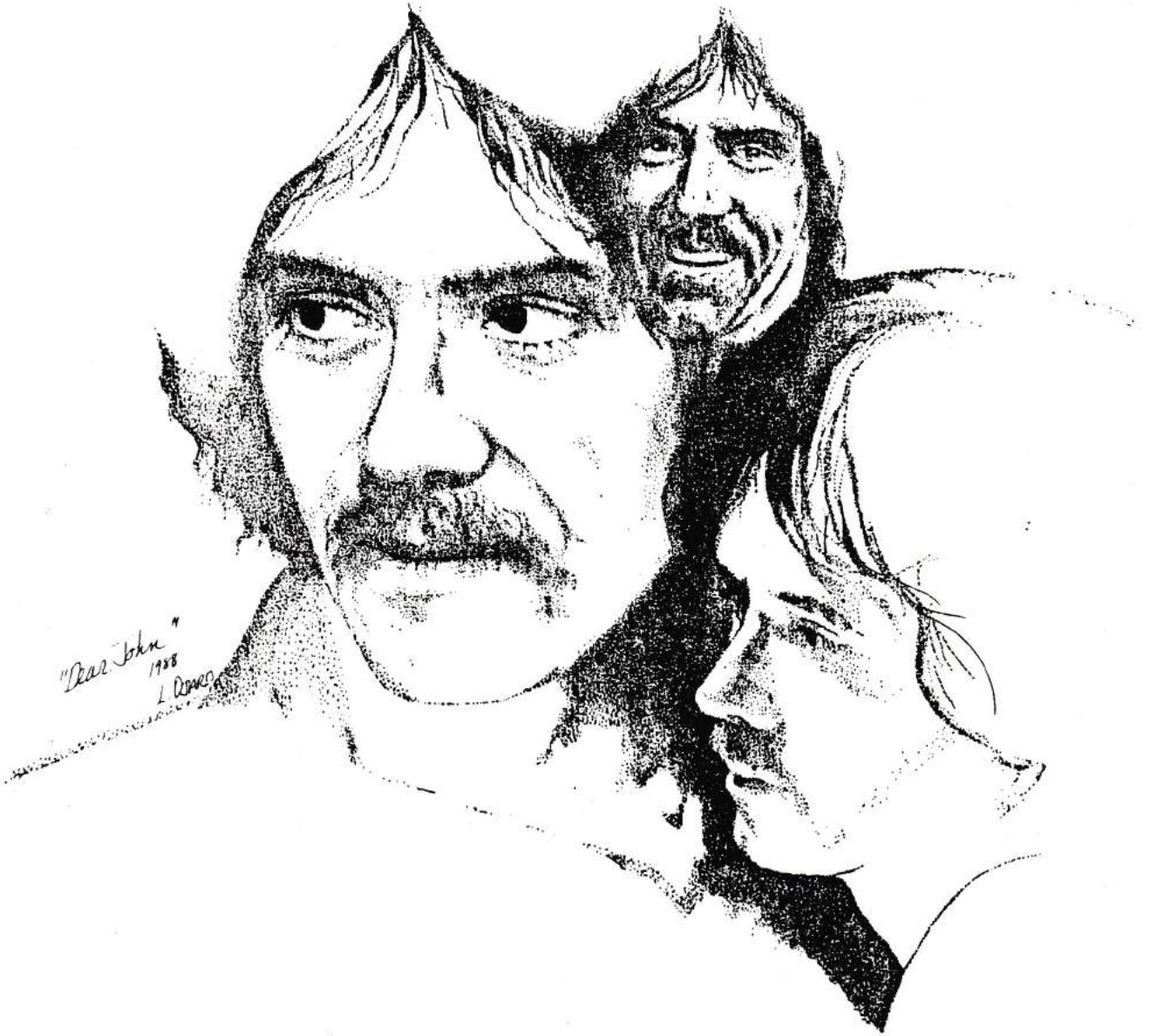
How do you do it? Time after time, or rather, movie after movie, you never cease to entertain us with the incredible range of your talents. Alternately you amaze us, amuse us, entice us, thrill us, give us a good tug at our heartstrings, keep us in suspense, or scare the living shit out of us, but always, always you entertain us.

Along with a select few individuals, you have the unique ability to bring your ideas to life. You know in your mind exactly how you want something to look and lo and behold! what you see is what we get. For this, I admire you, I respect you, I envy you and I thank you. From the bottom of my heart.

For what you do - this book's for you!



P.S. How about that sequel?



"Dear John"
1988
L. Cooper

McQuay

Mike McQuay
Oklahoma City, OK

11 April 85

Dear Judi,

First off, let me apologize for taking so long getting back to you. The pressures of deadline freak me out and freeze me up for outside stuff. What happens is, I let the mail pile way up, then try to spend a couple of days just answering it.

I read SNAKEBIT the moment I got it out of the mailbox and loved it. I don't remember talking with you about fanzines and being negative, but my feelings about SNAKEBIT are totally upbeat. Dynamite stuff! Excellent writing and production. You and Linda should be working professionally. I can't say enough good things about you guys. I found Snake right there on the pages and didn't realize how much I missed the guy until I got to see his further adventures. Thanks.

Parenthetically, the day after your 'zine arrived, I got a letter from Jennifer Whitford in Colorado who is working on a Snake Plissken fanzine entitled CALL ME SNAKE, and is just about through with production. How odd that so

long after the fact, two separate entities produced fanzines on the same topic.

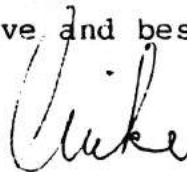
Also, on related matters: Bantam Books, which had let my novelization of ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK go out of print awhile back, is re-releasing the novel in November of '85 with a new cover. Thanks to dedicated fans like yourselves, plus a new cadre of fans through cable television, Snake Plissken will once again see the light of day in novel format. I owe it all to people like you.

Thanks.

For what it's worth, and then I'll close, I am hooked up to several data bases through compuserv. My computer name whenever I'm in the system...you guessed it -- Snake.

All my best. Next issue give me a chance to write something for you. Believe me, it would be a labor of love.

Love and best wishes,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Mike".

[Jennifer Whitford asked me to insert a note about Mike's statement regarding the alleged other **EFNY** fanzine, Call Me Snake. She merely submitted a story to that 'zine many years ago and is not the one publishing it. Mike wrote this letter before she could get back to him letting him know he'd misunderstood. Ed.]



1997 * A BAY * BOOK

1997

NEW YORK CITY IS A MAXIMUM SECURITY PRISON.
A MASTER CRIMINAL'S MISSION TO RESCUE THE CAPTIVE U.S. PRESIDENT.

ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK



A NOVEL BY MIKE McQUAY BASED UPON A SCREENPLAY BY JOHN CARPENTER & NICK CASTLE
NOW A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE

ON LIVING WITH SNAKE
by MIKE MCQUAY

As a property, ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK has had an interesting endurance rate over the last six years or so. Its continuing popularity has always been a source of interest to me (both economically and artistically) and something that I've always wanted to examine close up. So when Judi and Linda flattered me by asking me to write a piece for SNAKEBIT, it struck me that it might be the perfect time to take a look at the phenomenon through my own involvement in it, through my own skewered view, as it were.

If the dynamics of the film and book business working in concert (dis-concert) is of no interest to you, I suggest you tear out this page and use it taped to your window to keep out that little aggravating ray of sunshine that always comes in and hits you in the eye. Thanks. The rest of us will proceed. I may even have a couple of things to tell you about your favorite eye-patched hero that you didn't know.

My first association with the project that would eventually become ESCAPE came during the summer of 1980. My editor at Bantam at the time was a lady named Karen Haas, who had just purchased one of my novels that turned out to be a series about a future private eye named Matt Swain. Karen asked me if I'd be interested in a novelization job of an unnamed film (the first thing you learn in the book business is that nobody tells you anything unless they have to) that was being done by "the guy who made HALLOWEEN." Being basically easy and an agreeable little shit, I said sure. At which time she told me that fifteen other people were also up for it and thank you very much.

I never heard anything else until about four months later. I got a call from a man in LA, who asked me if I was still interested in the novelization. I said, again, sure and he gave me the job on the spot and told me the title was ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK. He also gave me the second rule of the book business -- they need it right away. No matter that they sat on the property for five extra months while bumping percentage points from a quarter to a half and back again. They have to have the book right away -- six weeks tops, not even enough time for the contract to get written and a check made, which is rule #3 -- the writer is always the last one paid.

Fine. I enjoy pressure (and money). I said, "Sure. Send me a script." They were happy to oblige, and, in the delivery, cut another week and a half off my already brief schedule.

Three things struck me upon receipt of the red-bound manuscript: one, it had a 1974 completion date written on it, which meant that I was looking at an original script that had probably been written totally ten more times since this edition; two, the script bore a strong resemblance

to a film Carpenter had already made (more on this later); and, three, the story had an anti-hero as its protagonist -- usually a no, no in the book business.

I rejected the script, knowing it wouldn't resemble the film that was still being shot (this was October, 80). They promised me another from the middleman in LA (I never spoke with Carpenter or any of his people), and while waiting for the new script, I set about trying to figure out how to expand a 120 page script into a 300 page novel. I did it by killing two birds with one stone.

I'd learned enough in script #1 to know that they'd really done nothing to expand the motivations or backgrounds of the characters (in the first script the film opens with Snake's robbing the Federal Reserve in Colorado, then being caught after a long, drawn out chase sequence where he tries to escape on his specially equipped motorcycle that expanded the snake imagery -- bet you didn't know that!), so I decided to give him good, solid motivations and set them out in the book, which served the purpose of building sympathy for him with the book reader. I finished out the process by taking Carpenter's McGuffin, the tape, and making it a harmful instead of helpful thing. In so doing, the government is not only stuck with responsibility for the way things are (instead of out-of-control crime), but it also makes Snake a humane hero instead of a cad. And in the book, I think that's the way he should be. (Why you ask -- because in a book you identify with the protagonist in ways that you don't in a film, and nobody wants to identify for any amount of time with an asshole; plus, you spend more time with a book hour-wise than you do with a film and consequently have to like the characters better). All the extra characterization and motivation would more than compensate for the extra pages.

I'd found out from Karen that I was hired because they'd read my first Swain book, so that took care of my next problem -- style. I used a modified Swain style, changing from first to third person on ESCAPE, and I think it was a good decision.

I'd also found out the story behind the film. Apparently, ESCAPE was the first script Carpenter wrote after his film school experience. He'd been unable to sell it (probably because of natural anti-s/f bias and the cost of production), so it simply languished. Later, he had the opportunity to revive the script as an urban drama that was eventually called, ASSAULT ON PRECINCT 13.

If you've never seen this film, take a look. In many ways it's superior to ESCAPE, predating it by several years. The same situations and characters are duplicated in both films with minor changes. Carpenter does similar music in both films. The Snake Plissken character has several of the same lines in both films. Two of the actors, Frank Double-day and Charles Cyphers from ESCAPE play nearly identical roles in ASSAULT.

In another week and a half another script arrived. This one was, as I suspected, very dissimilar from the first. By now, I already had a pretty good feel for Snake and his world (once I had adequately explained it to myself) and I dove in.

I spent four or five weeks in the actual writing, finishing in November of 1980. It was a relatively simple write because the story was simplistic. In fact, I found myself complicating it just for fun with

subliminal subplots and by starting scenes well ahead of the action in the film. The only real problem I had was with the aforementioned McGuffin. In the film, the tape is music-only Bandstand Boogie, and believe it or not, music-only does not translate very well to the printed page. Ta ta ta ta-da, Ta ta ta ta da-da da...you get the message. So, it became necessary to change the McGuffin music. Simple enough to me -- I just used the words for Satisfaction by the Stones. It fit perfectly. My new editor (I'd been kicked up to the movie tie-in department), Fred Klein, did not agree.

Fred called and told me that Bantam Books nor any combined thirty publishers could afford the royalties it would cost to get permission to use that song. He suggested that I write one. Better still, he suggested that he write one because he always wrote skits for the reps down at the Bantam sales conferences in Florida every summer (rough work if you can get it).

That got me to the typewriter (we still used typewriters back in those days), and I turned out a wonderful little ditty called, Night Music, and sent it to Fred who then informed me that he had written a song called Gettin' Even, that was sung to the tune of Satisfaction (of course). I argued. Fred disagreed. He turned it over to a higher authority (his secretary) to ask for her unbiased opinion as to which song was better. If there's any doubt as to which song Fred's secretary chose, get a copy of my novelization and try to remember the tune to Satisfaction.

When I finished the thing, my real problems began. Everybody wanted the right to edit, from the filmmaker on down. I went through Carpenter corrections, the LA middleman corrections, then corrections in New York by Fred (he did not edit anything out of his song, though), leaving very little of my initial manuscript. They did things like, cut out all the humor (there's nothing funny about this!) and all the philosophy (what's this shit?!), then, remembering rule #2, they proceeded to send it back to me in late April to tell me I had to hurry and get my galley corrections back in five days or they'd miss pub date in June. They were so rushed this time they told me if I couldn't get them mailed back in time, that I could call them in to somebody in production.

The beauty of every system is that it has been created by humans and has loopholes, and every once in a while we get to slip through those loopholes. I held my manuscript; I held it for too long and then called it in to a sweet young woman in production who was just soooo happy to meet a real writer and would you please be kind enough to put all those nasty deletions right back in that manuscript and oh yes, I'd be glad to do whatever you say and --

Voila! The butchery was done-in by my heads-up trench fighting. Every unkind cut was readded to my manuscript, the thing going out exactly as written, humor and all. It was a move worthy of Snake Plissken.

Production was rushed to get it out at film release, so rushed that the first cover was taken from a still of Kurt Russell instead of the cover art, though the cover art was stuck on the second edition.

The opening was fun. We happened to be in New York when the movie premiered there in June of '81. They had a real media blitz and even had stenciled the name of the film all over the streets around Broadway. I stood in the B. Dalton's at 666 Fifth Avenue and watched people buy my

book (I also watched one woman pick it up, read the last page, and put it back down -- I learned my lesson about hanging around the racks). It was fun. It also did things for me.

ESCAPE was only my second published novel. I'd written others, but this was rushed out ahead of them because of the timing of the film release. It had an initial printing of 150,000 copies, which is great for science fiction. Within two weeks we were back to press for an additional 50,000. There were a number of overseas editions. In the book's healthy run, it's been through three American covers and four printings, the latest just last year.

As a writer, the impact was tremendous for me. The book sold well and I became more recognizable in a very short time. We had some fun ESCAPE parties for awhile (for a time I feared my eleven year old son would become Snake; he did a great impersonation). Then, of course, it faded.

One of the very sad things about writing is that if you do it, you usually aren't able to enjoy it once you've done it. I've never reread anything I've ever written. I daresay very few writers have. So, I've never gone back and peeked through the book again to see if it's any good. It was a fun write, but not a spectacularly innovative write since I was basically doing someone else's ideas, ideas that I would have taken in entirely different directions. It went quick; I probably had the money spent even before I got it -- but then that's usually a safe bet with me.

I don't think the movie had a very successful run first time around. It did well in the big cities, then died in the heartland. It may have done well overseas, though. But for some reason, for a pretty solid cult, the story still lives and breathes. This publication is proof enough of that. Why? Maybe you guys can answer that better than me. But I'd like to take a shot at it anyway.

Snake's a loner in the Ollie North/Clint Eastwood/John Wayne mold, a singular type of individual who cuts through the bullshit to get something done. In ESCAPE, the tangle of the city could be a metaphor for the endless red tape that seems to entangle our lives anymore, over which we are powerless to act or change anything. But the tangle isn't an obstacle to Snake. He goes in, alone, and faces up to all the pitfalls that society can dig for him. Snake is our revenge against our modern world and the new problems that it brings.

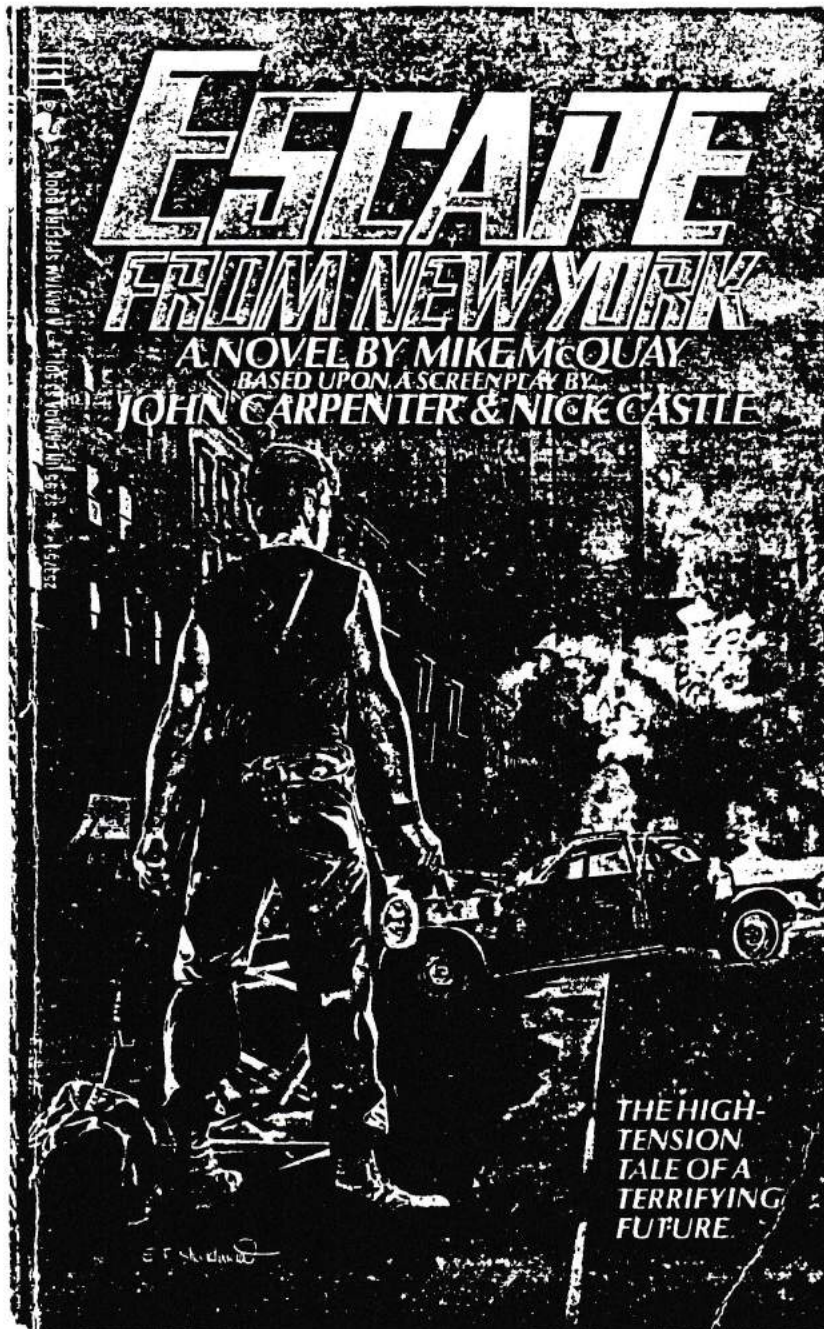
Now, add to this the idea that Snake isn't just a loner, but an outsider as well, someone who'll never fit in, and you begin to see the appeal to s/f fans who think of themselves as outside the general order of the world anyway. Snake is not a representative of society on any level. He is, above all, an individual operating under his own set of rules and ethics totally removed from the conflicting ethics of society. Ollie North may be a sociopath, but he at least knows what he wants out of life and how to get it. Snake isn't crazy like North; his ethics work on a more personal level, one on one. He is the man we'd all like to be, and he don't take no shit from nooobody.

It's a simplistic definition, but, I feel, one that's on the mark. We, both fortunately and otherwise, live with a great deal of control in our lives. While none of us really wants to relinquish that control (for it also means protection), it sure is fun to live out Snake's life for just awhile.

I hear that Carpenter's making a sequel. Hmmm. To tell you the truth, I'd love to be connected with it. Only nobody's asked me. After living with Snake all these years, I really think I'd be able to contribute something to the man and his world. Take matches, for instance. Don't you think Snake should be able to light matches on his face?

Just a thought.

Maybe Carpenter knows what he's doing after all.





© L. Ojeda '88

THE TWELVE DAYS OF X-MAS: 1997

by J. A. Raish

Prologue

Apparently there were some members of the USPF who questioned the validity of Snake Plissken's pardon. Or more likely, to Snake's way of thinking, a very angry, vengeful - and embarrassed - President had put out a secret bounty on him because of his exchange of the tapes. It would have to be unofficial because he figured Police Commissioner Bob Hauk would demand that the pardon with his signature on it be honored. For all Hauk's faults, Snake felt he'd proved himself to be an honorable man. Snake wouldn't know positively what motivated the relentless pursuit until later. All he knew for sure was that he was in some very deep shit.

*

Hauk had demanded that the enraged President Harker honor the pardon and after a very ugly scene, the man known as "Mousey" had eventually agreed, but reluctantly, and not until an alternate means to his end had occurred to him. Truth be known, Harker was more than a little afraid of Bob Hauk.

Knowing that the President would never give up so easily, Hauk had assumed the worst. He was sorry for Plissken but felt he'd brought it all on himself with his rash, foolish stunt. He'd traded perhaps his last chance for freedom and the opportunity to start over with a clean slate for one fleeting moment of personal revenge. But Bob Hauk had a feeling that under similar circumstances, he might have done exactly the same thing. So, he'd done all he could - officially. The rest was up to Plissken.

*

Plissken had assumed that there would be repercussions because of what he'd done. He didn't figure the President would remember to be grateful to Plissken for saving his life by getting him out of that cesspool of a prison. He also knew that this time they would have to kill him since they couldn't legally bring him in. It wouldn't be a "dead or alive" bounty. By insisting Plissken's pardon be honored, Hauk had inadvertently signed his death warrant. Luckily for both of them, that little twist would never occur to either Hauk or Plissken.

Nobody would ever think to ask him why he had destroyed the tape since it was supposed to be a means to end the War. But men like Plissken - and Hauk - knew better. Besides, he figured there were plenty more tapes like that one around. All he'd really done was make a public fool out of a carefully private one. What he'd done wouldn't change a damn thing - except put a very powerful enemy on his ass in a very major way. What the hell - he could handle that. There were worse things. Besides, it was a fair exchange for the satisfaction it had brought him. Switching the tapes had appealed to his sense of justice.

But it had also put him on the run again. The only difference between now and before was that before he'd been on the offensive, cutting a serious path of destruction wherever he went. Now he was content just to be on the defensive. Time and 24 hours inside New York Max had drained the vengeance right out of him.

* *

23 December 1997

So, there he was, exactly two months later, back to dodging blackbellies. He pressed himself against the cold brick wall, blending in with the shadows in the alley cast by the dim street light until the solid black patrol car with its high-intensity beam spotlight cruised slowly on by. After it passed, he cautiously moved up to the mouth of the alley to check the street. As he peeked around the corner of the building, he saw the vehicle's brake lights flash and the back-up lights come on. He cursed. They'd decided to check his alley more closely after all. Somebody really wanted that "Christmas bonus".

He ran back down the alley calculating that they were almost sure to see him before he could reach the other end. Trying as always to beat the odds, he pushed himself even harder. He heard the car enter the alley behind him just before he sprinted out into the street. He cut right and disappeared around another corner before his pursuit could reach the end of the alley. Then he heard them bottom out as they hit the driveway into the street, and smiled as he ran.

Ducking into the next alley, he tried the first door he came to. Locked. He ran on and came out onto the street. He could still hear the police car somewhere behind him but it was moving more slowly now. He was almost home free - for now.

Cutting right again, he vaulted the railing of a stairway leading down to the basement of the corner building. He tried the door and to his surprise found it unlocked. He disappeared through the doorway just as the USPF patrol car hit the street around the corner from him.

Within seconds, his eye adjusted to the darkness and he moved on, away from the door. The basement appeared to be a storage area for the businesses above. Several of the doors along the corridor were locked but most were not. Plissken was checking out the last rooms before heading up the stairway he'd passed which accessed the store directly above, when he heard someone trying the door from the outside that he'd just come in. He froze, his hand on the doorknob and cursed silently, then pushed the door on open and ducked through, pulling it shut behind him.

The room was dark but for the weak streamers of light coming through the tiny, boarded up window near the ceiling. He carefully climbed behind the high stacks of boxes and quietly piled more boxes in front to hide the empty space behind.

Tripping over something in the darkness, he was startled by the rustling sounds that followed. When he felt around the same area with his boot, whatever had tripped him was gone. Rats! he thought with mild disgust. And big ones too.

Hearing doors opening and closing further down the hall, he returned

to his stacking, then crouched down to wait.

In the silence he swore he could hear his heart pounding and his now slow, steady breathing seemed too loud, but he knew these were entirely subjective. Then he sensed something more. The hairs on the back of his neck came up in warning. He was not alone here - and it wasn't any rat.

He quickly pinpointed the source of his alarm in the corner behind him. Now his normal senses were picking up the barely audible sound of shallow, rapid breathing. His voice was a low hiss.

"Who's there?"

No answer. Then there was a small, scraping sound. The tension in the small space was palpable.

He moved slowly toward the sound, ready for an attack. His hand quickly contacted warm flesh, then he felt it jerk away, accompanied by what sounded like a whimper.

Plissken thought - a child?

"Who are you?"

Still no answer. The sounds in the hallway were getting much closer now.

"They're coming - you've got to stay quiet or we're both dead. Understand?"

He reached out and again grasped warmth. He felt a shudder as the arm tried to pull away, firmly at first, then frantically when he didn't let go. He hissed sharply.

"Calm down or they'll hear you, dammit!"

The struggles increased. Plissken could hear the blackbellies right across the narrow hallway.

He lunged for the struggling figure, expertly clapping his hand over where he hoped a mouth would be, and eased them both down to the floor, with himself on top, holding the other immobile. He whispered close to an ear.

"If you try to move or make a sound, I'll have to kill you."

Then the door opened and they both froze.

Luckily, there was no ceiling light, just the beams from the blackbellies' flashlights to search the room. Plissken lay there unmoving, barely breathing. He was in a bad position if discovered but there was no help for it.

By now the two USPF officers were getting tired of their so-far fruitless search.

"Goddammit, I told you he didn't come in here. We'da seen him. There're two more rooms to check. Let's go."

Plissken waited for the door to shut, then listened to the voices as they checked out the remaining doors. A short time later, he heard them tromping up the stairway to check the street level floor of the old brownstone. He relaxed slightly and thought he felt the body beneath him relax too. But he didn't remove his hand.

"We're gonna stay put until those assholes leave the building and I hear 'em drive off. Understand?"

No response. He applied more pressure on the mouth, enough to elicit a small whimper. He eased off and whispered more gently.

"Understand?"

The head nodded under his hand.

"I take my hand away, you'll stay quiet?"

Another nod. He withdrew his hand slowly, repeating his previous warning.

"Remember - make any noise or try to get away, I'll kill you."

Then he chuckled. "And if I don't, those blackbellies out there will. They won't appreciate any witnesses when they try to kill me. You got that?"

A breathless voice whispered, "Yes."

Plissken shifted his body off to one side, taking most of his weight off the prone figure. Immediately, he could hear the deeper, relieved breathing.

"Who are you?"

The small voice answered. "Nobody." It came out like a sigh.

Plissken's first thought was - gas! Another victim of the chemical warfare gases that polluted the atmosphere.

"What's your name?"

"My - name?" There was confusion in the voice. Plissken was not a patient man, even under ideal circumstances, and there was nothing ideal about this situation.

"Yeah, dammit, your name."

It took a while but the answer finally came.

"Elizabeth - my name is Elizabeth."

Plissken hadn't been sure until now he was dealing with a female. She was very thin, wasted, and was wearing a heavy coat.

"How old are you, Elizabeth?"

He was startled by her patronizing laugh. Then she answered.

"Older than you, I'd guess."

He repeated his first question. "Who are you?"

She repeated her answer. "Nobody - now I'm nobody."

Plissken's curiosity was overcoming his annoyance at the vague evasiveness of her answers - almost.

"What the hell does that mean?"

She didn't answer. He decided to try a different direction.

"What're you doin' here?"

"Same as you."

"Huh?"

"Hiding."

"From who?"

"Them."

"Them?"

She didn't respond

"You mean the police?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I've got something they want."

"What?"

Then he heard the blackbellies returning down the stairs, still arguing. He hissed for her to stay quiet.

He listened carefully as the heavy footsteps moved farther and farther away. Shortly, the heavy outside door clanged shut and the basement was once more in silence.

Plissken relaxed. He stood up and climbed a stack of boxes to peer out the narrow slits of the window. The patrol car moved away slowly on

down the street as Plissken watched, until it rounded a corner and disappeared.

He climbed down carefully, asking, "What is it you have that the police want?"

Once again she failed to answer, but this time it was because she'd fallen asleep. Right there on the cold concrete floor.

Plissken felt around until he found her "nest", then picked her up and carried her over to it. He lay down with her and covered them both with his jacket. Exhausted from the days of uninterrupted running, he fell asleep quickly. His last conscious thought was that the next day was Christmas Eve.

* * *

24 December 1997

Plissken awoke late the following morning, long after sunrise. Bright streams of light poured through the slats covering the window allowing him his first real look at his mysterious companion, still sound asleep.

He could see now that she was much older than he'd originally thought, but just as thin. She had once been very pretty, but whatever had caused her apparent insanity had taken a heavy toll. Plissken wondered what was driving her. He had a gut feeling that gas was not her problem - at least not entirely.

He climbed once more to check the streets for USPF activity. He wouldn't make a move until dark anyway but it never hurt to watch the streets.

When he climbed down, his weight shifted a box. The noise woke Elizabeth.

She seemed very disoriented and confused. Snake stood quietly, waiting for her to notice him. Eventually she did, but showed no reaction - no alarm, no recognition, nothing. That surprised him.

"Mornin' . . ." then he added, ". . . Elizabeth."

She looked over at him. "You came last night?"

He nodded, waiting, but she didn't respond further. He knelt down and took a really good look at her.

"How long have you been here?"

She didn't answer right away, so he repeated his question, making sure she was listening.

This time she seemed to be thinking, trying to remember. Finally, she answered.

"I don't know."

"You don't know?" Then something else hit him. "When was the last time you ate?"

"I don't know."

"How about water?"

Impatient at her hesitation, he answered for her. "You don't know, right?"

She shook her head. "I'm sorry."

"Do you want to die?"

"I don't know - I guess I do."
He hadn't expected that answer. "Why?
Her smile was sad. "Because I can't let them have what they want."
He was getting confused now. "Why? Can't you just get rid of it?"
She smiled again and tapped her head with her finger. "Can't. It's
in here."
Plissken felt a chill. "What is it, Elizabeth? Who are you?"
"I'm nobody."
Snake clenched his fist in exasperation.
"All right - who were you?"
"I was a scientist."
He stared at her in disbelief. "Where?"
"U. S. Army Chemical Warfare lab - but I was a civilian. They tried
to draft me but I wouldn't let 'em."
Such a long speech seemed to exhaust her.
"What is it you've got in your head that they want, Elizabeth?"
She began to get upset. "My formula - they want my formula."
"Formula for what?"
"A new kind of gas."
Another chill ran through him - more gas?
"What does it do?"
Getting more upset, she didn't answer. He pressed her - he had to
know.
"Elizabeth, what does the gas do?"
Her voice breaking, she finally told him.
"Mind control."
Plissken was shocked. Was it possible?
"Je-sus! How does it work?"
She was starting to cry now.
"It destroys free will. If they catch me, they'll use it on me to
get the secret."
"But if they already have some of the stuff, whadda they need you
for?"
"It's a very complex process. They'll never be able to synthesize it
without the exact procedures. I destroyed all my papers, but it's all in
my head. I can't let 'em have it. Don't you see?"
Plissken nodded. "Yeah - I see."
And he did see. It was all crystal clear. He wondered if the bounty
on her might not be even higher than the one on him.
"So, what're you plannin' to do?"
Again she laughed, shakily. "I don't know. Just stay here, I
guess."
"'Til you die?"
"What would you suggest?"
He was exasperated. "Keep moving, running, surviving." It was
obvious. Why couldn't she see?
Her thin laugh was bitter. "Me? I don't know how. I've spent most
of my life in a laboratory. All I know is that I can't let them catch me.
If I stay here, they won't."
"But you'll die if you stay here. Doesn't that mean anything to
you?"
He grasped her bony wrist. "Hell, you're half dead already."

She pulled away from him. "Half? I think you overestimate. Don't you see? I can't let them catch me and I don't have the courage to kill myself outright."

She was really crying now, hysterical, and had completely shut him out. He finally gave up trying to talk to her and went to watch out the window. He had some thinking to do.

*

Long after darkness had fallen, he tried to rouse her. After finally shaking her to attention, he told her his plan.

"Get up - it's time to move."

"What?"

"We're leaving - get up."

She didn't move. "Why?"

"Don't argue with me or I may change my mind."

He pulled her to her feet. She was dizzy, barely able to stand. He supported her and hoped she could hold up long enough for him to get her where they were going.

As soon as he was sure the street was clear, they started out. The destination Plissken had in mind wasn't far away but for her it might be too far. And it was starting to snow. Snake cursed under his breath, thinking - that's all I need!

He kept them to the darkest alleys whenever possible and had to stop several times to let her rest. Only once were they forced to crouch in a stairwell to hide from a USPF patrol car. With a strictly enforced dusk to dawn curfew, the streets were otherwise empty.

Sometime before midnight they arrived at a dilapidated old brownstone and after making sure they hadn't been followed, they went in. Snake had to practically carry her up the three flights of stairs and down a short, dark hallway. At one of the doors, Snake finally stopped and knocked very softly.

A muffled voice asked, "Who's there?"

Snake's answer was a low hiss. "Plissken."

The door opened immediately and Snake herded Elizabeth into the dimly lit room. The door closed quietly behind them.

"What you doin' here, Snake?"

The question came from a very large, old black woman. "I heard you was dead."

He grinned. "Not yet, Grandma." Then he nodded toward Elizabeth. "Brought you a Christmas present."

She glanced at Elizabeth, then gave Snake a dirty look. "Now what the hell am I 'sposed to do with a scrawny little white woman?"

"Her name is Elizabeth and she sure could use your help, Grandma."

"'Nother stray, huh? Like you."

The old woman took the girl's chin and tilted her head up.

"She's not lookin' too good, Snake. When the last time she eat?"

He shook his head. "Don't know - long time, I think."

Grandma made several clicking sounds with her tongue, and then told him, "You take her on into the spare room whilst I heat her up some broth. Then you can tell me her story."

Snake took Elizabeth's arm and led her down the short hallway into a

tiny bedroom. Grandma bustled in a moment later.

"Broth's on the stove. You go watch it, Snake, whilst I get this po' girl into the bed."

Snake obeyed with a docility that would've shocked most people who knew him. But then he was more tolerant of Grandma than just about any other human being. Their relationship went way back, to the days just after he'd returned home from the War, minus one eye and most of his soul. He owed her his life - and maybe what was left of his sanity, too.

*

He was ladling the hot broth into a bowl when Grandma rejoined him in the kitchen.

"What's happened to her, Snake? Poor thing hasn't eaten in at least a week. Not much to drink either, probably just melted snow. She's bad dehydrated. No spirit left in her. Didn't say a word to me, just did what I told her."

Snake leaned in the doorway, watching the old woman get her things together.

"Found her in a basement, Grandma. She was hidin' in a storeroom. Been there awhile."

Grandma interrupted with a beautiful, white-toothed smile.

"And what was you doin' in that basement, boy?"

Snake grinned. "Hidin'. Blackbellies just can't seem to leave me alone."

It was Grandma's turn to chuckle. "So's I heard. Word on the street is that The Man wants you real bad. More money on your ass than anybody a'fore you. Ever!"

Snake nodded. "Yeah, that's what I figured."

Grandma looked at him a little sadly, exclaiming, "You just won't be satisfied 'til you're lyin' dead in the street, full o' blackbelly bullets."

Snake shook his head. "They won't be satisfied, Grandma. They won't be."

* * *

25 December 1997

Elizabeth awoke to a cold, clear Christmas morning. It had snowed all night and the world outside was covered with a layer of dingy white. She felt surprisingly calm and rested, but her future seemed no less uncertain than before. This man who'd found her seemed to be willing to help her, but for how long? And why? Mightn't he try to make his peace with the police by turning her in?

Somehow she didn't think so, but her analytical mind was trained to explore all possibilities. For the first time in years, Christmas had brought her a little hope. For now she'd be content to place herself in his hands. She just didn't have the strength any more to do otherwise.

*

During the week that followed, Elizabeth gained back some of her strength and with it returned her personality. Snake stayed in the background just listening to the two women talk. Grandma had subtle ways of drawing out a shy individual that she'd once even used on him with some success.

What he learned about Elizabeth from these casual chats convinced him that he had to do whatever it took to keep her out of police and military hands.

Her name was Elizabeth Ann Stockwell - Dr. Stockwell. MD. PH.D. in Biochemistry from Harvard. Her drug research there - she'd been seeking agents to neutralize the gases in the atmosphere that were causing such havoc with the biosphere - had been interrupted by escalation of the War. The Army had tried to draft her officially and, failing that, had simply "bought" her contract from the University and took her away against her will, putting her to work in one of their secret chemical warfare labs.

Elizabeth's new assignment had been to develop a new gas capable of destroying free will, rendering those exposed unable to function independently and therefore highly susceptible to mind control. Being the dedicated scientist she was, and enticed by the excellent facilities they had given her, she had thrown herself into the work with little thought to its ultimate consequences.

But in spite of the careful government insulation of the scientists from outside influences, Elizabeth did learn what her discoveries would really be used for. Naive in the ways of politics, she had gone straight to the military officers in charge. They had reassured but not convinced her of their good intentions. So, she'd continued her work, keeping her progress secret by maintaining two sets of notes. But, when a spy in her own lab informed the Army Intelligence officers of her breakthrough, Elizabeth had destroyed her real notes and disappeared. She hadn't had time to destroy all her samples and knew they would use her own formula to extract the exact synthesis procedures from her. Without her detailed notes or the knowledge stored in her brain, it would take the Army years to duplicate the process. If they ever figured it out at all. There weren't too many scientists of Elizabeth's caliber left since the advent of chemical warfare among the warring nations.

Elizabeth hadn't really needed an outsider to tell her that the gas wouldn't just be used on the enemy. Deep down she'd known it all the time but her drive to research was too strong. She'd buried the knowledge deep and rationalized for her conscience's sake. But the outside confirmation had blown it all away and she'd been forced to deal with the truth.

It was something of a relief for Snake too, those days of rest and good food. He'd been running for two months without a break and the wound in his leg had been a source of constant pain. The hurt was already easing.

But, they couldn't stay there forever. Grandma had told him when they'd first arrived that she was pretty sure the police had been watching her for the past couple of months, but she hadn't really known why until he'd showed up at her door. Rumors were rampant; facts few and far between. Snake knew he had to get the scientist out of the city - somehow.

In fact, he figured he'd better take her west, away from the blackbelly concentration present all over the east coast. He knew people in California who would be happy to hide her, and guard her with their lives if necessary. But there was one large obstacle that had to be overcome first - he had to get her out of the city. That would be really tricky because of the massive search in progress, a search for both of them. They wanted her alive and him very much dead.

*



The days were passing too quickly for Elizabeth. She'd never met anyone like Snake Plissken and was developing a strong attraction to the tough, quiet man. She began to feel things she'd never really experienced in her sequestered life - unfamiliar emotions and physical longings she'd always managed to control or ignore. Eventually these feelings and her ever-present curiosity of the unknown overcame her nervousness and fear of rejection.

* *

30 December 1997

Snake was lying on the old sofa, half-asleep when Elizabeth's bedroom door opened. He was instantly alert but made no outward sign. Aware of movement, he was unconcerned, figuring she was just headed for the bathroom. He relaxed again.

A few seconds later, his keen sixth sense told him he was not alone in the living room. His good eye opened.

Elizabeth was standing close to the radiator, wrapped in a robe, her hands held out to the warmth.

He sat up stiffly, the blanket falling down across his lap.

"Cold?" His voice was low, a husky whisper.

She looked up, startled, then answered a little nervously. "Um hmm."

Then she noticed his bare upper half and felt her cheeks warm, "Aren't you?"

He grinned and stood up, draping the blanket around his shoulders.

"Nah."

He moved to stand beside her, realizing that this was the first time they'd been alone together since the night he'd found her. They looked out the window for a few silent moments, just watching the snow gently falling. A flat black USPF patrol car cruised slowly past. Elizabeth shivered and wrapped her arms around herself. Momentarily forgetting her mission, she hung her head and whispered, "God, will it ever end?"

Snake put his arm around her shoulders, including her in the warmth of his body. To his surprise, she turned toward him, moving close to slip her arms around him, laying her cheek on his bare chest. He folded his arms around her, enclosing her in the blanket and held her tightly against him.

A few days before she had seemed so frail, so insubstantial, almost like a wraith, but now; that same small body felt very real, firm, warm, still too thin but very much alive, with an energy that seemed to flow between them like an electric current. Her small, soft hands began moving slowly up and down the length of his back, sending little tingles of pleasure through him. He felt himself becoming aroused.

The hands slid around toward the front and began caressing their way up his chest toward his neck. She grasped the sides of the blanket and pulled his head down to kiss him. As their lips met, Snake's hands began to move on her back, rubbing, kneading, finally crushing her body against his.

His strength and roughness both frightened and excited her. She gasped involuntarily and leaned away slightly, breathless. The movement

seemed to bring him back to himself.

He started to pull away from her but she held the blanket across his neck with surprising strength. He wasn't going anywhere. She'd gone too far to stop now.

He looked down at her upturned face. Much of the lost beauty he'd seen in the face had returned. Warm, intelligent blue eyes looked back at him boldly. He could see uncertainty in them, mixed with fear and doubt - and unrealized passion. He whispered three simple words.

"Are you sure?"

He'd left the last move up to her. Stop it now or forget about stopping it for quite awhile. Hearing the long-lost but not forgotten roaring in his ears, he figured she had about five seconds to decide. Then he'd have to get the hell away from her or take her whether she wanted it or not.

In response, she pulled his head down to kiss him again. As they kissed, she let go of the blanket and let her hands wander over his body - chest, back, arms and down his stomach to the waist of his jeans. Her trembling hands were a little clumsy as they undid the column of metal buttons.

Dropping the blanket, his hands moved over her sides and began fumbling with the sash of her robe. Finally untying it, he parted the fold and slid his arms around her, pleasantly surprised to find that she was naked under the robe. He pulled her in against him, bare flesh meeting bare flesh, and began kissing her with increasing fervor. She responded in kind, all hesitation vanished, all doubt swept away by wave after relentless wave of nearly mindless passion. She'd never experienced anything even remotely like this in her life. And it was only the beginning!

As they kissed, Snake gathered her into his arms and carried her back into the bedroom, closing the door quietly with his foot.

* *

31 December 1997

Snake had planned to stay at Grandma's until after the first, to give Elizabeth more time to regain her strength and increase her chance of making the hard journey west. But on New Year's Eve, they had to leave in a hurry on a tip from one of the old woman's street friends.

Snake hated to leave Grandma alone and unprotected but she reassured him she'd be fine. By the time the blackbellies got there, all traces of her "company" would be gone, as if they'd never been there at all.

He was worried that the cops might try to force information from her in spite of her age but Grandma wasn't worried. She'd been through a lot in her long life and was no longer afraid of pain or death. She knew there were worse things.

The message had come just after dark. A faint tap at the door, a few whispered words exchanged, then Grandma had come to them with the bad news.

A S.W.A.T. team was organizing and would be on its way there within the hour. No, he didn't know who their target was, but considering the

firepower involved, it was most likely Snake Plissken. The cops probably didn't even know that Dr. Elizabeth Ann Stockwell was with him.

Being with him made it infinitely more dangerous for her but neither of them had much choice. And in spite of the odds, he was still her best chance for escape. For freedom.

*

They silently climbed the fire escape to the roof of the building as Grandma had instructed them. Heading for the southwest corner, Snake spotted the "bridge" crossing over to the next rooftop. A dark figure frantically gestured them forward.

At the edge of the roof, Elizabeth balked. "I c-c-can't. I'm afraid of heights."

He glared at her. "Come on, dammit! The blackbellies are here. We're outta time!"

She shrank away from him, startled by his look and tone.

"You go on. I can't do it. I'm sorry. I just can't."

Rather than argue further, Snake grabbed her and threw her over his shoulder. She was still struggling when he stepped onto the ladder bridge.

"Hold still, dammit, or we'll go down together!"

She calmed down instantly with a barely audible whimper. He took a deep breath and hurried across the narrow ladder, his excellent sense of balance making it easy in spite of his off-center load.

Once safely on the roof, he slid the still limp woman off his shoulder. Her eyes were still squeezed tightly shut.

"We made it, Elizabeth. You can open your eyes now."

She opened one eye, then the other. He grinned at her, shaking his head, then took her hand and pulled her along, following the black man who was there to show them the way out of the neighborhood.

Grandma was part of a large underground working inside the USPF-held city and had been making arrangements for Snake's escape since the day after their arrival. The underground was ready when the time came and if anyone could get them out of the city, it would be Grandma's friends.

*

The man - Snake had never heard his name - led them down through the building and to the basement where there was a hidden entrance into the city storm drain system. There he stopped and turned to them, speaking for the first time.

"You on your own now, Snake. I got to go back now, check up on Grandma. Those blackbellies gonna be real pissed when they find out they prize is gone. Might want to take it out on her. My woman's keepin' an ear on things from our place, but. . ."

He shook his head. Snake knew what he meant; the man didn't have to finish. The USPF seldom gave a damn about having witnesses to their atrocities. They figured it was good publicity, a deterrent.

"Sure was a pleasure meetin' you, Snake Plissken."

He held out his hand to Snake who shook it with only the slightest hesitation. Then the man nodded toward Elizabeth. "Nice meetin' you too,

ma'am."

She smiled shyly.

Pulling a flashlight out of his coat, he turned it on and pointed the beam toward the markings on the damp wall of the cement tunnel.

"Just keep headin' left and then follow the marks on the wall. They'll tell you when it's time to climb up to the street. Then you really on your own."

Snake looked at him. "On our own - where?"

"Over on the west side of town." He grinned. "If you think it's bad here . . ."

Sighing, Snake interrupted. "I get the idea."

But the man went on anyway. "It's so rough over there even the po-lice think twice a'fore goin' in."

Taking the flashlight the grinning man was offering, Snake grasped Elizabeth's arm firmly and pulled her into the pitch dark tunnel, muttering, "Wonderful!"

*

They traveled the underground for several hours, through the smelly, dripping drains. To Snake's surprise, Elizabeth's regained strength held up and he only had to stop twice to let her rest. It certainly wasn't the first time she'd surprised him. He had a feeling that the dank stench helped keep her moving. It was sure as hell working for him.

*

Hours later, they finally reached the end of their journey - a long, vertical iron ladder to the surface. Snake had to push her up, wrung by wrung, nudging her with his shoulder when she faltered. At the top of the ladder, he made her wait, clinging to one side, while he went on ahead.

The exit to the outside was not at a nice, safe, hidden spot as the entrance had been. Snake raised the heavy metal lid slowly and peered out through the crack at the damp street. It was quiet. Almost too quiet. He could hear the wail of sirens in the distance but nothing close by.

Warily he shoved the lid to one side, trying to make as little noise as possible. It wasn't easy. Then, checking one last time to be sure they were not observed, he climbed out of the manhole. Kneeling, he reached his hand down and called out to her.

"Come on, Elizabeth. Hurry."

Then from deep in the hole behind them, he thought he heard faint sounds, like voices and heavy boots running, getting closer to them. His heart skipped a beat. Shit!

As soon as her hand contacted his, he pulled her up out of the hole, a little more roughly than he'd meant to, but he was very nervous about being so out in the open. If they could be so close behind in the sewer, they could also be waiting out here in the street. He wanted a nice, dark alley or another basement - one a little less crowded than the last. Before she could even really get her balance, he grasped her arm and jerked her along with him as he started for the nearest alley.

But before they could get to the mouth of the alley, a USPF patrol car cruised slowly into sight. As it turned the corner, it's spotlight

swept over the pavement, across them, then bounced back to fix on them instantly. Never breaking stride, Snake forced his legs to pump even harder, dragging Elizabeth with him. He had to find them a safe haven fast. She couldn't take much more of this. Not much at all.

Through the first alley, they burst out onto the deserted street. Snake paused and glanced wildly to either side, then took off to the left. With the street light out, it was darker that way. He pounded down the damp sidewalk, pulling the woman's limp, unresisting body after him. She was definitely slowing him down and it could get them both killed. He had to find a place to hide!

As they rounded the corner onto the block the patrol car had come from, he heard the car enter the street from their alley. Deja vu - he'd been playing this same game of cat and mouse just a few days before. But the stakes were much, much higher now.

Near the corner of the block, they approached a partially obscured stairway leading down to another basement. Praying to a god he didn't believe in, Snake grabbed the railing and swung them around to the head of the stairs, letting his momentum carry them on down. Staggering, Elizabeth tripped and fell forward, catching Snake off balance. They tumbled down the steps and landed in a wet, tangled heap at the bottom, Elizabeth - luckily for her - ending up on top of him. Ignoring the sharp pain in his shoulder, Snake reached up to try the door. Locked! So much for the power of prayer. He cursed under his breath and scuttled back into the deepest corner of the space, pulling her with him.

Sobbing and barely able to breathe, she clung to him, burying her face against his chest. She was making too much noise. He tried to quiet her.

"Hey, babe, come on. We're all right. I heard 'em turn the other way. They won't look here."

After what seemed like an eternity to him, she calmed a little but stayed huddled in his arms. She couldn't have moved even if she wanted to. And she didn't want to.

"Elizabeth, listen to me. They probably still don't know about you, that you're with me. If it comes down to it, I'll have to leave you, draw them away. You can make it on your own - if you have to."

She shook her head. "No, I . . ."

He stopped her. "Yes - you can. If you want to badly enough. You can do it."

She met his eye. "Snake, if it comes down to it, you have to kill me. You can't let them take me alive. You know that. The world will be better off if I'm dead. I . . ."

Her defeatist attitude made him very angry. "No, dammit! You have the right to live! You'll just have to play the game by their rules for now."

She didn't respond. There was no point in arguing.

They crouched there in the cold, wet darkness for an hour, listening to the patrol car, joined by its companions, frantically combing the streets for their lost prize.

When it was quieter, Snake disentangled himself from the dozing woman and struggled to his feet. The pain in his shoulder had dulled to a throbbing ache, but his leg felt like it was on fire again. He crawled up the stairs until he could see over the ledge onto the street. Nothing was

in sight, but he knew they could be parked anywhere, just waiting for some movement to zero in on. He wouldn't even want to be a stray dog wandering this street tonight.

He eased back down the steps. Elizabeth was sitting up, her back in the corner. She wouldn't meet his eye now, just stared blankly at nothing. He wondered if she was in shock - or if her mind had snapped altogether.

"Hey - you okay?"

She nodded slowly, still staring straight ahead. There was something hauntingly familiar about the look on her face.

"Yes - I'm fine now."

Uh huh. He turned around and went to work on the locked door. There hadn't been a lock invented that Snake Plissken couldn't pick.

Concentrating on his task, he didn't notice Elizabeth get to her feet and move slowly up behind him. He was aware of nothing out of place until the brick hit him full on the side of the head. Then he was only briefly aware of Elizabeth's anguished sobs before he hit the hard ground and unconsciousness enveloped him.

*

When he finally came to, it had begun to snow again. He was cold, chilled to the bone, and soaking wet in uncovered spots where snow had settled on him and melted. His head was pounding and his bad eye hurt like a sonofabitch. He felt his face and realized why - his eyepatch was gone. So was his jacket. And his gun. Her coat covered him from neck to mid-thigh. It took him several minutes of intense concentration to push the pain aside and think clearly. Then he realized what she must have in mind. He was furious.

Using the cold concrete wall for support, he forced himself to stand. A wave of dizziness and nausea washed over him. He wanted more than anything he could imagine to lie back down right where he was. But he couldn't. He had to find her, stop her somehow.

Then he heard the sounds of tires screaming a few blocks away. More distant sirens began to sound, coming closer, closer. He cursed and half-staggered, half-crawled up the steps to the sidewalk, fighting the dizziness, forcing himself forward.

Making his way toward the sounds, he stumbled along the sidewalk, her coat around his shoulders, keeping to the shadows as best he could, staying close to the wall for support. His head was spinning; he felt alternately hot and cold, and his leg hurt like it had nine weeks ago inside New York.

As he neared the source of the clamor, he could hear voices shouting, tires squealing. The blackbellies had cornered their prey - or so they thought.

Snowflakes swirling gently around him, he watched the scene from around the corner at one end of the block. They had something all right. Seven blackbellies crept cautiously toward a building in the middle of the block, keeping carefully behind cover, firing short bursts occasionally as they moved.

When there was no response from within, one cop moved boldly out into the open, running towards the open doorway. Two shots rang out and down

he went, dead before he hit the pavement. Could Elizabeth have fired the shots? He couldn't imagine it.

The six remaining cops fell back, their nearly superstitious fear of Snake Plissken overcoming their greed for the considerable bounty. Before they had the chance to regroup, the image of Plissken bounded out the door and down the short stairway, hitting the ground near the dead man and rolling close enough to grab his weapon from where it lay in the street. Then, up again, the apparition ran toward one of the police cars, firing short bursts at the panicky men.

Snake squinted, trying to get a better view of his look-alike in the gray pre-dawn light. His eyepatch, his jacket - but it was definitely Elizabeth. Only in such poor light would anyone mistake her short, slight build for his taller, heavier one. But she had them all convinced.

Before she could reach the car, one blackbelly found his wits and began shooting. As she pivoted to return fire, one bullet, maybe more, struck her body. Snake couldn't tell where. She fired as she fell, bringing her score up to two.

He had to help her. But as he took a step forward, his injured leg collapsed under him and he went down on his knees.

Still firing at the cowering blackbellies, she crawled the rest of the way to the car, leaving a trail of blood in the snow, and hauled herself up into the driver's seat.



The remaining blackbellies, seeing their prize about to "slither" away again, opened fire on the patrol car. A bullet ripped through the gas tank, igniting the fuel. The car exploded in a billowing cloud of orange fire, knocking all the cops flat. Snake's shout of denial was drowned out by the roar as he too was knocked backwards into the brick wall by the blast.

He stared at the burning wreckage, the bright light of the flames sending spasms of pain up into his brain through his unprotected eye. He had gone down with his bad leg twisted under him, and he struggled weakly to straighten it.

Vaguely, he could make out the triumphant cheers of the surviving blackbellies. There were only four left now to share Harker's bounty - another had been killed in the explosion.

He was angry, unreasonably angry. They thought they'd killed him. They thought that burning body in the ruined car was his. He wanted them to know the horrible mistake they'd made. He wanted to laugh in their faces - before he killed them.

Gripping the window ledge above him, he pulled himself unsteadily to his feet. One way or another, he'd make them pay. But before he could take a single step, strong hands grabbed him from behind, one covering his mouth so he couldn't cry out, and pulled him back around the corner, out of sight.

He fought but was too weak, too tired, the pain and fever made him clumsy. Seconds later, the agony he was feeling, both physical and mental, overwhelmed him and mercifully, he passed out.

* *

1 January 1988

The New Year dawned clear and cold. The previous night's light snowfall had left a thin layer of relatively clean, white snow. It had stayed cold enough for the snow to stick rather than melt right away into the usual gray sludge. But Snake Plissken didn't see that dawn.

He finally awoke late that evening, confused and hurting. Someone was sitting at the bedside tending his injured leg when his good eye opened. A new black leather eyepatch was already in place over his bad eye. It didn't fit as comfortably as his old, worn one had but he knew it would in time. The room seemed familiar. He tried to focus his thoughts. Then a familiar voice spoke.

"How you feelin', baby?"

He forced his head up a few inches off the pillow to see the source of the question. "Grandma?" His voice was a hoarse whisper.

She smiled as well as she could with the swelling on her mouth and around her left eye. "'Course it's me. Who else?"

Snake let his head fall back down onto the pillow. "They hurt you bad?"

She chuckled. "Not as bad as they'd liked. Shermin's woman heard 'em and came to help me. That's how they found out where you went."

Snake struggled up onto his elbows to get a look at his leg. It looked as bad as it felt. He grunted as she felt around the wound she'd

just cleaned. "Whaddaya mean?"

"Well, I wouldn't tell 'em doodly squat, so they tol' Velma they'd kill me if she didn't tell 'em. I tried to stop her but they shut me up fast. So she tol' 'em. She asked me to tell you she was real sorry. Shermin too. He was the one brung you back to me. Him and a couple other boys."

Snake's voice went cold and hard. "Yeah, I owe him one. For stoppin' me . . ."

Outraged, Grandma interrupted. "For savin' your worthless hide, you mean!"

"Dammit, Grandma, you don't understand." His anger made his head pound.

"I do understand! I understand grief. And I understand revenge. And I understand outrage!"

Her voice softened ever-so-slightly. "And, baby, I understand sacrifice. Elizabeth traded her life for your freedom. And her own too, I reckon. She knew there was no other way for her, bein' who she was and knowin' what she knew. And makin' them think it was you they was killin' was just her way of givin' you a new lease on life. You're free now, Snake! Don't waste it on revenge. Don't throw away the gift she's given you. Think about it."

Snake went silent, mulling over her words. He'd never known Grandma to lecture or interfere with anyone's lifestyle, and yet she'd just given him a speech that would've brought down the house. He figured this must be something she felt very strongly about. For her, he would think about it. That was something else Elizabeth had given him - a little time to think, a little time to catch his breath.

*

3 January 1998

Snake Plissken made his escape from New Jersey the evening of January 3, 1998, smuggled out in the back of a produce truck headed for Boston, the ride compliments of Grandma's extensive underground.

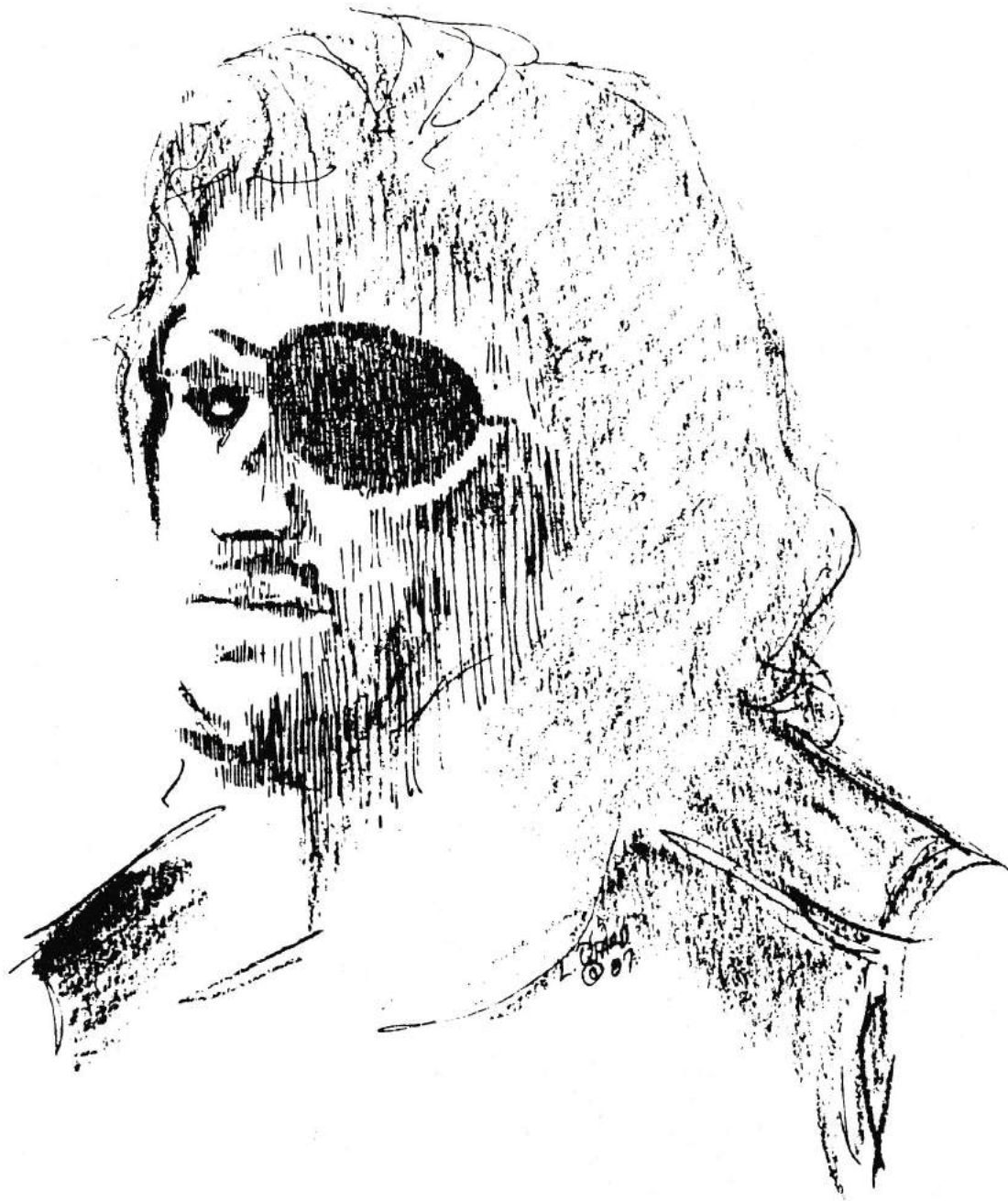
In Boston, he kept a very low profile - until he found a lone USPF motorcycle cop. He spent a day "modifying" the Harley to make it unrecognizable as former USPF equipment. Then he gathered what supplies he'd need for the long journey and took to the highway, heading west toward California.

He'd thought it over, long and hard, while Grandma pampered him and tended his leg. The decision to walk away, to abandon the violent and self-destructive lifestyle he'd grown used to since his return from the War hadn't been an easy one. He was still bitter and full of hate for "The Man" but maybe it was time to channel his energies to a more constructive outlet than crime and violence. It was something to think about and the long trip west would give him more time to decide what to do with his "new lease on life". In their very brief acquaintance, Elizabeth Stockwell had had a great effect on him, though he wouldn't fully realize just how great until much later.

California had always been a beacon to Americans in the East who'd

grown tired of city life and Snake felt a little like a pioneer as he set out. As it had been when the country was new, the vast area west of the Mississippi was now sparsely settled and filled with known and unknown dangers. That was why the underground Rapid Transit System that he and Bill Taylor had once used had been so carefully maintained. Snake found that he was looking forward to the challenge. Once he made it to California . . . well, he had plenty of time to worry about that. Later.

* * * * *



ONE-EYED JACK TIMES THREE

by L.J. Ojard

...or should that be three aces? Whatever.

You probably wouldn't be reading this if you weren't familiar with the first "Jack/Ace", Snake Plissken.

His character was, of course, the focal point in the movie **Escape From New York** which took a dark-humored look at the near future wherein a young man, already an outlaw, was molded into an anti-hero by circumstance. We found out tantalizingly little about him except that he had been a member of the elite Special Forces and, evidently, was a natural at the finer points of waging war, personal or otherwise.

I seem to recall Commissioner Bob Hauk, wonderfully played by veteran actor Lee Van Cleef, mentioning something about Plissken being the youngest man ever to be decorated by the president. Actually, the youngest war hero to be decorated by a U. S. President that I've heard of was a thirteen year old sailor in World War II. Incredible.

The second member of this trio cropped up on a daytime soap several years ago (you will note his likeness at the end of this article). I stumbled across Steve ('Patch' Johnson) Nichols while flipping channels one afternoon. There, all blond, blue-eyed (one), patched, and leather clad was a gravely-voiced, rough-talking, Plissken clone. This man finally married the woman of his dreams, yet has done anything but settle down into a tranquil, domestic life.

This patched sweetheart is a pool hustler who, on a regular basis, gets up to his armpits in hot water. He works with the ISA, James Bonding it up with the international group when not solving home-town crimes. This Plissken-like character easily slides from choir-boy to one mean muther and back again. He is loyal, stubborn, and thoroughly likable even at his worst moments. The soap is **Days of Our Lives** and worth a look.

The third in this trio is no figment of any imagination. He exists and does so, I would imagine, much like Snake Plissken would do, living from hand to mouth, no permanent roof, unless it's offered by someone he trusts--for the moment, anyway.

Now, I know for a fact that every woman with a fondness for Snake has fantasized about meeting, working, running with, but most importantly making love to Snake, or her idea of Snake Plissken. I am, by no means, an exception, but as vivid as one may dream of a meeting, you have no clue what to expect of yourself until confronted with the situation. Let me explain.

It's been my habit to rely on Intercity Transit--buses--for my transportation only because I don't have a car, I don't want a car, and I turn into a foul-mouthed, broom-riding bitch when confronted with other drivers who don't meet my standards. I'd need a tank to shove the bastards out of my way. That's what I get for living in downtown Seattle during my "formative" years (18 to 25). Back to the subject...

The near hour travel time was and is a great place to write. Rarely does anyone sit beside me, I mean would you ask a grouchy looking old broad to move an attache case, purse, coat and assorted packages? Hmmm?

You brave soul, you! Anyway, the trip is split into two half-hour rides, the revamped downtown area being where transfers are made.

As in most towns the kids, from middle school to college congregate in the area with their wild hair, denim jackets, leathers, ear-shattering music--remarkable how some things never change. I guess I never really paid much attention to individuals as I was usually engrossed in writing, not to say that any good looking, long-haired, well-built male gets by without ample study, but the facts usually didn't sink in until I put my pen down and 'rewound' the visual feast for more casual study. Maybe I'd seen him before and just not noticed. How the hell could I not notice?!?

I made the usual transfer, notebook in hand and completely engrossed in a tete'a tete, when I suddenly realized dinner would consist of ice cubes and bread crumbs unless I bought something PDQ at the mom/pop grocery around the corner. Still concentrating on my story, I dove off the bus. The finer details of the confrontation did not blot out the fact that someone with a heavy footstep followed close behind me. Daylight. Lots of people. No big deal.

I put my supplies on the counter and rummaged through my purse for the correct change, but as I put the money down, I became acutely aware of someone standing behind me--right on my heels behind me. Then a long, bare arm reached over my shoulder and dropped a pack of cigarettes and the change for same with mine. Curious at the impatience, I turned.

The first thing I noticed after the definite maleness was a wide, leather watchband just like the one Commissioner Hawk wore in the movie. That, coupled with the story still sloshing around in my brain, caused me to smile as I followed the heavily muscled line back to the owner who, upon my turning, did not budge. I was pinned, hip to zipper, as I stared up into a face right out of EFNy! It took me a very long time to re-grasp reality enough realize this one dark blue eye, left eye patched, unshaven face and shoulder length sun-lightened hair belonged to a total stranger.

As the smile on my face faded to absolute shock, his husky voice came from the echo of Kurt/Snake's mouth and asked quietly, though obviously amused, "Did I scare you?"

Oh, hell no! That's not what I said, but that's sure what I was thinking.

He smelled of tobacco, leather, and something else, not unpleasant, something like he'd been working on a car. He wore a denim jacket--minus the sleeves, faded jeans, and cycle boots. And I was still in contact with this very real, very warm body from hip to heel.

Know what I did, I mean, after I croaked, "no," to his question? I scurried away like a frightened rabbit, that's what. Out the door as fast as my stubby nubbins would go. I hurriedly climbed back aboard the bus, dropped into the first seat and breathed a sigh of relief as though I'd just escaped with my life. Of course, then I really started thinking about him, my lack of of bravado, and the story I'd been writing. Being alone on the bus at that point, I laughed, brought out the story, read the last few lines and smiled again at my own idiotic reaction. And finally looked up. Guess who was grinning back? You got it. He stood outside the bus on the sidewalk next to the window. Grinning. Just

grinning.

Those who know me are well aware of the fact that I blush so well, I've been nicknamed "Neon Cheeks". This time was no exception, but luckily, he was distracted by someone and walked away. That gave me a great opportunity to study this look-alike. From the initial contact, I'd say he's six feet tall, maybe six-one. He's built more like Mel Gibson--heavily muscled legs--than Kurt Russell's classic "v" of wide shoulders and narrow hips.

The ten minute lag finally over, the driver I'll call Dave, climbed aboard. I noticed him talking to this "Plissken" and as soon as we were under way, I began asking questions about him. His reaction was instantaneous.

"You a nark?"

So much for formalities.

I happened to be carrying some of this issue's drawings with me and flashed the cover at him.

"Where the hell'd you get that?"

"Ever see the movie **Escape From New York**? Snake Plissken?"

He had, so that settled the question of why I would ask about his friend and, as I discovered, someone he grew up with on a Reservation on the Olympic Peninsula. Patch, as he calls himself, is half American Indian.

The driver, also half (although looking at him, I'd say half human and half woolly mammoth), started telling me about the rough life he and Patch had growing up, but since a former roomie back in 1979 was also half Indian--with pale blue eyes--I knew exactly what torment can come from growing up and not being accepted into either world. Children can be cruel. The Indian kids tormented him because his dad was white, then he switched to another school and slammed headlong into exactly the same situation, only this time because his mother was Indian.

Basically, I learned that Patch is one of the thousands of street-people, doing whatever it takes to survive. I was told he lost his eye in Viet Nam, but I think it's more likely that he lost it in a street fight. Other than that, I heard nothing that didn't sound like something right out of the EFNy novel.

I got used to seeing Patch in constant attendance with at least four groupies, all young enough to probably be high school students. He hung around with them, though I noticed he was also friends with a young police officer that frequents the area. Patch seemed to really be in his element with all that attention. Then abruptly, he disappeared for three full weeks. I assumed he had taken up residence elsewhere, maybe Seattle, until one bleak afternoon.

I saw him first from the back, but something was wrong with his usual stance. He seemed hunched over, lost in the remnants of a too-big, torn and dirty jacket. He stood away from the usual crowd, hands shoved deep into his pockets. Something was wrong, but I didn't know what until he turned.

The whole front of his lovely, long hair was shaved off. On that bristled skull ran a ragged scar from right ear to left temple. The stitches were still visible. He looked frail and fragile, having lost at

least twenty pounds. But worst of all, he couldn't seem to meet anyone's gaze. His pride, confidence, self-assurance, whatever you want to call it, was gone. Ripped away.

I saw the driver talk to him, offer him a cigarette that he took like some wary, but starving animal taking an offering of food. His trust, that's what was missing. He no longer trusted anyone.

It was an effort to squelch the urge to offer Patch a roof, meal, money, whatever he needed. But Dave warned me against ever trying to "interview" Patch during our first conversation. He did so in such a manner that seemed more a warning for safety than anything else, yet it was difficult to look at this present-day Plissken and not want to talk, especially when he smiled. I don't know much about reptiles, but Dave gave me the impression that's exactly what I'd have been dealing with on even the most casual level. Funny, Patch didn't look like he had fangs.

On the journey home, Dave told me what had happened to his friend. He said there was this character that invited Patch out for a couple drinks at a local tavern. Patch cannot hold much alcohol, but this "friend" got him totally fried then proceeded to beat him with a baseball bat. Just for the hell of it, mind you. This "friend", from what I understand was known for other such sessions with invalids, old people, anyone who was in no shape to fight back. Patch, drunk, just happened to fit the bill. The cost was three weeks in intensive care.

Dave also said that the police asked Patch to file charges against the guy. They wanted him too, because everyone else he'd assaulted was afraid of reprisal. The dude was BAD. Patch refused. He said the guy would probably get off on a technicality. He had a better idea. He wouldn't get mad. He'd get even. The police just wanted the man stopped. Patch insisted he had a few friends that would have a persuasive talk with him.

Patch contacted his friends. They happened to ride Harleys, from what I'm told. They're members of a rather exclusive group, that usually wear leather and denim decorated with chains, etc., if you get my drift. These friends are feared by some, but they also happen to have a real dislike for those who pick on the helpless.

From what I understand, they finally had their nice, long talk with the bad-ass and somehow, in the course of the conversation, he broke his legs. Several times. He also decided he would give up his life of crime. Gee, maybe he got religion or something.

Anyway, the last time I saw Patch, his hair had grown back, though he was wearing it shorter. He was dressed in gray corduroy slacks, a light blue jacket, and was carrying an arm full of books as he ran to catch the Evergreen State College bus. He looked healthy, happy and hopeful. He blended well with the rest of the crowd.

You know, in a way, it's kind of a shame. He would have made a great character in a story.

Nah. Who'd believe it?



Stephen Earl "Patch" Johnson

(played by Steve Nichols,
DAYS OF OUR LIVES, NBC)



PRIVATE TRAP
by Jeanne Cavelos

Snake decided that it hadn't been the smartest move in his life, stealing Hawk's car. But after he'd left the president to his rock and roll, he'd come upon it with luck too good to ignore. A parking lot full of blackbelly transportation, him with a bum leg, and H-A-U-K on the godforsaken license plate. Snake wondered who'd talked Hawk into that. Maybe his son. Maybe plates were blackbelly status symbols.

He'd thought at first that it must be a trap. Giving him his pardon, then arresting him in the parking lot--it fit right in with Hawk's mentality. Blackbelly Hawk, who'd suggested as if it were the most reasonable thing in the world that they work together. As if Snake didn't want to destroy everything that Hawk and the rest of them valued. As if Snake didn't hate Hawk. As if they were kindred.

So he'd checked around the car, but it had been clear. As Fresno Bob would have said, a heist made in heaven. Of course he'd turned it into hell before he'd gone, leaving behind a lot full of flaming wrecks. Like Bob advised, if you have to take it lying down, burn the fucking bed.

Snake almost laughed; he was that far gone. Sure, they'd bandaged him all neat and tidy, but that didn't quite fill the bill as far as Snake was concerned. His leg had been numb for a while now--Snake couldn't judge how long--and his head buzzed pleasantly, as if he were resting swathed in pillows on a jet. Air Force One. He wondered if that was how the president had felt before he'd crashed. But he'd had an escape pod.

Snake blinked rapidly and straightened, trying to find something of interest within the domain of the headlights. Rain poured against the windshield too fast for the wipers, blurring the dim section of road that had become his world. Darkness filled the space on either side. It seemed like hours since that last car had rushed blindingly past him. The double yellow lines ran on. Snake didn't know where in hell he was.

He had planned to dump the car for something else as soon as he was a few miles away, but his body had fit so perfectly into the seat, and the idea of movement carried with it such a threat of pain, that he'd gone on and on, until now he didn't know if he could ever get out. He'd slipped into this one, all right.

Hawk might figure out his car was missing, might not, but Snake had ruined the tape, and they'd be looking for him. Until the world decided to blow itself up, anyway. Better than that, he was on some godforsaken road with his gas gauge below E. And as he thought that, the engine died.

"Son of a bitch." Snake slid an arm beneath his dead leg and dropped the leg onto the clutch. He reached for the ignition wires. Rain splattered on the roof, poured down the windshield to enclose him in water. The car slowed. Snake found the wires, ripped them apart and brought them together again. The wipers jerked across the windshield. The engine caught and died in one breath. He tried again. Again. As the car crested a hill, Snake's hands closed around the wires. There, beyond the water, was a blur of blue neon, like salvation. Snake brought the wires together

and the wipers clicked quietly back and forth, resolving the blur. It was a sign. Bates Motel. Vacancy.

The parking lot was empty. Snake coasted in on the crunching gravel as far as the car would take him and hoped that night and rain would hide his presence. He snapped off the headlights. Before him rose a hill, and on the hill was a house with one lighted window on the second story level, left side. As the wipers crossed his view, he thought he saw a shadow behind the window's sheer curtain. Snake squinted but saw only light. He pulled the ignition wires apart and the wipers went still, leaving him with the sound of the rain. If there were no other car here, or gas, the Bates Motel could be as entrapping as Hauk's car had been.

Snake lifted his leg off the clutch and it sent out a twinge. Snake smiled. It knew what was coming. He pushed open the door.

The sensation that pillows cushioned his head disappeared with his first step. Pain found a center in his eye. Snake reached the motel by keeping his leg stiff. The door to the office was open, the light on. Shivering, he grasped one of the posts that supported the porch overhang and pulled himself up the single step onto the charred boards. Wiping the rain from his eye, Snake looked down the row of doors. After the first two the building collapsed into timbers and darkness. A burned-down motel run by Mom and Pop Crazy. Great. Just fantastic. Snake went in.

It was a shabby little place, older than most, but cleaner than most. Though the office smelled of old smoke, he saw no fire damage. Snake hit the bell on the desk several times, intensifying the throbbing in his eye. No one came. Get a little rest and then worry about it, his body told him. Finding that sound advice, Snake went around the counter to the board on which the keys hung. He'd just rest for a few hours. Hoping that there was something left to sleep on, he took the key to number one.

"Hello."

Snake spun, pain shooting back through his head. The middle-aged man across the counter wore a black turtleneck and a nervous smile.

"That's not the way we do things around here."

Snake stared at him.

"We have p--procedures. I'm supposed to give you the key. But it really doesn't matter, because we're closed." The man shrugged and smiled again. "Fire damage." His eyes were sharp, wary.

"I'm out of gas," Snake said.

"Oh. Well I haven't got any. I mean, I don't have a car, so why would I have any gas?"

"Something wrong?"

The man's smile was half sly, half uncertain. "Why would you say that?"

He had a touch of madness in him. At least a cough. "You seem nervous," Snake breathed, leaning onto the counter.

"No. Nervous? No. I was just--just thinking. There's a gas station about two miles down the road. Of course they'd be closed now. You must have seen it. Or were you coming from Fairvale?"

Snake was too tired for this. He walked around the counter.

The man backed away. "What I was going to--to suggest was that you stay in the house with my mother and I tonight, and in the morning we

can--can call the station as soon as they open and get them to bring out some gas."

Snake stopped before the man. "Fine." He dropped the key to number one into the man's hand and walked out.

The man overtook him. "I'm Norman Bates." He opened his umbrella as they stepped down from the porch and solicitously covered Snake. "I didn't catch your name."

Snake had the urge to shove the umbrella down Bates' throat, but decided to wait at least until they'd gotten to the house. If he hadn't seen the car just then, Snake probably wouldn't have answered. "Hauk," he said.

"Well, Mr. Hauk, I'm--I'm really sorry about the motel. We're re-building, but it's a lot of work. And to tell you the truth, we weren't getting too many customers anyway."

Snake looked up the long, twisting string of stairs and thought that somewhere Hauk was laughing. "You and your mother live here alone?"

"She's a gentle woman really. She wouldn't hurt a fly."

Snake started up the steps at a run he hoped would carry him to the top. On the fourth step his leg buckled and he barely caught himself. Bates rushed up and took his arm, his expression in the dim light intense, different. Snake concentrated on getting up the stairs. At least there weren't fifty flights.

As he struggled upward, Snake thought of Hauk. Hauk figured since he'd sold out to the system, everybody would. Snake ought to take him up on his offer. Screw Hauk over as royally as he had been. Feed him some of his own blackbelly medicine. Snake liked that idea. In fact, his affection for it grew with every step. It pulsed in his eye with the pain.

"...need some rest. It's too hard out there. That's why I like having this place. A strong man like you reduced to such a state. We're safe here, away from all that filth."

Snake spared a glance in Bates' direction. Some were crazier than others.

Bates continued, more hesitant. "It's like a--a private island. But sometimes I admit I do get lonely." He laughed shortly. "Sometimes it seems more like a private trap." They had reached the porch. "Would you care to join me for a snack?" Bates closed his umbrella, shook it, and opened the door, his eyes on Snake, intent. After the exertion, Snake found he was hungry.

"Why not," he said, pulling himself up into the house. Bates followed him.

"That's the living room in there. You can rest until it's ready, if you want." The house looked like a historical monument.

"Bathroom," Snake said.

"Oh. The uh... Upstairs."

Snake gazed at the stairs and imagined Hauk's fleshy throat in his hands as it had been in the examination room, imagined choking off the maddening stream that came out of his mouth: the deals, the justifications, the bullshit. "Why not," he muttered, clutched the banister and started up.

"Do you need any help?" Bates warbled.

"No."

He dragged himself up the stairs and nearly fell into the bathroom.

Having satisfied his immediate needs, Snake bent over the sink and splashed cold water over his head, his neck. He'd pulled himself back from his stupor in the car and he knew now that he couldn't afford to let himself go again until he was somewhere safe. In hell, with Hauk. He smiled at the thought and began to tug off his shirt. A shower would keep him going.

He turned on the cold water and ran his hand through the spray. Just what the doctor ordered. Snake dropped the toilet seat, sat, and yanked off his boots, dropping them to the floor. Standing, he worked his pants down over the pressure bandage around his thigh. Soaked through the bandage was a large tan circle surrounding a smaller red one. Snake decided to keep the bandage on.

He jerked upright, feeling watched.

The door was closed. Snake turned slowly. The outdated fixtures, the white plastic shower curtain, the neatly folded towels hanging over flowered wallpaper--everything seemed all right. The water sprayed, waiting.

He flipped off his eye patch and hung it on the doorknob. Avoiding his reflection, he stepped into the shower. The curtain rings rattled across the bar.

The dangling eye-patch swung in the air rising from the crack beneath the door. Boots lay under the sink, crossed carelessly. The silhouette of a bather slithered over a shower curtain caught in conflicting currents. And above the towel rack, in the wall, there was a hole, a circle the size of the red stain on Snake's bandage, cut out from the center of the wallpaper flower, hidden and dark, like a trap, encompassing, filled with brown and black, and then, suddenly, with light.

"He's gone into the shower anyway," Mother said.

"That's disgusting, Mother. It's disgusting. How could you do that?"

"Don't you dare to call me disgusting, you ungrateful boy. Look at all I've done for you, and you a disrespectful boy with a cheap erotic mind. Haven't I taken care of you all these years? Haven't I watched over you to make sure you didn't do anything good boys shouldn't?"

"You don't have to watch over Mr. Hauk."

"You need a father to teach you manners, boy. A father to take care of us and rebuild the motel. To do all the things only a man can do."

"I'm a man, Mother."

"No you're not, Norman, and you never will be until you learn to mind your mother. I'm going to ask Mr. Hauk to stay and help us rebuild the motel. Your dawdling certainly hasn't gotten us very far."

"I can do it."

"A son is a poor substitute for a lover."

"No, Mother."

"You do manage to look ludicrous when you try to give me orders."

"Please, Mother. Didn't you see his leg? He's some kind of criminal. He's dangerous. That--that--"

"Tattoo, Norman? Say what you mean, boy. I didn't raise you to be some mealy-mouthed girl."

"What about that tattoo?"

"What about it? Many of our men in the service have tattoos, Norman. It shows their patriotism. It's one of the things men do, Norman. Men with guts."

"Men with cheap erotic minds, Mother?"

She slapped him. "No, Norman. But you'll never know because you'll always be a boy, with nothing but disgusting fantasies about strange girls. Now, go down and make Mr. Hauk his dinner before he comes out of the shower. And you be on your best behavior. I'll be watching you, boy."

Snake felt better. The pain in his eye had fallen to near its customary throbbing and his leg was cooperative, if unsteady. Snake figured it was his last wind, and he wondered how long it would last. Long enough, he hoped, to get him through the night, to get him somewhere safe where he could deal with Hauk, make him regret ever thinking they might be a team. Anger gave him energy. The trip to the kitchen wasn't hard.

Bates looked up from the stove. "It's nothing fancy," he smiled. "Just sandwiches and...tea."

Snake didn't trust that look. Within it was something he recognized: hate. He sat before one of the two sandwiches.

"Isn't your mother eating?"

"No, she's--she's ill. She eats in her room." He paused. "You can go ahead and start without me, Mr. Hauk. I'm just waiting for the tea."

Snake leaned back in his seat. "Call me Bob."

Bates' jaw worked as if he were chewing his own words.

Snake saved his energy.

They waited for the tea.

Bates brought the steaming cups to the table, put one before Snake, one before his own plate. Snake didn't know exactly why, but there was no way he was going to drink that tea. No way. Shit, he didn't even like tea.

There was no reason to tell Bates that though.

Snake requested milk, then sugar. He stirred. He waited until Bates started his sandwich, then bit into his own. Seeing this, Bates took a long sip of tea. Snake ignored him and continued to eat. The bread tasted different. Good. It reminded Snake of the bread he'd been served at high roller Johnny O'Malley's. O'Malley had a personal chef and a dread fear of chemical contamination. Bates drank again, nervous.

"Do you like the sandwich?"

Snake nodded, chewing.

Bates took another sip. "You don't like tea, do you?"

"Love it," Snake said.

Bates leaned forward. "You don't want to offend me by not trying it, do you?"

Snake stuffed the end of his sandwich into his mouth. He fingered the cup.

Bates jumped up. "Don't drink it!" he shrilled.

Snake jerked his hand back.

Bates regarded him coldly, reminding Snake, for a strange moment, of Hawk: 'The tape, Plissken.'

"You awful boy." His voice was high, quavering.

Snake's mouth tightened with distaste.

"Think you can kill my lover in your foolish jealousy? You're nothing, boy. I've taken care of you, boy; I've made you; I've formed you. You're crazy as a jaybird, but did I have you locked up? I've tried to help you, boy, for isn't a boy's best friend his mother? And all I get in return is hate."

Contempt vanished into uncertainty in the instant before Bates answered in his normal voice. "I don't..."

"A son is supposed to love his mother like a mother loves her son." Bates put his hands on the table and spat his venom toward Snake. "I try to rebuild our lives and you poison my dreams, boy; you poison them with your spite. You're bad; you've always been bad. You've always been bad. You've always been a disgusting boy with disgusting thoughts, in spite of everything I've done to teach you."

Bates straightened. "I'm sorry, Mother."

"I won't pardon this, Norman. I won't pardon this. You go to your room this instant. And don't let me hear a word out of you."

Snake held himself tense, ready, but Bates turned, as if watching someone leave, then took his chair, dragged it beside Snake, and sat.

"That boy's had his way too long, Bob. I'm just a tired old woman. I can't keep watch on him all by myself." Bates looked at him in appeal, and Snake was duly impressed. There were crazies and there were crazies, but this guy was a class-A psycho.

Crafty, intense, Bates put a forearm on the table.

"Together we could teach that boy some manners. Teach him his place." His voice softened. "You could have a nice life here. Full of pleasure."

Snake thought of himself offering Brain and Maggie a glider trip out of New York.

"I could have had that boy locked up years ago. He's a great strain on me. He doesn't want me to be happy. But I won't send him away. I won't because I'm going to teach him." Bates leaned closer and whispered, "I hate that boy and I'm never going to let him go." His fingers touched Snake's arm and Snake started to his feet.

Bates stood, his eyes sharp. "I'll have Norman apologize."

He strode out and Snake gazed after him, uneasy. Snake went to the window. It had stopped raining. He could try walking to the gas station. There were bound to be some junkers there. He might even get some crazies to give him a ride. Hearing footsteps on the staircase, Snake turned.

Bates stopped in the doorway, breathing heavily. "You're not going to have my mother."

Snake spread his hand, "I don't want your mother. I just want to get out of here."

"You don't--" Bate's expression turned decidedly dangerous, "--you

don't--love her?"

"I'm crazy about her, but if I don't get going soon, you're going to have blackbellies cutting the tape on your new motel."

"You're a criminal."

"I'm an asshole, but I'm not one that's going to sit around here and wait to be captured."

"Mother wouldn't want that. Come on."

Snake followed Bates out the kitchen door and down--finally--a few steps to a shed. Bates pulled open the door and flipped on a switch. Inside was a car.

Snake thought of killing him then, but the memory of Bates leaning toward him, whispering how much he hated himself, stopped Snake. Life could be a worse hell than death could ever be. Snake knew that. It was his edge.

"Where'd you get it?" he asked. The car was an ancient yellow Ford, but it looked almost new.

"S--someone left it here."

Snake held out his hand. "Keys."

Bates smiled proudly. "I hid them." He went to a tool box in the corner and began digging through it. "You know, I have a th--theory."

Snake put his weight on his good leg and tried to ignore the throbbing in his eye. It'd be a cold day in Miami Beach before he gave a shit what Bates' theory was.

"People never run away from anything," Bates continued. "We're all in our private traps. Prisoners in them. We scratch and claw, but only at the air, only at each other. And for all of it, we never budge an inch. Ha!" He lifted out the keys.

Snake took them and limped around the car to the driver's side, Bates trailing after him. Snake was thinking of Hawk; of the long trail of destruction he'd blazed since Leningrad, ending in a tangled tape and a burning lot; of the funnel of pain in his eye drawing him down, trapping him. He'd let Hawk's car stand as payment for now.

Snake opened the door and slid inside. He unrolled the window. "If you don't want this place crawling with blackbellies, you'll move my car in here. Can you start it without keys?"

Bates leaned down to look inside and nodded. With a half-cynical, half-uncertain smile, Bates asked, "Do you think you can escape, Mr. Hawk?"

He started the engine. "Call me Snake," he said.

The
Long Road Home



by
J. A. Raish

THE LONG ROAD HOME

Sequel to THE COLDEST WAR

by
J. A. Raish

"All right, Hawk, ya' got me here - now whaddaya want?"

Snake Plissken had come to Bob Hawk's hotel room very reluctantly. He had flatly refused at first, but then something in the Police Commissioner's voice had made him change his mind.

"Siddown, Plissken. Make yourself at home." Hawk's voice was even.

Snake looked around at the posh surroundings of the Presidential Suite, and answered sarcastically. "Um hm. Sure. Right at home."

Hawk was beginning to doubt his judgment on this whole deal. Being in such close proximity to a man who hated him as intensely as Plissken did was making him wish he'd stayed in retirement. His ulcer had finally started to calm down. It hadn't been that long since he'd sent Plissken into the nightmare they called a prison to rescue the President. Not that it would matter. He didn't figure that hate like Plissken's was likely to fade with time.

Hawk sat down tiredly on the overstuffed sofa and gestured toward the opposing chair. "Just sit down - please."

Snake eyed him suspiciously, then moved slowly to comply. As he settled back into the deep cushions, he reached into his jacket pocket and brought out a pack of cigarettes. He stuck one in the corner of his mouth where it hung loosely as he spoke. "Thought you retired." He couldn't resist a little dig at Hawk's age.

"I did."

"Just couldn't stay away, could you, blackbelly?" Another dig.

Hawk's eyes narrowed. "Something like that." His voice remained even.



As he lit the cigarette, Snake grunted in disgust, then, to Hauk's surprise, added, "From what I've heard, the inmates weren't doin' so well after you left. Food cuts, and I heard a lot of 'em weren't ever 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."

After a brief, tense silence, Hauk moved on to the business that had brought him back to the job he hated more than Plissken could ever know.

"I've got another job for you . . ."

Looking angry and indignant, Snake started to get up. "Look, asshole, I told you before, I'm not . . ."

Hauk interrupted, "I think this one just might interest you, Plissken. Sid down."

Snake relaxed back down into the chair, drawing deeply on the cigarette.

"All right, Hauk, but it'd better be good."

Hauk smiled. "It is, Snake, it is."

"The name's Plissken."

Hauk nodded impatiently, then went on. "About six weeks ago, a prisoner was brought in. When Rehme saw her, he called me right away."

Plissken interrupted. "'Her'?"

Nodding, Hauk continued. "They'd already dropped her Inside before I could get there to check it out. But, we went over 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. "Then we dug a little deeper - back into what we could find of old Army records."

Plissken felt a chill. His voice came out as a hiss. "What're you getting at, old man?"

"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 blow up, but it sure as hell looks like she wasn't in it!"

"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 said that prisoner even moved liked her."

Snake was remembering how she moved. It was hard to speak.

"What'd she go in for?"

Hauk frowned. "Murder. Several of 'em, as a matter of fact."

Snake sat back, relaxing a little. "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 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 Leningrad. Just like I figured, there wasn't even any record of her goin' with Texas Thunder on that mission. According to the Army, Hilley was last recorded on her days off at 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 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 something that's 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, Hawk?"

Hawk smiled and ignored the remark. "Turns out that the evenin' we were limpin' back from Leningrad, a woman was found beaten nearly to death at the far side of the landin' field. No clothes, no ID. Her face was badly 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 night and all the next day. And, when she finally came out of the coma, she had total amnesia. So, her identity remained a mystery. Hell, because of the emergency evacuation, there was a major foul-up with the records 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 and thumbed through the papers until he found the one he wanted. "According to the medical reports, she had a fractured skull with severe concussion, both arms and half her ribs were broken, and there were 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?"

Hawk nodded. "Yeah, that too."

Snake breathed a single word. "Blair."

Hawk hadn't quite caught it. "What?"

Snake was staring at nothing.

Hawk 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 had finished.

Hawk 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, Snake spoke, his voice low, but not the menacing hiss as before. "You people keep records of the inmates' crimes? Like who they kill?"

Hawk's face split in a knowing smile as he realized the implication of Plissken's question. "We sure do."

He stood up and walked to the phone. Snake stood up and moved slowly toward the window. He'd been sitting long enough that his leg had stiffened up, making his usually slight limp more pronounced. Watching him, Hawk had to look away. He didn't need any more reminders of what he'd put Plissken through before.

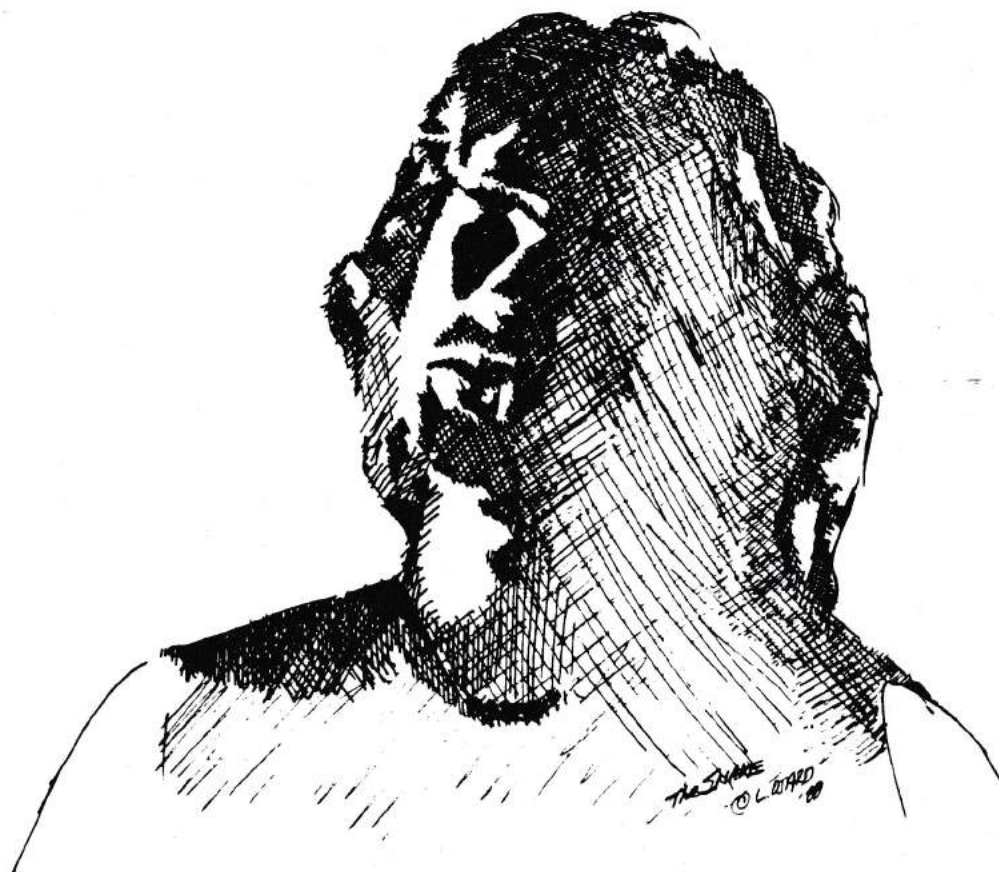
Snake heard Hawk ask for Rehme. Then, when the second-in-command answered, Hawk told him what information they needed. Because the computer was down, the wait was a long one.

Lighting another cigarette, Snake stood looking out the plate glass window, thinking about Hilley. Could it be possible that she really 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 happened?

He glanced over at Hawk who was watching him. Was it even her? Or was this just another one of Hawk's tricks?

He looked away, back out the window, mumbling to himself, "It's the only way I'll know for sure it's her."

Hawk 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, I'm still here. Just a second." He called out to get Snake's attention. "Plissken."

When Snake looked over at him, Hawk indicated the extension. Snake moved to pick up the receiver.

"All right, Tom, go ahead."

Hawk 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 Hawk's scrutiny.

"Thanks a lot, Tom. 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'."

"No, not Blair, but the others were all there. They must've caught her before she could get to him." He looked over at Hawk. "I mean you must've caught her."

Hawk 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 Hawk looked uncomfortable.

"If everything we've found out is true, no matter what she's 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.

Hawk nodded. "I guess so. I kinda liked that lady. She had a lotta class."

Snake agreed, a faraway look on his face. "Yeah, a lotta class."

* * *

Once again Snake Plissken stood with Bob Hawk and Tom Rehme inside the Material Disbursement room of the Liberty Island Control Center, arming himself prior to going Inside. At Hawk's insistence, he was taking a full survival pack since they had no idea how long it might take to find her. With no time limit, he could afford to be less conspicuous this time and it would take more gear for him to stay undercover.

Plissken was busy examining a pistol and only half listening to Hawk and Rehme. Then he froze as the stray idea that had stayed stubbornly in the back of his mind finally burst full blown into his consciousness. Hawk immediately noticed the change in his demeanor.

"What is it, Plissken?"

Snake was staring thoughtfully at the weapon in his hands. He glanced up a little absently at the two men and spoke quietly. "Blair."

Hawk looked confused. "What about him?"

A thin smile had crept to Plissken's lips. "Maybe he's Inside. Maybe she got caught on purpose."

Hawk's eyes widened and he nodded. Then, with a thin smile, he gestured Plissken toward the door. "Let's check it out."

*



Snake scanned the display on the computer terminal's screen, the light from the read-out casting an eerie green glow on his face. He was unable to remember Blair's full name - if he'd ever actually known it - so they had to wade through a lot of records. But eventually the computer came up with a match.

Snake breathed a pleased "'bout time!" as the data on Blair flashed onto the screen. It was the same Blair all right. Snake checked the date he'd been dropped Inside - it had been just a few weeks after his own brief visit there. Snake was surprised it had taken so long. Blair had been right on the edge back in Helsinki. But it did make him wonder what the man had done that the blackbellies finally considered bad enough to put him away permanently. He read on, and what he read made even him a little queasy. For once, the blackbellies should've done the world a favor and blown the sick fucker right out of his socks.

* * *

A flat black helicopter, running nearly silent in stealth mode, landed Plissken on the roof of the World Trade Center. Coming in unheard, unseen, no one would know he was there until he wanted them to. He figured Hawk couldn't afford to give him another jet glider. Not this time. He was risking enough just sending someone in. New York Max was supposed to be for keeps.

He took the elevator down to the fiftieth floor, then walked the seemingly endless stairs to the street level.

First, he decided, he had to find a secure place to base his operation. He couldn't very well lug the heavy back pack around the whole time. It would be too obvious and would make dodging Crazies rather difficult.

He found a spot that suited his purpose just before sunrise and settled in for the day, to watch the action on the street and plan his strategy. He knew this mission Inside wouldn't be any easier than the last but at least now he could take as much time as he needed. Or at least as much as he could stand.

*

After giving the matter a great deal of thought, Snake decided to take the direct approach. He went out onto the streets the next day, grabbed the first man he came across in a stranglehold and asked a simple question in his most menacing voice.

"Where can I find a woman?"

It seemed like a logical question.

Following up on every lead, no matter how vague, Plissken spent day after day locating most of the few women New York still held. Maggie had been one in a million - literally.

But, he didn't find Hilley, not even a trace, not even a rumor. None of the other women he found knew of anyone fitting her description.

After two frustrating weeks, he was about ready to quit. He'd thought that the twenty-four hours he'd spent here before were bad, but being this long in the hellhole was driving him crazy. The place was dark and depressing. No hope lived Inside - it was truly the city of the dead.

He wanted out of there badly, but something a little like hope, maybe more like tenacity kept him there looking.

*

One night he went out a little too tired, got a little careless - and almost lost it all. Fatigue and frustration made him too bold, throwing caution to the winds. He was walking down the middle of the street rather than keeping to the shadows as he usually did and was about in the middle of the block when a large, apparently well-organized group of torch-carrying men rounded the corner ahead of him. He was able to crouch down behind some debris but knew that he'd be spotted within seconds as the men drew closer.

Cursing his own stupidity, he checked every possible escape route, knowing that he could never make it to cover. Some of the men were carrying crude crossbows at ready. Snake knew from painful experience just what one of those could do.

A second later Snake recognized the leader of the mob - it was Blair, and he knew this wouldn't be a situation he'd be able to talk his way out of. Even if Blair didn't recognize him at first sight, it wouldn't take long. He checked the load in his Ouzi and braced himself for a fight. The one thing in his favor - the element of surprise - just might give him enough of an edge to escape. And it gave him a grim satisfaction knowing that he'd be able to kill Blair before the others could take him out.

At the same time Snake rose to his feet, ready to open fire, a loud crash behind the mob got everyone's attention, and the group turned as a man. Just before he took off the opposite direction, running for all he was worth, he spotted the source of the clamor. A lone man disappeared into the shadows a block away, the old, battered metal garbage cans he'd knocked over still rolling back and forth noisily in the street. The group gave a shout and took off in hot pursuit.

Surprised but more than a little pleased and relieved at the turn of events, Snake, too, disappeared into the shadows, thinking about what had just happened. There had been something hauntingly familiar about the guy, but it had all happened so fast and the light in the street was piss-poor. He wouldn't know until later how much trouble he'd just caused the man who'd saved his life.

*

He went out late that night, goaded by the fact of having only three days of food left, five if he really stretched it. He had already decided to wait until he was completely out of food before planning his next move.

As he moved silently through the dark, rain-wet streets, a shadowy figure a block distant caught his eye. He quickened his pace, watching the dark form carefully. His heart began to pound - it had to be Hilley! Or someone who moved just like her.

She was moving fast, keeping to the shadows, intent on someone or something ahead of her. Snake was able to come within fifty feet of her before he caught the steel toe of his boot on an old, rusty tailpipe. Startled by the noise, she whipped around, then disappeared into the shadows just as he looked up again.

For over an hour he scoured the area for her, cursing softly at his clumsiness. Finding no sign of her, he started back toward the building he was holing up in. He was exhausted and angry. She'd been so damn close . . . He'd just about had it.

Snake never heard or saw what hit him from somewhere on his blind side. He hit the ground stunned nearly unconscious, unable to move. He barely felt the search that relieved him of his weapons. Then his assailant stood up and put a heavy foot on his chest. As his vision cleared, he saw a dirty hand slowly draw a long-bladed knife out of its sheath. His eye moved up - it was Hilley, with a murderous look in the beautiful green eyes that had enchanted him so many years ago. She knelt full weight on his chest and right arm, and grabbed a handful of his hair. As Snake watched, the knife came toward his throat. He spoke her name, his voice a hoarse whisper. Her eyes were cold and held no trace of recognition. The knife came on with only the briefest hesitation. His left hand came up to grasp the wrist of her knife hand. She was incredibly strong; the knife was slowed but still moved toward him. Her expression hadn't changed. He repeated her name, a little louder than before. She slammed his head against the concrete sidewalk. Dazed, his grip weakened, but he didn't let go.

Deciding he'd better do something - or die - Snake heaved her off and rolled away from her. Watching her, he dragged himself up to a kneeling position.

Putting the knife away, Hilley stared at him. Then, a thin, eerie smile touched her lips. Snake thought she'd finally recognized him. He lowered his head and felt the back of it. His hand came away bloody.

"Christ, Hilley, you coulda killed me."

No response. He looked back up at her. She was pulling his pistol out of her waistband, caressing the cold metal of the barrel. She aimed the gun at his face.

Snake readied himself to dive for nonexistent cover, but he knew she was too good a shot to miss no matter what he did. She was pulling the trigger when a thin wraith of a man appeared out of the darkness.

"No, Hilley - don't shoot 'im!"

The harsh whisper sounded loud in the quiet of the very-early morning. Automatically the gun swung toward the newcomer, then dropped. Her expression changed to anger.

"Don't ever do that again, Pete!"

Snake had never heard her voice sound so strange. The gun came back to level at him.

Snake focused. It was Pete Marks, Hilley's former sergeant.

"No, Hilley - you can't kill him. He didn't do nothin'."

The gun swung back on Pete. "Whadda you mean 'no'?"

Pete backed down instantly, throwing his hands up in a defensive gesture.

"It's okay, Hilley. I only meant you shouldn't kill him - yet."

She looked back at Snake, glaring. "Why not?! I lost Blair again because of this asshole! I almost had him, Pete!"

Shocked, Snake just stared at her. There were tears in her red-rimmed eyes. His heart sank; her mind was gone. He wondered if there was anything left of the old Hilley besides the combat soldier he'd only heard stories about during the War.

He got to his feet slowly, but the movement caused her to whip the gun around once more in his direction. She snarled at him.

"Don't move, asshole!"

Pete moved toward her slowly. Snake caught his eye.

"Pete, what the hell's goin' on?"

Hilley snapped, "Shut up!"

Pete Mark's mouth dropped open as he stared in disbelief, "Plissken? Lieutenant Plissken?"

Snake nodded.

"Shit, Lieutenant I thought that was you the other night, but I didn't see how . . . 'Cripes! What the hell are you doin' in here?"

Losing patience, Snake nodded Hilley's way, forgetting at least temporarily to thank Pete for saving his ass - twice now. "I came in to get her out."

Hilley was feeling very confused. And confusion made her head hurt bad.

"Both of you SHUT UP!"

They turned to stare at her, surprised at the outburst. Then, Hilley froze, listening. Snake saw her sniff the air. Her eyes narrowed.

"Shit!"

She moved toward them fast, like a cat, the gun pulled in against her but still aimed at Snake. "Let's go, let's go!"

Snake was still angry enough to be stubborn. "Why?"

Hilley stuck the gun in his stomach and shoved him backward. "Crazies, that's why, asshole - now move!"

She turned without another word and shoved him on, jabbing him in the back occasionally with the barrel of the gun, just to remind him she was still there. A moment later, Pete moved out stealthily to follow.

Snake was mad as hell but decided against acting on it until he knew more about that was going on. Every time the gun poked him, Snake gritted his teeth and fought back the urge to flatten her. Besides, he still wasn't eager to find out who would come out on top in a real, no-holds-barred fight between them.

They moved through the streets and alleys quickly. Eventually, Hilley grabbed the back of his jacket and yanked him to a stop at the mouth of the alley they'd been traveling. Finally losing his temper, he started to protest. She jabbed with the gun, harder than before and hissed, "Sshhh!"

She watched and listened for several long seconds, then shoved him on around the corner of the building and down the stairs into the basement. She herded him into the corner of the room furthest from the entrance, then moved away to the small window, the gun never wavering from Snake's chest. Holding back the dropcloth covering the window, Hilley stood watching through the dirty glass. Snake leaned into the corner and waited, just staring at her in silence.

Her profile in the moonlight clearly showed the long ugly scar that ran from her jawline up across her left cheek, past her eye to disappear at the hairline. Remembering the flawless beauty of years past, the sight saddened him but he knew it wasn't the worst of her scars. He forced himself to look past the scar. Her face was smeared with dirt and sweat, her hair stringy and dull, her clothes ragged and filthy. The beautiful emerald eyes were still as green but the glint of amused intelligence was

gone, replaced by a look of hate and madness. Maybe he and Hawk were wrong. Maybe she was exactly where she belonged.

Glancing over, she caught him staring and glared at him until he looked away. Something about the man seemed hauntingly familiar to her and she wondered if she needed to kill him too. Probably not or she'd know it. She hadn't killed anyone yet that wasn't on her 'list', not even the blackbellies trying to capture her. But her last victim had been a blackbelly, had become a cop after the War, and killing him had gotten her here just as she had planned. She considered it a sort of 2-for-1 deal, kind of a bonus. Getting into the prison in one piece had been pretty tricky but she'd made it - alive and kicking.

After several minutes, Snake saw a thin smile come to her lips. She stepped away from the window and sat down opposite him, just staring his way, her face devoid of expression. He wondered what she was thinking about. What did a crazy person think about?

A moment later, Pete entered the room, out of breath but smiling. At Snake.

"Great to see ya, Lieutenant! Did ya mean what ya said about getting her outta here? Me too?"

Snake nodded. No way would he leave Pete Marks in here. Hawk would just have to lump it.

Pete looked excited and relieved. "When?"

Snake shrugged. "Any time. Now."

Hilley raised her head, a strange agony in her eyes. "Shut up - both of you just shut the fuck up."

Pete moved toward her, slowly as always. "Listen, Hilley - didn't ya hear what he said? He's come to take you outta here."

She rubbed her temple tiredly with thumb and forefinger. "Why?"

Pete looked confused. "Huh?" That question had never occurred to him.

Her eyes were incredibly bloodshot. "Why the hell should he come in here just to take me out? Why?"

Pete looked over at Snake.

Snake, his back against the wall, slid down to sit on the hard, cold floor. His eye fixed on hers. "Bob Hawk sent me in to find you and get you the hell outta here."

"Who?"

Snake felt like screaming. "Police Commissioner Bob Hawk. Ex-Colonel Hawk. 'Big Bob' Hawk. You were supposed to fly with his Special Forces Unit Texas Thunder - into Leningrad . . ."

The confused look on her face stopped him. He glanced over at Pete who looked down at his feet, shaking his head sadly.

Hilley's head was throbbing. "Why the hell should the fuckin' Police Commissioner want you to get me out? He's the one that dumped me in here."

A trace of sarcastic exasperation cut through the pain in her voice, but it was lost on Plissken. He was feeling a little too exasperated himself.

"It wasn't Hawk. He'd retired before you were caught. He same back."

"Why?"

Snake was getting very tired of that question. "How the hell should

I know?! I didn't care, so I didn't ask. He came back and he wanted to help you. So here I am."

"Why?"

"Why what, ferchrissake?" He was about ready to take his chances and make a break for it.

"Why are you here?"

Snake was getting a real headache now. "I'm beginning to wonder that myself."

Pete broke in. "What difference does it make, Hilley? It's a way outta this place."

Hilley stood up, glaring at him. "You still don't get it, do you?! I'm here on purpose - for a reason!"

"But Hilley, he's a bigshot here. You'll never get close enough to .

... " Pocketing Snake's pistol, she advanced on her old friend, her only friend. She grasped him by the shirt and jerked him close, face-to-face.

"No buts, Pete! I don't want to hear another word or I'll kill both of you! Got it?"

Pete nodded mutely.

Snake watched Pete's face - there was real fear there. Things were worse than he'd thought. He rose silently and took a step toward them.

Hilley released Pete suddenly and spun on Snake. The gun had magically reappeared in her hand and was aimed once again at his heart. She snarled at him. "Siddown, asshole!"

Snake moved back slowly and knelt down. Their eyes were locked until Hilley spoke again to Pete. "Tie 'im up!"

Snake stood up again quickly. "I'll be damned!"

She smiled coldly. "No doubt!" Then, to Pete, "I said tie him up!"

Pete moved toward Snake, his eyes pleading. "Better let me do it, Lieutenant. She means it - she'll kill us both."

Nodding, Snake sighed and let Pete bind his wrists to the remnants of old plumbing. Hilley watched closely and when Pete was finished, she spoke again.

"You watch him now, Pete. I'm gonna get some sleep." She handed him the pistol. "If he moves, shoot 'im!"

Completely irrational, Snake was thinking - one minute she's threatening to shoot him, the next she's handing him the gun. Then he mentally added - either irrational or she trusts him completely.

Exhausted physically and emotionally, Hilley curled up on her pallet in another corner of the room and fell asleep almost immediately. Her quest kept her on an adrenalin high while she was on the move but as soon as she stopped, the resulting low was devastating.

Pete waited quite awhile before silently moving over closer to Snake. He spoke in a low whisper. Snake knew that the older man was afraid of waking her.

"I'm real sorry about this, Lieutenant, but I didn't have no choice. She gets like this when things go wrong."

Snake nodded. "Wonderful. Now untie me."

Pete shook his head. "Can't do that just yet, Lieutenant. I'm really sorry 'bout that too. She might wake up and catch you untied."

Snake was getting mad all over again. "Goddammit, Pete . . . !" His voice was barely controlled.

"Sshhhhh! Soon as she goes out tonight, I'll cut you loose. Can't do it 'til then, Lieutenant."

Snake reddened with rage, then he sighed again, deciding that a low boil was safer all around - for now.

Pete patted his shoulder. "Try to get some sleep, Lieutenant."

Snake growled, "Lieutenant S. D. Plissken died at Leningrad. You got that, Pete? Lt. Plissken died about the same time Lt. M. L. Hilley died."

He relaxed back against the corner wall. "Call me Snake, Pete - just Snake."

Pete nodded and returned to his original position to rest and watch over his former C.O.

Snake watched them thoughtfully for a few minutes. He could see the loyalty and affection in the old sergeant's eyes - some things hadn't changed at all.

*

Hilley awoke naturally, just before dark, in a slightly better mood, although it took her several minutes to remember what Snake was doing there bound to the pipes in the corner.

Needing the rest, Snake had slept off and on during the long hours, but discomfort and tension had kept him from falling into a deep sleep.

Hilley disappeared for a short time, presumably to attend to personal needs, while Pete fixed her some food. Snake's stomach let him know it was time he ate something too. He tried to ignore it.

When she came back, she took what Pete offered with silent gratitude. As quickly as she ate, Snake doubted if she even tasted it. The Hilley he had known had enjoyed eating. She had enjoyed it almost as much as she had other things. Almost.

It was obvious from every gesture and move she made that Hilley was very eager to get back out on the street after her prey. Snake wondered then if she had deliberately saved Blair for last or if it had just been a happy coincidence.

As she prepared to leave, Snake awkwardly changed position. She turned to glance at him when the noise distracted her. "Pete, you stay here tonight and keep an eye on him."

Pete looked disturbed. "But Hilley, you can't go out alone. You need back-up. You . . ."

She interrupted angrily. "Don't argue. And don't tell me what I can and can't do."

Pete was silent. Some days there was no reasoning with her. This was one of them.

Snake's voice came across quiet and low. "What're you gonna do with me, Hilley?"

At the sound of that tone, something like a memory sent chills through her. It made her hesitate and look over at him. "I haven't decided yet."

Something in her eyes made him try again, push a little harder.

"Come on, Hilley, let me go or kill me now. I don't like bein' tied up."

She glared at him, but didn't lose her temper. "Just shut up and behave."

Not good enough.

She was heading for the door, almost close enough for him to reach out and touch.

"Goddammit, bitch, turn me loose and I'll help you find him!"

Hilley was on him in a second, grabbing a handful of his hair and snapping his head back against the wall. Her face only a fraction of an inch from his, she snarled at him. "Just be thankful you're still alive!"

Then she released him and stalked out, into the dangerous night. Alone.

*

As soon as she was gone, Plissken quietly exploded. "Cut me loose, man, or I swear to god I'll get loose and kill the both of ya'!"

Though the volume was low, the tone controlled, Pete could see how angry Snake was, and was almost afraid to free him. And there was also the fact that Hilley would probably kill him if he disobeyed her orders. It looked like another no-win situation for former-Sgt. Pete Marks. But, it was Plissken's mission Inside that finally decided him. After all, Snake was here to get Hilley out, and he couldn't very well do that if he was tied up. Besides, he figured that between the two of them, they should be able to handle Hilley if things got too bad. He steeled himself and moved forward.

"Cripes, Lieutenant, er, Snake, I'm real sorry about all this. I just hadta wait 'til she was gone."

As he worked at the cord binding Snake's wrists, he tried to see the back of Snake's head. "She didn't hurt you again, did she? Your head hit that wall pretty hard."

Snake, his wrists finally freed, struggled angrily to his feet, forcing his stiff body to move. "Goddamn bitch! I shoulda just decked her when I had the chance!"

Pete stepped back a few feet and stood nervously working his hands. "Cripes, Lieu" Snake's glare stopped him cold. "Sorry."

Snake stood rubbing his chafed wrists. His anger was already fading, leaving him with one helluva headache and one big question - what the hell do I do now?

Pete started again. "Come on, Snake. You know that's not the real Hilley. She never woulda done any of this before. She"

Snake interrupted. "Maybe this is the real Hilley - now. Maybe the old Hilley really is gone."

Pete shook his head. "Not completely. Sometimes she's there. Like when she's so tired she forgets the hate and the pain. Or when she's half asleep. Then she remembers things and talks about old times."

Snake hesitated before asking, "Does she ever mention me?"

Pete grinned. "Yeah, she has a few times. Once she even said she wished you were there."

Snake didn't want to dwell on it. He changed the subject. "You got somethin' I can eat?"

Pete bustled into action. "Sure do. Just take a minute or two to fix."

He kept talking as he worked. "You really come in here just to get her?"

Snake nodded.

Pete shook his head. "Cripes, Snake, that's really somethin'. I heard you were here before - and got out."

Again Snake nodded. Shaking his head, Pete grinned. "Guess the Snake's magic is still workin'."

Snake returned grin for grin. "So far."

Pete handed him a can of K-ration stew. "How we gonna get out when the time comes?"

Snake answered between mouthfuls. "I signal Bob Hauk and he sends a chopper in."

Pete looked skeptical. "That easy?"

Snake smiled. "The pick-up point is on the roof of the World Trade Center."

"Yeah, so?"

As he finished off the tasteless stew, he thought he knew now the real reason Hilley had eaten her meal so quickly.

"We walk up to the fiftieth floor."

Pete gulped. "Oh shit."

Snake nodded. "Uh huh."

And this time he didn't have any go-fast to help push him along. He had stimulants in his pack, but nothing nearly as powerful as the crystal meth he'd had before.

"She really won't go until Blair's dead?"

Pete shook his head. "No way. Like she said, he's the only reason she's in here."

"Hell, man - she killed a cop?"

"You think they ever woulda caught her if she hadn't wanted 'em to? Smart as she is?"

Snake just grunted. Pete had him there. Briefly.

"But dammit, I'm offerin' her freedom. No more runnin'. No more cops on her ass."

"I understand that, Snake, but right now, that's not the kind of freedom she's interested in. Hers is in her head. Until Blair's dead, she'll never be free."

"What about after?"

Pete shook his head. "I dunno. I been kinda worried about that myself."

What would she do when her quest was finally at an end? There would be nothing left for her to focus on. Unless, Pete thought, it might be Snake Plissken. That thought pleased him. Those two had been meant for each other and he figured Snake just might need her as badly as she needed him.

Snake's thoughts had begun to wander along those same lines. He was remembering how she'd looked the second time he'd laid eyes on her some six months after the first time when she and her squad had rescued him and his. Sitting at a table in the smoke-filled Officer's Club playing poker. She'd been one helluva poker player. Then, he began to remember other things, and quickly changed the subject - again.

"What about you, Pete? What're you doin' in here?"

The older man looked a little embarrassed. "When her kills started showin' up in the news, I put two 'n' two together and figured it had to be Hilley, that somehow she didn't die at Leningrad. I just followed the



trail of bodies - to here. When I found out she was sentenced to The Island, I 'arranged' to get myself in. I didn't know Blair was here 'til she told me. I convinced her to let me help. Apparently, whatever memories left of me were good ones and she decided to trust me, not kill

me."

Snake chuckled. "I guess her memories of me weren't so good 'cause she was sure as hell gonna cut my throat!"

Pete shook his head. "I don't think so. I saw the hesitation in her."

"I figured she was just playin' with me."

"Naw, not Hilley. There's just three kinds of people for her. Friend - that's me. Foe - that's Blair. And a helluva lot of faceless nobodies that don't really even exist for her."

"So where the hell do I fit in?"

"I think that's why she hesitated. She wasn't sure. She knew you weren't a nobody but couldn't figure out if you were friend or foe."

"Je-sus! What happens when she figures it out?"

Pete grinned and winked. "You better hope you're a friend."

Chuckling, Snake shook his head. "I always was, Pete."

"I know that and I think she will too."

Snake stood up to stretch his stiffening legs and moved to the window to look outside. After a minute or two, he spoke again.

"Maybe we oughta go out and find her. It's bad out there at night, real bad."

Pete shook his head. "No, we better stay here. She'd be madder'n hell if she even finds out I untied you."

Knowing Snake was worried, he tried to ease the younger man's mind.

"She'll be okay, Snake. She's good out there."

Snake turned his head to look at Pete. "Just like one of them, huh?"

Pete looked down at his feet. "Yeah." Then he looked back up with a grin and a twinkle in his eye. "But with a helluva lot more class."

Snake just grunted and turned back to gaze out the window. It was because of him that she was out there alone, and he had a bad feeling about it.

*

Snake spent most of the night trying to sleep. The 'bed' was too uncomfortable to do much better than try but he was too concerned about Hilley to worry much about sleeping anyway. After spending so much time just looking for her, it would really piss him off for her to get killed now that he'd finally found her.

Pete couldn't sleep either. Watching Plissken - a man he'd never known to be patient - grow more irritated and antsy with each passing moment, he decided he'd better say something to take both their minds off Hilley's absence. He tried to be cheerful.

"Hey, Snake, did Hilley ever tell you how she ended up with the 'Loser Squad'?"

Reluctantly, Snake turned his attention to Pete. "Huh?"

"I was just wonderin' if Hilley ever told you much about her squad and how we all got together."

Snake sat down facing Pete, his back against the wall. Pete thought he heard a quiet sigh. "Well, she told me how she got busted down to Lt."

They both had to grin at that memory.

"And she said giving her command of a bunch of misfits was part of the deal - both to punish her and them."

Pete leaned back and chuckled. "Oh yeah. That's how it started, all right. When we first took over the group, it was unorganized, just a bunch of strangers thrown together. None of 'em had ever worked together before. Just odds 'n' ends, rejects from a dozen different squads. All busted out for one reason or another.

But, worse than bein' stuck together, they figured, was bein' stuck with a split-tail for a C. O."

He chuckled again. "That was what first brought 'em together - they had to cooperate to get rid of Hilley."

Snake shifted to a more comfortable position. This was getting really interesting.

"And Je-sus Christ, did they try! Cripes, they ragged her for a coupla months. And she just took it - and took it - and took it. Never put a single one of 'em on report. Took all the flak from the brass without a whimper. Finally, they wore themselves out and came to me. Asked me what the hell kind of crazy bitch she was."

Snake grinned. "So you told 'em?"

Pete shrugged. "So I told 'em."

Snake laughed out loud. Pete went on.

"Things calmed down after that. They started seeing her a little differently. That was what she'd been waitin' for all along. But the real clincher came a coupla weeks later - during a rescue.

One of our choppers was shot down pulling away from the scene. Hilley was already up and movin' but when she heard 'em go down, she went back. Had one of her 'feelin's' about the crew still bein' alive. So we all had to pull back while her crew worked another rescue. Damned if those two boys in the wreck weren't alive, just like she thought."

He paused and looked slyly at Plissken. "Kinda the same sort a deal like we had in Siberia. She came pretty close to getting blown away this time too. The brass really chewed her ass for riskin' her assigned mission for a coupla dead-beat chopper jockeys. You know Hilley - she chewed right back. Lucky they didn't knock her down another peg 'r two."

Snake shook his head. Luck? He doubted it. Pete went on.

"Anyhow, everybody backed her up, includin' the guys we'd gone after in the first place. Turned out one of 'em was a Senator's son or something like that. He told 'em she oughta get a medal for bravery, so they just settled for lettin' her off with a reprimand."

Snake was thoughtful. "She always was gettin' the shit end of the stick, wasn't she?"

Pete grinned and shrugged. "That's the Army for ya."

Snake snorted. "Yeah."

Pete stood up stiffly and moved to the window. After checking the street again, he sighed and turned back to Plissken.

"Anyhow, after that, Hilley didn't have no more problems with her squad. Cripes, they'da done anything for her - but I guess you already knew that. And under her, we had the best rescue record around in just a few months."

He chuckled. "Doncha know that musta pissed off a lotta those assholes that wanted her to 'crash 'n' burn'!"

Snake smiled. "Yeah, a strong woman like her had to make a lot of enemies among all those 'good ol' boys'. It was inevitable."

Pete agreed. "I heard that! I guess some of 'em just found worse

ways to hurt her than others."

Snake knew what he meant. The battered Colonel's way had been to have her busted down in rank and in trying to ruin her career. Blair's -and Jacoby's - revenge had been physical. He wondered what had ever happened to Jacoby. There'd been rumors of a firing squad - an unofficial one.

Both men lapsed into a thoughtful silence. Snake lay back down to take another stab at sleeping, but his mind was too full of unanswered questions. Too full of Hilley.

*

Pete began to get nervous when she didn't come back at the usual time. By sunrise he was practically frantic and was ready to tell Snake they should go out to look for her no matter what the consequences. But before he could open his mouth, they heard a noise on the stairs. Both men froze. Snake crouched in his corner at combat ready, his boot knife in hand.

Someone was moving noisily down the steps. Snake looked at Pete who shook his head to indicate that Hilley wouldn't make such a clamor.

To their surprise, a moment later Hilley staggered through the doorway and collapsed on the floor. Her right arm was badly burned, she was bleeding from numerous cuts and her clothes were even more torn and dirty than before.

Pete reached her before Snake could cross the room. He knelt down and touched her hair. One of her eyes was stuck shut with dried blood from a still-oozing scalp wound, but the other one opened at Pete's gentle touch. Her voice was a weak, hoarse whisper.

"Pete."

He shook his head and murmured sadly, "Cripes, Hilley."

She smiled weakly and tried to get up.

Pete held her down with little effort. "Help me move her, Snake."

As the two men picked her up gently, Pete spoke to her, his voice soft, soothing, almost a whisper. "What the hell happened, Hilley? Did ya get 'im?"

She answered breathlessly between grunts and groans as they carried her to the bedroll. "I almost had 'im, Pete. Close enough to shoot but then the Crazies attacked and spoiled everything. I tried to get at 'im anyway - at first - then I got pretty busy fightin' Crazies myself. Then Blair spotted me and I think he must've recognized me. I heard him shout something to his men about forgettin' the Crazies, then I saw him point right at me. It was one of his gang that burned me with his torch. I shot that one and decided it was time to disappear. I holed up in a basement until things quieted down."

Pete remained silent as he ripped her shirt sleeve up and away from the burn so he could see the damage. He had nothing to treat it with, not even anything clean to cover it with. He looked over at Snake who was keeping his distance so as not to upset her. It didn't really matter -she had forgotten he was there.

"Shit, man, she needs a medic."

Snake spoke from where he was. "I've got a Med-Kit with the rest of my gear but it's a long way from here."

Pete began gently dabbing at the cut on her head. "Has it got what we need?"

Snake nodded.

"Will you go get it - now?"

Snake nodded again and stood up. Hilley was conscious enough to understand.

"No!"

The strength of her voice surprised them both. Pete spoke to her softly. "He's got medical supplies, Hilley. You need help. It's the only way."

"No, Pete! You let him leave and we'll never see him again! I'm not through with him yet!"

Breathless from her outburst, she quieted a little. "I'll be okay, Pete. I just need to rest awhile."

Pete looked away from her face to Snake. "Go on - and hurry back, if you can."

Snake nodded once more and moved to the door. Hilley was practically hysterical. "No, dammit, no! If he leaves, we'll never see 'im again. Damn you, Pete, I'll kill you for this! I'll . . . "

Her voice faded as Snake moved quickly up the stairs and out of the building, wondering if there was much point in trying to help her. Then he remembered back to their time together during the War, remembered her soft warmth, her passion, her intelligence, and he decided she was worth anything he had to do, any risk he had to take. Maybe, just maybe, the old Hilley was still in her somewhere, locked away, just waiting for a key to be released once more. And just maybe he was that key.

*

Snake made it back to his base without incident but decided to stay put until dark rather risk being followed back. Judging from the increased activity on the streets during the day, he figured Blair must've recognized her just as she'd thought and had all his people out looking for her, scouring the dead city for an old enemy he assumed he'd killed years ago.

Snake had to smile as he thought of what a shock it must've been for the man to see her alive after all those years. He had to know she was after him and that only one of them - or neither- would be left alive when all was said and done. Thinking of the long scar down her face, Snake hoped that he'd get a piece of the sonofabitch too.

*

Just after dark, Snake pulled on his heavy backpack and set out, taking his time, keeping very carefully to the backstreets and shadows. He had to force himself not to hurry, knowing that in spite of her need for help, it would be more serious if anyone were to spot him and follow him back to her. She was in no condition for fight or flight.

He descended the stairway silently and pushed the battered door open. Pete was sitting on the floor at Hilley's side, holding her hand in his as she slept fitfully. He looked up, startled, when Snake came in. Snake's harsh whisper seemed loud in the silence of the room. "How is she?"

Pete shrugged. "Feverish. Hurtin'. I figured you'd be back hours ago. I was beginnin' to think maybe she was right."

His tone was accusing, suspicious. Snake ignored it out of habit. "Too much action on the streets. I think Blair really did recognize her and has his men out lookin'."

Pete's look changed to one of concern. "No shit? What're we gonna do?"

It was Snake's turn to shrug. "Sit tight for awhile. Tend to her. Then see where we stand."

Pete nodded and gestured him forward anxiously. "What've ya got?"

Snake pulled off the backpack as he moved forward. When Pete released her hand, Hilley stirred, muttering, "Wha' hell's goin' on?"

Pete tried to soothe her. "Take it easy, Hilley. Snake's back and he's gonna make ya feel better."

"Who?" Now she sounded alert and suspicious.

"Snake. Snake Plissken. Doncha remember? He came to get you outta here."

The confusion was back, made even worse by the fever. "Huh?" Her sweat-damp face crumpled into the familiar lines Pete knew meant she was concentrating hard, trying to focus.

"Never mind, Hilley. He's brought something to make you feel better. Okay?"

A look of alarm replaced the confusion and she began struggling to get up. Pete held her down easily and spoke soothingly. "No, Hilley, it's all right. I promise. You trust me, doncha? You trust your ol' friend Pete?"

Snake was surprised at her answer.

"Yes, I trust you, Pete."

There was something different in her voice, a softening. She really did trust him. Probably the only human being on earth she did trust -now.

"Then you know if I say it's okay, it's okay?"

"I guess so." She didn't sound convinced to Plissken.

"Then you'll let him help you - right?"

There was a brief moment of hesitation before she answered.

"All right." She didn't sound at all convinced.

Snake knelt down beside her. He felt her tense as he touched her injured arm. She made no move to stop him but her eyes -fixed on him, glaring and suspicious.

After carefully removing the crude cloth bandage, he sprayed the injured area with the special burn foam from his Med-Kit. The foam would clean the wound, anesthetize the pain and moisturize the skin to promote faster healing and less scarring. It was a bad burn and the immediate relief the foam gave her was obvious. He laid a gauze pad gently over the white foam just to protect the area from further contamination, then moved on to clean and medicate her other, less serious injuries. When that was done, he gave her an antibiotic/sedative injection quickly, before she could protest. He looked at Pete.

"That's all I can do for her."

Pete nodded. "Think she'll be okay?"

Snake shrugged. "I'm no medic, man." Then the worried look on Pete's face made him relent. "Yeah, I think so. That foam's good stuff - remember?"

Pete nodded uncomfortably. He didn't like to remember anything from the War.

*

Hilley slept peacefully for awhile. Snake sat close by, keeping an eye on her while Pete got some badly needed sleep. He'd stayed up with her the whole time Snake was gone and was exhausted.

Snake was dozing himself when she woke up. The sound of her voice brought him awake instantly.

"Snake?"

He opened his eye and looked down at her. She was looking right at him, no fear or confusion apparent on her face. His voice was soft, an almost tender whisper. "Yeah, babe?"

"Is that really you?"

She knew him! He grinned. "Yeah, it's really me. How ya feelin'?"

She gave him a weak smile. "Like I've been run over by a truck."

His smile broadened - now she sounded like the old Hilley he'd known and loved. Loved? Yeah, why not? He took her hand in his.

"You'll feel a lot better in a little while."

She closed her eyes again and sighed contentedly. He thought she was going back to sleep. But a moment later, a frown creased her face and her eyes opened.

"What the hell are you doin' here?"

"Bob Hawk sent me in to find you and bring you out. He doesn't figure you belong here. Thinks you deserve better."

She smiled at that. "Does he?"

Then the smile faded. "I'm here for a reason, Snake. I won't leave 'til Blair's dead. He's the last."

"He's as good as dead already, Hilley. Just bein' here. He'll never get out."

She was stubborn. "I have to kill him. I won't leave 'til it's done."

"You don't have much choice." He could be stubborn too.

Her eyes took on the almost fanatical gleam he'd seen previously.

"If you take me out before he's dead, I'll come back. I'll find a way and I'll come back. It's not finished 'til he's dead."

Silent, Snake looked at her for several seconds, then responded. "Then I guess we'll just have to kill him before we go."

Relieved, she smiled and closed her eyes. "Thanks, Snake."

They were silent again for several minutes, then she spoke, her words voicing the guilt he'd been feeling since that day in Hawk's hotel room.

"Why'd you do it, Snake? Why'd you go after Blair after I asked you not to?"

He had to look away from her accusing gaze. "I'm sorry, Hilley. If I'd only known . . ."

He forced himself to meet her eyes. "If there was any way of goin' back . . ." He hesitated, then went on. "I'll try to make it up to you, babe, when we get outta here."

She smiled. "You really think we'll make it outta here alive?"

He grinned. "Sure. I'm the Snake, aren't I?"

She chuckled and squeezed his hand. "Sure. You're the Snake."

But he knew she didn't really believe it would happen. He wasn't sure he did either.

*

Hilley was silent for so long this time that Snake was sure that she had finally fallen asleep again. He lay down beside her on his side, propped up on one elbow, just watching her sleep and thinking about how best to accomplish her mission, about what would happen afterward - if there was an afterward - about the past, their past together. All of a sudden he was having trouble separating past, present and future. He shook his head in a futile attempt to clear it - tireder than I thought!

The movement seemed to wake Hilley up. There was some movement under the blanket as she shifted position slightly. Her voice was soft, slurred, but coherent.

"Plissken, did I ever tell you that you remind me a little of my daddy?"

Of all the things in the world she could've said, he couldn't think of a single one that would've surprised him more than that. Eventually, he remembered to answer.

"Uh, no, babe. I don't think you ever mentioned it."

He could've sworn he heard a small, drugged giggle, then she went on.

"I don't mean you looked like him or even acted like him. You just both have the same kind of quiet, inner strength. The kind that makes a woman feel very, very safe and secure. And he was hard-headed and fiercely independent - just like you are."

She hadn't been asleep at all. She'd been tripping down memory lane - just like him.

"Like father, like daughter."

She smiled and sighed. It was a sad, old sound. "You bet. He taught me a lot."

"Like how to fly?"

"Like how to fly - with or without a plane."

Snake felt uncomfortable, unsure if he was up for comparison with a man like that.

"That's how you always made me feel too, Snake."

He had to change the subject. Quickly.

"Who was your father, Hilley? What'd he do?"

Her eyes half-closed as she began to speak.

"He started out as a crop-duster in West Texas. That old, rattle-trap single-engine prop job was the first plane I ever flew. As soon as we got any money, he'd buy every acre of land he could, so we stayed dirt-poor for a long time. Then he discovered a big pocket of oil on our land that somehow everybody else had missed, and things got better. A lot better. He expanded the dustin' business and got into a few other things as well. We ended up pretty damn well off. That's when I learned to fly small jets and helicopters. It became like a game to him - to find something new for me to fly. He'd always bet me I couldn't do it first try and I won the bet every damn time. Woulda disappointed him if I hadn't. 'Natural aptitude for altitude' he called it."

Her eyes closed and the wistful smile that had come to her lips faded.

"He was killed in an accident in '88 and the government came in and took everything. 'Back taxes', they said. They were doin' a lot of that back then. Just takin' whatever they wanted, whenever they felt like it. Left me with nothin'. I tried workin' as a private pilot for awhile but the military was pushin' real hard for experienced pilots, so I finally gave in and joined up."

Snake understood. He'd been drawn in by the same kind of high-pressure recruiting hype. They'd made lots of promises, few of which they'd bothered to keep. But, of course, by the time you figured it out, it was far too late to do anything about it. Thinking about the Army made his bad eye throb like a sonofabitch. He pushed the pain and memories away and concentrated back on what she was saying.

". . . big mistake. They were screwin' people right and left."

"I know, babe. They fucked me over too. Time after time. Right up to . . ."

He couldn't finish. Didn't have to. She did it for him.

"Leningrad. I think Pete told me something about that. Can't seem to remember . . ."

"Don't try to remember. It's all in the past and that's where it belongs."

She grunted, struggling to keep her eyes open - and failing.

Snake leaned over to whisper in her ear. "You sleep now. Do ya good. We'll talk more later."

He had to listen hard to hear her mumbled words. "By the way, Plissken, I like the patch - it suits you." He looked down and saw a faint smile on her lips, and had to smile himself. As she drifted off, she barely felt the soft pressure of his lips on her cheek as he leaned a little further to kiss her.

*

Forty-eight hours later, Hilley was back to her normal, nasty self. Snake's Medi-Kit had run out of pain-killer and as soon as the drug wore off, it was as if the brief interlude of sanity had never been. If anything, she was more short-tempered than before because of the pain of her burned arm. Pain was something Plissken understood. The constant pain in his bad eye kept him on the edge most of the time. It made for a rather unpleasant time of waiting. Neither of them was particularly long on patience and both were eager to get on with it. The tension was mounting with every passing hour. The only relief Pete got was when one or both of them was asleep.

Eventually, though, Snake announced that she was "as ready as she'd ever be" and they prepared to go out. She was vocally against Plissken's involvement, insisting that she preferred to work alone but both men were insistent and for the first time in a many years, Hilley was forced to compromise.

In spite of his protests, Pete was left behind. Snake knew it would be difficult for two to move about unnoticed. With three, it would be impossible. He also worried that Pete's age and poor condition might hold them back. But Pete had learned many years ago that when those two set their minds to something, there wasn't anything on earth that would sway either one of them.

He watched them leave just after dark, worrying that he might never see his beloved lieutenant again, worried that he might be left alone in this hellhole. With a rebellious scowl, he started shoving a few necessities into his pockets and left the basement hide-out to follow. He figured what Hilley - and Plissken - didn't know, wouldn't hurt him.

*

Snake and Hilley quickly learned that Blair's search for her was more intensive than Snake had thought. Twenty-four hours a day the men were scouring the island, brutalizing every inmate unlucky enough to be caught in their quest for information on her whereabouts. The men learned nothing about Hilley, but did hear rumors of a one-eyed man who had also been looking for her. When Blair heard about that, he made the connection and redoubled his efforts. A sane man would have been at least a little nervous about the thought of a rematch with Snake Plissken after the beating he'd taken years ago, but Blair was not, never had been, a sane man. His huge ego, made even bigger by his position of power in the prison, welcomed the idea of meeting both Plissken and the bitch, Hilley, again. His eyes glittered at the memory of what they'd done to her before - and would, no doubt, do again. Blair was out of control.

*

After one night of close calls on the streets, even Hilley had to admit they had a problem. Near dawn, they found a secure place to hole-up for the day, agreeing to the need to rest and rethink their strategy.

But, in spite of her seemingly docile concession, Hilley had a new strategy in mind already, one that didn't include Snake Plissken.

That evening, after spending the daylight hours in a tense, silent pretense of rest, Snake got up, checked the street outside for activity, then turned to face her.

"There's just too much goin' on out there, Hilley. It'll be impossible to get close to Blair right now. We'll go on back to Pete and wait a few days for things to die down a little."

He chuckled as he turned back to the window. "Hell, if we wait long enough, Maybe Blair'll figure he just hallucinated the whole thing."

He didn't hear Hilley as she crept up quickly behind him. He didn't see the pipe-length coming down on the side of his head as she blind-sided him. He didn't feel the cold, hard floor as it rushed up to greet him.

He didn't hear Hilley's voice, surprisingly gentle, as she knelt at his side and touched his hair.

"I'm sorry, Snake, but I told you a long time ago that I don't want anybody fightin' my battles for me. At least that hasn't changed."

He didn't see her leave their hiding place, to disappear into the night like a wraith.

But he did feel the horrible throbbing in his head when he finally came to several hours later. And he was mad as hell - at her and at his own stupidity for turning his back on her when he should've known better. Her brief return to her old self had made him careless.

A sound outside the doorway cut through the pain and Snake slipped behind debris left behind in the ruined apartment. He peered out as the

door creaked slowly open. It was Pete. He whispered. "Snake?"

Snake stood up slowly, leaning heavily on the battered, old dresser he'd hidden behind. He looked terrible. A thin line of blood, now dried, ran down the side of his face.

"Where the fuck is she?" His voice was a hoarse croak.

Pete shook his head. "I don't know. I lost 'er. I'm real sorry, Snake, I . . ."

Snake cut him off abruptly. "Shut up!"

He didn't want to hear it. He didn't want to hear anything. He was too damn mad. And listening made his head hurt even worse.

"You better sit back down, Snake."

Snake didn't argue - he just sat, leaning back against the hard wood, and closed his eye.

Pete moved nervously over to squat down beside him, not speaking, just waiting as patiently as he could. After what seemed like an eternity to Pete, Plissken's eye opened once again and the younger man spoke. He was calmer now.

"Let's go find her."

Pete stood, wondering if he should offer Snake a hand up, then decided against it. No point in pushing his luck.

As they moved toward the stairs, he put his hand on Snake's arm. "I hope she didn't hurt you too bad."

Snake shrugged away from the man's touch. "I'll live."

He was still very angry, and wanted to stay that way. It helped block out the pain.

*

It didn't take Blair's men long to catch her. In her eagerness to kill him, she got careless. Under normal circumstances, anyone in their right mind would've figured out it was a trap. Blair had even used himself as bait! His only instruction was to bring her back to him alive. How alive didn't matter, as long as she was still breathing. Needless to say, Hilley didn't get to Blair unscathed.

Snake and Pete never even got close but they were able to home in on the clamor caused when she was captured. They followed the triumphant search party back to Blair's headquarters, careful to keep a safe distance.

Even from a distance, Snake could see that she was hurt. Not badly he thought, but probably enough to slow her down, which could be fatal. But then, everything about this situation could be fatal. He and Pete waited until dusk, when things were calmer, before going in. Very carefully.

* * *

Former Army Lieutenant G. T. "Butch" Blair thought long and hard about the woman from his past who was now his prisoner. His prisoner. In his territory. This was his island no matter what the USPF thought. He was in charge here. Completely and absolutely. He had the power of life and death over everyone here, and it was a power he exercised quite often. He had a policy of killing any inmate who refused to join him. At first

they'd called him the new Duke of New York. He'd told them to jam the Duke shit; he was the King of New York. King Butch! King Blair! He loved it! Blair was over the edge. Had been for years. He was no longer just a vicious bully; he'd graduated to full-blown psychopath.

He'd even had them build him a throne. It was the same chair Harold "Brain" Hellman had sat in, there in the Library, when Plissken had been there before, but it looked completely different now. Blair had decided a king needed a castle and had moved into the old building. He permitted only his elite "guard" to live within the stone walls. The guards and every woman he could find and catch. These he kept locked up and carefully guarded.

Blair sat on his throne watching Hilley thoughtfully. What to do? What to do? He had her suspended from the high ceiling by her wrists, her toes dangling a foot or so off the ground. She'd kept staring at him, and it disturbed his thinking, so occasionally, at his signal, one of his men would bump into her to send her body swinging like a pendulum. Sometimes they added a spin to her movement, just for fun.

What to do? What to do? It had to be something great, something suitable for the entertainment of a king. Then it hit him. Of course, he chided himself, why didn't I think of it sooner?

*

Hilley hung there in silence, never responding to her captors' abuse, neither physical nor verbal. Her wrists were finally beginning to grow numb but her shoulders were screaming. The pain in her burned arm had dulled to a deep ache. But she found she could block out the pain and hopelessness by concentrating on Blair. She focused every ounce of her being on her hatred for the man, on her determination to see him dead at her feet, by her own hand. Hilley hung there, staring at Blair, holding her mind, her temper, her emotions at a low but potent boil. She knew there was a good chance she wouldn't live long enough to kill him but it didn't matter. There had always been that chance. But so far, her luck had held. Surely fate wouldn't cheat her out of her final revenge.

*

A few hours later, Hilley was led, in chains, into a huge, high-ceilinged room filled to overflowing with bleachers of shouting, applauding inmates. In the center of the room was a square platform, ringed by ropes, its filthy floor of stained canvas. Though once used for boxing or wrestling, she knew that the ring wouldn't be used for anything nearly so civilized now. She had a pretty good idea what Blair had in mind for her and was glad she'd at least have the chance to go out fighting. And with any luck, she would take him with her. She smiled.

After making sure Hilley was securely chained to the corner post, Blair himself climbed into the ring to announce the evening's entertainment. After the enforced cheering died down, he began to speak.

"We have a special guest here with us tonight. She came here just to see me but decided to stay so you all could get to know her."

Those in the know chuckled at Blair's wittiness. Everyone else just waited expectantly.

"She thinks she's tough. Tougher'n any man here." He paused, scanning the crowd. "And I think she might just be right."

The crowd of men reacted to that. There was a murmur throughout the room.

"Maybe you're all the pussies she says you are."

The murmur grew louder, uglier.

"So, here's the deal. Any man here who wants to accept her challenge and face her in the ring, hand-to-hand, gets first crack at fucking her - if you can beat 'er."

The applause began again, accented by crude cheers and wolf whistles. The dumb bastards were thinking it'd be a piece a' cake. Blair smiled. He knew better.

As Blair neared the edge of the ring, he noticed one of his "elite" eyeing Hilley hungrily. Grinning, he shook his head and leaned closer to the man. His voice was low. "Patience, my friend - you'll get your chance. Just wait. Trust me."

The man looked from Blair to Hilley and back again. Then he nodded. "Right."

Cotton knew his boss was crazy but he also knew that the man was very smart. It was a deadly combination.

The first volunteer climbed onto the platform, looking very confident. He was very big and very tough, a born fighter, but he was also slow, mentally as well as physically. He wanted to be first and no one was about to argue with him. Blair was pleased.

As the big man climbed through the ropes into the ring, Blair climbed out and returned to his special ringside 'box' seat, where his portable 'throne' awaited. Standing above the crowd, he raised his arms for silence, then shouted, "Let the good times roll!"

The crowd noise was deafening as the two guards holding Hilley released her, shoving her roughly out toward the center of the ring. She stumbled forward, losing her balance, and would've fallen, but her opponent was there to catch her - in a bear hug. He assumed the fight was already over and it was time to collect his reward. The crowd thought so too and voiced their disappointment.

At first it appeared Hilley felt the same way. She relaxed and went limp in the man's grasp. But as soon as she felt his hold loosen, she exploded. Her knee flashed upward, hitting the big man's crotch with enough force to make every man in the place - even those who had visited the Steri-Chamber - cringe. He released her as he doubled over and emitted a long, loud moan. But Hilley was just getting started.

She brought her booted foot down hard on his instep, then the same knee came up again, this time catching his chin. The impact threw him backwards and he landed hard on his back on the dirty mat.

Hilley glanced over at him, then surveyed the now-silent crowd with mild disgust. She wasn't even winded, hadn't even worked up a sweat. The whole battle hadn't lasted two minutes. The crowd was infuriated - and embarrassed. The shocked silence turned to grumbling. Blair stood up and shouted, "Who's next?"

Nobody made a move to volunteer. Blair's face turned an angry purple-red.

"You're all chicken-shit bastards! Afraid of a woman! If somebody doesn't get in there and kick that cunt's ass, I'm gonna start kickin'!

some ass right out here!"

By the time he finished, Blair was screaming, practically foaming at the mouth. Hilley stared his way and shook her head. The man's mind was totally gone. He was about one step above the Crazies - and it was a very short step. She looked down at her feet to hide her smile as she wondered just what it would take to knock him down that little step. It was something to aim for.

After only the briefest hesitation, another man stepped forward to accept the challenge. The crowd cheered him on, bolstering his courage. He began to think that maybe her quick success with the other man had been a fluke, just dumb luck. After all, she was just a woman. Besides, he hadn't had real pussy in years. He found out how wrong he was about her - the hard way. Hilley took him out almost as quickly, almost as easily.

There was no shocked silence this time. The crowd was outraged. This couldn't be happening! Long lost male ego resurfaced and suddenly there was no lack of volunteers. Now everyone wanted a piece of this cocky bitch!

Hilley managed to take out all comers, but as she began to tire, each time it took a little longer, was not quite as easy. As her reflexes slowed, some of the men were able to land painful hits on her.

Because of her continued success, most of the inmates began to feel a grudging admiration for the woman. By now it was more than obvious that luck wasn't involved in any way, shape or form. The bitch was just good. In fact, she was damn good.

*



Snake and Pete had managed to infiltrate the crowd and were watching the combat from the bleachers. Blair had a circle of his men surrounding the ring to keep the inmates back, and Snake knew they couldn't get to her that way without starting more shit than they were equipped to handle. They'd just have to find another way.

As he watched Hilley win round after round, Plissken was glad he had never tried to find out if he could take her in a real fight. She could be really brutal - and she knew how to fight dirty. He smiled.

*

Hilley leaned back against the cornerpost, her arms out to the sides resting on the ropes, watching as two men dragged her last conquest out of the ring. She was wearing down and knew that pretty soon one of the men was going to get lucky. She sensed the change of heart in the crowd and decided now was the time to make her move. She wanted her chance at Blair before it was too late.

She looked up at Blair and shouted, startling the noisy crowd to silence once more.

"Hey, Blair!" She raised her right arm slowly up over her head, then thrust it forward, her middle finger extended. "Fuck you!"

The crowd loved it. Without ever considering the possible consequences, they began to laugh. It was a real knee-slapper.

Blair went berserk. He began jumping up and down, fists raised, screaming for someone to kill her. The laughter tapered off as the men became aware of Blair's insane rage. Times like this were when he was most dangerous, out of control. He might do anything.

The guards looked at each other, unsure whether he really wanted them to kill her outright or not. Hilley resolved their dilemma for them. She stepped to the center of the ring and shouted, loud enough for everyone to hear over Blair's ravings.

"Why don't you come on down here and kill me yourself?" She paused briefly, then added, "Or are you still afraid of me - asshole!"

Her words, thick with sarcasm, cut through his fogged mind. He calmed immediately, his red face and quick breathing the only remaining signs of his outburst. He stared at her, thinking remarkably clearly - for Blair. His mind was weighing factors, evaluating the situation. The bitch was bloodied, sagging with hurt and exhaustion. Surely he could take her now. Sure he could!

He grinned broadly, suddenly full of bravado, and announced, "You bet I'll fight you, bitch! I wanted first go at you anyway. I had you first the other time too. Remember, cunt?"

To his surprise, and everyone else's close enough to see her face, a vicious smile came to her lips. Her eyes gleamed a reflection of the anger and hate burning inside of her. Her voice answered, low and cold.

"I remember."

Even Blair was unnerved as he realized that this was what she'd had in mind all along - to get at him one-on-one. But it was too late for him to back out now. Her victories with the others had turned crowd sentiment in her favor, and even Blair knew there were limits on his leadership. He ruled through strength and fear. These men wouldn't stand for cowardice. And now she had proven herself, was practically one of them. If she beat

him too, she could conceivably end up in charge. The only way out was to beat her in a fair fight. But Butch Blair knew there was fair and there was "fair".

As he climbed down to head for the ring, he whispered to one of his lieutenants. The man nodded and moved away to alert the rest of the elite. The men subtly positioned themselves at intervals ringside. They tried to look like crowd control but Hilley knew better. She'd have to very careful, try to stay out of their reach.

But, once Blair was in the ring with her, she forgot everything but her intense hatred for the man. She had envisioned his death many times but now, with her goal finally in sight, she hesitated, unsure which of the scenarios to play out.

Blair saw his death in her cold, fanatical stare, and was truly frightened. He glances nervously at his men, wishing that she would quit staring and do something. The crowd waited, quietly expectant, not realizing just how easily her other challengers had gotten off compared with what she had in mind for Blair. Then she smiled and began moving toward him slowly, like an animal stalking its prey. Mesmerized by her glittering eyes, Blair backed away from her slow advance without ever realizing it. But when his back contacted the ropes, he came out of his trance in a hurry.

Panicked, he lunged at her, but Hilley was ready. She sidestepped and landed a painful chop with her elbow across the back of his neck. He hit the mat hard, the impact slamming the air out of his lungs. Before he could move, she kicked him in the side hard enough to crack a rib or two. As she moved in on him again, he rolled onto his back, pain and anger -and fear - finally goading him into action. For all the good it would do him.

He had to maneuver her close enough to the sides for his men to go to work on her. But he knew it wouldn't be easy - she was too wary. She seemed to know why they were there and was staying carefully out of range.

He crab-walked backwards to the side, then pulled himself up using the ropes for support, never taking his eyes off her. Leaning against the ropes, panting, he taunted her.

"Come on, bitch. Here I am. Come 'n' get me."

Hilley smiled and replied softly. "Here I am, Blair. Come and get me. Your people are waiting."

He hesitated, glancing furtively at the sea of faces. He could see the beginnings of doubt on many faces. He was losing them. She went on.

"That's right, asshole. Show them the cowardly bastard you really are."

That did it. Blair's face changed. He was back on the edge. He charged her like an angry bull. Again, she sidestepped, slammed the same elbow where she knew a kidney would be. And so it went on. And on. And on.

*

Snake and Pete still watched helplessly from their spot in the bleachers. They hadn't been noticed yet but neither man had figured out a way to help her. Snake leaned over and whispered close to the older man's ear.

"We need a diversion, man. Somethin' to take everybody's mind off the fight, get 'em outside."

Pete whispered back, his eyes never leaving his former lieutenant.

"Yeah, but what?"

The answer hit Snake suddenly. He grinned.

"How 'bout some fireworks?"

Pete tore his gaze from Hilley to look at Plissken.

"You got somethin' in mind?"

Snake's smile widened, as he reached into an inner pocket of his jacket.

"Do rabbits have a sex life?"

*

Blair was getting tired. And he was hurting in half a dozen places. The pain was taking the edge off his insanity once more. He was getting desperate. But he could also see that Hilley was wearing down. Her reflexes were slowing. She was beginning to stagger. He had to get her close enough to the ropes for one of his men to get a shot at her.

Then he noticed the edge of the bandage under her shirt sleeve, and realized that she hadn't been using the arm much at all. He moved toward her slowly, keeping to her right no matter how she tried to position herself. She knew immediately that he'd figured out that she'd been hiding an injury. But it didn't matter. She could kill him just as well one-armed as with two. He kept coming. She waited for him to lunge, but this time he didn't try it, just kept on moving toward her.

For once, he didn't signal his attack. In a fast rush, he was on her. As she tried to move out of his way, he caught her injured arm and slung her away from him, into the ropes. His man reacted quickly, striking her with his lead pipe club. She saw the blow coming and tried to duck away, but being off-balance, she couldn't move fast enough and the pipe slammed down across the back of her head and shoulder.

Hilley hit the canvas hard, her ears ringing and her vision blurred. Her left arm was half-paralyzed. Blair smiled sadistically and boldly moved in for the kill.

But Hilley wasn't out of it just yet. She rolled away from his advance, then struggled as fast as she could to her feet. Hesitant now, Blair came on more slowly. Hilley kept out of his reach, working her still-numb left arm and trying desperately to clear her head. For the first time, she was on the defensive.

His courage bolstered by the cheers and shouts of encouragement, Blair moved in on her again, head-on, not bothering to favor one side or another, knowing that both her arms were injured now. He was feeling better, sure of himself, sure that in a few more minutes he'd have her down on the canvas, fucking her brains out, making her beg for mercy. With those thoughts in mind, he went for her in a rush.

Hilley staggered back away from him into the ropes where another of Blair's men waited for her with a baseball bat. She saw the blow coming but was too tired to move fast enough to avoid it completely. The heavy bat struck a glancing blow across her back, knocking her to her knees. Leaning down, she tried to catch her breath.

Seizing the opportunity, Blair attacked, kicking her savagely in the

ribs. She rolled with the force of the kick, landing on her back. As Blair took a step toward her, a leer of victory on his face, Hilley brought her leg up, kicking him hard in the balls. She scrambled back away from him, out of reach, as Blair fell to his knees, screaming and clutching his crotch.

Hilley dragged herself to her feet, knowing that she had to move now while she still could. She had to kill him now. Or never. This was it - and that realization gave her the additional energy she needed.

*

Snake was getting frantic as he watched Hilley's final struggle. He wanted to be down there helping her take Blair out. And if worse came to worst, he'd do just that - whatever the consequences.

*

She moved toward Blair, staggering a little with every step. Looking up, he saw her face and for a moment forgot the horrible pain between his legs. He realized that up to now, she'd just been playing with him. Not any more. She was coming to kill him. A fear-induced spurt of adrenalin got him to his feet. He wasn't thinking about fucking her now. He just wanted to get out of that ring. If he didn't, he was a dead man.

He turned and started for the side. It was a mistake. The idea that he was finally hers for the killing had pumped Hilley up, almost to a frenzy. Her pain and exhaustion disappeared as her mind focused solely on Blair. Before he made it three steps, she caught him in a flying leap, her boot hitting the small of his back. She landed on her feet in a crouch; Blair landed on his face on the mat. He dragged himself slowly across the canvas, reaching for the rope, blood streaming from his broken nose.

Hilley let him crawl a few feet, let him think he had a chance, then came at him again, this time kicking him viciously in the side of the head.

Blair rolled onto his back, moaning, more blood flowing from a cut above his left eye. In the stands, Snake was smiling. Atta girl, Hilley!
Go for it!

Blair watched through tear-blurred eyes as her foot came at him again as if in slow motion. Before the boot hit his ribs, he tried to twist away but he was too slow. He felt the pain explode in his side and reached to grab her ankle. Hilley's reflexes had begun to slow and she couldn't draw back in time. He jerked her off her feet and she landed hard on her back close by. Too close.

She lay motionless for a few seconds, gasping air back into her lungs. But those few seconds were enough for Blair to recover and see what might be his last chance.

He rolled over on top of her, then sat up, straddling her waist, pinning her injured wrist down with one hand. He had her - finally.

When he began tearing at her shirt, she struggled wildly against his grasp, so hard that he quit and started slapping her, loud, open-handed blows.

*

Snake was on his feet and moving down through the crowd of excited onlookers toward the ring. His mind was racing. Where the hell was Pete?

Suddenly, as if in answer to his unspoken question, an explosion rocked the building. Snake fought to keep his balance. Chunks of plaster began falling from the ancient ceiling. The crowd panicked and everyone started moving toward the exits in a rush. Another charge went off on the other side of the building and all hell broke loose.

Snake made his way slowly, letting the others move by him. He had to fight the flow of panicked inmates to avoid being swept along with them.

*

Startled by the first explosion, Blair hesitated and looked up at the chaos all around him. Hilley mentally shook off her daze and took advantage of his inattention. She pulled her left arm out of his loosened grip and smashed the heel of her hand into his throat. As he leaned back, clutching at his throat, she twisted hard, throwing him off her, then rolled over and began crawling toward the ropes. She needed a weapon now. Anything.

Blair got to his feet, pumped up by his insane rage, pulled a switchblade out of his boot and lunged after her. He entwined his fingers in her hair and jerked her head back, pulling until she fell backward. Keeping a tight grip, he moved around to stand over her, kicking her with every step he took. She fought him as well as she could, but she was just about out of strength.

His face was an insane, leering mask. He no longer cared about fucking her. He just wanted her dead. Maybe then . . . what the hell! He was just that crazy.

The knife came down toward her throat slowly. She cut one hand trying to push it away. Blair's voice was breathless.

"Nice seeing you again, Lieutenant - it's been fun."

His arm drew back, but as it swept forward to slash her throat, a single gunshot rang out, the sound deafening in the echoing silence of the huge, high-ceilinged room.

Blair was knocked backward by the impact of the large caliber bullet entering his shoulder, shattering the collar bone.

Startled, Hilley scrambled to her knees, staring first at Blair, then up to where the shot had come from. She seemed confused.

Snake Plissken stood in the bleachers, at a slightly higher level than the floor of the ring. Lowering the gun, he gave her a lopsided grin.

"Hiya, babe."

Then the gun came up again, aimed straight at Blair's head. Hilley leaped in front of Blair, putting herself directly in the line of fire, screaming, "No, dammit! He's mine!"

Still smiling, Snake lowered the gun slowly. His voice was low and cool. "Sure, babe. Whatever you say. I was just evenin' the odds a little."

Hilley held his gaze, and ever-so-slowly, a smile came to her lips. She could see that he really understood. She nodded, then turned her attention back to Blair, who was crawling toward the side of the ring.

Her eyes scanned the floor until she found Blair's knife where he had

dropped it. She retrieved it, then went after Blair, the knife at ready with a look on her face that scared the hell out of Blair and made Snake's skin crawl. Numbled by fear and pain, Blair felt like he was living his worst nightmare.

As Snake took a step down, still watching the action in the ring intently, a crossbow bolt struck the bleacher just an inch from his boot. He froze.

Simultaneously, another bolt embedded itself in the canvas mat at Hilley's feet. She was close enough to Blair to smell his fear. She barely hesitated, glancing at the still quivering shaft, and kept moving in on Blair.

Snake looked around to locate the source of the danger. Two of Blair's men, who had rushed outside to see what was causing the commotion, had crept back in to help their leader.

Seeing that Hilley meant to kill him no matter what, Blair frantically signalled his hidden men to move in on Plissken. Then he began backing away from her.

"Stop - now! Or they'll kill him!"

His words seemed to have no effect on her slow, steady advance.

"They'll kill him, bitch! I swear to God! If you touch me, they'll kill Plissken!"

Hilley froze as his words cut through her hate. Kill Plissken! Looking from Blair to Snake, she hesitated again as the conflict raged in her mind. Then, she lowered her head in surrender and dropped the knife at her feet.

Relief washed over Blair and he sagged back against the ropes.

"Kick it over to me, you stupid cunt."

Without looking up, she did what he commanded. Blair's men disarmed Plissken and brought him down out of the bleachers. One of them handed the gun up to Blair.

"Tie him in the corner - I want him to watch."

Then Blair turned back to Hilley, his smile gone from smug to savage. As she looked up at him, she could read in his face what would come next. So could Snake. Blair's men stuck close by him to be sure he didn't somehow magically 'slither' out of his bonds.

Hilley backed slowly away from Blair until she felt the corner post against her back. Her eyes never left his, and in spite of his bravado, it bothered him. He fingered the trigger nervously and raised the gun higher, pointing it right in her face.

"Your run is over, bitch! Your ass is mine!"

To everyone's surprise, Hilley smiled. "Like before, Blair?"

"Just like before."

He reached past the barrel of the gun with his free hand to rip open her shirt, exposing her dirty T-shirt and the smooth swell of her breasts beneath. Hilley didn't even flinch, just kept staring. Her cold gaze, so calm and unaffected, still frightened Blair. Without warning, he smashed the butt of the gun across her face, knocking her into the ropes. But she didn't fall.

Hilley regained her balance and brought her gaze back up to Blair's face. But something was different in her look now. The ice in her eyes was gone, replaced by a smoldering fire.

The growing fear in him enraged Blair. He drew back to strike her

again. But as his arm began its forward sweep, a shot rang out from somewhere above them. One of Blair's men fell dead at Snake's feet.

Forgetting his close proximity to Plissken, the other guard spun into a combat crouch, scanning the upper levels. Getting the best leverage he could under the circumstances, Snake dropped the guard with a single kick of his steel-toed boot to the man's chin.

In the ring, Blair, startled by the gunshot, made the same mistake his lieutenant had. He turned away from Hilley toward the source of the shot, and quickly spotted Pete above on a ledge. He fired Snake's gun at him, hitting the already injured man in the chest. Thrown off balance by the impact of the bullet, Pete fell from the ledge, hitting the hard floor with a sickening thud.

Hilley watched in horror as her old friend fell, then uttered a cry of pain and rage - just before she attacked Blair.

Blair realized his mistake at that same moment and tried to bring the gun back around to bear on Hilley, but he wasn't quite fast enough. She hit him hard, knocking him backwards. The gun went off, the wild bullet hitting Plissken who was still tied to the corner post.

Blair went down to the canvas on his back. The gun was slapped from his grasp and went sliding across the canvas. Hilley leaped on top of him, straddling his waist. Before he could react, she smashed her elbow into his face, then again to his throat. He lay there dazed, blood pouring from his mouth and nose, choking and gasping for breath. Her hands went to his throat and tightened. But suddenly, the idea of killing him with her bare hands made Hilley feel sick. She climbed off him and crawled over to where Snake's gun lay waiting. Waiting for her.

She picked it up and stared at it, then looked over at Blair, who had somehow managed to roll over onto his stomach. He was trying feebly to crawl away.

Suddenly, everything had changed. She shook her head hard, trying to clear the fog. What the hell is wrong with me? This was the moment she'd been waiting for, hoping for, working for all these long years. Blair was here, at her feet, helpless, hurting. He was hers for the killing. So what the hell was wrong?

Snake's voice got through to her. "Do it, Hilley. Finish it!"

She looked at him, at the blood on his jacket sleeve and tried to feel her former rage. Nothing. She'd lost it. She tried to speak, but all that came out was an anguished sob.

"Dammit, Hilley, kill him and let's get outta here!"

Tears filled her eyes as she looked at him. She shook her head sadly. "I can't."

It came out as a whisper. "I just can't."

Snake stared in disbelief. It was the old Hilley! What timing!
Shit!

"Then cut me loose and let's get the hell outta here!"

She stuffed the gun in her belt and hurried toward Plissken. As she cut at the ropes tying his wrists, she glanced back at Blair, lying motionless, face down on the canvas.

"Come on, babe."

She turned her attention back to Snake and in a moment he was free. He reached up to help her down out of the ring. She hesitated again, glancing back at Blair.

"Hilley, finish it or forget him."

She nodded and let him lift her down. He grabbed her arm and pulled her along with him.

"Let's go."

She stopped suddenly, exclaiming, "Oh my god - Pete! Where's Pete?" Snake nodded toward where the older man had fallen and they hurried over to him.

Pete lay on his back, broken, bleeding, barely alive. Hilley went down on her knees beside him, cradling her old sergeant's head in her lap. Tears ran freely down her face. "Oh, Pete."

Pete's eyes flickered opened and he looked up at her. His voice was a hoarse whisper. "Hiya, Lieutenant. You okay?"

"Dammit, Pete." Hilley choked back a sob. "I'm so sorry. You weren't supposed to die. I was."

"That's okay, Hilley. I don't mind."

Pete closed his eyes and died right there in her arms. Hilley felt a part of her die with him. It reminded Snake too much of what had happened to Taylor. Almost like reliving it.

She lowered her head and cried without shame, the tears falling on her old friend's face.

Kneeling beside her, Snake put his hand on her arm. "Come on, babe - we gotta go now."

She shook her head, glaring at him defiantly. "I can't leave him here. Not like this."

Snake held her gaze. "He's dead, Hilley. Come on."

Another shot of deja vu. As soon as he'd said them, he realized he'd heard himself say almost those same words before. But at least this time he thought he knew what he was fighting for. He shook off the eerie feeling and went on.

"He's gone, babe. There's nothing we can do for him now."

She didn't seem convinced.

"Hilley, he wouldn't want you to stay here and get killed because of him. He wanted you to make it. He sacrificed himself so you could live."

That got through. The fire rekindled in her eyes.

"You're right."

With Snake's assistance, she got up slowly, already painfully stiff, carefully lifting Pete's head from her lap. She stood there just staring down at the body until Snake took her arm and gently pulled her away.

*

As they neared the exit, Snake heard the angry mob returning. He stopped short and Hilley ran right into him. All she could hear was the pounding of her own heart. She was exhausted, literally drained of energy. Then she heard it too, and whispered, "Oh, shit! What now, hero?"

Bitting back a nasty reply, he turned and headed back the way they'd come, moving a little faster now.

"There's gotta be another way out."

They raced back through the huge room and down a wide hallway. There was an exit at the end but it was well-blocked.

"Shit!"

He grabbed her arm and hurried them back a short way to the mouth of another, narrower hall. The noise of the crowd seemed to be getting louder and uglier. They ran down the hallway, turning corner after corner until Snake had no idea where they were. He was afraid that any minute they'd run head-on into the mob of angry inmates. He kept his pistol in one hand, ready for trouble, and held Hilley's hand tightly in the other. No way he was going to lose her now. Not if he had to carry her out. And from the looks of her, it just might come to that. But then - he wondered - who's gonna carry me?

*

Eventually, they came to another battered door marked 'EXIT'. Snake hit the bar hard, fully expecting to be thrown back when it didn't budge. But to his surprise, it flew open, crashing into the cement wall outside. Then they were running up the slight incline of the loading ramp and out into the dark street.

Half a block later, they were spotted by the pursuing mob, and the chase was on.

*

The two battered fugitives managed to make it back to the basement hide-out without being caught, but getting to the World Trade Center was going to be tricky.

As they ate what little food was left, Snake decided they should rest there for awhile. He sat, quietly watching her as Hilley bandaged his arm as best she could. He had protested that it would be okay, but she'd insisted. He let her have her way - just as he almost always had, so many years before.

She caught him looking at her and blushed. Despite the poor light, he saw her discomfort. "What's wrong?"

"I wish you wouldn't look at me like that."

He had to smile. "Like what?"

"Like it was old times."

He thought she sounded bitter. "You never used to mind when I looked at you."

She concentrated on his arm. "I didn't used to look like this."

He smiled again. "Neither did I, babe. You still look as beautiful to me now as you did before . . ."

His voice trailed off. He couldn't say it. Couldn't say the hated word - Leningrad.

She blushed again. "Come on, Plissken. I thought you still had one good eye."

He grabbed her wrist and whispered, "I do."

He pulled her close with his good arm and kissed her. For a few, too-brief seconds, it was just like old times. Then she pulled away. Her voice was a shaky whisper, as she held his gaze.

"Not here. Not now. Maybe if we get out of this alive . . ." She faltered and looked down ". . . well, we'll see."

Nodding, he loosened his hold and she sat down beside him. They rested in silence, sitting on the cold, hard floor, their backs against

the wall, Snake's arm draped across her shoulders.

*

After an hour, Snake decided it was time to go. His whole body was stiff and sore, and he knew if he didn't move soon, he wouldn't be able to move at all. And he figured Hilley was in much worse shape.

"Hey - babe?"

Hilley was about half-asleep, her head on his shoulder. "Hmmm?"

"Time to move."

She groaned. "Do we have to?"

"Well, sweetness, we could stay right here 'til you feel better if you'd rather, but personally, I'd prefer to get the hell out of this place ASAP. It's up to you."

She raised her head and glanced around the cold, damp room and then at him. "Let's go."

Both struggled stiffly to their feet and started slowly for the stairs. Hilley paused on the bottom step and leaned over to kiss his cheek. Smiling at his look of surprise, she blushed a little and whispered, "For luck!"

He took her hand and squeezed it, then continued on up the stairs with Hilley in tow. We're sure gonna need it!

As soon as they were outside of the basement and on the street, Snake triggered the signaling device. Then they set out for the World Trade Center.

*

When they got to their destination without serious incident, Snake began to get a little worried. They'd had to duck several search parties along the way but there hadn't been any really close calls.

They hurried into the ruined lobby, headed for the stairwell that would lead them up the flights of stairs to the fiftieth floor. Then they could ride the rest of the way in the elevator, take it easy. He hoped. But he had a bad feeling about the whole thing that was getting stronger with every passing moment.

*

Somehow, Hilley made it all the way to fifty without stopping. He had offered her rest stops several times but she had grunted refusal each time. It was all she could do. By the thirty-fifth floor, he had wished she would take him up on it. He was exhausted too. But if she could make it, he certainly could too. Somehow.

On fifty, he insisted they stop for awhile and Hilley didn't argue. Or couldn't.

When his heart finally stopped pounding and his breathing was back to normal, Snake got to his feet and headed down the dark hallway to the elevator, leaving Hilley sitting on the floor, eyes closed. As he walked slowly, working out the aching stiffness in his leg, he thought about her. He'd meant what he said earlier - she looked as good to him now as she had back in Helsinki. Both of them had been through hell - and survived.

What difference could a few battle scars possibly make after that?

He reconnected the wires and punched the 'UP' button. He was still waiting when Hilley limped up beside him. He had to smile at her haggard but still-determined look. She blushed again.

"What're you grinnin' at?"

He shook his head and turned his attention back to the elevator. He pressed his ear to the heavy doors and listened. After a few moments, he leaned back, exclaiming, "Shit!"

"Now what?"

He looked thoroughly pissed off and more than a little bit worried. "Something's wrong - it's not working."

Hilley let out a resigned sigh. "Oh well."

She turned and headed back toward the stairs, with Snake following close behind. "Whaddaya 'spose happened to it?"

He shrugged. "Could be anything."

"Including trouble waiting for us on the roof, right?"

He looked at her and nodded. "Especially that."

*

As they trudged up the remaining fifty floors worth of stairs, Snake began to worry about all the extra time it was taking them. He was afraid that the chopper might leave, figuring that the escape had soured. He didn't figure the pilot would leave without Hawk's okay, but he also knew Hawk was sticking his neck out on this deal. Way out. Maybe he would begin to worry about his helicopter and men - all U.S. government property. Maybe he would have second thoughts on the whole deal. Maybe the whole thing had been a set-up to get him back in prison for good. Harker had been really pissed off. Maybe . . .

He stopped himself. The chopper would either be there or not. If it wasn't, there wouldn't be one damn thing he could do about it anyway. Hawk would only be able to imagine what Plissken thought about it.

But, somehow Snake knew that Hawk wouldn't let them down. He would never have agreed to come back in if he'd had the slightest doubt. Distasteful as it might be, sometimes Plissken felt a real kinship with the old bastard, almost liked him. They'd both been at Leningrad and had made it back - that was something special, something not too many could say they'd done. Pete had been another survivor - now he too was dead. And Taylor . . .

He forced the thoughts of Leningrad from his mind. They could only distract him now, weaken him. He was here, with Hilley, and they had more immediate problems. The past was dead. He glanced over at Hilley, just slightly behind, pulling herself up each step using the railing. Maybe not everything in the past was dead. With a little luck . . .

*

Snake Plissken had never really believed in "luck", good or bad. He figured you made your own luck, made your circumstances either work for you or against you. That was why when they finally reached the narrow stairway up to the roof, he took the steps slowly and silently. 'Caution' was Snake Plissken's middle name.

The door to the roof was gone and the wind gusted through the opening unhindered. It was like trying to walk uphill in a wind tunnel. He turned and grabbed Hilley's hand, pulling her over behind him.

Hilley was instantly alert, her aches and pains forgotten. Her bone-deep exhaustion vanished as adrenalin pumped into her overtired system. Where the reserve had come from, she didn't know. Perhaps from some deeply buried nook or cranny within her labeled "survival". She drew Snake's pistol from her belt and let him know with a decisive nod that she was ready.

Snake quickly checked the clip in his Ouzi then flipped the switch to change it from rapid-fire to single-shot. It was too damn close to empty to waste even a single bullet. Snake wished he had a smaller weapon, another handgun, rather than the Ouzi.

Crouching low, he inched his way up to the doorway, straining his eye to see anything out of place in the darkness outside. He could barely make out the silhouette of the flat-black police helicopter sitting at the other end of the roof on an ancient helipad. There was something wrong, though. His mental alarms were screaming, louder and more insistent than before.

Then he realized - the chopper's main rotor sat motionless except to sway a little as the wind bombarded it. No lights of any kind were visible in the cockpit. Surely no pilot in his right mind would shut down the engine under these circumstances? Apparently Hilley agreed.

She edged her way up behind him and spoke, close to his ear. "Why the hell did those idiots shut 'er down? Je-sus!"

He half-turned toward her and answered, "We're late. Maybe they decided to take a walk, enjoy the night air."

"Very funny. Whadda we do now?"

He shrugged. "I guess we go for it. Very carefully. Not much else we can do."

She nodded, and they moved toward the chopper at a normal pace. Hilley turned every few steps to cover their rear, but there was nothing else moving on that roof - only them and the wind.

As they neared the machine, the black Plexiglas door flew open and an inmate holding a USPF issue automatic rifle popped out. As he did, two others, all in black, appeared from around the helicopter. They were all armed with crossbows. Every one was primed and ready.

Snake and Hilley froze, guns at ready. Then, the passenger side door opened, and a battered and bloody Blair pulled himself out, slowly and with great difficulty. He shouted to be heard over the roar of the wind.

"Welcome to my little party. Glad you both could make it."

His bruised mouth grinned sadistically, showing broken and missing teeth. He had a police weapon in hand too.

"We've run into a little problem here. We killed the pilot before we realized none of us could fly this thing." He looked straight at Hilley. "Looks like we need your services again, Lieutenant."

Hilley just stared at him. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. "You're out of your fuckin' mind!"

Blair's grin faded. "Git movin', bitch!"

Hilley stood tall, her gun aimed straight at Blair. "Go jump!"

Once again, Hilley watched as insane rage took over the man's mind. She raised her gun so Blair would see clearly where it was aimed - right

between his legs. She fairly screamed to be heard.

"Kill me and you've got no pilot! Kill Plissken and you'll be the next to die! Guaranteed!"

The words got through; Blair calmed.

"So - it seems we have something of a stand-off. Whadda you propose?"

Hilley smiled. "I propose that you and your men step away from that chopper."

"Just like that?"

Hilley nodded, smiling. "Exactly like that."

Blair chuckled. "And just let you and the hotshot there leave?"

Still smiling, she nodded again.

"I don't think so, Lieutenant."

Hilley decided to try reasoning with the crazy sonofabitch.

"Look at it this way, Blair. If you let us go, at least you'll still be alive. And, you'll still be the King of New York." She paused a second. "Nothin' sadder than a dead king, Blair. Ya know?"

A pebble struck the heel of Plissken's boot; he whipped around, going down on one knee in a combat stance.

"Hilley, four more with crossbows, about twenty feet behind us." He didn't bother to mention that all weapons were trained on him. Didn't figure he needed to. She'd know.

Hilley began to worry a little. That made the odds 4 to 1. Nothing new there, but it could get a bit tricky. They might be able to avoid the single-shot crossbows but the automatic weapons would be a problem.

Hilley's eyes never left Blair's. She showed no outward sign of her concern for Plissken, but inside, she was afraid. She knew they wouldn't kill her - yet, but wouldn't hesitate to kill him. As her mind raced through the various options open to them, she forced a smile and spoke casually.

"Come on, Blair. You know damn well it won't matter how many there are or what they're packin'. You kill Plissken, you might as well go ahead and kill me too. There's no way I'll fly you outta here."

Blair seemed confused, and that made his men uneasy. It was her ball and she decided to run with it. "Besides, there's not room in that chopper for everybody. Which of your guys have volunteered to stay behind?"

Even in the poor light, she could see the man's battered face darken with rage. He snarled at her, "Shut up, bitch! Nobody stays behind!"

She kept smiling but her gaze shifted around to the worried-looking inmates.

"I'm telling you there's not room for all eight of you. Even without Plissken along, she could only fly with five max - including the pilot. Any more and we'll go down like a rock." She gestured expansively. "Who's gonna stay behind, Blair? Which four? Huh?"

"I told you to shut up! The others can ride outside - on the skids."

She shook her head. "No way. Too heavy. And in this wind, it'd be a toss-up whether we hit the ground or the side of a building first! Sorry, guys. Who's it gonna be?"

The men were looking at him now.

"Godammit, you mouthy cunt! You'll just have to make two trips."

Chuckling, she shook her head again. "I really don't think the

blackbellies would go for that, do you?"

Listening to her, Snake was impressed at her cool. Impressed but concerned.

Despite his injuries, Blair was crazy enough to consider going for her again. He took a step forward, then stopped as a simpler solution occurred to him.

"Shoot 'em!"

His lieutenants, one on either side, looked at him, confused. One finally found his tongue. "We can't - who'll fly the chopper?"

Blair grabbed his machine gun. "Not those two, you idiots!"

Then he opened fire on the four unfortunates standing guard behind Plissken and Hilley.

Even Hilley was shocked at the sudden brutality of the move, although her ploy had worked out better than she had ever hoped for. The odds were back to 2 to 1, and Blair had used up most of the ammo clip killing his own men! He stood as if in triumph, his face a hideous mask of insane pleasure.

"No more excuses, bitch! Now there's room for everybody."

Hilley made a show of counting, then shook her head. "Nope. I still count one too many."

Blair's men shifted nervously. They knew he was well over the edge. He didn't notice them; he was too busy bellowing.

"Plissken stays! Dead or alive! He stays!"

Hilley's eyes glittered. "No deal, asshole! Get yourself another pilot!"

That did it. As the gun in Blair's hands came up, Hilley shoved Snake as hard as she could to the side, then dropped to the rough gravel surface of the roof.

As Snake went down, diving for cover, Blair's men opened fire on him. Blair began shooting wildly at Hilley.

When one of the desperate inmates realized that his leader was trying his damndest to kill their only ticket out of the prison, he turned his weapon on Blair, screaming for him to stop.

Blair hesitated just long enough to blow the man away, then went back to shooting at Hilley. Seeing this, the two remaining men stopped firing at Snake and looked at each other. Then, both aimed their weapons at Blair and began shooting. Their bullets and Hilley's hit Blair simultaneously, throwing him backwards against the armored door of the helicopter.

Taking advantage of their distraction, Snake came up off the ground and opened fire on them. He knew that their new-found 'affection' for Hilley would definitely not extend to him. Both men fell dead.

The relative silence that followed was eerie. Nothing moved but the wind for several seconds, then Snake got to his feet and moved slowly, warily watching the bodies, toward where Hilley lay. She hadn't moved.

As he drew near, her head came up. She glanced at him, then at the helicopter.

"You okay, babe?"

She rolled slowly onto her back, clutching her right thigh, and struggled to sit up. Dark blood flowed sluggishly from a bullet wound on her leg.

"Just fine. Outstanding. I sure hope you didn't hit the goddamn

helicopter, Plissken!"

He had to grin. "Yeah. Me, too."

He knelt to look at her leg, wishing he had the Med-Kit from his survival pack. Maybe there was one in the chopper. Should be.

"Well, help me up and let's check it out. Time to get the hell outta here!"

For Snake Plissken, there came a moment of indecision - whether to laugh or kick her ass. Then, instead of either, he scooped her up in his arms, without a word, and carried her over to the waiting helicopter, setting her down carefully in the pilot's seat. While he searched for the Med-Kit, Hilley checked out the controls. A bullet had passed through the windshield but had exited harmlessly through the door on the passenger's side. Now if everything was just intact outside . . .

After he finished bandaging her leg as best he could, Snake and Hilley quickly went over the exterior of the trim, black bird. Finally satisfied it was still airworthy, Hilley climbed painfully back into the pilot's seat and started the jet engine, holding her breath as she did. She relaxed as the big rotor began to turn, just as it was built to, slowly at first, then rapidly picking up speed. She yelled for Plissken to get in.

As he strapped himself in, Snake looked over at her, his uncertainty obvious. There was concern in his voice that even the roar of the rotor couldn't mask.

"You sure you can fly this thing?"

She had found the late USPF pilot's cigarettes and was lighting one for each of them. As she passed him his, she gave him a dirty look and answered. "They still haven't invented an aircraft I can't fly."

As she familiarized herself with the controls, she inhaled the smoke deeply, then coughed a little, muttering, "'S been awhile." Then it occurred to her that it had "been awhile" for a lot of things - cigarettes, helicopters, rational thought and especially, Snake Plissken.

"Besides, you been takin' lessons, or somethin'? Seems I recall you couldn't fly helicopters."

"Shut up. I meant - are you well enough to fly. Intact enough."

She grinned at him and touched his leg. "Remember Siberia? I got us back that day."

Snake remembered. Remembered catching her afterward, when she finally passed out from loss of blood and shock. She had held on 'til they were all back, safe and sound. Well, safe anyway. He relaxed back in the seat and put his hand over hers.

"Let's get the hell outta here!"

She gave his thigh a quick, firm squeeze, just as she had the second time she'd come to his rescue, when she'd defied authority, pulled every string she could, just for him. Tossing the half-smoked butt out the side window, she slipped on the heavy headset and returned both hands to the controls.

She took the helicopter up slowly, getting the feel of the controls in fighting the high wind. When they were clear of the buildings, she turned them toward the brightly lit Statue of Liberty. Once again, the Lady had become a symbol of freedom - for Hilley. And in some ways, for Plissken too.

"Where to, buddy?"

Snake had to chuckle at her excellent imitation of a Brooklyn cab driver, in spite of another stab of deja vu. The Cabbie. It was so weird for Plissken, this whole affair. So many memories of his past coming back to haunt him. Really weird.

"Well, I guess we ought to return Hawk's helicopter. I mean, he was nice enough to provide it."

Hilley grinned and nodded, moving the chopper forward much faster than Plissken's stomach liked.

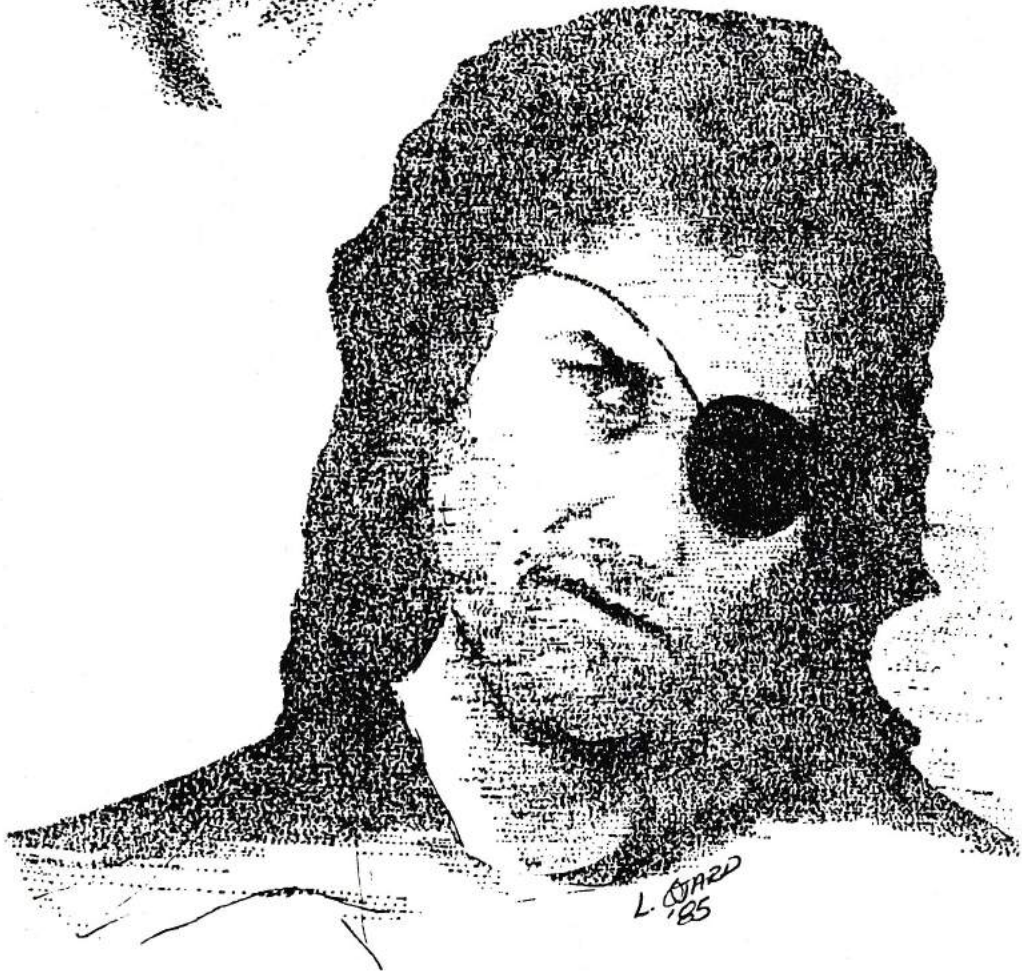
Same old Hilley.

He smiled at that thought. Glancing over at her profile, he was amazed at how much she looked like she had years ago, especially with the scar out of sight. Not that it mattered to him. Scarred or not, she was still his Hilley. His. And he had no intention of ever losing her again. He owed Hawk for this one. Owed him big time. Or maybe Hawk would just consider them all even now. It didn't matter much. Plissken was finally beginning to realize that all three of them were tied together by the past, and even after this 'mission' was finished, they would always be there for each other if needed. It was an unbreakable bond - of life and death and survival. And somehow, Snake didn't mind any more.

* * *







HOBSON'S CHOICE

by
Sheila Paulson

As the music cut across the night, almost obscene in its unexpectedness, Bob Hauk looked at the disgruntled expression on the President's face with sudden comprehension. Plissken! He'd known what tape he'd brought out of the prison, and right now he was probably laughing his damn fool head off.

On the surface, Hauk couldn't laugh but deep inside, where it would never show, a laugh rose up and tickled his funny bone. Hauk couldn't let Snake get away with it though. The deal had been for the President and the tape, and Snake had cheated him, thumbing his nose at the whole system and at Hauk himself. Well, the man had cause, Hauk thought. The mission had to take precedence, even if it meant using Plissken as the best and most readily available tool. He hadn't had the luxury of being fair with Plissken, and he understood that the younger man's resentment might drive him to a stunt like this. In his place, Hauk might have done the same, and that part of him could appreciate Snake's action. He understood Plissken better than Plissken thought he did. Under the right circumstances, the man might have become a friend.

But the circumstances hadn't been right and probably they never would. Hauk couldn't even allow himself the luxury of regret.

The President looked like he was about to have an apoplexy, and Hauk knew it was his job to smooth the ruffled presidential feathers. The Hartford Summit couldn't be saved though a later meeting might yet redeem the situation. That wasn't Hauk's job, and he wouldn't worry about it. But the tape had been his responsibility and he'd failed to deliver it.

Hauk had overheard Plissken's conversation with the President, and while he had no respect for the man, he had to have some for the position. The man was a first class bastard, and he deserved what Snake had done to him. The country didn't deserve it though, even if Snake felt it did.

"I want the one responsible," the President was ranting now, coldly furious. He would not be afraid to take revenge either - witness the fate of the Duke of New York.

That memory gave Hauk an idea. "You already got him, Mr. President," he said smoothly.

The President broke off in mid-rave and stared at him. "The Duke! That bastard had the tape. He must have switched it. You have to send people in to get it. Now, Hauk."

"We can send people in," Hauk agreed. The President was no longer a hostage and that gave him freedom of movement. "But there's no guarantee we can find it. You saw what it's like in the prison."

"You mismanaged the whole affair," the President raved.

"You're still alive, sir," Hauk said levelly, controlling his temper.

"That's the only reason you aren't losing your job." He dismissed Hauk by simply turning away as if he were of no importance. "I'll have the tape duplicated," he muttered to himself as he walked off with two advisors or bodyguards. "We'll have to set up another summit . . ."

The Commissioner looked after him and thought very mixed thoughts about Snake Plissken.

He found the ruined half an hour later where Plissken had cast it aside, and he took ten minutes to walk to the shore and dispose of it in the water. No one would know he had covered for Snake, least of all Snake himself.

Shortly thereafter, he found Snake, sitting on a rock, smoking a cigarette, his injured leg propped up carefully in front of him.

"We've still got business, Snake."

"Fuck off." Plissken was silent a minute, then he repeated, "And the name's still Plissken."

"You didn't live up to your end of the bargain, Plissken."

Wariness flashed in Snake's eye. "The hell I didn't. What kind of crap are you trying to pull now?"

"The tape, Plissken."

He saw a suspicious and defensive look in Snake's eye. "I gave you a tape, asshole. How the fuck was I supposed to know what was on it?"

"Part of the deal, Plissken. We neutralized the charges, but I haven't given you your pardon yet."

As he had expected, Snake went for his throat. As he had also expected, Snake's leg had had time to stiffen up, and he staggered as it buckled under him. Hauk caught him easily as he started to fall and put him back on his rock. "You can kill me later, Snake. I'm not going anywhere."

"Count on it." Snake's voice was hoarse and brittle with rage.

"So, what are you going to do now, Plissken?" Hauk asked. He fished a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket, removed two of them and offered one to Snake, who took it suspiciously as if he expected it to explode in his face. "Both of us know the job market doesn't give a shit for war heroes. Robbing the Federal Reserve Depository wasn't smart."

"So you're telling me I should sell out - like you did?"

"I'm not the one who was going to spend the rest of my life in the prison," said Hauk reasonably. "What made you think there were ever any guarantees, Snake?"

"I didn't expect any, from you."

"And you didn't get any. But I'm not sending you back inside, Snake, at least not as a prisoner."

"You're not sending me anywhere, Hauk."

"How far do you think you'd get without a pardon. You couldn't get off this island unless I gave the word."

"You can go fuck yourself." But a rapid calculation of the odds was going on behind Snake's one eye.

Hauk grinned. "I was right before, Snake. We'd make a great team."

"There's no way you can blackmail me into working for you again."

"I found the tape, Plissken." He didn't explain what he had done with it - that was one secret he had no intention of sharing, at least not yet.

Snake glared at him. "I don't know what the hell you're talking about, old man."

"You know. Both of us know. Snake, you've got nowhere else to go, and you know it. Let me give you a job."

"And if I don't, I go back to the prison anyway. Some deal."

"And if you do, you can bide your time and try to kill me when you're ready."

Snake stared at him. "You're a fool. I'd do it, too."

"You wouldn't get away with it. As long as I'm alive, I can keep you out

of there. No one else is going to take any trouble over Snake Plissken."

"But you're gonna look out for me out of the goodness of your heart?" Plissken asked sarcastically. "Bullshit."

"Does it matter why?"

"No," said Snake, but his curiosity was imperfectly concealed.

"Snake, you've got no other options. I can use a man of your abilities. What other work do you know? The Service trained you far too well for civilian life, just like they did me. You don't want this job. I didn't either. But what else is there? Routine jobs? Nine to five? That's bull. Robbing banks? They'll catch you every time, and you'd be back here anyway. You're damn good, Plissken. You'd be even better with the system on your side."

"You can take your system and your job, and you can shove it."

Hauk smiled. "You never know, Snake. You might even find it interesting."

"Like I just did? I lost . . . we lost some good people just getting that asshole out of there. It's not worth it."

"I know." Hauk kept his sympathy masked. He knew Plissken wouldn't want understanding from him. He also knew what it felt like to lose comrades-in-arms, and it never got any easier, no matter what the battlefield.

But Plissken's voice was less harsh when he spoke, as if he had recognized Hauk's understanding for what it was. He said, "You've got the damn piece of paper. You're calling the shots."

"Does that mean I might live out the week?"

"If you're lucky. Somebody's gonna kill you someday, Hauk, for being such a bastard, and it'll probably be me." He shifted his injured leg carefully and winced. "You may have bought yourself a trouble-shooter, but you also bought yourself more trouble than you can handle."

"I'll risk it," Hauk said with a wry grin. Snake would fight him every step of the way. What the younger man hadn't realized yet, and what Hauk was just beginning to understand was that both of them would enjoy the fight.

"Come on," Hauk added. "You need more than a temporary bandage on that leg. And I'd recommend you sleep the clock around."

"That's the first thing you ever said that I agreed with." Plissken hauled himself to his feet, putting weight on the bad leg cautiously. Hauk didn't offer a hand, knowing that Snake would reject it, but he stayed close enough to catch him if he fell. The two of them turned back to the command post, and Hauk matched his long-legged stride to Snake's halting one, wondering what Rehme would think of his new - was 'protege' the word? Probably he would think that Hauk had finally lost his mind.

'Maybe I have,' he thought to himself. But at least it wouldn't be dull.

the end



ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK TRIVIA QUIZ

(questions taken from both movie and novelization)

- 1) What was the date of Snake Plissken's escape from New York?
- 2) Who was Bill Taylor?
- 3) What institution did Plissken rob?
- 4) What was the name of Plissken's Special Forces unit in the War?
- 5) What was Police Commissioner Hauk's nickname?
- 6) What was Hauk's Special Forces unit in the War?
- 7) In which ear did Bob Hauk wear a gold earring and why?
- 8) What was the President's nickname?
- 9) What was the code name of the President's jet?
- 10) Who hijacked Air Force One?
- 11) What did Romero offer as positive proof that the President was being held hostage?
- 12) Over which eye does Plissken wear the eyepatch?
- 13) What design was the tracer bracelet made in?
- 14) What was the name of the jet glider Plissken flew into the Prison?
- 15) Where did Snake meet an attractive blond and what was her name?
- 16) At the time the movie was made, what was the relationship between the actress who played the blond and another cast member?
- 17) How many times was the line "I heard you were dead." (or the like) spoken in the movie and by whom?
- 18) What company did Cabbie originally drive for?
- 19) What was Brain's real name?
- 20) What was the name of the other partner Brain 'ran out on', when and where?
- 21) What was the nickname for the officers of the USPF?
- 22) What was the relationship between the actress who played Maggie and another individual involved with the movie?
- 23) In what famous NYC landmark was the Duke holding the President?
- 24) In which leg did Plissken catch the crossbow bolt?
- 25) What was in the briefcase the Prisoner's sent back to Hauk?
- 26) What was the name of the man Snake had to fight in the ring?
- 27) What kind of snake is tattooed on Snake's belly?
- 28) How long did the tracer signal last?
- 29) Which bridge did Plissken & Co. take to get off the Island?
- 30) What make car did the Duke drive?
- 31) At what USPF guard 'station' did Snake and the President get over the wall?
- 32) In the movie, how much time was left on Snake's 'lifeclock' when he looked at it after the charges in his neck were finally neutralized?
- 33) Is Snake Plissken right- or left-handed?
- 34) What building was Hauk leaning on when Plissken accosted him (after Snake's unsatisfactory 'chat' with the President)?
- 35) In what city was much of the movie actually filmed?



YOUNG MAN/OLD MAN II
TEN YEARS AFTER THE NIGHT BEFORE
fiction by L.J. Ojard

September, the year 2000.

A spectacular sunset bathed the massive living room of the plush penthouse apartment in a fiery glow. In the middle of that hellish light sat U.S. Police Force Commissioner Bob Hauk. Smoke from his pipe curled lazily around his sharp features, made even sharper by his smile. Wrapped in a wine-red robe, Hauk looked like the devil himself.

"So you want me to slap their hands, Senator?"

An abbreviated figure of a paunchy, but well dressed man spun on his heel at the words. "I won't tolerate your sarcasm, Hauk. It was a good plan, well thought out. We've done everything humanly possible to make allowances for those--those people," he spat. "We've come to an agreement. We've accepted their offer of--"

"--a bribe?" the Commissioner injected as he lifted a glass of Scotch and gazed appreciatively at the amber, iced liquid.

Frustrated, Senator Rayburn looked to his two military companions for assistance, but Lt. Colonel Savon and General Fitzgerald stayed out of it. Rayburn frowned at the men, then continued, "They've offered a very impressive piece of equipment in exchange for amnesty--for the civilian personnel only, of course. The military personnel will be formally charged, though why anyone would want to bother."

He cleared his throat, readjusted his tie, and gave a long, dry mouthed gaze at the well-stocked bar. "Awfully warm in here, isn't it?"

Hauk ignored the weakly camouflaged request. He would rather have ignored the whole meeting, but he felt obliged to ask, "What exactly is this equipment you're expecting."

"That's classified."

Hauk laughed, "Not if you expect my help, it isn't."

The senator resigned himself to the fact that Hauk would not award him, nor the others, any courtesies save the few inches of carpet on which they stood. Even at that, he knew they were dangerously close to overstepping their bounds.

The senator shifted uncomfortably, then gave up. "Well, I suppose you do have clearance."

Damn right he had clearance. Clearance equal to the president. And besides, he already had a pretty good idea what the big secret was. Even without clearance, Hauk had his own sources. Then too, rumors had been flying for days.

Hauk took a sip of Scotch and listened politely. Sure enough, the speech-maker did nothing but verify what he already knew.

Negotiations with the laser station personnel had been carried out by a supposedly non-partisan group--ten to one, bought and paid for by the U.S. government. Negotiations made his head ache.

Wearing a blank expression, Hauk studied the 'suit' and toyed with the idea of dumping the pompous ass head-first out the nearest window. For someone with Hauk's power, it wouldn't be difficult to claim that the

man never arrived--even with his companions. Of course, the senator probably had connections, too. And there again, the blithering idiot was so overstuffed with his own importance, he'd probably just bounce or crush some innocent bystander. Hauk came back from his daydream of mayhem to find the senator still rambling.

"--so you see why it's imperative. We need that device, Hauk. It's vital if we're ever going to win this war."

Horse piles. It might make the good old U.S. of A. top dog in the boneyard for awhile, but nothing short of annihilation of every man, woman and child with any political inclination would ever really bring peace. Probably lose ninety-nine percent of the population and have to neuter the rest. Still, there had to be some poor soul somewhere that didn't want to be king of the world.

Rayburn and his cohorts were glaring at him.

"We need an answer now, Hauk. If--if it makes any difference, the president has agreed to give you full authority. Run this operation as you see fit."

Thrills. Full authority over a suicide mission. Full authority to send someone out to get their head blown off. And with the president's blessing, no less. Who was president now, anyway? Felding? Fielding? Something like that. No matter. Everybody'd lost faith in the office after watching John Harker lose his marbles over the summit meeting fiasco. Crazy bastard.

Harker tried to accuse Snake Plissken of deliberately switching tapes on him, demanded the Snake be put to death, even threatened to kill the boy himself. He might have, if he'd been given the chance. But lucky for Snake, Hauk recognized the sounds of a snapping mind--not that Snake was beyond pulling a switch, but under the circumstances, Hauk was just uncertain enough to refuse the order. A fraction of a second after 'no' passed his lips, Harker lost it. The blame switched to Hauk. Then Rehme was behind it all. When Harker got around to blaming the entire police force of undermining his authority, Hauk called security.

Actually, the original blame might have stuck if Harker had just waited for the press to turn off the tv cameras. But ol' Johnny went and turned into a raving looney right there in front of God and everybody. He was hauled away in a strait-jacket. The cause, of course, was stress. The ordeal Inside, they said. Sounded perfectly logical.

No great loss. Two minutes after Harker was declared incompetent, the next beady-eyed bastard stepped into the presidential shoes. Funny thing, nobody could tell the difference.

In a way he felt sorry for Harker. He wondered if the man would ever realize how history would have gone if he'd only stuck with his original accusation. He might have finished his term in office--president instead of resident--in his own private, padded cell. And Snake would have been dead. Maybe. It was hard to say if anyone could kill the Snake. That boy was special, one of those truly sneaky SOB's who could walk through wet cement and not leave tracks.

But Plissken didn't get off scot-free. Not when dealing with 'Big' Bob. Hauk made damn sure the one-man riot-act knew he owed his slippery hide to him. He went ahead with the pardon as promised, but with one

minor change.--It was a full pardon only if Snake agreed to work for him. Granted, it took a bit of fancy talking and the promise that it wouldn't be forever--just a few 'special' deals, he said. Snake finally agreed. And promptly vanished for the better part of a year. It took one heap of tracking to find him again. Now Snake couldn't have a smoke without a cop offering to light it for him.

Immediately after Snake's reappearance came a rash of vandalism aimed directly at Hauk. Nothing major. Just little things, like a few bottles of his favorite liquor disappearing from his supposedly impenetrable home in upstate New York. Then one of the limo's mysteriously blew up in an automated car wash. No one was killed. No one was even injured, but there were soap suds for two square blocks. The real clincher came when Hauk's office at Liberty Island Central was raided in broad daylight. Only two things were taken; the cigarettes he kept on his desk and a file--Plissken's. Just a friendly reminder that Snake was damn good at his profession. Just his way of telling Hauk he could take him out any time he chose to do so.

Hauk watched the fidgeting man wear a dirty path in his nice, white carpet. "I guess," he concluded, "there isn't much choice."

The senator came alert, "Is that a yes?"

With a mild shrug and nod, Hauk put the pipe back in his mouth and cradled the hardwood bowl as he watched the sweet smoke rise. He'd made the senator very happy. But now came the hard part--conning Snake Plissken into carrying out the plan.

The black truck slid to a halt on the rain-slick pavement. Even before it completely stopped, a dozen USPF troopers leapt over the tailgate and fanned out along the dark street and adjacent alleyways to cover all means of escape. A few citizens stayed around to watch the event. Curiosity they called it, though anyone sane enough to leave the area called it a latent death wish.



Plissken woke with a start. Sweat rolled in slow rivers down his forehead, neck and onto his bare chest. For a long moment, as his heart continued its frantic pace, the surroundings seemed unfamiliar. Then slowly, the man known as the Snake recalled the night before; the bar, a bottle of good whiskey, and a dark-eyed woman with bright red hair. The bar was just down the street. The whiskey was gone. The woman, however, was sprawled out beside him, still sound asleep.

Satisfied with the circumstances, he slowly relaxed and let himself sink back into the curve of the warm, worn, mattress. Yet the comfortable position didn't do a damn thing for his headache--not his usual ache, but a throbbing hangover. More and more often, a little cash in hand turned into nothing but a bottle and a bed, not that he paid for the bed.

Snake studied his companion for a time and marveled at his choice in women. This one was as pale as an albino, reeked of cheap perfume and reminded him too much of every other "friend" he'd had lately. Actually, all he'd wanted was a place to sleep. He could have settled for only that, but she'd done her level best to arouse him. Granted, it took awhile. He hadn't been disinterested so much as stubborn. Snake had settled into one of his moods. He would have--and did--argue about anything and everything, including his own pleasure. There again, when the game was over--it was over--with or without her approval. No, she hadn't been at all happy with the abruptness of his performance. To him, though, the argument that followed had been every bit as entertaining as the sex.

He sat on the edge of the bed and groped the nightstand for his cigarettes. The pack was empty. There were more in his jacket, wherever it was. To his surprise, his clothes were folded and stacked on a chair across the room. That was a mistake he never made, being that far from his smokes, not to mention the gun that should have been under his pillow.

As he was about to stand, the woman came awake and stretched out a hand to him. "You don't have to go yet, do you?"

His answer was a gravel-voiced, "Yeah."

Her cool hands moved to his back, traced the line of his spine to his shoulders as she crept forward and pressed against him. "Stay," was the only word she said as her breath burned against his ear.

Despite his hangover, a familiar need began to creep through him and he let her draw him back down. He was becoming thoroughly engrossed in his own pleasure, when a faint, almost imperceptible noise filtered through the heavy breathing to lodge in the part of his soul bent on survival. His training took over and he dove for the weapon buried under his clothes. His search was short-lived. The door exploded open.

The snap of a safety catch being released cut the air as a familiar voice boomed out, "Hold it right there, hotshot."

"Shit, Hoskins, whadda you want?"

A black-uniformed, giant of a man smiled back at him. In the ham-hands was an automatic rifle aimed squarely at Plissken's chest. The grin on the ugly face widened as the eyes wandered over the battle-scarred warrior's body, then the woman's reed-thin form. Both were naked. Neither seemed to notice.

"Put yer pants on, loverboy. The boss wants to see you."

"Why?" came the hissed question.

The officer's gaze again focused on the nude woman. This time his appraisal caused her to drag a blanket up over herself as she glared back. His grin faded into a frown and his attention returned to Plissken. "I plumb forgot to ask. Maybe he's throwing you a party. C'mon, c'mon," he snarled, but only let Snake pull on the blue/gray/black camouflage pants before impatiently grabbing his jacket and throwing it at him. "Move it, asshole. I ain't got all day."

If Snake hadn't noticed the other cops standing in the shadows of the darkened hall, he might have gone for his gun. But this wasn't the place to try an escape. He decided to wait for more room to maneuver. However, once out of the room, one of the other 'uniforms' manacled his hands behind his back. Plissken was furious. His glare said so, yet he kept his anger buried deep, stewing for release at a more convenient time.

Twenty minutes later he was shoved out the door of a helicopter at Liberty Island Headquarters. He hit the pavement and instinctively rolled. The action softened the landing enough to do only minor damage to his body, but major ego damage to the one who'd shoved him.

As he fought to right himself before the guard could again vent his anger, Snake noticed Tom Rehme, the Section Commander, running toward him. The man looked mad. His arms waved frantically as he motioned for the chopper to take off again, then he warned the guards away. He crouched quickly and yanked Plissken to his feet.

"Sorry...had to...some...talk...Hauk," were the few words that made it through the din of the rising helicopter.

Once inside the main compound, Rehme tried again. "You're a hard man to locate. We've been trying to find you for nearly twenty-four hours. Damn near gave up till Carly phoned in and said you'd spent the night with her."

Plissken didn't like hearing that bit of information. No sir, not at all, but Rehme didn't notice the glare and went on talking.

"Guess I shouldn't blow her cover like that, but you were bound to figure it out sooner or later.

"Sorry about the rough treatment, but if you'd learn to cooperate, we wouldn't have to resort to force."

The look Snake gave him was full of malice. "You been given the boys nice lessons, huh?"

Rehme simply shrugged and pulled out a key to undo the cuffs. "We're not all assholes, Snake."

"Coulda fooled me. And the name's Plissken."

"Right. That way—Plissken," he sighed and began walking again.

Snake's first impulse was to deck him, but this was Blackbelly City and hitting a cop could get him killed, so he sauntered along, nice and quiet, like a good little soldier—only until he could get some idea what kind of shit they wanted to dump on him this time.

"Hauk just about gave up on you—thought he might take this one on himself," Rehme told him.

They continued on in silence, walking through a series of garishly lit halls until finally rounding a corner. The Section Commander opened the door and gestured for him to go in.

The room he entered was cold, dark and smelled of the Police

Commissioner's tobacco. The memories it dredged up made the constant ache in his head from nerve-gas damage take a second to the acid burning in his stomach. He hated this place, yet outwardly, he appeared relaxed as he reached for the freshly filled container of cigarettes Hauk still kept on his desk.

Rehme heard the creak of leather against leather and flipped on the lights to discover that Plissken had made himself at home in the Commissioner's chair.

"Where's the head man, off on another raiding party?"

"Right here, Plissken," came Hauk's unmistakable voice from the doorway. "Glad you decided to drop in."

Snake grimaced, "Anything for a friend."

Hauk had put an all-points bulletin out on Snake Plissken nearly twenty-four hours earlier. He'd even put the word out on the streets that he only wanted to talk, though he knew Snake would never come in of his own accord. Still, Hauk felt it necessary to at least attempt the polite route before dragging Snake in by force. The boy was stubborn.

Commissioner Bob Hauk strolled in, sat on the edge of the desk and asked sarcastically, "Comfortable?"

Snake took a long drag off the cigarette, grinned, then propped his feet on the polished surface. "It'll do." He paused to exhale the smoke in the man's direction, then inquired, "So, why am I here?"

"Got a deal for ya, Snake."

"—an' I told you before, old man—I don't make any more deals with you. Besides," he continued as he stood up, "I'm a free man, remember?"

But the look that passed between the Commissioner and the Section Commander told him he wasn't going anywhere. Snake sighed and shook his head as he stole a glance toward the door. Right on cue, Rehme took a side-step to block the exit.

"Sit down, Snake," Hauk told him, "Hear me out. Then if you still want to leave, I'll see you get a personal escort off the base."

"—an' a bullet in the back."

"I'm tellin' you straight."

"Bullshit."

The silence was getting unbearable, when Hauk reached around for a match. As he lit his pipe, he felt Snake analyzing the situation, but Hauk wasn't worried. This time, he wouldn't have to resort to any 'explosive persuasion' on this anti-hero. He needed Snake's expertise for a dirty deal, one Snake might not readily agree to, but Hauk had an ace up his sleeve, and if he read Plissken correctly, the Snake would want to cooperate.

One bright-blue eye slid its razor glare over Hauk's well-lined face, before he slumped back into the chair. "All right, so talk."

Hauk spoke first, "I had a few visitors last night; a senator and a couple brassplates from the Pentagon. Seems the military's still trying to pinpoint the laser station--the one that's been frying all the missile bases," he added in case Snake hadn't heard of--quite literally--the hottest revolution in history. "They wanted to blast it out of orbit, but somebody figured it might be easier to make a deal with them instead."

"A pardon," he said, "for all criminal actions—"

"—heard that before—"

"—in exchange for equipment they've developed. An agreement was reached about two days ago. Unfortunately, the Feds decided to get in on it and change the rules."

Snake muttered, "That figures."

"They want us to meet the crew, take what's been offered—"

"—and kill 'em?" he surmised through a cloud of smoke.

Rehme nodded, "Something like that. The military's gonna use some stool-pigeon they've planted, get the coordinates and take out the station like—"

"—they planned all along." Snake didn't get or expect an answer. He already had a gut feeling he knew what Hauk was about to ask. And he didn't want any part of it. Neither did Rehme, if Snake could believe the look on his face.

Hauk picked up a file, sifted through it a moment, then slapped it down in on the desk in front of him. "Read this."

Despite his hatred for the men, his curiosity got the better of him. He thought he saw some sympathy for the space cadets in those dark, narrow eyes of Hauk's. He picked up the folder and read technical language in more syllables than the back of a medicine bottle, though he had no trouble understanding it. It seemed the space-cases had discovered a way to neutralize the nerve-gas that permeated the air just about everywhere on the globe. That would have been enough for most people, but the military was more interested in a piece of equipment that could be adapted to fit any aircraft or missile. With what the station personnel referred to as the 'Damper', radar, infrared, nothing yet invented could track them.

Hauk leaned across the desk as soon as he thought Plissken was done reading. "You beginning to get the picture? They've offered this stuff to everybody. Us. The Russians. The Chinese." He stopped and let his words sink in before adding, "Somebody gave the poor bastards the impression that they were dealing with a legitimate spokesman for the U.N."

Maybe it was the proximity, but Snake suddenly became aware of Hauk's power and presence. Alpha male all the way. And close enough to smell. Hauk, to Plissken, smelled like a cop—scrubbed clean, aftershave and all. Wanting for nothing, unlike the rest of the world.

"So you're picking me to do your dirty work," Snake snarled back. He'd already reached the conclusion that Hauk and Rehme had been doing their deep breathing exercises in a gas cloud.

"I want you to go after the crew and equipment, yes. But I want them brought back here. Alive."

Snake inhaled slowly off the smoker and hesitated before asking, "Why, so you can throw them inside?"

Hauk's smile spread like a deadly infection, "I want 'em. That's all you need to know." His refusal, of course, only baited Plissken's curiosity.

Snake's laugh was bitter, "Bullshit. I wanna know the real reason you're so hot on sending me out there when you've got a fuckin' army at your disposal."

Hauk chose to ignore the profanity and keep the game going. He stood, paced a few steps, then told him, "The ship's scheduled to land in Southwestern Canada. They're a bit touchy about us--cops--flying so close to their borders, so we've agreed to stick to a set route."

"They've okayed a medivac," Rehme announced.

"Who said I was going?"

"Take ya within' five miles of the airbase. From there, you jump."

"The hell I will." Obviously, these men hadn't heard about the little confrontation he'd had a couple months back with a few Canadian officials, an irrate border guard, and a limo that sort of blew into tiny pieces one humid, summer afternoon.

Hauk folded his arms over a still impressive expanse of chest and spoke in a low, rasping tone as if the information had to be squeezed out. "Look Plissken, Canada was hit real hard by that station. They want it, and the shuttle eliminated any way possible. We've negotiated for seventy-two hours. We've got a little under forty-eight left before they concentrate their remaining fire-power at the area. Near as we can figure, it'll take out about fifty square miles."

"Great. You have yourself a real good time, old man, cause I ain't goin'." He stood again and headed for the door.

"You'll go, Snake. And you'll bring back the crew, the Damper and the formula."

With a heavy, disgusted sigh, the one-eyed warrior twisted back toward Hauk. "An' what rotten trick are you gonna pull this time? More explosives in the neck? Slow poison, maybe?"

Hauk shrugged, "Just thought you'd like first crack at Berrigan."

Snake nearly bit through the filter of the cigarette he had poised to light.

"You do remember Captain Berrigan, don'tcha, Snake? The one who set up the Special Forces party at Leningrad?"

His eye narrowed, "So help me, Hauk, if you're lying--"

"Not about this. I want him here. And I want him alive."

Snake grinned wickedly, "Yeah? Well, what if he happens to fall on a bullet and hurt himself?"



Tom Rehme stood behind the Commissioner and read over his shoulder as a list of former Special Forces personnel scrolled up the screen of the microcomputer. He wasn't sure what Hauk was looking for, but judging from the intensity of concentration applied to the task, it had to be something important.

"You're sure this is the most accurate listing?"

Rehme nodded, "Yeah, as accurate as we can make it."

Hauk didn't find that comforting. He stretched his long legs out in front of him, folded his hand across his stomach and grumbled, "Damn."

"What are you looking for?"

Hauk pointed to a name that was followed by 'K.I.A., Leningrad'.

Something clicked. "Wasn't there a Commander Kern involved in the negotiations?" He gave the screen another study. The name was listed in Hauk's unit, 'Texas Thunder'. Suddenly, it all fell into place.

"Kern? Mac Kern? Wasn't she the one you were--ah--"

"Yeah, I was," he sighed, then added softly, "and so was Plissken."

Snake spent a leisurely half-hour picking weapons from the supply room, although he could easily have found everything he needed in five minutes. The variety in the arsenal held his interest, as did the plentiful K-rations.

While he ate, he dreamt of revenge against Berrigan--the man whose face he'd never seen. His voice had been muffled, mechanical sounding through the gas mask he always wore even in the security of the underground bunkers. Nothing outstanding. Nothing but a blunt, shapeless mass in full gear. Seemingly without reason, Snake felt uncomfortable around him from the beginning. Now, of course, everyone knew the story of the infamous Berrigan, yet it was incredible that no one knew his real identity. That, however, would soon be remedied.

Snake was staring blankly at a map of the Canadian Rockies and trying to recall everything he could about the captain, when someone interrupted his thoughts. He swore at himself for being so distracted that he'd forgotten where he was and just who he was dealing with. The cigarette he held would clue Hauk in on his daydreaming even more by the length of the precariously balanced ash. Snake threw the smoker down and crushed it with the toe of his boot.

Hauk watched the young face grow suddenly older at his approach. It was easy to forget how young Snake Plissken actually was, just as it was easy to forget how dangerous he could be.

Hauk teased him about it once. Right after Snake rescued the president, he'd asked if Snake was going to make good his threat about killing him. The young man said something about being 'too tired' and 'maybe later'. Well, it was later and Hauk was still alive, though looking into that one, icy-blue orb left to the Snake, Hauk had to wonder why.

"When do I leave?"

"Right now."

The door was marked 'Viewport', but many thought there should have been a 'Caution: Enter at your own risk' added to that title. The word

'port' implied window, but the structure was a twenty-meter in diameter crystalline globe, coated with gold to protect the occupants from solar glare. The standard, double-sealed hatch was the only entrance. A walk-way leading to its center was as clear as the port itself, and the unobstructed view of the sun, Earth, moon and stars was better than any space-suited stroll could provide.

Inevitably, certain members of the stations compliment of 187 found a more exciting form of recreation for the viewport than just gazing at the stars. At such a time of R&R use, the Base Commander found it necessary to enter the globe. Although she knew the situation she was walking into, she was too angry for any tactful or remotely polite announcement of her arrival.

There were clothes strewn from the entry to the center of the observation port where the object of her anger, Chief Security Officer Soren Anlan, lay tangled in the embrace of his newest conquest, a very young Lieutenant Alicia James.

The Commander fully expected the love-making to end at her arrival, but the primal rhythm continued even when the man looked up. If anything, her presence added to the intensity of his passion. As the concentration reflected in his hazel eyes changed direction from his partner to her, the Commander's face flushed with embarrassment and she became torn between the desire to leave the pair to their intimate recreation and the need to assert her authority. Unfortunately, she was mentally paralyzed by the look on the man's face. Right up until Soren, with an outstretched, open palm, reached out to her. Then his hand closed into a grasping fist while his amorous exclamation rose.

Soren's reputation for volume was not unfounded. His cry shook Commander Mac Kern right through to her soul. But a sudden return of his typical, self-satisfied smirk brought back her resolution.

"Damn you!"

Mac struck at one of the articles of clothing, caught it with the toe of her boot and kicked it at the couple. The metallic cloth flopped over Alicia's face.

Right up to that moment, Alicia thought she and Soren were alone. Realizing her mistake, she shoved him aside, scrambled for her clothes and clutching her uniform, flew past the commander at a dead run. She nearly made it to the open hatch before the boom lowered.

"Lieutenant!"

Ally halted mid-step for a long moment, then turned slowly to face her commanding officer. "Yes, ma'am."

"You're restricted to quarters pending formal charges."

"Y--yes, ma'am."

Soren Anlan, too, stood up, though he made no move to dress except to pick up his uniform. He knew Mac was on the verge of a major outburst. She had that certain chill in her voice--a low pitch. Just like a calm breeze before the one that ripped the roof off. He stood quietly by, anticipating the worst.

"As for you, mister," Mac announced as soon as they were alone, "You were ordered to report to the docking bay for preflight two hours ago."

He shrugged, "It's done." He gently stroked the soft, pale fabric

draped in his hand. The garment hid nothing. It was a deliberate move to keep her distracted, and from the way her eyes stayed nervously riveted to his, it was working. Soren thoroughly enjoyed playing such games, though he seldom had the opportunity to play them with her.

"We launch in ten minutes. Did you plan on making that one on time, too?"

"Looks like it," he shrugged. Soren was good at antagonizing her, but in truth he knew exactly how far she could be pushed. He also knew enough to stay well out of reach, for although she was a full head shorter and half his weight, she was perfectly capable of doing serious physical damage if she caught him off guard, not that she'd ever used his skills on him outside the gym.

"Damn it Soren, I don't have time to put up with your escapades."

"I was just saying goodbye to a friend," he argued as he ran his fingers impatiently through his elbow-length, pale blond hair. The move was suggestive. He preened often with the same pride as any well-plumed peacock. It might have been just another arrogant gesture if Mac hadn't fantasized about the silken web. Anlan knew that for a fact, if only from the way her dilated eyes followed the move.

"Just saying goodbye?!? Goodgod, Soren, you've said goodbye to half the women in this crew in the past two days!"

His head bowed in mock submission, though he didn't bother to hide his smile, nor did he allow her gaze to stray from him as he murmured, "Ya know Mac, sometimes you make noise like a jealous woman."



The argument would have continued but for the abrupt change in lighting. The whole globe suddenly glowed red.

They said it in unison, "--shit!"

Soren bolted past her, grabbing her hand in the process, just as a soothing, yet somewhat sarcastic mechanical voice chimed, "Red alert. Red alert. This is not a drill. I repeat this is not a drill. All personnel proceed to battle stations. Incoming projectile, estimating impact in four minutes, seventeen seconds and counting. I repeat--red alert, red alert..."

They dove through the opening into the change-room. Soren stepped into his uniform, yanking it up with one hand, while opening the second hatch that led into the corridor with the other.

Mac immediately hit the intercom. "Bridge!" Nothing but static answered. It seemed everyone on base had the same idea. "Computer! Identify Kern. Bridge, answer me!"

"Commander, we've got a positive track--a multi-strike. When that baby opens, we'll have at least twenty-five war-heads blanketing the area."

"Can we shift orbit?"

"Not fast enough. And if we fire, we'll give away our position for sure."

"That's it then." She still had to ask, "Computer, project strike if Code-4 engaged immediately."

"Probability: eight percent strike ratio if Code-4 engaged within next sixty seconds."

Mac was shaking, not with fear, but with an overflow of adrenalin dumping into a body that hadn't known a decent night's sleep in over three weeks.

"--eight percent--" She swallowed hard before speaking again. "Full ship. This is Commander Kern to all personnel--prepare for Code-4 in forty-five seconds."

"Computer, on my mark, countdown to Code-4. Mark and engage." Normally, thirty seconds was all they needed to cover a distance half the length of the station. Child's play. A straight shot. But the game was over. The corridors were crowded and hatches were automatically sealing themselves off like falling dominoes.

"Forty-three, forty-two--" to make it into the hangar and up into the shuttle before the whole station blew itself to pieces. Neat pieces. It was a last resort effort to rip apart sections that had been so carefully joined. There were too many lives at stake to risk the whole station. Too many families rushing to be together just in case.

Mac and Soren ran flat out, their hands locked, each drawing strength from the other. Each terrified to let go. And still the last hatch seemed to taunt them, closing in slow motion, waiting until Mac was almost through before slamming down on her boot.

Mac would have fallen if Soren hadn't been looking back. Before she knew what had happened, he produced a knife, popped open the emergency panel, hit manual over-ride and kicked the hatch back open enough to pull her clear.

"I'm okay! Go, go!" she insisted. The reinforced heel was all that

saved her foot. It was bruised, hurt like hell, but she wasn't about to let it slow her down.

She did hesitate to make a quick grab for her spacesuit, hanging first in line in the neat little row of bodiless armor.

"Fuck the suit!" Soren yelled.

He was right, of course. There wasn't time and there should have been backup equipment on the shuttle, but Soren being Soren was prone to trust the reliability of the ship, rather than think of any what-if scenario. Mac could only pray that nothing else would go wrong.

Deep rumbling followed by a sharp jolt almost knocked them off the platform leading to the ship. Mac grabbed at the railing, while her long-limbed companion leapt for the open entrance--his move over-powering hers, and the next thing she knew they were settling in to their respective seats onboard the small, modified space 'truck'.

Mac was relieved to find that Craig 'Doc' McKensie was already aboard and strapped in, humming to himself, totally oblivious to the emergency raging all around him.

Another lurch and the hangar exploded free of the other sections, it's directions seemingly headed straight for the huge full moon hanging so close. But something was wrong as they began the launch. The open hangar should have remained stationary, yet it rolled slowly over like a dead fish going belly up. Now, with the rolling action came just enough gravitational pull to rattle the shuttle. Its nose, still too near the hanger opening, scraped with a sound that set teeth on edge. Mac hated what she referred to as those poke-your-nose-in landing bays. She'd had nightmares about just this type of situation. Luckily, with delicate maneuvering the shuttle cleared the bay without further incident. It took another orbit to establish the proper window for the meeting/landing site.

Snake didn't like to fly unless he was the pilot. In this case, however, that was out of the question. For one thing, he'd never had the opportunity to fly a C-141, and for another, the military still held on to McChord Air Force Base. The armor-plated HALO's, manned by trigger-happy loonies who shot at anything within range of the high-fenced parameters, might have had something to do with it.

The aircraft landed just long enough for Snake to jump off and run for another C-141, this one silver and marked with a red cross. Big disguise. Med-evacs were shot down just as often as anything else.

But Plissken accepted the transfer, settled in to the uncomfortable red, nylon webbed side-seat and tried to catnap. He was dragged out of his semi-sleep by a baby-faced airman.

"--more like a conventional hang-glider. Course that survival pack could make maneuvering a little difficult, but you should still--"

He interrupted with a growl, "Yeah, yeah. I've used 'em before."

"Oh, well--uh--five minutes to the drop point, sir."

Sir?! Plissken smiled at the term, yet it also made him aware that he wasn't as much respected as feared--like some aging lion. Maybe one day some younger 'cat' would come along, take a heavy swipe and--pow--there'd go the old throne.

Snake leaned back again and shut his eye. The mere thought of his hands closing around Berrigan's throat sent a rush of adrenalin coursing through his veins. It sharpened his senses like a dose of meth. Hearing, sight and sense of smell were dramatically increased. But the best sense was touch. He thoroughly enjoyed the burning urge to touch or be touched whether in battle or sex. Funny how the two seemed to blend into one. Once in a while he could remember when the two had been separate drives, but at times like this, he wondered if he'd ever be able to separate the two again.

He took a deep breath and concentrated on the urge until it took a stronger hold, pulled the painful throb from behind his eye, transformed it to pure fire, shoved it down his spine and wedged the sensation up tightly between his long legs. Snake inhaled slowly, then exhaled with a deep sexy moan. He opened his eye while smiling a smile any woman could read.

"One minute to target, sir."

The kid was back.

Plissken let the adrenalin urge him to his feet. Without a word, he headed for the hatch where he turned from the curious stare given him for the strange grin pasted to his full mouth. Then he jumped into the hazy, rust colored evening sky.

With Soren at the controls during re-entry, Commander Kern found herself falling asleep. She didn't fight the urge and dozed, apparently content, during what would have been to anyone else, a most traumatic time. Soren knew he was good pilot, but it was beyond his comprehension how she could nap while the trip went through such a precarious state. Of course, she'd made this flight at least one hundred times over the past six years. But still—a glowing red hull, violent buffeting, and extra G's didn't seem very conducive to sleep.

The truth was, she'd been awake for the better part of the past three days because of the negotiations. And for three weeks before that, Soren found her pacing through more than two full shifts and napping no more than two or three hours a night. He knew she couldn't possibly keep up such a pace much longer without collapsing, but he also realized she was driven by an uncanny will to see this mission through.

With her as main spokesperson for the eight stations, the results had pleased them all. She, too, was satisfied with the outcome. It meant that the personnel who wanted so much to return to their Earth-bound families could do so without fear of reprisal. More than half of those who manned the stations now were civilians who had signed on for no more than a three month stint to work on various experiments, build new or enhance the older stations, and some came to make routine satellite repairs. Whatever the reason, they'd all volunteered to join forces with eight stations full of social outcasts.

Originally, the stations were strictly military. Each major power involved in the war had sent up tracking devices, lasers, anything and every sort of devious device to maim, harass or destroy their enemies stations, satellites and missile launch platforms. It got to the point where everyone of them were in a constant state of alert. Repairs were

impossible to make without becoming a target for every laser cannon, satellite and particle beam up there or on the ground.

Something had to give. They all knew it, but it took an accident to bring the out the compassionate element they'd tried to deny for so long.

A random pot-shot hit an solid fuel tank near the center of the French station 'La Angelic'. The resulting explosion ripped the ring to pieces, trapping it's personnel in sections destined to burn up as they fell into the atmosphere. Every other station found themselves watching the terror, unable to shut out the vision, the cries and pleas for help.

At first, the hard-core military personnel pretended not to notice the debris floating where once had been a great silver wheel. No one was really sure who made the first move, but suddenly and without clearance to do so, shuttles began to dot the area around the wreckage. With flags and ID's covered, unidentified personnel in heavy-duty work suits with giant booster packs began drifting in and among the sections, attaching lines, supplying oxygen when they could. And prayers when they couldn't.

The horror of war really hit home when one of the sections was found to contain five young children, all in dire need of immediate medical attention. The Russian's had the medical expert, but the American base had the equipment, while the Red Chinese had tried and true herbal medicines they insisted would greatly increase the children's chances.

"Just this once," the leaders said emphatically.

'Just this once' came and went while little by little friendships were formed. Visits and information exchanges became the common place as the barriers came down. No one really knew when it started, but it seemed to Mac that one morning they just woke up to find the personnel had become a mix/match exchange.

Still the plea for peace took it's most dramatic turn while a technician routinely tracked a mobile missile base as it sped across the Siberian plain. The readouts showed the missiles to be armed with nuclear warheads. The man thought it might prove interesting to see if the main computer could suggest something to negate the armaments. He followed the 'game' through to everything but its logical conclusion.

Two panels over, a friend, busy replacing a worn board, heard his laughter and came up to investigate. Unfortunately, he whacked his head on the metal corner of the panel. His immediate reaction was to reach for the wound, but while still bent over, the tool in his hand made contact with an open circuit. Something shorted and the laser fired on it's pre-set target. Simple as that, the mobile missile base melted into a free-form sculpture.

At some point during the investigation, several minds struck on the like-notion that such a strike could be used as a deterrent to nations who still threatened to use nukes. After the press learned what was on the tape that former President Harker intended to play at the Hartford Summit, the independent station personnel realized that the threat of a nuclear strike was closer than ever. None of them wanted such fear hanging over their families back home. When the base commanders realized they were actually in a position to eliminate the threat, they could come to only one conclusion, and with the advent of the Damper, they could not only do it, but rest assured that they wouldn't get caught at it.

The laws of their homelands, of course, took an entirely different view of the idea and sentenced all station personnel to death. No trial, no option for prison. Even the living hell of New York prison was too good for them. The worst penalties were paid by the families of those on the stations. They took the brunt of the hatred. Many were murdered outright.

Mac came rudely awake—cold and angry at the world. Though months had gone by since her last thought of him, her tired mind dredged up memories of Bob Hauk. She had her own reasons for hating the man, but his persecution of her companions brought her silent hatred into the open.

"—you okay?" Anlan asked quietly. He waited for her faint nod, then jerked a thumb toward the port side. "Good, cause we've got big trouble."

Jets.

"We've been had," she enunciated slowly.

"Recognize the markings?"

Doc McKensie, in one of his few sane moments, came up between them for a quick look. "Hmm, Euro-Asian Alliance. David Isaacson's people."

Mac tiredly rubbed her forehead while swearing under her breath, "Damn, that's all we need." Suddenly, she got up and headed aft, down into the lower compartment.

Doc McKensie watched her go, then gave Soren Anlan a nervous glance. They both knew her well enough to be sure she wouldn't put up with any interference in their plans. Doc went to peer down the opening.

"Mac? M—Carrie, what—whatcha doin'?"

Soren heard the man's sanity slip with the same subtlety as dropping a brick on a fresh egg.

"He's—he's your friend, isn't he Carrie?"

God, how she hated that name. Soren clenched his jaw in preparation for a yell that never came. He decided to ignore the Crazy.

"Maybe David wants to see you, huh? Carrie, maybe he's here to help us—"

"—an Jack the Ripper plays the Tooth Faerie on weekends," Soren mumbled under his breath.

Doc heard it and shook his head to clear the fog when he realized his rational mind had faltered. Shame-faced, he slipped back into his seat, buckled up, then tried to explain, "I'm just nervous, Soren. It always happens more when I'm—I'm nervous. I can't—c—control—please, why am I here? I shouldn't be here." He winced as the violent headaches began, "This mission is too important to risk on the likes of me—please, make the pain go away, Mac—Mac? Please make the pain go away."

Suddenly, she was beside him, rubbing his temples, whispering in his ear. Soren could hear the pitch, low and hypnotic, but he couldn't hear what she said. He never got used to watching her perform that trick. He only knew whatever she did would bring immediate results. In a very few seconds the stress faded and Doc looked more like the young man he was instead of the old man the gas made him. Mac had one of those voices that could lull or destroy; soft, low and sweet or ragged and venomous.

He felt sorry for Doc. Soon after the introduction of the 'heavy'

nerve gas, Craig 'the Doc' McKensie decided to take responsibility for its invention--not that he'd been any more to blame than any other scientist in the company. But it was his father's company, McKensie Chemical, that discovered the gas. At +20,000 feet it was highly corrosive to metal, at 10,000 or less, its structure changed to an instantly toxic acid that homed-in on the nervous system. The initial tests showed it would dissipate after a few hours. Unfortunately, in vast quantities, it changed structure again and became the slow, insanity causing killer that drifted over most of the globe.

And Doc became obsessed with finding a cure--a neutralizing agent. It took five and a half years of futile experiments before he found a clue. Doc felt he was on the right track, but he needed a special environment. He needed a lab in space. He used his own political connections to tug the right strings, call in IOU's and generally push the issue until Washington caved in. He got what he wanted; a lab in space, and though twice he nearly lost his life in that lab, he found the answer--and lost his mind in the process. Doc looked seventy-five years old. He was only forty-one.

Soren spoke again as she left the dozing man's side, "What'd you do down there?"

"Just stacked the deck a little."

"Mind clueing me in?"

She didn't answer, just met his gaze long enough to make him sure he didn't want to know.

"Where are we?"

He gave her a worrisome, sidelong glance, then checked the readout, "Hmm, 'bout 39,000. Right on target."

"Nose 'er down."

His jaw went slack, "--must not'a heard that right. Say again."

"I said, nose her down. Dump it."

"That's what I thought you said," he glared. "Have you lost your fuckin' mind?"

"Yeah, probably." Her laughter was laced with exhaustion as she leaned back to strap in.

Soren muttered to himself a while, then questioned, "Would you mind if I found a suitable crash site?"

"Sounds like a good idea," she sighed, leaned back and folded her arms across her lap as she watched him prepare to follow her peculiar order.

He felt her eyes watching him. Any other time, he would have enjoyed it, but now it made him squirm and that caused her to smile even more.

"You're not going to tell me, are you?"

No answer.

"Okay, be that way. Lake dead ahead."

She raised an eyebrow at his choice of words, but nodded, "Good."

A moment before they contacted murky water, Doc McKensie mumbled aloud, "God, I wish I'd learned to swim."

Plissken stuffed the parachute into the hollow at the base of a tree and tossed fir needles over it to cover any sign of disturbance. He'd chosen his landing site carefully. The hilltop on which he stood overlooked a series of valleys. Directly below was a mile wide, slow moving river that cut a crooked path from east to west. In the early evening light, the growing sunset colors reflected off the mirror of water and tinted it to match the scattered clouds that clung to the tips of the higher peaks. A velvety, black-green, coniferous forest, interspersed with fiery, autumn hued vine-maple, ash and alder, blanketed the land. The damage from nerve gas-laced acid rain was nearly nonexistent in this sheltered land.

For a time, Snake remained poised against the outcropping of rock. Secure in the fact he was undetectable in the shadows, he revelled in the solitude and silence of the clean, cool air. Here in the mountains, he could almost forget the ache behind his patched eye. He could almost forget about the horrors of a so-called civilized world's continuous war. He could almost relax in a place like this. Almost.

Abruptly, the stillness became stifling, smothering like a wool blanket on a hot summer night. The atmosphere changed to soup, heavy and hot, as something invaded the sky. Falling. Rapidly.

One or two stars were beginning to show, but none had the awe-inspiring intensity of the incandescent bluge, first swelling out of the yellow, rising moon, then swallowing it whole. The glowing ghost dropped, white-hot and angry, but with precision. Carefully, aimed was this projectile. It passed not 500 feet over Snake's head with only a hiss and a wave of incredible heat.

Suddenly, a thundering roar ripped away the silent spell as two dark jets trailed after the spaceship. But the F-15's were too late. The astronauts had aimed their craft straight for the lake, and the ship went down, protesting in an unearthly scream. Steam boiled up around it turning the black water into the likeness of a primeval swamp. Silt and slime crept over the pale hull. Then silence thudded over the landscape once more as the jets slid up and over the far ridge.

A few seconds later, a subtle, yet more familiar sound drifted up from the valley below. Helicopters. Three of them rose above the trees and skimmed out across the water like grotesque insects. There was movement around an old lodge, too. Soldiers. Lots of them.

With infrared binoculars, Snake scanned the area ahead of the choppers and spotted an odd colored patch of water just off shore. Even though there was no longer a definable shape to the object, he knew what it had to be. The ship had sunk.

Huddled against the cold stone, Snake pulled out the 'talker'.

Police Commissioner Hauk answered, "It's about time you checked in."

"Yeah, well we got a slight problem."

"Have you spotted the shuttle?"

"Sure have. Underwater. About five miles down range from the airstrip. They dumped it, Hauk, for good reason. This place is crawlin' with EA's."

The silence stretched like a note from an off-key piano.

"Hauk--you copy that?"

The voice on the other end sounded strained and angry. "Get your butt in there, Plissken. Get the crew and equipment out of there!"

The antenna bent as Snake rammed it down. "Got nothin' better to do, anyway," he sighed to dead air.

Snake wanted to get his hands on Berrigan, no doubt about it. But a stroll through the woods with a couple dozen crazies hiding under every rock wasn't exactly how he'd hoped this mission would go.

Complaints were still on his lips when he spotted movement in the water near the downed ship. In a single, swift motion he brought up the binoculars again. The area around the craft glowed dully from the heat of re-entry, but an irregular blob of more intense color bobbed on the lake not too far from shore. Swimmers. Calculating the speed and distance of the choppers moving in on them, he estimated that the two just might make it to shore and up into the safety of the trees if they hurried. Snake started the long climb down toward them.

By the time he neared the water's edge, the shuttle had half a dozen lines attached and was slowly being dragged up from the slime and silt that tried to hold and bury evidence of it. Plissken saw only two aerocranes doing the lifting. The third helicopter, a troop carrier, had gone after the crew. It sat on the bank, not fifty yards from him, the big blades rotating in preparation for takeoff.

Frustrated, Snake crouched in heavy brush and watched while two figures were dragged out of the undergrowth. The scant distance and bright floodlights gave him some relief as he noted that both hostages gave vigorous protest to their capture. They were alive. For the moment.

Refocusing, Snake could make out the shapes of the insignias on the dark flight suits of the captives. Immediately, he dismissed the taller of the two as a likely candidate for Berrigan. The man was an officer, but his long, wild blond hair and heavily muscled frame was that of a young man. Snake's vision settled on the other one, a civilian.

The insignia he wore was that of a bio-engineering specialist. He had gray hair and was of medium height. Despite a frail appearance, he had to be the one Plissken sought.

Snake lowered the binoculars and watched the capture as images of Berrigan clouded his mind. He had assumed Berrigan to be in his late thirties or early forties at the time of the Ruse. Berrigan had been rounder, but weight was a relative factor considering it had been ten years. As he'd done so often before, Snake wished he could have gotten a glimpse of Berrigan without full gear.

Helplessly, Snake watched as the pair were shoved into the chopper and taken to a spot of light at the far end of the long valley. He started to follow, but the remaining 'birds' distracted him when their engines suddenly picked up power.

Though nearly one hundred yards off shore, the lights reflecting off the white hull of the modified spacecraft had enough ferocity to drive away the twilight within a mile radius. Snake gazed at the diminutive version of the shuttle. New technology responsible for the changes in its size had to be admired, although the strain on the cables as it cleared the surface, proved that the weight, though considerably less than its earlier counterparts, was still too much for these two aerocranes to

handle. However, it looked as if the pilots of the cranes were too damn stubborn to give up without a fight.

An instant later came a movement so fast he nearly missed it. A blue-white blast flashed off the skin of the ship. Smoke billowed up as cables snapped and melted. Then a split second later, a shadow cast as the hatch opened, nearly succeeded in hiding a third crewman diving into the water. For a reason Snake could only classify as instinct, he decided not to go after the others. He remained motionless at lakes edge as the figure began a frantic swim--straight for him.

The sharp smell of ozone from the electrical fires reached his nostrils about the same time as the soldiers began shooting. Luckily, they were limited by distance and the fact that the ship still dangled by a few cables. They couldn't pursue him without dropping their precious cargo. Of course, there was nothing to stop them from calling to request help. It became a toss-up to see if the escapee would make it to shore before reinforcements arrived.

Though his concentration remained with the swimmer, it came as no surprise to Snake when a twig snapped close behind him. Lightly, he stepped back and melded with the darkness just as two E/A guerrillas, one with a walkie-talkie, appeared on the shore. Snake waited patiently for the man to finish his conversation, then he slipped in closer and, with an elbow and a rifle butt, eliminated the pair.

Twice more while waiting for the crewman, he crossed paths with Isaacson's Raiders. They all had reputations as hard-core mercenaries, but Snake had the advantage. No one expected a warrior of his caliber roaming the woods. Not yet anyway.

But Snake grew tired of splitting his knuckles on faces long before he noticed the swimmer had reached shore. Stalking with the silence of his namesake, Snake timed his move, made a quick grab and knocked the crewman off balance, then dragged him into an oversized slit in a rock wall.

In the damp semi-darkness, the stranger nearly slipped from his grasp twice before Snake realized he was trying to contain a woman. He mellowed his fighting method, tried to tell her he was there to help, but the second time she caused serious pain, Snake tossed his manners aside. The space big wasn't enough to allow a good swing, so he popped her in the ribs, pinned her right arm up between her shoulder blades and threatened to dislocate or break it--the choice was hers. Surprisingly, it still took an intimate closeup of the nearest wall before she quit kicking.

At her submission, he put a hand over her mouth to ensure her silence until the soldiers, crashing through the brush just outside the entrance, made it past. However, as the thunderous running died away in the distance, he felt a blade cut a deep path across his arm.

Silently and without hesitation, Snake dropped his hand from her mouth to her throat, pulled out his pistol, rammed it against her head and hissed in her ear, "You lose!"

The knife dropped.

When he was finally sure no one would hear them, he spun her around, slammed her back against the rough stone and leaned close, crushing the remaining fight out of her as he tucked the gun under her chin.

"You pull another trick like that and I'll blow your brains all over this canyon," he whispered hoarsely. "You understand me?"

She squirmed weakly, gave up and nodded.

Though he eased his crushing hold just enough to study her a little closer in the dim light, his pistol remained buried in the soft flesh of her stubborn set jaw. And suddenly, a feeling of recognition shot through him. He remained still, holding her pinned to the wall as he wrestled with the shock. Eventually and slowly, he let a smile warm the cool reserve out of his features.

"Mac Kern. Heard you were dead." Well hell, why not? It wasn't as if he hadn't been fed that line often enough. And it certainly wasn't inappropriate. "When'd you start playing with knives?"

"Plissken," she finally rumbled, but there was a warmth in her voice even when she added, "If I'd known it was you, I'd have aimed lower."

His laugh was no more than a rough exhale as he effortlessly flipped his pistol back into its holster. The confrontation was over. After all, they were old friends--intimate old friends.

While checking the extent of his wound, he asked quietly, "What brings you out here, Mac?" He knew damn well why she was in the valley, but how much she intended to cooperate depended on her answer.

"Just out for a stroll."

"Yeah. An' I'm here for my health."

"That's funny, last I heard you were working for the Man."

"I'm here to rescue you," he sighed.

"Got an army in your pocket? Those are Isaacson's Raiders."

"No shit," he sighed and leaned back against the wall to take a better look at her. The hair on the back of his neck rose as her image conjured up ghostly visions from fiery graves. He'd been told she was shot down over Leningrad. He'd always wanted to know what idiot sent her out with the big guns in the first place. Yet, looking at her, it never occurred to him to ask. He was too busy remembering other things, like hot and heavy nights in Helsinki, thanks to her. Trouble was, her kind of distraction could prove fatal on the battle field. And this was a battle field. And, damn, if she wasn't some kind of distraction.

She was watching him. "You're after the reward."

Reward? Hauk didn't mention any reward, but then, Hauk wouldn't. Besides, a reward would be for the whole crew, including one Mac Kern.

He changed the subject. "Isaacson's got your friends, an' he'll be coming back for you."

"So what do you suggest I do about it?"

"We get the hell out of here." He grabbed her shoulder to shove her out the cave entrance. As she brushed past, he caught the scent of perfume. Just a slight hint, mixed thoroughly with a healthy shot of swamp water. Still, it was staggering--the subtle, spicy warmth that drifted up, hitting him like a new wound with memories of times when that scent nearly drove him crazy as he tried to bury himself in her arms--against her skin, in her hair. It would be tough indeed to turn her over to Hauk.

She took one step, did an about-face and pushed him back into the cave. Words weren't necessary. Soldiers were coming.

Plissken looked for another way out. There was only one. He took her arm, pointed up the cliff face and climbed.



Halfway up, however, a rumbling began that Snake recognized at once. He scrambled for the only available shelter, and with a yank, dragged Mac up onto a narrow ledge as the din increased to deafening proportions. Dirt, rocks, and dust showered down as a jet cleared the hill right above them and headed towards the lake. Even huddled against the hard-packed dirt wall, they were nearly buried.

Only when the air cleared did either of them attempt to move and Snake went first. He crawled forward to peer over the edge. The space they'd occupied only a minute before was gone--crushed out of existence under tons of rubble, as they might have been had they stayed longer.

"Shit!"

Snake nearly jumped out of his hide. The voice was Mac's, but she'd come up on his blind side. He turned toward her in time to see her begin to stand. He yanked her down and slapped a hand over her about-to-protest mouth.

She dropped with an unlady-like thud where he pointed, this time on his right to keep alert to anymore of her antics. Snake wasn't moving until he could be sure there were no more soldiers around. Maybe, if they were lucky, the two men they'd narrowly avoided would find evidence of the avalanche and report her dead. Better yet, maybe the slide caught the troopers.

With that hope in mind, he went back to the cover of the ledge and lit a smoke under cupped hands. As he exhaled, he made another study of her in the light of the rapidly rising moon. He watched her fidget as she became acutely aware of his scrutiny.

Nervously, Mac pulled something out of her pocket and leaned out over the edge again. "It's clear."

Personal scanner--they'd let him down once too often. Snake checked the path his way, but as he stretched out, Mac lifted the revolver out of its holster at his side. The hair-trigger made him react with extreme caution.

He rocked back on his heels, turning as he did so. "Hand it over," he sighed like a parent to a child.

She leveled the gun squarely at the bridge of his nose and shook her head. "Not on a bet. This mission is too important to let you mess it up. Now, just get up nice and slow and go away."

"Your mission was screwed long before you landed, baby." He crept closer.

"Don't press me, Snake. I need a weapon to get my people away from Isaacson."

"You don't stand a chance without me. Give me the gun."

"Damn it, Snake, this is military business. It's got nothing to do with you!"

"I'm all you've got."

She didn't like his pushing, however, it grew increasingly difficult to be near him without recalling the bond they'd had. He used to say the only real proof of friendship was loyalty. She still believed it, but there was no way to be sure of him, not with the constant reports of havoc everywhere he went. To trust him now could cost too many lives.

"I don't believe you, Snake. I can't afford to believe you. Please, I don't want to kill you, but damn it, you're not giving me much choice."

A handful of gravel dropped beside her, a last sigh of the avalanche. Snake took advantage of the split-second distraction to rush her. It was an easy matter to pin her down and even easier to take the gun from her. Maybe too easy. He glanced down and caught a flicker of fear in her eyes that was quickly replaced with anger. He could feel her heart slamming

against his chest. He smiled and stayed right where he was.

"Get off me," she hissed at him.

The question was simple. "Why?" He shifted slightly. Helsinki cropped up in his mind again, bringing with it an old, familiar itch she'd been expert at scratching.

A frown greeted his all-too-physical question. "No."

"No what?" he breathed through a sexy grin. Once more he shifted his weight against her, this time wedging his knee between hers.

Her breathing changed to something more rapid and shallow.

"Just like old times," he told her as his shaggy maned head lowered toward hers. She twisted to avoid his mouth, but he matched the move. Again she eluded him until he let go of her arms and took a firm hold on either side of her face. He squelched her argument with a none-too-gentle kiss.

She hit his shoulders hard, trying unsuccessfully to push him away, but Snake had no intention of going anywhere, except possibly a little lower if and when she quit fighting him. She had to want him. She always wanted him.

He pulled back, whispered, "Relax," and reached for the zipper on her flight suit. A moment later, his hand was sliding down inside the still-damp uniform. He watched her eyes close as she shivered under his cold hands. Just like old times, all right. He thought.

He never saw the rock. Only a blinding flash of pain told him he'd made a mistake. Numbly, he tried to get away. She hit him again, luckily, not in the same spot. A second blow to his temple would have killed him. He felt her shove him aside. He felt the gravel against his back. Then nothing.

Mac scooped up the pistol and put the barrel to his head. Shaking with rage, she hissed, "You know better than to force me down!" She tried to pull the trigger, but she was staring down at the unmarred right side of his face—a face she remembered too well. There was too much of the old Plissken left in that view to kill.

Somewhere in the overly-silent night, a gentle breeze picked up a strand of his soft brown hair and, without thinking, Mac reached out and brushed it aside. She ran her fingers over his cheek, across the week's growth of beard, then over his warm mouth. From there her hand seemed to guide itself down onto his heavily corded neck. His pulse was strong and steady despite the dark stain spreading in the dust beside him. Again, Mac studied his face as her hand rested lightly on his chest.

It was hard to let go, but eventually, she unbuckled his holster and strapped it on herself, rammed the pistol in it, then proceeded to go through his pockets, taking any and all he had, including his jacket. While removing it, she inadvertantly, lifted his shirt and exposed the infamous tattoo. She warmed at the sight of the artwork that crawled up from his crotch to coil on his hard-muscled belly. She knew she'd never shake that memory again.

Slowly, she stood up, gazed thoughtfully at him a moment longer, then asked, "Why the hell'd you have to show up now?" Reluctantly, she turned away.

Doc McKensie was nudged toward General David Hine Isaacson, head of the infamous E/A Forces. It was surprising to meet this adversary face to face after all the hype given him by the news media. This living legend was billed as a ruthless killer, yet there was also a touch of Robin Hood in him. Rumors of sympathy and compassion spread with the stories of murder and bloody battles. Isaacson was the type of man who'd shoot a man, rape his wife, then make sure their children went to a good home.

In appearance, the gentle, classic features, bronzed complexion and wavy, slightly graying, blue/black hair projected the image of an amiable man. A cane he was forced to depend on, the result of a bullet wound to his left knee, added to the vulnerability.

"We were promised amnesty," McKensie announced in one of his rare moments.

Isaacson shrugged, "I've heard nothing to that affect." His soft, French-accented voice was oddly soothing as he told the scientist, "I am only one with the power to grant you anything. You see, my companions and I are the only ones who came to your--party. You will have to deal with me."

Shouts--loud and sharp--came from the hall outside. Then, like an explosion, the door burst open and Soren stumbled into the room. He was restrained by two soldiers, while a third held a rifle to his back. Though his wrists were cuffed, someone made an error and locked them in front of him. In the moment it took the soldiers to acknowledge their leader, Soren locked his fists together and swung toward the man behind him. The blow cracked against the side of the guard's face and shattered his jaw. Soren pivoted, kicked high and knocked over one trooper with his foot while slamming the third in the solar-plexus with his elbow.

Isaacson clicked his tongue in a scolding manner, pulled out his sidearm, leveled it at Soren's head and fired.

The blond fell back against the wall, slid down to sit with a thud, then, slowly came out of his stupor enough to gingerly touch his scalp. When he realized the bullet had only grazed him, his startled expression changed to a sardonic grin.

Leaning back against the desk in casual repose, Isaacson studied the man for a long, empty moment. "Don't I know you?" he inquired.

Soren said nothing, but his eyes were laughing.

Isaacson straightened up as static filled the gap between them. He identified the young man and once more waved the gun at Soren's face, though this time with intent to kill.

"Firefall..." he said hoarsely, "You led Firefall."

No sirens, no shouts, nothing warned the village of the impending doom. Their enemies floated in like puffs of mist on the morning breeze. Vultures. Human vultures came--sent in to pick the landscape clean of all life if need be, just to capture him. How they knew where to find him, Isaacson couldn't say, but the Firefall Unit came to his home village and leveled it before anyone could lift a finger to stop them.

Ironic how the bastards left the church untouched. Ironic how his mother and the priest insisted he hide there. He'd crept out just in time to watch them both being murdered on the steps of that church. And this man--this paled haired Norseman stood in the middle of that village,

shouting orders, yet keeping his back to the atrocities his men committed.

Isaacson pulled back the hammer.

Doc wasn't sure what was going on, but he knew Soren would die if he didn't intervene. "General," he sputtered, and again, softer when he'd distracted the man, "General, please, I'm sure you have good reason to want him dead, but I guarantee he's worth a great deal more to you alive."

Soren's dark eyebrows slid rapidly toward his matted, bloody hair. It sounded to him as if good ol' Doc McKensie was about to use him as a bargaining tool—the key word being 'use'.

"You still haven't caught the other member of our crew."

"No!" Soren lunged, but a guard slammed a rifle butt into his stomach. Soren dropped to his knees.

"You won't catch her--"

"--her?"

"Yes, Commander Kern. You won't catch her without him. He may be able to persuade her to disarm the bomb she's planted on our ship."

"You stupid bastard," Soren croaked hoarsely.

Isaacson was pleased by news of her arrival, though it didn't thrill him to learn she'd planted a bomb on his reason for attending the--party.

"She may even come willingly--if she thinks he's safe. They're close, you know, very close." Now that was an out and out lie, but it didn't stop him from taking a step closer to the general. "It's the only way you'll ever gain her cooperation. And without it, you don't stand a chance of getting out of this valley alive. She's quite insane, you know. Insane enough to destroy us all. But then, I forget you may know her better than either of us already."

"Doc, you asshole, shut up! Think what he'll do to her!" Again his argument was ended with the guards blow, this time a vicious kick to the same area as before. He could no longer talk through the blinding red pain. In fact, he could scarcely breathe.

"Enough," Isaacson waved as the soldier drew back to strike again. "Enough for now. Take him to the basement. And Benjamin," Isaacson purred, "do try to make him more--cooperative."

The guard reached down, gathered up a fist full of Soren's silvery mane and jerked his head back. His poisonous smile grew in intensity as the barrel of his rifle slid slowly up the inside of Soren's legs. "Yes, sir, I'll take care of pretty-boy personally."

Soren smiled back as pleasantly as you please, even as his manacled fists slammed into the man's crotch.

Isaacson frowned as he watched Benjamin fall, then twist and cry in agony, "That wasn't at all polite. Now I'll have to let Rosie take care of you."

Soren's face lit up, "Rosie?" He could handle a woman, no sweat. Then 'Rosie' helped him to his feet and Soren turned to look--up. Soren was six foot three inches. Rosie was seven feet--easy--and he was the meanest looking SOB he'd ever seen.

Soren stared up at the black man in awe for a time, then chirped, "Nice braids. Who does your hair?"

Snake came alert one sense at a time. First a chilling wind tugged at him, lifted his hair, tapped his cheek. Then a blue-white light caused him to flinch, but it was only the moon winking at him from between scattered clouds. He rolled to his stomach and pushed himself up onto his knees. A brief wave of nausea began to wash over him, but Snake didn't have time to be ill. The ground suddenly began to come alive; vibrating with a low rumbling that increased to teeth rattling proportions.

Immediately, he scrambled for the cover of the overhang. As he hurried to hide, his boot caught and kicked up an object half buried in the dirt. Only after securely hidden did he take time to look. The object was his communicator. Just out of reach. The metallic case lay sparkling in the moonlight. Bright enough to be a damn airport beacon.

Half a second later, two jet-copters rose up behind him. The pair was low and loud enough to cause the already loose bank to disintegrate even further. In desperation Snake threw his arms over his head, for protection, but the dry sand and gravel still threatened to bury him. Yet, as the noise lessened to a distant slapping, the slide subsided, leaving him buried up to his chest in the dusty earth. Snake struggled to his feet, trying to keep the choking powder off his face. Exhausted, he picked up the communicator and pulled up the antenna.

"Hauk..." he coughed.

"Plissken! Where in hell've you been for the last five hours?"

"On a fuckin' picnic," he growled gingerly rubbing the knot on his skull.

"Have you got the crew?"

"The E/A's picked up two of 'em. The other one jumped ship awhile ago. I'm going after her now."

Snake hesitated to see if Hauk would comment on the reference to 'her'. When the pause continued a bit too long, he went on with his explanation, though he was left somewhat curious whether Hauk was ignoring him or just not paying attention.

"Isaacson's holed up in an old ski lodge. Guess he wants these space cadets alive, too." Maybe to sell to the highest bidder.

"Is the ship intact?"

"Yeah. Up to the cabin in mud, but intact. I 'spose you want me to stick it in my pocket..."

"Look Plissken, the Canadians are getting antsy. They're starting to talk about pushing the deadline up to Saturday. That gives you just about nine hours to get those people to the drop point. My men'll be standing by. I'd suggest you get your butt moving, Plissken."

"Thanks for the advice," he snarled at the box, but Hauk had all ready signed off. Nine hours. Nine hours to pick Isaacson's 'pocket'. Well, first things first. First; find Mac. Second; wring her neck.

Twenty eight minutes later he found her and his scattered supplies along a wide stretch of gravel beach. A few feet from the waters edge Mac crouched, one knee down for balance, her back to him.

Snake hadn't felt such satisfaction since switching tapes on John Harker. The press had a heyday with that one. They'd run the bastard right out of office and into his very own private funny farm. Old John

lived in a nice padded room and had a whole wardrobe of strait-jackets to sleep in. Too bad they didn't just throw him back inside New York with the rest of the loonies.

Mac, half hidden in the dense brush along the lake, didn't hear his approach. She didn't hear Snake pick up his rifle until he deliberately yanked back the bolt with a loud crack. She spun at the sound, pulling a pistol while still crouched. But the move was a little too quick. She lost her balance and toppled backward onto the gravel. In that same split second, recognition flitted across her face. She lowered the gun.

"Jesus! It's only you."

"Only?"

"--thought I was dead for sure."

"What makes you think you're not?"

Mac stood and dropped the pistol back into the holster at her hip.

"I'd say we're even."

The sheer gall of her statement astonished him. He moved closer, took her elbow and dragged her up against him. "And just how do you figure that?"

"You play too rough."

Mac wore his, warm, dry, arctic-weight jacket over a wet t-shirt and an open-to-the-waist, dark, quilted flight suit and boots. Maybe the outfit wasn't as warm as it looked. She was shivering, though something told him, it was out of fear more than cold.

Despite his anger, a smile briefly touched his face at her answer. His grip relaxed somewhat as he ran through her list of offenses so far. She'd sliced his arm, tried to brain him with a rock, then left him in the middle of woods full of crazies without a weapon, all without a hint of remorse. No doubt she would have stripped him to his shorts--if he'd worn any.

He finally let go with a shove. There was no point trying to reason with her. The only way through that thick skull was to ignore her. In silence, Snake gathered his belongings, stuffed them back in his pant pockets and put on his vest. Then he grabbed his holster and sidearm from her, strapped them on, then took a firm hold on the lapels of his jacket and roughly peeled it off her.

She didn't make a move of protest, but her look was hostile.

He walked away checking his pistol.

"Snake--"

He kept going.

"Damn it," she huffed, "at least leave me your rifle."

He glanced over his shoulder, grinned, but never slowed.

She picked up a rock and let fly. It found its target--right square in the middle of his back. It didn't hurt so much as infuriate him. A split second later he was running at her, reaching to grab her throat. Then he saw a flash of metal and skidded to a halt just inches shy of the blade point.

She gave him a bitter smile that angered him even more. With fists clenched, he was no more than a heartbeat away from knocking the grin off her face, when suddenly, she flipped the handle toward him.

"You forgot your knife."

The rapid breathing that accompanied his fury began to subside, while the awful ache behind his dead eye dulled to its usual throb as soon as his blood pressure approached normal. Lightning quick, he snatched the knife out of her open palm and, still keeping his glare on her, stuffed it back into the sheath along side his boot.

"You're welcome," she breathed huskily.

He straightened up slowly. Snake tried to look away--tried to turn away, but something in her eyes held him immobile just as surely as if he were physically tied. He thought Sergeant Taylor had been the last link bonding him to the human race, he'd thought Taylor's death took the last bit of his soul. Wrong. She held it. There. In those pale eyes he saw it--felt it. And he didn't like it.

He remembered their last meeting--a brief, bitter argument. He tried to recall what the fight had been about. Oh yeah. He'd been a few hours late for a date. Funny. She never complained before. The whole fight hadn't made much sense. But she'd sure picked a helluva time to piss him off. His leave had been canceled without warning. Now it seemed almost like a childish tantrum--his anger at the loss. So he missed his parents anniversary--first time he'd ever missed it. Odd thing was, it would have been his last chance to see them alive.

So that night he got drunk. He forgot the time. He crept into her quarters three hours later than he promised. He expected her to cheer him up--tease him out of his depression. He needed to hold and be held just to drive away the hollow ache he had when he thought too much about home. That was another Snake Plissken, of course, some kid that died in a battle that should never have happened.

Mac never did tell him why she was so upset. All he knew was that he crept in, stripped and crawled in bed next to her, only to be inexplicably attacked by a raving bitch. He'd never seen her fury in full bloom like that night. She was just shy of crazy. Every profanity she knew came at him. And brother--she could cuss in at least three languages! He had a pretty fair temper himself and stomped out with the intent of letting her cool off a couple days before he tried again. He knew she liked him too much to let one shout-down end it. Unfortunately, forty-eight hours later he woke in agony--screaming at the ceiling, minus one eye and all but one other member of his unit, thanks to the battle at Leningrad.

He snapped out of memory lane to find himself staring at the white t-shirt. She used to sleep in a white t-shirt. His.

"Well?"

"Well, what?" he whispered back.

Frustrated by what she thought was his refusal to answer, Mac threw up her hands, "Goddamnit, Snake, will you give me a straight answer?"

Straight? Yeah, straight was good. He'd give it to her straight.

"...money--I'll get it. Deal or not?"

He covered his drifting thoughts with a coarse whisper, "Tell ya what, you show me where your buddy, Captain Berrigan is, an' I'll think about it." Whatever 'it' was.

She repeated the name, "Berrigan? What the hell's Berrigan got to do with my crew?"

"Don't play games with me, baby. The old man on the shuttle--"

She shook her head, "Oh, sweetheart, you've been sippin' out of the wrong bottle. That's Doc McKensie."

He didn't buy it. Snake slowly put a hand on either side of the collar of her flight suit, then twisted it tight as he pulled her closer.

"Doc is no more Berrigan than I am," she insisted.

He kept the firm hold and nearly lifted her off the ground.

It wasn't the action as much as the wild look in his eye that prompted her to gingerly lay a hand on his chest and add, "He worked for NASA when all that was going on. What possible connection could they have had with Leningrad? C'mon, Snake, you know as well as I do that one man couldn't have been solely responsible for the Ruse. You want the source."

He never suspected she'd be so helpful. "Keep talkin'!"

"Only if you promise--"

He shoved her back against a tree and pressed his fingers against the arteries in her neck. "I don't make promises, baby! I want Berrigan and I want him now! Keep talking or I'll throw you back to Isaacson and hunt down your friends all by myself!"

"You won't get the others--or the Damper--without me."

"Don't bet on it." He leaned against her, rib to rib, thigh to thigh, all the way down. The heat was incredible. An urge to finish the game she'd interrupted raced through him. She knew it, too. He could read it in her eyes. But her next words drained the warmth right out of him.

"The Damper's still on the ship, Plissken. Out there. With a nuclear charge attached. First attempt to remove it an' this whole valley goes up like one, big sky-rocket."

Plissken let go so abruptly she almost fell. Isaacson's men were already playing around with the shuttle. They'd get inside. Soon. And when they did--

"That'll be the signal for my people to start burning bases again. Military bases, police installations, you name it. Every country. Nobody and nothing will be able to stop it. And they'll all blame each other."

Limited war would become unlimited.

"Total annihilation within twenty-four hours."

There was that magic number again. "You're crazy."

Mac turned and started for the deep woods. "No, I'm not. I'm just sick and tired of this war, Plissken, just like the rest of the world. We offered them a means for peace and they turned us down. Did they tell you that? We even offered a way to neutralize the nerve gas." As she became part of the shadows she told him, "This idiotic war is gonna end one way or the other. All or nothing. The choice is theirs."

Was theirs. She'd just dumped it on him.

Hauk was pacing, fogging the room with cigarette after cigarette, and drinking coffee like he enjoyed it, though Tom Rehme knew better.

"I'll take over if you wanna get some sleep."

"No thanks."

Rehme watched his boss pace a few more times before he asked a question he'd wanted to ask since the onset of the assignment. "You think

Berrigan's really up there?"

Hauk broke stride and stared at his watch for the twentieth time in ten minutes before answering, "I don't know. At this point, I wouldn't bet on it."

"Then it's Commander Kern you're after."

That was no question. Hauk's glare was sharp, but it mellowed when he sat down in front of the computer and called up data on his unit for the second time just to gaze at her name and the lousy ID photo.

"I assumed there had to be a connection--the committee insisting Berrigan was on the shuttle and--" he hesitated to say the name, "--Kern being the base commander. Maybe it was just a way to get my cooperation because she was part of my unit. There's got to be more to it."

He shook his head while studying Rehme's expression, then answered the unasked question. "I didn't know she was alive till they told me. Even then, I hoped it was another Kern."

Rehme smiled at the image, "Nice looking."

Hauk, slouched in the chair with arms folded, fed back the grin with, "You mean, what's a nice girl like that doin' with an old fart like me?"

Rehme sputtered, "No, I didn't mean--"

But Hauk was laughing, "I was her interesting older man. Wasn't bad looking, either, ya know." In truth, he still had quite a following of young and older women. "She was twenty-six and I was forty-four."

"Kept you busy, huh?"

The Commissioner didn't elaborate except to smile once more.

"Leningrad?" Then it occurred to him that Plissken might have been the cause.

Hauk looked tired as his gaze wandered back to the screen. "Lack of communication, I guess."

He suddenly straightened up, "I'm sure Plissken doesn't know she's alive. Those two got pretty attached to each other. If he'd known, he would have found her long ago."

"Maybe you should've told him."

Hauk shook his head again. "Hate's a better motivation for that boy." He exhaled slowly, "You know, it's funny, but I'll guarantee that committee knew I'd go for Plissken on this job."

"Think he knows--"

"What--? Who we have in common?" Hauk yawned and rubbed the heels of his hands over his eyes. "I doubt it. Probably wouldn't make much difference. Whatever we had ended before she met him. Who knows, it might make him all the more determined to get her out alive."

"To bring back here?"

Suddenly, Hauk realized just what a fatal mistake he'd made. He might never see either of those two again. Snake was great at making himself scarce. And if she went with him--

"Call the field."

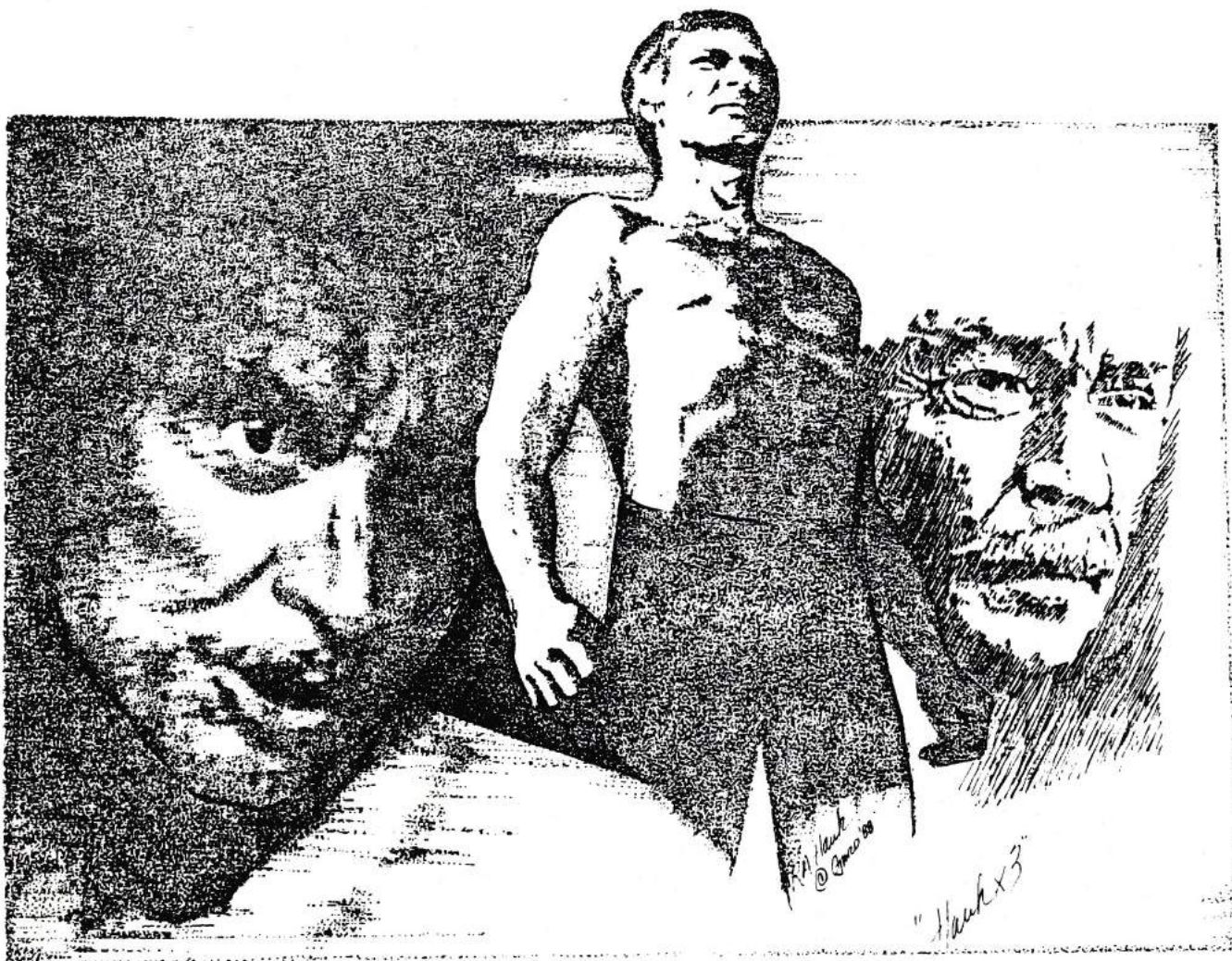
"Right. One transport--"

"No! I go in alone. We can't risk a show of force."

"But if the Canadians find you up there--"

"I'll be okay." He stopped on his way out to smile at the Section

Commander. "If anyone wants to know where I'm at, tell 'em--tell 'em I've gone to a family reunion."



Snake stepped into the lake to get a better view of the lodge. He heard gunfire coming from that direction--and something else, too. Ice shattering under his boots. The moon lent an even colder glow to the frigid air and the light breeze of sundown had picked up considerably, lowering the chill factor to near zero. He glanced over his shoulder toward Mac. She hadn't said anything yet, but that damp shirt and flight suit wouldn't keep her warm much longer.

Mac hadn't complained, reason being, she hadn't noticed. Her mind was too intent on other things, like the safety of her crewmen. She, too, heard gunfire and followed him into the water.

Snake turned on her, "You wanna freeze to death? Get outta here!"

"I want to know who they're shooting at."

If she hadn't figured that one out, he wasn't going to tell her. He gestured at her again, pulled the jacket collar higher against his neck, and focused his attention back on the lodge to watch for signs of escape.

Hauk ran a hand over the rain-slick skin of his plane, an F-20, bought and paid for by the government for his private use. The job came with it's own plane, of course, but his employer had jumped at the chance to swap massive upkeep costs of a 757 for costs of the small fighter. And like Plissken, he didn't trust anyone else's skill nearly so much as his own.

After a quick recheck, he took off. Three minutes later, he leveled at 45,000 feet and slowed to a nice, leisurely cruising speed, and let his mind drift.

The office of Police Commissioner came well padded; a fifty acre estate in the country, a penthouse downtown, more servants and security personnel than even the president would need, two limousines, a yacht, all frosted with a more than adequate salary. The man who held such an office wanted for nothing. No doubt some of the finer embellishments had enticed his predecessors to take the job. Not so for Bob Hauk.

Originally, he'd signed on as a Regular to look for his son, Jerry. Then, too, he hoped to find some clue to his wife's disappearance and why his other son had died in an L.A. fire bombing. Rehme's newest man, Red Jensen, had recently come across a police record that had given Hauk an odd sense of peace.

The burnt shell of a car registered in the name of Ann Hauk had been discovered at the bottom of a ravine on old U.S. 101, the coast highway. Of the four bodies found in the car, three were identified as members of a terrorist organization--the same organization responsible for the fire bombing that his son, Walt, died in. To Hauk, there could be only one conclusion: Ann, the driver, must have taken her own life to stop the terrorists, and his son died trying to avenge her kidnaping and death. That was the answer. It was the only answer he could live with.

A long, low, midnight-blue limousine parked on the outside of the hurricane fence bordering the USPF runway. The car, undetectable in the rainy, starless night, still had it's motor running.

"Report."

A well groomed gorilla of a chauffeur watched the plane disappear into the low clouds, then turned and smiled at his reflection in the mirrored glass.

"On his way, sir."

The laughter that answered him was maniacal. "Good, good. It's started, Thomas. It's finally started. I've waited such a long time for this."

"Yes sir. Anything else, sir?"

"It's time to celebrate. I want to be entertained. Thoroughly entertained. Lets get back to the hotel. The redhead. The one you got last time. I liked her."

The gorilla's breathing increased with anticipation. "Yes sir...I understand, sir."

Anlan studied the pipe overhead then dropped his weight to test the strength of the cuffs holding him to it. They held well enough to peel the skin from his wrists. The pipe did groan in protest, and he was rewarded with a small shower of cement dust and water began to seep down the gray wall.

"'bout time!" he mumbled enthusiastically. Again he pulled till his wrists bled and the pipe began to bow. Warm water sprayed out over his face, chest and arms. Gratefully, Anlan licked the moisture off his parched lips, and tugged again.

"Soren," a small voice interrupted.

"Yeah?"

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Doc McKensie advised from the corner where he lay sprawled, bound hand and foot.

"Its okay, old man. They can't hear a thing."

"I'm not talking about the noise."

Patiently, Soren Anlan stopped, twisted and peered between his arms. "s'okay, Doc. Trust me. You just hang on an' I'll have us out of here in no time."

"I don't think so."

His patience wore thin. "Okay. I'll bite. Why not?"

"..the box behind you."

Anlan twirled again, then squirmed to get a closer look. When he realized what he stared at, his heart began to pound. Quickly he turned back to the water puddling up close to his feet and again to the box on the wall. There were cables running in and out of the box. Frayed, ill-wrapped electrical cables.

"Oh, shit...."

Hauk landed at McChord. It took awhile just to get clearance since the tower crew didn't believe who wanted permission to land. No one expected to see the head of the United States Police Force on the West Coast let alone on a military installation. But after the initial panic subsided and apologies were made, Hauk supervised the mandatory check and refueling. By the time everything was finished, he'd lost a full two hours.

Though he wanted to arm his plane, time, red tape and the attention he'd already called to his flight made it too much to risk. His flight plan was already out of the ordinary, though perfectly legal as far as he was concerned. It consisted of one large arrow and the word; North scrawled across the form. The few personal weapons he carried consisted of a rifle, his sidearm and as much ammunition as he could stuff in his pockets. But evidently, someone at the base thought even that amount was more than necessary.

As he taxied down the long runway, a jeep careened out after him, the driver honking the horn and his partner waving frantically for Hauk to abort the flight. He wanted to ignore them, but the uniforms slowed him down. He'd been in the Air Force too many years to ignore the AP insignia of the military police. Hauk nodded, swung back and rolled toward the nearest hangar. In silence he rode back to visit the Base Commander. Strangely enough, as he rode in the cold air, he felt the presence of Mac Kern. She was close, very close.

Soren hurt. His wrists bled. His body, covered with bruised and bloodied welts, ached from the beating Isaacson's guards inflicted on him after they made sure he couldn't fight back. Even the water he'd welcomed earlier now chilled him to the bone.

"Get up," he ordered.

Doc lay humming a nonsense tune in a dream world all his own.

"C'mon! Snap out of it! I need your help!"

The old man yawned widely, closed his eyes for a second, then looked up startled. A slow grin spread across his face, "Anlan, you're naked."

"Yeah," he rumbled, then louder, "Now pay attention, old man. I want you to get up."

The lanky, gray haired professor squirmed and pushed his way into a sitting position.

"Great. Good boy. Now, up on your feet."

"My head hurts awful bad," he whined.

"I know. I know, Doc, but you gotta try."

He did.

"Now, get over to the window. Up on the crate."

"You're all wet," Doc observed while hobbling toward the one dry corner of the room.

"Hurry up!"

"I'm trying."

Anlan saw only one solution to his predicament. He slid the cuffs to the weakest point in the pipe; next to the wall. As soon as Doc was out of danger, the awful scream of stressed metal filled the room. Though the pipe refused to give up its hold, Anlan refused to stop pulling. Instead, a resolute calm washed over him and his sense of purpose changed direction.

Doc gazed on as Anlan's strong/graceful hands turned into visions from hell. They peeled, bled, bent and twisted their way through the narrow wrist openings. Anlan didn't dare acknowledge the pain. He couldn't acknowledge anything...except the need to be free.

Doc's screams of terror echoed through the building as bloody hands reached to help him out the window. It was open. Crimson finger prints painted its surface. He tried to ask who opened it, but immediately he became mesmerized by bright colors flashing and spraying across the floor from the shorting cables. He wanted to watch, but the hands insisted he keep moving toward the open window.

"No!" he protested, "It's too cold to play outside!"

Everywhere in camp lights flickered, sputtered, exploded and died. The guard just outside the utility room didn't have to be told what happened. He spun, kicked and shattered the frame. The old wooden door slammed like cannon fire against the wall. Though the prisoners glanced toward the noise, they continued their escape.

Being alternately silhouetted then highlighted by inconsistent flashes made them easy targets. The trooper fired a warning shot and blew a massive hole in the wall next to them, but neither man made any attempt to comply to his noisy request, so the guard fired again. One man yelped, but the larger turned on him. As the trooper stumbled backward under the falling weight of the blond, something told him he was about to die.

Plissken heard another jet. To an untrained ear, one engine sounded pretty much like any other, but to an expert like the Snake, each jet carried a distinct musical calling card. The slightly lower pitch belonged to an F-20. Interesting. All he'd seen so far were two F-15's and a Harrier.

Curiosity urged him forward. Snake climbed to a better vantage point on the hill and studied the aircraft, then the lodge. As the plane dipped low, all hell broke loose in camp. Soldiers scrambled for jeeps while troop trucks vied for position on the road that wound its way to the airfield just over the hill. Such a commotion confirmed his suspicions. The newcomer was uninvited. And drop-ins were not welcome, not when a maniac like Isaacson ran the show.

Snake thought it might be wise to get closer to the airfield. First, however, he had to go after Mac. She'd become increasingly obsessed with the idea of going to that damned lodge. Even though she had a fair head start, he could hear her moving through the underbrush. He wondered if she might be open to a few suggestions about stealth.

Tom Rehme sat in Hawk's dimly lit office for nearly two hours staring at a picture nailed on the wall behind the desk. He'd gone through two cigars, one cigarette, two cups of coffee and three shots of Scotch--none of which helped clarify his thinking in the least.

The picture he studied was a typical group shot posed in front of a Slant, the largest and heaviest firepower in a single-pilot bomber ever built. In the background, out of focus, was the Rolls Royce engined, French built, roughly triangular, 15 foot wedge referred to as LARS, or technically Light Attack and Reconnaissance Ship, the smallest jet used in wartime. An odd paring, if ever there was one. But in spite of its size, the LARS successfully ran interference--escorts for the Slants.

Of course, when recon-satellites were blown out of commission, the LARS were capable of taking over those duties as they skipped in and out

of the atmosphere. At times they were used to home in on the tracking devices that the special assault teams wore in the field. They beamed live action, provided additional air cover, or just hovered like guardian angels until the evac choppers arrived.

Suborbital capabilities, the military biggies proudly announced in regard to the LARS. Hauk said, "bull," to that. According to him, those little buzzards could fly to the moon and back on a tank of gas.

The LARS was her plane. Some called it a cross between an old SR-71 and an AV-A9 Harrier. The records said she'd been in on the design and testing phases. Rehme decided he wanted to meet this mighty-mite--see for himself why she held Hauk's fascination.

One woman among thirty-four men. Rehme had seen better photos of her in the old personnel file--and also a great, sexy shot in Hauk's wallet, though Rehme would never admit to anyone he'd seen it. Still, it was this one, heavy framed, wall photo of 'Texas Thunder' Hauk gazed at most often. As much as the evidence pointed toward it, Rehme didn't want to conclude that Hauk's interest now pivoted around Kern's survival more than any other factor of the mission.

Rehme's main concern lay with the fact that the Canadians were already threatening to close their borders to the US. If they caught the head honcho in their territory, Hauk would die. Since the USPF takeover of border checkpoints a couple months back, the Canadian government had become increasingly nervous that the police were planning a full-scale invasion of their country. Whether or not it was a delusion of some political yo-yo, or a rumor started in the back room of a bar someplace didn't matter. Hauk's appearance could have no other consequence but to add to the growing tension between the countries.

Plissken's skills, of course, were second to none. Rehme didn't doubt that Snake, the original, die-hard, stand-alone who wasn't alignable to anyone but himself, could tackle the mission like an afternoon nap. Yet Hauk's sudden urge to join and possibly ruin Snake's chances made Rehme uneasy. He refused to believe that a woman could be the only reason Hauk went in. No one woman had the right to hold that much power over an old war-horse like Hauk. Two or three women, maybe--but one? Never.

Tired and irritated, Rehme wandered into the computer room to sit at Hauk's console. While he waited for Snake's next check-in, he typed five names into the computer. Information on the split screen showed him the connections.

Kern and Isaacson had been members of the Israeli Air Force. Then Kern was pulled into Special Forces with the three other Americans who had extensive knowledge of a new plane to be used in Hauk's unit. Isaacson's loyalties drifted elsewhere. That brought Hauk and Kern together in Helsinki. Finally, Snake Plissken entered the picture about six weeks before the Leningrad Ruse.

Berrigan, the bastard, came in with the special clearance--highest priority plans for a mission that drew in all of them. Damn! Including Isaacson's Raiders. They, too, had been briefly aligned with an American ally. Coincidence?

Not many made it back from Leningrad, yet nearly every country, every special unit had a hand in that fiasco. Maybe, maybe a thousand went in,

including the Russian's and their allied nations. How many made it out of there? Two hundred? Maybe less. Maybe one hundred.

Like a bride on wedding day, Rehme nervously called up names of General Isaacson's known troopers. One common denominator ran through the information like a sharp sword. Of sixty-five names, thirty-seven were survivors of Leningrad. Something much more important than the need for a piece of equipment was being played out. Rehme had seen too many scams in his life not to recognize impending disaster when he saw it.

A chill shot up his spine! He jerked around to find one of his own, hand-picked personal staff standing only a few feet away.

"You want somethin', Red?" Rehme covered his nervous jump by digging through his pockets for a smoke.

"Didn't mean to interrupt ya, sir, but I--ah--found something I think you might find real interesting."

"Like what?" Rehme lit his cigarette.

The man handed him a detailed list of Hauk's every move for the past three weeks.

"I was monitoring communications--"

That was his job.

"--when I started pickin' up an odd signal. I didn't think much about it, you know, with all the bootleg stations around now, but I kept taping it. Sounded like some kinda code after a while, so I ran it through one of my own programs and came up with that. Kinda got to me. I mean, I figured you woulda said somethin' if he needed watchin'. Anyway, when I got this last one decoded, I thought you an' him oughta know about it."

Rehme acknowledged, though engrossed in thought, while he took a deep drag off the smoker.

"It was 'sposed to be a secret--his headin' for Canada--wasn't it?"

Rehme tossed him a startled look. He hadn't gotten to that point on the list yet.

"The reference--there--" he pointed, "that got me curious, so I dug a little an'--well, lemme show you what I ran across."

Rehme stood to let the man at the console. Red's hands flew over the keys bringing up security coded screens. The man was a bonafied computer genius, a fact easily overlooked when confronted with his elfish physique and boyishly innocent charm, yet there wasn't a system in existence that Red couldn't tear down, rebuild, reprogram or just break into, and that was precisely the reason Rehme found him irreplaceable.

"See, I was siftin' through all this crap an' I kept runnin' across some reference to the word 'team'. Damn thing got m'goat when I couldn't get past it, ya know? But last night, I got this idea and--" he moved over so Rehme could get a clearer view of the screen, "--tried it. When I got in, this is what I found. You want a hard copy of it?"

Rehme had bowed to read over his shoulder, but slowly he straightened up. "Jesus Christ," he whispered in true prayer. He tossed the cigarette aside and barked, "Get McChord on the horn. Tell 'em to keep Hauk there till I arrive. Then get Seattle. I want as many choppers as they can spare. And tie-in with the Canadian's, too. Top dog. Nobody else. An', Red, for chrissakes keep it coded!"

Red snapped, "Yes, sir!" But as Rehme left the room, Red Jensen took another look at the list on the screen; a hit-list issued by the US government with the name of Commissioner R. A. Hauk first in line.

The bald man shot off the terrace. His pink head glistened with sweat from the exertion. "What is it? What's wrong?"

The chauffeur/bodyguard, Thomas, shifted uneasily, gazed at the naked form curled on the couch, then said softly, "I got word from our contact. The old man--"

"--he talked. Damn it, I knew he couldn't keep quiet."

"No, sir. He didn't talk."

"He better not have! If he talks, I'm a dead man."

"He was eliminated."

Relief showed clearly, then faded, "And the others--what about the others?"

"Mr. Anlan escaped custody."

"What?"

"They've already picked up his trail and expect to apprehend him shortly, but they're holding back hoping he'll lead them to the woman."

There was a chilling smile as the Bossman lost himself in memory, but it faded. "Isaacson promised to kill them."

"Evidently, the General's made other arrangements," the hulk said with a tad too much intelligence for his own good.

The fat man glared at him a moment, then wandered over to the redheaded woman and stroked her cheek. She smiled up at him, while he lightly kissed her hand and settled down next to her.

"Thomas, call our friend in Victoria. I want this mess settled once and for all. If it means eliminating Isaacson, do it."

Soren woke slowly from a deep sleep. His joints were stiff, his head ached, and his mood was as dark as the hole he crawled out of. Doc's death weighed heavily on him. After all, Mac hadn't asked him to join their mission for his flying abilities. Nor were his uncommonly good looks and sparkling wit what prompted his appointment. She'd chosen him purely for his knowledge of combat. Maybe she'd suspected something or maybe she was just being careful. But he'd failed his assignment to keep McKensie alive. He'd be hard pressed to find an excuse for this one.

Soren wore the uniform of the guard he'd killed. He should have taken the helmet as well as the clothes and rifle, but with his masses of long hair, the helmet just didn't fit. He stuffed most of his pale locks down inside the jacket and yanked the collar high against the back of his neck. Though his hair glowed white in the moonlight, he was in too much of a hurry to rejoin Mac to worry about it.

After a few minutes to orient himself on location, Soren left the security of the grotto and headed toward a point of land where he and Mac had agreed to meet if anything went wrong. That was her idea. His was to have her stay aboard the ship until he and Doc found out exactly what Isaacson intended to do with them. She and ol' Davy weren't exactly the best of friends anymore and Soren knew David Hine Isaacson would not just outright kill her—or him for that matter. He'd turn them over to his

troops and let them beg for death long before he'd allow it. Soren had hoped to convince the General that there was a large profit to be made by keeping them all alive. The General could be bought. That was common knowledge. Unfortunately, the man had recognized him. He and Doc had both been beaten, despite the offer of cooperation Doc made. Soren Anlan wasn't about to try and reason with the general again.

The soft crunch of leaves under a careless foot caused Soren to become intimate friends with an old, half rotten tree stump as he waited for the enemy to show himself.

Macarra, too, stalked the area and, sensing another's presence, she pressed back into the brush. Two soldiers passed within inches of her, though neither stopped nor slowed their pace. With a relieved sigh, she relaxed, turned, stepped into the open--and slammed headlong into Soren. He quickly slapped a hand over her mouth to ensure her silence until their respective heart rates could return to normal. At last breathing easier, they agreed to follow the two soldiers. Soren, in his rush to get away, didn't take time to grab extra ammunition.

Soren continued on ahead, circling the pair as Mac readied herself to distract them. When her flaxen-haired companion appeared, she stepped into the open. She'd already removed her t-shirt and, with hands raised, she whistled softly.

The troopers, of course, spun at the sound, but both hesitated at the sight of a woman and, slowly, with one hand, Mac reached down to unzip the diagonal line. From left shoulder to right hip, she exposed a long, pale length of definite womanly curves. Wearing her sweetest smile, she crooked her pointer finger, inviting them to take a closer look. Neither man knew who this weaponless wonder was, nor did they care. They moved in.

Soren, too, admired the view for a time, yet he didn't see it as anything but dangerous. It bothered him to see how easily she turned into Little-Miz-Innocense. She did, indeed appear to be completely harmless. A shy little lady, wholly incapable of defending herself.

Soren quietly introduced one man to his hunting knife while the other met his boot. The first man dropped where he stood, while the other went flying to sprawl at Mac's feet. He came up spitting fir needles, wondering what the hell happened. Then Mac ripped off his helmet, grabbed his hair, slammed her knee into his nose, and sent shards of bone into his brain. He kissed the ground again. This time forever.

"Jeez," she whispered, "they still fall for that shit."

"Looked pretty convincing from where I stood," Soren commented.

He busied himself stealing clips, weapons and a talker, while watching out of the corner of his eye as Mac redressed. Finally admitting she was cold, she stole the smaller trooper's jacket and gloves.

"Okay," she whispered as they prepared to leave, "where's Doc?"

Soren didn't quite know how to answer.

But Snake Plissken did.

He hadn't had nearly so much trouble tracking her this time. He'd been close enough to see her run-in with Blondy. He'd watched them make asses of the soldiers and he'd been within earshot when her question came and went unanswered.

"I'd say he's dead." Snake was on her heels, unnoticed till he spoke. Soren spun, prepared to shoot, but Mac waved him off. Still he had to ask, "Who the hell're you?"

Snake ignored the question. "He's dead, isn't he, Blondy?"

"Soren--where is he? Where'd you stash Doc?"

"You're Snake Plissken," he laughed. "Funny. I expected you to be bigger 'n life--"

"Soren, answer me! Where's Doc?"

"Keep it down," Snake shushed. "Just tell her where Berrigan's at."

Her volume dropped. Somewhat. "I told you, I don't know anything about Berrigan! Now, where the hell is--"

"He's right, Doc's dead." He had no choice. Backed into a corner by Snake's glare and Mac's persistence, Soren tried to explain. "He was shot while we were trying to escape. I'm sorry, Mac, there was nothing I could do. He said--he said to tell you--" he hesitated, shot a glare at Snake and continued, "--he was sorry about Leningrad."

Snake's glare focused on her. "So he wasn't Berrigan, huh?"

"He wasn't," Soren interrupted, "I mean, he didn't play Berrigan, but he knew who did."

"So who was it? You maybe?" Snake grabbed his collar, "Come on, Blondy, tell me all about it."

Soren shrugged off his grip and kept his attention on Mac. "He was part of the Team--the group that planned the Ruse."

The news of his death already had her in numbed silence. She shook her head and backed away from them both.

Snake was well aware of the shock ripping through her. If what the blond said was true, she hadn't known until that moment.

Her logic believed, but her fondness for Doc couldn't accept it. "No, you have to be wrong. My brother wouldn't--"

"Brother?!" She'd told Snake a good dozen times she didn't have any family. Now she was calling the man he hated most--brother?!

They ignored him.

"Doc worked for NASA. He was a research scientist. What possible connection could NASA have with--"

"He said he was a tech-advisor for the Senate sub-committee that headed the Team."

Snake jerked him around, "Senate? You expect me to believe the U.S. Senate planned that whole fuckin' mess?"

"No, it wasn't just the Senate, Plissken. Every political bastard, every group, every country that had any gas exposed troops got in on it."

Mac was still shaking her head, backing away from both of them. "You're talkin' crazy, Soren, you're talking absolutely crazy. Doc was a peace-maker, not a killer. He had friends in the service. I was in the service."

"He knew that. Don'tcha think he knew that? Why do you think he worked so damn hard to find a cure for the gas? Why do you think he put his neck out for us? It wasn't the gas killin' him, Mac, it was guilt. He had to tell somebody before he went completely mad."

"So he confided in you. How touching," Snake hissed. "I don't suppose he told you which asshole played Captain Berrigan?"

"What difference does it make, Plissken? Berrigan was a figure-head, nothing more."

Snake grabbed his lapels and dragged the tall man down a couple inches to stare him straight in the eye, "I asked you a question--"

Soren, however, shook off the grip and bolted after Mac who was rapidly moving toward the deeper woods. Snake let him go and followed the brief pursuit.

They were still arguing. For a time Soren held her by the shoulders, trying to make her listen, but she fought his grip and slipped free only to turn and strike at his hands whenever he reached for her.

"You're going to listen, if I have to tie you to this tree to do it!" he insisted.

"I'd cut your heart out--if you had one! You hated the old man, didn't you? I'll bet you left him to those butchers and ran to cover your own ass, right? You deserted him, just like you're always deserting your post--" she swung wildly, just missing his flawless face.

"I didn't believe it either," he persisted, "but think about it, will ya? He knew too much, Mac, too many details. Remember how crowded it was? Remember all the planes, troops, tanks--ten, maybe fifteen countries were in on it. Think about it, that's all I'm saying, just think about what nerve gas can do--has done to so many of us."

She quit fighting, but still wouldn't let him touch her.

He held up his hands in surrender and kept talking, "All right, all right, but listen to me. Please.

"Doc said the Team thought they were the only ones still sane enough to make any rational decisions. They just couldn't let a bunch of gas-crazed, trained killers loose at home. With the economies all shot to hell, nobody could afford to institutionalize so many of us. The only way to keep us from coming home was--" he took a deep breath, "--was for us to die in battle. Make heroes out of us. Dead heroes." He paused, "Honored. And harmless."

Plissken and Mac both wore the same shocked, sickened expression. All this man said hit too many right chords.

"I guess the Team figured they created the problem, they should end it."

It made sense. So many with nothing; thousands homeless, jobless. The food rationing helped, but not enough. Riots, sabotage--and the thought of adding hundreds of thousands gas-exposed warriors must have been terrifying. Yet how could any government deliberately plan the deaths of their own countrymen?

And there were still a few strays to round up.

"All of us--you, too, Plissken--we're all survivors of Leningrad. I know for a fact Isaacson's troopers are. Doc figured this mission might be just an elaborate plan to finish us off."

So that's why the cops were brought in. Their ranks were made up entirely of gas-crazed veterans--not that there was anyone left who hadn't been exposed to some degree or other. Those cops were glorified, uniformed, so-called 'peace keepers' that killed with little or no provocation. And who led them? Only one of the most well known vets to come away from Leningrad unscathed. Physically, anyway. And who, too,

was safe at home while he--the Snake Plissken--was stuck up here playin' run-bunny-run with the rest of the targets? Good old Bobbyboy, alias Commissioner Bob Hauk, alias Colonel Robert A--for asshole--liauk. That clinched it. When he got out of this mess, he definitely had to make good his threat to kill him. He'd toyed and teased the rat long enough.

Snake knew what he'd heard was true, but he was also keenly aware of the moment. If they didn't move soon, Isaacson's men would spot them for sure.

"Look," he interrupted and tapped his rifle barrel against Soren's chest, "I'd love to hang around here and reminisce about the good old days, but I'm supposed to try an' get you assholes outta here in one piece. Now, I for one, don't wanna stand around here like a fuckin' target any longer than I have to. You're sure the old man's dead?"

Soren stared down his nose at the grimy, unshaven renegade and said, "Yeah, yeah, he's dead all right. I screwed up, okay?" Then he glanced over Snake's shoulder, "But it won't do any good to go after the body, Mac. Mac? Mac!?"

Snake twisted around to see the North side of a Southern directed lady disappear into the shadows, headed in a straight line for Isaacson's camp.

"Damn that woman!"

She'd taken advantage of his blind side. Again.



Spit-shine. The back of the boots he stared into were polished well enough to reflect his own likeness. Hauk was in deep trouble. The AP who'd signaled him to abort his flight now stood guard outside his cell. Hauk wanted to kick himself for not being more alert to the inevitable attack. The boy'd been all smiles. Pleasant chit-chat while they strolled down the hall, supposedly to see the base commander. The last lie he heard was how much the boy admired the police force. Then everything went black.

The AP turned. "Stand away, sir. I don't wanna have to shoot."

"Easy, son," Hauk muttered under his breath. Cautiously, he got to his feet, locked his hands behind his head, and waited passively for the guard to unlock the door.

A fatigue-suited General Isaacson took his time climbing out of the vehicle. It was a painful task; the hard surfaced airstrip jarring his bones, but only a hint of the agony showed behind his brown eyes. As he confronted the tall pilot of the F-20, he rested heavily on the silver-tipped cane. Finally, he motioned for the flier to rest easy.

"Who sent you?"

The stranger announced, "I have a message from Captain Berrigan."

Isaacson smiled, nodded, then lost interest in the pilot and became wholly intrigued with the jet, or more precisely, the name painted so neatly below the canopy; R. A. Hauk.

The general waved his cane at the craft. "Where is he?"

"Commissioner Hauk? I would imagine he's dead by now, sir. Colonel Mason was ordered to dispose of him as soon as possible."

Tom Rehme's face was purple with rage. Trying to shout over the roar of his five waiting helicopters didn't help his coloring either.

He was talking to the McChord Base Commander. "I told you to keep him here till I arrived. How in hell could you louse up a simple order like that?! One man. One goddamned plane!"

Full-bird Colonel 'Budah' Buddy Mason squared his huge shoulders, sucked in his huge pot belly, and snarled back, "Lookie here, son, this is my base. Your man landed here without my permission. He did not file a proper flight plan, nor did he bother to tell my people where he was headed. I am not holdin' my personnel responsible if you can't keep track of your man. It ain't my problem, son. An' you ain't gonna make it mine. Understand?"

Rehme understood all right. Mason was running scared for some reason. Maybe a change of tactics could clear up the problem. Rehme's rubbery face changed from mean-ugly to down-right lovable.

"Colonel," he purred, "d'you recall anything about the Leningrad Ruse?"

Macarra didn't get very far. News of Doc's death, exhaustion, and the weight of a rapidly failing mission sapped the will right out of her. Slumping against a tree, Mac shut her eyes, hoping the action would clear her mind and renew her energy. But the days events circled around her

like mental vampires, sucking the blood of even her most basic instincts.

It had to be true, they were all invited guests to this morbid little picnic. And the host as Soren said, was the political group known only as the Team. Only they would have a reason to bring old friends and enemies together in such an isolated place. Only the Team would have had access to enough information to plan the outcome of such an event. And she'd played right into their hands.

As Plissken and Anlan caught up to her, Isaacson's men appeared in force. Anlan yanked her up and pulled her with him into the denser growth just as the first shots were exchanged. She appeared to come out of her stupor, lift her rifle, aim and squeeze off a few rounds, but for the first time all day, she missed the targets.

The pilot of the F-20 continued his speech until shooting caught Isaacson's attention. The general ordered silence, then with a wave of his hand, motioned the nearest officer to escort the man to the troop truck. Isaacson followed along behind them, still listening. As he climbed into the cab, he ordered the driver to track the sounds.

Snake heard shots immediately behind him and swung around. Until that moment, he'd had second--even third thoughts concerning Pretty-boy's skills as a combat soldier. However, when Snake spotted the body of a sniper almost within reach he changed his mind about the man's abilities. Maybe Blondy served some other purpose besides stud-service to the space cadets. He nodded curtly, then went back to business.

However in another few seconds, the three agreed that this situation called for flight rather than fight. The dense brush was easy enough to get lost in, so they scrambled in three directions, headed for a clearing higher up the slope.

Mac thought they'd reach the goal at roughly the same time, but after several tense minutes, Snake and Soren were still nowhere in sight. Swearing in a harsh whisper, she doubled back, running a wide arc off to the left of her last direction to cut across Snake's chosen path. Finally, she heard footsteps, but the sounds brought an uneasiness. Mac held her breath. Sure enough, three troopers appeared, no doubt scanning the area with infrared. Immediately, she dropped and rolled into a narrow space under a fallen log and waited there for a good five minutes before daring to move again.

Believing it to be safe and relying on hearing more than sight to find her way through the forest, she crept out, but gained only a few yards when something caused her to stop. She hadn't heard nor seen anything out of the ordinary, yet--

A rifle barrel jabbed her in the back.

There was no sense in arguing. She held out her weapon and the man snatched it away. She raised her hands slowly, then turned to face her captor. It looked like she'd have an armed escort to that cabin.

For a man who considered himself out of shape, Hawk made short work of the AP. The airman lay sprawled at his feet, unconscious. Hawk confiscated the sidearm and hurried back to the airstrip. Unfortunately,

his plane was gone. McChord was a good sized base; lots of hangars, but he really didn't want to have to hunt through every one, so he decided to take the first available aircraft and just hope he'd be airborne before the alarm was raised. He'd spotted a likely looking old F-16E just about to be refueled when he heard incoming copters.

Black helicopters in the inky predawn darkness shouldn't have been easy to identify, but their sound was familiar. Wearing a wry smile, he edged closer and closer to the spot where these beasts were going to set down. Sure enough, the floodlights reflecting off the ash colored cement lit up the USPF insignia long before they landed. And as soon as they touched the runway, Hauk hauled ass toward the closest one. Feeling his oats, he did a rolling leap up into the open hatch. The detective-sergeant he bowled over stared in shock as Hauk dusted himself off, commandeered a helmet and scooted up front to replace the stunned copilot.

"I want to see General Isaacson," Mac told the soldier.

The man, a lieutenant, said nothing, but with a quick hand gesture, drew two more men out of the brush.

Rattled by their arrival and closeness, she chattered, "Your leader, David Isaacson--he's a friend of mine, understand? Friend. Call him. Tell him Commander Kern wants to talk."

The lieutenant, closer than the others, said something she didn't understand, laughed and tossed his weapon to the nearest man. The other backed away, checked the area, then nodded to him. He slowly stepped out of the shadows and into the moonlight where he removed his helmet to expose a pleasant, though painfully young face.

Isaacson's men came from every corner of the globe. This one, by the look of him was from the Mediterranean area, or possibly an Israeli national by birth, if she could trust her ear for languages. Whatever he was, he'd definitely become an enemy to the rest of the humanity since he'd chosen to follow a madman--a self-proclaimed god. Isaacson's Raiders as the press tagged them, thoroughly believed they would eventually rule the world. The general promised it, and the general would never lie to his troops. For that reason, anything a Raider wanted, he simply took--and she'd just put herself on the menu.

Mac hoped she just wasn't getting her message across. She tried French, Spanish, Norwegian, even her own bastardized version of Hebrew, plus the few phrases she'd picked up in Finland and Scotland. As a last resort, she tried Russian. They didn't acknowledge anything she said.

Again she went to English. "Isaacson's going to be real upset when he finds out I was asking for him." Without realizing it, she'd been backing away. The closest man reached out to run his fingers over her cheek, under her jaw and down her throat.

Normally headstrong and unflappable, Mac knew better than to show fear, but the events of the day left her wide open. She flinched at his touch, unable to control the reflex. She didn't have to guess what kind of situation she'd walked into--not with the others closing in on either side of her.

To mask her frayed nerves, she warned in a gruff voice, "Huh uh,

no. Don't start something you'll be sorry for." He persisted, slipped his hands inside the flight suit and pushed it off her shoulders.

The frigid air snapped her to attention. She struck with both fists on the insides of his arms to knock loose his grip, but even before the blow landed, he struck back in a move so fast that he continued almost without interruption. He pushed outward and down. The suit dropped around her elbows. She jerked it up again.

His strike was meant as a warning not to fight him. Warnings were a waste on her. She tried again, this time with an elbow to his ribs and locked fists on the back of his neck as he doubled over. Apprehensively, she glanced at the others and expected them to rush her, but neither moved. They were actually laughing at the officer's failure to subdue this seemingly delicate flower of womanhood. Mac didn't take time to question their reasoning, she just made haste away from the crazies.

It took some time for the young officer to recover enough to pick himself up. Furious at the other two for not stopping her, he shouted an order. They didn't listen until he snatched a rifle out of the taller man's hands and struck him across the face with a blow hard enough to knock any normal man off his feet. This man, however, was by no means normal. He took the blow, snapped to attention, then abruptly, bowed in rather dubious respect considering the hate in his dark eyes. Obediently, he started after her--determined to make her pay for his humiliations.

"So where the hell is she?"

"I'm not her fuckin' keeper--not that she couldn't use one. Shit, Plissken, you don't suppose they got her?"

"You double-back that way," he pointed down the hill, "an' I'll head over there--"

"The lodge? But I told her it wouldn't help--"

"Don't know her very well, do ya, Blondy?"



His name was Nickoli. He claimed to be from the Steppes of Russia and he was oblivious to the cold, or perhaps it was the chase that kept him warm. To Mac, he looked and smelled more like a mountain man who had skipped his yearly bath for several decades. He'd already shed his helmet and jacket as he plowed through the brush after her. It didn't take him long to spot her, and even less time to drop her with a flying tackle.

Despite the frigid air, he was sweating profusely. Some thought it was due to nerve gas damage, but he knew what caused it--the thrill of the chase. Like a runner's euphoria, Nickoli got high off the mere thought of inflicting pain. The prelude to capture, the run, pushed his pleasure to the edge. For that reason her let her escape so he could see the panic in her eyes when he brought her down again. He was in no hurry. Only when she was thoroughly exhausted would he finally subdue her. The game reminded him of the chases back home, running with the reindeer, picking one animal, trapping it, snapping it's neck with his bare hands. That was for food, not sport, but this--this was better. He peeled off his shirt, dropped his speed to keep the distance between them equal, and swung the cloth, slapping her with it just to let her know how close he was.

Abruptly, Mac stumbled into an area strewn with piles of freshly cut timber. She saw the opportunity to disappear and did just that. She dropped low and scrambled down inbetween the logs, still running, but where the big man couldn't follow.

Nickoli, caught completely off guard, sailed right over top of her, to land heavily ten feet further on. It took him several more steps to realize what she'd done and stop his own flight. He turned, laughing, wagging a finger at her, watching her slip down through the pile where he couldn't reach. He watched her burst into the open again, enlarging the gap between them by twenty yards. She was good. Very good. Perhaps he'd let her live when he was through with her.

Knowing his friends weren't far behind, Mac dropped from view again to backtrack for a few yards. She veered left, back toward the lake and, hopefully, Snake or Soren.

Nickoli wasn't so easily duped. He suspected the move and cut in on her chosen path. By the time she saw him, it was too late to slow down. Mac launched off a tree stump between them and leapt high in a kick. Nickoli could only stand and stare at the heavy boots headed straight for his chest. He swung wildly, trying to fend off the blow, but he missed. She hit hard, rolled and was gone, leaving him winded, wounded and stunned.

Nickoli ran slower now, in a great deal of pain. She'd broken at least one of his ribs and he wasn't so sure if he wouldn't just kill her and have done with it. If he could catch her. The woman was almost out of sight.

He finally spied his companions and motioned for them to circle around, while he kept her headed in a straight line.

The lieutenant ran a parallel course until the brush cleared enough for him to cut in front of her. With arms wide, he blocked her escape, dancing left and right, always ahead, herding her like an animal.

She glared at this laughing boy in front of her, let him get closer,

then hooked her arm around a small sapling, and kicked. The blow caught him on the chin, and sent him sprawling. But before she could regain momentum, Nickoli appeared, grabbed her around the back of the neck and jerked her to a stop. She swung back with the heel of her hand aimed for his nose. The Russian caught the offending fist as he dropped. Mac went down under him.

The lieutenant wiped his wounded chin on his shirt sleeve and stood to watch Nickoli pin her arms with one hand, while he tried to find a way to get the jumpsuit off her. The young officer drew closer, laughing, falling to his knees beside them, to watch Nickoli's futile attempts to rip the quilted material.

Frantic for a way out, Mac still struggled under the man's weight. When the zipper popped off track, she got a glimmer of an idea for a way out of the dilemma. The answer was quite possibly staring her in the face.

Nickoli didn't notice when her concentration turned toward the young officer. The boy saw only that she wanted him, whether genuine or not, it stirred his lust even more to see Nickoli reach down into her uniform, his icy hands causing her to shiver. The lieutenant took the bait and shoved the mountainous man's shoulders with an order to move aside.

Nickoli, of course, refused to give up his right. He'd brought her down and no one, not even this officer, was going to make him relinquish his claim. He flatly refused to acknowledge him. Until the man's foot slammed into his already broken ribs. Nickoli bellowed in agony, rose up and dove after the lieutenant.

Mac scurried away, first backward, then on her hands and knees through the thick underbrush. She thought she was safe, glanced over her shoulder to make sure, and bumped into another pair of legs. Somehow, in the chase, she'd forgotten that there'd been another trooper, though he certainly hadn't forgotten about her.

He jerked her to her feet at knife-point and dragged her back to the others. Seeing their quarrel, he decided to take his turn at her first. He shoved her against the nearest tree and held her there. The third man pressed his knife to her throat and let the razor tip draw blood. She felt it run down her neck in a slow, steady stream.

Mac had no doubt that this man was decidedly more dangerous than either of the others. His round, rosey-cheeked face had a feminine softness to it, and his hypnotic, pink-eyed gaze left her terrified. Where the others had lust, he had nothing but hate. She knew if she died at the hand of an E/A trooper, this would be the one.

As the argument grew in intensity, Porky flipped the knife to grip it tip down, then slipped the blade into her t-shirt and cut. She inhaled sharply, tried to make herself part of the tree, tried to keep her flesh away from the knife's curved tip. He fed off the fear and deliberately cut a thin, shallow path from breastbone to stomach. It stung like fire, though it was scarcely more than a scratch. But the sight of blood roused his lust. He motioned for her to kneel in front of him.

A shout from his lieutenant distracted Porky for a moment. He turned, still holding his knife at her throat, his other hand still tangled in her hair as he watched Nickoli take on the boy/officer. It

was no contest.

The officer shouted an order in the Russian's face, then repeated the order to Porky. In that brief span, Nickoli grabbed something out of the officer's belt and jabbed once. Twice.

The boy's step faltered, his face drained of color, and he met Mac's frightened gaze. The look translated into an apology that he couldn't voice. Nickoli jerked him around and stabbed again, laughing all the while the boy clutched at him, then slid to fall face-first in the mud. Still wearing a wide grin, Nickoli nudged the body with his foot and rolled it over to let her see what he'd done.

Nickoli's full concern once more focused on Mac. In disbelief, she saw him reach down, remove the blade, and with the unmistakable leer of a full-blown crazie, he strolled over to hold up the dripping metal. He didn't have to persuade Porky to move. The round one stepped aside with an eagerness that astounded her. Nickoli crouched down to twirl the blade under her nose for a time, then laughed and licked the sanguine liquid off the flat of it, and tried to get her to do the same. She spit in his face.

He hit her with such force that she almost blacked out. She fell back, hitting her head against the rough barked tree, and fought to remain conscious. She wanted to be sick. If she had remembered to eat anything in the previous twenty-four hours, she might have been.

Nickoli was still laughing as he pulled the blue flight-suit down off her arms. He had it to her hips when she kicked him full in the chest, knocking him off balance. He fell on his butt, reached and grabbed her foot, dragged her closer and tried again.

The whole time, Porky stood by, massaging his own erection, and repeating one phrase over and over. Though Mac didn't understand the words, his meaning became all too clear. As he continued to try for his own climax with his left hand, he drew his pistol with his right.

Time slowed to a crawl as Macarra watched the gun scrape past the holster. Porky dropped to his knees and crept steadily closer as Nickoli hovered over her, still trying to pin her down. Nickoli didn't seem to notice his companion, nor did he see the gun aim for her head. Her thoughts about Porky were right. He wanted her. Dead.

Odd how in that extended moment, her memory played back another, somewhat similar fight. Pain and rage dominated it, too, but no insanity. The details unfolded in a new light--Hauk's point of view. She now knew what must have gone through his mind when facing a gun.

Months of trust and caring, all of it, tossed away because he never talked of home. She realized now, Hauk had never talked about anything that wasn't of immediate consequence. In all the time they'd spent together, she hadn't learned anything about the man inside the officer.

Watching death approach, glinting silver in the cold light, her note, "It's over. Go to hell." seemed tragically funny. She'd shot him, too, the first time out of drunken stupidity, the second time out of fear. When she relived it, he exhibited no hatred. Pain, yes. And anger. And confusion. But he'd stayed with her, held her close for an hour after what she labeled rape. She couldn't make him go away. As much as he'd needed medical attention, he had refused to let her go until she

quit fighting. Then he'd grown quiet. That cold silence nearly drove her crazy. He wouldn't speak. And neither would she. Maybe if she'd told him how jealous she was of his family--maybe if she'd stayed sober--

One word. They both lacked one word in their vocabulary. She'd tried to use it once, but she was drunk then, too. Funny how one, short, four-letter word might have changed things.

Mac abruptly realized that the Russian's crushing grip was gone from her wrists. His ham-hand slid down her arm to aid his fight with her uniform.

With Nickoli's preoccupation for penetration, he didn't much care what manner of argument she put up above the waist. He wasn't even aware of his pudgy companion's vicinity, until he heard the slap of flesh against flesh, followed a breath later by gunfire and a sharp sting across the side of his head. His startled halt gave Mac time to strike again. Her flat-handed blow to the side of his head ruptured his eardrum.

Though roaring in agony, he still held on. He couldn't decide who had hurt him more, so he took care of both of them. His left hand threatened to crush Mac's windpipe, while his right backhanded Porky.

The fat one fell away, whimpering, trying to explain his actions to his comrade, but Nickoli blamed Mac more than Porky. He jerked her up into a sitting position under him, and struck. The momentum carried her backward. He hit her again and raised his fist to strike once more. Plissken stopped his third effort.

He'd seen signs of trouble long before he heard it. At a dead run, he followed the broken branches and trampled grass, found the clearing with its discarded helmet and jacket, and the tracks that lead away. There was no need to guess what kind of trouble she was in. He knew.

Snake entered the arena totally unnoticed. He decided not to use a gun for the simple reason that it would only bring in more troopers. He used his best weapon instead. Himself. Besides, it was infinitely more pleasurable to personally wring the necks of these bastards, than to end the fight quickly with a few impersonal bullets.

As Nickoli raised his fist again, Snake planted his steel-toed boot in the man's face. Snake never had been particularly thrilled with the idea of assaulting a woman, not that he hadn't threatened to do it himself a few times. But this crazy bastard obviously enjoyed beating up someone Snake called friend, and if Snake ever felt compelled to defend anyone, it had to be a friend, be they man or woman.

With Nickoli sprawled, bleeding and unmoving, Snake pulled Mac up and out of the line of fire with an order to, "Stay behind me."

She was too stunned to do otherwise.

Porky, shocked at Snake's abrupt appearance, finally scrambled for his pistol. Before he could lay a hand on it or his rifle, Snake was on him, hitting fast and hard. Porky caved in with surprisingly little resistance. Snake snatched up the gun and shoved it into his belt.

Neither of them noticed Nickoli's recovery until it was almost too late. Mac didn't see him stand up directly behind her until he roared his anger like some wounded bear. She twisted toward the sound, then instantly dropped, Snake thought, to get away from the wild grab the man

made for her. But Nickoli, remarkably agile, caught her by the elbow. He yanked her up, face first against his chest. At that point, his smug expression dissolved into shock.

All action ceased. Snake watched the man's eyes widen in horror as they stared down at the woman still locked in his grip. He'd quit struggling and, though Snake had no idea what had happened, he was quick to take advantage of the lull. Snake stretched out his hand to Mac, while keeping his eye on the half-dressed crazie. She came away easily.

With his shield gone, Nickoli's rapidly dulling gaze dropped to his chest. Jutting out from the wide, well-furred expanse of muscle was Mac's knife--buried to the hilt.

When Nickoli full comprehended what she'd done to him, he began an unearthly howl as he clawed wildly, trying to loosen the blade. Its barbed edges held. Already near death, the Russian began to scream vows to take them both to hell with him. Fortunately, Mac was out of reach when he lunged. Snake simply side-stepped out of his path. Nickoli stumbled, fell flat, rolled and came to rest on his back. When at last he lay still, they saw the blade and most of the handle buried between his ribs. Right through his heart.

Snake saw Mac's paler-than-pale skin glowing white and cold in the moonlight. Her dark uniform hung around her hips, while the white undershirt fluttered in bloodied shreds in the light breeze. Snake pulled off his jacket and held it out to her.

She didn't respond. She continued to stare at Nickoli's body.

"Your aim's improved," he murmured and draped the sheepskin lined jacket over her shoulders. She jumped at his touch, obviously unaware of his approach. He tried again.

"Mac?"

She glanced down at her clothes, nervously pulled the tattered shirt together and tied it in a vain attempt to cover herself. She pulled the quilted suit up, shaking as she stuffed her arms back into the sleeves. The zipper was broken, of course, leaving the suit open from collar to a low line of lace panties, but where they'd once been white, they were now stained red from the long, thin slash on her stomach and the blood of Nickoli that had splattered like a sprinkler with every beat of his failing heart.

Snake held her gaze while he helped her into his jacket. She swam in the size of it, but her chills began to subside almost immediately after he zipped it. He pulled the collar up against the back of her neck, then brushed a stray strand of hair from her eyes. She was battered and bruised from head to--everywhere he'd seen, but there wasn't time to do much more than get her away from the source.

When she warmed up, she acknowledged his presence, "Guess I should stick to flying."

"You did fine. C'mon, we gotta get movin'."

A sudden crashing through the brush tensed the situation all over again. Snake and Mac both turned, but Plissken twisted toward the sound, placing himself between Mac and the cause. It was only Porky crawling out of the woods to throw himself over Nickoli's body.

The man's cries were soft--child-like. Mac couldn't quite manage

to look away. She did reach out blindly, groping for Snake's hand to steady her, while listening to the trooper's words. He needed something. Begged for it. And slowly, she realized why this man held such hatred for her. He'd been in love with Nickoli.

Soren finally put in an appearance, though it didn't go unnoticed by Snake that Blondy wasn't even winded. He strolled in, surveyed the damage and asked through a frown, "Jesus, what happened? Mac, are you okay?"

She nodded, but didn't take her eyes from the trooper.

Soren listened to the plea for a moment, then shook his head in disgust, but the soldier, realizing he understood, renewed his cries.

Snake felt the trooper was no longer threat and preferred to leave the crazie to his mourning. He urged Mac to do the same. She might have followed, if Soren hadn't suddenly sworn, then headed for the Raider. Without hesitation, Soren pulled his .45 and put it to the man's temple.

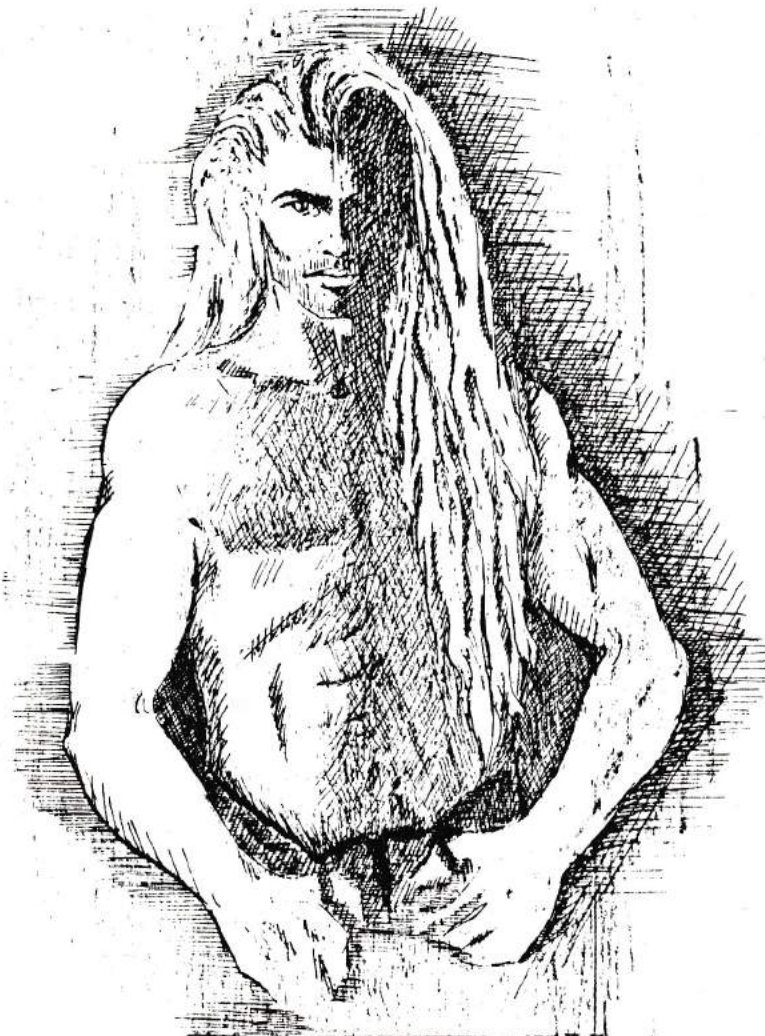
"Aw, shit," Snake hissed.

Mac snapped out of her stupor to scream, "No!"

It was too late.

Soren watched the body collapse, then casually dropped the revolver back into its holster. Absolutely unaffected by his deed, he strolled past them as he worked his pale hair into one, long, heavy braid.

"It's what he wanted," he shrugged.



"SOREN ANLAN" © L. OJED 1966

Thomas watched his balding boss with renewed disgust. The man was nuts. There was only one reason to stand and watch him crawl all over the woman. Money. Thomas liked money, though he thoroughly disliked having to watch the old goat's deviant behavior to earn it. While his eyes remained fixed on the writhing bodies, his mind found infinitely more pleasant subjects to focus on than watching a beached whale hump a goldfish.

The six foot seven inch, two hundred and seventy five pound body guard blinked, shifted his weight and stifled a yawn. The tussle was almost over. The rasping breaths of his employer were growing loud enough to wake the dead. Time to pay closer attention. There would be no living with him if he found that Thomas hadn't caught his act.

Finally, the maniac flopped onto his back.

"Wonderful," he laughed. "Wasn't I wonderful?!"

Thomas focused his gaze on the big body with its gray hair blending so well with the washed out skin tone. Thomas acknowledged through a forced smile, "Yeah--as usual."

The boss came up with a vengeance. "What do you mean, as usual?! That was perfection! Look at me," he held out his arms and the excess flesh waved like a sail in a high breeze, "Have you ever seen such a fine specimen?"

"No, sir." Thomas fought an urge to look away as the man approached. The sight was hard enough to take, but coupled with the odors of sweat, whiskey, and half bottle of aftershave, the stench was really unbearable.

Thomas, holding his breath, casually walked away under the thinly veiled guise of collecting the man's clothes.

"I called per your suggestion, sir," Thomas announced. "They'll wait. Unfortunately, the General didn't comply with your request. Mr. Anlan and Commander Kern have disappeared, though he says they're in the immediate area. He seems to think they have help..."

"Plissken..."

"Yes sir. I suppose it'd have to be. Anyway, sir, Colonel Mason did as you asked. He detained the Commissioner while one of his men flew on with your message. But he's rather afraid that Isaacson may decide to fly the Commissioner's plane out of the area which would eliminate the problem he could encounter crossing U.S. territory."

"..doesn't trust me."

"No sir, I don't think he does. The Canadians have agreed to secure the area whenever you like. Should I ask them to push the deadline up a bit? Without informing Isaacson..."

His over-ripe boss waved his hand. "Yes, yes. And tell Mason to get rid of Hauk. Quietly! I don't want the whole damn police force on my neck when I take over again. Tell him to make sure it looks like an accident."

The man tugged on his shorts and continued, "As soon as those astronauts are properly disposed of, I'll have all I need to run this country as it should be run. And mark my word, Thomas this time no one will toss me out. I'll show those idiots who's boss."

"There--" Snake said as he nudged Soren and motioned further on.

The roadway, a pair of dull gray ruts in hardpan and gravel, stood out pale in the growing dawn. Through the trees, it was only a short way ahead and down a ten foot bank. Somewhere nearby, they heard a vehicle approaching.

As if reading Snake's mind, Mac met his gaze, gave him a quick nod and stole along the ledge to check for troops inside the carrier, while he and Soren made their way to the edge of the bank. At Mac's all-clear, they leapt and landed unscathed on the heavy canopy.

Snake took the driver by surprise. He swung down with his rifle, smashed and threw the glass into the cab. Immediately, he reached in, popped the handle and the door swung open. The man behind the wheel jumped back in surprise, though not fast enough to avoid the hand that yanked him out. The drop over the cliff wasn't enough to kill him, but the unyielding branches collected a considerable amount of his hide.

Soren Anlan's like-task didn't turn out quite so well. Although he synchronized his attack with Plissken's, as he reached down to pull the door open, someone grabbed his wrist and jerked him off balance. He hung over the roof--slipping, fighting to maintain his grip as the one who held him fought to loose it. Finally, wedged between the canopy and the cab, he reached in to free himself only to have the business end of a pistol rammed against his throat. With bulging eyes, Soren stared down into the smiling face of General David Hine Isaacson.

Snake saw his plight. Had he thought about it a little longer, he might have let Isaacson blow Blondy away, but old habits were hard to break. With one hand locked on the wheel, Snake leaned across the seat and slammed his fist into Isaacson's side. The air whistled out of his lungs and Soren snatched the gun away.

"I owe ya one," Blondy grinned as he bound the general's wrists.

"Yeah," Snake growled as he slowed the truck. "Check on Mac."

Soren glanced out the window and signaled. Out of the brush along side them, she appeared.

To Commander Kern, the back of the truck looked empty. She caught the tailgate and hoisted herself up over the back. The landing was considerably softer than she anticipated. Along with the ominous crack of a rifle bolt, a beam of light illuminated her and her human cushion. Mac found herself nose to nose with a U.S. Air Force Captain.

Soren opened the cab rear window. As it hissed aside and caught with a soft click, two shots, almost fired together, rang out.

Immediately, Snake stood on the brakes and brought the vehicle to a sideways, grinding halt. Even before they'd stopped completely, Snake and Soren bailed out the doors, Anlan dragging Isaacson with him.

A single shaft of light came from an attachment to a rifle somewhere under the side bench. Snake snapped on his own torch and found Mac wedged into a corner holding a pistol on a shadowy figure sprawled beside her. Snake swept the light down.

"Well, well," he marveled, "looks like the military's finally arrived."

Snake bounded over the back, nearly landing on a guard that lay huddled against the tailgate clutching his wounded hand. What was left

of the man's rifle stock lay scattered across the floor.

"—you do that?"

She nodded.

"An' here I thought you were just dieing for him to come save ya."

"Don't be sarcastic," she grumbled.

"—you okay?"

"Peachy. The son-of-a-bitch shot me." She showed him blood from a minor scratch across her upper arm.

Snake wasn't surprised. He yanked the pilot to his feet and asked, "Flew here all alone, did ya?"

"Ellery. J. Captain. United States Air Force. Serial num—" His voice squeaked to a halt as Snake twisted the material of his collar.

"Don't give me that bullshit. Where's the rest of your squad?"

Again the man repeated his statement. But this time, Snake added to the threat by waving a rifle under his nose.

"I'm just following orders. They told me to fly Hauk's plane."

"Bob Hauk?"

"—shit. I knew you were working for the cops."

Snake glared her quiet, but kept pushing the Airman. "Go on."

"I was s'posed to tell 'em I have a message from Berrigan."

"You know him? Where is he?"

"No--no, honest. All I got were written instructions. That's all. Nothin' else, just fly the plane. General Isaacson would understand."

Isaacson stifled his laughter and spouted quickly to avoid any more pain Soren might inflict. "All it means is that Hauk is dead." His straight face faded back into a broad smile. "So sad." Then with quiet laughter, "Ah, Me'carra, I'm afraid there will be no grand reunion."

A deep frown creased Snake's brow. "What reunion?"

Mac's hate-filled eyes remained glued to Isaacson, who opened his mouth to continue. The explanation was cut short by the punctuation of a pistol in his ribs.

"One more word and you're dead," Soren whispered in his ear.

Isaacson knew he had Snake's full attention and played it to the hilt. "You can't afford to kill me. None of you will ever leave this valley without my help."

Mac sighed, "Where've I heard that before?"

"We'll chance it," Soren murmured as he snuggled up against him.

Suddenly distracted by another sound, all of them shifted to gaze at the sky. A few seconds later, the shuttle swung into view. Suspended from silvery cables, it drifted scarcely fifty feet above the trees.

"I guess I have the last laugh after all," the general grinned.

"Shut up!" Mac ordered and aimed her pistol at his face. "Just shut up!"

"Now Me'carra—you still need my help—"

"Your help? What kind of help could you offer me? You've killed Doc. You took my ship. I've got nothing left to bargain with," her low tone took on a deadly pitch, "and nothing left to lose if I kill you!"

Isaacson raised his bound hands and backed up. Terrified, he sputtered to life. "McKensie is alive!"

"You liar!" Soren roared, raised his pistol, pulled back the hammer and shoved the barrel into Isaacson's startled, open mouth.

"Soren, back off!" Mac warned. "He's mine."

"He's just tryin' to buy more time!"

"I gave you a direct order, mister. Let him talk."

Soren hesitated, glared, then complied. For a moment.

She warned Isaacson in the same tone, "Okay, General, tell me about Doc--and you'd better make it good."

Isaacson wiped the metal taste from his mouth, "He's at the lodge."

"Sure he is," Snake sighed, jumped out of the back of the truck and circled the man slowly. The General visably tensed at his approach. All Plissken had to do was stand there and Isaacson got nervous.

"Mac," Soren persisted, "they blew his brains out! I was there! I saw it happen!"

Isaacson rebutted, "No, he's very much alive, though understandably upset with you for deserting him, Mr. Anlan."

Snake suddenly began to wonder who else Soren had deserted lately. Why hadn't he been winded when he waltzed into the clearing, and why had he had such a disappointed frown on his too-pretty face? Snake suddenly began to wonder if Blondboy hadn't been there all along, watching those assholes beat the shit out of Mac. Maybe Soren was disappointed that Snake interrupted the proceedings before Nickoli actually got around to raping her. It sure 'felt' like the right conclusion.

Soren kept pushing, though not directly. Talking to himself, he muttered, "The guy's a class-A bastard, but who does she believe? Not her security chief, but that son-of--"

"Soren, shut up," she sighed again, then climbed down out of the truck and leaned heavily against it for support. "If Doc's all right, why haven't you taken him to the airstrip? Most of your troopers are already up there, aren't they?"

"How very observant you are," Isaacson leered. "I left your friend with my interrogation team. What else would I do with a prisoner?"

Hurting and tired, she decided, "Okay, if there's even a remote chance he's telling the truth, I want to follow through.

"So--David, old friend, you're going to take us to Doc. Then we're going to the airstrip and you will make damn sure we all get out of here safely--or I will personally perform a little surgery on you--one protuberance at a time." Her aim dropped to his pants. "Do I make myself clear?"

David bowed low to her, "I always prefer life over death when given so gracious a choice."

Snake looked at Mac for a long moment before he surmised, "I suppose you wanna go back to his camp?"

Mac nodded an, "I suppose," back at him and headed for the cab of the truck.

"Good," Soren agreed, "You two go get the Doc and I'll get us some transportation outta here."

Snake came around slowly, head tilted and with enough venom in his smile to make even Blondy nervous. "Bullshit." He jerked his thumb, "In the back, flyboy. You're gonna watch those two."

Soren listened to the engine start and bolted into the back. For no reason other than frustration, he kicked the wounded trooper in the stomach and shoved the Airman down on the floor, too.

"Glad to see you!" Hauk shouted above the roar.

"—fraid we wouldn't make it!" Rehme shouted back. "Trouble?"

"I'm all right," Hauk assured as he gently probed his sore skull. "Thought I told you to stay put?"

"Who, me?" Rehme shrugged, "I thought you might like some new info."

"You mean about this being a set-up?" he replied as he settled on to the cold, leathery side-seat.

"Yeah," Rehme nodded, not bothering to hide his surprise. "Does that mean you also know that Kern was adopted by the McKensie family?"

Hauk's silent smile was answer enough.

"Sort of points an incriminating finger at her, doesn't it?"

"Maybe." Hauk leaned back, shut his eyes and let his mind drift. He recalled the first night he and Macarra spent together in their special place in town off the Helsinki base. He hadn't done nearly so much talking as listening to a story which was, though depressingly all too common, fascinating none the less. Hearing the circumstances surrounding her adoption shed a new light on the pilot known as Sparrow to her squad members.

As police records told the story, Macarra Kern was born March 30, 1964 and found shortly thereafter by two patrolman. They answered a call to investigate strange sounds coming from a pile of boxes in an alley near the Pike Place Market in downtown Seattle. Actually, the first two calls had been ignored. Cat fights. That time of year. Then, too, there were always drunks in the area. But the third complaint came from a reputable source who finally prodded the graveyard shift policemen into spending the last few minutes of their shift playing good-samaritans by rescuing what sounded like a trapped animal. Probably belonged to some poor old lady. The men didn't find a cat.

They discovered a baby girl wrapped in newspaper, stuffed in a cardboard box and dumped into a trashcan. As if that wouldn't be brand enough, through a cop with a warped sense of humor, she acquired her name from the box they found her in; Mac-Carry-All, Kern Manufacturing Company. Most of the letters were blotted out by rain, mud and mold. The readable letters were written down on the police report. Somehow, they found their way to her birth certificate.

Shuffled from foster home to foster home, Mac grew mentally older than her years. She told Hauk she became an expert at running away by five, and at six she resolved to find a place to live where no one would give her away again.

Oddly enough, she spent nearly a year living exactly as she chose. Home was a wooden crate in a little-disturbed hangar at Boeing Field. She "borrowed" food from the employees at the field, though when she thought about it, some of them had to be wise to her predicament. They went out of their way to leave lunch boxes where she could get at them.

Eventually, one of the owners of the hangar noticed her. Five years her senior, Craig McKensie coerced his father into adopting the urchin.

The boy, nicknamed 'Doc' after he nursed her through pneumonia, went so far as to threaten suicide if his father refused his demand. The elder McKensie, founder of a multi-million dollar pharmaceutical company, gave in and went through the motions of adoption, though he had no intention of letting the children spend anymore time together than they already had. He feared his genius son would lose interest in school, but Mac, reasonably sure she wouldn't be given away again, not only caught up with her new brother, but matched him grade for grade, class for class.

By twenty years of age, she was well on her way to an MA in astrophysics, with engineering placing a close second, but rather than continue with her studies, she went to work for NASA and began testing a new prototype. The design was eventually rejected by the US, then picked up by the Israeli Armed Forces. She and a fellow pilot—one Michael James Redhawk—went with the jet to rework the internal design and instruct the world's best air force pilots how to fly the multi-purpose light attack craft. The Israeli forces didn't have the stigma about women in combat situations like the US forces had. Mac was accepted for her proven skills.

One story Hauk learned about her via a newsarticle given to him as a gift from two of her cohorts. It concerned the theft of the McKensie family plane, a Lear Jet.

The article concerned a solo flight by a twelve year old girl who wanted a trip to Disneyland. She didn't get to Disneyland, but she did give LA International a run for their money. She requested an emergency landing, made it and walked away, leaving a full dozen emergency vehicle personnel waiting for an adult to come off the plane. A thorough search revealed none, of course, but by then Mac was lost in the crowd.

Hauk came back to the moment, "Three months after Kern was assigned to my unit, a couple LARS Stealths collided over the field. Turned out to be sabotage. Killed one pilot, crippled the other." Hauk flashed on a newspaper article that came special delivery one peaceful Spring afternoon. It concerned the only survivor of that crash: **Home Town Hero Commits Suicide**, the headline blasted. There was no return address on the envelope, though now that he thought about it, Mac was the only one who would go to such pains to make sure he knew.

"She was close to both men. They'd been in the same squad for two—maybe three—tours. Mac was supposed to go on R&R that morning, packed and ready. I'm still not sure if I believe why she changed her mind—said she had a premonition."

Hauk conveniently forgot to mention how she explained in minute detail where the explosives could be set to cause such a collision. A theory, she said, her theory, hours before the investigation turned up evidence to prove it.

"Maybe she was part of it." He didn't believe that for a minute. Her image flared with such realism he could smell her perfume. Funny how she professed to be one of the guys, but the guys certainly didn't smell like that. It used to drive him nuts to pass her on the flightline—all suited up just like every other body out there, till she brushed past. Such a subtle scent—not something anyone would notice unless they were

damn close--like when he curled up against her at night.

He blinked to find Rehme watching him.

"Maybe she got caught up in it because of McKensie," Rehme said as quietly as possible.

The man was reading his thoughts again. Hauk shrugged, took a deep breath as he leaned back and shut his eyes to once more travel back in time. His mind's eye watched her slip into his office, slouch down in his chair, stretch out her long legs, and take man-sized swallows out of a bottle of his best Scotch. Beginning. The end came in a jealous rage. Not that she'd admit she was jealous of a family he hardly knew. He still carried the scars. Strange how memories of her caused them to burn. Worse yet was the pain of having to bring her in only to hand her over to those chicken-shit political assholes. They'd kill her no matter if they got everything she promised. Maybe the best thing he could do would be to make her death quick and painless. One bullet. If he could look into those sage-green eyes and pull the trigger.

Rehme studied Hauk closely. He knew the Commissioner would follow orders, regardless of his feelings for the woman--and it was painfully obvious that his feelings for her still ran deep.

"Well, if Craig McKensie was part of the Ruse, his part was strictly minor league. From what we've decoded so far, the plan was hatched by some Senator who organized an investigative committee. There were even testimonies from your 'Nam commander, Baker-Green. Looks like at least half the politicians in this country were positive that a police force made up of us vets wouldn't solve the problem. Made it stick for awhile."

"Long enough to plan the Leningrad fiasco."

"There's a hit list out on us, you know."

"I know," Hauk nodded, "I know."

"You sure picked a great place for this meeting," Snake growled as the truck bounced down an incredibly rutted road.

"Don't blame me for this mess. That innocent air strip over the hill was cover for a missile base. Our readouts showed it still operational and manned up until we landed. Truth is, somebody was running just enough juice through the systems for us to read it as 'active'. We planned to burn it, till the committee conned us into using it for our so-called peace meeting. Said it was a perfect way to show the world how sincere we were about keeping our word. Yeah. Great place. No interference, easy to protect," she laughed bitterly. "God, how I wanted to believe them."

"Have you ever seen a laser strike?" Isaacson asked dreamily.

Plissken kept his eye on the road.

"Most impressive. Ashes to ashes in an instant. Poof," he snapped his fingers, "no more people."

"They're given plenty of warning," Mac injected.

"Five minutes? Ten perhaps?" he growled back, then continued again to Plissken. "Everything--literally everything--bursts into flame," he waved his bound hands. "Seconds later all is gone but the glow. A glow that goes on for hours," he acidly directed to Macarra. "When finally the earth cools, you find sand melted to glass, shadows on scorched

sidewalks and walls. Just like Hiroshima."

"Maybe you'd rather have radiation?"

"One's just a little faster than the other," Snake commented to shut them both up.

The uneasy silence lasted until they reached the end of the road. Plissken brought the truck to a sliding stop, hunched over the wheel, hugged it tight against his chest, then let out a frustrated sigh.

They'd torched it. Where once stood a massive log structure lay a heap of charred beams and glowing coals—a fire primed with gasoline, judging from the stench that hung in the air.

Isaacson sputtered to life. "I gave no order for this, I swear! Your friend is alive. He—he must be at the airfield." That was a lie and Isaacson knew it. His men were professional killers, the kind who wouldn't pull their own mothers from a fire without a direct order from him. And Isaacson had given no such order. All he wanted was for them to evacuate the area, and they had—after destroying everything they couldn't carry, sell or use. He'd chosen his troopers carefully. He'd made sure they were thoroughly professional—the world's highest paid assassins. But dear God, he hadn't meant to give the impression that Doc was expendable. Isaacson could only hope his men had at least shot the poor old bastard before setting fire to the building.

Mac stared ahead for a long time, then slowly turned and raised the pistol to the general's head. Snake, one jump ahead of her, made a quick swipe as she took aim. The gun blew a hole in the roof big enough to put a fist through.

"Why'd you stop me?!?"

"We need him."

"I don't!"

"Look, sweetheart, you kill him now and his army is gonna shred us in pieces the ants won't find. You gotta realize," he purred, "our friend here is gonna be our ticket out of this place, aren'tcha General?"

Isaacson tried and failed to straighten under Snake's heavy hand on his shoulder. He hadn't lived forty-seven years by being stupid, so he agreed. "Very well, what do you wish me to do?"

Plissken smiled like a rattlesnake, "See, I told you he was a smart man." Picking up the radio, he ordered, "Get on the horn and tell your men to clear us a nice, neat path to the airfield or they'll be looking for a new leader."

Mac grabbed Isaacson's chin and twisted him toward her, "Tell 'em to have a plane ready for us. The one you bastards are attaching my ship to will do nicely." When she noted Snake's frown, she shrugged, "You want the Damper or not?"

A faint smile played behind his eye for a second and he nodded, "You heard her."

"You're joking!"

Isaacson watched in horror as Snake lifted a knife and twirled the razor edge closer and closer to his face. He squirmed, but there was no escape from the weapon he hated most. To make matters even worse, the harsh, yellow morning glare reflected off the knife back into Snake's one powder blue eye, causing the color to turn golden like the reptile he

claimed to be, but this Snake didn't make idle threats, and Isaacson knew it.

About then, the General decided he was getting just too tired of this mission to fight, money or no money. "Very well, I will try."
Snake didn't buy the sincerity.

"--worked for NASA for awhile."

Rehme nodded and went on quietly. "Turns out, all the allies had the same idea. When we hit Leningrad, the area was full of gas-exposed troops all right, but they'd also dumped in the undesirables. Crazies they said. Political prisoners. Women. Kids. Old folks. Anyone who'd gotten a major dose of gas."

Sounded just like New York's infamous prison.

"Sirs," the com-officer interrupted, "message from McChord. On scramble,"

Hauk and Rehme exchanged an apprehensive glance.

"Colonel Mason. Want's to talk to Commander Rehme." He laid a hand to his earphone, "Correction. He wants to talk to you, Commissioner, if you're aboard."

Rehme's brow furrowed deeper as Hauk grabbed the com.

"This is Bob Hauk."

"Commissioner! Sorry about the inconvenience. Had orders, ya know."

"Cut the bull, Mason. Who told you to burn me?"

"They ordered me to stop all air traffic for the next 48 hours. All traffic in or out of Canada."

They, they, always they. "They who, Mason? I want names!"

Mason blew a fuse. "Damn it man, where the blazes d'you think an order like that would originate? I wouldn't do anything without conformation from the top, you know. Give me a little credit."

As little as possible. "I'm losin' my patience--"

"Look, Commissioner, the last thing I need is some bastard comin' out here from D.C. to crawl up and down my ass because of some half-baked political bullshit."

Somebody warned him about his language.

"Aw, blow it out yours. Listen up, Hauk. I've decided to give you guys my full cooperation. Got m'planes on alert. We'll escort you--"

"Negative! Tell your people to stand down. Stay out of this Mason."

Mason focused on the acid in Hauk's sign-off. The cop was seriously pissed. "Okay, Hauk. It's your butt," he signed off.

"Colonel," the AP asked, "are we gonna stand down sir? I mean, he's just a cop."

Mason shook his head, "Boy, he ain't just anything. That man could have himself crowned king if he wanted to."

Roughly a half hour later, the USPF helicopters landed at Blaine, a once-thriving town situated on the U.S./Canadian border.

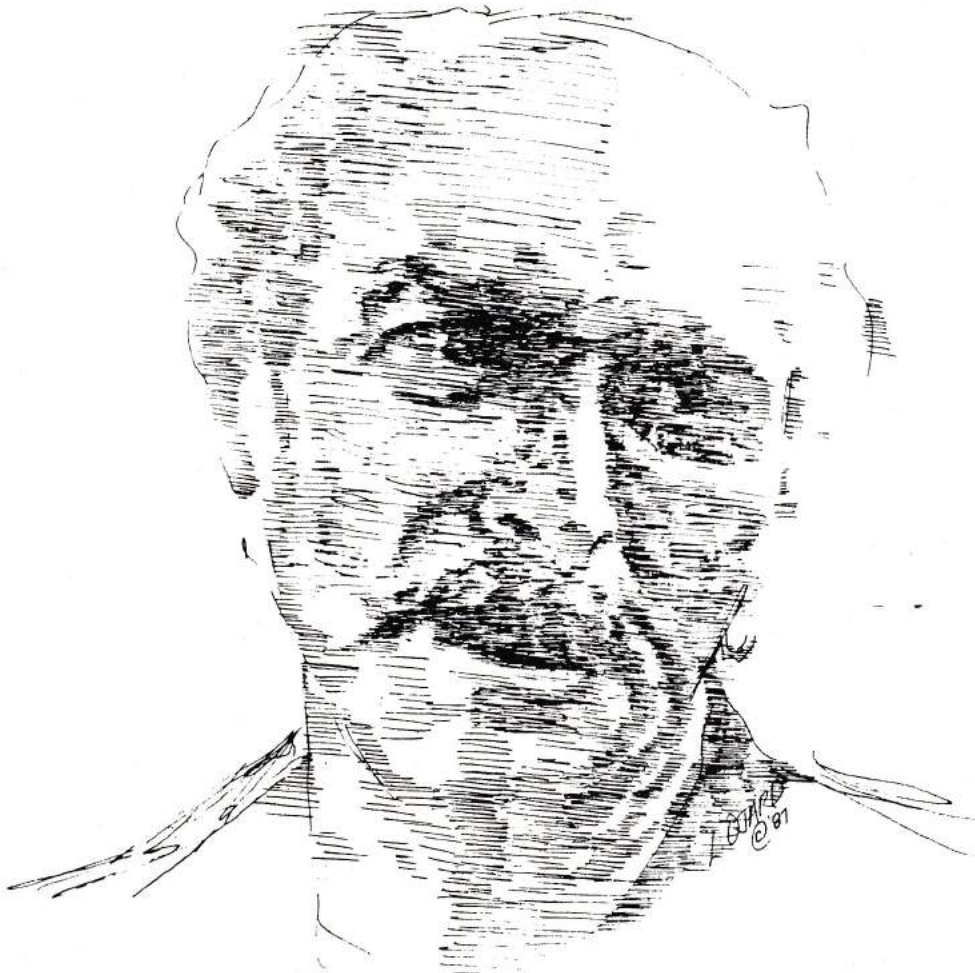
"You're sure you won't need the rest of us?"

Hauk shook his head at the Section Commander. "Time's too short. We're already walking on eggs being this close in. I don't want to chance a full-blown confrontation. I'm just going to use a little

friendly persuasion on Isaacson and get Plissken and the crew out of there. That's all. It shouldn't take more than a couple hours at most. And you--nothing else. Don't move from this spot until Isaacson crosses over, understand?"

Rehme reluctantly nodded, "Yeah. Yeah, we'll be ready."

Hauk's features knit into a frown. As an afterthought he added, "And Rehme, monitor everything coming and going up there. I got a gut feeling the Canadians are going to push that deadline up as far as possible. Keep an eye out. If anything moves--flying, crawling, or just breathin' funny, I wanna hear about it."



Snake figured Isaacson would double-cross them. And true to form, he did just that. Yet, somehow all three of them managed to slither out of his way, but they'd spent the better part of an hour holed-up among a tumble of boulders. It hadn't taken much fighting to back them in there. The E/A mercenaries had been close enough to kill, but for some reason, they hadn't. More than likely, Isaacson wanted it that way; make them to stay put for awhile. He, Mac and Anlan were grateful for the rest, though apprehensive about the reason.

Snake turned from his vigil and leaned back against the granite wall. His headache returned, this time coupled with hunger and exhaustion. He shifted uncomfortably, then glanced down when he brushed up against an unexpected warmth. Mac was on his left again; her favorite spot, probably because she knew he didn't like it.

She, like Anlan and the Snake himself, were filthy. Her hair, a dark stringy, damp mass of tangles, framed her upturned face as she rested against the wall of stone. Her eyes remained shut until he shifted again.

"..anything?" she whispered sleepily.

Plissken shrugged, "Can't see much. But I know they're up to somethin'." He stopped and groped for his smokes.

Mac watched him light the cigarette, then lazily pushed herself up beside him. She stayed close, brushing his shoulder as she stood.

Snake took a deep drag off the smoker, exhaled slowly, then turned his head full to the left to see her. His usual grimace from nearly constant pain began to fade. Years of anguish melted from the relatively flawless right side of his face as he openly smiled and offered her a drag off his cigarette. Mac accepted though with some apprehension. One puff and she handed it back.

Anlan, in a far corner of the cave-like structure, watched the interplay. He was well aware that Mac had been, and seemingly was once more, very attached to Plissken. Anlan felt sure that if he hadn't been there, the friendly exchange would inevitably continue at a different angle. Horizontally. He didn't like that idea. Not one bit.

"Ya know," he interrupted to make sure they knew he was there, "I bet Isaacson's gone by now. Probably left just enough troopers to keep us here...make sure we're in range when the bombing starts.."

Tension came back into her stance as Mac eased slightly away from Plissken. She glanced at the blond, and watched him stand; studied him stretch and silently demand she notice his wide, overexposed chest. Mac knew he felt neglected. Not being the center of attention always got his goat. She smiled despite herself.

"They wouldn't dare..."

Plissken, still gazing past the grime on her face, inhaled once more on the cigarette, then stomped it out. Without bothering to explain, Snake checked his rifle and hoisted himself, belly first, over the top of the rock outcropping.

Soren watched him go, then lifted an eyebrow Mac's direction.

She held his gaze a moment, then shrugged and shoved the too-long sleeves of the flight jacket further up, waved her rifle in a 'c'mon' gesture.

Plissken crouched low behind sparse brush that skirted the edge of the airstrip. Two 15's and Hawk's 20 lay within fifty yards of him. And still not a guard in sight. The only hint of habitation was at the far end of the runway where a camouflaged, pot-bellied transport was on-loading a jeep. It looked tame enough. Still, the hair on the back of his neck stayed standing.

Mac crawled out of nowhere and flattened on the ground beside him. "Where the hell's my ship?"

"Gone," Snake offered.

No...it wasn't her creeping up on him that caused his uneasiness. Nor did that blond braided bastard slithering up beside her have anything to do with it. But there was something amiss. The air was dead still. Not a bird. Not a breath of air. Yet...something.

He motioned for silence and all three held their breath.

Suddenly Mac breathed, "...copter."

Yeah. Way off. But closer than that...

Shouts ruptured the silence. Soldiers suddenly poured out of the woods right behind them.

"Christ..."

They made a mad dash for the only thing open to them to use as cover. The planes.

Snake took it upon himself to guard his companions by constantly spinning and firing while the others ran flat out for cover. A very few seconds later they slid around the closest craft, winded and pale but unharmed. Snake turned his rifle on the nose gear of the F15 and collapsed the front to the pavement. No sooner had the ringing clang of metal died away than a deafening scream of a jet copter took over and a tell-tale black, USPF Troop Carrier blasted straight up from the ridge, then dropped within a few feet of the ground. The E/A's scattered like bowling pins as the blackbird plowed through their midst. Even before the side panel was fully opened, black clad cops poured out and opened fire on Isaacson's men.

Snake launched himself into the open urging Mac to stay ahead of him. The zigzag path they ran became pockmarked as bullets from the AR-15's rained like yellowjackets at a summer picnic. Snake felt more than one sting as cement fragments bit the leather and metal of his jungle boots. He knew Mac and Anlan weren't nearly as protected as he was and it came as no surprise when he heard Mac yelp. He turned in time to see her stumble, lose her balance and drop to the ground as she clutched at her leg. A hole in the material of her suit was only the size of a fingernail making it impossible to tell if the wound had been caused by a bullet or just a chunk of runway. To her it made no difference. Isaacson's men were responsible and Isaacson's men would pay. She leveled her pistol at the nearest targets and fired. Two soldiers dropped. Thoroughly soaked in the sweet taste of revenge, Mac might have stayed there forever if Snake hadn't swung back, grabbed her arm, and forced her to continue the flight.

The USPF chopper was nearly within reach when Mac suddenly slipped from his grasp. He glanced over his shoulder and saw that she'd come to a complete halt. Her wide eyes were filled with shock as she stared

past him into the open hatch. He reached back, but before he could stop her, Mac spun and veered off toward the right. She was headed for the planes. Headed for her own brand of freedom.

"Son of a...Soren! Grab her!"

Soren, bringing up the rear, extended an arm, but Mac twisted out of range. He skipped a step, rotated and watched her run, then turned to the helicopter for an answer to her action. Immediately, he spotted Bob Hauk in the shadow of the opening, standing there, gazing back at him through a sea of black-clothed cops. No wonder she'd balked. Soren didn't have to guess why she ran from the infamous Commissioner. For himself, Hauk's being a cop was reason enough to hate him. Especially in light of the situation. Some choice; Hauk's brand of slow death or a bullet from Isaacson. Yeah, he had to go along with Mac. Get the hell away from both madmen.

Soren blew a kiss and tossed a wave toward the open hatch, while yelling, "I'd see you in hell first!"

Somehow, Snake wasn't surprised when Soren mutinied, too. Even he was a bit taken aback at the sight of Hauk on the battle field. But only for a split second. He knew what Hauk would order. The look in the old bird's eyes said it all. Snake didn't wait to be told. He turned back and headed after the shuttle crew.

He caught up with Soren and shouted at him to return to the copter. The order was ignored, as he figured it would be. Snake simply swung with the butt of his rifle and the blond collapsed in a heap, while he continued to close the gap between he and Mac.



She skidded around the nose of the F-20 and leapt for a firm hold. Snake caught her by the ankle and tried to pull her down, but she kicked, caught his shoulder and kicked again. He ducked out of the way of her third effort, jumped and got a good grip on her waist. For a time, she held on, but with her hands damp from her own blood, Mac slid backward.

Snake might have made good the effort to drag her down if Soren hadn't whacked him across the base of his neck. Without malice, the big blond shoved Snake aside, cupped his hands and boosted Mac into the cockpit. It was the first time she noticed whose name was on the outside of the jet. Had she known sooner, she might have gone for the '15.

She settled into the seat and buckled in--expecting Soren to join her any second. It took her awhile to realize he had no intention of going with her.

"C'mon!" She motioned. "Soren, get in here, quick!"

He was backing away. "You go ahead. I'll take the other one."

The fighting was still going on, but Hawk's men were closing on them just the same. "You'll never make it."

"Sure I will. Go on, get outta here while there's still time."

"Please--"

He was still retreating from her. "Meet you in the Viewport," he laughed.

The canopy hissed shut blocking all sounds of the battle raging outside. Isaacson's men were finally giving up in the wake of the United States Police Force. Heading that attack on the mercenaries was the head honcho himself, Robert Allen Hawk. He'd aged some, though a few wrinkles and some gray hair certainly hadn't slowed him down. He made an impressive figure charging out across the runway. Unfortunately, the rage emanating from his eyes was directed right at her.

An unexpected pang of regret hit her as she dumped the too-big helmet over her head and watched Soren drag Snake clear. He stood there waving her on, wearing that same smile he'd used to win a hundred other hearts. The man didn't stand a chance of getting away. He had to know it. She almost wished she could remain with him, but duty dictated otherwise.

As the jet inched forward, she saw Hawk signal the chopper pilot to block her path, but she was already caught up in the rush--riding a rocket--and that's just how she flew.

Hawk never thought he'd regret keeping his plane in top shape, but watching her fly it certainly gave him cause for alarm. There was no way to catch her. Nothing could slow her down now and to prove it, she circled back, did a flyby at no more than fifty feet off the deck and then climbed--spiraling upward to finally level off at 40,000, where she did a nice, easy roll-over and headed due south.

"Better'n sex," she laughed aloud as the G's dropped to normal. 'Well, almost' was how she used to finish that phrase.

Soren got an immediate erection watching the stunt.

Snake just got angry. He'd roused out of that judo-induced nap just in time to catch the flyby and climb. He momentarily focused on the image of Hawk running for him, but Snake was up, headed for the F-15,

telling Hauk to "kiss-off" as he stomped past. He knew he couldn't catch her, but he made up his mind to be right on her ass when she landed that thing. There was gonna be some serious hell to pay when he got his hands on her again.

Soren, handcuffed with two policemen in tow, gave Hauk a toothy grin and a tsk-tsk. "That's a shame, a real shame. I guess you just weren't fast enough."

Abruptly, as if suddenly remembering his manners, Soren held out his manacled hands, "'scuse me, sir. The name's Anlan. Soren Anlan. Chief Security Officer. Serial number 7-0-5--" he stopped as Hauk's face darkened with rage.

"Really looked forward to meeting you, too," the blond rumbled.

"Where's she headed?"

Soren shrugged, "Damned if I know."

The Commissioner grabbed a fist full of shirt, jerked him closer and growled in his face, "I asked you where she was headed, boy."

"Anywhere she wants?"

The sarcasm didn't make much of an impression on Hauk who shoved him into the waiting arms of his men. "Take him to the chopper. And if he so much as blinks--shoot him."

Soren figured all was going about as it should until he saw where Plissken was headed.

"No! No, you can't!" He flattened both the cops and ran for Snake, "You'll have to kill her to bring her in--"

Hauk fired a single round, that caught Soren in the fleshy part of his upper arm. It should have slowed his progress, but he only stumbled, shot a glare over his shoulder, then continued toward Plissken.

Hauk mumbled, "Stubborn bastard," under his breath and waved more of his men forward. This time three of them brought him down and fought him all the way back.

Hauk stayed on the runway, watching the determination and ease with which Snake climbed into the cockpit, dropped the canopy and took off. Fast, clean and quick, just like everything the boy did. As soon as Plissken left the runway, Hauk hauled ass into his chopper, shoved the copilot out of his way and snarled, "Gimme a headset!"

The voice that filled his ears drove a spike through his heart. There could be no mistake now. He'd caught only a fleeting glimpse of the dirty-faced, ragged creature on the runway. Not quite enough to be sure it was her, but now he was positive. And she'd made it obvious that she'd sooner be dead than share his company again.

"O-M-Q-8-1-9, calling OMQ819. Jayce, answer me!"

Another voice, clear enough to be right on top of them finally answered.

"Uh oh, are we in trouble, boss lady?"

"Check the tracer, Jayce. Kosherman's got the ship."

"Just a moment. Jesus, you've got a regular parade following you. I read an f-one-five and a cop chopper."

"Who's piloting the '15?"

"Feeding through enhancements now. Well, I'll be damned--it's Snake Plissken."

"Son-of-a-bitch," she sighed. "It figures. I guess that mean you'd better keep an eye on the chopper. The cops probably have Soren."

"Kosherman's headed South Southwest. I don't think Mike's gonna like them trashin' his territory."

"Don't say that. Please, don't even think it."

*

Hauk tapped his headset. "What's the matter with the reception?"

"I dunno. I'm losing--it's gone, sir."

"Plissken," Hauk called, "Plissken answer me."

*

"Is that Commissioner Hauk?"

"Ignore him. Just give me the coordinates where I can refuel this thing."

"Mikes."

"Mikes?! Damn it. Are you sure?"

"Positive. 900 miles. Isaacson's transports should hit there about forty-five minutes ahead of you."

*

Hauk's man fiddled with the console. He swore, fussed and fumed, then gave up. "I'm not reading anything. Sorry, Commissioner."

*

For Plissken, the small dot of silver ahead of him drew him in like a homing beacon. That and the faint, garbled communication.

"Jayce, patch me in to the computer. I want some answers. Isaacson's saying Doc's still alive. Any readings?"

"Just a sec--no. I'm sorry, Mac. His line went out just before dawn. I guess Soren was right about Isaacson."

"I was afraid of that."

Jayce quickly changed the subject. "Tom checked in. Said something big's going down. There are riots breaking out all over the East coast. Those cops are going to have their hands full."

"Speaking of which--I can't say where the order originated, but somebody tried a take-over at Blaine. Shot their Major Ranger. We've ID'd him as Tom Rehme."

"So?"

"Hauk's right hand man. We got him. He's throwin' fits, of course. He's like the rest of those clowns--thinks we're behind the whole mess. The bastard put Monkey and Joe in the infirmary before we could contain him."

"Double the guard on him."

"Went one better. Put Megs in there. He quieted down real fast, he did."

"Plissken still tracking?"

"Yeah. You want me to send him a little deterrent?"

"No, he can't--damn! Hey, I think somebody's been tampering with this rig. The readings are going nuts."

"Tie in complete. Shit, Mac, you're leaking fuel!"

"Estimate consumption."

"Yeah. Readings coming up, though my guess is you won't--"

"Damn it, mister, I didn't ask for your opinion! I want numbers!"

Just give me the damn numbers!"

"Yes, ma'am. Well, if you climb like hell and dead-stick it in, maybe another three hundred, give or take fifty."

Snake heard her laugh. It was not a joyful sound.

"Maybe you'd better send out the troops."

"No can do. They're still trying to recover the pieces from this afternoon's excitement. And we had a little scare over on number four. A bomb. We found it and got it disarmed before any damage was done. Shook us up pretty good, though."

"Keep talking, Jayce."

"Uh--oh, okay. Ah--we've been studying the files Red beamed up. Real interesting stuff. You gotta read these things when you get home. Reads like a real soap opera. Mentions most of the big dudes."

Mac was too involved watching the fuel gauge to lend an ear to anything but the steady, somehow comforting drone of her communications officer. Just knowing he was watching over her made her feel better, even if he couldn't help.

Jayce continued, "Tom tells me that asshole we planted him with gave orders to strand you and your friends up there and let the Candy's take the blame. Says Hauk told Plissken he'd find Berrigan running in the woods, too."

"Some people will believe anything."

"Commander, you've got company. Eight miles and closing."

"Plissken?"

"Plissken."

"Yeah, I see him. Keep him busy while I go with the Damper."

Snake locked on target.

Immediately, a high pitched, nerve shattering whistle rang in her ears. She took a deep, calming, slow breath, then spoke aloud, "Didn't your mother ever tell you it was impolite to point?"

"Turn back."

"Don't be an ass."

The voice from the station interrupted. "I'd advise you to disengage your weapons, Mr. Plissken. Station tracking is locked. Lasers on target. You have ten seconds--nine seconds--"

Snake didn't like being pushed. "Think you can burn me before I fire?"

"--six seconds--five seconds--"

"Looks like we've got a stand-off."

"Not really. You'll be dead at the speed of light. Your missiles will simply evaporate. But if you'd care to chance a shot--"

The conversation was exactly what Mac needed. It bought her just enough time. The F-20 flew into a cloud bank. And off radar.

Plissken's instruments were wiped clean. Clouds whited-out his world for a time, then the cumulus was replaced with blinding blue skies and sunshine. Mac was nowhere in sight. Other gunsites caught him. Hers. Pinging, loud and steady, filled the cockpit.

"Bang, bang," she sighed sweetly. "Gee, if I only had a bullet--"

His vision swept the sky. Nothing.

"I won't go back, Snake. Not to those cops."

On impulse he rolled. Slow. Careful not to spook her. There she was. Right on his ass. Slightly left. His blind side. Where else?

"You're leaking fuel."

"No shit."

Jayne broke in, "Cops. They're tracking Plissken."

Suddenly, the '20 shuddered violently. Then came a hissing, snap, spark and a thin stream of smoke rose from the instrument panel.

"Oh shit! I don't need this! Plissken, I've got a fire in here."

Jayne added, "Mac, I'm reading a magnetic flux--as though someone cut through--"

"Bait. Why do I always wind up takin' the goddamned bait?!?" she muttered over his speech. "Plissken? Plissken, do you read me?"

"Don't screw around with it. Eject!"

After a long moment, her voice came back surprisingly calm. "'Fraid I can't do that. Somebody's been playing with the arming mechanism. I'll have to ride it out. Follow me down."

"Then we go back."

"Damn it, Plissken, we can discuss terms later!"

He was close enough to see the smoke in the cockpit, but he remained quiet.

"I can do this without you, ya know!" she threatened.

"Bullshit. You're already flying half-blind."

Her mutterings grew in volume until he heard, "Okay, okay. Just help me get this piece 'a shit on the ground."

By the time he lined her up with the roadway, black smoke and noxious fumes filled the canopy. His last words of comfort were, "Easy, easy! I don't want that thing blowin' up in my face!"

The internal fire was screaming louder than a wounded cat when the landing gear hit the pavement. The canopy, coated with a thick smudge and too hot to touch, refused to budge for a long, terrifying moment. Mac wrestled with it and had about run out of profanities before the explosive bolts finally lived up to their name and blasted the canopy open. She leapt over the side and ran for her life. But within a very few short steps, she was flying through the air again--only this time without benefit of craft.

For obvious reasons, Plissken landed well ahead of her, yet he swung the '15 around and taxied to within fifty yards of the now burning jet. Before his jet completely stopped rolling, he was out and running an intercept course for Mac. The shockwave as the F-20 blew hit him hard. He stumbled, throwing his arms over his head for protection as he fell, but then he was up, running after her as soon as the initial blast ended. He found her a good thirty yards from the smoldering remains of Hawk's pride and joy.

Snake skidded to a stop beside her and tugged off her helmet. She remained still; dazed and scratched, bruised and bloodied, though he could see no major damage. He did notice that she'd wrapped a strip of cloth around the leg wound she'd received on the runway and, for the time being, it appeared tended well enough.

Her eyes finally fluttered open.

"--you okay?"

She nodded slowly after a lengthy pause. "Yeah. I guess so."

Snake unzipped and helped her out of the jacket that still bore more than a few scorch marks. In fact, it was still smoldering in places. She remained quiet while Snake inspected her blistered arm and burnt fingers.

"Doesn't look too bad. Think you can stand?"

Her answer came faster. "Yeah. Sure." In truth she was thoroughly nauseated and too dizzy to try, yet she made the attempt anyway, without his assistance. And fell.

He pulled her up and wrapped an arm around her middle. She yelped and grabbed his hand, shoved it lower, then leaned heavily, dependant on him for support as he guided her back toward his plane.

"Gonna be a tight squeeze in there," she gasped.

Silence.

"Got enough room for takeoff?"

"I'll manage."

"What about fuel, you got enough fuel?"

"Won't take that much to go back."

She stopped dead in her tracks and shook off his hold. "Like hell!"

He looked at her a moment, then shrugged and kept walking.

"Read my lips, Plissken," she hollered, "those are cops. I'm a criminal. They won't wait to kick my ass into New York, they'll burn me! No excuses. No pardons. I'm dead meat as far as they're concerned!" She followed of her own accord, though scarcely putting weight on her left leg.

Meanwhile, he lit a smoke and never missed a step.

"D'you hear me?! They'll kill me, Plissken!"

Not a hint of hesitation did he give her.

"I won't go," she announced in a calmer, though equally loud voice.

"I refuse to be thrown to that pack of wolves."

Snake stopped next to the nose of the '15 and ground the smoker out with the toe of his boot, then jumped for a handhold and pulled himself into the cockpit. He picked up the helmet and glanced down at her. "Have a nice walk."

"You son-of-a-bitch," she marveled. The next words, she knew, had to be utterly spectacular to get his attention.

"Then you're givin' Berrigan to me." She was clutching at straws.

He knew it, too. "Nice try." He reached to start the engine.

"I know who he is. And," she jabbed the air for emphasis, "and I know where he is and where he'll be."

Disgustedly, he glanced in her direction. He knew it was a mistake the minute he did it. Of course, by then he was already sucked in.

Her voice was softer now, "You'll never find him without me." A faint smile glowed behind those pale eyes. "Take me to Mike's. We refuel. Then we talk. Deal?"

"If that's a lie, baby," he smiled, "I'll break your fuckin' neck."

She just stood there, grinning up at him. God, he hated that smirk. Especially since he couldn't read behind it. Grudgingly, Snake extended himself as far over the side as he could, caught her hands and pulled her in.

Cozy didn't begin to describe the accommodations. A simple thing like inhaling had to be scheduled to keep from crushing each other. It also forced him to keep the '15 low and barely above stall speed. Hawk would have no trouble following them now.

The path she told him to fly skirted Nevada and Utah. It made him edgy to fly over the Grand Canyon, but when they passed over what used to be Flagstaf, she seemed to know exactly where they were headed. She ordered him to watch for a series of horseshoe shaped hills. But after an hour of nothing but rocks, sand and cacti, Snake began to wonder about her sense of direction. He hadn't seen a sign of human habitation for two hundred miles, nor had there been anything save low, rolling hills and high, red-rock plateaus. Then abruptly, he topped a low ridge and the mountains seemed to loom up out of nowhere. At their base, the desert itself disappeared.

Fields of corn, wheat, oats, and neat rectangles of other vegetation stretched out from horizon to horizon. A deep green lake with canals like spokes of a living wheel watered more than ten thousand acres of the most beautiful farm land he'd ever seen. Off his right wing, near a cluster of glaring white adobe homes was a modern runway, complete with tower.

Snake dropped the plane low, skimming across an apple orchard, and headed--reluctantly--for the landing field. He taxied the aircraft with the canopy open for a better view as well as to give them both a chance to breathe real air again. No doubt about it, the place was impressive.

And so were the rifle brandishing horsemen riding out to meet them.

Continued in **The Ballad of Mike Redhawk**
in SNAKEBIT # 3



Preview - Coming soon from **ESCAPE PRESS**

RETURN TO NEW YORK

by
J. A. Raish

Mid-August 1998

I.

He awoke to the fell of raindrops on his face and a headache like a hammer pounding inside his skull. When he opened his good eye, the brightness of the moon sent a sharp bolt of pain up into his brain. He closed the eye and slowly rolled over onto his stomach, then fought the wave of dizziness and nausea. After it passed, he got slowly to his knees and glanced around. A feeling of confusion and anger washed through him as he realized where he was. He stood up shakily and staggered to the edge of the building.

His breathing ragged, Snake Plissken leaned heavily on the cool concrete wall, looking out across the erratically lit wreck of a city below. The view was all too familiar. He was back on the roof of the World Trade Center, Manhattan Island, New York Maximum Security Penitentiary. Memories of the twenty-four hours he'd spent here nearly eight months before flooded unwelcome into his consciousness. They were not, but not, happy memories. His rising anger quickly pushed them away.

"Damn you, Hawk!" he snarled aloud, but when the blind rage passed, a plaintive why? echoed painfully through his mind.

He turned his back on the city and moved toward the elevator entrance, checking his jacket pockets as he walked. He wasn't too surprised to find boxes of extra ammunition and several packs of cigarettes in the pockets. Good ol' Hawk - always thinkin' of my welfare. He had already noticed the .357 magnum in the shoulder holster under his jacket when he first rolled over. Now, he pulled it out to examine it more closely. He ran his fingers down the barrel, enjoying the smooth coolness of the gray-black gunmetal, unaware of the appreciative smile that had come to his lips. In spite of all the modern weapons he had been familiar with, a handgun like this was still his favorite. And this one was a real beauty.

At the elevator door, he knelt down to reconnect the wires, as he'd done the last time. The last time. The thought shot another bolt of pain through his bad eye.

While kneeling, he checked inside his boot to be sure his combat knife was still in its sheath, hidden inside his boot. He was glad to find it securely in place. That knife had been with him in Siberia, Leningrad, and on his first visit inside New York. It's familiar presence was vaguely comforting in the confusing situation the Snake now found himself in.

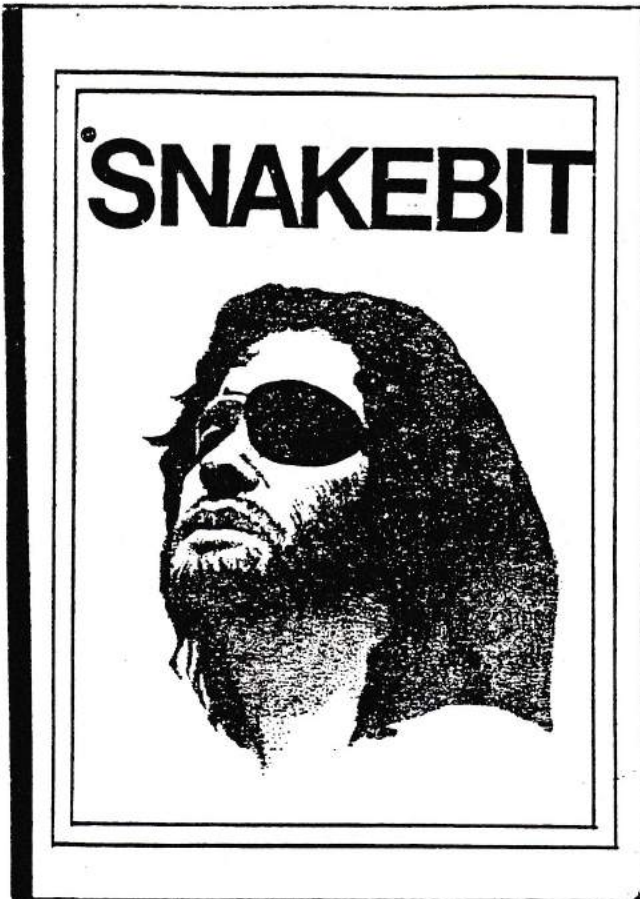
He stepped inside the musty-smelling elevator car and tried to relax for the long, dark ride down to the fiftieth floor. His mind raced, trying to pinpoint which of his enemies might be responsible for his being back Inside. Hawk? Berrigan? Maybe Harker was finally getting even. In the absolute darkness of the car, Snake went back over his last hours outside.

RETURN TO NEW YORK is a novella based on John Carpenter's classic movie, ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK. Too long to fit in SNAKEBIT, it will be offered as a separate publication. Send an SASE to **ESCAPE PRESS** to reserve your copy now!



TRIVIA QUIZ ANSWERS

- 1) He arrived on October 23, 1997 and escaped on October 24, 1997.
- 2) Bill Taylor was formerly a sergeant in Plissken's Special Forces unit, and the only other survivor of that unit, besides Plissken, of the Leningrad Ruse. He was also Plissken's partner in the robbery that got Snake sentenced to NY Max.
- 3) Federal Reserve Depository at Denver
- 4) Special Forces Unit 'Black Light'
- 5) Colonel 'Big Bob' Hawk
- 6) Special Forces Unit 'Texas Thunder'
- 7) In the movie, Bob Hawk wore a gold earring in his left ear. It was symbolic of his surviving the Leningrad Ruse, as in years past, sailors wore one to show they had survived a shipwreck. In the book, it was stated that he wore it in his right ear.
- 8) President John Harker actually had two nicknames - 'Mousey' and 'Straddler' (as in fences). Snake had other nicknames for him.
- 9) David 14 was the unregistered code name for Air Force One.
- 10) a 'solider' of the National Liberation Front of America masquerading as a stewardess
- 11) Romero showed Hawk the President's severed finger still wearing the ring with the Presidential seal. In the book, Hawk took it back to HQ with him and showed it to Secretary of State Prather.
- 12) Plissken wears the eyepatch over his left eye (except on the original cover of Mike's novelization where the negative was reversed.
- 13) The tracer bracelet sported the USPF eagle emblem.
- 14) The jet glider was a Gulfstream.
- 15) Snake met a blond named Maureen in Chock Full o' Nuts.
- 16) Season Hubley was Kurt Russell's wife at the time of the filming.
- 17) I counted five: 1.Cabbie, 2.Maureen, 3.Maggie, 4.The Duke, 5.Brain.
- 18) Cabbie drove for The Yellow Cab Company.
- 19) Brain's real name was Harold Hellman.
- 20) The third partner was Fresno Bob in Kansas City, four years before.
- 21) USPF officers were fondly referred to as blackbellies.
- 22) Actress Adrienne Barbeau was the wife of Director John Carpenter.
- 23) The Duke was holding the President in Grand Central Station.
- 24) Plissken was nailed in the right thigh by the crossbow bolt.
- 25) A ransom note demanding amnesty for all prisoners in exchange for the President and Plissken's infrared goggles with a nail through each lens.
- 26) Snake fought Slag, played by professional wrestler Ox Baker.
- 27) Snake's tattoo is a cobra, hood flaring magnificently, etc., etc.
- 28) The tracer signal only lasted 15 minutes.
- 29) In the movie, it was the 69th Street Bridge, 59th Street Bridge in the book.
- 30) The Duke drove a customized Cadillac.
- 31) Station 19
- 32) It flashed from 3 seconds down to 2 as he looked down.
- 33) Snake is right-handed, as is actor Kurt Russell.
- 34) Hawk was leaning on the Air Traffic Control building.
- 35) **EFNY** was filmed in the city of St. Louis. NYC said no way.



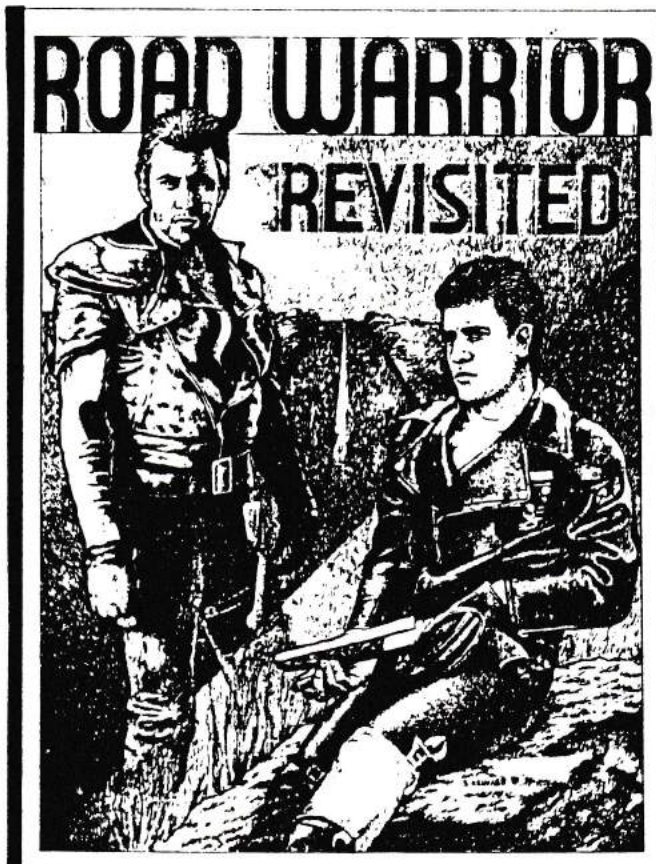
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Reprints of the 1st & best MAD MAX/ROAD WARRIOR fanzine, **ROAD WARRIOR REVISITED # 1**, are finally available! Copies are only \$7.50 1st class (same as the original).

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SNAKEBIT!

The proud editors of the first, best & only ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK fanzine are now accepting submissions of filler art, fiction, poetry, etc. for big issue # 3! If you think we love doing this 'zine, you're absolutely right! We ended up with way too much material for # 2 and had to cut it and plan for another issue right away.

To be included in # 3 is The Legend of 'Wild Cat' Lacey and more exciting fiction by J. A. Raish.

Also, Linda Ojard's tie-in story to her Young Man/Old Man saga, The Ballad of Mike Redhawk and the final sequel, Violets and Beer, plus much more fantastic artwork.

Our 'explain Snake's tattoo' challenge for writers and artists will be retossed for big issue # 4, so that should give everyone plenty of time to work out their ideas.

Tentative deadline for submissions for # 3 is June 1, 1989, for publication approximately mid-July 1989.

Send an SASE to reserve your copy of # 3 and to receive publication information when it's ready!

Copies of **SNAKEBIT # 2** are available for \$10.00 1st class.

Reprints of **SNAKEBIT # 1** are available for \$9.00 1st class.

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1/8/89
97

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 ROAD WARRIOR and MAD MAX 3: BEYOND THUNDERDOME.

Issue # 1 is now sold out but reprints will soon be available. SASE for more information.

Submissions of art, poetry, fiction, non-fiction, etc. are still being considered for issue # 2. LoCs welcome. Tentative deadline for submissions has been set for Sept. 1, 1988. Quality R-rated welcome, as always!

Material accepted so far includes:

A fantastic montage cover and more great artwork from Linda Ojard, plus her Road Warrior story we shoulda seen in issue # 1!

A Day in the Life of the M. F. P., fiction by Michael L. Coburn (Charles May's brother!).

More exciting fiction from J. A. Raish (possibly even the sequel to Deals from issue # 1).

Poetry from Marguerite Emmons, including "Dog" and "Max: A Sonnet".

More blockbuster artwork from Rick Lucey!

The Mad Max Radio Show from Yankee DJ Kevin Wisniewski.

More great car drawings by Charles May plus photos of his scale model work plus an update of his information on the Road Warrior's car!

Fine artwork by Johanna Bolton and Sandy Goodall.

More fabulous fan photos. A short essay by Bill Fisher.

"Heart Like an Axle", a filksong by Leslie Fish.

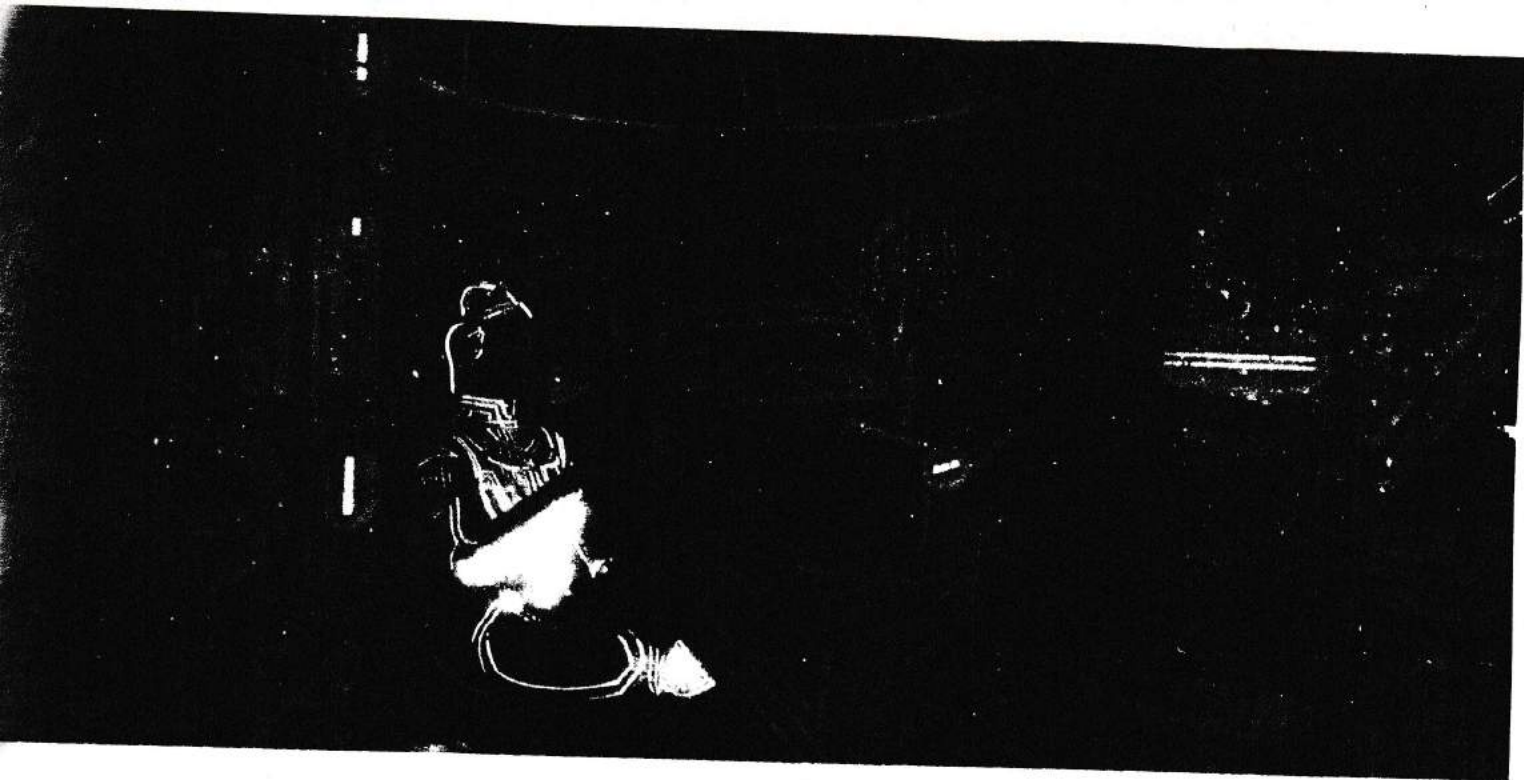
Send a SASE for submission specification, inquiries, or to reserve a copy and receive price information when it becomes available. Write to:

Escape Press

J. A. Raish, Editor

1705 Virginia Place
Fort Worth, Texas 76107

(817)732-5865 home



IT'S FINALLY READY!!!!

The Further Adventures of Flynn is a one-shot fanzine based on the characters and concepts introduced in the classic Walt Disney movie, TRON.

Contents include:

Cover design and "The Magic of TRON" essay by Matt McCullar.

"Recognizer" program, TRON graffiti and Tron's Trip by Laura Michaels.

L'Orange and Inside Out (mild R-rating) by J. A. Raish.

Never Quite the Same Again by Laurie Shanahan.

TRON Ice Show Review w/ photos, and artwork by Judith Dalton.

Resurrection by Phyllis Milby w/ artwork by Ted Delorme.

The Blank Plaque by Laura Ruskin.

To receive your copy via first class mail, please send check or money order (U.S. funds only) for \$8.00 made payable to Judith A. Raish. Mail to:



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THE FURTHER
ADVENTURES OF
FLYNN

ANNOUNCING

A Proposed Fanzine Devoted to the Diverse Roles of

MEL GIBSON

Projected Publication Date: Summer/Fall 1989

WANTED:

Writers, Artists, Readers

We would like to gauge need for and interest in a non-profit fan-produced and published zine devoted to the many film roles of one of the most exciting actors of our time: Mel Gibson. If sufficient interest is shown in this project, it is the intention of the editors to put forth a high quality publication containing the best in fiction, poetry and artwork. This project has been conceived as a "one-shot," but this may be subject to change based on enthusiasm generated.

Our intention is to explore the diverse facets of the many characters Mr. Gibson has played in his films. Fiction, poetry and artwork centered on any of the characters he has portrayed is welcomed; Mad Max to Martin Riggs...and beyond... Action adventure, humor, and high drama will be considered, with a special eye given to stories rich in character development.

Plans call for the zine to be 100+ pages, unreduced, offset printed--but final plans really depend on you.

WRITERS AND ARTISTS: If you have work you wish to submit for consideration, drop a SASE for a statement of editorial policy and outline of standards. Submissions, when ready, should be sent in duplicate and accompanied by sufficient postage for their return. Artists should submit a photocopy sample of their work. All potential contributors should note that this project will maintain a PG-13 rating whenever possible. All submissions should be in good taste, and no same sex stories will be considered. We may bend the PG-13 rating in the event of an exceptional piece of work, but "slash" will not be accepted, no matter its quality.

READERS: Without you, this project won't fly. Please submit Self-Addressed, Stamped Envelopes so that we may gauge your interest. If the project gets off the ground, your SASEs will be used to notify you of contents and publishing information as it becomes available. If the project fizzles, we'll use them to notify you.

Address all inquiries to:

Down & Outback Press
317 Lincoln Street
Snohomish, WA 98290 USA





Future CONVENTION INFORMATION

1988:

HOUSTON FANFAIR, August 27, 28, 1988, Ramada Inn Galleria West, I-10 just west of I-610. FEATURING: 60 dealer tables, 15 guests, video room, Japanimation, programming, gaming, open con suite, masquerade, art show, filksinging. ANTICIPATED ATTENDANCE: 600-800. TABLES \$50 island, \$60 wall until sellout. ADMISSION: \$4 Sat., \$3. Sun., or \$5 for both days at the door only.

AUSTIN FANFAIR, September 17, 18, 1988, Holiday Inn Town Lake, I-35 at the river. FEATURING: 60 dealer tables, 15 guests, video room, Japanimation, programming, gaming, open con suite, masquerade, art show, filksinging. ANTICIPATED ATTENDANCE: 600-800. TABLES \$50 island, \$60 wall until sellout. ADMISSION: \$4 Sat., \$3. Sun., or \$5 for both days at the door only.

SAN ANTONIO FANFAIR, November 5, 6, 1988, hotel to be announced. FEATURING: 60 dealer tables, 15 guests, video room, Japanimation, programming, gaming, open con suite, masquerade, art show, filksinging. ANTICIPATED ATTENDANCE: 600-800. TABLES \$50 island, \$60 wall until sellout. ADMISSION: \$4 Sat., \$3. Sun., or \$5 for both days at the door only.

DALLAS FANTASY FAIR, November 25-27, 1988, Marriott Park Central, 7750 I-610 at Coit Road. FEATURING: 140 dealers tables, more than 60 guests, two 24 hour video rooms, Japanimation, 24 hour gaming, 4 track programming, masquerade, open con suite, art show and auction, charity auction, artists and writers workshops, autograph sessions, filksinging, saturday night dance, amateur film festival, talent show. ANTICIPATED ATTENDANCE: 2,200. TABLES: \$120 island, \$140 wall, 20% discount for three or more. Publisher table rate: \$75 per table. One convention membership comes with each table. PROGRAM BOOK ADVERTISING: Full page (8 1/2" x 11") \$120, camera ready deadline November 18, 1988. ADMISSION: \$15 for three days in advance, \$20 at the door, Single day Fri. \$8, Sat. \$10, Sun \$8. at the door only.

DALLAS MINICONS, August 13, September 10, October 8, December 17, Marriott Park Central, 7750 I-635 at Coit Road. FEATURING: 40 dealer tables, Japanimation, gaming. ANTICIPATED ATTENDANCE: 300-400. TABLES: \$35 island, \$40 wall in advance. ADMISSION: \$2, or free with purchase of a Fantasy Fair ticket.

1989:

DALLAS FANTASY FAIR, April 7-9, 1989, Marriott Park Central, 7750 I-635 at Coit Road. FEATURING: 140 dealers tables, more than 60 guests, two 24 hour video rooms, Japanimation, 24 hour gaming, 4 track programming, masquerade, open con suite, art show and auction, charity auction, artists and writers workshops, autograph sessions, filksinging, saturday night dance, amateur film festival, talent show. ANTICIPATED ATTENDANCE: 2,200. TABLES: \$100 island, \$120 wall through January 1, 1989, \$120 island, \$140 wall after. 20% discount for three or more. Publisher table rate: \$75 per table. One convention membership comes with each table. PROGRAM BOOK ADVERTISING: Full page (8 1/2" x 11") \$120, camera ready deadline March 30, 1988. ADMISSION: \$15 for three days in advance, \$20 at the door, Single day Fri. \$8, Sat. \$10, Sun \$8. at the door only.

SAN ANTONIO FANFAIR, June 10, 11, 1989, hotel to be announced. FEATURING: 60 dealer tables, 15 guests, video room, Japanimation, programming, gaming, open con suite, masquerade, art show, filksinging. ANTICIPATED ATTENDANCE: 600-800. TABLES: \$60 island, \$70 wall until sellout. ADMISSION: \$5 Sat., \$4 Sun., or \$6 for both days at the door only.

DALLAS FANTASY FAIR, July 14-16, 1989, Sheraton Park Central, 12720 Merit Drive, I-635 at Coit Road. FEATURING: 140 dealers tables, more than 60 guests, two 24 hour video rooms, Japanimation, 24 hour gaming, 4 track programming, masquerade, open con suite, art show and auction, charity auction, artists and writers workshops, autograph sessions, filksinging, saturday night dance, amateur film festival, talent show. ANTICIPATED ATTENDANCE: 3,000. TABLES: \$120 island, \$140 wall through April 15, 1989, \$140 island, \$160 wall after, 20% discount for three or more. 10' x 10' booth, \$300 through April 15, 1988, \$350 after. Publisher rate: \$100 per table, \$200 per booth. One convention membership comes with each table, three per booth. PROGRAM BOOK ADVERTISING: Full page (8 1/2" x 11") \$120, camera ready deadline July 7, 1989. ADMISSION: \$20 for three days in advance, \$25 at the door, Single day Fri. \$10, Sat. \$12, Sun. \$10 at the door only.

HOUSTON FANFAIR, August 12, 13, 1989, hotel to be announced. FEATURING: 60 dealer tables, 15 guests, video room, Japanimation, programming, gaming, open con suite, masquerade, art show, filksinging. ANTICIPATED ATTENDANCE: 600-800. TABLES \$60 island, \$70 wall until sellout. ADMISSION: \$5 Sat., \$4 Sun., or \$6 for both days at the door only.

AUSTIN FANFAIR, September 8, 9, 1989, hotel to be announced. FEATURING: 60 dealer tables, 15 guests, video room, Japanimation, programming, gaming, open con suite, masquerade, art show, filksinging. ANTICIPATED ATTENDANCE: 600-800. TABLES \$60 island, \$70 wall until sellout. ADMISSION: \$5 Sat., \$4 Sun., or \$6 for both days at the door only.

DALLAS FANTASY FAIR, November 24-26, 1989, Marriott Park Central, 7750 I-635 at Coit Road. FEATURING: 140 dealers tables, more than 60 guests, two 24 hour video rooms, Japanimation, 24 hour gaming, 4 track programming, masquerade, open con suite, art show and auction, charity auction, artists and writers workshops, autograph sessions, filksinging, saturday night dance, amateur film festival, talent show. ANTICIPATED ATTENDANCE: 2,200. TABLES: \$100 island, \$120 wall through August 1, 1989, \$120 island, \$140 wall after, 20% discount for three or more. Publisher table rate: \$75 per table. One convention membership comes with each table. PROGRAM BOOK ADVERTISING: Full page (8 1/2" x 11") \$120, camera ready deadline November 17, 1989. ADMISSION: \$15 for three days in advance, \$20 at the door, Single day Fri. \$8, Sat. \$10, Sun \$8. at the door only.

DALLAS MINICONS, January 21, February 18, March 18, May 20, June 17, August 19, September 16, October 21, December 16, 1988, Marriott Park Central, 7750 I 635 at Coit Road. FEATURING: 40 dealer tables, Japanimation, gaming. ANTICIPATED ATTENDANCE: 300-400. TABLES: \$40 island, \$45 wall in advance. ADMISSION: \$2, or free with purchase of a Fantasy Fair ticket.

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