

PLANS SCAMS & VANS

#5

A fanzine from Sockii Press

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An A-Team fanzine from Sockii Press

First published February 1998

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*This fanzine is also available in electronic format for a \$2 shareware fee.
<http://www.seas.upenn.edu/~pellegr/sockii.html> for downloading instructions.*

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The Sockii Press Mailbag...

Thanks for taking the time/love of doing it to help our Team alive for short periods of time by doing all those A-Team 'zines. I think you miss your calling by not being a writer...Have you ever thought about sending copies of these A-Team 'zines to Stepen Cannell for his comments???

J.M.Z.

[Ummm...out of fear of offending the great copyright holders, no, I haven't. While a few shows have under-standing Powers-that-be, most will only respond to being sent/shown a fanzine by getting the lawyers to send Cease & Desist orders (whether they liked the 'zine or not, it's what they legally must do). —Ed.]

Just logged on to say I finished reading Plans, Scams, and Vans 4 and enjoyed it very much. I'm not much of a fan of "cross-over" stories, but I have to admit I really got a chuckle out of Remington Steele and Face being old friends, and the questions it raised about how they met. That was really cute :) I hope the author writes another story like it.

Serenity

[Katherine's story seemed to be a big favorite from readers, and Steele seems to be big with fans in general. Anyone else have any AT/RS crossover ideas? —Ed.]

Hiya —

Just downloaded and read a few stories from Deadly Maneuvers #1. And found it an unexpected treat. Wasn't expecting too much—too-serious A-Team stories aren't my bag, and the h/c tag kinda scared me—but it was worth the constant "check backs" on the Sockii Press site. "All Good Things Must Come to an End" was especially funny at the end. Worth that laugh I was looking for. For the others, a bit grim for my tastes—and, hah, maybe the DM titles need a medical editor (meant only as tongue-in-cheek criticism; can't get away with contradicting facial expressions in email, sheesh)—but the quality of writing was crisp, refreshing. The nice thing about some of the "serious" authors is that, topic choice aside sometimes, they are seriously good. I was lucky enough to get a preview of Irene's short, and I think I've found a couple of new minor heroes, say M. Sauers for one.

Okay! I'm NOT getting gushy! It was a fun break, is all. Every time I think the A-Team isn't going to do that for me anymore, Sockii Press comes out with something that justifies time away from "real" things. Okay? 'Kay.

E.L.

[Even this editor admits freely that hurt/comfort is not a genre I'm usually that fond of—but as you said, the quality of the writing for the stories for DM#1 was outstanding, and this issue has received some of our best comments yet. I think most stories steered clear of the typical chiches seen in h/c as well. —Ed.]

I got it last nite [DM#1]...What a treat for this coming weekend!!! I like the color cover. I have so far have already read over 80% and good stuff so far. I just wish there was more stories.

J.M.Z.

[Ack! There's only so much this editor can handle at one time... —Ed.]

Sockii was right—"Sound of Thunder, Part II" alone was worth the money for this fanzine [DM#1] if you are one of the many Murdockaholics. But "Notes from Some Place Else" is the icing on the cake for us M people. So, if you have delayed getting Deadly Maneuvers, do not delay any longer. I belonged to another fan club a while back and they had fanzines, too, and the one for the A-Team is heads above those others. These writers know what they are doing. And I have only read two stories so far. So, stop reading my ramblings and get your order in the mail.

H.V.

I just finished it last night [A Team Through Time]!!! Another couple stories that should be included in the best of the A-Team. I Think "Face's Mission" and "Another Time, Another Place" holds that honor. "Truth & Consequences" and "Riders of the High Plains" fit the bill for the zine's subject matter. The rest of the stories, I had a little trouble getting into or following them because they just did not flow like other stories. Deadly Maneuvers's stories did not have that problem. You did another great job of packaging them into a zine. I hope to see more stories from you. You got the characters down.

J.M.Z.

[Sometimes as an editor I find I can't predict which stories are going to be the big "crowd pleasers" with readers. Everyone's tastes are different, but that's what makes doing this so interesting. Yes, I would like to put together a "Best of..." 'zine sometime, based on stories chosen by our readers as their favorites. And don't forget to get in your Fan Q award nominations for those authors whom you enjoyed the most! —Ed.]

...I got Deadly Maneuvers and I really enjoyed it. It's cool to read some of the Nam era stories. I have to say "All Good Things Must Come to an End" was my favorite story. It was very funny. I'm looking forward to upcoming 'zines.

S.C.

By the way, I enjoyed all of Deadly Maneuvers and the Murdock-Amy story you wrote [*"Special Assignment"*] the best of all the 'zines I've read.

E.B.

Keep those letters coming! They mean a lot!

Trains, Planes and Boats

by D. Ferrara

Part I: Train Tales

The rhythmic swaying of the train mesmerized Templeton “Face” Peck. Despite the crowd of bodies shoved into the rail car, he felt peaceful. Life as a member of the A-Team rarely allowed for trips abroad, and Peck was determined to enjoy this one.

Their mission had been successful: Rescuing a Mongolian holy man from Communist assassins had offered a number of challenges. All had gone well, however: Their pilot, H.M. Murdock, spoke enough Chinese to convince air control in a desolate military air base that he had authority to fly the plane he was stealing. The Team had smuggled the holy man out of China, into the Northwest Frontier Provinces of Pakistan. There, they had been paid, as promised, blessed as a bonus, and had arranged for re-fueling and re-painting of the plane.

Everything had gone like clockwork, until the sedative administered to B.A. Baracus, the Team’s mechanic, wore off. Enraged, roaring like a maddened bull, B.A. wouldn’t stand still enough for them to get either a hypodermic or a two-by-four into play. Instead, howling dire threats at each of them (but especially Murdock), he headed for the nearest train station, determined to take a train to the coast, and hop a freighter there. Hannibal and Face knew they had to keep an eye on him, leaving Murdock to refuel and mind the plane. They had barely enough time to grab a knapsack each.

Train travel in Pakistan was cheap, and the country was crisscrossed with tracks. Consequently, everyone traveled by rail. Popular routes, like this one from the Northwest to the coast, were mobbed. Peck had barely managed to acquire second-class tickets. The air-conditioned first-class compartments were sold out, and the third-class section was untroubled by the formality of tickets—or seats.

At least in second-class, there were seats, and even space for luggage. As was customary in Muslim countries, women sat in a separate section of the car in this class, although in the private compartments families traveled together. Small children raced between their parents and older siblings, enjoying the grand adventure. Every seat in their car was filled, and people sat on luggage, stretched in the aisles, and stowed the smallest children in the overhead racks. Earlier, a push cart selling food had made its way through the car, the vendor dispensing spicy stews in cardboard bowls, topped with flat bread. The bread served as cover, insulation and utensil.

Face and the leader of the A-Team, John

“Hannibal” Smith, had happily dug into the stew, not inquiring too closely as to its ingredients. Their companion, B.A. Baracus, had wrinkled his nose, muttering darkly about prison camp, and settled on plain rice and some fruit. People in the surrounding seats had offered juice, candy and homemade delicacies, generously sharing what they had. A number of passengers carried delicately etched brass pots, and made milky tea over small propane fires. Tiny cups of the sweet liquid were dispensed to anyone within reach. B.A. offered his Power Bars and fruit to all, and the evening had passed pleasantly.

Racing through the countryside, the train chased a glorious moon. The silver light was enough for Face to read, and cast a lovely glow over his teammates.

Smith and Baracus had settled into their seats. Feet propped on B.A.’s duffel, both were asleep in seconds. The ability to take advantage of any opportunity to sleep was a shared trait of the A-Team—and a very useful one at that.

Hannibal had taken the aisle, Face the window, leaving B.A. with the middle seat. The big man had grumbled a bit, but quietly. After all, it was B.A.’s fear of flying which made this trip necessary. The team could have continued by plane from Islamabad. B.A.’s lack of faith in flying generally, and H.M. Murdock particularly, however, was legendary.

Now, it was after midnight, and the train was quiet. Peck was ready to sleep but reluctant to close his eyes on the magnificent scenery rolling by. B.A., however, was snoring deeply, lolling onto Face with every sway of the car. Sighing, Peck decided to take a walk before attempting sleep.

Gingerly picking his way through the sleeping bodies, Face wandered out to the platform between cars. The space was open to the night, and the soft air wafted past him. On a whim, he grabbed hold of the ladder and clambered to the roof.

The train was traveling slowly, and the breeze over the car was refreshing. Stretching out on the roof, Peck could enjoy the huge night sky. Carefully winding his hands into a grab bar, he dozed off.

The sound of the railcar door opening awoke him. Mutttered voices reached his ears. *What’s strange about those voices?* he wondered sleepily. *Oh, yeah, they’re American . . .*

One voice grew louder: “You sure about that? I mean, what would they be doing here?”

The second voice was softer, but still audible. “I’m sure. I got confirmation about twenty minutes

ago.”

“So what should we do, Ben?”

“Can’t take them here—too many people. Never know what that big guy would do . . .”

At that point, the train slowed further at a crossing, and the two men returned to the first-class car.

For a second, Peck wondered if he had dreamed the exchange. *No, I heard it: but what did I hear?* “Can’t take them here”—*Who is ‘them’?* he reflected soberly, as the night sky slid by. American voices on a Pakistani train: it was too dangerous not to check out. It was possible that these men were not looking for the A-Team. It was also possible that they were.

Rolling onto his stomach, Face worked his way to the edge of the car. Peering carefully, he assured himself that the men were gone. He debated a flashy jump to the small platform, but thought better of it. After all, there wasn’t even an audience . . .

Back in the car, Face nudged Hannibal and explained tersely what he had heard. Hannibal asked a number of questions, but in the end agreed with Face that caution was the better course. Face was to check out the first class compartments.

“Any ideas, Colonel? After all, we’re pretty conspicuous.”

Hannibal gravely patted his shoulder. “You will think of something. I have great faith in you.”

“Gee, thanks.”

Peck retired to the platform to formulate his plan. First, he had to determine whether the Americans were after them. Second, if they were, they had to be dodged, or better yet, sent on a detour until B.A. was safely on some freighter in Karachi. The train had picked up speed, and a fresh breeze cleared the air nicely. Peck studied the passing stars for a few moments, until a smile crossed his lips.

Few people were awake to see the pushcart vendor make his way through the first class compartment. This was a good thing for that vendor, as a close inspection would have revealed his blue-green eyes and sandy hair. While some Pakistanis are of Aryan descent, few were quite as pale as this one. Moreover, this particular Pakistani could speak only a few words of Urdu.

Face had convinced the vendor to lend him his cart and extra shalwar kamis (wide trousers and shirt). The vendor, like many of the staff, lived on the train, in the baggage compartment, spoke some English, and viewed the changing throngs with amused detachment. He accepted the modest sum Face offered for the loan of the cart and even provided his cleanest clothes. After all, the sum involved was more than he could have earned in several days, and it seemed to be part of some game—a diversion for the Americans.

Peck made his way down the side aisle of the compartment, softly calling “Korma” (stew), “Roti” (bread) and “Lassi” (yogurt drink). Fortunately, no one took him up on his offer, as his cart contained none of those particular foods. He strained to see into the compartments, but most had drawn curtains over the windows and door. Pushing the cart, he stumbled over something: a pair of shoes. Curious, he looked down the hallway: Almost every compartment had a pair of shoes outside. Most of the shoes were sandals, or other

warm weather shoes. Outside one compartment, however, there were no shoes, although the drawn curtain indicated occupancy.

Now, if every self-respecting Pakistani would leave his shoes at the door, who would be in a compartment with no shoes outside? Peck drew closer to the compartment in question.

Parking his cart across the door, Face leaned against the window, near the hinges of the door. If the door opened suddenly, he would have an extra second’s advantage.

He could barely make out the conversation in the compartment, but snatches were clear. A plaintive voice—not one of the two from the platform—grouched, “Come on, Ben, what do we care about these guys? We’ve got a load of other crap to worry about, what with . . .”

The voice was lost in the sound of the train squealing around a corner. By the time Face could hear again, the voice of “Ben” was talking.

“Look, we’re law enforcement. Just because they’d normally be out of the jurisdiction doesn’t mean they’re not our business. If it’s a big hassle, we’ll call in the military, but . . .”

Face didn’t need to hear any more. Whoever these guys were, “law enforcement” and “call in the military” were enough to sound the alarm. Face tugged on the cart, but it was stuck in a hole in the rug. Pulling harder, the rug gave up, just as the train hit another curve. The cart clattered against the door, splashing food and drinks.

Inside, Face could hear the Americans rouse themselves in alarm. In his hasty exit, he thought he could hear them drawing their guns. Turning, he ran down the hall, as the door smashed open onto the vendor’s unfortunate wares. Frantically, Face chose a doorway, and dashed into a compartment.

It was dark in the compartment, which was occupied by only two people. A single reading light illuminated one, a lovely young woman. Upon Face’s dramatic entrance, she grabbed her dupatta (thin veil) and threw it over her head. Something in Peck’s pleading look, however, stifled her scream.

Peck stammered softly, “Um, ach’ha? (Okay?) Kar liji en? (Please?)” He looked desperately from her to her companion, a child, curled on the seat opposite her. Angry American voices sounded outside the compartment, as he racked his brains for his meager store of local phrases. “Um, ah, ejazet hai? (May I leave?) Geez, what is the friggin’ word for ‘friend’?” he said to himself.

“Actually, you should address me as ‘Begum Shahib’, the more polite form of address.” From her bright eyes, she was enjoying his discomfort. “Whatever your intentions, it is always better to mask them with civility.” She studied him for a moment, sizing him up.

“You may sit down.” Her tone was imperious. Face began to sit next to her, but she stiffened. “Not here. There.” She pointed to the other seat. He perched on the edge, avoiding the child who remained asleep. She softened somewhat. “You must never sit next to a Pakistani woman who is not your wife or relative. It is

not done.”

Outside the compartment, Ben and his friends were debating their next move. As Face and the woman listened, the four argued whether there was any point in chasing the vendor whose wares now littered the first class hallway. By now, other passengers were complaining about the noise, and the conductor was politely shepherding the Americans back into their compartment. Face could not tell if the conductor had been successful.

Quietly, the woman spoke. “Those men—they are chasing you?”

“Yeah, I guess they didn’t like their charpoi that spicy.”

The woman burst into laughter. “Truly?” she gasped. When she caught her breath, she corrected him, “I don’t know what you think you were saying, but ‘charpoi’ means ‘bed’. We don’t tend to spice those here.”

“Oh. Right.” He wiped his palms on his pants, and moved the curtain slightly. Someone was still standing in the hall, although he could not tell if it were one of the Americans, or the conductor.

“So, what have you done that these men chase you?”

“It’s a long story. . .”

“It is a long night.”

“Let’s just say that they think I and my friends did something wrong about twelve years ago.”

“Twelve years? That is a long time.”

“They have long memories.” The two paused in their patter, and laughed. “Anyway,” Face continued, “I’m sorry to have burst in here like this.”

“It is no problem, really. This trip has been very long, and I may not leave the compartment until my father comes for me in Karachi.” At his curious glance, she shrugged. “It is the custom. I got away from it for a while, but now, I believe it is for the best, for Rana.” She indicated the sleeping child. “If this is to be her home, she must learn its ways.”

“Your daughter?”

“Yes. She was born when my husband was attached to the embassy in London. We’ve only been back for a short time.”

“Your husband?” Face shifted uncomfortably.

The woman laughed. “Don’t worry. He is in Islamabad. We are visiting my parents. Normally, we would not travel alone, but he is unable to join us, and his brothers live abroad.”

“Um, that would be a problem. . .”

“It’s all right. You don’t have to understand. Now, how do you plan on getting out of here?”

“I guess I’ll just wait for that guy to get tired, or bored.”

Impatiently, she shook her head. “That could take all night. We will be in Karachi in the morning, and you cannot be here when my father comes to get me. We will figure a way to get you out tonight.”

Face looked at her curiously. “Why are you helping me?”

“Those men, the ones looking for you. They are very rude—boorish. One of them tried to . . . to . . . what is that American phrase? ‘Come on to me’ this

afternoon. It is not that I want to help you, as much as I don’t want to help *them*. And besides,” she smiled, “as poor as your Urdu is, you used the most subservient forms. Good manners should be rewarded.”

Some time later, the American standing watch in the hall snapped out of his reverie. A black shrouded figure emerged from one of the compartments, and, with eyes modestly downcast, headed for the toilets. The figure stopped silently, and the American stepped into his compartment to allow passage. He knew enough about the custom of purdah to be disconcerted by it.

Had he looked carefully, he may have wondered what a woman shrouded in a black burquah was doing wearing Nikes. Of course, he didn’t.

Once back in the second class car, Peck faced a dilemma: If he tossed the burquah, he might be seen by one of the Americans. If he kept it, he would cause a stir in the men’s section of the car. Sighing, he pulled off the garment and rolled it under his arm.

Hannibal had awakened B.A. and explained the situation. By the time Face returned, his companions were ready. The Team would jump off the train at the next small station, and hitch hike to Karachi. Face groaned.

“Hannibal, that could take days! I vote we just tough it out here on the train. There are only four of them, and they can’t expect reinforcements out here.”

“Tough it out, Lieutenant? How do you propose we do that? May I remind you that our weapons are buried in a cave outside Islamabad, and that we have two penknives and a handkerchief between us?”

“Maybe we can get one of their guns,” Face offered. “Maybe I could put this back on. . .”

Hannibal’s eyes sparkled. “Really? How fetching!” Suddenly, he reached for the burquah. “On the other hand. . .”

A lumbering figure in a black burquah made its way to the women’s section of the car. The figure was very large for a woman, and swayed.

“Now cut tha’ out, Face. Stop squirmin’,” the figure hissed. “Bad enough I gotta carry you, don’t go wigglin’ around on my back!”

“Just be careful where you sit, fella, I don’t want to get squashed!”

Although they were already crowded, the other women adjusted to make room for them. Late as it was, there was no conversation. Everyone wanted to sleep in the last few hours before arriving in Karachi. The bulky figure settled itself in awkwardly, and tried to get some sleep.

In the men’s section, there was a new porter. Dressed in traditional garb, including a makeshift turban, the man sat with a pile of luggage in the space between the cars. Other porters sat with him, assuming that he, like them, was paid to watch someone’s excess baggage until reaching Karachi. Four noisy Americans stalked the aisles and corridors in great annoyance, but seemed unable to find what they were looking for.

In Karachi, the porters gathered the bags and jumped from the train. The passengers emerged in a wave of shouting and shoving. A few women remained behind, awaiting male relatives. One, peering from her window, seemed to be enjoying the spectacle of human

crush.

As planned, the Team met at the central tourist office in Karachi. B.A. was particularly cranky after carrying Face on his back for twelve hours, although Peck was none too happy about having spent a night under B.A. either.

Hannibal, however, looked remarkably chipper for having spent the night sitting on luggage. The intrusion of the four men on the train simply added to the zest of the day.

“Look guys, we’ve got nothing to worry about. We gave those jokers the slip on the train. They may or may not wander around Karachi looking for us, but it doesn’t matter: We’re leaving. B.A.’s getting on board a ship, and Face and I will head out on the same train we took in.”

“Mebbe so,” B.A. growled, “but I don’ wanna spend one more minute here then I hafta.” He gripped a local paper, open to the shipping news. “There’s two ships scheduled to leave today—I’m gonna be on one of ‘em.”

“Nothing could be simpler, B.A.” Hannibal draped an arm around the big guy. “Face here will check out the availability on both ships, and you will be heading out the wet blue yonder in no time.”

“Check out the availability’, huh?” Face complained. “I guess that’s shorthand for ‘Face will scam the tickets, forge the passports and arrange for on-board movies’.”

“Lieutenant, the old passports will do just fine. All you need do is make sure there’s plenty of milk in the mini-bar.” Hannibal chuckled.

Shortly, B.A. was booked on a South Korean merchant ship. The ship was not luxurious, but the shipping agent did promise that passenger facilities were available. The ship’s route was not straightforward, but freighters were tied to cargo. Although the route proceeded more or less easterly to Los Angeles, it was not guaranteed to make it in less than a month.

Seeing B.A.’s ire rising at the description of the route, Face sputtered, “Look B.A., there’s no passenger service out of Karachi at the best of times. This is winter: if you don’t take this ship, there might not be another one for weeks.”

“Wha’ ’bout that Japanese boat—the other one in the paper?”

“Left early. That’s the thing about freighters, B.A., once they’re loaded, they take off. If you’d rather I got you a plane ticket . . .”

Snarling incoherently, B.A. snatched the tickets from Peck’s hand.

The rest of the morning was spent gathering supplies for B.A. The open-air markets held an enormous variety of fruits, breads and even processed goods—although the latter were expensive. B.A. even decided to try irradiated milk, filling an enormous sack with the square cartons. Fortunately, the market also sold huge nylon tote bags, which swallowed the entire results of

the shopping spree.

Finally, Hannibal and Face stood on pier, watching B.A. stagger up the gangplank with his load. Having a few hours before catching their train, the pair sat comfortably ensconced on sacks of coffee.

“Face, take the watch. I’ve gotta get some shut-eye. Wake me in an hour, and I’ll relieve you.”

“But Hannibal, shouldn’t we check out Karachi, do some sight-seeing, amuse ourselves?”

Hannibal fixed Peck with a cold eye. “This is Karachi. Pakistan, a devout Muslim country. No drinking, gambling, public cigar smoking or visible woman. Worse, if they even find you thinking about that stuff, they arrest you. Now, I don’t have the time, or the inclination, to bail you out. Trust me, Face, you will be much happier staying here, out of trouble.” With that, Hannibal leaned back, and started to snore within minutes.

Take the watch. Face snapped to himself, watching the ship cast off. B.A. stood on the deck of the ship, glowering at a sailor. Face watched, amused and a little sorry for the sailor. *Like there’s anything to watch for. Like those two guys over there are something to worry about. Like there’s gonna . . . Wait a minute!*

“Hannibal. Hannibal, wake up!” he whispered.

“Yeah, Face,” Hannibal replied without opening his eyes.

“I could be wrong, but I think two of the guys from the train just arrived. And they’re pointing at B.A. on deck.”

The colonel shot up. “Where?”

“There, over by immigration.” They watched silently, as the two Americans approached the Pakistani official. The taller man gestured at B.A., now disappearing from the deck of the ship. Face rummaged through his knapsack for binoculars. “They’re showing him something, a bunch of pictures, I think. Hannibal . . .” Face lowered the binoculars. “One of those pictures is of B.A.”

Hannibal reached for the glasses. Nodding his head in confirmation, he muttered, “Where’s that ship going next, Face?”

Unfolding the shipping news, Face scanned it quickly. “Bangladesh.”

“Bangladesh? Not anywhere in India first?”

“Nope. Bangladesh.”

Hannibal handed the binoculars to Peck. “Then Face, I propose that we scurry back to Islamabad, find Murdock, and take a little excursion to Bangladesh.” He brushed off his pants. “Don’t want B.A. to have too hot a welcome party when he arrives.”

Sighing heavily, Face stowed the binoculars. “You realize, of course, that he’ll never believe were didn’t do this on purpose—just to get him to fly.” He shouldered his knapsack. “I can’t wait until he sees Murdock. The trick will be to keep B.A. from killing him until we can explain all this.”

Part II: Interlude In Pakistan

The plane bounced wildly down the ravine, tossing Murdock against the windscreen as he clung to the yoke.

“Come on you crummy piece of Chinese tin foil—get down there!” he howled, throwing his weight onto the wheel. As he set the landing gear, a sudden wind shift slammed him into the windscreen, and he heard, more than felt, the gash on his forehead.

Somehow, he managed to stay conscious until the plane lurched to a stop.

Hours later, he awoke in gathering gloom, drenched and chilled. Disoriented, he gradually remembered the mission. The A-Team had been sent to rescue a Mongolian holy man from Communist assassins. Bundling their charge into a Chinese military transport, the team had delivered him safely to Islamabad in Northwest Pakistan. Because the flight home would take them into Soviet airspace, they changed the markings on the plane to those of a non-military cargo plane of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

Not everything went according to Hannibal’s plan, however: B.A.’s sedatives had worn off too soon, and he angrily refused to get back on the plane. Unwilling to leave the big man alone, Face and Hannibal opted to join him on the train to Karachi, and scam space on a freighter for B.A. Murdock was to wait for the fuel for the plane, then rendezvous with the colonel and the lieutenant at an airstrip outside of Karachi.

Islamabad, however, was a hotbed of terrorists, smugglers and religious fanatics. While waiting for the fuel, Murdock was beset by a horde with elements of all three, intent on stealing the plane. Taking off quickly to evade capture, Murdock was caught by a sudden storm, throwing him off course, deeper into the Northwest Frontier of Pakistan. Low on fuel, he maneuvered the plane through the mountainous region. Finally, a deep valley, with a fairly flat bed appeared, and he muscled the plane down.

Now, he looked around the cockpit, and groaned. Without testing, he knew that the batteries were dead. *Damn magnetos! Shoulda turned ‘em off!* he berated himself irrationally.

Gathering his duffel, and a canteen, he looked around for weapons, but found none. *Where’d that AK-47 get to? Shoot, not even a side arm.* He glanced at the broken cockpit window. *Must’ve blown out. Gonna be a cold trip home.*

His last position had been twenty miles due east of the Kunaf River delta—which was itself a hundred miles from anything resembling civilization. Struggling out of the plane, he opted to head west, up the side of a ravine. According to his map, a village lay in that direction. From an assignment for the Central Intelligence Agency during the Vietnam War, Murdock also knew that this area also held secret Soviet bases—listening posts. With luck, no one had seen the plane go down.

The ravine was not high, but it was steep, slippery with mud. The sun had set by the time he reached the top. Once there, a faint path seemed to appear in the

scrub brush. *Maybe, maybe not. Well, it’s all I got.*

After a few hundred yards, the path defined itself more sharply. Trusting some instinct, he continued until a small sandstone house came into view. In the gathering gloom, he saw someone through the single window, lighting a kerosene lantern. He crept toward the window for a look.

At first, he thought her a child: then he saw that she was a woman in her thirties. From his vantage point, he could only see part of her face, but he could tell that she was tiny, five feet at most, with delicate features. Her clothes were plain: brown shirt, pulled over jeans, anonymous sneakers. No rings, no watch, no jewelry visible—a bandana tucked in her jeans pocket.

Feeling stiff and sore, he shifted, kicking a small rock, which rattled thunderously in his ears. *Did she hear that? No—she didn’t move.* Overcome by exhaustion, he simply curled into a ball, and fell asleep.

A soft purring sound crept through his dreams. Steady, rhythmic, no—melodic. Forcing his eyes open, he turned toward the sound. His limbs, stiff with exposure and the jostling of the day before, protested angrily. As he stretched, his hand touched something next to him: a thick glass, filled with a milky liquid, and a piece of flat bread, studded with nuts and herbs. *Looks like room service got my order.* Hesitantly, he nibbled on the bread. It tasted harmless enough, but he didn’t touch the drink.

In the silver gray morning, a soft rain fell. Pushing off, he staggered to his feet. His khaki pants were mottled with blood from a dozen cuts and scrapes, but he felt whole. During the night, his cap had fallen off—he retrieved it, noticing the sticky residue in the band and brim—noticing, but paying it no heed. His head, too, was unbroken: a scrape or two was not worth care.

Peering over the windowsill, he could see that the house was empty. Wherever the young woman had gone, she had left the single room immaculately clean. He leaned heavily on the wall, trying to get his bearings.

The purring grew louder. *What the hell, may as well see what’s shakin’.*

He headed for the sound. It came from a nearby copse of tree—a hundred, maybe a hundred and ten feet away, but the landscape rose and fell in waves before him. *Damn! Strange place, this Kunaf, kuneef, kuneena, kunnina, kun-moe . . .* the nonsense rhyme flitted around his brain, distracting him from his erratic progress.

Dizzily, he reached for a tree, but misjudged the distance, falling heavily.

The purring continued unabated. Rolling onto his hands and knees, he struggled to his feet once more. It slowly occurred to him that he hadn’t taken his medication in several days. Although he hid the drugs shyly from his friends, he rarely missed a dose. He wondered how long he could go without . . . then wondered what

form his condition would take—if any. Once or twice, he had missed a week’s worth of drugs, but had noticed no change—except in B.A.’s temper.

The copse had moved closer. *Strange bushes*, he thought, *got some kinda weird leaves*. He touched a “leaf” and discovered it was a sock. The purring was very near.

He pressed on toward the sound. Beyond the bushes was a small clearing. In the center of the clearing, completely naked, the young woman stood, motionless, speaking softly. When the words reached him, he could hear what he instinctively knew as poetry—but different poems jumbled together.

*There will come soft rains
I all alone beweeep my outcast state
Fog crept in on little cat feet
Razors pain you, rivers are damp*

Snatches of verses, bits of songs. Somehow, her American English did not surprise him, even in this isolated place.

Politely, he waited for her to finish. Gradually, in a minute, or an hour, the poetry stopped.

“Hello.” His voice split the early morning—hers had blended with the pastels.

Calmly, she turned toward him. She expressed no surprise at his appearance, accepting him as she did the dawn itself. Bejeweled with rain drops, her body seemed even more child-like. Coppery strands of short hair drifted onto her pale forehead, almost reaching her green eyes. Fearlessly, she approached and held out her hand.

Does she want to shake hands? Confused, he followed her gaze. “Oh, your socks! I’m sorry, I didn’t . . .” his voice trailed off as she collected her socks, gathered her clothes from the bushes. Murdock followed her to the house, a little unsteadily, scooping up his bag and the glass from where he had slept the night before.

Inside, she dressed without haste. The furnishings were sparse: a bed, a table, two stools, and an enormous carved chest. Spoons, plates, glasses, an aluminum pot and a few books lined the single shelf. A large basket sat near them. Murdock tossed his flight jacket onto the bed and tried to make himself invisible. His attempt failed—she soaked a rag in cool water to wipe the blood from his face.

Murdock reached for the rag. “It’s okay, I can do that.”

Dropping the rag, she backed away. *Is that fear in her eyes? No, somethin’ else.* “It’s okay,” he said again. Hearing his gentle tone, she seemed to relax slightly.

After cleaning a surprising amount of blood from his face, Murdock turned his attention to his duffel. For the first time, he noticed that the duffel was soaked—probably from the broken cockpit window. From the look of things, his single change of clothes had survived intact, but the rest of the contents were badly battered. His various bottles of pills had spilled into the

wet bottom of the duffel, melting into a colorful blob. Gingerly, he picked out the smashed vials, and set them on the table. *Damn! Not a single survivor! Guess we’re ridin’ bare back for a while.*

Picking up his tape player, he punched the play button, but nothing happened. He shook the walkman, as if that would revive the failing toy. “Shoot! Probably ate my Stones tape,” he muttered.

She was looking at him curiously.

“Um, you know, music? If the batteries are dead . . .” Helplessly he offered the Walkman for examination. *What am I doing?* he thought. *Do you have any idea what this is or why I have it?*

To his surprise, she took the tape player from him. Delicately holding it, she ran her tiny fingers over the surface. The cover on the battery compartment had disappeared long ago: only worn duct tape held the batteries in place. Passing her fingers over the compartment, the batteries dropped into her fingers.

He smiled. “Might be time to replace that duct tape, huh?”

Without reaction, she held the batteries in her hand. Suddenly, she shoved the tape player into his hands and turned away.

Feeling foolish, he sat for a moment, staring at the Walkman. “I need to get to a telephone, or a radio,” he ventured. “I need to get to Karachi.” Aware she was listening, although not sure she understood, he tried again, “I need some high octane gasoline, aviation grade, 140, 150 or so.” *Was that a nod?* “And a generator? Gas-powered, something that can crank up some amps . . .” Turning with a second glass in her hand, she shook her head. *Damn—need to juice up that bird.* “Maybe a truck—a half-ton, deuce and a half, even a bus.” No response.

She placed the two glasses on the table.

“Breakfast of champions, huh?” Other than her chanting in the clearing, she had not spoken a word, but it was clear that she expected him to drink the strange liquid. Uncertainly, he reached for a glass. In a single motion, she drained the other. *Guess she showed me.*

Tentatively, he sniffed the glass. The liquid had a sour smell, oddly citrus-like. He sipped, and found it not as bad as he had expected. Quickly, a warm flush passed over him. *Must be fermented. It’s got a little kick.*

Wiping her mouth with her bandana, she set out the tableware—heavy stoneware plates and spoons. Pulling down the basket, she removed roasted meat, bread, a pasty rice and vegetable combination, and a stone jug. Methodically, she spooned out small amounts of food, then doubled one portion and pushed it toward him.

He glanced at the food. *Shoot, she must think I’m a mouse or somethin’.* *There ain’t enough here to feed a grown man.* He began to speak, but stopped, suddenly guilty. *She’s probably givin’ me more’n she eats in a week.* Murdock swept the remains of his medication into his duffel.

The roast meat was fiery with spices, as was the rice. The bread was stuffed with something that imparted a faint taste of lavender and almonds. Try as he

might to slow down, he found himself shoveling spoonful after spoonful, washing the food down with the milky liquid. Wiping his empty plate, and wolfing down the bread, he glanced at her. Her spoon poised in mid-air, he couldn't tell if she had actually taken a bite yet. Her glass was drained.

"Sorry," he blushed at his bad manners. "I guess I was hungrier than I thought."

She pushed her plate over to him, and refilled his glass.

"No, I can't take your food." He tried to push the plate back, but she shook her head, keeping only the bread. Hunger won, and he cleaned her plate. Sated, he looked around the room. Although the meat was still warm, there was no oven or stove in the room, and the weather was far too wet for an outdoor fire. Moreover, the meat and bread had been cut into pieces, as if apportioned for meals, yet there was no knife in sight.

Someone must bring this to her.

"Who gives you this food?" He wasn't sure he expected an answer.

"The villagers." Her voice was so soft he wasn't sure he had heard it.

Gently, afraid to press, he asked, "Where is the village?"

"Down the ravine past your plane." *So much for the map.*

By now, the warm flush had relaxed his entire body, soothing the multiple pains and extinguishing the last of his hunger. The liquid brought the same feeling of well being as his complicated drug regime. *Hmmm. This is nice. The V.A. could save a fortune on Thorazine and Lithium usin' this stuff.*

"Is there a telephone or radio in the village?"

Without a sound, she rose, and opening the carved chest, removed an olive-drab canvas bag, with a web strap. Murdock suppressed a whoop of excitement, but eagerly reached for the bag.

It was an ancient field radio—probably forty or fifty years old—World War II vintage or earlier. From the Cyrillic markings, it was Russian; from the emblems, it was military. The black Bakelite case was scuffed and chipped in places, but still intact. Tucked in the bag were earphones, but he did not see a microphone.

She leaned over and set the earphones on his head, then placed the radio on the floor and knelt, turning the handle on the side of the radio. As she turned, static and frequency feedback filled his ears, and finally, a faint voice, speaking in a local dialect.

"This is great!" he shouted. Startled, she shrank away, a glimmer of fear in her eyes. "Sorry. I was just excited . . . uh, happy . . . About the radio." A long moment passed before she smiled.

"Well, I'll be . . . you can smile—got teeth and everythin', huh, sweetheart." His tone was cajoling. "I bet you even have a name."

Smiling dreamily, she seemed to be forming a word, but thinking better of speaking it. Instead, she reached out for him, floating her fingers near his wrist, not actually touching it.

She wants to know my name. "My name is H.M. Murdock."

"Murdock." Her voice was lilting. "Murdock."

"And you?" He reached for her hand, but she with-drew it quickly, rising to her feet. Startled, he pulled back. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you." *Skittish as a new colt, ain't she?*

"You sound like an American. How'd you get here—in Pakistan?"

She walked to the shelf, and reached for a book. Clutching it to her chest, she hesitated, then held it out to him.

He accepted carefully, avoiding her hands— noticing her relief. "Thank you."

The book was homemade, thin strips of wood or cardboard, carefully covered with fabric. There was no writing on the covers, which had been sewn with great care. Examining the edges closely, he could see evenly spaced stitches, forming a scalloped design. Without looking, he could feel she approved his delicacy. *This must be very important to her. She wants me to appreciate it.*

Laying the book on his knees, he lifted the cover.

On the first page was a painting. The colors were brilliant and violent, reminiscent of tests he had taken at the V.A. The painting seemed to have no shape at first. Then, as he stared, he felt a vortex. Unable to tear his eyes away, he choked as if on strange smoke. *Snap out of it!* he chastised himself. *Helluva time for a psychotic episode.* Inexorably, the painting dragged him into its depths.

The crash of a plate finally pulled his eyes away from the page. Sweeping the broken crockery, she stared at him—but she seemed unsurprised by his reaction, and only slightly concerned, as if she had pulled a small child from shallow waters—a child in no immediate danger.

"It's very nice," he croaked.

He flipped the page of the book. The next leaf was also covered with bright washes of color, which flowed over a newspaper clipping. Despite the blotchy color, he could read most of the article. Unthinkingly, he read aloud:

"Viet Vet Defects to USSR.

Michael Beveridge, Viet Nam veteran missing since last Tuesday, surfaced today in a press conference in Vladivostok, in the USSR. Beveridge, 32, a decorated munitions expert, renounced the United States and its involvement in the Viet Nam War, terming the conflict 'an illegal, immoral act of monumental proportions' and condemning the military-industrial complex as 'war criminals and pigs'."

Murdock looked up at her. "I think I remember this guy." She tensed. "He a friend of yours?" Eyes welling, she looked at his flight jacket on the bed, emblazoned with a tiger, and the caption, "Da Nang 1970".

He followed her line of sight. "Yeah, I was there. Strange times. Lotta guys couldn't handle it there . . . lotta us couldn't handle comin' home." He started to rise, but sank back at her look of terror. "Uh, look, don't be afraid . . . I don't hate this guy . . . I

understan' how someone could feel . . . angry at what we had to do . . . It was pretty awful most days . . . pretty hard on everyone . . ." He wondered if she understood him.

Placing his hands flat on the open book, he tried again, "Some guys, they felt . . . abandoned after the war . . . alone. That made some of them mad—you know, we went and did what we were supposed to do, and then we come home, one by one, alone, no parades or nothin'—people callin' you 'baby killers' an' stuff . . . I understand' . . ."

When she did not respond, he continued to read:

"Beveridge, and his companion, an unidentified woman, were hailed by a Soviet spokesman as 'heroes of the New Revolution'."

"That you, honey, the 'unidentified woman'?" She nodded. "He still around?" She shook her head, tears flowing freely now. "You wanna to go home?" Unsteadily, she leaned over and turned the page of the book.

The next page contained only the headlines of another article—this one washed in blue. The paper was crisscrossed with fine lines, like crazing in porcelain. He read:

"Military Installation Bombed In California Student Militants Claim Credit"

"Is that you?" She nodded slowly.

He closed the book. "I don't guess you got a pardon or nothin'." She shook her head.

"So how'd you end up in Pakistan?"

Tentatively, she began to speak, "The military, the Soviets, um, the KGB maybe . . . I don't know . . . They brought Michael . . . for . . . munitions design . . . near here, there was a KGB post, a lab, some barracks . . . Why are you smiling?"

He was grinning broadly. "I like your voice. It's nice."

She laughed, very softly. "Sometimes, I forget how . . . to make words. The thoughts are in my head, but my mouth can't push them out. Then, sometimes, the words come out . . . not . . . connected to thoughts at all . . . just words. Like today—in the rain." Speaking had wearied her: she poured more of the milky liquid and drank deeply. "I used to talk more . . . Michael would tell me . . . noisy bitch." A frown creased her face.

"So you and Michael came here to work on weapons?" he encouraged.

"Yeah, with three Russians. They never let us out of their sight . . . always watching, listening, when we slept or ate or washed, even . . . Never alone. Michael figured out how to give them the slip . . ."

Murdock felt a surge of irrational anger. "He left you behind?"

She nodded, dreamily. "At first, the others were angry . . . they'd hit me . . . as if I'd tell them where Michael had gone. Then, they figured that I didn't know, so they'd take turns . . ." her voice trailed off, her frown deepening. "After a while, they just left.

With Michael gone, there wasn't any reason for them to stay . . . or to take me back."

Bastards! Murdock thought, but held his tongue. In his mind, he could see her tiny figure abused, raped, abandoned by faceless monsters. The brightness of his vision blinded him. Frightened by its intensity, he shook himself. *Man, what is in this stuff? I'll be seein' the walls melt soon. I need some air.*

"So, where is this lab?"

She looked at him in surprise. "I'll show you."

The path was narrow, as if the forest had yielded the way only for the tiny woman. Murdock was swatted by branches, even hunched over.

She seemed stronger with each step. Even though the way was steep and rocky, she moved more quickly as they ascended. His long legs were no advantage here, and her short ones flashed quickly.

In a short while, they came upon three small buildings. Murdock recognized the design as Soviet military—sheet metal roofs, prefab wooden sides, windowless, with metal doors. He grinned at the doors: cheap, flimsy metal, they nevertheless held massive locks and hinges. *B.A. could sneeze one of these open.*

She approached the largest of the three, and pushed open the door. Inside was a laboratory: neat piles of notebooks lined the shelves above two long tables, equipped with Bunsen burners, glass vials and boxes of supplies. Like the sandstone house, the room was swept clean and scrubbed bright.

"Here," she said simply. Her face swam in front of him. "This is where Michael and I worked. This is what I give the villagers in return for the food." She passed her hands over some boxes. "Nitrate prills, ammonia and urea. Nitro gel. Getting old, too old. Radium detonators—those I don't understand. Distilled kerosene—homey little boom. Aviation grade fuel—at least 160 octane—at least ten barrels, maybe more."

Her voice was casual, as if naming spices on a rack. Suddenly, a familiar sensation passed through him—one he would jokingly call the "purple wobblies". Flashes of color, nearly blinding him, shot across his field of vision. The walls of the room rippled as if in shimmering heat. Confused, he tried to remember the last time the world had shaken like this.

"Murdock?" Her voice was timid again. "Are you all right?"

The delusion ended abruptly, leaving him shaking. "I'm okay, honey . . . just had a little too much of that . . . what is that stuff, anyway?" Bewildered, she helped him to a stool. "You know, that white stuff, tastes like sour milk, but kicks like Southern Comfort?"

"That's just lassi—a yogurt drink. It's not alcohol or anything. The villagers are Moslem—they don't drink alcohol."

Not alcohol? Must be my meds wearing off. . . Aloud, he asked, "So if these villagers are so kind to you—bringin' food and lassie-the-hair-of-the-dog drink—why don't they put you up, 'stead of leaving you on your own?"

She sat on the table next to him.

“They’ve got their reasons.”

“Like what?”

“Like I’m . . . I’m . . . I’m not exactly the all-American girl.”

“Wouldn’t think that’d matter much in Pakistan.”

Studying her feet, she whispered. “I’m not . . . not . . . sane.”

He waited for more, but none was forthcoming. “That all?” She shot him an amazed look. “Shoot, darlin’, I ain’t been sane for at least twelve years—probably more—certified psycho since 1972.” His laugh was hearty. “It’s one of my more colorful personality traits. Who declared you insane? The head mullah?”

She reached for her canteen, drinking deeply. “No, it was long before I came here. I was always . . . different. My folks dragged me to a dozen shrinks, even some velvet-lined loony bins. When I met Michael, I thought, ‘Here’s what I’ve been missing. I’m not nuts, I just need the right . . . person to . . . help.’” She took another long swig. “I was wrong. He needed someone loyal, who didn’t have fingerprints on file with the Feds. Someone who could plant his bombs in small places.”

“That was you.”

“That was me. When the Feds got too close, he defected. Took me with him, so he’d have someone to sleep with. When the parades and vodka parties stopped, the Soviets expected him to earn his keep—so he took off.”

A long silence passed. “After the Russians . . . left, the villagers found me. At first, they tried to take me to their village, but I was pretty unstable. They didn’t want to hurt me—God knows why—so they left me here—brought me clothes and food. In a while, I started giving them chemical fertilizer and explosives in return. It’s not hard, really—Michael had taught me basics, and there were texts and lab notebooks here.”

“You know it’s funny . . . They come once a week—I count the days on a stick—and I find that right after they come, I get much calmer, happier. Toward the end of the week, I get more nervous—like there’s a monster on the edge of my mind, and I need fresh supplies to push him back.”

Heck, I know that feelin’. Like before the nurse brings the pills . . . He bolted upright. Damn! It’s just like that. What is in that stuff?

“Sweetheart, I need to get to my plane.”

“I can take you.”

“What about the fuel?”

Her smile bordered on brilliant. “I have lots of flexible tubing in the storeroom.” She squinted at the sun, now halfway up the eastern sky. “Your plane is almost directly down in this direction,” her lips moved silently as she triangulated the distance, “less than half a mile. We can weight the tubing, and feed it down,



with one of us guiding it on the rough parts. Attach the tube to a spigot, and the fuel will flow down. There should be enough pressure to fill your tanks in no time.”

Amazed, he stared at her. *She’s a different person. Confident, strong . . .* He closed his mouth firmly. His fate was tied to this strange woman, and there was no point in questioning it.

“What about a generator?” He asked. “I need a charge . . .”

“How about the radio? It’s got a crank generator: it may take some time, but taking turns, we should be able to get enough juice into your plane.”

Hot damn! She may be short, nuts and female—but she’s got some real B.A. in her! Maybe she can make me a rocket launcher out of some trash bags and popsicle sticks!

Laughing, he followed her to the storeroom.

Stopping only for lunch, they ran the tubing down the craggy hillside to the ravine, and filled both tanks of the plane. Then, she wired the radio to the plane, and had begun cranking. There was still not enough power to turn the engines, but as sunset approached, a faint flow of electricity had begun to register.

Only one could crank the radio at a time, and when it was Murdock’s turn, she returned to the house for his duffel and supplies. If they cranked all night, Murdock estimated that he should be able to start the engine. As he watched her scramble up the ravine, sorrow pricked his heart.

How can I leave her here—alone? She’s got no one to talk to except the bushes—what if she got hurt or sick? And this stuff she drinks—it’s got somethin’ in it.

If I take her back, they’ll arrest her for that bombing. Maybe her parents can hire some fancy lawyer to get her sprung. She’ll still have to serve time . . . Tiny little thing like her, she’d be dog meat in jail. His mind tumbled helplessly over the problem. If I leave her here, she’ll be safe, as long as these

villagers take care of her. What happens when she runs out of chemicals? Will they desert her? She's free here—but not really—she can't leave.

In his agitation, he began cranking faster, causing such a din that he did not notice her return. When he looked up, she and a heavily veiled figure were staring at his frenzied activity.

Startled at the sight of the stranger, he let out a small yelp, but did not stop cranking.

"Murdock, this is my friend, Harmeet," she said, casually as if introducing him at a party. He nodded, dumbstruck. "Harmeet speaks English pretty well—I've been teaching her—and she brought us extra food." To his quizzical glance, she replied, "The villagers set up a system of signals for me to use in emergencies."

"Um, well hello, Harmeet . . ." The dark eyes above the veil were serene and unafraid, as she ducked her head in reply. The American woman took Harmeet's basket, sat near Murdock, setting out food for an evening meal. Harmeet gracefully floated to the ground, and placidly stared at Murdock for a long moment before speaking.

"Muhr-dok, you leave soon?" Muffled by the thick veil, her voice was husky and deep.

"I'm gonna try, ma'am—depends on whether I get this bird charged up."

Harmeet absorbed this silently for a moment.

"You turn handle long time—maybe all night."

"I expect so."

"This . . . foolish, Muhr-dok. Small charge—plane need large one." Murdock stared, as Harmeet continued. "Little one did not tell you we have diesel generators?" Murdock glanced at his friend, who was busily arranging the food.

"Little one—go to the stone house and signal my father—he bring generator." Obediently, the smaller woman scurried up the ravine. Harmeet watched for a moment, then turned back to Murdock.

"You know, Muhr-dok, she does not want you to leave." Her English had improved markedly.

Arms aching, Murdock stopped. "But I must go . . . my friends are waiting."

"She knows that, and so, she helps you—but not as much as she can. Will you take her with you?"

Taken aback by her blunt question, Murdock sputtered, "I don't know . . . if I take her back, my government will arrest her. If she stays here . . ."

"If she stays here, you worry if she will live?" He nodded. "That is a hard choice: I cannot turn it into an easy one. I can tell you that we will protect her if we can." Shifting her weight under her flowing robe, Harmeet fixed him with a hard look. "We found the little one after the Russians left. They had beaten her, and worse . . . She was sitting near their lab, staring at the sky. My father found her, and carried her to our village, where he told me to tend her." Even through the veil, Murdock could discern a smile. "I have a degree in Nursing from Lahore. It is there I learned to speak English, but the Little One thinks she taught me. A harmless lie."

"Before long, we discovered her madness. She would strike out at invisible attackers, screaming horrible words. Once, she attacked my mother. It was

then that my father cast her from our home."

Harmeet stretched her legs. "I begged my father to let me help her, and he allowed me to do so. First, however, I needed to make sure she would not hurt herself."

"The lassi?"

Surprised, she nodded. "You are clever. Yes, in the lassi, and the bread, and the spices on the meat . . . We know many substances that ease torment of mind. These substances are not as . . . refined as Western drugs, but they soothe, and allow her to work. After a while, she and the village reached a compromise: she is protected, but so are we. We are helped by her work, and so is she."

Murdock was silent.

"You wonder, Muhr-dok, whether taking her away offers her more than leaving her here? I cannot tell you. I have seen the asylums in my country—even for the rich, they offer no hope. For the poor, they are worse than death. The patients there give nothing to the world, and take only misery. Maybe, in your country, it is different?"

Is it different? His fellow patients at the V.A. howled in his mind. *Pump us full 'a drugs, and zone us out, to keep the screaming down. If it weren't for the Team, I'd be just another doorknob with no reason to get up in the morning. Still . . .*

"What about her family? Don't they have a right to have their daughter back?"

Harmeet shrugged. "If you want to take her, we will not stop you. If she stays, we will continue as we have. Here, she gives to the world, and so, she can take as well. We will not harm her, but we cannot offer more. If we take her into the village, she will notice that her food is different, that she does not share what others eat and drink. Soon, she would determine—as you did—what we are doing. Perhaps she would rebel, perhaps not."

"I . . . I guess we can let her make up her own mind."

Harmeet's brow furrowed, as this idea had never occurred to her.

Murdock rubbed his sore arms, wishing he could massage his spirit as well. Harmeet's serene attitude did not relieve his turmoil. His heart ached for his friend, yet he knew that if he took her back, her life could be living hell. His head found sense in what Harmeet had said. *Hell, I don't even know if she wants to go back.* He glanced at Harmeet, who sat silently, eyes downcast. *But how long before some religious type decides she should be veiled, or married, or worse?*

Absently, he began to sample the food set out on the ground. *I need to get back to Hannibal and Face—soon. If they head back to Islamabad to find me, we may never hook up—can't stay here.* Dipping a piece of bread into some kind of soup, he debated the issue hotly with himself. Abruptly, he sat up. "What's in this food?" he demanded.

"That is nan paratha, bread with grain and tubers, and dahl—lentil soup. There is lamb as well . . ." Her voice was growing faint. "The soup was not for you, of course, but no real harm . . ."

No harm? What does she mean . . . ? Softly, night slipped over the conflict in his mind.

The roaring generator tore the sleep from him. Groggily, he remembered where he was.

It was another gray dawn—rainy and cold. His friend had donned a dull quilted jacket, far too large, and had wrapped a scarf around her head. She sat in the open door of the plane, her strange book on her lap, looking into space. Two men stood at a distance, regarding him warily.

“Good morning.” Harmeet’s voice rose over the engine noise. “My father and brother have brought our generator. It should service your needs.”

My needs . . . What if my I don’t know my needs?

Harmeet continued, “The men from the village moved the plane last night, so it would be easier for you to take off.”

Startled, Murdock looked around to find the plane was indeed turned ninety degrees from its landing, and the stray brush cleared from its path. *Hot damn! This might even be easy . . . Now to try to turn this sucker over.*

Clambering past his companion into the plane, Murdock checked the gauges, turned on the magnetos, and tugged on the wires that served as an ignition. Waving the others to safety, he cranked the engine once, twice, then, with a sputter, it turned over. He lowered the prop speed to a lazy whirl, just enough to keep the juice flowing, and jumped from the plane.

Without a word, the men disconnected the generator, beckoned Harmeet, and left. The Pakistani woman passed only to nod farewell to Murdock.

The small woman, oblivious to the engine, and the departure of the others, remained immobile in the doorway. Her eyes bore through the cloudy sky.

It’s now or never. He pulled himself next to her in the doorway. “Um, sweetheart . . . shoot, I don’t even know your name . . . I’ve got to go now—my friends are waiting.” Steeling himself, he asked, “Do you want to come with me?”

Eyes shining, she seemed to hear him for the first time: “I can take you to Karachi for sure, and probably all the way to California—though it’d be a rough flight—or we can get you passage on a freighter—it’d be safer.” *Dammit, is any of this getting through?*

“Look, you probably still got folks—worrying about you.” Slowly, she nodded. Encouraged, he went

on: “I’m sure they could help you beat that rap for the, uh, bombing, and get you back on track . . .” *Back on track—to what?* he wondered.

Hesitantly, she shook her head.

“What’s wrong?”

“Murdock, I cannot come.”

“Are you afraid? Of the villagers? Shoot, they won’t stop you . . .” But he knew she was not afraid.

“What would I do, back there? Who would need me—even a little?”

“Darlin’, you’re helping the folks here, but you should know, they, um, it’s . . . it’s . . .”

“I know,” she said simply. “I think I’ve known for a long time.” She paused reflectively. “It’s all right . . .”

“It’s not all right!” he exploded angrily. “It’s most definitely not all right to keep you doped up, dependent on . . .” Her mild look stopped him.

“Dependent on something to keep me sane? Like Thorazine, lithium, barbiturates . . . Like those pills you carried in your bag?” He flushed.

Shaking her head, she said, “The people here don’t offer me the best life—just the best life they can. I’m not ready to leave yet.” She held out her book to him, opening it as she did.

The page she chose held a small rectangle. On closer inspection, Murdock identified it as long-expired drivers’ license. Unlike the other pages in the book, there was only a single slash of black paint across the face on the license.

“The name, the address—should be easy to find my folks. Just—let them know . . . Let them know I found work.”

Slipping out of the plane, she walked away, leaving him standing with the book. He watched her easily climb the ravine, reaching the top quickly. At the ridge, she hesitated, but did not look back.

Returning to Islamabad, Murdock had to fight a crosswind to put the plane down on the runway. As it rolled to a stop, the pilot found himself staring through the windscreen. It was only when Hannibal and Face pounded on the plane’s fuselage that he snapped out of his reverie. Half hearing their excited report of the trip to Karachi, Murdock sought the horizon, gazing far into their dark green splendor, before turning his mind to the tasks ahead.

Part III: A Boat to the Finish

She leaned wearily against the bulkhead, soothed by its rough vibrations. Only ten years old, she looked even younger—inadequate nutrition, hard work, and childhood disease all conspired to keep her tiny.

Her name was Elish: she was Romanian. Her father had disappeared before her birth, leaving her mother to cope with yet another child. Despite government pressure to abandon Elish, her mother struggled to raise her family together.

Even now, stowed away on this Korean freighter, her mother, Racina, prayed with the children, and stoked their hopes with tales of America. Elish's three siblings listened enraptured. Only Elish questioned the golden dream, demanding details of the strange land.

Finally, exhausted, the others fell asleep. Elish, however, could not. She crept from the tiny metal storage locker that had served as her home for almost two weeks. Her mother had warned her repeatedly that the captain would throw them overboard if he discovered them, and that, if the captain discovered that the Filipino crewmen had been helping them—it could mean dire things for their helpers as well.

This warning cowed her siblings: Elish however was far too stubborn. She had managed to sneak out every night for at least a few minutes—just enough to wave to their friend on the night crew, before disappearing into her locker.

Elish spoke no Spanish or Tagalog, the Filipinos, no Romanian—yet they communicated out of common emotions—fear, deprivation, oppression. In the hierarchy of the ship, the Filipinos were the lowest. They toiled in the engine rooms, slept in communal quarters by the thumping pistons. Though their salaries far exceeded anything they could make at home, they still earned less than anyone else on the ship. Most of the day, they were segregated from the Korean and European crew members—eating in a separate mess, denied access to the ship's meager entertainment, such as the library and record player. No matter—the library held only books in Korean, the music limited to praise of the leader of South Korea.

Not all of the Filipinos supported the decision to befriend the stowaways. Most feared for their jobs and their families' welfare if the Korean ship owners black-listed them. Not all supported, but none betrayed.

So when Elish played her nightly game, sticking her little head over the barrel of oil, she felt a measure of risk—but also a measure of safety. Tonight, however, her friend, upon seeing her, waved frantically at her, as if in warning. Too late.

A large hand clapped her on the shoulder. Frozen with terror, she did not resist the hand as it turned her around. A huge black man, wearing several gold chains, was staring at her.

His lips moved, but above the roar of the engines, she could not make out a sound—not that she would have understood his English.

With amazing gentleness, he lifted her, staring into her eyes. He spoke again. The words were

gibberish, but his tone calmed her.

“Little sister, what you doin’ in this place?”

In the corner of her eye, she could see the Filipino crewman tense, fingers curled around a large wrench. For some reason, the crewman's concern made her smile, and she watched as he lowered the wrench.

“Little sister,” the black man repeated, “What you doin’ here?”

Elish did not understand the words, but she did understand the concern in his eyes. Fascinated, she reached for one of his gold necklaces. Even in the dim room, it sparkled with a million lights. Cradled by the big man, she felt remarkably safe. Something about the shine soothed her, and she relaxed into his arms.

B.A. Baracus was restless at night. Much as he hated to fly, he was beginning to regret his decision to seek passage on this freighter. He missed his companions—even that fool Murdock—and felt a deep isolation. Since he had embarked in Karachi, Pakistan, the hierarchy of the ship affronted his sense of democracy. A small Korean crew commanded the ship, with two Italians serving as purser and ship's accountant. The rest of the crew was Filipino and Indonesian, and, in B.A.'s eyes, they were treated as second-class citizens. The captain treated the below-deck crew as beneath contempt, refusing to even attempt to communicate with them. The Italians were somewhat kinder, breaking through the language barrier with English and Spanish, but the captain discouraged this contact as inappropriate.

Having served in Viet Nam, B.A. was aware of the strict caste system in many Asian cultures, but this captain seemed bent on enforcing an even more arduous one. Moreover, even as a paying passenger, B.A. felt the captain's low regard for African-Americans. Therefore, B.A. found himself gravitating to the below-deck crew for companionship.

There, he found the noise and smell of the engines a welcome relief from the tedium of the dark sea and small cabins. Here, the Filipinos ruled their world of grease and fumes, unconnected to the rest of the ship, except for the occasional squawk of the intercom. The senior crew never ventured into the dark hold, never risked streaks on their gleaming white uniforms. This state of affairs suited the engine crew—and B.A. as well.

After a fashion, he communicated with the engine crew, learning about the huge pistons, and massive tanks. With them, he discussed engine design, mechanical engineering, fuel economy and the general state of the diesel universe. Politics, class systems and the world order remained above deck.

This night, he was particularly uneasy. The first mate had dogged his heels all day, crowding him with suspicion and mistrust. Growling at the mate had only made the man follow at a distance. The camaraderie of the engine room was more inviting, causing him to stay far longer than usual.



Inexplicably, his companions grew nervous. *What's buggin' 'em?* B. A. wondered. *They 'fraid that mate come down here?* He chortled at the thought. *Little toy sailor, he too 'fraid to mess up his whites!* Still, the mechanics encouraged him to leave the hold, using the peculiar mix of Spanish and English the group had settled on. When he saw the little head, he realized why.

Approaching the child, he touched her gently, appalled by the fragile bones he felt. *Oh Lord, ain't this child eaten?* As she turned her terrified eyes to him, he could only murmur, "Don't be afraid—I won't hurt you."

So this is what they hidin'. No wonder, that tin captain find her, no tellin' what he'd do. Wonder if she alone?

"Little sister, what you doin' in this place?" B.A. scooped the girl into his arms, and repeated his question, knowing that she could not reply.

Her tiny hand reached for his gold chain, fingering the links pensively. Mesmerized, she relaxed against his chest.

B.A. returned to the small group on duty, carrying the girl as if she were no heavier than a pencil. Searching their eyes, he said nothing, but received the answers he needed. These men were protecting this child, and he wholeheartedly joined their conspiracy of silence.

He asked if the child needed food—the men shook their heads, and showed B.A. the store of food they had gathered. From the amount in the box, he knew the answer to the next inquiry: she was not alone.

Elish was sleeping soundly in his arms now, without a care in the world. Although he would not put her down, B.A. saw that the crewmen were hesitant to show him the child's hiding place. *That what they call the "need to know" basis, huh?* he thought. *What I don't know, I can't let slip out.* The Filipinos stared, smiling; B.A. stared, characteristically scowling.

The impasse ended in a few seconds, when

Elish's mother came out of her hiding place. Normally a timid woman, Racina had fire and steel in her heart where her children were concerned. Conducting her usual midnight bedcheck (which Elish had never before missed, despite her wanderings), Racina panicked when her daughter was not in her assigned place. Creeping through the massive engine compartment, she saw Elish in the arms of a giant—and a gold-cruled black giant at that. While running into B.A. Baracus was comparable to running into a brick wall, Racina did just that.

Whirling madly, Racina pummeled B.A., to the vast amusement of the sailors witnessing the sight.

"Hey, mama cut it out, hey stop! Fellas, stop her! Amigos, ayuda mi!" B.A. sputtered as the small woman continued her attack. Laughing, the Filipinos finally took pity on the big man, and pulled off Racina, who pleaded in Romanian for her daughter. Slowly, she realized that Elish was in no danger. Panting, she watched B.A. steadily, as the ludicrous nature of the standoff began to dawn on everyone: a tiny woman, weak from poor nutrition and lack of fresh air, assaulting a giant, who tenderly cradled an even tinier child. Racina gradually remembered how to smile, and finally, everyone relaxed into laughter.

Racina held out her arms for Elish: B.A. gently deposited the child there. Elish had fallen asleep with her hands curled tightly around one of his chains. Rather than wake the child, B.A. removed the necklace, and over Racina's protests, laid it across Elish's chest.

"It's okay, mama." Despite the noise, and the language barrier, both understood the nature of their communication: the chain was a gift, and B.A. was a friend. He scooped up the box of food the crewmen had gathered and indicated that he would carry it to their hiding places. Tentatively, Racina nodded, and led B.A. on the torturous route to the metal storage lockers, which served as their haven.

The area in which the lockers were situated was not quite as noisy as the rest of the engine compartment, and a feeble stream of air wafted from the ventilation system nearby. The lockers themselves were approximately eight feet by ten, tall enough for a small person to stand in, and stacked two high. B.A.'s heart fell when he saw the pitiful accommodations, which the family struggled to keep as clean as possible. The three other children were sleeping soundly in their underwear on tattered blankets, their clothes hung neatly on the ladder which gave access to the higher lockers. For safety, the locker doors were closed, which increased the temperature to over 100 degrees. *Poor folks, they sleep with the doors closed so they won't get caught, but they clothes are hangin' out like a sign!*

B.A. followed Racina's hand gestures and laid the food in one of the lockers. Racina laid her daughter in another. She indicated that he should take his necklace, but B.A. simply smiled and shook his head. *What I need that chain for? Just 'nother weight on my neck.*

It was almost dawn by the time B.A. returned to the upper deck, but he did not feel tired. A soft warmth had spread through his body, creating an aura of peace. When he bumped into the first mate, he barely growled at the stunned officer.

“Out my way, fool,” he muttered, barely noticing the man’s rumpled appearance at first. Then as he made his way to his cabin, he looked again: the normally spit-shine first officer had clearly slept in his uniform—or tried to sleep. His haggard expression bespoke a sleepless night as he stood and stared at B.A.

Wha’ that fool want from me? B.A.’s normal impatience was muted. *He look like he been here on deck all night.* It slowly dawned on the big man that the mate *had* been there all night—waiting for B.A. to return from below. A flood of contradictory emotions washed over B.A.: anger at being followed, but curiosity at the sailor’s actions, melded with weariness. He gestured to the mate, who hesitantly approached.

“Wha’ you want?”

The mate’s English was tentative. “I need to know if you help me.”

“Help you? Help you do wha’?”

“This bad ship—bad captain. I think he have terrible plan. I cannot find out, cannot stop him alone.”

B.A.’s eyes narrowed. It seemed unlikely that the U.S. Army could be setting a trap, but he was wary nonetheless. “So wha’ you think I can do? I ain’t no policeman.”

The Korean looked around furtively. “I have family in Los Angeles—I visit a lot and they send newspapers. Are you . . .” he gulped nervously, “A-Team?”

Had the man not been so obviously terrified, B.A. might have reacted with violence. As it was, he glowered, “Don’ know what you talkin’ ’bout. I’m jes’ a passenger.”

Disappointment flooded the mate’s face. “Not A-Team? Then, I am very sorry.” He turned dejectedly.

“Wait.” B.A. could scarcely believe his own voice. “Why you wan’ the A-Team, anyway?”

The mate shrugged. “Captain Yuan very powerful—have powerful friends. If I fail, he will kill me—and maybe my wife and children.”

Shaking his head, B.A. slid to the deck and waved the mate over. “Why don’ you start at the beginnin’. Maybe I can be a little help, anyway.” The sailor joined him on the deck.

“What your name, fella?”

“Young Ji. Please, call me Ji.”

The mate’s tale was chilling. Young Ji was a career officer, assigned to many ships over the past twenty years. Because of his modest background, he had risen as far as he was likely to go, and contented himself with serving as the second to a series of hard-nosed commanding officers. Captain Yuan had been newly appointed to his post, and from the first, had seemed determined to prove himself harsher than his predecessors.

Like many freighters, this one meandered through Europe and Asia, in an almost haphazard fashion. It appeared to Ji, however, that Captain Yuan spent an inordinate amount of time in Iron Curtain countries, such as Poland and Albania. Consequently, the crew was often pushed to cut short its stays in other countries, and to make up for lost time en route.

A week after the ship had left Trieste, in Yugoslavia, the captain had discovered two stowaways.

Standard procedure required that the stowaways be deposited in the nearest port of call, or returned to Trieste. By then, however, the ship had passed through the Straits of Gibraltar and was steaming down the African coast. Furious, the captain refused to return to port, or even detour to Sierra Leone. Screaming about the loss of time, he had ordered the stowaways thrown overboard. It was only Young Ji’s pleading which convinced the captain to allow the two unfortunates a life raft and some water. Still, the mate was sure that the two could not have survived, even in mild seas, for very long.

Lowering his eye, Ji whispered, “Captain Yuan so angry, I believe he throw me overboard, too. I think about my wife, my children, and I say no more. I don’t give them food, or radio—I just watch.” The man’s shame was visible.

Appalled, B.A. stared at Ji’s head. In his fatigue, he could think only of Elish and her family. It was inconceivable that anyone could simply abandon people on the open sea—yet he believed that the captain would do the same to the family in the hold. Laying an arm gently on the man’s shoulders, B.A. had no words to console him.

There was more to the officer’s tale, however. As is customary at sea, Ji and the captain alternated shifts. Oddly, the captain preferred the night hours, and permitted Ji the daytime. After the stowaways had been cast off, however, Ji found sleep elusive. Even after his long watch, he could not rest, and often wandered the decks aimlessly. It was on one such walk that he saw Captain Yuan coming from a forward cabin. Yuan seldom left the bridge during his watch, preferring to summon whomever he needed to the bridge. He had certainly never gone below deck, or even strolled around the ship. Now, something about the senior officer’s furtive behavior roused Ji’s suspicions, and he waited for the captain to return to the bridge.

The cabin was seldom used, as it stood apart from other sleeping compartments, close to the cargo bays, and easily filled with the smell of whatever the bays held. Moreover, the captain had declared that the cabin’s toilet was broken, and the room was unfit for passengers or officers. Until that moment, Ji had not questioned the captain’s decision, nor had he been curious about why the captain had chosen to examine the plumbing of this particular compartment. Now, however, the peculiarity of Yuan’s actions struck him.

When the coast was clear, Ji crept to the cabin door. Testing it, he was unsurprised to find it locked. He placed his ear against the metal, but heard nothing. Still suspicious, he looked around: seeing a bucket of paint—common on ships which are constantly in need of its protection, he laid a thick stripe of paint just in front of the door. Standing up, he examined his work. The fresh paint was the same color as the deck, so it would not likely be detected. It was thick enough, however, to dry slowly, and retain any footprints for at least a day.

Returning the next night, he checked the paint line: it remained intact. That day, the ship was due in Namibia, Angola. Again, the captain seemed heedless of the danger in stopping at a small port, in a country

embroiled in civil war. Namibia itself was torn between the Marxist UNITA rebels and the tattered government. Again, the ship docked far too long, in Ji's opinion.

Ji watched carefully, choosing a moment to place his thick line of paint. After the ship had cast off, he examined the paint: it was smeared, indicating that something large had been dragged into the cabin.

"So, there something in that cabin that captain not want us to see," Ji concluded.

B.A. furrowed his brow. "I don't git it. Maybe he jes' want to keep some souvenirs or somethin' in there. Maybe it jes' cargo."

Ji shook his head firmly. "Not cargo. I see manifests—we take on nothing in Namibia—just unload. That strange, too—not usual for ship to unload in port and not take on—not make sense. And there no souvenirs in Angola—unless you run guns." He looked at B.A. meaningfully.

"You think the captain take on guns?"

The shake of his head was less sure. "Maybe, I don't know. Whatever he take, it big and it secret." Ji was clearly worried. "One more thing—last night, I think I hear voices in the cabin."

"Voices?"

"Yes. Very low, but I think I hear Chinese."

"Chinese?" B.A. took this in slowly. The divided Korean peninsula was, to this day, still officially at war. Occasional skirmishes plagued the DMZ—the Demilitarized Zone, while rigid dictator-ships gripped both sides. The Chinese, the Soviets and the Americans, as well as other countries, still had their military hands in the situation. The presence of someone who spoke Chinese could be meaningless. Such a presence that the captain chose to keep secret—that could be significant, indeed.

Again, B.A. regretted his choice of transportation. "Take me to this cabin, Ji."

"You help me?"

"Yeah. I help you."

Ji relieved the captain at dawn, as usual, then waited a short time before signaling B.A. to meet him at the locked cabin. After checking carefully for Captain Yuan, Ji showed B.A. the smeared paint streak, as B.A. pressed an ear to the cabin door.

Shaking his head, B.A. whispered, "I don't hear nothin'." He stepped away from the door and motioned Ji to follow. "Any way we can get into this cabin?"

Ji looked confused. "Just the door. No portholes—this inside cabin."

B.A. scowled thoughtfully. "So can't we use the service tubes or ventilation shafts? I know you got 'em."

Wrinkling his brow, Ji replied, "There air vent, but it very small—maybe this big." He held his hands about eighteen inches apart. "We can't get through."

B.A. grunted. *Damn, if Face was here, he could pick that lock like nothin'. Can't risk pryin' the door open, 'cause then Yuan know for sure somethin' up. 'Sides, who knows who's in there.* He glanced at Ji, wondering how far he could trust him. For all his distress, Ji might not want to risk his career and possibly

his life in open defiance of his captain.

Something about Ji's face reminded B.A. of Lin Duc Tho, the cook at the POW camp in which he and his teammates had been interred. Lin Duc Tho had risked his life to protect men who were his enemies, feeding prisoners who would have certainly died without his intervention. B.A. had never questioned his motives. Nor, he decided, would he doubt this man's integrity.

"Meet me in my cabin, tonight, after mess. I think I know how we find out what's behind that door."

B.A. was never sure how he got Racina to agree to let Elish come with him. Certainly, he stressed to the Filipino crew and to her, that his request was dangerous. Racina could follow some of his Spanish, as Romanian shared Latin roots with that language, and seemed to comprehend that this was important. She hugged Elish, and chastised her for some imagined future transgression, then blessed her repeatedly before letting her go.

Elish, on the other hand, accepted this as a merry adventure. She crawled into a duffel bag, and giggled as B.A. slung her over his shoulder.

"Hush, little sister, can't have no laughin' sack!"

She quieted down for the trip to B.A.'s cabin.

As agreed, Ji arrived after his watch. Quickly entering the room, he closed the door behind him.

B.A. began hesitantly. "Now, Ji, you gotta promise to keep this to yourself . . ."

A tiny head appeared from behind B.A. Ji's jaw dropped as he began to sputter.

"B-b-but, who . . . what . . . This is highly irregular!"

Lord, don't get "regular" on me now! "Look, Ji, we need to get someone through that shaft. This here Elish—she small, and she tough. Tha' make her the best one for the job."

Standing stiffly, Ji quivered slightly. B.A. could sense his concern. Already in the captain's bad graces, Ji would be severely punished for any further misconduct—real or perceived. And Elish, though barely four feet tall, was a huge dose of trouble.

The little girl approached Ji, her huge eyes serious. In solemn tones, she promised to be no trouble, and assist "Mr. Giant" in whatever way she could. Her words rattled meaninglessly in Ji's ears, but another voice—that of his own small daughter—sounded in his heart. Despite the danger, Yuan's secret had to be discovered. He held out his hand, and Elish shook it, formally.

The plan was simple: Elish, carrying a paper and pencil, would enter the service tube about fifty feet from the locked cabin, then crawl to the appropriate grate. She was to make a simple drawing of anything she found in the room, and crawl out.

The trio waited until the captain was safely in his cabin, and no one was in the immediate vicinity. Hoisting the small child into the tube, B.A. handed her the drawing materials, and gently patted her cheek. Elish smiled broadly, and headed down the shaft.

The tube was indeed small, even for a child: it was also dark, dusty and studded with protrusions of all sorts. Elish gritted her teeth around the pencil as screws, nails and other hardware tore through her clothes, leaving deep scratches on her skin. For comfort, she quickly squeezed the gold chain that B.A. had allowed her to keep. The tube was hot, and full of stale smells. Even the close living quarters she had been suffering through had not prepared her: She gagged helplessly, but continued on.

Finally reaching the turn that led to the grate, she peered through. At first, she could only see dark shapes; then as her eyes adjusted, she could distinguish a large box, and two human forms huddled over a faintly glowing panel. Straining her ears, she heard a soft muttering, but nothing she could understand.

Pulling the paper from her pocket, she drew two stick figures, then struggled to get a better look at the panel. Suddenly, one of the figures switched on a light.

Shrinking back, she waited, breath abated. After terribly long seconds, she moved toward the grate again. In the new light, she could see two men, Oriental in features. Despite the heat, both wore dark sweaters and pants, and hunched over something she could not quite see. She could see a headset, however, and she added that to her picture. Wiggling around a bit, she could also see the box. It was about one meter high, and looked like metal. Elish bit her lip: how would she indicate metal on her picture? With a minute sigh, she settled for adding the odd symbol on the box to her picture. At least that was simple: a circle with three triangles.

Satisfied that she could add no more to her penciled "report", Elish squirmed backwards, painfully. In her eagerness to remain silent, she ignored the sharp protrusions and rough edges. She even disregarded the long sheet metal screw that caught on B.A.'s necklace and pulled it from her pocket.

Later, in the relative safety of B.A.'s cabin, B.A. and Ji examined the drawing, as Elish waited anxiously.

B.A. scrunched up his face. "Look like you right, Ji—there somebody in there." He turned to the little girl. "'Lish, these men, what they look like?"

Elish blinked uncomprehending.

Ji stepped in. "These men—" he pointed to the stick figures "—they have eyes—" he pointed to his eyes "—like mine or B.A.?" He pointed to B.A.'s eyes.

Elish smiled, and pointed to Ji's eyes. He tried again. "They have clothes like this?" indicating his uniform jacket. The little girl shook her head, and held out her own drab clothing. Ji nodded.

B.A. tried again. "This box—it this big—" he held his hands about ten inches apart "—or this big?" he held his hands wider. Elish considered this thoughtfully, then squatted, placed her hand on the floor, then brought it about three feet from its starting place. Setting the object's height for her friend, she then stretched her arms as wide as she could to express the width of the box.

"Good! Now, 'Lish, what this thing?" His big finger stabbed at the drawing of the headset. Elish placed her hands over her ears.

"Earphones!" Ji guessed. "They must have radio!"

B.A. leaned over Elish, seriously. "Little sister, this very important—this symbol here, the three triangles, you sure it look like this?"

Elish bit her lip, trying to comprehend the question. B.A. stroked her cheek gently. "This symbol, looked just like this?" She shrugged, helplessly. B.A.'s eyes met Ji's, locking in mutual awareness: If Elish were accurate in her artwork, the three triangles indicated that whatever the captain's mysterious cargo, it was marked as radioactive.

Captain Yuan was a most disagreeable man at the best of times. Today, a week out of Karachi, nearing Bangladesh, running two weeks behind schedule, he was virtually toxic with rage. This particular evening, the object of his fury was an unfortunate deck hand whose crime appeared to be swabbing the pilot house deck at an inopportune time.

"Idiot! Fool!" Yuan kicked the pail of soap water violently. He hurled abuse in Korean at the Indonesian teenager, who cowered in complete incomprehension. Finally, the captain stormed from the room, slipping on the suds as he went.

Morons! I'm surrounded! Fuming, Yuan hurried down the steps, heading for the locked forward cabin. Glancing furtively around, he unlocked the door and entered.

The two men in the dark room jumped to their feet, guns drawn. Yuan's lip curled in contempt. *Cowards! Who do they think is entering, using a key!* Forcing his sneer into a false smile, Yuan nodded curtly to the men. Although fluent in several dialects of Chinese, Yuan forced the men to stumble through in Korean.

"How are you faring, comrades?" he said cheerfully, noting with satisfaction that the airless compartment was stifling hot. Yuan had nothing against these men personally—indeed he had spoken no more than a dozen words to them since they boarded in Angola. No, they were merely symbols of how his Chinese masters did not trust him to complete his mission without supervision. That thought deepened his foul mood: had he not delivered arms shipments, trade secrets and even people without being caught? The box, for all their concern, presented no challenge. Moreover, the two watchdogs were an increased burden.

The two men nodded miserably, also forcing smiles, as they blinked the sweat from their eyes.

"I trust all is well? Our mission proceeds with no difficulty?" Yuan patted the large metal cube that occupied the center of the room—occupying so much precious floor space that the men were limited to sitting on the single bed or the open toilet. Crammed under the bed were the pair's few possessions, and the remnants of the single meal they were allotted each day. Perched on the sink was a radio. Yuan knew that the pounding of the engines would make communication

especially perilous: in order to be heard above the din, the radio operator needed to shout. Shouting made discovery more likely, therefore, verbal communication was kept to a minimum.

The smaller of the two men tentatively spoke. "Comrade, as you know, our mission is paramount. We have no interest in our own comforts. The temperature of this room, however, is damaging to our radio. Could perhaps some fresh air be directed to this room?"

Yuan's smile had deteriorated into a smirk. *These Chinese are pathetic! How can they hope to defeat our enemies when they are so weak?* "I believe you are mistaken, comrade: the fresh air vent pumps copious amounts of air into this room every minute." Yuan planted a foot onto the bunk, and smacked the grate over the airshaft. "See? Plenty of fresh air for your radio." He was about to launch into a diatribe about the softness of his comrades when a glint in the air shaft caught his eye. Grabbing the grate, he yanked it off, tossing it below—barely missing one of the men.

Reaching into the tube, Yuan pulled out a slender gold chain. Drawing it into the dim light, he ignored the confusion of his companions. *What could this be?* The charm on the end of the chain was a small helicopter. Such a frivolous piece was unlikely to belong to any of his senior crew. Nor could he picture any of the Filipinos or Indonesians owning such a trinket. He thought of his single passenger. *That black ape! He would wear such a bauble! But how . . . ?* This was a mystery beyond Yuan's ken. His passenger was a large man—impossible that he could fit in this narrow tube.

Wrapping his handkerchief around his hand, Yuan felt around the tube. Withdrawing his hand, he examined it in the poor light. There was little dust, but there were brownish streaks on the cloth. *Blood?* He stepped carefully from the bunk, plastering his false smile again across his face.

"You see?" he advised, "Plenty of fresh air! Nothing to whine about!" Briskly he wiped his hands on his handkerchief. "Now, what further can I do for you?"

Hopelessly the second man spoke, "Comrade Yuan, perhaps some food? Our supplies are very low . . ."

"Food, comrade? How can I bring you food? Surely the captain of this vessel cannot be seen stuffing his pockets with bread like a beggar! Our mission would be discovered!" He smirked again. "Perhaps I will be able to divert some of the table scraps. See that you don't grow too fat, comrades!" He wagged a mocking finger at the two. "The door is small, and you may get stuck."

With that warning, Yuan turned, opened the door slowly, then left. In the cool moon light he examined the gold helicopter. In the dim light he could not see all the details, but he could see an inscription: "To B.A.—Fly high. H.M." As the captain of an ocean-going vessel, Yuan could read and speak some English, but the inscription made no sense.

B.A.? This does belong to that American dog! Perhaps he will share with us how it got into the airshaft . . .

Earlier that evening, Ji and B.A. had debated their next move.

"There no doubt about it—we need help! I have to contact my friends," B.A. insisted.

Ji shook his head emphatically. "Very dangerous . . . We can't tell who captain is working with . . ."

"Don' matter—we can't do this alone. Gotta get reinforcements. Is there a radio telephone on board?"

Ji hesitated. Located in the radio room behind the bridge, the radio telephone's use was strictly monitored. If they used it on Ji's day shift, most of the men would be on duty. Moreover, B.A. was scarcely inconspicuous. Not only was he the only black man on board—he was the only American, and the only person wearing feathered earrings. All in all, Ji did not think B.A.'s phone usage would escape notice. B.A. had to agree.

They decided that it would be safer to attempt the use during the evening, although that meant risking discovery by Yuan. At least during Yuan's shift, they knew where he would be. On his off-hours he could be anywhere. They would need a diversion.

A successful diversion, however, required additional assistance. It had to be simple, effective, and so commonplace as to arouse no suspicion. Ji smiled suddenly.

"Swab deck!"

"Say wha'?"

"Captain Yuan hate smell of disinfectant, but insist that all decks—especially bridge deck—be cleaned every day. We make bridge deck dirty, have someone swab at night, Captain leave bridge. Simple!"

Simple, huh? B.A. thought. How we get someone to clean without lettin' them in on the deal?

Despite B.A.'s misgivings, the plan was perfect in its simplicity. At the end of his shift, Ji strategically spilled coffee, then called for someone to clean it up. The deckhand arrived a minute after the captain took the watch. Yuan therefore saw the mess, and couldn't question the wisdom of a prompt clean-up. He also couldn't witness the deckhand's bewilderment at Ji's order for extra disinfectant.

Ji and B.A. watched Yuan storm off the bridge. Waiting for the captain to put a good deal of distance between himself and the radiotelephone, the pair took off for the bridge as soon as it was safe.

Sweeping past the helmsman and deckhand without a word, Ji entered the radio room. B.A. followed, shaking his head at his companion's actions. *Never get used to tha' chain a' command stuff. Worse 'en the army!* It never occurred to Ji to explain himself, and never occurred to the crew to question.

Curtly, Ji ordered the radio operator to get the number B.A. had given him. The operator was startled, but nodded without a word and complied. After a few moments, the operator offered apologetically that there was no response.

Ji looked at B.A. blankly. The big man scowled. *No answer? Where those guys at?* After a moment's thought, he scribbled another number—that of Amy Allen, the reporter who often joined the team on their escapades. While there was no human at Amy's office

number, he left a detailed message on her answering machine, asking her to tell the Team to meet him on the pier when the ship docked in Bangladesh. For B.A., this was close to long-winded.

Disconnecting the call, B.A. stood for a minute, bewildered. Amy was often on foreign assignments, although her outgoing message usually provided that information. This time, the machine gave no such clues. He hoped that Amy would get the message, but couldn't be sure.

Staring at the folded list of telephone numbers which served as his address book, B.A. barked one further number at the operator—that of H.M. Murdock. *Crazy fool—he never out of touch with that phone machine for long.*

After leaving the same message for Murdock, B.A. felt strangely empty. *Nothin' to do now, but wait . . .* He forced from his mind thoughts of his companions missing the rendezvous. *They ain't never let me down before—ain't gonna do it now.*

"Thank you." The radio operator was startled at the sudden courtesy, and nodded briefly. Ji's glance instructed him to hold his tongue. The first officer also took the log sheet from the pad, thereby removing all record of the three calls. Again, the radio operator said nothing. Ji was stern, but he was also honest and fair. If he wanted no reminders of this big black man's calls, the operator would not question that decision. *Besides, the radio operator reflected as the two men strode from the bridge, Ji will be here for a long time. This captain with the foul temper and cruel ways—he will be gone soon enough. Such men always are.* He returned to his work with a sense of satisfaction.

B.A. and Ji sat glumly in B.A.'s cabin. For all the risk taken with the telephone call, it was not clear that help would arrive in Bangladesh. Out of any conversation, Ji excused himself and went to his own quarters to attempt sleep.

The next day, Ji took his watch as usual. Captain Yuan thrust the logs in his hands, and strode off. Ji could not tell whether Yuan was more hostile than usual. The radio operator left quickly, sneaking only the slightest glance at Ji.

The day passed uneventfully. Ji did not see B.A.—but then, he did not expect to. Passengers were not encouraged on the bridge. Even an uneventful day, however, was full of tasks and routine. It was only at dinner in the officers' mess that Ji noticed B.A. was missing.

Ji strode briskly around the ship, trying to disguise the fact that he was heading for B.A.'s cabin. Passing unnoticed through the passages, he arrived at the isolated cabin. The cabin door was unlocked—standard for crew, but odd for a passenger. Ji fought down the dread rising in his throat.

B.A.'s room, unlike the man, was austere. A simple duffel lay on the floor, open to reveal neatly folded clothes. The bed was made—also odd, as the freighter offered no maid service beyond tossing clean linen on the bunk once a week. A Bible, open to the Psalms, was the only other personal object visible.

A chill passed through Ji: *What is wrong here?* The room was neat—just as B.A. would have left it.

No indications of a fight, or an accident, yet he could not escape the feeling that his ally was in trouble. He squeezed into the tiny bathroom. A shaving kit sprawled on the edge of the sink, precariously, slightly open to reveal the basic necessities of travel: toothbrush, comb, razor. No cologne, no manicure implements—nothing of a personal nature.

Nothing of a personal nature. The words echoed in Ji's mind. In a flash, it occurred to him what was missing: There was no jewelry. While B.A. wore a minimum of jewelry (for him) on board the ship, Ji knew that he had a trove stored in his cabin. Yet, there was no sign of it anywhere.

Stepping back into the main cabin, Ji scanned the room carefully. *Think!* he chastised himself. *Where would this man hide his most important things?* Ji did not know why he needed to find B.A.'s jewelry—he only knew he did.

The tiny room was relatively easy to search: the bed, a chair and a desk-height shelf were the only furnishings. The duffel was small, and contained nothing of interest. He raised the mattress, opened the toilet and peered under the bed and the shelf. *Where? Where?* His frustration mounted. A whiff of air tickled his face. *That's it! The airshaft!* Excitedly, he stood on the bed and peered into the grating that covered the vent. He could see nothing. Yanking the grate off, he reached in and felt around. Nothing.

Dejected, Ji pulled the chair out to sit, scraping the chair leg heavily across the metal floor. Something caught on the leg as he did so. Ji dropped to his knees. The seam of the floor was uneven. He reached for his penknife, and ran the slim blade down the crack. A piece of the metal floor shifted. *But how? These floors are solid . . .* Working carefully, Ji pried the plate up.

Amazingly, the piece of metal had been recently cut—cleanly and smoothly. The edges had been filed, and the piece returned to its place. Even from his position on the floor, Ji could hardly see the seam.

Beneath the hole was a steel I-beam, its flat surface confounding Ji. *Why go to all this trouble to reveal a space that could hold nothing?* Unwilling to accept this conclusion, Ji ran his hand over the beam's surface. The first time he felt nothing. On the second try, he felt a gap next to the I-beam—a gap far too small for even his slender fingers. Certainly B.A.'s big hands could not reach into the space. Again, he ran his hand down the beam, but more slowly—and was rewarded with—something. *Thread? No, not thread—wire!* He looped the wire around his finger and tugged gently. The wire pulled up, then snagged on something unseen.

Ji lay on the floor, peering into the space. A tiny piece of white cloth showed. With a little wiggling, the cloth grew larger, until Ji could discern the mouth of a sack. From the resistance on the wire, the sack was filled with something heavy.

In a few moments, Ji realized that he could hold the sack with one hand and "fish" with the wire in the other. Pulling on the wire, Ji was rewarded with a shining gold catch. Smiling, Ji pictured his friend, painstakingly feeding his precious gold into the sack piece by piece. Fumbling again with the line, Ji retrieved something light.

It was a piece of paper, with a scribbled drawing. A stick figure, with long hair, stood in a rectangle. Above the rectangle was a single parallel line.

Ji studied the drawing. *This is a message . . . the figure—that is the girl . . . the box? Could he be telling me to look in the airshaft? But it is empty!*

The dark hole of the duct stared at him. Again, he stood on the bed, and groped in the shaft. *The second line . . . what can that mean? Maybe . . . the top of the shaft?* Ji pushed upward. The “ceiling” of the shaft moved easily. Balancing on the iron frame of the bed to gain a few inches, Ji found his treasure trove: Several chunky pieces of jewelry fell into his hand. One chain had been looped into something more useful—a revolver.

Ji examined the weapon with interest. Having completed compulsory military service, he had been trained to use such things, but it had been many years since the need had arisen. A small shiver raced down his spine as he checked the safety and stuck the revolver into his waist band, smoothing his uniform jacket over it.

Again, he balanced on the bed frame and felt around the opening. Again, he was rewarded. A leather case, not much larger than the Bible B.A. carried, had been stowed in the hole.

Satisfied that there was nothing more in the hiding place, Ji replaced everything as carefully as possible. Gathering the jewelry and the tools, Ji furtively glanced around for something to carry them in. On the top of the duffel, folded neatly was a khaki vest, with numerous pockets. Shoving his booty into the various pockets, Ji scurried from the room.

Once in his own quarters, Ji secreted the jewelry in the frame of his bed. Unlike passenger cabins, the first mate’s had a wooden framed bed, with built-in bookcases. The bottom shelf lifted out, revealing a small hollow he could fill with B.A.’s treasures. As an added precaution, he placed three books on the shelf, and laid a thread across the top. If anyone moved the books, the thread would fall.

After the jewelry was safe, Ji examined the leather case. It was black, worn smooth, but carefully polished. Two straps buckled the case closed. A guilty feeling washed over Ji; he felt as if he were intruding on something very private. Nevertheless, he opened the case.

Nestled in well-worn suede compartments was a set of tools. Tweezers, pliers, screwdrivers, a tiny soldering iron, razors and miniature files were all carefully in place.

Ji ran his fingers over the tweezers, imagining the fine tools in B.A.’s big hands. *Tell me*, he commanded, *what has happened with my ally!* Snorting in disgust at his foolish thought, he snapped the case shut and tossed it onto the bed. *As if little pieces of metal could tell me anything.*

The case struck the wooden bed frame sharply, giving forth a soft “ping” sound. Ji retrieved the case: the corner of the case had parted slightly. *Ah, no! I have broken his case.* On closer inspection, however, Ji saw that the case was not broken. Inside the corner was a tiny clasp. Peering into the corner, Ji saw a strip of

metal, which he used the tweezers to extract. The strip was attached somewhere to the inside of the case, and barely reached the outside of the case. As he tugged, a second “ping” sounded, and within the case, a red light glowed, as tiny as a match head.

Oh, my friend, what is this box—what have you left here? Is this a beacon to you? Or is this some weapon which will explode and destroy me? Confused, he pushed the secret compartment shut, and placed the box on his bookshelf. He could not imagine B.A. would leave a dangerous weapon—yet, what about the revolver? *Should I throw this box overboard?* He shoved a book in front of the box, and rose hurriedly. He had some paperwork to complete, and then everyone would expect that he would sleep.

Hundreds of miles away, a red light, similar to the one in B.A.’s tool kit, began to flash. A pale, lanky man, whose eyes had grown weary staring at the instrument panel, jumped up excitedly.

“Hannibal, Hannibal—it’s B.A.! The big guy’s activated his homing device!”

Hannibal Smith picked up the handheld receiver with mingled anxiety and satisfaction. The A-Team, concerned for their companion B.A., had not returned to Los Angeles. Information they obtained in Karachi had led them to believe that he could be in need of assistance. The homing device had a wide range, and B.A. could be anywhere around the Indian subcontinent, but at least they could track him now. *But why would B.A. use the homing device? Why would he think we could hear it?* Caution would need to be the watchword of this mission.

Ji was not the only one who missed B.A.: Elish waited in the engine room for the big man to visit. Frightened as she had been during their adventure, she was eager to repeat it. The days were long below decks, with little to distinguish the hours. B.A. had offered her the chance to escape above.

Racina, on the other hand, was grateful for her daughter’s safe return, and pressed her not to tempt fate. Racina had no fear of B.A., but she was frightened of what he represented: exposure—and ultimately death. The two stowaways that Yuan had set adrift had been her neighbors in Romania. They had not betrayed the family in the cargo hold, but had gone silently to their fate. The engine crew had not betrayed them, but had closed ranks protectively. Yet each person who knew of their presence added to the risk of discovery.

Still, as she watched her children, Racina felt a pang, although she could not place its origins. She wondered where the big man had gone—it had been several days . . .

The presence of another body did not make the tiny cabin any more bearable. The two Chinese operatives had stoically accepted Yuan’s orders to follow B.A., and had dutifully waylaid him as he left his cabin. Further, they had obediently chained him to the

single bunk, and injected him with a melange of drugs, all designed to loosen his tongue. The big man, however, seemed immune somehow to the drugs, as if he had experienced many such injections.

Frustrated, Yuan had raised his hand to strike his captive, but in the cramped quarters, he had succeeded only in smacking his hand against the metal box. A stream of fluent curses hissed from his lips. When he had exhausted his vocabulary, he ordered B.A. chained under the bunk.

It was not difficult to get into Bangladesh. The port cities were wide open, and the traffic of human misery flowed freely. Certainly the Korean ship raised no suspicions. Nor, in fact, did a slightly refurbished plane that landed on a dusty forgotten runway right outside of the port city. The three men aboard took care to secure the plane, and its extra fuel, separately and very well. Soon they were on their way to the harbor.

They didn't notice—though they would have cared if they had noticed—the much sleeker jet that landed a mile away. Besides the pilot, there were four men on that plane—four men who looked as slick and well-equipped as their plane. These men did not speak, even among themselves, even in whispers, a sharp contrast to the three easy, joking men in the beat-up plane. The four also secured their plane, with their pilot to guard it—then booby-trapped it. Anyone foolish enough to assault the pilot and succeed in stealing the plane would not live to talk about it.

All seven were heading for the port. All seven were going to give Huang Yuan the surprise of his life. They just didn't know it yet.

Shoved under the bed, B.A. could hardly move. The drugs Yuan had pumped into him were wearing off, and each bruise was making itself known.

He had heard them lying in wait outside his door, and had hidden his gold and tools carefully. He had considered escape, but believed it impossible. The porthole was too small, and he did not have the time or tools to cut a hatch. He would put up a fight, of course—and he would choose the time. At the last moment, he had scrawled the cryptic message to Ji, with a quick prayer that the mate would find and decipher it. Flipping through his Bible, he had meditated for a moment. Then, with a last glance around the room, he had opened the door to his fate.

The attack had been swift: a blow by a pipe brought him his knees, but it was the sack with the chloroform that had rendered him unconscious. He had a dim recollection of Yuan's near hysterical questioning. *Man's a fool*, he snorted contemptuously, *them drugs took th' edge offa any kind of whacks he laid on me*. Something nagged him, though: a faint thought of an object that had seemed very important to Yuan. *Wha' was it?* His mind slogged on. *Tha's it!* He started banging firmly into the steel bed frame, terrifying both of his captors.

Ignoring the stream of hissed opprobrium, B.A. rubbed his forehead ruefully. *The char—charm tha' fool*

Murdock gave me! Tha's what it was! Dazed, for a moment B.A. believed that Murdock was here, in Yuan's hands. As he forced his head to clear, B.A. remembered giving the charm to Elish. *L'il 'Lish . . . does Yuan have her?* B.A. couldn't remember seeing her, but couldn't shake the feeling that she was in trouble.

Struggling against the chains was futile, but he did so anyway, until the frustrated Chinese jabbed him with yet another sedative. Even that took a long time to fell him.

In the officers' mess, Ji was near frantic. It was almost dawn; he was due on watch in less than an hour and they would take on the harbor pilot an hour after that. He had no doubt that B.A. was in the hands of Captain Yuan. If B.A. were still alive, he did not think Yuan would risk trying to get him off the ship in port. *So much easier to dispose of unwanteds at sea*, he thought bitterly. Still, Bangladesh was a wild place, even more so than Karachi. It was impossible to guess what Yuan could have planned for their stay here.

He stared at his untouched tea and fish gruel. An uncontrollable sense of doom constricted his throat. Forcing his leaden body from the chair, he headed for the bridge.

To his surprise, Yuan had left his watch early, leaving only the night radio operator. Ji looked questioningly at the man, who simply shrugged and hurried past him. The day watch was in place, and the harbor pilot would soon be aboard. A pile of disembarkation documentation awaited his attention in the radio room. He ordered one of the engine crew, a young Filipino, to the bridge. The teenager had spent a few months stranded in Bangladesh between tours of duty, and spoke a little of the local dialect. Although all harbor pilots and senior ship personnel were expected to converse in English, Ji found it useful to have assistance at times.

Immersed in his paperwork, and distracted with concern for B.A., Ji did not pay much attention when the harbor pilot came aboard. If he had, he may have been surprised at the man's natty dress whites—although a close inspection would have revealed no particular nation's insignia. Ji would probably not have noticed the intruders who slipped off the pilot's launch before it pulled away.

"Right. Now let's jolly well get started. Chop, chop, lads—need to get moving here! Time's wasting." The voice boomed through the deck long before the pilot made his appearance. Pulled from his work, Ji looked up just in time to see a tall, thin man enter the bridge. The pilot wore an almost impossible pallor surrounding very dark eyes. Speaking very loudly and rapidly, he ordered the crew about in a confusing manner. Ji had the uncomfortable feeling that the man had no idea what he was doing. Unfortunately, that was an almost usual condition for harbor pilots.

Sighing at this additional burden, Ji left his paperwork to assist the pilot. Ji was a slight man of average height, but the pilot hovered over him like a manic scarecrow.

“Right—now you are the captain of this vessel?” the pilot asked breathlessly.

“No, I am the mate. Captain Yuan has signed all the necessary papers already, but I will summon him if you want.”

“No, no, no, not a problem. Now, please be sure to sign the embarking ship survey form. It’s a new one, we’re just instituting it . . .” the lanky man fluttered through a stack of papers, seizing one and plunking it in front of Ji. The rest of the stack slid to the floor. Ji attempted to catch the paper, as the man babbled on.

“You see, there are a number of questions about the ship, cargo, passengers—that sort of thing . . .”

Ji froze. “This is a new form. We have the cargo manifests prepared for customs, of course, and the passenger list.” Ji’s mind was racing. *Can this wild man help me discover what Yuan is planning? Should I tell him our passenger is missing?* Ji could not dismiss the idea completely. Choking down his panic, Ji scanned the strange form. Although he had never seen it before, the form contained a number of impressive seals and signatures. His hand trembling, Ji began to fill out the form, with the strange man hovering over his shoulder.

“No no no no NO!” the pilot shouted. I need to see your passport, and your merchant marine papers, not just the numbers.”

Ji nodded. “My papers in my cabin.” With the pilot close on his heels, he headed for his quarters.

Upon reaching his cabin door, Ji hesitated again. *Can this man help me?* Dubious, Ji opened the door. Suddenly, the pilot pushed him, hard, onto the floor of the cabin, then stepped in and shut the door.

Slowly regaining his feet, Ji saw three pair of legs. Continuing to rise, the legs connected to three torsos, and across two of the torsos, automatic weapons were slung. Ji found himself transfixed by the guns, relieved that they were not pointed at him directly.

“Okay, Murdock, pat him down—don’t want any surprises,” one of the torsos said. A pair of long hands—Ji assumed they were the pilot’s—briskly moved up and down his body. Quickly, he was relieved of his penknife, wallet and handkerchief. The pilot tossed them on the bed.

“Nice and slow—get up, sailor.” The voice had an authoritarian, ironic tone. As he complied, Ji took in the rest of the men. Besides the harbor pilot, there were two other Caucasians. One was blond, slender, and held his gun with an insolent air. The second, whom Ji pegged as the speaker, was somewhat older, with white hair and piercing blue eyes. In his fright, Ji could not shake the feeling that he had seen this man before.

Once upright, Ji’s fear froze his tongue. The white haired man stared at him for a few moments, then held out a piece of cloth. Behind him, Ji could see his books and belongings tossed onto the bed. B.A.’s tool kit lay on its spine, the open corner gaping. The white-haired man was speaking:

“This vest belongs a friend of ours. So does the jewelry and this tool kit. We want to know why we found them here—in your room. We would like to know . . . now.” His voice was not loud, but it reverberated in Ji’s ears.

Could these be his friends? Or is this a trap? Ji

opened his mouth, but the words stuck in his throat.

Quietly, Murdock, who had been watching him intently, spoke: “Hannibal, maybe he doesn’t speak English real well—we got him scared half t’death.” The tall man gently turned Ji toward him, speaking softly in Korean:

“We are looking for our friend, B.A. We do not wish to harm you.”

Relieved, Ji took the pilot’s hand. “I speak English. Are you truly B.A.’s friends?”

The three men drew closer to Ji. He quickly relayed the entire story, including his suspicion of how Yuan had B.A. somewhere—possibly in the locked cabin.

“Maybe we can do a recon sweep of the cabin, check out the layout,” the man called Face offered.

Ji was silent.

Murdock noticed the tension on Ji’s face.

“What’s wrong, Ji?”

Reluctantly, Ji told the team of the room’s inaccessibility. “There are no portholes, and the air vent is only eighteen inches.”

Hannibal exchanged a surprised glance with Face. “So how did you find out what was in the room?”

Stammering, Ji told them about Elish’s journey through the air vent.

“There is a child, alone, on this ship?”

Ji shook his head. “No, there are others, a whole family. If Yuan discovers them, he will kill them.”

“Maybe we can sneak them off the ship, here,” Murdock offered helpfully.

“No, Murdock, how would they make out here, in Bangladesh—you saw this place, it’s worse than Romania. They’re the wrong nationality, wrong religion, speak the wrong language—they wouldn’t have a chance. No,” Hannibal mused, “we have to get them someplace safer.”

“*We?*” Face complained. “Aren’t you forgetting something? We came here to find B.A., and we haven’t. And how much better would the United States be for them as illegal aliens? The INS will just ship them back to Romania, where I’m sure that lunatic Ceauceseu will have a warm welcome for them.”

Hannibal draped an arm over the younger man’s shoulders. “All the more reason for us to lend a hand. After all, I’m sure the A-Team Charitable Causes Fund could support a few green cards, passports, bank accounts . . .”

“A-Team? You are A-Team?” Ji couldn’t believe his ears.

“I see our publicist has implemented the global marketing strategy,” Face grouched. “Look, Hannibal, I’m all for aiding the deserving poor, but we’re getting a little high profile here. We still don’t know who those guys were who followed us on the train. We know that they’ve targeted *this* boat, and that they could be waiting for us on the pier. Now I say we get B.A. as fast as we can, and be ready to fight our way out at the pier—without any extra baggage.”

Murdock studied his shoes carefully. “You know, Face, you make a lot of sense. After all, we know where B.A. is . . . Oh, no, guess we don’t. Well, we can search the most likely places . . . Oh, no, can’t do that

neither. Um, we can wave our magic wands and make ourselves teeny weeny so's we can squeeze into the keyhole of that room . . ."

Face threw up his hands. "All right, all right, I get the point. We need the kid. But do we have to adopt the whole family?" He looked imploringly from Hannibal to Murdock to Ji, sensing imminent defeat. Sighing heavily, he capitulated. "What's the plan, Hannibal?"

Thanks to Murdock's "piloting", the ship was easily an hour behind schedule, heading in lazy circles. Soon, however, one of the crew would notice it, and set it back on course. Ji sent for one of the Filipino mechanics. Despite his mistrust of the senior crew, the mechanic had been worried, and the sight of the three Americans convinced him that B.A.'s friends had come to help him. Tersely, Ji asked the mechanic to bring Elish above board.

Elish was eager for more excitement. Racina could barely contain her other children, who were now envious of their sister's adventure. The little girl suffered her mother's warnings and prayers with good grace, impatient to go above decks.

Moving quickly, the Team convened in a storage room close to the captain's locked cabin. Elish, by now an expert, scrambled into the airshaft. Ji prayed that she had understood her instructions: move silently to the grate, and determine whether B.A. was in the cabin. Then she was to back down the shaft. If anything went wrong, Ji would be outside the cabin door, listening. The fact that he did not know where Yuan was increased his tension.

Elish wiggled down the shaft quickly. The path was straight for twenty feet, then made a ninety degree turn, running another two feet to the cabin. She could see some light coming from her destination. In her eagerness, she didn't notice that there was too much light.

Coming to the corner, she checked the wall for the screws that had caught on her on the prior trip. Turning into the last leg of the shaft, she came head on to an empty vent.

The grate was missing. Yuan had pulled it off, and the two operatives had not replaced it.

Both men were bent over some task that she could not see. In the crowded space, she could hardly distinguish their forms. If she backed out silently, they would not see her.

Suddenly, she heard a moan. Craning her neck, she saw a flash of gold. The two men had rolled a semi-conscious B.A. out from under the bed, and were about to administer another shot.

If she shouted, they would see her, and she could not be sure that Ji would hear. Still, as the needle was raised in preparation for use, she knew she could not wait.

The two operatives were stunned when a small ball of fury launched itself from the air vent, howling like a murdered ghost. Elish landed on the back of the man with the needle, kicking wildly, effectively keeping the other man at bay. The needle fell to the floor, as the

two attempted to coordinate their defense in the cramped room.

One of the men stepped heavily on B.A., who groggily swiped at him. He missed the one, but whacked the other firmly in the leg, sending him off balance onto the bed.

Outside, Ji signaled for the Team. Face slid onto his knees, lockpick in hand to work on the latch. Hannibal shouted, "No time, Face!" as he and Murdock crashed into the door on both sides of the kneeling Peck. The door gave up without a fight, slamming onto the man who had just managed to ditch Elish.

"B.A.!" Murdock howled. "Speak to me, buddy!" He knelt besides the big man, as Face and Hannibal made short work of the two Chinese operatives. In fact, after weeks of stifling heat and poor food, the two seemed almost relieved at their capture.

"Come on, let's give him some air," Hannibal ordered. The colonel tossed a pistol to Ji, and shoved the prisoners out of the room.

"Faceman, give me a hand here—maybe we can get the big guy onto the bed."

The two men maneuvered B.A. onto the bunk, checking him for broken bones or other serious injuries. As they worked, a tiny head poked between them.

"Bee AA," Elish said softly.

B.A.'s eyes opened slightly, and a smile worked its way across his mouth. "Hey, there, little mama, you done real fine . . . real fine . . ." Still smiling, his head lolled peacefully.

Anxiously, Elish looked up at the other two men.

"Don't worry, kid, he's tough." Face ruffled Elish's hair playfully.

"That's right, darlin', ain't no way this guy's goin' down with less than an army on the other side," Murdock agreed cheerfully.

Elish did not understand a word, but she understood the tone. Picking up B.A.'s huge hand, she settled in patiently under his arm, assured that he would be all right.

On the deck, Ji watched nervously for the captain. The senior crew, confused and frightened, milled about. Most of the crew had served with Ji for a long time, and trusted his judgment. Most of them suspected the captain of having dark motives. All had been shocked by his callous treatment of the stowaways. Still, it was one thing to harbor ill feelings about one's captain: it was quite another to take part in a mutiny.

Behind him, Murdock and Face emerged from the cabin, struggling with the large metal box.

"I tell you, Faceman, this box mus' be filled with B.A.'s jewelry, it's so heavy," Murdock puffed.

"Wait a minute, guys—look at the markings on that box." Hannibal gestured at the international symbol for radioactive material. "These slimeballs have some pretty fast talking to do. Tell 'em, Ji."

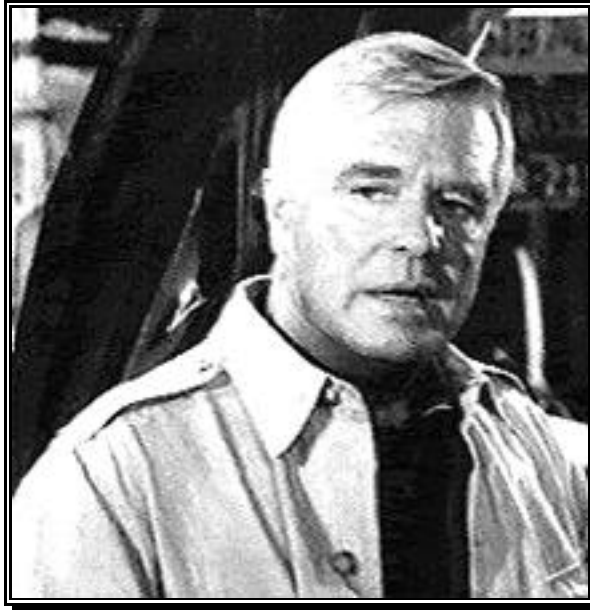
Pale, Ji asked the two in Korean what the box contained. They ignored him. He asked in halting Chinese. They looked mildly surprised, but gave no response.

"Tell them to open the box," Hannibal ordered, "but first, clear the area."

Ji sent the crew scampering away. When Hannibal

said, “You, too, Ji—just tell them to open it, and you can go.”

Ji shook his head. “No, I am officer of this ship. Captain Yuan put it at risk, now I must take over,” he said simply.



Nodding, Hannibal took a position close behind the two captives. When Ji gave the order, one of the men paled considerably, and shrank from the box. The other merely smirked, and folded his arms across his chest.

“Now, that’s interesting,” Hannibal observed, “One of the jolly twins is scared out of his pants—the other doesn’t think there’s much to worry about. Which one,” he cocked his pistol, “is right?” Pressing the pistol against the skull of the smirking man, Hannibal pushed him toward the box.

Smile gone, the man knelt by the box, while his companion turned away. Slowly, he manipulated the latch, and opened the box.

Inside were smaller wooden crates, three across, partially covered with straw.

“Doesn’t look exactly appropriate for radioactive material, now does it?” Hannibal commented. He gestured for the man to pick up one of the small crates.

The first crate pulled out smoothly. Seeing the crate, the second operative could hardly contain his curiosity. As the crate was laid on the deck, Hannibal shoved the two men against the wall.

“Open ’em up, Murdock. I don’t think you’re going to glow in the dark from this stuff.”

The first crate splintered open, and Murdock whooped with surprise.

“Maybe not, Hannibal, but I sure would shine! Lookee here!”

Scattered in the small crate were dozens of rough-cut diamonds.

Face whistled appreciatively. “My, my, that is attractive reactor fuel.” He scooped up one of the stones, and held it to the light. “Doesn’t look like gem

quality, but a nice haul, nevertheless.”

“Industrial diamonds. Probably smuggled out of Angola. Yuan could dump these in a hundred places along the route, maybe even use them to pay for some military contraband.”

“But Colonel.” Murdock wrinkled his brow. “Why pack ’em in this box—make people think this stuff is radioactive?”

“So no one would open the box. You see that symbol,” Hannibal nudged the box with his toe, “you don’t go exploring.”

“So how did you know it wasn’t dangerous?” Murdock asked.

Hannibal reached for a cigar. “I didn’t.” He pointed to the second operative. “He did. His pal bought into this, but this guy knew there was nothing dangerous in that box.”

Spitting out the end of the cigar, Hannibal smiled. “Okay, fellas, let’s get this box back in the cabin, and see how B.A. is feeling. Ji, let’s tie these jokers up.”

As Hannibal and Ji fastened their prisoners to the railing, a furtive pair of eyes observed them. Just above them, Yuan hid behind a huge capstan, swearing under his breath. The contents of the box infuriated him. While the more senior operative clearly knew about the diamonds, his companion and Yuan had been kept in the dark.

Yuan seethed. There was no one on the crew he could trust. *That fool Ji! I will have his heart pulled from his chest!* Empty threats offered no comfort for the captain, and he pulled away to hide. He knew the identity of his contact in Bangladesh, and he could slip off the ship in port. It would be nice to have a handful of those diamonds to ease his retirement from active service . . . With that thought in mind, Yuan began to work on a plan.

B.A.’s roar was scarcely muted by his recent misadventure. Awakening, he instantly reported his dissatisfaction with the stale air and filthy conditions. He softened somewhat at Elish’s frightened face, but insisted on leaving the foul smelling cabin immediately.

By now, the ship was nearing its berth. Most of the crew was busy preparing to dock, and the decks were humming with activity. B.A. and Elish stood at the railing, engrossed in the bustle. So engrossed, neither noticed the figure who slipped up behind them, and grabbed Elish roughly.

“Don’t move or I kill girl!” Yuan’s voice churned in B.A.’s ears.

Whirling around, B.A. nearly slipped. Yuan held Elish, with a pistol pressed against her temple.

“You, go inside, get one crate of stones. Now!”

B.A., still dizzy from his ordeal, moved toward the cabin. Yuan followed cautiously.

Inside, B.A. opened the metal box slowly, and pulled out a small crate. He knew that any sudden moves could instantly cause Elish’s death, so he moved carefully. Turning to Yuan, he briefly considered tossing the crate at the captain, but rejected that idea as too risky. He caught Elish’s wide eyes and

tried to comfort her with a smile. She cast her eyes downward.

Don' worry, 'Lish—I won' let you down! B.A. held out the crate to Yuan. The captain let Elish slip from his grasp, and turning the gun on B.A., reached for the crate.

In a flash, B.A. swung the crate at Yuan, knocking the pistol from his grasp. Before he let go, however, Yuan's finger jerked on the trigger, firing one shot. The effort of the blow made B.A.'s head spin, and he stumbled against the metal box. Yuan sprang at him, yanking the crate, and raising it to smash it on B.A.'s head. Suddenly, Yuan howled, dropping the crate, scattering the precious stones in a wide arc.

With a look of shocked surprise, Yuan flailed at his leg and crumbled onto the floor.

Shaking his head clear, B.A. looked up to see Elish grinning. In her hand was the hypodermic needle that the Chinese operatives had prepared to use on him. The sedative was now working its magic on Captain Yuan.

Grinning broadly, B.A. nodded. "Tha's right, 'Lish—'Waste not, want not'!"

The shot brought the other team members running. Hannibal arrived first and scanned the situation quickly. As everything was under control, he helped B.A. onto the bed. When Murdock and Face arrived, Hannibal sent Murdock back to the bridge. Leaning his weapon against the wall, Hannibal trussed Yuan firmly, as Face diligently collected the diamonds.

Stowing Yuan under the bunk to save space, Hannibal settled onto the metal box, lifting his feet to avoid Face's busy fingers.

"I love it when a plan comes together!" Hannibal crowed.

"So do I." The voice was hard, and distinctly American. The tall man they had seen on the train in Pakistan stood in the doorway, pistol leveled at Hannibal. Following Hannibal's line of sight, he warned, "Don't even think of making reaching for that gun. I might not get you, but," he gestured at Face, "pretty boy here would be splattered."

"Now, get up slowly, and sit on the bed—not the girl." He gestured for Elish. She looked imploringly at B.A., who comforted, "It's all right, 'Lish, I won' let them hurt you."

"Big talk for a guy in your position," the tall man sneered. B.A. growled under his breath. "Don't get your tail in a wringer, the U.S. Government doesn't hurt kids." A second man appeared over his shoulder. The first man gently pulled Elish out of the room, his eyes never leaving the trio now crammed onto the bunk.

"U.S. Government, you mean CIA?" Face groaned, "Oh, great! I don't suppose we get brownie points for breaking up a smuggling ring?"

The tall man stepped back, allowing a third man into the room. This man quickly handcuffed the three together, then handcuffed B.A. to the bedframe. After the three were secure, the tall agent leaned against the wall and holstered his pistol.

"Brownie points? Maybe in a fair world, but this one doesn't operate that way. No, we've been after

these clowns for over a year. The leader, Yuan, has been using this ship to move all sorts of contraband around the world—guns, information, diamonds . . . He's a North Korean by birth, planted with relatives in the South, and recruited to run errands for the Chinese. When we saw you on the train, we recognized you as military fugitives. Imagine our surprise when the big guy here booked passage on Yuan's ship."

He waved his pistol at Yuan, who was tucked under the bunk. "So what happened? You and Yuan have a lovers' quarrel?"

Hannibal's eyes flashed. "Look, mister, we may be fugitives, but we're not traitors."

The agent shrugged. "Doesn't make any difference to me. I'm sure the military will have someone anxious to get you guys home."

A sudden commotion ensued outside, and Murdock's voice bounced down the deck.

"You guys are makin' a big mistake! I'm a tourist! I got a student visa!"

The agent stepped aside just in time for Murdock to sprawl into the room, roughly assisted by another agent.

"Found this wacko on the bridge, Chaney. Says he's just hitching a ride." Agent Chaney nodded, and leaned over to offer Murdock a hand. The pilot's dark eyes widened as he struggled to his feet.

Chaney and Murdock stared at each other for a moment. Finally, Chaney spoke: "Take off, Billings. Find a better place for those two guys tied to the rail. I can handle this end."

Billings exited quickly. Chaney cocked his head toward the door, inviting Murdock to join him.

They edged warily to the railing. Murdock broke the silence.

"Ben."

The man evaded his eyes. Murdock continued insistently. "Ben, dammit, I know you recognize me—you ain't the crazy one."

Chaney studied the railing intently. "Been a long time, H.M. When was it, 1972? April, maybe?"

"May."

"You're keeping pretty bad company, Murdock. It can land you in a lot of trouble."

Murdock laughed shortly. "I'm already in a lot of trouble."

Chaney rubbed the railing with his forefinger. "This'd be worse. I . . . I can give you a head start—a short one. You could disappear in this place . . ."

"Not without my boys."

"No can do, Murdock. They're wanted by the military, found here with known Chinese agents, shoving a load of hot diamonds into their pockets. I can't just turn my back . . ."

Murdock intoned dully, "No, you can't do that—not in the spook code, is it? Expediency, ruthlessness—just not the way the Company does it."

The CIA man finally met his eyes. "H.M., I'd like to help you, but these guys have been laughin' at the US government for over ten years . . ."

Murdock gripped his arm firmly. "These guys are my guys, Ben. This is my unit."

"Look, Murdock, I'd like to help you . . ."

“Would you? After you turn them in, and give me your generous head start, what do you think the government will do with me? I’ll get thrown so far down a well, they’ll have to mail in sunlight.”

Murdock straightened, but did not release his grip. “You remember Laos, Ben, you remember Burma? I could’ve left you, and your merry men, but I didn’t.”

Involuntarily, Ben whispered, “And you took a bullet in Laos for it—for me.”

Releasing the man, Murdock said nothing.

Ben exhaled sharply. “Okay, H.M., I’ll see what I can do.”

Late that night, the wire services ran a true human interest story: A fearless family of Romanian refugees

had discovered that a Korean ship was carrying military contraband, and with the help of unidentified crew members, had captured the Chinese operatives.

The State Department announced that the Romanians would be granted political asylum. Public sentiment quickly grew, and numerous contributions poured in to assist the family. Pictures of the smiling family, prominently featuring the youngest, were sent world-wide. The quality of the pictures was so good that a careful viewer could make out the tiny gold helicopter hanging from a chain around the little girl’s neck.

The wire services were silent, however, on the departure of a dilapidated plane from a hidden runway in the nearby plains. The four passengers, including one sleepy giant, were scarcely newsworthy, after all.



DOUBLE DEALING

by Amanda Bogardus

Mrs. Carmichael showed the newest addition to the V.A. Hospital around the wing, the brief instructions and helpful tips rattling off her tongue like a drill sergeant. The fourth new nurse in the last month alone, the lecture was kept sharp in her brain due to repetition.

“And this is Mr. Murdock’s room,” the administrator said, stopping before the last door. “You’ll realize that soon enough.”

The brown eyes of the young recruit glanced inside the locked room. She couldn’t help wondering why the older woman had specifically identified only the one patient. “I’m afraid I don’t understand. What makes this patient special?”

“Don’t let that innocent facade fool you.” As they watched him, Murdock sat perched on his bed, knees drawn up to his chest. Chewing on finger nails in anticipation, his gaze never flickering from the TV set.

The screen was blank.

“He has been personally responsible for the dismissal of countless staff members over the decade he’s been with us.”

“How is that possible?”

They moved away from the door, continuing down the hall towards the nurses’ station. “I’ll show you.”

Michele Cooper looked up from the huge pile of reports that had just been dumped unceremoniously in her lap. “He’s escaped this many times?” She flipped through the top file, only a few days old.

“These are just within the last two years,” Mrs. Carmichael admitted reluctantly, with more than a touch of bitterness.

“He disappeared when his room was being fumigated?” The other was surprised by what she discovered in the reading. “But no one reportedly called the exterminator?”

“Mr. Murdock specializes in making the impossible possible. He used Mr. Dorsey’s hamster from room 107 to create the diversion.”

The nurse would have sworn she heard a hint of admiration in her boss’s voice, if it weren’t for the firm scowl that remained in place. “And each time, he returns?”

“Eventually he either wanders back or someone spots him and we go and pick him up. The point is he needs to be here. He has no family and wouldn’t be able to survive on his own.”

Michele was beginning to wonder. A man who was able to orchestrate such complex plans and blind-

side so many people? Something just struck her as off. The more reports she waded through, the more convinced she became that a missing element existed in the puzzle . . .

One she intended to unearth.

“So, Ms. Cooper.” The other nurse’s voice brought her back to her surroundings. “Do you think you can handle the job?”

“I won’t let you down.”

Carmichael took in the overconfident smile and determined attitude and almost let out an exasperated sigh. That’s what they all said. She only hoped this time would be different.

One Week Later . . .

The attractive man with the sandy blonde hair and adorable smile stepped out of the elevator and straightened the white lab coat. He made his way over to the nurses’ desk, mentally reviewing the case he was going to present.

The face that greeted him was not the one he had been expecting. “Ah. I was looking for Nurse Dawes.”

“I’m afraid she no longer works here,” the nurse replied, her attention divided between a chart and the new arrival. “I’m her replacement. Is there something I can help you with?”

Time to break in another one, Face thought to himself, not entirely dismayed by the situation. Sometimes he actually felt sorry for the young women he helped sabotage, but they made it so easy! “Yes. I’m Doctor Kellerman.” He indicated the tag pinned over his breast. “I’m here for a checkup on a patient. A Mr. . . .” He made a great show of searching through the file in hand, just to be convincing. “Murdock. Yes, Mr. Murdock, that’s it.”

“Okay, let me check.” She knew without glancing that no appointment was scheduled, but she checked anyway. “I’m sorry. I have no record of a Dr. Kellerman in here.”

“Are you sure? I called—”

Cooper’s eyes grew big as if in understanding as she interrupted. “Did you say the name was Kellerman?”

Face looked at her warily, surprised by her sudden excitement. “Yes.”

“Oh! I am so sorry! I was told to expect you!” She leaned over the counter towards him, her voice dropping to a whispering level. “Don’t worry, your secret is safe with me.”

He was beginning to feel nervous. Would Murdock have told her something? No, he doubted it. More

likely she just had him confused with someone else. But would it hurt to play along? “You do?”

“Oh, yes!” The chipper, little face chatted away excitedly as she stepped from behind the barrier and took his arm. “Follow me. I’ll make sure you arrive there safely.” She led him towards the stairs. “I know a shortcut so no one will spot us.”

Twenty minutes later, after passing through every floor in the hospital, weaving and dodging attendants, patients, and doctors, the two arrived in front of a dark door at the end of a deserted hallway. No markings were evident so Face, having been dragged through a maze of corridors and rooms, hadn’t the faintest clue as to where he was or what the door led to. He was beginning to wish he hadn’t taken the risk to come visit his buddy after all.

“Well,” his guide gave him a brave smile, “good luck.”

“Thanks.” He watched as she spun on her heel and started the journey back without another word.

By this point, his curiosity was getting the best of him. Sure, this wasn’t the reason he had come, but after all he had just been put through, didn’t he deserve some answers? This logic appealed to him. Even if there was something dangerous behind there, which he doubted, he was a member of the A-Team! He could handle a little trouble.

Without allowing himself any more time to back out, he burst through the mysterious door, prepared for anything.

Except what he saw.

“You blindsided me!”

Michele looked up from her reading directly into the infuriated face of Templeton Peck. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” Face was more embarrassed than anything. Tricked by a nurse? “You sent me out into the parking lot! You set me up!”

“Wasn’t that what you were trying to pull on me, Dr. Kellerman?” There was a hint of amusement, and a smile she just couldn’t get rid of. A sense of satisfaction knowing that she had played him right from the start as he had tried to do to her.

“I had my reasons.” He was defending himself more out of need than conviction.

“Your reasons could have quite possibly cost me my job.”

Direct hit. He was surprised to find he had a guilty conscience. “I just wanted to visit a friend.”

“That’s all you had to say in the first place.” She grabbed a set of keys and moved down the hall, not bothering to check if he was following. “Murdock’s room, right?”

“Yes,” Face said warily, staying a few steps back. Unsure of her motives and still remembering what happened that last time he had gone along with her, he decided to remain cautious.

“Hiya, Faceman!” Murdock greeted him enthusiastically upon his entrance, pointing towards the new video game machine. “You want to be Pacman or Ms. Pacman?”

“Not now, Murdock.” He waited until he was

sure she had left, closing the door to Murdock’s cell behind her. “What’s the story with the new nurse?”

“Quite a spitfire, isn’t she?” The crazyman’s admiration was evident. “You’re going to have your hands full with this one, Face.”

“So I’ve noticed. Exactly how much does she know about . . .”

“Nothing,” Murdock assured him, quickly catching his drift. “She just came to the conclusion that someone was helping me escape. Go figure!”

Face turned his attention back to his friend. After all, he had gone to all this trouble just to visit him. If it were just about anyone else, he wouldn’t even have bothered with the attempt. He would never admit it out loud, but Face often found himself thinking very highly of the pilot. Not many people could get away with the scam Murdock was pulling. Maybe the restrictions weren’t always tolerable, but when it came right down to it he had something the rest of the Team didn’t: a ticket out. Whenever he needed it. He didn’t have to worry about being recognized or the military following him—

“Yes, General Fulbright, how can I help you?” The voice down the hall drew the war vets’ attention.

“Ah, you’re not fooling me twice.” Despite Murdock’s worried expression, the lieutenant walked towards the door to glance out the small opening. “You told her, right? She’s in on this.”

“I’m looking for a member of the A-Team.” The general’s distinctive voice caused Face to freeze. “My men spotted him in the parking lot only a short time ago. We think he might be here for Captain Murdock.”

Murdock observed helpfully, “Looks like you’re the one who needs someone to break you out now.”

Cooper wasn’t quite sure what to think. The A-Team? She had heard someone mention them earlier, but she had no idea! And she had aided one of them. There was only one thing left for her to do.

Lie. Cover her own butt.

“There was a man here to see Mr. Murdock earlier, but he left hours ago.” She noticed the adrenaline in Fulbright’s eyes dim a bit. “Is that important?” she added innocently.

“Thank you. That’s all I need.” He turned and motioned for the two guards with him to follow him down the white hall rather than proceeding to the elevator.

“Where are you going?” If the general found what he was looking for, she was in a lot of trouble.

“Just checking something out.”

“But really, there’s no need . . .” The nurse followed suit as the group came to a collected halt in front of Murdock’s room. “I assure you there’s no one in there.”

“We’ll see, won’t we?” Fulbright surveyed the room through the tiny hole. Posters, games, and various toys lined the room but there appeared to be no inhabitants. “What is the meaning of this? Where’s Murdock?” he demanded, turning on the baffled employee.

“Bull!” Murdock surprised all, jumping from

seemingly out of nowhere to appear directly in front of them. "I thought that was you! How you been, old buddy? Still terrorizing the lower ranks?"

The exaggerated warmth only fueled the other's temper. "Where is he, Captain? We know Peck is around here somewhere!"

"General, General! You really need to relax! You know, the room next door was recently vacated. Why don't you spend sometime getting to know the joys of institutionalized life? Does wonders for the nerves. Why, just look at Billy—"

"I don't have time for this!" Fulbright turned away in disgust, already giving orders to his men. "Search the building! I want him found!"

"That guy never was very personable." Murdock shrugged after the threat had disappeared. He was moving away from the door when Face popped out from underneath the bed, cautiously glancing about.

Michele felt like shaking her head in amazement. She knew things around here were supposed to be a little crazy, but this was ridiculous! She was harboring a

wanted criminal! There was no turning back now. "Come on." She unlocked the door and motioned for Face to exit. "We've got to get you out of here while they're still occupied."

"You know, you were pretty good back there," Face complimented a few minutes later after he had said good-bye to Murdock and was following Nurse Cooper down another presumably shorter shortcut.

"I took a couple of acting classes in college."

"It shows." Now that the danger was out of the way, he was really starting to notice her for the first time. "In any case, thanks for the help."

"No problem." They came to a stop by a first floor window and she opened it for him. "Just do me a favor next time and ask when you want something."

"How would you like to have dinner with me?"

"Don't push it."

From then on, Face was forced to give the V.A. staff more credit when planning his scams.



ONE SWAM INTO THE CUCKOO'S NEST

by Jessica Hargis

It started with a pre-birthday dinner that Face had arranged for Murdock.

Over appetizers, the pilot's voice grew taut and urgent as he told the Team that something shady was going down at the V.A. At least three patients had disappeared during the last month, and in that same month four new orderlies had been hired—short on bedside manner but bristling with muscles. It couldn't be a coincidence.

The entrees saw Hannibal make a phone call. He was, of course, well aware of Murdock's penchant for fantasy, but he also knew that when the pilot was serious, he was probably the sanest of anyone on the Team. A few minutes with a helpful administrator established that the patients had supposedly checked *themselves* out of the hospital and gone to live with families Murdock knew for a fact they didn't have.

The question was, "Why would anyone want to kidnap shell-shocked vets?" The answer lay in Hannibal's smile, which, by the time dessert was served, was flashing in the bright, inexorable way that had spelled doom for dozens of dirtbags across the world. Nothing could stop that smile, because it was fueled by the birth of a Plan.

And that plan consisted of six words to Face: "Better get those whites pressed, Lieutenant."

Which was how Templeton Peck, a.k.a. Faceman (and currently a.k.a. Alex Holmes, V.A. orderly) came to be wheeling Captain H.M. Murdock through the gardens of the Veteran's Association Psychiatric Hospital two days before the pilot's birthday.

Ordinarily, Face might have enjoyed the opportunity to spend a few quiet hours with his friend, but today he was tired from a night spent hastily drawing up credentials and transfer papers and bored from a morning's initiation tour of V.A. facilities that he already knew by heart. Not to mention that he had been forced to break off a lunch date with a very personable, very promising, young woman by the name of Brandi with an "i". And it was always such a *good* sign when they spelled their names with an "i".

"I really, really hate this Murdock," Face grumbled as he pushed the wheelchair down one of the gravel lanes that wove around flowerbeds, bushes and well-trimmed trees. "I mean, coming in here for a few minutes to scam you out is one thing, but *working* in a military hospital isn't going to do my blood pressure any favors."

Murdock, lounging with his feet draped over the armrest of the wheelchair he seemed to consider the hospital's answer to a golf cart, ignored his comrade's complaints with the instincts of a born tour guide.

"Now over here is where I go when I feel the need to contemplate my place in the complex web of nature, space and time," he drawled, pointing a lazy hand to a shady spot under an oak. "It's a spot of peace in this tumultuous whirlwind that we call life . . . and once you hop over that fence you're right on the main road outta town."

"Murdock, I *have* been here before," Face reminded him. "So can we skip the five cent tour and stick to business?"

"This *is* business, Faceman," Murdock countered, twisting around in the wheelchair to regard him reproachfully. "You see, it's your job as an orderly to provide me with kind, gentle companionship to combat my *intense* feelings of insecurity and emotional instability."

Face didn't believe a word of it, but didn't push the subject beyond asking, with a certain irritability, if Murdock would at least get out of the wheelchair.

Instead, the pilot held up a cautioning hand. "Hold on, amigo," he said, voice and posture now showing no trace of his earlier sleepy demeanor. "If you would be some kind as to direct your attention to your immediate right, you will see a man of Ramboesque proportions and crummy disposition who is only one of the many newly hired personnel one can now see littering the halls of our fair facility."

The orderly in question might as well have been carrying a sign that read "Thug for Hire—will do any dirty work for reasonable rates." He was heavysset and tow-headed, with a boxer's nose and the kind of arrogant swagger that made even *Face's* fists itch.

"Looks like a real prince," the lieutenant whispered. "What's his name?"

"Steven Dorf," Murdock supplied. "He's got a real way with people, sort of like Jack the Ripper. Whatever's goin' on, you can bet your tap shoes he's right in the middle of it."

Dorf had out-distanced the quietly shuffling patient he was supposedly escorting and now turned back impatiently. "Come on, why don't you?" he snapped, "Or do you want we should lock you away for good?"

The patient didn't seem to mind—or even notice—as Dorf half-dragged him back toward the hospital building, but the two unnoticed watchers minded very much. The Team had a problem with bullies in general, but especially so when victim was a veteran who, for whatever reason, had paid the ultimate sacrifice in war: not life, but sanity.

"Kind, gentle companionship, eh?" Face murmured, feeling a brief surge of relief that however crazy *Murdock* might act, at least he was sane enough that the Team could casually gripe about his insanity.

"Somebody sure pulled some strings to get him

and his buddies on staff," the pilot agreed, eyes still hard as he watched Dorf disappear down the trail. "And it's time somebody unraveled 'em. Face, when you gonna start rubbing shoulders with some of your co-workers? Know what I mean?"

"It worries me whenever I say this, but yeah, I know exactly what you mean, and it just so happens that it's time for my lunch break."

Murdock nodded and jerked a thumb toward the hospital. "Good, cause I gotta get to my weekly therapy session anyway."

Face paused. "You actually go to therapy? Does it help?"

"Course it does!" Murdock's tone was hurt. "Do you think I could've gotten this far without professional help?"

The V.A. cafeteria was a typically beige-walled, metal-tabled, over-crowded affair, with a small selection of hot entrees and vending machines to supply everything else. Grabbing coffee, an apple, and something resembling macaroni and cheese, Face regretfully overlooked several smiling invitations from nurses and made his way to where his quarry sat with half a table of hard-faced orderlies. They promised to be *much* less pleasant company than the women.

"Hiya!" Face concentrated on keeping his expression ingenuous as half a dozen glowers told him to get lost. "The name's Alex, Alex Holmes, and I just got transferred from San Diego, and well, I was wondering if you'd mind if I joined you?"

Dorf—obviously the leader of the motley group—reached out and picked up the apple from the tray Face had placed on the table. "We mind, cuz, so if you don't want your pretty face to look like this macaroni, you'd better get outta here."

Amid rough laughter, Dorf lobbed the apple at Face, whose composure never wavered as his hand snapped out to catch the fruit in mid-flight. "You know, that's a good point," he admitted, absently shining the apple on his shirt. "And now that I think about it, that little nurse over there probably *would* be better company for a new boy in town." The apple crunched sweetly under his very white teeth. "Thanks anyway."

Abandoning his tray to the mercies of the gang, Face spun on his heels and zeroed in on a young woman he remembered from his brief tour of the V.A.'s file room.

She was a blonde, blue-eyed beauty and more than made up for the lost Brandi. "Hello," he said to get the ball rolling.

She looked him up and down and tossed out a smile which he returned at a slightly higher amp.

"Hello . . . Alex, isn't it?"

"That's what it says on my name tag."

She laughed. "Well, I'm Cristal."

"With an 'i'?"

"How'd you guess? Please, sit down."

"Thanks," he said and tried out an abashed grin.

"I guess I should've tried over here first. At least then I'd still have my lunch."

Cristal frowned prettily. "Those guys have been bullying everyone ever since the day they came here. I don't know how they got their credentials, but they're rotten with the patients, don't get along with any of the staff, and we don't even need the extra hands!"

"Well, I for one am glad someone *thinks* you do," Face teased, filing away the information for later use.

Cristal dropped her eyes and blushed attractively. "Actually, you're the first person Mr. Michaels has recently hired who seems to know anything about handling people."

That was a comment worth explicating. "Mr. Michaels . . . ?"

"The Assistant Director of the Hospital." She smiled again. "You know, I saw you with Murdock this morning and it's amazing—I've never seen him take to someone so quickly. Usually he double-talks people into a frenzy until he's sure of them."

"Maybe I remind him of someone he knows," Face suggested and was glad when she missed the trace of sadness in his voice and began to talk of other things.

He let the conversation flow aimlessly for a few minutes, then gave Cristal one of his best smiles, and in the most charming and convivial manner possible, set about worming his way into the V.A.'s files.

"Hello, I'm here to see Captain H.M. Murdock," Amy told the nurse on duty and handed over her driver's license as per routine. The woman politely perused the card and handed it back.

"All right, Ms. Allen," she said pleasantly, "please sign in and one of the orderlies will show you to Captain Murdock's room."

It was the same thing every week since Amy had first run into Murdock on her quest to find the mysterious A-Team. License, visitor's list, orderly. The only difference this time was the orderly who approached to guide her to the room which by now she could find blindfolded.

Templeton Peck acting like a fresh-faced, over-zealous employee was like Hannibal masquerading as one of the feeble old men he liked to use as disguises: utterly unbelievable to anyone who knew the real man. But even knowing Face as she did, Amy still had to remind herself that those blue eyes his white livery accentuated so becomingly were *nowhere* as innocent as they appeared. *Nowhere*.

"If you'll please step this way," he asked her, and biting back a smile, she followed him down the hallway.

"Having fun, Face?"

He dropped the eager-beaver routine. "The time of my life. Did you get the information on Dorf?"

"Every grisly detail," Amy replied, patting the satchel slung over her shoulder. "Have Hannibal and B.A. arrived yet?"

"About ten minutes ago. You don't have to worry about visiting hours when you use the window entrance."

They stopped at Murdock's door and after Face had rapped a polite hello, the pilot's face popped into

the view, framed by the door's small mesh grill. "Who is it?" he asked suspiciously.

Amy gave a wave. "Hi, Murdock."

"Hey there muchacha," he responded with a broad smile. "Did you bring my pizza and potstickers?"

"Would you settle for a tic-tac?"

"Depends—what flavor?"

"Murdock," Face cut in impatiently. "You wanna let us in here?"

"Spearmint," Amy revealed.

The smile grew wider. "My favorite!" So saying, he threw open the door, deftly catching the tic-tac package Amy tossed to him in passing.

Hannibal and B.A. cut off their conversation and waved salutations as the two entered. Even without Amy and Face, the room had been full, with B.A. leaning against the sill of the one window, while Hannibal sat backward on the room's only chair, arms crossed over its back and his traditional cigar smoking in one hand. Now, almost every square inch was packed with wanted criminals and accessories.

"Hi guys." Amy arranged herself on the edge of Murdock's bed while Murdock and the tic-tacs flopped across the rest of it and Face took up a sentry position next to the door. He nodded to show they were clear.

"Okay, Face, what've you got for us?" Hannibal asked. That was the A-Team's signal to get down to business, and the intensity in the room increased accordingly.

Pushing off the doorframe, Face took up a more central position in the room. "Well, I checked the V.A.'s files," he reported crisply, "and according to the registry, for the last seven months, there have been twelve hundred patients living here full-time."

Murdock caught a tic tac in his mouth and shook his head. "That's not right," he declared. "The hospital's not big enough to hold more than a thousand vets at any one time."

Hannibal glanced at Face. "He's right," the lieutenant confirmed.

"Course I am," Murdock sniffed, throwing and catching another piece of candy. "Don't you think I know how many lunatics I'm competing with?"

"Only thing you know is craziness, fool," B.A. snorted from the window.

"Thank you, B.A.," Murdock said around the tic-tac, "for proving my point exactly."

Hannibal took a long drag on his cigar and Amy could almost *see* his mind spinning as he developed and dismissed strategies from the scraps Face had given him. "So someone's padding the records and pocketing the extra dough the government shells out for patients who don't exist," he hypothesized.

"Looks like it," Face nodded. "*Probably* a guy named Kane Michaels, the Assistant Director of the V.A."

"Michaels?" Murdock half straightened, pushing his cap up and then pulling it back down. "He's the guy who recommended me for shock therapy last year!"

"Can't be all bad, then," B.A. laughed.

"Hey, B.A., I was *traumatized* by that. I had to play it straight for a week and a half!"

"You couldn't play it straight for a *minute* and a

half, fool, let alone—"

"Guys," Hannibal quietly forestalled the impending battle, then steered back to business. "What kind of money are we talking about here, Face?"

"Well . . ." Face tilted his head as he ran through mental mathematics with a speed that always made Amy, who was by no means a slouch at numbers, dizzy. "Counting board, staffing requirements, general facilities . . . let's say an average of twenty-five thousand a veteran, multiplied by two hundred phony patients, and that gives us a grand total of five million dollars a year."

Amy gave a low whistle.

"Not bad," Hannibal agreed thoughtfully. "And not very nice."

"Hey man, someone's using other people's problems to make money and I don't like it," B.A. growled.

"Anything else, Face?"

Face smiled sardonically. "How did you guess? I also found a list with three names on it: Marcums, Stevenson and Callahan."

"Our missing men." Hannibal's eyes gleamed in a not entirely pleasant manner. "Interesting. How about Dorf, Amy?"

She shrugged. "Nothing special, basically he's your typical hired goon. But he *is* rumored to be connected to a prominent drug-lord by the name of Alfred Hackman who runs a club downtown called 'The Game'."

"Oh, I *like* games," Hannibal said in a tone that made Amy think that the word missing in that sentence was "winning".

"Is Dorf really a registered nurse?" Murdock asked doubtfully.

Amy shook her head. "Definitely not. I don't know how he got those credentials—probably the same way Face got his."

"Well, he's certainly not here because of his compassion for other people," Face chipped in.

Murdock still had a puzzled look on his face. "What I don't understand is what does scamming the taxpayers have to do with kidnapping? I mean, if all we're talkin' about is some upper-level fraud, why bother with the muscle? And why did it only start a month ago?"

Hannibal, being Hannibal, already had a theory. "Maybe Michaels got greedy. He probably figures that he's got an entire building full of people nobody wants to know about, so why not put those American I.D.s to good use?"

"You mean body laundering?" Amy asked, stomach roiling at the thought.

Face's smile said there was nothing funny about the situation. "Why not? It's a quick, tidy way for mobsters, war criminals and other upstanding citizens to get a new identity—for a small fee, of course."

"So every once and a while—" Hannibal was pacing now—"a patient disappears, theoretically checking themselves out of the V.A., and someone enters society with their papers—"

"While they get dropped in some alleyway," Murdock finished, anger curling through the words.

"And a guy like Hackman's just the type to arrange everything," was Face's opinion.

"Hannibal," Amy demanded, "we've got to stop this."

The colonel clamped teeth around his cigar.

"Don't worry, we will. Face. . . ."

"Hmmm?"

"Can you get back into the files room?"

"Sure." The lieutenant held up a heart-shaped keychain. "Anytime."

Amy eyed the second key on the chain. "That one looks like a *house* key to me, Face."

"Ah, well . . ." Face cleared his throat. "Well, Cristal thought that since I'm new and everything, I might need some extra, ah, *personal* attention . . ."

He finished the thought with a look like a choir boy caught bumming smokes in-between services, and seemed just as glad when Hannibal cut in to announce the next step.

"Okay, we've got to make sure that Hackman and Michaels are the sewer rats running this party."

"How we gonna do that, Hannibal?" B.A. asked.

The colonel stopped in front of Murdock with a speculative air. "Murdock, how'd you like to join the very exclusive ranks of kidnapped mental patients?"

"Do you think I can make it?" the pilot replied with the beginnings of the wild abandon that had earned "Howlin' Mad" his name. "What if I don't wear the right clothes? What if I forget the secret handshake?"

"Wait a minute, Hannibal," Amy objected, feeling a bit ridiculous because although Face and B.A. didn't look ecstatic about the idea, they weren't complaining and Murdock himself seemed fine with it. "If these guys are killing everyone on that list, what's to stop them from just dumping Murdock in a ditch somewhere?"

Hannibal leveled a patient look in her direction. "*Us*. But in the meantime, I think it's time for Murdock to open some of his birthday presents."

"Birthday presents?" Amy echoed, hopelessly confused. "But that's not even today!"

"No," Hannibal admitted, "but we like to be flexible. B.A.?"

B.A. tossed a colorfully wrapped package to Murdock, who easily flowed in the new conversational direction. "Presents? For me?" he exclaimed delightedly. "You guys shouldn't have."

"I didn't," Face put in, then hastened to add: "But I will, once we've got this all sorted out."

He made the mission sound as dangerous as mowing the lawn. Sometimes the A-Team's devil-may-care mentality frustrated the hell out of Amy.

Murdock shook his present speculatively. "What is it?" he wheedled. "Come on, give me a hint . . ."

"It's to keep you outta so much trouble when you're in here alone," B.A. said gruffly, and Amy would have sworn that he was blushing as he tried not to show how much he cared for his friend.

"Aw, B.A. . . ."

"The card's from me," Hannibal prompted, and as the pilot read the inscription, the customary gleam in the colonel's blue eyes slipped into Murdock's brown ones.

"Oh, Colonel," Murdock beamed. "A Plan, it's just what I wanted. How did you ever know?"

"I've always had a knack for gifts," Hannibal grinned.

Face waited until just before the night shift to slip into the files' room and add, in a very credible imitation of the handwriting on the hit list, Murdock's name and room number.

The first kink in Hannibal's plan occurred approximately thirty seconds later when Dorf, followed by a crony with cauliflower ears, burst into the small room and announced himself with a punch that spun the lieutenant into the file cabinets.

"Oh, hi guys," Face managed.

"Save it," the crony ordered, pulling him upright the better to twist his arm behind his back and up to somewhere just beyond the point of pain.

"Well, look what we have here?" Dorf asked with a smirk that Face didn't like at all. "What were you looking for, *Peck*?"

That was the second kink in the plan. And a rather large kink it was, too.

Face knew he was in trouble, but gave it the ol' college try anyway, opening his eyes wide and looking as virtuous as a man in an armlock *could* look. "Peck? Is that someone I should know? I mean, *my* name's, uh, Holmes!"

"Don't even bother, Peck," Dorf snarled. "You're not the only one who can snoop around and find out stuff. *I* pay attention to the news."

"Great," Face shook his head disgustedly, "an entire hospital of military personnel and the only ones who keep up with events are the criminals."

Right on schedule, the crony jacked Face's arm up a notch, to Dorf's obvious amusement. Which meant that despite his unnatural alertness to the army's outstanding warrants, he was just like any other hired thug: mean, but not all that smart.

"I asked you a question, Peck," Dorf reminded him.

"Oh, yeah, what was that again?" Face estimated he had about an inch and a half—*ah, no, make that just one*—before the crony broke his arm. Which was enough leeway to either get Dorf mad enough to stop thinking straight and maybe let Face salvage this situation . . . or else it was just enough to get Dorf really mad. Period.

It all depended on how much they knew he knew, and what they had guessed about Murdock. He looked around, trying to find a way to gently introduce the subject—but then the tenacious, inexplicable quality that permeated all of Hannibal's plans kicked in. Glancing down, Dorf noticed the hit list that Face had dropped while becoming intimately acquainted with the filing cabinets.

"What's that?"

"My grocery list?" Face offered, then winced. Okay, half an inch more. That was the problem with this outfit—the only place to keep a gun was at the ankle and these guys didn't seem inclined to let him bend down so he could unstrap his weapon.

Luckily, Dorf had retrieved the list and was busy jumping to the right—or rather wrong—conclusion like a good little henchman. “Your friend Murdock found out about us and knew he was next, so he sent you to save him, right?”

Right . . . “Guess you caught me,” Face admitted cheerfully.

“You won’t be smiling for long, buddy,” Dorf predicted, “and neither will your crazy pal.”

“You don’t know Murdock very well, do you?”

“Shut up.” And since Dorf now had a snub-nosed .45 pressed against the small of Face’s back, the lieutenant didn’t argue. “We’re going to pay your friend a visit.”

No one said another word until Dorf stopped at the proper room and told Face to knock on the door.

Face knocked on the door.

“Who is it?” Murdock asked.

“It’s Templeton, H.M.,” Face warned.

“Ah, Temp, do come in,” Murdock replied. So much for hoping Murdock could get the drop on the men.

“We thought we’d pay a visit to your friend first,” Dorf confirmed smugly.

“You really thought of everything, didn’t you?”

Face mumbled as they shoved him into the room.

Now, their only ace in the hole was Murdock’s new All-Stars—if they worked as well as B.A. said they would. If not, things could get really irritating.

Murdock sat on his chair, bound hand and foot with various cronies scattered around the room. “It’s so nice to feel wanted,” he told Face.

“The glamour wears off,” the lieutenant assured him.

“All right, everyone.” The click as Dorf pulled back the .45’s hammer caught the attention of everyone, especially the two prisoners. “It’s time for the crazy man to take his daily walk,” the big man continued with that special brand of affability that was uglier than any outright gloating. “And we’ll all come along, just in case he tries to escape.”

They closed in on Murdock, who did his best to shrug. “Who, *me*?”

And then his shoes began to play County and Western.

“There he is, Hannibal! And Face is with him!” B.A. announced from inside the A-Team’s black and red van, a vehicle that was more like home than the more traditional residences the Team occasionally inhabited.

“Damn,” Hannibal muttered from the passenger seat as Murdock and Face were manhandled down the sidewalk toward a parked sedan. “Well, doesn’t matter now. B.A.—”

That was when he noticed that the needle of the machine in his hands hadn’t moved. “B.A.,” he said in a very different tone. “Why isn’t this tracking the homing beacon you put in Murdock’s shoes?”

“Let me see that,” B.A. snapped, grabbing the

machine. Hannibal scooped up a pair of binoculars and focused on Murdock’s feet as the pilot followed Face into the trunk of the dark sedan. The shoes he now wore were old and faded.

“It should be working, Hannibal,” B.A. said in a tone of confusion. “Less that crazy fool did something to it . . .”

“Forget it, B.A.,” Hannibal said flatly. “He’s not wearing the shoes. Something must’ve tipped Dorf off.”

Down the street, the sedan’s engine purred into life.

“Stay close,” Hannibal ordered and B.A. gunned the van’s own motor, just as determined as the colonel not to lose their two comrades.

Unfortunately, the goons in the sedan were good at their job and spotted the trailing van almost immediately. After that, the chase was hot and heavy as both vehicles screeched around corners, raced through red lights and stop signs, and dodged cars moving in both directions. Hannibal hung out of the van’s side door and tried to pick off one of the sedan’s tires and a thug leaned out of a back window and tried to do the same for the van.

The colonel had to aim with extra care, however, since he didn’t cotton to accidentally shooting either of the trunk-bound men he was trying to rescue. The goon in the sedan had no such compunctions and his random barrage paid off where caution did not. With a squeal of protest the van’s front tire exploded, slamming Hannibal against the door as the vehicle fish-tailed across the street. The sedan disappeared into the wilds of L.A.

Grunting a little at newly tender ribs, Hannibal climbed back into the front seat. B.A.’s worried eyes were waiting for him. “What do we do now, Hannibal?”

“We wait until Hackman contacts us. If they took Face, they probably know who he is, which means they probably know who *we* are.” The colonel pulled out a cigar and bit off the tip. “Which means it’s time for our old friend Arman Altoido to make bail and hit the streets.”

“Oh, *Hannibal*,” B.A. groaned. “Not Arman Altoido. You know what happened last time.”

Hannibal lit the cigar and smiled. “Yeah, but this time I’ve got it down pat.”

Smoothing his suit jacket across his slight paunch, Alfred Hackman entered the back room of his club and inspected his two unexpected “guests”. The men were disheveled—natural enough after a high-speed chase spent in the trunk of a car—but they still watched him with complete composure. Hackman wasn’t worried by the act. He was used to dealing with false bravado, and used to breaking it as well.

The shorter of the men, a pretty boy in hospital whites who must be Peck, broke the silence. “Mr. Hackman, I presume?”

“Correct. I do apologize for your surroundings, Mr. Peck, but your arrival came as rather a surprise to me.”

"Us, too," Peck admitted carelessly.

Hackman turned to the other prisoner, a rangy man with a baseball cap and dark eyes that burnt with an—almost—unsettling intensity. "And you must be Captain H.M. Murdock, possibly the illusive fourth member of the infamous A-Team, and the inmate that Mr. Dorf informs me I 'requested.'"

He held up a hand before Murdock could speak. "Please, don't try to convince me that you're hopelessly insane. I don't need anyone of your description at the moment, so if you're not part of the A-Team, it seems there's really no use for you to keep breathing."

It seemed as if Peck and Murdock exchanged glances—although since they were sitting side by side that was impossible—and Murdock's jaw tightened in temporary acquiescence. "You've done your homework well, Hackman," he rasped.

"I always do." Enough chitchat. Slowly, Hackman took out Peck's nine millimeter and slipped its safety off; the weapon gleamed very effectively under the electric lights in the ceiling. "For instance, this gun. A beautiful choice, Mr. Peck: Powerful, efficient, and let's not forget precise. In fact, did you know that the nine millimeter can shoot off a single finger without damaging the hand?"

Cocking the hammer, he walked up to Murdock and tilted the gun toward the man's right hand where it lay immovable against the chair arm. "Of course," he admitted very softly, "one can't say the same thing about the finger."

The threat in Murdock's gaze grew, but his tone remained flippant as he answered, "But then I'll never play the violin again!"

It was an interesting reaction.

"And you, Mr. Peck?" Hackman asked, smoothly relocating the gun. "What would you say if I told you that I am interested in the A-Team in a purely financial degree, and would quite willing release you if Smith and Baracus can pay?"

It was harder to detect the danger in Peck, but Hackman saw its promise in the grin the man shot him. "Well, Hackman," Peck returned lightly, "I'd say . . . that I don't play the violin."

"He does the floor show while I provide the music," Murdock put in.

"We'd show you the routine," Peck added, "but your goons took our accompaniment."

Hackman weighed the two men. They had set him a neat trap, and it had only been a fluke that the bug in the pilot's shoes had picked up a local radio station and alerted Dorf and the others to the duplicity. Hackman did not like to rely on flukes. He also did not like to have the security of his tidy business with Michaels at the V.A. threatened.

Killing these two would be the wise choice, but what he had told Peck was true: he was a businessman, and he enjoyed making a profit. All that the A-Team's vigilante status meant to him was that if Smith wouldn't deal, or if the Army couldn't meet his price—which he doubted it could—there would be plenty of wealthy, interested parties to whom he could sell two of the members of a band that had frequently caused them insult and injury.

Either way, he won. He appreciated that.

"You know, you're right," Hackman said, refocusing his attention on his prisoners. "Why bother with fingers, when heads are so *much* more satisfying."

He concentrated on Peck as he pressed the nine milliliter against Murdock's temple—the captain tensed but said nothing—and caught the worry edging into the lieutenant's measuring stare. They really had no choice. That was the beauty of working with a team—it was so much easier to break someone when loyalty was involved.

"The options are this," Hackman told Peck. "You can call Smith or I can kill your friend. You see, I only have your word that he's actually part of your little team, so he's really not worth much to me."

Just to be safe, and because he rather enjoyed the feeling of holding a man's life in his hands, he kept the gun on Murdock even after Peck had dialed the number and handed over the phone.

B.A. had just finished changing the van's tire when the car phone rang.

"Get going, B.A.," Hannibal told the sergeant, and waited until the van was heading back in the proper direction before picking up the phone. "Lou's Delivery."

"It's me, Hannibal," Face said, sounding strained but not hurt.

"How are you doin', kid?"

"Not bad, but tell B.A. he needs to work on his bugs. Murdock's shoes suddenly started spouting Hank Williams on F.M."

There wasn't much time. "Are you clear?"

"Yep."

"Are you at Hackman's club?"

"Probably. Listen, Colonel, someone here wants to talk to you."

"Right."

There was a pause and then a new voice came on. It was so smooth it would have been ubiquitous except for the undercurrent of cruelty. "Colonel Hannibal Smith?"

Hannibal took the cigar out of his mouth. "Druglord Alfred Hackman?"

There was a slight hesitation on the other end of the line and then: "Ah, I see we are on an equal footing, Colonel Smith."

"No, we're not on an equal anything, Hackman," Hannibal corrected coldly. "Now, I'd rather not pollute my ears talking to you more than I have to, so why don't you drop the spy routine and spill whatever cockroach deal you've cooked up?"

When Hackman spoke again, it was with a certain shortness and Hannibal smiled to himself. He had gotten to the man. Now all he had to do was keep pushing and luckily, he had a natural talent for needling dirt-balls. "Very well, Colonel. The position is simple. I have no patriotism that urges me to turn in the A-Team, and neither do I hold any personal grudges against any of you."

Yet. "Well, I'll sleep better tonight knowing that." Hannibal replaced the cigar and took a heavy



drag. “So what’s your angle? Wait, don’t tell me—you want cash, don’t you? Slimebags like you always want cash.”

“What I want is one million dollars in exchange for each member of your Team I am currently holding.”

“I knew it. Doesn’t originality count for anything anymore?”

“I also want your guarantee that you’ll back off from the V.A. Hospital.” Hackman was beginning to sound less the dispassionate businessman and more the felon-waiting-to-happen he was. “Otherwise, I’ll sell your people to the highest bidder I can find, and that person can arrest them, kill them, or just cut them into tiny pieces, for all I care.”

Hannibal’s teeth ground into his cigar at the threat. “What if I don’t have an extra two million dollars to spare?” he asked tightly.

“Then I will consider trading Peck and Murdock for you, Colonel Smith. You’re the leader and easily worth two millions dollars. I think that’s a fair bargain, don’t you agree?”

Hackman had regained his poise, and then some. “Oh, and don’t think you can rescue them—I know how you work, and I’ll be ready for you.”

“Wanna bet? Let me talk to Murdock,” Hannibal bargained. “If I’m going to cough up a thousand Gs, I want proof he’s still in working condition.”

“Of course.” Hackman obviously thought he had won. A lot of people had thought that when they first went up against Hannibal, and they had all, without exception, been proven absolutely wrong.

“H.M. here.” Murdock spoke easily, but with the undercurrent of stress that meant he had been focusing on reality more he appreciated.

“Condition, Captain?”

“Running fine, Colonel, but . . . they took my tic tacs, and I was really *counting* on those two and a half calorie diet supplements to get me through this. Can you think of anything that might help?”

“How about Arman Altoido at the Hobby Horse?”

Murdock’s tone dropped. “Hannibal, not again—”

“Just give me back to Hackman, Murdock.”

“. . . Roger.”

Another pause, then: “So you agree to my terms, Colonel?” Hackman’s voice dripped confidence.

But Hannibal had other plans. “Sorry, Hackman, no can do. I don’t have the cash and I’m running a little short on self-sacrificing spirit lately. Probably hanging around guys like you too much. Tell the guys sorry.”

“Mr. Smith—” Now shock colored every syllable. “Do you understand what—”

“See ya, lizard breath.” Hannibal hung up and bit down hard on his cigar. “We don’t have much time, B.A.”

B.A. didn’t even look away from the road. “Right, man,” he said.

Hackman listened in amazement to the dial tone for a full dozen seconds before hanging up the phone.

“Bad news?” Peck asked pleasantly.

“For you, I’m afraid. Your colonel refused to do business.”

Normally, he would have found the look of stunned betrayal on their faces amusing, but oddly enough, Hackman found himself wishing that Smith had been willing to trade. In just that short conversation, Smith had gotten further under his skin than anyone had in quite a long time. Instincts that had clawed Hackman to the top of his profession now demanded a confrontation with the man—and if that meeting did take place, a few lessons would be taught!

“He did say he was sorry.”

Peck rolled his eyes. “Oh, great.”

All in all, the interview had proven a

disappointment for everyone involved. Except perhaps for Hannibal Smith.

"Things went a *little* sour?" Amy cupped one hand around the phone's receiver and struggled to keep her voice down as the other reporters at the *Courier* glanced her way. "Hannibal, Face and Murdock are being held by a maniac who's ready to hold an auction and invite the A-Team hate club! I mean, that wasn't exactly in the game plan!"

"I know, kid," Hannibal replied with that infuriating good humor he always seemed to feel whenever one of his schemes came crashing down around his ears. "But that's why sometimes in life we've got to be—"

"Flexible," Amy completed the sentence more calmly as her brief panic subsided into more useful pragmatism. "Yeah, I know, you keep telling me that. So what are we going to do?"

Hannibal shelved the flippancy. "*You're* going to go home and collect whatever you need to be a first-class ornament."

Oh, brother, not again. "Hannibal, I appreciate your letting me a *first-class* bimbo, but leaving out the women's lib stuff for the moment, I don't have that kind of wardrobe."

"Don't worry about the dress."

His off-handed tone worried her. Of course she wanted to save the guys, but . . . "*Hannibal*, what kind of scam are we talking about here?"

"All I meant, Allen, is that we've got the dress taken care of. Just bring the—" here his tone grew vague as he touched on a world he usually left to women—"the other stuff. You know."

"Yeah, I know."

"Fifteen minutes, kid. We're on a tight schedule here."

She was already putting away the day's copy. "Right. Wait a minute, where are you—?"

But she was talking to herself. *Perfect. I wonder if he does this to me on purpose?* That was silly. Of course he did. *Well, Amy, you're the investigative reporter.*

Mentally, she replayed the conversation and . . . *of course. Bimbos.*

Fifteen minutes later, holding an overstuffed bag of odds and ends, she knocked on the door of Face's latest scammed apartment.

"Come in, my dear." Hannibal opened the door and gestured her into the domicile. As usual, it made her own house look like a low-income renter.

The colonel looked hideous. A slicked-back black wig created the impression of a crude oil spill on his head, and a thick black mustache slithered across his face, twirling against thick sideburns that reached half-way down his face. A very white shirt and a very red suit with a few of B.A.'s smaller gold chains completed the ensemble.

"Hannibal, *what* are you supposed to be?"

"Nice, huh?" He seemed honestly proud of the effect. "The name's Arman Altoido, and you—" he held up a tiny swatch of material—"will be my lovely consort Esmerelda Cuchina."

"Wearing *that*?" Amy dumped her bag on the sofa and took the almost-dress with a grimace. "Hannibal, this thing is sinking low even for *Face*."

"Now, Amy," the colonel chided, "this isn't just some leftover from one of Face's flings."

"Isn't it?"

"No," B.A. chipped in from the kitchen. "He bought it for you."

"What!"

"What B.A. means," Hannibal said quickly, "is that we were *planning* to introduce Arman a few months ago for that Chinatown case, but since you were away on a story, I . . ."

"Did without the bimbo."

"Soloed."

"Yeah, and he did it so well he got arrested on suspicion of being a mobster," B.A. growled. "Took us all night to get him out."

"Of course, if you don't want to wear it," Hannibal continued, ignoring B.A.'s addition with masterful self-possession, "we could always hunt around Face's closet and see what we come up with. Although . . ."

Although they both knew very well that Face usually preferred women half a foot shorter and quite a few inches more voluptuous than Amy. *Checkmate.* "Just give me the dress," she sighed, and scooping up her bag, retreated to the bathroom.

Later, when she had arranged the proper underwear, and squeezed in to the dress—which, to give grudging credit to Face's fashion sense, suited her build and coloring extremely well—she realized what was missing.

"Hannibal, I need shoes!"

"What size?" he called back through the door.

She relayed the proper information and after a moment, Hannibal knocked on the door. "You decent?"

In this dress? "Yeah, come on in."

Hannibal entered, eyebrows only lifting slightly as he took her in. He held a shoe in either hand.

"These are the only colors we could find."

"The beige will work, I think," she decided.

Hannibal shrugged. "B.A., we need the other beige!"

A muffled grunt was his only answer, and curious, Amy craned her neck to see exactly *where* B.A. was looking. All that was visible of the sergeant was his legs from the knees down; the rest of him had vanished under Face's bed.

"I should have guessed," Amy groaned.

With another grunt, B.A. finally emerged, towing the illusive shoe in one hand. He broke into one of his rare, sunny smiles as he caught sight of her. "You look good, momma."

"Thanks, B.A."

Hannibal had found a sleek, white fur coat somewhere in the closet; with a flourish, he draped it around her shoulders. "Everyone ready?"

"Hannibal, I don't even know what we're about to do!"

He regarded her merrily. "Well, we're gonna hit the town, punch out a slimebag or two, and blow open a few scandals at the V.A. just to round things off."

"Oh," Amy said. "Just a normal night, then."

The sarcasm bounced right off the colonel. "Yeah, pretty much," he agreed. "But it wiles away the time, doesn't it?"

"You know, Face," Murdock mused idly, "it's times like this when those shoes of mine would come in handy. I mean, here we are, tied up, nowhere to go, nothing to do, and a little music would just help *lighten* the sense of impending doom."

"Murdock, will you concentrate here?" Face snapped, inching his chair closer to the pilot. "If we don't get out of here fast, we're gonna be dogmeat."

"Okay . . ." Murdock angled his chair to complement Face's movements. "What about your watch?"

"What about it?"

"Well, you've still got it, right? You could use it to cut through the ropes."

Face bent forward, lifting his chair off the ground and shuffling 90 degrees to face the pilot. "Murdock, this is a Rolex," he panted. "It can't cut through anything."

"That's not a Rolex, Faceman."

"A very good friend gave me this watch and she *swore* it's a Rolex." This was the part he really disliked; gritting his teeth, Face threw himself hard to the left and toppled to the floor.

Murdock edged closer, talking over Face's soft grunt of pain. "And I bet *you* swore your name was Terence."

"Ah, right, I've been meaning to get that inscription changed."

Murdock's leg was in position now. Very carefully, Face caught his friend's cuff between his teeth and pulled it down. After a heart-pounding moment, a small pocketknife fell out of the fabric, bounced across Murdock's shoe and skidded onto the floor.

"You know what I heard, Faceman?" Murdock's voice was pensive as he kicked the knife toward Face's bound left hand. "I heard Arman Altoido is back in town."

"Not Altoido," Face groaned. He had the knife in his fingers now and struggled to open it against the chair arm. "Now there's a man who would pay a million just to hear us scream."

"He used to always hang out at the . . . the Hobby Horse, down on Sheridan and 23rd, didn't he?" Murdock continued.

"Yeah, yeah I think so. Murdock, this watch isn't doing anything."

"Do you have a better idea?"

Face's smile caught in the blade of the pocketknife. *Yes*, it answered, *as a matter of fact, I do*. "Not at the moment," he said.

"Then you keep sawing and I'll lift our spirits with an old favorite from your friend and mine, the king of swoon, ol' blue eyes himself . . ."

"Just what we need: a soundtrack," Face muttered and set about cutting his bonds without slicing himself more than absolutely necessary.

"*Would you like to swing on a star?*" Murdock crooned, "*carry moonbeams home in a jar . . . ?*"

But the men listening to their conversation in Hackman's private office weren't worried about Sinatra. They had other matters on their minds.

"Did you hear that, Mr. Hackman?" Dorf asked excitedly. "They just gave us two million dollars!"

Hackman reached for his overcoat, smiling with brittle humor. A bug for a bug, and they didn't even realize how they had fallen over themselves to give him the information he needed. So much for the cunning of the A-Team.

"Dorf, get the car ready," he ordered. "We're going to the Hobby Horse."

"*You'd be better off than you are*," Murdock warned over the intercom. "*Or would you rather be a fish?*"

Amy sipped her umpteenth ginger ale of the evening and once again glanced around the jam-packed club. It wasn't her kind of place, and even if she had liked the music or the patrons, the bar stool wasn't exactly the most comfortable seat on which to spend the evening. In fact, the only good thing about spending two hours here while Hannibal circulated in the pulsating crowd was that at least now she didn't have to work to keep her eyes properly glazed and vacant.

"Miss Esmerelda Cuchina?"

It was Hackman, looking just like the photo she had found at the paper, with a suit much too expensive for this club and a trace of ruthlessness under his pale features. Dorf stood behind him, dividing his time between scanning the crowd and leering at her.

"Yeah, who wants to know?" she asked languidly, trying to ignore the way her stomach was racing toward deep freeze.

"I understand that you're here tonight with a man by the name of Arman Altoido, Miss Cuchina." Hackman's tone made it clear that he didn't consider her worth the "Miss," but she stomped down the urge to slug him and kept playing the dumb blonde.

"So what if he is?"

"Well, I'd like to discuss some business with him, if I could."

Amy pulled out her compact and began fixing her hair. "I don't know about any business, but you can wait here if you want."

Hannibal was already making his way over to the little group—thank God!—a glass of something in one hand. "Hey, Esme, I tot I told ya not ta talk ta any-buddy while I was gone," he snapped, playing the role to the hilt.

"These guys wanna talk to you," Amy told him, still fussing with her hair in order to give her hands something to do besides spill her drink.

"Den why're dey talking ta you?" Hannibal asked and kissed her. Then he finally deigned to notice Hackman and Dorf, while she dutifully fished out her lipstick and concentrated on touching up the makeup. It was his show now. "Am I supposed to know you?"

Hackman responded with a smile so icy Amy could have poured scotch over it. "Not yet, but I believe you *are* familiar with these two men." He withdrew a Polaroid from his jacket pocket and presented it

to Hannibal.

"Hey, yeah," Hannibal agreed after a quick glance at the shots. "I know dese guys, they're parta dat A-Team dat sent me to da slamma for da last tree years."

He studied Hackman with renewed interest and a crafty note entered his voice. "You holdin' dese guys?"

"For now."

"Any chance I can relieve you a dem?"

"That's what I came here to discuss."

Hannibal drained his drink and clapped his hands together. "Good, let's go."

"The price—"

"Whatever, I'll pay it. Dese guys cost me tree years of my life. I owe 'em big."

Oh, he is good, Amy thought to herself and barely stopped herself from applauding.

Hackman's solicitousness now had a degree of honest warmth in it. "Excellent, then if you'd care to follow me . . ."

That was her cue. "Where we goin', baby?" Amy dumped the lipstick and pouted. "You said we'd go home after this."

Hannibal slung an arm around her shoulders. "Don't bodder me when I'm doing business, angel. I keep tellin' ya, don't bodder me. Dis won't take long."

"Perhaps you could leave the lady here," Hackman hinted, but Hannibal shook his head emphatically and gestured to Amy.

"You want me to leave a girl like *dat* alone in dis kinda crowd?"

The warmth had gone again and Hackman smiled like an early frost. "Of course."

Hackman's club was everything the Hobby Horse wasn't: quiet, controlled, elegant and very rich.

"Looks like a nice joint," Hannibal remarked.

Hackman inclined his head. "I try to keep my customers satisfied."

Dorf parked the limo in the alley behind the club, and Hackman escorted Hannibal and Amy into the building by a small service door. The music from the club was muted here, but someone that sounded suspiciously like Murdock was singing behind an unpretentious door guarded by three very pretentious thugs at the end of the hallway.

They had almost reached the guards when the gun materialized in Hackman's hand. Amy's gasp was more from instincts than acting abilities, but Hannibal just looked annoyed.

"Hey Hacky," he complained, "wot is dis, some kinda set-up?"

"That's what I'd like to ascertain, Mr. Altoido," Hackman replied, holding the gun rock steady. Dorf had come up behind them, and Amy had no doubt that he, too, had a weapon out.

"You see," Hackman continued, "I've heard quite a lot about the talents of Hannibal Smith for disguise. Before I let you into this room, I need to set my mind at ease that you are who you say you are." He nodded to Dorf. "See if he's wearing a piece."

"Of course I'm wearing a piece," Hannibal snapped, drawing back his jacket to reveal the gun

stuck in his waistband. "You tink I'm the kinda guy that'd follow the kinda guy *you* are around without some insurance?"

"I was referring to your head," Hackman clarified as Dorf grabbed a chunk of greasy hair and pulled. Hannibal has his black gloves out and was pulling them on practically before the wig lifted to reveal the silver-white hair beneath.

"Hannibal Smith," Hackman gloated.

"Arman!" Amy squeaked.

"Sorry, cupcake, long story," Hannibal told her. "Hey, Hackman," he continued, pulling a cigar from his jacket pocket, "now that we've got everything cleared up, you got a light?"

Dorf slid up to disarm Hannibal with professional—and practical—veracity, and Hackman pocketed the gun. "I knew you would make a move for your men."

"Yeah, you're a real kid genius," Hannibal agreed. "Shall we? I've gotta be up early tomorrow."

"What about the girl?" Dorf asked.

"I picked her up at the bar," Hannibal shrugged. "I figured I'd need a girl to make the image sell, and B.A. just wouldn't fit in the dress."

"Watch her," Hackman told the guards, then waved for them to open the door.

Amy kept her eyes stunned and her mouth open as one of the guards, Hackman, Dorf and Hannibal stepped into the room.

Leaving her with two thugs and a Smith and Wesson .38 in her purse.

*"Well, I got me a fine life, I got me ol' fiddle/
when the sun's comin' up I got cakes on the griddle
/and life ain't nuthin' but a funny, funny riddle/ thank
God I'm a country boy!"*

When the three men entered the room, Peck actually seemed to be glad of the interruption, even though it was Hackman who was holding the gun on Smith, rather than vice versa. Hackman could only guess it had something to do with the fact that Murdock had apparently run through his repertoire of Sinatra and was now singing what seemed to be works of John Denver.

"Hi guys," Smith hailed his comrades with maddening lightheartedness.

"Hannibal," Peck replied in like kind, and Murdock abandoned his music to tease gently, "what took you so long?"

"Had to get my suit from the cleaners," Smith joked back.

Watching the three men, Hackman was gripped by the feeling that despite appearances, he was no longer in control. And he was getting tired of feeling that way where Hannibal Smith and his A-Team were concerned.

"What now, boss?" Dorf asked a little uncertainly, as if he, too, felt the discordance in reality.

Hackman clicked the hammer of his gun back in a furious decision. "We kill them."

"Are you sure you want to do that?" Smith asked him solicitously.

"Yes."

Smith shrugged. "Suit yourself."

And then, Murdock and Peck were moving, leaping up and sweeping their chairs overhead and down . . .

Dorf and Smitty collapsed under the furniture and before Hackman could react, Smith had control of both guns, pointing them directly at Hackman's chest. Hackman froze. Without so much as blinking, Smith tossed the nine millimeter to Peck.

"I believe this belongs to you, Lieutenant."

Peck caught the gun in his right hand and with his left handed Smitty's weapon to Murdock as the pilot moved in with Dorf's 45 to cover the two men. Both thugs were still on the ground, decorated with the remains of the chairs and looking hopelessly dazed.

"What d'you know, Murdock," Peck sneered quietly, "that watch must not have been a Rolex after all. Or was it the pocketknife that helped?"

Hackman glared at Smith with impotent hatred. "You'll never get away with this!"

"Shhhh," Hannibal advised, then motioned Peck toward the door, leaving Murdock to watch the—Hackman's blood pressure rose to think of it—*prisoners*. But the captain *was* certifiable . . .

Something in Hackman's face must have given away his thoughts, because Murdock very slowly raised his two weapons at the men. "Sunshine in your eyes may make you cry, buddy," he hissed, "but that's nothing compared to what bullets will do, so I'd play nice if I were you."

"My men—" Hackman began. Two heavy thuds from the hallway interrupted him, and a moment later Smith and Peck sauntered into the room. The girl was with them—so she was one of the Team!—and was blushing heavily, while Peck looked quite pleased for some reason.

Murdock grinned appreciatively as the girl walked in, although he wasn't so distracted that he let his guard down the necessary fraction. "Is that what all the well-dressed rescuers are wearing this year?" he asked in a suddenly playful tone.

"Yeah, we should get kidnapped more often," Peck agreed, then gestured at Hackman. "Colonel, what do we do with Mr. Congeniality here?"

Smith didn't even bother pointing his weapon at Hackman. "First," he said, "we find out what happened to Marcums, Stevenson and Callahan."

Caught under Smith's gaze and Murdock's guns, Hackman had no choice but to answer the question. "They're still alive," he told the men. "We used the I.D.s and let them stay on as, uh, runners."

A very dangerous silence followed his words and he kept talking just to fill it. "Because, you know, if somebody caught em, who'd believe some lunatic?"

"I've heard some *low* things in my life," Murdock began, his tone reinforcing the fact that this particular lunatic had his finger very tightly against the triggers of two very powerful guns . . .

"Save it, Captain," Smith cut Murdock off. "Dirt like this has heard it all before."

"What are you going to do?" Dorf asked from the floor, half blustering and half quavering.

Smith's smile had the humor of a newly sprung bear-trap. "Well, first, I'm going to be forced to call

'the Game' on account of rain."

Hackman tensed. "What do you mea—?!"

Then Smith took casual aim at the ceiling sprinkler and showed him exactly what he meant. With a tiny pop, the faucet exploded, sending water cascading down onto Hackman, Dorf and Smitty. Faint screams from the club proved that the entire building's sprinkler system had been set off.

"You'll pay for that, Smith!" Hackman vowed, then involuntarily stumbled backward at the man's expression.

"I don't think you're in any position to make threats, do you, Hackman?" Smith asked softly.

"I wouldn't push if I were you," Peck advised. "We've had a long day."

"Yeah, and I get cranky if I miss my bedtime, so we're gonna get out of here. And you're going to ring up Michaels or whoever you're working with at the V.A. and tell him that he's got until eight o'clock tomorrow morning to close up shop and get out of the country. Otherwise, we'll have to get mean."

He might have said more, but Hackman's hired help had finally figured out something was wrong and guns out and blazing, half a dozen goons stormed in from the club. Bullets sprayed through the air and Hackman prudently hit the ground.

"What now, Colonel?" Peck called over the soaring bullets and the gurgle of rushing water.

In answer, Smith yelled, "Do it, B.A.!"

Baracus did it. There was a terrible screech from outside the building and then, with the sound of a mini earthquake, a black and red van came tearing through the wooden walls of the room. Timber groaned, snapping like matchsticks under the assault, and Hackman watched helplessly as the A-Team dodged lead to dive into the open door of the vehicle.

Murdock crying "Let's rocky mountain high-tail it outta here!" was the last thing Hackman heard before, with a scream of rubber, the van backed up and took off.

A few of the more idiotic guards kept firing for a moment, then all was quiet.

"They were lucky this time," Dorf said, grime from water and dust dripping from his face. "We'll get 'em next time."

Hackman felt the same mud on him suit and his fists clenched. Money was no longer an issue—now he owed the A-Team. He owed Hannibal Smith. And Smith *would* pay.

"Next time," he said coldly, "either they die or you do."

Safely tucked safely in the van and headed back toward the V.A. Hospital, Amy, Murdock and Face thankfully sank into their seats and caught their breath. Hannibal never seemed to lose his, but he did take the opportunity to light up a new cigar and take a contented puff.

They all knew what he was about to say—those fateful eight words hovered in the air, just waiting for the colonel to speak—but Face wasn't about to let him get away with it. Not this time.

"Hannibal," he warned, "don't say you love is

when a plan comes together, because it *didn't*.”

“Oh, I don't know, Face,” Hannibal disagreed. “We confirmed that Hackman is involved at the V.A.”

“Yeah, but Face was kidnapped, my shoes went haywire, and we had to make a getaway through the side of a building!” Murdock protested.

B.A. thumped his steering wheel. “An' some-one's gonna pay for makin' me mess up my van!”

As usual, the colonel was impervious to the criticism. “Okay, maybe there were some slight hiccups to Part A—”

“Hannibal, Hackman threatened to shoot off our *fingers!*”

“—but don't worry, Part B will be a real piece of cake.” Hannibal smiled around his cigar like an avenging angel.

While B.A. shook his head and muttered imprecations against the “Jazz,” Face gave in under the confidence that had launched them into certain death countless times over the last twelve years—and yet each time had also brought them out in more or less one piece.

Murdock only stared hopefully at Amy. “Amy, I don't suppose you have any more tic tacs hidden away in that dress?”

Amy shot him the look she usually reserved for Face's occasional flirtational sallies, then turned back to Hannibal. “So what's Part B?”

“You had to ask,” Face muttered.

“We've gotten Hackman's attention,” Hannibal, the master of understatement, said. “So what we need now is Hackman's V.A.”

“Yeah, but how're we going to get them together?”

“Simple.” Hannibal's tone said this was the easiest thing in the world. “All we need to do is use the right bait.”

“Which is?”

The colonel sketched a curlicue with his cigar and grinned. “Me.”

“Hannibal, I keep forgetting how suicidal you can be,” Amy said wonderingly.

“Well, Amy,” Face countered resignedly, “they always say you can be anything you want, if only you put your mind to it.”

Hannibal kept grinning. “I *like* that attitude, Lieutenant.”

“What about in your handbag,” Murdock persisted. “Or the coat?”

“Shut up, fool,” B.A. growled, “or I'll tic tac toe you across the face!”

“Better swing by the studio lot, B.A., I've gotta pick up a few things.”

“*Murdock!* That is *not* a tic tac!”

Sometimes, Face reflected, life was like riding the last bus to the funny farm. And that was when things were *normal*. The rest of the time, he just tried not to think about it.

The next morning, Nurse Kelly Shields looked up from her romance novel to see a worried young woman leading what appeared to be a person clad in some kind of large, green rubber monster suit.

“May I help you?” she asked dubiously.

“Yeah, have you seen Godzilla?” the man in the suit said. “I was supposed to meet him in Tokyo, but I think I made a wrong turn somewhere.”

“I'm sorry?”

The woman gestured her over. “I'm with the Aquamaniac,” she explained.

“Aquamaniac?”

“It's a sea monster.” She pointed to the rubber-suited man. “You know, for the movies?”

“Oh . . . I see.” But why was he *here?*

“Anyway,” the woman continued, “this morning our star, uh, Colonel John Smith, went . . . well, I don't know how to describe it, but—” she lowered her voice to a confidential whisper, “he really thinks he *is* the Aquamaniac.”

“Oh dear.” Shields had heard of veterans suffering from delusional episodes, but she had never heard of *anyone* believing himself to be a low-budget sea monster before! She rang for assistance.

The rather cute nurse on duty was still doggedly trying to persuade Hannibal to take off his suit as Face rounded the corner, “But sir, you *can't* be the Aquamaniac.”

“Tell that to the west coast of Japan, lady,” Hannibal replied. “Tell that to King Kong, tell that to the slime monster from the black tar pit. You know how I took him down? It was great—I came out of the ocean just when he least expected it, and then, whammo!”

“Sir, that's just a *character* you play. Why don't you take off your, uh, head . . .”

“You first, lady. I'd help, but as a rule I don't behead women. You see, I'm mainly misunderstood. I mean, sure I sometimes eat the occasional tourist, but I'm not totally heartless. I still have feelings, you know. I still have a sense of common decency. If you stab me with a whaling harpoon, do I not ooze?”

“Ah, can I help with anything here?” Face interjected before Hannibal could break into a full-fledged soliloquy.

The nurse automatically ran a hand through her hair and smiled at him, then shot another nervous glance at Hannibal, who was now making small monster noises to himself. “Would you please take this, uh, man down one of the ‘special’ rooms while I locate a psychiatrist?”

“Good idea.” Face put a comforting hand on Hannibal's rubber-clad arm. “Come on, sir, we've got an extremely comfortable room all set up for you . . .”

“Does it have an ocean view?” Hannibal asked, letting Face guide him down the corridor. “How about a spa? Or an aquarium? Hey, that reminds me, when's lunch around here? I'd kill for a tuna sandwich . . .”

“Have I mentioned that this is crazy?” Face asked as soon as they were out of earshot.

“Perfect place for it,” Hannibal shrugged, ditching the fish act.

“Do you know how many M.P.s Decker's going to unload on this place?”

“The better to arrest the real criminals. Has B.A. finished with the room?”

Hannibal couldn't see a thing in the costume, so Face didn't bother to nod. "I hope you know what you're doing, Hannibal."

Somehow, the colonel's grin was clear through even the rubber suit. "Don't I always?"

The damned thing was that he always did.

Nurse Shields watched the handsome orderly lead the poor, deranged vet away until the patient's greenish blue tail had disappeared around the corner. Then, sighing to herself, she accessed the proper computer file and typed in, "Smith, John, Colonel."

Two seconds later she gasped, grabbed the phone, and hastily dialed the number for Colonel Decker of the U.S. Army.

Kane Michaels, the Assistant Director of the Veterans Administration Hospital, glared resentfully at the man seated before him. Damn Hackman anyway! A few dirty photos of Michaels and some girl hired to set him up and not only was he forced to agree to that hair-brained body laundering scheme, but now he had the *A-Team* cracking down on him!

"I can take care of them," Hackman insisted, his pasty features painted with rage. "Just give me some time."

"We don't have any more time," Michaels snarled. "But *I'm* still on the side of the law, and they aren't. I can handle the situation before things get out of hand."

Hackman gave in grudgingly, and with a barely shaking hand, Michaels dialed a number, asked for a certain army colonel, and then said, "*What?*" in a very loud voice.

"What is it?" Hackman demanded.

"Smith just checked into the hospital."

"*What?* It's gotta be a trick."

"Of course it is," Michaels snapped, "but if Decker gets to him, my job is history, and so is your cozy little side business."

They both came to the same decision, but it was Hackman who pulled out his gun and checked the barrel. "Then we'd better get to him first."

He was right, and if necessary, Michaels could always blame the deaths on Hackman or Dorf, possibly getting rid of two nuisances at once. Michaels collected his own gun, then led Hackman and Hackman's idiot henchmen to the padded "safety" room where the nurse had sent Smith. The colonel, dressed in some cheap rubber costume, was complacently sitting on the floor of the otherwise empty room, legs and tail splayed out at odd angles and a half-finished game of solitaire in front of him. He didn't even look up from the cards when the men swarmed into the room.

"We meet again, Smith," Hackman crowed.

"Did you bring my room service?" Smith asked, voice muffled from inside the suit. "I hear the salmon's great around here. Hey Michaels, how much does a five star dinner cost for two hundred patients?"

"Not as much as you'd expect," Michaels growled. "They're light eaters."

"What I can't figure out is why you went in with Hackman here on the body smuggling if you were already making six figures off the government's sloppy accounting." A sorrowful note entered the colonel's voice. "Greed? I expected better of you."

"I wouldn't worry about it, if I were you."

"You're not me," Smith said matter-of-factly. "You're scum."

Michaels hand tightened around his gun, but Hackman got there first. "Enough of this," he rasped, stepping forward to level his gun at Smith's head.

"Can't you ever solve anything without violence?" Smith asked unconcernedly.

Hackman's answer was swift and accurate. Three bullets hit Smith's chest with soft thuds.

"Hey, careful on the suit," Smith grumbled. "These things cost money, y'know."

Hackman stared at Michaels, then grabbed Dorf's weapon from him and fired the full round into the sea monster.

"Now the suit's *really* going to leak."

There was only one explanation. "He's not in there," Michaels gasped with panicked revelation.

"Figure that out all by yourself?" Smith asked. But now the voice came from outside the room.

The men swiveled to face the doorway. "Smile for the camera, guys," Peck called from Smith's side, and then the door slammed shut to absorb the shots that Hackman, Michaels, Dorf and the others had fired. The bullets sank without a sound into the padding that lined even the door.

"The door's locked," Dorf reported after a moment of investigation.

"You'll also notice the door and lock are both of the finest material, specially made to keep undesirables out of the way of the good honest folks of society," Smith elaborated helpfully.

But Michaels was too busy remembering details about these special rooms to react to the taunting. What he was specifically recalling was that these rooms were each equipped with a hidden camera. A hidden camera that, judging by the square of thick metal in the corner of the room, had already been bullet-proofed. His career, his *life*, crumbled into tiny pieces before him.

"He has us on tape," Hackman guessed.

"Of course he does, you idiot."

"He can't do that!" Dorf protested.

Michaels sank to the floor and buried his head in his hands. What hurt most of all was that he was probably going to end up sharing a cell with someone like Dorf. And that hurt a *lot*.

Along with Smith's cigar smoke, the faint sounds of a police siren were already beginning to filter in through the tiny grate in the door. "Sorry we can't stick around, guys," Peck cracked, "but don't worry, Murdock's bringing something to keep you company until Decker gets here."

"Murdock?" Michaels demanded. Hadn't he recommended that an H.M. Murdock be enrolled in shock therapy? "You mean the patient?"

Smith's smile took up the entire grate. "Just think of him as *another* Murdock."

Running footsteps faded into hearing range,

followed by a pair of high-top tennis shoes stuffed through the grate's food slot. A tinny Western song filled the cell.

"The reception is best if you tie the laces in a double bow," Murdock said helpfully.

"I hate Willie Nelson," Hackman whined.

"Maybe we can get another station," Dorf proposed.

Michaels thought he might just kill them both and be done with it.

Leaning against the right side of the door, Face shook his head in mock astonishment. "*Another* Murdock, Colonel?"

"The mind boggles, doesn't it?" Hannibal agreed. Inside the room, an all-out screaming match was already picking up steam.

"That's right," Murdock stated proudly, "I'm a one of a kind commodity."

"You're a one of a kind crazy fool," B.A. corrected, but even he looked pleased at the success of another mission.

Amy had long ago decided that they were all crazy, although whether more or less than Murdock she hadn't figured out yet. On days like this, she leaned toward more.

"Guys, shouldn't we be going?" she prodded as the sirens grew in volume.

Hannibal seemed oblivious to the sound. "Face, Murdock had better lay low for a few weeks, can you take care of it?"

A new smile cresting over his features, Face held up a folder of papers. "Already have. How do two weeks of Hawaiian sun, sand and surf sound, courtesy of some very close producer friends of mine? It was supposed to be a birthday present, but I figure what the hey, we can kill two birds with one stone. And for the trip—" he tossed a pristine package of tic tacs to Murdock. "Spearmint, right?"

"Faceman," Murdock sniffed, "I, I just don't know what to say."

"How about aloha?"

"Not bad, Lieutenant," Hannibal congratulated, then: "What do you say, Amy? How's your schedule for the next fortnight?"

Amy grinned back at him. "I can be flexible."

"Really?" Face and Murdock chorused, but B.A. had other concerns on his mind.

"Faceman, how're we gonna get to Hawaii?"

Face looked shifty. "Oh, well, we certainly won't be taking a plane . . . !"

"That's good," B.A. said, stepped closer to the lieutenant "Because you *know* I don't fly."

"B.A.," Murdock complained, "it's *my* birthday and I wanna fly!"

"You wanna live to see another birthday, sucka?"

"Geez, I didn't even get party hats, and now I can't have an airplane? You sure are one stingy friend!"

"Listen guys," Amy cut in, "why don't we discuss this later, when we're out of here?"

"Good i . . ." Face trailed off and looked closely at Hannibal, who was smiling absently at the by-play, but still seemed vaguely dissatisfied. "Something wrong, Colonel?"

"I hate to go without leaving Decker a little token of our appreciation," Hannibal sighed.

"You mean besides the gombahs in the rubber room?"

"Yeah, but we always do that. I wanted something special this time."

Murdock's attitude turned suddenly mischievous. "You know, Colonel, they say a picture is worth a hundred words . . ."

"Got you camera handy, Amy?" Face asked, catching on to the joke.

Hannibal laughed. "*Nice*, guys. Very nice."

Colonel Decker swept through the corridors of the V.A. with Crane and a host of M.P.s at his heel. This time he had them. He had the A-Team—the *entire* A-Team. There was no way Murdock was escaping from this one, not when Smith and the others had gone romping around in the very hospital where the captain supposedly lived.

The nurse on duty looked as if she couldn't decide whether to faint or not. "He's in room 223," she fluttered. "But be careful, there was an awful lot of screaming a few minutes ago!"

"Thank you, ma'am," Decker dismissed her, then turned to Crane. "Captain, take two men and check out Murdock's room. I won't have him sneaking away this time."

"Yes, *sir*." The captain peeled away with the M.P.s, and Decker gestured for the remaining soldiers to follow him down the corridor. At the door they quickly fanned out and readied their weapons.

"There's no escape this time, Smith!" Decker called into the room. "Even *you* couldn't have made a weapon from those padded walls. Drop your weapons immediately and come out with your hands up or we'll open fire."

He had expected some snide comment, some slam against his technique or some taunting riddle. Instead, a voice shouted, "Don't shoot! We surrender!"

That wasn't right.

Decker hesitated, then carefully inched to the small mesh window in the door and peered through. A group of assorted men stared shamefacedly back at him—but not one of them was a member of the A-Team.

They had done it again. They had slipped away under his very nose and, to top it off, they had left him to mop up the garbage from their latest do-gooder cause. The last time it had happened, he had received a commendation. A *commendation* that the A-Team had handed to him like some kind of party favor!

Very, very slowly, Decker turned away from the door to face his men. "I want this entire building searched. *Now!*"

"Colonel Decker . . ." The reluctance in Crane's steps as he approached promised even more bad news. "I think you'd better hear this, sir."

Two minutes later, Decker lost his temper altogether. "*How could he be gone?*" he roared. The nurse shrank back.

"I'm sorry, sir," she stammered. "According to

the files, Captain Murdock has been attending a special re-habilitation program in Florida for the past week and a half, and he isn't due back until the end of the month. There's no way he could have been involved with the, uh, incident here, sir."

Crane shook his head helplessly. "I don't know how they did it, sir, but Murdock came out of this squeaky clean. Maybe he really *wasn't* working with them."

"Oh, he's working with them, Captain," Decker corrected through clenched teeth.. "And someday I'll prove it."

Making a strategic retreat, Crane backed away, leaving Decker to glare down at the Polaroid he had found in the claws of the sea monster costume. Smith, Peck and Baracus smiled sunnily back at him. Peck had

on a blue baseball cap that Decker knew he had seen somewhere before, and he and Baracus were waving as if they had just won the presidency of the United States. And Smith . . .

Smith had his cigar raised in a semi-salute, and Decker could almost *hear* the man's deep chuckle as he scrawled the words on the back of the photo.

Hey Decker—don't you just love it when a plan comes together?

Nestled in the van with a fresh cigar and a good day's crime bashing under his belt, Hannibal bestowed upon his team a look of pure satisfaction.

"I know *I* do," he said brightly.

And they knew he meant it, too.



THIS LITTLE TEAM WENT TO MARKET

by Mary Sauers

with inspiration from Denise Messer
(who is responsible for the cucumber scene!)

“Damn them! *Damn them to hell!*” Colonel Roderick Decker choked on the words he spat out, fighting to bring his temper under control. For the third time this week, he’d located the A-Team’s van only to lose it in the ensuing chase. It was as if Smith was taunting him, cruising around town in that blatant black and red vehicle, daring him to give pursuit. The colonel could feel another migraine forming.

Captain Crane leaned against the steering wheel and shot a sidelong glance at his commanding officer. The man was definitely not doing well. Crane sighed wearily, wishing he’d not spotted the A-Team an hour ago. He should have kept his mouth shut—saved his colonel the frustrating chase and maybe even taken some fun out of Smith’s day.

“I can’t believe they gave us the slip again, Colonel,” the captain said mystified, staring at the dumpster in front of him. Decker rubbed the bridge of his nose and refused to comment. Shaking his head, the captain put the car in reverse and hit the gas, breaking the vehicle free of the steel obstruction. He cringed at the sound of ripping metal, feeling the car lurch as the front bumper parted company with the body. Crane stopped the car, got out and pried the chrome off the dumpster’s side. Tucking it under his arm, he stalked back to the green sedan and popped the trunk, laying the shining, slightly crumpled chrome alongside one dented hubcap and the two side mirrors they’d shaved off in yesterday’s pursuit of the A-Team. He closed the trunk as far down as he could and slid back into the driver’s seat.

Decker was still rubbing at his nose absently.

“Don’t worry, Colonel,” Crane muttered. “Their luck’s bound to run out one of these days.”

A deep guttural “Humph!” was the only response.

“Sometimes I feel like Robin Hood and his merry men!” Lieutenant-Colonel John “Hannibal” Smith exclaimed, lighting his cigar with a victorious flourish.

“Oh, and which of us is merry, Mr. Hood?” Templeton Peck asked, his tone mocking Smith’s exuberance. Hannibal gazed out the front window of the van, choosing to ignore the sarcasm.

“Well, certainly not Decker!” the silver-haired colonel laughed.

The driver of the van giggled. “Yeah,” B.A. Baracus agreed. “He weren’t too merry when that dumpster fell in front of him. Nother government sedan bites the dust!”

Hannibal’s grin grew broader. “I wonder what the motor pool will say when he returns that car? Or what’s left of that car. If we keep crossing his track,

he’ll be bringing it back in an envelope.”

Face groaned from the back seat. “You know, Hannibal, that brings up a good point.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Yes, it does! Stop interrupting. Now, as I was saying, that brings up a good point. I think—”

“Nope, nope, Faceman. You were saying ‘You know, Hannibal’ before you were saying ‘that brings up a good point’. Accuracy, you must be accurate!” Captain “Howlin’ Mad” intoned with a superior air. The pilot had insisted on wearing a costume appropriate for his current college English professor personality—tweed blazer, spectacles, pipe (unlit) . . . and no baseball hat! Face declined to mention he hadn’t seen very many scholars clad in khaki pants and hightop basketball shoes.

Peck shot the captain a disgusted look. “I give up,” he muttered petulantly.

Several moments of silence followed before Hannibal decided to placate the harassed lieutenant.

“Okay, Face. As you were saying?” he asked in a carefully neutral tone. If Face suspected he was being laughed at . . .

After a heavy sigh, Peck continued, “We’ve been running Decker ’round town like we’ve got him on a leash. We’re gonna jerk it once too often and *then—?*” He arched his eyebrows giving the colonel a speculative look. Hannibal lost his grin.

“Yeah, maybe you’re right,” he agreed. “Maybe we are pushing it . . .”

“*Maybe?*” Face snorted. “Bad enough we’ve enticed him into chasing us three times in the last four days, but now he’s probably wrecked his second car this week.” The lieutenant shook his head in mock sadness. “I know *I* wouldn’t be too thrilled.”

Hannibal adopted an air of deep concentration though the amusement in his eyes revealed his true feelings. He glanced at B.A. who was carefully silent, though he did catch Hannibal’s eye and wink. The colonel suppressed his smile and sneaked a look at Murdock, who was deeply immersed in The Harper Book of Quotations. Hannibal shook his head, wondering where Murdock came up with these volumes. The captain, sensing he was under observation, crinkled merry brown eyes at Smith, waiting for the fun to begin. *I love it when a plan comes together!* Hannibal thought, a radiant, mischievous grin stretching across his face.

“Well, Lieutenant, I gather that you have an idea.” The colonel, knowing full well what Face was going to suggest, turned innocent blue eyes on the younger man.

Very seriously, Peck nodded. “Yeah, I think we need to lay low. All this racing around town, tires squealing, cars crashing, pedestrians running for their lives, has a way of making people sit up and take notice, ya know? This isn’t exactly a low-profile vehicle.”

Hannibal listened intently, occasionally nodding in agreement.

“I mean, we have been kind of flagrant about this,” Face continued unaware of the amused looks he was receiving from his teammates. “B.A. seeing Decker at 3rd and Wilson, then rear ending him? Not exactly subtle.”

Baracus was incensed, though Hannibal’s placating hand on his arm stopped his sharp retort. The big man calmed down, knowing the look in Smith’s eye meant Peck would get his.

Murdock raised his head, his face a wise mask. “When the military man approaches, the world locks up its spoons and packs off its womankind.” George Bernard Shaw, 1903.”

Smith and Peck exchanged tolerant, bemused stares.

“Ah, thank you for that, Captain,” Hannibal finally said. “I think you and Face may have a point. We need to lock up this van and pack ourselves off.” He paused a moment for dramatic effect. “Okay, we lay low for a few days.” Hannibal declared, noting Face’s surprised expression.

Finally, the lieutenant thought. *Someone’s seeing the light!*

“So,” the colonel began, turning back around to scan out the front window. “Where did you say your new place is, Lieutenant?”

Total silence emanated from the back seat of the van.

Murdock looked up, glancing around at all parties. He dropped his head back into the book to cover his smile. “That sound you just heard,” he drawled in his Howard Cossell voice. “Was the Faceman’s jaw hitting the floor in a moving vehicle.”

Hannibal laughed.

“Come on Face, you’re the one who suggested we lay low. Decker knows where Murdock is—well, *usually* is. B.A.’s place has been staked out for a week. You’re the only one who moves around enough to keep the good colonel guessing,” Smith cajoled.

Peck tried to curb his aggravation. “I don’t see you offering to put us up, Colonel.”

Hannibal shook his head briefly. “Oh, my places are never as nice as yours, kid.”

“Home is home, though it be never so homely,” Murdock added to Hannibal’s amusement and Peck’s irritation. “John Clarke, 1639.”

“Oh, man!” Face turned away as much as he could in the tight confines of the van. “I can’t believe this is happening—*again!* After all the places of mine you’ve wrecked . . .” Peck remained quiet for long moments, trying to accept that his beautiful new beach-front condo was about to be appropriated by three guys *no one* would ever knowingly invite home for dinner.

“Fine, whatever. But you buy the food this time, Hannibal! I can’t afford you three. Bad enough I get stuck with all the damages every time you camp at one

of my places.”

B.A. guffawed. “You don’t get stuck with nothin’! When was the last time you ever paid for anything?”

Murdock picked his head up. “Aw, c’mon guys, let’s just get some grub and head for the hideout. Where is our hideout this time, oh Facial One?”

Hannibal turned around to hear the details. The lieutenant hesitated, obviously torn about revealing his new abode’s location. He decided it was no use remaining silent; Hannibal would get it out of him one way or another.

“Oh, for cryin’ out loud! It’s a condo in Malibu. There, you happy now?”

“I will be when we get some food. There’s a Safeway in the next block, B.A.,” Hannibal directed the driver’s eyes to the large, bustling supermarket. “Seems as good a place as any since I’m flippin’ the bill.” Hannibal turned icy blue eyes on Face, who shrugged unworried.

“Staying with me was *your* idea, Colonel.”

“What are friends for, Face?” Hannibal remarked, unrepentant.

“I do not believe that friends are necessarily the people you like best, they are merely the people who got there first,” Murdock quoted in a scholarly, slightly condescending tone. “Peter Ustinov, 1977.”

“Oh, great!” Face groaned. “Going to market with Bartlett’s Quotations!”

“Every quotation contributes something to the stability or enlargement of the language,” the captain retaliated. “Samuel Johnson, 1755.”

Face narrowed brilliant blue eyes and hissed, “I hate quotation. Tell me what you know.” He turned to Murdock almost nose to nose. “Ralph Waldo Emerson,” he proclaimed slowly emphasizing each word, quite pleased with himself.

The pilot struggled for a moment. “Classical quotation is the *parole* of literary men all over the world.’ Also Samuel Johnson, 1781.” Murdock’s face broke into a dazzling smile of triumph.

Peck scowled, then brightened. “Robert Benchley: ‘The surest way to make a monkey of a man is to quote him.’”

Murdock frowned in annoyance, then started flipping through the pages of his book. Hannibal, having watched the exchange with amusement, came to the captain’s rescue.

“Simeon Strunsky once said, ‘Famous remarks are very seldom quoted correctly.’ Will you two give it a rest?”

Face and Murdock backed off, sneaking sly, amused looks at each other, like two school boys having just been reprimanded by the principal.

“And so to bed’ . . .” the pilot muttered under his breath.

“Murdock! Enough!” Smith said, exasperated.

B.A. drove into the crowded parking lot, cruising up an aisle. His sharp eyes located several first spaces but as he approached, familiar blue signs decorated each empty place.

“Handicapped? All these are handicapped spots?” he said, incredulous.

Hannibal surveyed the dozen empty parking places.

“Hmm, does seem they overdid it just a bit. Well, B.A., since none of us qualify as handicapped better take her around again.”

“That fool in the back there is mentally handicapped. Don’t that count?” the sergeant huffed.

Smith grimaced. “Only if the V.A. gave him a special license plate. Hey, look over there—third row. I see one empty, right next to the cart return.”

B.A. wheeled the van down the appointed aisle and swung into the spot only to slam on the brakes.

“Jeez, B.A., take it easy will ya?” Face complained picking himself up from the floor of the van.

“It ain’t my fault! Some fool stuck a shopping cart in front of me!”

Murdock, having regained his seat and dusted himself off informed the black man, “‘Fools rush in where angels fear to tread,’ B.A.!” The pilot straightened his wire-framed glasses. “Alexander Pope, 1711.”

“Face, get out and move that cart for us, huh?” Hannibal prompted.

“Me? A shopping cart? I’m not touching that thing! Let ‘Mr. Bartlett’ here do it.”

Murdock stuck his tongue out at the conman. “‘It’s true hard work never killed anybody, but I figure why take the chance,’ as said by our dear president, Mr. Ronald Reagan,” the captain extolled, clipping each word. “‘Sides, you’re closer to the door.’”

Face tilted his head and shot his friend an icy, confident smile. “‘If any should not work, neither should he eat.’ From the Bible, H.M.”

Murdock, his stomach rumbling with hunger, conceded momentary defeat, crawled over Peck and threw the door open. He disembarked, adjusting his coat as well as his dignity, before pushing the offending cart out of the space.

“Thought I’d just bring it in with us, Colonel. Last time I went shopping with B.A. I ended up carrying six gallons of milk. The tendonitis in my shoulder *still* twinges,” Murdock informed Hannibal once the Team was out of the van.

“Good thinking, Captain. I can always count on you to assess the situation,” Hannibal praised.

The four men started to move away from the van when they became aware of a loud *thunking* sound coming from the cart. Hannibal, Face and B.A. watched in amusement as Murdock tried to push the stubborn object, only to have the thing go in a circle.

Hannibal frowned. “Hmm, seems this one needs an alignment. No wonder it never made it to the cart return.”

B.A. shook his head. “Here, I got my tools. I can fix it.”

The colonel nodded his approval. “Okay, you two straighten out this little problem. Face and I’ll go get started. We’ll meet you inside.”

“Sure thing, Hannibal,” B.A. said, dragging his toolbox from the back of the van.

Face moved away from the two figures, busily flipping the cart over to access its wheels. He shook his head at the sight.

“Are you sure those two are safe to be alone

together in a public place without one of us around? Remember, we’re trying to lay low,” he said quietly to Hannibal.

Smith shrugged. “‘There are few things more painful than to recognize one’s own faults in others,’” the colonel remarked. “John Wells.”

Face groaned miserably.

“Where to now, Colonel?” Captain Crane asked softly. His C.O. hadn’t said a word since they’d pulled back on to the road. He just sat slumped in the passenger seat, rubbing forlornly at his forehead, eyes shut, mouth drawn into a grimace.

Colonel Decker raised his head slowly, blinking at the landscape passing outside the vehicle.

“Oh, I don’t care,” he muttered.

The captain wracked his brain for a suggestion that might appeal to his colonel.

“Um, what say we get something to eat? We could hit that little diner on Continental, the one just past that new Safeway. Food’s supposed to be pretty good.” Crane raised his eyebrows hopefully. Though he usually enjoyed working with Decker, the man was so obsessed with capturing the A-Team, he tended to neglect his aides, often forgetting the necessities of food and bathroom breaks.

The colonel shrugged. “Yeah, sounds fine.” Decker proceeded to dig through his pockets, pulling a small prescription bottle from his trousers. He gave it a disgusted look, shaking it tentatively.

“Hell!” he exclaimed, startling Crane. Decker opened the bottle to confirm his suspicions. “I’m out of ibuprofen. Stop at Safeway first, they have a pharmacy. I should be able to get it refilled there.”

“Um, Face, I’ve always been curious. Do you do your own food shopping?” Hannibal cast an inquisitive look at the younger man, pausing to stub out his cigar before entering the automatic doors.

Peck was indignant. “Of course I do. What, you think the ‘grocery elves’ deliver to my door?”

Smith shrugged. “No, I’m just having trouble picturing you in a supermarket.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t generally patronize these big chains,” Face pulled up just inside the doors, gazing back out into the parking lot. “I try to stick to little specialty shops, farmers’ markets, that kind of place.”

“Oh,” Hannibal replied, neutrally, surveying the layout of the store. Produce lay along the entire right-hand side where they were standing. Squinting, the colonel could see the bakery down along the left side. Between, across the front, lay the service desk, ATM and pharmacy. The high signs for each aisle blocked his view of what departments inhabited the back of the store. “A supporter of small businesses?” Smith continued.

Face shot him a shrewd glance. “And single women.” Noticing the colonel’s curiosity, he explained. “Yeah, well, those little shops tend to have more, ah, *receptive* females patronizing them. Not so many housewives, just tired, harassed, overworked

lawyers and CPAs picking up a quick dinner before spending the night doing office work in bed.”

The colonel was amused. “So you, naturally, offer to lend a hand—or two.”

“Naturally—you know how good I am with figures . . .”

That remark evoked a chortle from Hannibal as he looked out into the parking lot. B.A. and Murdock were coming, the sergeant stalking in front, the pilot dancing behind pushing the shopping cart. Hannibal and Face turned towards the doors as the pair entered.

“How’d it go, Sergeant?” the colonel called through the opening doors.

“No problem, Hannibal. Just needed the front end aligned a bit, little spot welding, and a washer on the left wheel to balance it out.”

B.A. was almost inside the second door when Murdock, adjusting his book, got careless with the cart and ran it up on to the big man’s heels.

“Yeow!” B.A. roared. “You crazy fool!”

Dozens of eyes turned in the Team’s direction. Hannibal quickly interceded, offering a supporting arm to the injured sergeant while Murdock prudently put space between himself and B.A. The colonel eased Baracus to a bench.

“Hush, B.A., I think you’ll survive. Besides we can’t afford to attract a lot of attention in here. The last thing we need is for some nervous store clerk to call the police and alert Decker.”

Face grinned smugly. “Oh no, the four of us never attract attention,” he muttered under his breath. H.M. beamed at the sarcasm.

“‘Famous men have the whole earth as their memorial,’ said by Pericles,” the pilot informed them.

Hannibal glared at the two officers who immediately adopted innocent expressions.

“Yeah, well our memorial is going to be Leavenworth prison if we can’t control ourselves,” he said pointedly at the sergeant. After confirming that B.A. only had a skinned heel, the colonel rose to his feet.

“Look, guys, what we need here is a plan. I think we’ll be less conspicuous if we split up.”

“I ain’t goin’ with that crazy man! He’ll put me on crutches ’fore we get outta here!” B.A. hollered.

Hannibal patted his shoulder and rolled his eyes. “You want to turn the volume down, Sergeant? We’ll let Face take Murdock and you and I will start at the other end of the store. Okay?”

That seemed to placate the angry black man. B.A. nodded then stood up, wincing as he put weight on his injured foot. He glowered at Murdock, who sought refuge behind Face. Hannibal drew out a second shopping cart.

“Here, B.A., you can lean on this, take some of the weight off that foot.” Satisfied that B.A. could handle the cart, the colonel turned towards the others.

“Well troops, let’s move out!”

Face hesitated. “Ah, what do you want us to get, Colonel?”

Hannibal thought for a moment. “Well, you two start here in produce; B.A. and I’ll start down at the other end, in the bakery, and we’ll meet somewhere in the middle.

“We won’t let you down, Colonel!” Murdock called as he ran behind the cart before jumping up on the back of it and saluting. “As Napoleon once said, ‘An army marches on its stomach!’”

Face sighed, giving Hannibal a long-suffering look. “Well, this should be different,” Peck muttered. Smith flashed a brilliant smile and raised his eyebrows. “Yeah!”

B.A. groaned. “Oh, man! Don’t get on the Jazz in here! We just gettin’ some food!”

Hannibal chuckled as he and the sergeant headed for the bakery. Face shook his head before following Murdock into the produce section.

“Oh, yes, this ought to be *very* different.”

“Just pull up to the doors, Crane. I’ll run in and get this filled. Shouldn’t be more than a couple of minutes,” Decker instructed his captain.

Crane looked at the broad yellow lines painted on the blacktop.

“Ah, Colonel, this is the fire lane,” he said meekly.

Decker glared at him.

“I *know* that, Captain. As long as you stay in the car, there won’t be a problem,” the colonel growled as he got out of the vehicle. He slammed the door and stalked into the market.

Captain Crane watched him go, shaking his head. *It was turning out to be one of those days*, he thought, letting his eyes drift across the parking lot.

“Wow,” B.A. breathed, staring at the great glass cases. “They must have fifty kinds of donuts!”

Hannibal threw a couple loaves of bread into the cart.

“See something you want, B.A.?” he asked, noticing the big man’s hungry stare.

The sergeant nodded and moved to the cases.

“I’m gonna get me some of these!”

“Well,” Hannibal observed. “They’ve got boxes over there. Looks like a dozen ought to fit in one.”

B.A. pressed his nose against the glass and sniffed.

“Yeah,” he said dreamily.

The colonel frowned.

“Okay, look. You stay here and pick out which ones you want then catch up. I’m heading for the dairy stuff, got it?”

The sergeant nodded. “Dairy, got it,” he whispered, a silly smile on his face.

Hannibal shrugged, pushing the cart away. “Just make sure you get me a couple of powdered!” he called over his shoulder.

“Mmmm, powdered. Sure thing, Hannibal!”

“I don’t know, Face. How do you pick out a good cantaloupe?” H.M. gently rapped his knuckles on each melon in turn.

Peck picked one up and shook it gently. “You should be able to hear it kind of gurgle when you shake

it, I think. I like honeydew, myself.”

Murdock nodded and diligently set about shaking each cantaloupe. One particular fruit seemed to appeal to him.

“Face! Face! Listen to this one!” he shouted, bringing the melon up close to his friend’s ear before shaking it.

“Hmm, sounds like a winner to me, pal.”

Murdock was disappointed. “No, didn’t you *hear* it? Listen!”

The pilot shook the cantaloupe again.

“Hear it?” he insisted, excitement ringing in his voice.

Face gave an uncomprehending shake of his head.

“Sorry, Murdock, all I hear is gurgling.”

The captain became agitated.

“I can’t believe you didn’t hear him!”

“*Him?*”

Murdock beamed. “Yes!” he hissed, his face alight with surprise and joy. “*He* just told me this week’s winning Lotto America numbers!”

Peck threw up his hands, exasperated. “Oh, for heaven’s sake, Murdock! Will you try to live in reality just for an hour? Cantaloupes can’t know anything about lottery numbers.”

H.M. adopted a hurt demeanor. “Well, I don’t care, this little guy’s coming with us,” he added, a trifle belligerently, as he carefully placed the melon in the cart.

“Whatever,” the lieutenant replied absently, setting a head of lettuce, a small bag of potatoes and some carrots alongside the cantaloupe. He moved ahead to scrutinize the cucumbers. Murdock joined him, hovering over his shoulder. Face tried to ignore him.

“What are you getting one of those for?” asked the pilot.

“Because I like them,” Peck replied patiently, inspecting the vegetables. He finally found one he preferred and turned to add it to their collection when Murdock stopped him.

“What about this one, Face?” said the pilot, holding out his own choice.

The lieutenant nodded. “If that’s the one you want, fine. I like this one,” he indicated the item in his hand.

Murdock held his cucumber choice next to his friend’s and studied the two vegetables.

“Mine’s bigger,” he remarked.

Peck stared down. “It is not.”

“Yes, it is. It’s bigger.”

“Well, maybe a little,” Face conceded. “But it’s what you do with it that counts.”

A shocked cry brought both men to attention. They raised startled eyes to see a petite, gray-haired woman gasping for air, staring at them. She looked very upset and very annoyed.

“Of all the—” she huffed, leaving the sentence open to hurry away, shaking her head at the two men.

Confused, they watched her stalk off.

“What does a woman want?” a confused and melodramatic H.M. quoted.

Peck became pensive. “W.C. Fields?” he guessed.

The pilot shook his head. “Nope, Sigmund Freud.”

“Ah,” Face nodded, enlightened. “Anyway, as I was saying, I have this cucumber casserole recipe—absolutely incredible!”

“As long as it’s absolutely edible,” the pilot exclaimed, wagging a finger at his friend.

Hannibal tried not to gape at the sight staggering down the long aisle. B.A. was balancing five boxes, trying to avoid running down little old ladies and small children. Upon reaching the shopping cart, the sergeant tenderly set the boxes inside on top of Hannibal’s bread. Smith’s brow furrowed.

“Ah, you sure you got enough donuts there, B.A.?”

Baracus examined the contents of the shopping cart.

“Yeah, Hannibal, think so.”

The colonel tried to suppress his grin. “Um, you don’t have to take a week’s supply today. We can stop by tomorrow and pick up some fresh ones.”

The big black man blinked, not comprehending Hannibal’s concern.

“We gonna have to stop back here for more tomorrow anyway.”

Smith’s jaw fell open. “B.A., there’s no way the four of us can eat five dozen donuts for breakfast!”

The sergeant was shocked. “You’re right!” he slapped a huge palm to his forehead as he hurried back to the pastry cases. “I didn’t get none for Face and Murdock!”

Murdock pushed his beloved shopping cart around the corner into the next aisle. Face was careful to remain behind his friend, lest he wind up with sore heels along with B.A.

“What’s down here, Visage-hombre?”

Peck glanced up at the sign.

“Canned fruits, nuts, condiments,” the lieutenant chuckled. “Sounds like we’re heading right up your alley, Murdock!”

The pilot chose to ignore the remark, picking up a can of grapefruit.

“Can’t imagine how they get a whole grapefruit into this little can.”

Face decided to humor the captain. “They don’t put the whole thing in there—they peel it and break it up.”

“What do they do with the peel?”

“What do you mean ‘what do they do with the peel’? Same as we do, I suppose—throw it out.”

Murdock was genuinely shocked.

“You throw grapefruit peel away?”

Peck grimaced. “I know I’m going to regret asking, but what do you do with it?”

“Eat it, of course! It’s full of all kinds of vitamins, minerals, other trace elements.”

Now it was Face who was genuinely shocked.

“You *eat* the peel of a grapefruit?” He was appalled.

H.M. smiled and nodded. “Yeah, usually with a

little ketchup. Everything tastes better with ketchup on it. Hey, why are you turning green?"

"It'd be cheaper if we just bought our own cow!" Hannibal Smith snarled at B.A. Baracus as the latter placed a sixth gallon of milk onto the undercarriage of the cart.

The black man's face turned angry.

"Hey, look man, camping at Face's wasn't my idea. You said get whatever we wants—so I'm gettin' it! You gotta problem with that?"

"Yeah—you get to push the cart. I can't get it to budge with all that moo juice aboard!"

B.A. jerked the cart to life, watching silently as Hannibal put a package of cheese, some yogurt, a couple dozen eggs and a gallon of orange juice alongside the donuts.

"Careful o' my breakfast, Hannibal," the sergeant warned.

Smith snapped at B.A., "Why? You flattened my bread without a second thought with your donuts!"

Baracus recognized the dangerous, annoyed tone in his colonel's voice and backed down. He followed Hannibal into the next aisle.

"What kind of soda do you want?" Smith asked.

"I don't drink that stuff—rots your teeth."

The colonel swallowed a sharp retort as he turned to the cart, a twelve-pack of ginger ale in his hand.

"Oh, for heaven's sake. We've gone down two aisles and there's no room left in this thing. Wait right here, I'll go get us another one," Hannibal grudgingly offered. This shopping trip wasn't turning out the way he'd intended. At the rate they were going, they'd have to rent a truck to get all this stuff home. He was thankful that Face and Murdock together ate less than half of what B.A. could put away.

Decker marched into Safeway, gripping his prescription bottle as if it were his lifeline to sanity. His practiced eye surveyed the arrangement of the store before spotting the pharmacy along the front, next to the ATM. After his rotten morning, all he wanted to do was get his prescription, get lunch and get home. Tomorrow had to be a better day.

To his dismay, there was a line at the pharmacy counter. *Figures*, he thought. *Why should anything go my way!* Aggravated, and feeling sorry for himself, he became the fourth person in the queue.

"What kind of cereal do you want, Murdock?" Face paused, waiting for the response. "Murdock?" Silence. "*Murdock?*" Peck turned around, alarmed to find the pilot missing. He quickly retraced his steps, worry pushing the adrenaline through his heart. Rounding the end of the aisle, he saw the lanky pilot at the seafood counter along the rear of the store. He was crouched down in front of the lobster tank, his nose pressed against the glass.

"Murdock?"

The captain heaved a great sigh.

"Look at them, Templeton." Face winced at the use of his Christian name. Murdock never called him that—unless one of his more serious neuroses was about to make an appearance. Peck gazed into the water.

"Just look at those poor creatures. One of them could be Thermidor's brother, or cousin, or even mother!" the distraught man lamented.

Face tried to console the pilot. "Ah, I doubt that. And besides, Therm was a . . . well . . . he was just a shell by the time you got him. He could have been stuck to that plaque for months, years, decades even. I—I doubt any of his relatives are in there."

Murdock wiped a tear from his eye.

"You're probably right," he said straightening. "What'll happen to these guys, Face?"

"Oh, people will buy them, take them home," Face was hesitant to go into more detail.

The pilot smiled sadly. "That's nice. Maybe they'll get their own little tank, have a bubbler all to themselves."

Peck nodded, placing a comforting hand around the pilot's shoulders. "Yeah, something like that."

They were pushed aside by a heavy-set woman, gesturing intently at a lobster in the tank.

"No, no, that one!" her shrill voice rang in their ears as she called to the clerk behind the tank. The man moved his tongs to catch hold of a sturdy specimen.

"That's the one!" the woman bellowed.

Murdock watched the exchange with interest.

"Hey, that's great! One of 'em's on his way to a new home!"

Face, anticipating what the woman would want next, tried to shepherd the pilot away.

"Yeah, c'mon, Murdock. We gotta get goin'. Hannibal will be really pissed if we hold him up because we were waving good-bye to crustaceans."

H.M. resisted Peck's efforts to move him. Instead he turned to the woman.

"An excellent choice, madam. I hope you give him the home he deserves."

"Home?" she choked. "Yeah, as part of Lobster Newburgh!"

"Hey lady!" the clerk called, waving the creature around on his tongs. "You want him steamed here or you gonna cook him at home?"

Murdock blanched; Face groaned—of all the lousy timing!

"Steam—steamed?" the pilot croaked, eyes wide with horror. "Cooked?" he squeaked. Suddenly, Murdock grabbed Face's shoulders, shaking the lieutenant as he begged for assistance.

"Please Face! We gotta do something! Those poor little guys and dolls are sitting ducks! They'll all be put to death if we don't help them!"

Peck tried desperately to free himself, acutely aware that they were drawing a large audience.

"Murdock! Let me go!" he hissed, while trying to smile confidently at the curious eyes. "Murdock! That's enough! Look, I can't help if you shake me to death!"

The pilot finally released his grip but before Face could stop him, Murdock jumped onto the small condiment case in front of the tank, scattering packets of

dill flavoring and cocktail sauce bottles. Heedless of his tweed jacket, he reached into the water, capturing a lobster in each hand.

"Come, my friends! I shall return you to your homeland—or waters, whichever you prefer."

Face was mortified. "Murdock! Get down from there! We're not supposed to attract attention, remember?"

Standing proudly on the little case, the pilot drew himself up with great dignity. "William Blake once said 'A robin red breast in a cage, puts all Heaven in a rage.'" Murdock bent low to the clerk, his voice rising with anger. "I'm sure a lobster held against all hope, won't exactly please the Pope!"

The clerk, having recovered from his shock at Murdock's tirade, called indignantly across the counter, "Hey, buddy, you want to take them home fine, but you gotta pay for 'em!"

The pilot, his movements sharp and agitated, turned on the little man.

"Sir," he said his voice condescending. "We shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend," he paused to raise the lobsters above his head, emphasizing the drama of the moment, "Oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty."

There was a stunned silence as the crowd stood mesmerized by the performance. Face laughed nervously, before offering, "John Kennedy's inaugural address."

The people burst into spontaneous ovation, their applause deafening. Peck realized Murdock's exhibition must have attracted every customer in the store.

"Great, just great!" he muttered to no one in particular. "Isn't this predictable—here we are, *not* attracting attention."

Crane forced his eyes open, ignoring the scowls he was getting from people entering and leaving the store. What was taking the colonel so long, he wondered. Judging from the number of cars in the lot, the captain decided everyone in town must have decided to shop today.

He checked his watch again. Fifteen minutes! The pharmacist must be mixing the drug himself! The captain let his gaze wander back out across the multitude of vehicles, watching in mild amusement as two cars squared off waiting for a minivan to vacate a space. Silently, he put his money on the Buick. He'd learned the hard way, you never messed with a vehicle driven by an old man in a hat! Crane shook his head while he watched the minivan back up. As the vehicle pulled out, a black van with a red stripe was revealed on the far side.

Hannibal was puzzled by the lack of customers at the front of the store. The few he did see were hurrying towards the back along with some of the store's personnel. He shrugged. *Wonder what they're giving away*, he thought, pulling a cart from the line and guiding it back to B.A., so deep in thought, he didn't see the uniformed

Army officer at the pharmacy counter. Neither did he see the beautiful young woman in front of him. He jumped as his cart came to an abrupt halt, knocking the woman's basket out of her hands.

"Sorry, ma'am," he apologized, coming quickly to her aid.

"That's all right. I wasn't watching where I was going," she said, accepting Hannibal's help.

"Here you go," Smith said, handing the woman her dropped items.

She gave him a dazzling smile. "Thank you."

"My pleasure," he winked at her, watching her blush before walking away.

To Hannibal's surprise, B.A. had indeed waited right where he was told. The colonel placed two twelve-packs of ginger ale into the second cart.

"B.A., you notice something?" Smith asked.

"Yeah, all the people are goin' down towards the other end of the store. S'pose there's trouble?"

Hannibal considered. "Nah," he finally decided. "I mean, what could Murdock possibly do in a grocery store?"

B.A. shook his head in agreement. "Yeah, they's probably jus' givin' away samples or somethin'."

The two men moved their carts into the next aisle.

"Hmm, paper products. Well, a good leader plans for everything," Hannibal mused around a grin. "I'm sure Face won't have enough toilet paper." Smith grabbed an 8-roll economy pack and lugged it to join the soda. He started to move away before turning back, looking at the package.

"Better get another one—no telling how long we're gonna be cooped up."

B.A. watched him load another 8-pack into the cart, nodding his approval.

"Good, you got the soft kind."

Colonel Decker had finally made it to the counter.

"I don't normally have this filled here, but it's an emergency," he explained to the pharmacist. The man behind the counter didn't seem to be giving the colonel his full alertness.

"Excuse me!" Decker hollered.

The pharmacist drew his attention away from the white-haired man who'd just bumped into a gorgeous brunette. *Some guys have all the luck!*

"I'm sorry, you were saying?"

Decker's upper lip twitched in anger.

"I need these—now!" he muttered in a menacingly low voice.

The pharmacist took the bottle and examined the label.

"We didn't fill this last time."

"No kidding? I just told you that!" The colonel paused to regain his composure. "Can you fill it?"

"Well," the man began hesitantly. "I'll have to call your doctor. This might take awhile. You can wait over there."

Decker sulked his way over to the bench, the throbbing behind his eyes growing stronger with each heartbeat.

“Damn you, Smith! You’re just lucky you’re not right in front of me now.”

“I don’t know about this, Murdock,” Face complained as he shifted the contents of the shopping cart to accommodate the two coolers where seventeen live lobsters were residing. “Hannibal’s pretty understanding, but he might object to this stunt!”

Murdock cooed to his boxed crustaceans.

“Aw, don’t worry, Faceman. I’m sure I can get him to understand our cause.”

Peck’s head jerked up as he grabbed a cooler. “Don’t *even* include me in this. This is *your* cause. My cause would involve melted butter and a twist of lemon.” The lieutenant placed the animals into the empty space. Murdock set the second cooler on top of the first. “And you can explain to Hannibal why he’s gonna pay \$8.99 a pound to turn seventeen lobsters free in the bay!”

The captain moved around to pilot the cart.

“He’ll understand, you’ll see. ‘A leader is a dealer in hope’: Napoleon Bonaparte. Hannibal is these guys’ hope.”

“I just *hope* when you tell him, it’s not our Waterloo!”

Captain Crane couldn’t believe his eyes.

“It can’t be,” he muttered over and over, eyes wide as he stared at the familiar vehicle. “They come *grocery* shopping?”

Shaking his head, he started up the car and drove around for a closer look—no use getting Colonel Decker all excited if it wasn’t B.A. Baracus’ van.

Hannibal and B.A. had weaved through the next several aisles picking up necessities such as toothpaste, shaving cream, shampoo. Hannibal also threw in a 500-count bottle of extra-strength Tylenol. The thought of spending several days with Face, B.A. and Murdock in the same apartment was already threatening to overload his pain threshold.

“All right! Ice cream!” B.A. announced with glee as they entered the frozen foods aisle. “What kind you like, Hannibal?”

The colonel considered. “Something with a little flare—how about chocolate-caramel-nut-marshmallow-swirl-cherry-chunk?”

B.A. threw Smith a disgusted look. “You kiddin’?”

Hannibal shook his head. “I never joke about something as serious as ice cream,” he explained, reaching into the case to pull out his choice.

The sergeant was still shaking his head as he grabbed a half-gallon of vanilla.

Face was all too happy to let Murdock continue pushing the cart. The scratching sounds of the lobsters shifting inside the coolers was making him squeamish.

“We’re gonna need coffee, H.M.,” Face said,

directing him down the appropriate aisle. “How much do you usually drink?”

The captain mentally tallied up his usage. “Um, ’bout ten cups.”

Face was incredulous. “A day?”

“Oh, no!” Murdock continued walking nonchalantly studying the java. “That’s just at breakfast. I probably put away a couple gallons of the stuff on a normal day.”

“Well, that explains a lot,” Peck muttered, piling four large cans of coffee on to the bottom of the cart. “Say, we’re gonna have to get another cart. We haven’t even hit the butcher’s shop yet.”

Murdock was off at a gallop.

“Your wish is my command, oh Countenance-chap!” he hollered as he disappeared out of sight. “I don’t know who said that!” Murdock’s voice faded.

“On a normal day?” Face blurted out, thinking back to the coffee conversation. “How on earth can he tell what a normal day is?”

B.A. stood, gaping at the huge variety of frozen dinners.

“Wow, they sure got lots to choose from,” he muttered, a little over-awed at the selection.

Hannibal agreed. “Let’s just get some frozen pizzas. Easier that way.”

B.A. threw a half dozen crispy thin-crusts into the cart followed by a couple of Chicago deep-dish for good measure.

“Vegetables?” Hannibal inquired, moving along the freezer case.

The sergeant thought a moment. “Um, whatever you want—say get one of them peas-carrots-corn mix! Mama used to have that all the time.”

Smith nodded, tossing a single serving box of the mix in along with equally minute containers of chopped broccoli and green beans.

“Can’t say we don’t eat healthy, Sergeant.”

“Cain’t say we don’t get into trouble, but you’d be lyin’,” the sergeant pointed out, wisely.

“Yeah,” Hannibal chuckled. “Wonder what Decker’s doing right about now.”

“Probably beatin’ his hard head ’gainst a wall somewheres.”

“How much longer is this going to take?”

Colonel Decker demanded of the pharmacist.

“Your doctor’s office just called back confirming your prescription. It’ll be a couple of minutes!” The man was more than a little annoyed at the Army officer’s hounding.

Decker turned away, banging his head against the wall and wishing he’d never gotten out of bed that morning. He crossed his arms and leaned back against the counter, watching the people moving through the store. Mothers dragging squalling children, little old men devotedly following their blue-rinsed wives, sweaty workman lugging six-packs of beer, Captain Murdock waltzing behind a cart, teen-agers running in for a Coke . . .

Captain Murdock!

“Hey look! There’s Face!” Hannibal smiled as he and his lieutenant met midway down the seasonal items aisle. The colonel spied the two coolers.

“What do you need those for?”

Peck turned pale under his tan.

“Ah, they’re Murdock’s,” he muttered.

“What’s he gonna put in ‘em?” B.A. asked, peering into the cart.

Face nervously adjusted his tie before admitting, “He, ah, already has something in them.”

Hannibal, deeply suspicious, moved closer and removed one of the lids. B.A. screamed in terror, backing up against the Halloween candy.

“Lobsters?” The colonel gaped at the squirming creatures before turning an angry gaze to Face, expecting an explanation.

“Uh, well, you know how Murdock gets sometimes!” Peck became defensive. “He saw them all sittin’ there waitin’ to become someone’s dinner and got all upset. Felt they were being imprisoned without due process.” Face paused trying to discern Hannibal’s feelings on the matter. The colonel was still in shock. “He wants to turn them all loose down at Lobster Bay.”

“That’s probably where they came from!” Hannibal bellowed.

“I know that!” Peck snapped. “He wants to return them to their home.”

The colonel peered back in at the lobsters. “How many are there?”

Face winced. “Seventeen.”

Hannibal exploded.

“Murdock expects me to pay for seventeen lobsters and I don’t even get to eat *one* of them?”

“Yeah, I think that’s his plan.”

Hannibal got an evil gleam in his eye. “It might be his plan, but it *ain’t* mine! Mine calls for a pot of boiling water, lots of butter and a lemon wedge!”

Face chuckled. “Great minds think alike,” he muttered.

“Just how much are these critters going to set me back, Lieutenant?”

Peck drew in a sharp breath, considering the cost. “Well, they’re all different sizes but I’d say they average ’bout a pound and a half a piece, times seventeen lobsters, at nine bucks a pound . . . you’re looking at about two hundred, thirty dollars of seafood there, Colonel.”

Smith’s jaw dropped. He was saved from forcing his stunned brain to devise a suitably sharp retort by the appearance of the Lobster Liberator himself. Murdock was fast approaching, gliding on the back of a runaway shopping cart.

“Hey, Colonel!” the pilot called. “Ya see our refugees? Thought we could swing by and drop them off at home on our way to Face’s. Whaddaya say?”

“Two hundred and thirty dollars?”

The pilot jumped off the cart and pulled it in with the other three. He turned sad, desperate eyes on Hannibal. “But—but it is pretty to see what money will

do,’ so said Samuel Pepys. You’ll be buying these fellas their freedom. ‘Send these, the homeless, tempest toss’d, to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door,’ Emma Lazarus. Show them the golden door, Colonel. I’m begging you!” the pilot dropped to his knees in front of Smith, gripping his hand tightly.

As Murdock paused for breath, Face leaned in close to whisper in Hannibal’s ear, “I tried to warn you. He pulled this routine in the seafood department and earned himself a rousing ovation from half the people patronizing this place.”

Murdock pressed on. “You said get whatever we want! I want these little guys,” he pleaded. “They’re destined for execution if they stay here. Surely they’ve done nothing to deserve so vile a fate!”

Hannibal sighed wearily. “Okay, Captain, okay. You’ve made your point. We’ll take them home. Are you satisfied?”

H.M. beamed jumping to his feet. “Aye, aye, Colonel.” He subjected Smith to an enthusiastic bear hug. “Thank you, sir. And I know my little buddies thank you, too. William Wordsworth must have known you’d come along when he wrote,

‘That best portion of a good man’s life,
His little, nameless, unremembered, acts
Of kindness and of love.’

You are a *good* man, Hannibal.”

Smith extricated himself from the pilot’s unrelenting grasp, touched by Murdock’s praise. It almost made shelling out two-hundred and thirty dollars for lobster he wasn’t going to eat worthwhile.

“Oh, by the way, Colonel Decker is at the pharmacy counter.”

Captain Crane couldn’t believe his good fortune. Pulling his car behind the van, he confirmed that it was, indeed, the same vehicle the A-Team had used to evade Colonel Decker and himself only an hour ago. Grinning with anticipation, the captain called headquarters for reinforcements and returned to the store’s entrance, parking once more in the fire lane. Hands shaking with excitement, he checked his sidearm before exiting the car to find Colonel Decker.

“When were you planning on letting us in on that little bombshell?” Peck fumed.

Murdock shrugged, flustered. “I was gonna tell you—I just kinda forgot in the heat of the moment and all.” The pilot ducked the angry stares by checking on his lobsters. “How’re y’all doin’ in there? Now, no squabbling—I know it’s tight quarters but we’ll have you home soon.”

“I don’t believe this!” Face ranted.

Hannibal placed a placating hand on the younger man’s arm. “Easy, Lieutenant. Decker doesn’t have us yet. Murdock, did he see you?”

The pilot replaced the lid on the top cooler. “Uh, yeah, I think he did. He had that ‘I’ve just been handed the best birthday present in the world’ look on his face.”

B.A. and Face exchanged worried exasperated

glances.

“Hmm, if he’s in here, that means Crane’s probably waiting outside,” the colonel mused.

“Yeah, and he’s most likely seen my van by now!” lamented B.A.

Hannibal gave a crooked grin. “That’s a definite possibility. I’ll bet Decker’s getting M.P.s down here even as we speak.

Captain, does Decker know you saw him?”

Murdock smiled. “Nope—I played it real cool, Colonel.”

Hannibal’s eyes were bright with the Jazz, as he withdrew a cigar from his jacket. “Oh, this is gonna be fun!”

Crane cautiously entered the Safeway, sliding slow and easy across the highly waxed floor. Feeling as if he were in an ambush situation, he remained close to the wall, peering into the store trying to locate the pharmacy.

“Crane!” Decker’s baritone hissed in his ear. The captain swung around as his colonel drew him behind the service desk.

“Colonel! The A-Team—they’re here—their van’s outside!”

“I know, I just saw Captain Murdock. Have you called for more manpower?”

“Yes, sir—first thing I did. It’ll take them a good thirty minutes to get here, though. Are we gonna wait that long?”

Decker contemplated the problem. If they waited for the reinforcements, the A-Team might finish their shopping and leave the store. If he and Crane tried to take them now, it would be just the two of them.

“We’ll stay posted here at the exit and wait for the M.P.s. You go keep an eye on their van. If the A-Team tries to leave we’ll make a grab for ’em. Otherwise, we’ll sit tight.”

Crane nodded and scrambled across the open ground, slipping out of the store.

“Well, where are they?” Hannibal asked his returning patrol.

Face shook his head. “Decker’s holding a position at the front of the store with a good view of the surrounding area. No way we’re gonna sneak up on him.”

Murdock added: “Yeah, and you were right—Crane’s here, too. He’s gone back outside—my guess is to watch the van.”

“I don’t suppose we could just sneak out the back and leave through the warehouse,” Face suggested knowing Hannibal would never consider such a simple solution.

The colonel drew himself up. “Lieutenant, I intend to go out of this store the same way I came in.”

B.A. groaned, “Oh, man. That means through the front door. You and that damn front door!”

Hannibal chuckled with unconcealed glee. “Oh come on, guys! We have a perfect opportunity here to ruin Decker’s day! I can’t pass this up. Decker’s sitting there, thinking we don’t know about him and we know *all* about him!”

“A wise man gets more use from his enemies than a fool from his friends,” Murdock quoted. “Baltasar Gracian.”

“You oughta know!” B.A. growled at the pilot.

“Hannibal, we already ruined Decker’s day.



Remember that little episode this morning, the falling dumpster?” Peck reminded the Team’s leader.

“Face, my boy,” the colonel admonished, placing a reassuring arm about the lieutenant’s shoulders. “Now we’ll ruin his week!”

Resigned, Peck asked, “What’s your plan, Colonel?”

Hannibal pulled a pen and small pad of paper from his coat pocket and began to scrawl furiously.

“I need you and Murdock to do a little more shopping. B.A., go check out the warehouse back there and see if they’ve all gone to lunch yet. We’ll need some working room.” The colonel tore off the first page and thrust it at Peck. His pen continued to fly across the pages.

Face stared at the list, not truly believing what he was reading. “One forklift, two motorized handicapped shopping carts, two five-foot sections of four inch metal pipe, four broom handles, one dozen rubber tie downs with ‘S’ hooks, a can opener, two bottles of rubbing alcohol, a cotton clothes line, nylon rope, wire hangers and all the hand baskets I can carry? Are you kidding?”

Hannibal just shook his head. “Um, the forklift’s probably in the warehouse. If B.A. gives the all-clear, that’ll be our base—bring everything back there. Hurry up, Lieutenant—and try not to arouse suspicions.”

Face snorted, before replying, “I’m sure no one will notice me ponying a couple of mechanized shopping carts through the store.” Still shaking his head, he set off on his quest.

The sergeant had returned from his scouting mission. Still, Hannibal wrote.

“All clear, Colonel. Looks like they only been gone ten, fifteen minutes.”

“Good. Here’s your list, Murdock. Take your cart—I think everything’ll fit in it.”

“Sure thing, Colonel.” The captain was several feet away, perusing his list before he stopped. “Malted

milk balls?"

"Just go, Captain!"

"I'm gone!" Murdock answered, amazed at the rest of the foodstuffs Hannibal had ordered.

Smith turned to his sergeant. "You didn't happen to notice a forklift back there, did you?"

B.A. grinned. "There's two—one of 'em brand new."

Once set about their tasks, Face and Murdock moved with astonishing speed, collecting all the items Hannibal had requested. Peck was thrown for a few minutes, trying to figure out where he would get the pipe. As he was contemplating the dilemma, he happened upon Murdock. The pilot was rolling honeydew melons along the back aisle to the warehouse. One of them strayed off course.

"Dang!" the pilot screeched after the errant fruit. "Gutter ball!"

Of course! Face dashed outside the back of the warehouse and returned several minutes later with the requested 4" piping in the form of downspouts.

After settling a wooden pallet into the arms of the forklift to create a platform where Hannibal would stand, B.A. affixed the spouts to the front of vehicle using the wire hangers, forming "twin cannons". The bottles of rubbing alcohol and clothesline were quickly transformed into Bunsen burners and placed just below the end of each gutter. Cans of tomatoes would be the projectiles, stuffed into the tubes then heated until they exploded, spewing their contents out the far end with considerable force.

The forklift was also equipped with a formidable slingshot, composed of broom handles and rubber ties, nestled between the gutters. Finally, Hannibal, having pulled all the baskets off the four shopping carts, secured one against the body of the vehicle to hold a wide variety of edible ammunition.

B.A. discovered enough stray tools in the warehouse to let him juice up the two motorized shopping carts, allowing them to attain a top speed of 10 miles per hour.

The sergeant warned, "They's only gonna last fifteen, twenty minutes at most 'fore the motors burn out. Hope Decker don't get stubborn."

Other improvements to the electric carts included broom handles for lances and a shopping cart basket attached to the rear for extra ammunition. Face and Murdock loaded easily thrown 'missiles' into the little baskets in front of the handle bars: eggs, donuts, potatoes, oranges, even Hannibal's cans of ginger ale were confiscated.

Peck and Murdock also 'mined' the store. They filled several small, hand-held shopping baskets with a wide selection of foods: open cans of coffee, malted milk balls, frozen peas, sour ball candy, brussel sprouts, mothballs, cranberries, bags of flour, chestnuts, opened bottles of cooking oil—anything that might render a floor difficult to traverse. The baskets were then set close to the edge of shelves in strategic locations about the store.

When he finished his tasks, Murdock removed the

lobsters to a safe haven, "out of the war zone," he told them.

The last thing Hannibal did was to secure the warehouse doors. He used the second forklift to set heavy pallets of dogfood on either side, rendering the doors capable of opening only into the store. B.A. placed his refitted machine neatly between the pet chow, facing towards the store.

Now that all was ready and the Team prepared for battle, Murdock climbed aboard B.A.'s forklift.

"Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of shoppers—born in this century, tempered by high prices, disciplined by hard and bitter cashiers, proud of our coupon clipping—and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those consumer rights to which this nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed—ARRK!" The captain squawked as B.A. unceremoniously removed him from the forklift.

"You the only one's been committed, fool!"

"Sergeant!" Hannibal interceded, nodding at the machine. "Better get her fired up."

Baracus snarled as he dropped the pilot.

"Thanks, Colonel," Murdock whispered, trying to get his bearings as Face helped him to his feet.

"Funny, I don't remember JFK's address sounding quite like that," Peck wondered aloud.

Hannibal broke up the reverie. "Face, there's a pay phone in the employee break room. Call the fire department and tell them Safeway's gonna conduct a fire drill. Murdock, go with him. As soon as he hangs up, pull the alarm. That ought to clear the store of non-combatants!"

The pilot smiled. "'A little inaccuracy sometimes saves tons of explanation.' Saki, 1924."

Crane smiled in relief as he watched the three carloads of M.P.s pull in behind him. Quickly and efficiently, he organized the troops and headed into the store. As the first door swung open, the shrill wail of a fire alarm shattered the normal sounds of the supermarket. Crane and the troops paused. The captain peered into the store, looking for his commanding officer, but all he saw was a mob of people swarming towards the doors.

Colonel Decker hit the floor when the alarm went off, too many memories of air raids permeating his startled brain. Recovering quickly, he drew his revolver and crouched down behind the service desk, oblivious to the store personnel trying to escape the building. Decker watched intently for the A-Team and when they didn't appear, he cursed, feeling the fool again. They'd known he was in the store all this time.

"Damn you, Smith!"

Face and Murdock rode the silent-running carts up opposite ends of the store, Peck going through the bakery, H.M. through produce. They stopped the carts before they got to the ends of the aisles and crept forward

on their bellies to spy on Colonel Decker. They witnessed the fifteen M.P.s and Captain Crane entering the store, having finally waded through the outbound customers. Murdock hurried his way back to his cart, driving it up within view of the military. No sense waiting until Decker had them organized.

“Say, Colonel,” the pilot called insolently tossing a huge, ripe tomato from palm to palm. “You like ketchup?” With that, Murdock hurled the object at Decker, watching in delight as the man tried to shield himself from the incoming fruit. The pilot’s aim was faultless; the tomato caught Decker square in the chest.

“Get him!” the furious colonel hollered. Immediately his men obeyed, taking off after the hysterically giggling Murdock. The pilot wheeled his cart in a tight circle and headed back down the produce aisle.

“No, no!” Decker called again. “Split up!”

As a dozen men ran after the quickly retreating Murdock, Decker and the rest started making a horizontal run across the front of the store. Peck chose that moment to reveal himself at the far end of the building, sitting arrogantly aboard his motorized cart.

“Hey guys! I hear the fruitcake here is superb!”

Assured that the M.P.s would continue on their way towards him, Face ducked back down the aisle. He paused at midstretch, waiting for his pursuers to appear. They rounded the corner *en masse*, Decker in the lead. Peck took off again, gripping his broom handle. Just as he slowed to make the turn at the end of the aisle, he hit a basket full of sourballs perched on a shelf, sending the hard candies rolling in a rainbow wave across the floor behind him. He didn’t have to watch what happened—the heavy thuds and strangled yelps of surprise told him Decker and his men had hit the “mines”.

Meanwhile, Murdock had taken care of most of his followers, upsetting a basket of vegetable oil, turning the floor into a slimy, slippery sheet. A few of the men managed to keep their footing as they slid through the trap, and resumed their chase of the captain. Murdock rounded the corner and dodged up through the breakfast foods. Using his broom handle, he hit baskets he’d set out full of cranberries, chestnuts and brussel sprouts. Aisle 3 became all but impassable.

Face had also started back towards the front of the store, a cursing, sputtering Decker hard on his heels. Feeling as if he were jousting, Peck knocked a container of coffee on one side, a basket of mothballs on the other. Again, he listened to the sounds of falling humans, grinning as he paused.

“Come on, surely you can do better than *that!*” he taunted, laughing.

It took one more trip down aisles for Murdock and Face to get Decker and his men right where Hannibal wanted them. The two A-Team members had slowed their carts down to give the Army a chance to catch up and feigned an inevitable capture, pushing their carts in reverse until they were against the wall on either side of the warehouse doors.

“Go ahead, say it!” Murdock called to Decker.

The colonel’s eyes narrowed as he crept closer, crouched with caution. “Say what?”

“You know, ‘I’ve got you now, Smith.’ You always say that.”

“Smith ain’t here,” Decker pointed out.

“Doesn’t that make you wonder where he is?”

Face asked, amusement sparkling in his eyes.

Before Decker could think about it, a heavy roar broke the stalemate. B.A. burst the forklift through the warehouse doors, driving straight for Decker.

“Somebody call?” Hannibal yelled, a huge coconut cream pie loaded into his slingshot. “As ranking officer, Decker, you get the first piece!” He released the confection, sending it hurtling through the air to collide with Decker’s head.

“Bullseye, Hannibal!” B.A. bellowed.

Crane grabbed Decker’s shoulder, spinning him out of the way before the forklift came barreling past. The rest of his men fled amid a flurry of pies, cakes, melons and frozen pizzas. Face and Murdock, howling like old time cowboys, raced up side aisles to cut off the retreating troops. They emerged just ahead of the M.P.s, blocking the exit from the store. The men gaped in fear as their escape route was cut-off by the two egg-throwing, can-hurling, potato-tossing A-Team officers. Thinking quickly, before the forklift ran over them, the soldiers cut across the storefront and down yet another aisle, unaware that they were being herded like cattle. B.A., with Hannibal lighting the alcohol burners, drove after the fleeing men while Face and Murdock once again sped down alternate routes to cut them off. The heavy *whumpf* of the tomato cannons could be heard through out the store.

By the time Decker had managed to wipe the cream off his face and pick the coconut out of his eyelashes, his men were racing back towards him. Before the soldiers could flee from the oncoming forklift, Murdock and Peck appeared cutting off their escape once again as they flung donuts like Frisbees to harass the huddled group. The M.P.s turned to run back the way they’d come, but B.A. and Hannibal were rounding the corner, a combination pizza loaded menacingly into the slingshot, “guns” dripping red juice.

Caught in the classic half-pincher movement, Decker’s only escape was into the warehouse. Crane’s initial attempts to push the doors open failed and the captain began to panic as the forklift moved closer, firing another round.

“Moron!” Decker hollered, wiping the stewed tomatoes out of his eyes. “*Pull* them!” he cried, gripping a handle and hauling the door open. His men beat a hasty retreat into the warehouse.

“Pull her all the way up, B.A.!” Hannibal called over the roar of the forklift. The sergeant didn’t stop the machine until it was pushing against the doors.

“Great job, guys!” Smith complimented, dousing the burners before climbing down. “They won’t be gettin’ out that way!”

Face hated to burst his bubble.

“How long do you think it’ll take them to figure out they can leave through the loading dock?”

Hannibal’s eyes glowed with a maniacal shimmer.

“Oh it won’t take them long to notice the truck bay, but it will take them awhile to get out. B.A. and I locked the doors then broke off the keys. Neat, huh?”

Face had to give him credit—Hannibal thought of everything.

“Come on, let’s get out of here while we can,” Smith ordered.

The four men made their way to the front doors, careful to avoid slipping on the littered floor.

“The lobsters!” Murdock suddenly announced.

Hannibal scowled. “Where’d you put ’em?”

“They’re sittin’ in bottle return. C’mon, Face, give me hand.”

While Peck and Murdock retrieved the coolers, Hannibal moved behind the service desk. He scribbled down a quick note, and attached a handful of bills to the message with a paper clip. B.A. watched him curiously.

“You payin’ for all the damage?”

Hannibal shook his head. “Nope, just the lobsters. As with any fraternity prank, whoever gets caught foots the bill. Wait’ll Decker tries to explain this one.”

Face and Murdock were approaching with the coolers.

“Lieutenant, I told you I was gonna go out the way I came in, through the front doors.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know, I know,” Peck muttered following Hannibal.

The colonel stopped abruptly in the entryway.

“Um, we need a way to get out of here,” he said, peering out the windows. The parking lot was filled with store customers and employees. “We can’t just march out of here with a couple coolers of lobsters in our hands.”

“How about ‘Fish and Game’ wardens?” Face proposed.

Hannibal shook his head. “I’m not sure lobsters come under their jurisdiction.”

“I know! Department of Health!” suggested Murdock.

“What—the lobsters missed their last shots so we’re taking them in?” the colonel remarked. “No, we need something better.”

B.A., listening to the exchange with growing irritation, growled.

“Why do everything need to be a lie with you guys? Jus’ tell ’em the truth! You paid fer the lobsters, now let’s git outta here!” With that, the sergeant stalked out the doors. Hannibal, Murdock and Face exchanged anxious looks before chasing after him.

The Team wasn’t ten feet from the building when an officious looking man approached them.

“What were you doing in there? And just where do you think you’re going?” he sneered.

“Ah, well, Mr. Reynolds,” Hannibal began lamely, reading the store manager’s badge. “We’re the local fire inspectors and we needed to check and—”

B.A. cut him off, positioning his considerable bulk directly in front of the manager.

“Look, Jack, we had a bad day. These here’re yo lobsters an’ we paid for ’em—money’s on the counter inside. If you go back to the warehouse, you gonna find Colonel Decker of the U.S. Army in there with a bunch o’ his goons. They messed up yo joint real bad. Don’t let ’em outta there ’til they agree to pay damages. They’s also the ones who’re parked here in yo fire lane.” B.A. took a menacing step forward and brought his face uncomfortable close to the squirming Reynolds. “I *hates* people who park in fire lanes. Have ’em towed, sucka! Now get outta my way! I had ’nough o’ this place!”

“Anger cannot be dishonest,” Murdock whispered to Face. “George S. Bach.”

Reynolds swallowed meekly and nodded, stepping aside to allow the angry man and his friends pass. After all, he reflected, the customer is always right.

Hannibal was very amused.

“Nice, B.A., real nice!” he praised.

H.M. waited until they were loading the lobsters in the van before inflicting one final quote. “And so, having disposed of the monster once more, exit our hero, stage right!”

Face was perplexed. “Who said that?”

Murdock beamed. “The greatest orator of all time—Bugs Bunny!”



JENNY-BETH

by Kristin Munson

The girl tentatively looked out the second-story window of the old building. The ground looked amazingly far away. The ladder propped against the side of the wall looked rickety and old. She nervously put a leg over the side of the sill. She hated heights, but she had to escape. She hadn't taken the time to put clothes on, and she only wore a light silk nightdress, a short one at that. She shivered.

She started down the ladder, feeling each rung several times with a foot to make sure it was safe. It was mid-morning and the people below were walking past on their way to work. The thought that anyone who happened to look up would be able to see her derriere hastened her descent.

She was about halfway down when an unpleasantly familiar face looked out the window and down at her. "Jen!" he exclaimed. "What the hell do you think you're doing?!" She was too far down for him to reach so he quickly disappeared back into the room, slamming the window shut as he did.

The ladder rocked violently before flipping completely around, and Jen's back was momentarily pinned to the wall. A moment later, the ladder fell to the sidewalk.

She landed hard. Her legs, twisted in the rungs of the ladder, were badly scratched. Blood was oozing out of half a dozen small cuts.

By now the alarm had certainly been raised inside. They would be on her in seconds.

Quickly she disentangled herself and kicked the ladder aside. She stood up and started to flee down the sidewalk.

She could only manage a slow jog; she wasn't wearing footwear of any kind. The pavement stung, burned, and cut the soles of her feet. Blood welled up between her toes and mingled with the red nail polish she wore.

She turned to look back as she heard a door slam and saw a gang of men quickly closing in on her. She ran faster, her feet stinging as they hit concrete.

Suddenly she was jerked roughly backwards by two of them.

"You aren't getting away that easily," one muttered. She struggled as they half-dragged her back to the complex.

This was her only chance!

Jen pulled away from the two men and ran towards the main street. They were after her in a moment.

She made it across the street, hoping to seek refuge in the post office. A car swerved around her, honking angrily.

She had gotten up two steps when they caught her

again. The leader of the group, who had a metal arm, seized her by the wrist. "This time I'll hold her," he snarled, looking directly at the two who had lost her a moment before.

The rest of the gang had reentered the building before he got her to the edge of the sidewalk.

He calmly waited for the traffic to let him cross, ignoring the half-naked woman struggling against his grip.

"Let go!" she shouted, pulling hard against his arm. "Let go! Let go! Let go!" she continued as he dragged her across the street. Midway across she managed to jerk free from his good arm. In a last ditch attempt to stop her he pivoted and grabbed her shoulder with his metal arm. She half turned and gave a sharp jerk to the right.

His arm, not used to being twisted in such a fashion, released instantly.

Desperately she ran down the center of the road. *Damn! Damn damn damn damn damn damn DAMN!* The thought came every time a foot would hit the asphalt.

She reached the intersection where the road met Main Street. Without a moment's hesitation she plunged through the heavy traffic.

A horn blared to her right and she turned to see a huge black van barreling down upon her. Like a frightened doe caught in the headlights of a pickup truck, she froze in the middle of its path. She could hear the squeal of tires as the van screeched to a halt a few inches away. She quickly staggered to the sidewalk, slightly dazed but unhurt. A giant of a black man shouted from behind the wheel, "Hey man, watch where you're going!"

On the passenger's side an older man leaned out the window. "I'd take his advice if I were you," he said between puffs on his cigar. "You could end up dead."

"You have no idea," she muttered under her breath.

In the rear of the van a much younger, well-dressed man looked incredulously ahead. "Was I seeing things, or was that girl wearing nothing but a silk nightgown?"

"Ohhh, you weren't seeing things, Faceman," the man seated next to him, wearing a worn leather jacket and a blue hat, assured him. "Believe me, you weren't seeing things!"

As the black and red van started to pull away, Jen could see through the two front windows that her pursuers were already heading her way.

The van! she thought suddenly. *The van's door was locked!* She took a running jump, her fingers caught just under the door handle. She held on for dear

life.

The van picked up speed and she held tighter, her feet tucked under her body which was pressed tightly against the side.

She was free! Free and safe! For the moment, anyway.

The van had driven and weaved through the streets for a good twenty minutes before it had been caught in the middle of the parade.

"We would have to come through here on Saint Patrick's Day," Hannibal grumbled, turning his road map sideways and then upside down. "I don't know how we're going to get out of this and back on route to the cabin."

"Chill out, man," Murdock said. "Just sit back and enjoy the show." Then, to everyone's horror he began to sing: "Leprechauns to the left of me, shamrocks to the right, here I am stuck in the middle with you."

"If you don't stop it you're gonna be stuck between my two fists, sucker!" B.A. shouted from the front seat.

"I'd do what the man says," Face instructed him. "B.A., I don't suppose there's any way at all you can get us out of this?" he asked, turning his attention back to the road.

"No man, I don't know any of these streets."

"Make a left at the next corner," came a woman's voice from outside.

Everyone leaned forward in their seats, looks of surprise plastered on their faces.

Murdock was the first to recover. "B.A., when did you teach your van to talk? This is great! It's just like K.I.T.T. and we're all on *Knight Rider!*" he gushed.

"Shut up you crazy fool, that ain't the van talkin'!"

Hannibal leaned out the window and saw the girl they had almost hit clinging to the side of the van. He opened his mouth, probably to make one of his famous smart retorts, when he was cut off by the sound of bullets being fired.

"Oh great," Face sighed, "the military. I didn't think Decker was Irish."

"Since when have you known Decker to resort to hijacking a Shamrock float to come after us, guns blazing?" asked Hannibal dryly. "Some creeps took over the float behind us, and they have heavy artillery."

"Dear God, no!" Murdock gasped. "Little crazed Leprechauns are after us! I can see them now: the little people, drunk on Lucky Charms, think we're banshees and are chasing us down, green foam flying out of their mouths . . ."

"Shut up Murdock! Shut up!" B.A. yelled.

"B.A. take this left," Hannibal instructed, as they reached the corner. He leaned out the window and spoke to her: "You're going to have to direct us from here."

"You got it!" she shouted back.

The van took the corner fast. Jen's fingers were getting cut up from holding on. Her body slammed against the side of the van, bruising her hip.

"Make another left here," she called over the rain of shells.

"Don't you think it would be easier to hear if she were inside the van?" Face asked.

"You're probably right," Hannibal agreed. "Pull her in at the next left turn."

"Now right!" she called. Her body was in serious pain, her fingers were slipping, and she had scratched her arm on the side of the van.

They came to a fork in the road, well ahead of the shamrock float.

"Left!" she practically shrieked.

As the van leaned, Jen lost her finger-hold. At the same instant Face pulled the door open and barely got his arms around her waist before she hit the pavement. He roughly hauled her in, and deposited her on the floor. He slid the door shut hard.

She lay on the van's carpet, heaving in breaths of air and wiping the blood from her hands on the ragged negligee.

"Well, I guess the luck of the Irish wasn't with that group today," Murdock said finally, in a rather bright tone.

The van was driving down a little-used backroad. Jen was sitting on the floor, arms behind her, one leg in Murdock's hand.

"Grit your teeth," Murdock ordered, brandishing a large rag soaked in antiseptic.

She flinched and inhaled sharply as he touched the cloth to her skin.

"How did you manage to get all these?" Murdock inquired. "These leg cuts weren't made by the van."

"I sort of fell off a ladder escaping from a second floor room," she said sheepishly. "I'm kind of a klutz."

"Well you're obviously in high demand if those guys came after you in a parade float," Hannibal said, half-turned in his seat.

She rubbed her bruised arm absently. "They're kind of a gang of guys I got involved with, who had me locked in a room for security purposes."

"Security purposes?!" Face reiterated. "What did you do?"

"Well, I sorta got involved for kicks. It was basically a motorcycle gang. Then I found out that the bikes we were importing and exporting to shows were stuffed with stolen valuables. A guy would hack out the seats' stuffing and remove the 'guts', then insert stuff like crystal, jewelry, and antique guns and knives.

We'd soup up the bikes, decorate them to look like they were going to fancy international shows and ship them out. The customer would pick them up take out the valuables and insert stolen goods of their own, then ship them back. I found out while I was doing their bookkeeping on the side. They were going to let me go if I agreed not to say anything. I wouldn't. So then they tried buying my silence. That didn't fly either, so I escaped out the window."

Face shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Would it have killed you to put some pants on?"

"One of the cleaners left his ladder out," she replied indignantly. "It was my only chance to get out."

"Isn't it a little stupid on their part to come after you, guns blazing?" Hannibal inquired, still skeptical about the girl's story.

"They'll do anything Talbot tells them to do; he's the ringleader. They don't dare disobey him."

"Why would anyone do that?" B.A. asked, not taking his eyes off the road, or the rear-view mirror.

"Wouldn't you take orders from a guy who has a metal arm and is well over six-feet tall?" she remarked, flinching as Murdock touched the rag to one of the larger gouges in her leg.

"A metal arm?" Murdock snorted.

"He lost his hand and a good portion of his lower arm in an accident when he was younger. Instead of getting a prosthetic limb he went all out and got a working metal hand. The whole smuggling business was started to pay off the bill, only it was so profitable he just kept deal—Owww!" she broke off.

Murdock had reached the soles of her feet. "These are definitely going to need bandaging. Your feet are torn to pieces."

She clutched her arms so hard her nails left half-moon shaped indentations.

Murdock turned his hat backwards to better see what he was doing. Mistaking her shivering as a sign of being chilled, he removed his coat and handed it to her.

"Thanks, but I don't need it," she told him, pulling her torn nightgown farther down to cover between her legs. *At least you're wearing clean underwear*, a voice in her head remarked. *Shutup*, she thought back to herself.

"Trust me, put it on," Murdock told her, not even seeming to notice, or care, about her underwear. "If not for you, for us"

"Hey!" she protested adamantly, "I have a nice figure. I work hard to look like this!"

"We aren't complaining about your figure," Hannibal soothed.

"It's a very, very nice figure," Face agreed.

"But," Hannibal added, "if you don't put that jacket on Face's eyes are going to pop out of his head and he will burst into flames."

"Face is made of highly combustible material," Murdock added.

Jen reluctantly took the coat and put it on.

"Aren't you afraid it'll get all bloody?" she asked him.

"Nah. That baby's seen more action than Face, which is a significant amount," he teased.

"Jealous," Face snapped.

"If we took you to a hotel do you think they'd leave you alone?" Hannibal asked.

Now it was Jen's turn to snort indignantly.

"They've followed me this far."

"That's exactly my point," he said, lighting another cigar.

Hannibal, Faceman and Jen walked into the lobby of The Jester's Crown, a rather swank local hotel. It was usually only visited by the richer members of the community, and gullible tourists. The entire place was filled with fake-looking armor, cheesy plaques with tin rapiers crossed on them, tapestries that looked as if they

had been knitted by loom class dropouts, and other assorted medieval kitsch. Everyone who was employed there wore some sort of gothic costuming, either dressed as pages, peasants, or princes. Their motto, which was embroidered onto a tapestry that hung directly behind the check-in desk, was "The Middle Ages were never quite so interesting."

"Guys, I don't think this is so smart," she whispered. "This place is right across the street from Talbot's antique store."

"Relax kid," Hannibal said, with a wave of his arm. "This is all part of the plan."

For some reason that didn't make her feel better. "I don't have any money for a hotel room," she hissed.

"That's what Face is for," he indicated with his thumb.

"I feel like I should break into song," she muttered to herself.

Face cautiously approached the front desk. *Cheap hotel*, he thought to himself. *The costumes here are nauseating*. Just then one of the maids walked in front of him, dressed in a green terry cloth-type dress that had a band fastened around her ribcage like a belt, forcing her bosom to swell out of the low-cut neck. *Well, they aren't so bad*, he amended.

The man at the front desk was wearing blue hose and a dark navy doublet with poofy short pants. *He's wearing tights!* It took all of Face's control not to laugh. "Ummm, yes excuse me," he waved. "I'm, uh, with the fire commission. Last night a house around here was completely gutted by flames, and we were wondering if you could possibly give the occupant a free room until she gets some insurance money back?"

The young man eyed him skeptically. "I'm afraid we aren't *that* kind of establishment."

"Oh, oh, I see," Face turned around, thinking desperately. "Well I can't say that I blame you." Suddenly he got an idea. "But," he quickly added, "I want you to see the young woman you're turning away." He jogged back to where Jen and Hannibal were standing. He took her by the arm, "I need to borrow you for a second. Just keep your mouth closed and try to look as pitiful as possible," he muttered to her, taking Murdock's jacket and handing it to Hannibal.

"Here's the little trooper," Face presented Jen. "Poor little wretch, isn't she?"

The clerk looked over her marred body, limited apparel, and bandaged feet. Jen put on her "sad puppy" look. "Well . . . I still don't know . . ." he started.

"Quite all right," Face assured. "I'll just take Miss, Miss . . ." he drew a blank.

"Jenny-Beth," she interjected.

"Yes. Miss Jenny-Beth, somewhere else . . . perhaps Holiday Inn would like some good press . . ." Face trailed off.

"No! Wait, wait. We do have an opening in room 222. Just through that hall and up the stairs."

"Thank you so much." Face oozed saccharine. "We won't soon forget this."

“That was good thinking,” he praised her as he escorted her back to the lobby. “Jenny-Beth has a real down-home-farm kind of feel to it. A real hillbilly kinda touch. A . . . a, a . . .”

“Face,” she stopped him when they’d rejoined Hannibal. “It’s my real name.”

“Oh,” he said quietly. “Well, well, I meant all those things in a nice earthy kind of way. A . . .”

“Shut up,” she muttered.

Murdock joined them at that particular moment, giving Hannibal an odd look as he retrieved his coat.

“B.A. wants your room number so he can set up surveillance equipment and some booby traps.”

“222,” she informed him, “and I’d better not find any hidden cameras in strategic places so you can watch me undress.”

“Don’t be silly,” Face reassured. “Why would we do that when we can see just about everything now?”

Strangely enough she saw the logic in that. “God, I want some clothes,” she muttered, again self-consciously pulling her negligee farther down on her body.

“Milady,” Murdock bowed, “I would be honored if you covered your divine beauty with a jacket not half so worthy to be in the same room with you.”

“Oooh he’s good,” she said to Face, “but I thought you were the group romancer.”

“He’s in fantasy mode,” Face informed her, “but even then I usually get more girls than he does.”

“Uh-huh. Sure, Faceman,” she remarked dryly.

Jen went to take the proffered coat, but Murdock pulled it away jokingly. “Please,” he said, aghast. “Allow me.” She reluctantly turned her back to him and let him put the coat on her.

“If I do ten more good deeds I get to be a squire,” he told her, “or I earn a new toaster. I haven’t decided which I want more.”

Face gave Hannibal an “Oh, no, not again” look.

“Go for the squirehood,” she told Murdock. “The world could use a few more knights,” she yawned in spite of herself.

“Tired?” Hannibal inquired.

“Just a tad. I was up all last night thinking out escape routes.”

“Murdock,” Hannibal said, with complete sincerity and putting a hand on the man’s shoulder, “would you escort the lady to her chambers? Serve well and one day you’ll live to be one of Camelot’s finest.”

“Yes sir, an honor sir.” He saluted the colonel jauntily, then, looping his arm through Jen’s, marched proudly down the adjacent hallway.

“Do you really think that was wise, Hannibal?” Face asked.

“Murdock’ll treat her fine. Besides, it’ll keep her mind off her feet.”

As Jenny and Murdock walked down the hall she couldn’t help noticing some of the looks they got from other people in the hall. Some were shocked, others contemptuous, and some even seemed envious. She wasn’t sure if the people envied Murdock, (she thought

that was a bit self-centered on her part, but she was half-naked) or if their looks were directed towards her. He wasn’t handsome in the traditional sense as much as he had a rather sweet smile.

They reached her room and he unhooked his arm. “Be back in a minute,” he promised, and he was, with a glass of water. “Here,” he handed it to her, “you need it to make up for some of the blood you lost.”

She drank it obligingly. “I don’t know how I’ll be able to get to sleep. Between everything that’s happened and B.A. setting up equipment in my room, I’ll have chronic insomnia.”

“Oh I don’t think that at all,” he assured her. “3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . .” he counted. She collapsed into his arms, dead to the world. “Works every time,” he said to himself.

When he got back to the lobby some minutes later Hannibal asked, “How is she?”

“Sleeping like an angel,” Murdock informed him.

“I just hope I have her weight right or she’ll sleep forty hours instead of ten,” Face said. “It’s a good thing we always take that stuff everywhere with us for B.A., or she’d kill us for not letting her help.”

“Well B.A.’s gonna be up there for a while,” Hannibal said, “so Face, you and Murdock start staking out Talbot’s antique store across the way. I need to know exactly what it’s going to take to lure this wide-mouthed bass to our hooks.”

Face crouched behind a 1983 Buick; binoculars intently focused on the building across the street. Thus far Talbot had sold a humidior, a brass elephant, and a complete set of Time Life Record’s classical hits.

“Hey Faceman!”

Face leapt about a foot straight up in the air.

“Murdock,” Face hissed, “what on earth do you think you’re doing?”

Murdock shook a paper bag in front of Peck’s nose. “Munchies,” he sang.

“They have fast food restaurants here?” Face asked incredulously. “This place barely qualifies for a zip code.”

“Burger Hut,” Murdock explained.

“Ohhh,” Face nodded.

“No matter what town, no matter how small, Burger Hut’s the one to feed y’all,” they quoted in unison.

“See anything valuable yet?” Murdock asked, doling out burgers, fries, and blue slushies.

“Nah, mostly just routine purchases. Nothing we can entice him with.”

“That gal’s pretty spunky,” Murdock remarked offhandedly, sorting the ketchup packets into one neat pile and the salt and pepper packets into another.

“Murdock,” Face teased, “if I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re faking your medieval delusion.”

“Me?” he asked innocently. “I’m just trying to make her feel better. You do it all the time.”

“Ah yes,” Face sighed dreamily. “Where would I be without my many ‘comfort’ sessions?”

"You'd still be here, only your head would be full of a lot less hot air," Murdock joked.

Face gave him a dirty look and hit him in the shoulder with a paper bag full of fruit pies.

"Boys, boys, boys," Hannibal tsked. "Now what have I told you about assaulting each other with fast food? Someone could lose an eye." He had left B.A. to come and get his hourly update.

"Nothing yet, Colonel," Murdock reported, setting up the ketchup pile in a "V" formation and the salt and peppers in a triple row.

"Wait a minute!" Face had his binoculars up again. "Check this out." He handed the lenses to Hannibal.

A man was at the counter with a stack of oriental-looking plates. He seemed to be asking a question of Talbot and pointing to the stack of dishes. Talbot kept shaking his head in the negative.

"This looks like a winner," Hannibal announced, teeth firmly fastened on his cigar. "Now all we need is to talk to our little friend upstairs."

Face and Murdock rose to follow him inside.

"No, no . . . I need you to stay out here and make sure these guys have no clue we're involved, or where the girl is. I want this to be a delightful surprise."

Face sighed heavily and sat back down behind the car. Murdock led the salt packages in a revolt against the pepper.

Face checked his watch for the umpteenth time. "We've got a couple more hours before Jenny-Beth comes to."

"Jenny-Beth?" Murdock asked, taking his eyes off the troops for a moment.

"That's her real name," Face informed him.

Murdock smiled. "It's nice. It has kind of a down-home, rural feel to it."

Face looked down from his binoculars at him. "Shut up," he said.

Upstairs Jenny-Beth was just waking up. Her head hurt and her vision was rather blurry. She swung her feet off the bed and on to the floor. She paused a moment before stretching herself out.

She couldn't remember how she had gotten there, but she had a pretty good idea . . .

She quickly got to her feet, apparently too fast for her brain's liking, because she swayed rather dizzily. She half-fell backwards.

Two strong arms caught her.

"You're up earlier than we expected," Hannibal remarked dryly, helping her back to her feet.

"I don't appreciate being drugged, Mr. Smith," she said, a touch of malice in her voice.

"You needed sleep," he said matter-of-factly. "Now, we need your help to nail this guy."

She looked at him suspiciously. "What help do you need? You certainly didn't want or need my help before. That's why you drugged me, isn't it?"

He ignored the icy accusation. "A man was at the store today buying some oriental-looking china . . ."

"Oh that's Mr. Evans," she interrupted. "He comes in every so often buying plates for his collection.

He always looks for the same pattern. He has no idea the stuff he buys is stolen property. He's really very nice."

"Do you know where he lives?"

"Sure. I had to know his address and phone number by heart, in case something he wanted came in. He's only a few plates short of a complete collection. Why do you ask?"

"I do believe we're going to use your little 'friend' to catch these guys in the act of buying stolen merchandise and committing assault."

"Assault?" she asked nervously. "I don't think I like the sound of that."

An hour or so later Hannibal and Jenny-Beth entered the antique store. Talbot was adding up the day's receipts. "We're closed," he said, still bent over the adding machine.

"Oh I think you'll be interested in what I've got for you." Hannibal set down a stack of plates, all bearing the same jade-colored, oriental pattern.

Talbot's eyes widened. He counted them, twice to be sure—eight exactly. These would complete Evans' set. He could get top dollar for them if they were authentic and in pristine condition. But if he acted too interested he'd end up paying quite a bit for them.

"What makes you think I'd be at all interested in these?" he asked casually.

"Well I heard that you would from my lady friend here," Hannibal motioned for Jenny-Beth to come forward.

Talbot had guessed as much. Inside he was grinning; his plan was fitting together piece by piece. Jen looked rather nice in that particular piece of negligee, he noted. He turned his attention back to the china. "Well . . ." he held one up, examining it, "you see these two small splashes of blue dye," he pointed to nonexistent blemishes. "These could seriously cripple the value. If these were placed with a full set they would move in on a third category of quality."

The babble made absolutely no sense to Hannibal but Jenny knew that signal by heart. She quickly left Hannibal's side and walked around the corner, obscuring Hannibal's view of her. She stepped over to a shelf, nonchalantly examining a model horse, ignoring two of Talbot's men sitting at the bottom of a flight of stairs. "Do you have proof?" she asked quietly.

One of them grinned at her. "We have all the proof we need."

Hannibal shifted uncomfortably, where was that girl? She'd ruin everything. Unless . . . could they have been set up by the government? It wouldn't be the first time the A-Team had fallen for the old damsel in distress routine.

Jen followed the first man up the stairs; the second had remained behind to make sure she didn't pull any stunts. She had learned that code when she'd first joined. In case of emergencies, she'd been told. She

knew every variation and every usage of the sentences. All that antique babble had been a message to her: "We have two and are moving in on a third. We will harm them." Mike, who was waiting at the bottom of the stairs had photos of Face and Murdock by the van. She was trapped unless she could outwit Pat, who was walking just ahead of her. But she couldn't abandon these people, not after all they'd done for her. Then she realized something very important, and she knew she could escape.

When they had reached the top of the stairs Pat indicated the doors lining both sides of the hall. "Which one is yours?"

He didn't know! "The door on the end," she lied. He kept walking straight ahead. She, on the other hand, shoved open the second door on her right and leapt inside, closing it behind her. She grabbed a pair of pants and pulled them on, then a southwestern-patterned pullover which clashed with the dark green of her jeans. She shoved her foot into the boot lying on the floor and began to search frantically for a second one.

Pat had realized his error and was preparing to ram the door down. Then he discovered that Jen had forgotten something very important.

She hadn't locked the door! Jenny realized in a panic, and ran to do so. At the same time Pat was trying to shove the door open from the other side. She struggled to push the door shut.

Pat had his full weight against the door, jamming his leg in to keep it ajar. "We've got you for good, Baby," he leered.

"Bite me, you weasel." She kicked at him good and hard, catching him right under the kneecap with her booted foot. She heard a yelp of pain as she slammed the door shut, locking it securely.

There was no time to hunt for her other shoe. She went out the window and onto a set of scaffolding that repairmen had left when working on the old building; she looked down. The height was dizzying. She was even higher than when they had held her prisoner. Jen took off her boot and filled it with the small tiles that had been left to repair an aging mosaic number plate. She then promptly turned the shoe upside-down so they cascaded down on to the sidewalk like a waterfall. *Please, she prayed, please God let them see this.*

Face and Murdock were just below the overhang of the balcony Jenny was on, waiting for Hannibal's signal to come in guns blazing.

Suddenly small bits of what appeared to be glass rained down upon them. "Funny," Face said, "it's not supposed to hail today." They took a few steps backwards and looked up; Jen waved frantically at them.

"This isn't part of the plan," Murdock objected.

"We're talking Hannibal here—his plans never work out the way they're supposed to," Face commented dryly.

"'Tis true, 'tis true," H.M. agreed.

"Jump," Face urged her. "We'll catch you."

"Are you insane?!" she shrieked.

"Hello!" Murdock waved cheerily.

"Oh God," she muttered, "I don't believe this."

And before she could stop to think about it, she climbed up on the edge of the scaffold and let herself fall.

She scrunched her body up into a tight ball and shut her eyes tightly, praying they wouldn't need a squeegee to get her remains up off the pavement.

"I got it!" Face yelled.

"Are you kidding?" Murdock protested indignantly. "I'm much better at this than you. I got it!"

Face covered his eyes and let out a sigh, "Come on Murdock, I called it first."

"Flip for it?" Murdock offered.

"Fine. Okay. Tails," he called as Murdock tossed a quarter into the air and caught it again. He looked at it in the palm of his hand.

"You win," he said despondently.

"Thank you," Face replied tartly, stepping forward just as Jenny fell within reach. He caught her and stumbled backwards from the force, slamming into the side of a dark blue Ford.

"Are you all right?" Jenny asked worriedly, from her seat in his lap.

"Yeah," he answered slowly, "I'm just peachy."

Murdock took Jen by the hands and helped her to her feet.

Face still hadn't moved from his spot against the car. He looked at her, rubbing his back. "Hundred and five?" he asked her.

She grinned, "No, hundred and ten. I've got big hips," she answered, patting her thigh as she said so.

Murdock put a protective arm around her. "How about you? You okay?"

"I'm fine. A little shaken from falling seven floors in one day, but otherwise I'm fine."

Face finally started to get to his feet. "What the hell were you doing on the fifth floor?"

"I'll explain later. Right now we have to warn B.A. and get Hannibal out of there. This whole thing was a setup."

Face thought a moment. "Okay, I'll help Hannibal out. Murdock, you and Jenny use my walkie-talkie to prepare B.A. Tell him to get the van over here, too." He adjusted his jacket and took his gun out of his shoulder holster and ran into the store to assist Hannibal.

In the meantime, Murdock had radioed B.A. "Don't worry man," he told Murdock. "I've got everything under control. Right?" he asked the four men tied up on the floor, with a grin that would frighten a dog.

"Come on," Murdock grabbed Jen's hand.

"B.A.'s already taken care of Talbot's goons, we're going to meet him across the street."

When Hannibal and Face came running out of the antique store, the van was revved up and ready to go. They leapt in and as the van took off, Hannibal casually tossed a grenade through one of the building's many broken windows. As the store exploded into flames Hannibal remarked dryly, "Now Mr. Evans is sixteen plates short of a complete set."

As B.A. negotiated the van through the town's streets, Hannibal swiveled his chair around to face Jen. "Do you mind telling me what happened back there?"

Jen sat cross-legged on the floor of the van. "Talbot was sending me a message through all that technobabble he was telling you. Roughly translated, he said that they had Face and Murdock hostage and they were going after B.A."

"But they didn't," Face protested.

"How was I supposed to know? Anyway, they had some photos of you guys by the van for 'proof'. I could tell they were fake, though. So I outwitted Talbot's two assistants and pulled on some clothes—" she patted Peck's knee, "for Face's sake, and used the repairman's scaffolding to get out."

"How'd you know the pictures weren't authentic?" Murdock asked her, his head resting on hands propped on his knees.

"The light was all wrong," she answered. "The sun was too bright to have been taken recently. Besides, I could see an extra arm by the van in the photo."

"Yes, but how did you know it wasn't one of his henchman's arms?" Hannibal asked.

"How many people do you know wear gigantic gold rings?" she replied with a half-smile.

Just then the sound of bullets and squealing tires attracted their attention.

Hannibal sighed, "These guys just don't know when to give up."

"Talbot always was rather thick-headed," Jenny-Beth commented.

B.A. swerved right off Main Street and up the road. There was a huge *BANG* and the van bucked violently before coming to a stop, leaning to the left.

"Oh man!" B.A. exclaimed. "They blew out one of my tires! Hannibal, I just had these put on!"

"There, there, B.A.," Hannibal comforted. "We'll get you some shiny new tires when this is all over."

Everybody piled out of the van and into the street. "Oh cripes!" Jen exclaimed. "I'm right back where I started!"

And indeed she was. As a matter of fact, the window of the room she had escaped from had a large crack in it from being slammed shut and a ladder was lying on the pavement.

"Come on!" she motioned. "We can take a shortcut behind the post office."

She led them down a handicapped ramp and around behind the large building where there was a large marsh.

"I forgot about that," she muttered.

The water was none too inviting. The lake was a pea-soup green and about the same consistency. Huge piles of discarded wood were scattered throughout. On the right side, however, was a parking lot with cars inhabiting several spaces.

"All right boys," Hannibal said. "Let's just cross through as quickly as possible."

Jen lagged behind as the other team members plunged into the murky water.

"Don't dawdle," Hannibal nagged. "Just get in

and cross through."

They were all wading through the thigh high water as if it was a field of daisies, while Jenny-Beth was cautiously stepping from one piling to another.

"Afraid to get your feet wet?" Face taunted.

"No, I just don't feel like getting a snake bite today. This place is loaded with cottonmouths."

"Not this far north," Face protested.

"Oh really?" She pushed down on the next piling hard with her foot and a chorus of angry hisses emerged.

"Oh great," Face said, slightly deflated.

Unfortunately, Jen had run out of pilings to step on, and she was still a good ten feet away from land.

"Damn," she said, clearly irritated.

"Just get in the water. Watch," Face picked up a dead frog that had been floating in the water and tossed it towards the center of the pond.

"You shouldn't have done that," she said, her voice low.

There was a fast ripple in the water and Face staggered backwards. "Ow!" He grabbed at his lower leg.

"Snakes hunt by smell, not by movement," she informed him.

"Thanks for telling me."

Jenny measured the distance between the pile she was standing on and the edge of the parking lot. She stepped back a little, then ran forward and leapt, stretching her legs into almost a complete split, then landed on the pavement. Her eyes widened in pain and she bit her lip. "Ow," she said quietly and slowly, then, "ow, ow, ow, OW!"

"Did that sting?" Murdock asked, wringing out one of his drenched pant's legs.

"Oh yeah. Yeah you could say that," she answered, quickly shifting from one foot to the other.

B.A., Face and Hannibal emerged from the brackish water.

"How's the leg?" Hannibal inquired.

"It feels like I got a tetanus shot, only the sting is lingering."

"We'd better get you to a hospital."

"I can get you a tire off one of these parked cars," Jenny offered. She scanned the staggered row of cars. "I think the Pinto's will work out best," she said to no one in particular. She strode in between two cars to get to the rear of the car. An all too familiar form rose from the crouched position behind the vehicle.

The A-Team looked up at the sound of Jenny-Beth's gasp that abruptly changed into a strangled gurgle.

Talbot stepped forward, Jen dangling from his metal arm, which had a firm grasp on her throat.

The guys immediately pulled out their guns.

"Drop them, gentlemen," Talbot ordered. He snapped his fingers and his men emerged from their hiding places, guns pointed menacingly towards the four men. "Unless," Talbot added, "you want the lady dead."

The Team quickly tossed their weapons to the ground, where they were confiscated by the gang members.

Talbot turned his attention back to the girl. "Oh, Jenny, Jenny, Jenny," he said admonishingly, "if only

you hadn't gotten a third party involved I might have let you go. Now I'm going to have to either hold you captive for the rest of your life or kill you. And, given the amount of trouble you've been, and your numerous clever escapes, I'll have to say the first option is much more appealing." He looked over at the four men. "And," he added, "I'm going to have to get rid of your little boyfriends as well."

"Hey Talbot!" Hannibal called. "Heard you had quite a bull in your china shop today."

Talbot dropped Jen abruptly on the ground. She landed with a dull thud. "You'll pay for that mistake, old man, believe me you'll pay," he promised.

"Colonel, he called you an old man," Murdock said.

"I'd call him an arrogant whelp, but I don't know how old he is; and a gentleman never asks a lady's age," Hannibal replied, true to form.

Talbot lunged at him. Jenny grabbed his arm and hauled back hard. "Talbot, Talbot don't!" she pleaded. He shook her off, and again she hit the ground. "One of them's been bit by a snake," she added desperately.

"Not a water moccasin?!" he exclaimed, recalling his own fateful encounter that had left him half-dead from poison and without an arm.

"Yes," she said, relieved she'd distracted him.

"Yes, a cottonmouth. Please," she begged, getting to her feet, "please let them go. I'll leave with you, no more escapes, I swear. I'll help with the books and do everything you say. Just please let them go."

"And if they rat on us? I can't trust you, Bethy."

She cringed at the nickname. "We can set up somewhere else. This store's gone but we can get another. We can just get on our bikes now and leave. He'll die if he doesn't get treated," she implored the man. "You have my word I won't run. You know my promises are good."

He deliberated a moment. "All right," he conceded. He put his arm around her and pulled her roughly against him. "Maybe now you and I can get to know each other better." He licked his lips.

She shuddered in disgust. Then she quickly jerked his head down and kissed him.

Murdock and Face grimaced in distaste. "Ewww," they said in unison.

Jen slowly reached down and pulled the gun out of his holster and threw it to Hannibal. "Catch!" she shouted.

"Bitch!" Talbot snarled, clawing her cheek with one hand, then swiping her with the other, sending her reeling sideways.

Hannibal fired ruthlessly at the throng. Some of Talbot's meeker followers dropped their guns and ran. B.A., Face, and Murdock took this opportunity to pick up the discarded arms and open fire on the remaining bikers, who continued to return fire.

Murdock quickly took position in front of Jen. She took one of the guns he had picked up. "Don't be so chivalrous," she laughed and began shooting.

"Jenny-Beth, you are some kind of gal!" he exclaimed.

"Thank you Murdock, I believe that's the nicest thing a page has ever said to me."

Finally it was over. All of Talbot's men had surrendered. B.A. and Face had gone after those who had run.

Talbot was just regaining consciousness after B.A. had given him a beating to remember. He was lying on the ground looking at Jen, his face a mask of betrayal. Jenny looked at him in distaste. "Why?" he asked, almost inaudibly.

"Talbot," she replied sagely, "you may be able to trust my word, but I sure can't trust yours."

Face and B.A. returned, a group of unconscious miscreants in tow.

"Hannibal, we gotta move," Face alerted him. "Those gunshots weren't ignored as much as they would be in LA. The cops are going to be here any minute." Sure enough, the wail of sirens emerged above the sound of everyday traffic.

"Go on," Jenny urged. "They'll be able to book these guys with my testimony, and on accepting stolen goods; Mr. Evans will support that. Now hurry before that venom kicks in."

"The van's all set," Murdock announced. "Let's hit the road!" He gently brushed a smear of blood off the deep gouges in Jen's cheek. "Take care of yourself, okay? No more flying leaps outta windows."

"I promise," she said with a smile. "Only stairs and elevators for me from now on."

"Jenny . . ." he started, but B.A. impatiently honked the horn.

"Come on man, the cops are coming."

"You'd better go," she said quietly.

He hopped in the van after giving her one last smile.

The police pulled in only a few minutes after the van had sped off.

"Boy are you gonna have fun explaining this," Jen said with a laugh, looking around at Talbot and his associates.

A few days later

Jenny was behind the counter of the new store where she worked when bells chimed, announcing a customer's entrance.

She was leaning down at the time, grabbing some packs of *Charlie's Angels* trading cards to restock.

"Can I help you with anything?" she asked cheerfully.

"Yes, I'm looking for a rather attractive young lady we met a few days ago—nice legs, runs around half-naked, maybe you know her?"

She looked up in surprise. "Face!" she exclaimed. "I thought you left because of all the heat."

Face walked back over to the door, giving a wave to the black van parked outside. "We decided to come back. You know, see the sights, check out the restaurants, and lo and behold you still lived here."

She gave him a grin as B.A., Hannibal, and Murdock came into the shop.

“Comic book store?” Hannibal said, looking around. “Classy.”

“Well it’s not a glamorous job like yours but I like it,” she replied. “Come to pick up your fee I suppose?”

“Money?” Face asked innocently. “I’m sure we don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Come on, I know you guys are the A-Team. Now, how much do I owe you? I have money.”

“Consider it a favor,” Hannibal replied.

“Helping out pretty girls in limited apparel for free is what we do best,” Murdock added.

“Oh come on,” she pressed, “not even something from the store? We sell T-shirts and music too you know. Just have a look around. Please?” she asked.

“Okay,” Hannibal gave in, “but that doesn’t mean we’re going to take anything.”

Murdock approached her as the other three men perused the store. “So,” he said quietly, “how are you doing?”

“Oh, I’m fine,” she replied, “just fine. I went to the doctor’s the other day. He says my cheek’ll heal just fine and so should my feet, and that I shouldn’t worry about getting any permanent scars.”

“Well that’s great,” Murdock said, genuinely happy. “So nothing bad came out of this whole ordeal.”

“Except having to say good-bye to you,” she said softly. “I mean,” she quickly amended, “all of you guys, in general.”

“All right, let me have your phone number.”

“I was only kidding,” she weakly protested.

“Do you have a piece of paper, Jenny-Beth?”

She turned around and pulled a Spiderman comic book off the rack and handed it to him. “Murdock?”

“Hmmm?”

“Please don’t call me Jenny-Beth. I hate that name.”

“Sure thing, pun’kin.” He obediently erased the “B” from where he was writing her name on the back cover so it only read “Jenny”.

“What’s your number?”

She sighed in exasperation. “867,” she dictated, “5309.”

“You’re kidding?” he asked incredulously.

“No, that’s my number.”

“Unbelievable,” he murmured.

The three official team members had taken a cassette each to placate Jenny.

“Take care of yourselves,” she told them as they left the store.

“You too,” Hannibal waved.

She turned back to Murdock. “Well, I guess this is good-bye,” she said.

“Yeah well, you take care of yourself. If you go out a window always put clothes on first, and look both ways before crossing the street.” He turned to leave.

“Wait!” she cried suddenly. “Ummm, isn’t it customary for a Knight to kiss the maiden he rescues from the evil demon?” she asked hopefully.

“Only if she’s a fair maiden,” he told her. She looked down morosely. “So I guess I’m going to have to kiss you twice as long because you’re twice as fair,” he added.

She smiled shyly at him as he stepped forward, put his arms around her and gave her the most amazing good-bye kiss of her life.

“Bye,” he said, reluctantly pulling away at the sound of the van’s engine revving up.

“Bye,” she said quietly as he ran out the door. She put her arms around herself as a form of comfort. “Good-night, sweet prince,” she whispered.



A TENDENCY TO START FIRES

by Amanda Bogardus

He kept low and quiet as he crept through the rear of the house, just as he had been instructed. Not much farther and the intruder would be upon his unwitting victims, his quest completed. He followed the faint trail of sweet smelling smoke into the wide open living room, his mind already contemplating the lavish praise he would soon receive.

Failure never even occurred to him in his over-confidence.

John "Hannibal" Smith frowned down at the playing cards in his hand, biting into the cigar clenched between his teeth in concentration. He sat perched on the very edge of the soft, white sofa rather than reclining back into a more comfortable position, determined not to let his guard down even a fraction. Through narrowed eyes the colonel's suspicious gaze did not let a single move of his competitor's go unchecked. "Never underestimate your enemy" he had once said, and he was a true believer in the wisdom of words. Especially his own.

The other merely smiled, smugly, continuing to puff away on his own stick as he waited for the older man to decide his next course of action. It didn't really matter what he decided; the blonde had him right where he wanted him: backed into a corner.

"I see your bet, and I raise you," Hannibal paused, moving a sizable portion of his poker chips to the center to the small table separating the two players, "forty."

Before he could respond, let alone mentally calculate the total pot net worth, a movement in the corner of his eye caught Face's attention. With a small grin mocking the naiveté of youth and those with inferior abilities, Templeton Peck patiently called out to the obvious arrival, "Bang. You're dead, Frankie."

The shadow from behind the couch immediately sprang to full height, seemingly oblivious to the fact that he had just blown his own cover and confirmed Peck's guess. "What are you talking about?" Santana cried furiously. "You couldn't have seen me!"

In spite of himself, Face couldn't suppress the wave of satisfaction he felt. Ruining Santana's fun felt like justifiable payback after the way the movie technician had "fixed" the breaks of his Corvette only a few weeks back. The thought of his beloved vehicle forced a sigh of regret out of the conman. *Damn, I miss that car!*

But his attention soon returned to the present as he remembered the way his commander had been watching him like a hawk earlier. *No sense losing money mooning over the past . . .* he reasoned, turning

his mind back to the game at hand. Aloud, he offered, "You were shifting. A drunken sailor could have spotted you a mile away!" before raising the bet by twenty.

"I don't shift!" Frankie protested, his dreams of a victorious "mission" shattered to pieces. More than anything he wanted to impress these guys and let them know he was up for any challenge. Just because he'd only been a child during the war in Vietnam, had never been in the military, and had never killed anyone (on purpose) didn't mean he wasn't as prepared as the others . . . right?

Unfortunately, things didn't seem to be working out the way he had anticipated.

"Sorry, kid. I picked you up in the hallway." Hannibal took a card and rearranged it amongst the others in his hand. "Why were you trying to sneak up on us anyhow?"

Dejected and deflated with disappointment, Santana threw himself down beside Hannibal with a heavy thud. "I was trying out some tactical advice Murdock gave me. He made me a Nighthawk Commando, you know! Whatever that is . . ." he added, brightening a bit.

"Looks like you need more practice."

The new arrival ignored Face's sarcastic observation and the subsequent chuckle from Hannibal. "What's that you're playing? Poker?" He stole a quick glance at the colonel's cards. "Oh, man! I didn't know you could have that many kings in this game!"

The con man groaned, throwing his cards onto the table. "I fold." An icy glare followed focused directly on Frankie, mostly to distract himself from the sight of Hannibal gathering up the pot. "Why don't you go swim some laps in the pool or something?"

"Come on, guys! If I'm going to be a member of the Team, I think I should know a little bit about what I'm doing!"

The colonel exchanged glances with his lieutenant. The rookie did have a point. If they were going to be stuck with the kid, they should at least make sure he didn't get them all killed.

"All right, Frankie, let's try testing your aim." Smith grabbed the rubber band that had been holding the deck of cards together and handed it to his student. "See that camera?" He pointed across the room toward the video equipment in the ceiling. "I want you to hit it."

"Sure, no problem, Johnny!" Like a child with his toy, Frankie couldn't stop smirking as he pulled back on the elastic and took careful aim. Rubber bands? He'd been shooting those things off since preschool! Granted, there had been that *one* incident when the strap

broke while he was stretching it back and he had been caught in the eye. Ten year old Frankie had given his mother such a scare her hysteria had them both convinced he would go blind!

The unwanted flashback rattled him. If his mother could see him now . . . He could almost imagine her preparing to slap him right side the head in parental disapproval.

With a nervous chuckle he forced himself to continue, "I thought you were going to ask me to do something difficult!" His voice cracked. Closing his eyes he let loose.

Thwack!

The missile had sailed through the air, missing its intended target (which hadn't moved a centimeter) and, instead, found a new one. The room became dead silent as B.A. Baracus froze in midstep, the object having caught him squarely in the forehead on his way to the kitchen. Dazed, the big man shifted his stance to scowl at the others. "B.A., man, I'm sorry!" the offender squeaked out, immediately assuming a defensive posture. "It was an accident! Really!" *I can't die yet! I'm too good looking! Well, not as good as Face, but still!*

To everyone's surprise, the sergeant said not a word, only growling fiercely for a moment before continuing on his quest to find milk. A few minutes later, once he had, he disappeared back into the weight room without another glance. The door shut loudly behind him.

"Well, that was odd," Hannibal commented. Face had to agree. B.A. had been so quiet lately, not that that was unusual. The sergeant had never been big on words. However, he had never been *this* withdrawn from his teammates before, opting to spend most of his time since they had arrived in Virginia in virtual solitude. Something like the rubber band incident . . . let's just say, on a normal day they would have all been toast.

While the other two were sharing worried looks, Frankie, on the other hand, was just counting his blessings that he was still in one piece. "Maybe the 'ole Santana charm is winning him over."

"Instead of making jokes, shouldn't you be training?" Peck quipped. The electronics whiz feigned a hurt expression. "I've been practicing all day! I'm as ready as they come!" Now that the danger had passed, he found his confidence back in full force.

"Well, then," Hannibal clasped him on the shoulder, giving him a serious look. "Maybe it's time for you to go over the wall."

"You mean . . . escape?"

"As long as you think you can do it."

The younger man needed no further encouragement. It was a matter of pride now, and men are known to do foolish things in the name of their egos.

Peck waited until the other had marched out of the room before he leaned toward Smith conspiratorially. "I have ten dollars that says he's back within the next five minutes."

A smile broke out across the colonel's face as he pulled out his own bill. "I give him seven. Nobody's *that* hopeless."

Four Minutes and Ten Seconds Later...

The scene on the TV screen shifted quickly, the arrival of the hideous monster from out of nowhere forcing a bloodcurdling scream out of the movie's leading lady.

"Ah, those were the days . . ." Smith reflected with a mixture of pride and sadness, watching as his evil counterpart wreaked havoc on the fictional town in the movie. Stumbling upon the old movie while channel surfing had caught the colonel up in a bough of homesickness. He suddenly missed the stifling monster suits and negotiating with arrogant directors on the set. Actually, it was the freedom of being *able* to work on any B-movie script he pined for.

Face seemed to sense as much. "Don't worry, Hannibal. Before you know it, we'll have our pardons and you'll be allowed to make all the cheesy monster movies you want."

"If we can trust Stockwell to keep his end of the bargain. I'm still not sure—"

A commotion at the front door cut Hannibal off, and the lieutenant quickly checked his watch with a wide grin. "Four minutes, thirty-five seconds," he reported gleefully.

The colonel was silently handing Peck his bill when the prisoner was escorted into the room by two large security officers.

"That wasn't fair!" Santana whined after he had been deposited unceremoniously into an overstuffed chair. "Stockwell must have added some men out there! I'm telling you, *no one* could get past those guys!"

"Hi, fellas!" H.M. Murdock strolled through the front door whistling a happy tune, totally unaware of the discussion he had just walked in on. "I was passin' through the neighborhood and I thought I'd see how everyone's doin'. Something wrong, Frankie?" he asked, noticing the other's fallen jaw.

Defeated once again, the trainee could only collect what was left of his dignity as he turned to leave the room. "I think I'll go swim a few laps in the pool," was all he said.

"Don't ask," Face answered the captain's question before he even had a chance to ask it. "How's the dog catching job going?"

"I don't do that any more," came the firm response.

Hannibal couldn't hide his surprise. It was only the day before that Murdock had come in and proudly announced his new position. Now that he noticed it, his captain did appear a tad on the gloomy side. "What happened?"

H.M. fidgeted with his hands in his pockets as if it was a topic he really didn't want to discuss. "I found out what they do to the little guys that don't get claimed at the pound." He visibly shook himself, trying to disperse some horrible image. The idea of any innocent creature being put to sleep was just too much for him.

"So you quit?" the fair-haired man prompted sympathetically. "That's too bad—"

“Not exactly.”

Smith took the cigar out of his mouth and studied his captain, a tad concerned by the triumphant gleam in the other’s eye. “What do you mean by ‘Not exactly?’”

“Well, I got all the little guys together and we went over the wall, a good old-fashion jail break!” Howlin’ Mad proclaimed proudly, his enthusiasm shining brighter than the sun outside. “You should have been there, Colonel, you would have loved it! Cats were working side by side with dogs and rabbits! Ferrets and birds! The guards didn’t stand a chance against such teamwork.”

Even after so many years, Murdock still managed to surprise Hannibal with each zany stunt he pulled. The older man listened in amusement as the pilot continued his tale of the daring rescue. In the end, it seemed the animals had broken up into separate squads to spread out and avoid the fuzz: Team A (amphibians), Team B (birds and bunnies), Team C (cats), and Team D (dogs and a lone duck.)

“Oh!” The lanky freedom fighter suddenly bolted for the door as if remembering something. “Almost forgot!”

Faceman watched him go, trying to convince himself his vague sensation of dread was unwarranted. “Murdock’s been in town for only 48 hours and already he’s turning the place on its ear.”

Within minutes he was back, along with a friend. “I brought someone for you guys to meet.” Murdock placed the small tank on their poker table, brushing aside cards and chips in the process. With a great deal of pride he announced, “Meet lil’ B.A.!”

The name certainly fit. A large goldfish stared back at them, his huge eyes bulging outside of his head as it surveyed them. A single black stripe ran down the center of its back, and the rest was covered in gold.

“So, what do you think? The little guy wanted to meet his namesake.”

Hannibal clasped the pilot on the shoulder with the same reassuring manner he had given Frankie only a short time earlier. “Captain, I think the sergeant will be honored.”

Needing no further encouragement (for there wasn’t any offered) the crazy man gathered up the fish bowl and headed off to find the big guy. Templeton, always ready to offer his opinion, spoke up, “Colonel, do you really think that was a smart idea? Sending him into the lion’s den like that?”

“Face, this whole silent treatment of B.A.’s has been going on long enough already. If anybody can get a reaction out of him, it’s Murdock.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of . . .”

For a moment the house sat in absolute silence. The eerie quiet established such a tranquil mood that the ticking of the second hand on the clock in the living room was like tiny ripples in a perfectly clear lake. The TV had been killed as the two figures held their breaths in anticipation.

Out of nowhere, a deafening scream broke the tension. Exchanging startled glances, Hannibal and Face

quickly ran for the weight room.

“Murdered—! Killed—! Whole—!” Murdock was sputtering helplessly, an empty gallon of water clutched tightly to his chest as they entered. He turned wide, horrified eyes towards them, his skin a deadly white as if he would faint at any moment. “He *swallowed* lil’ B.A.!”

Nearby, Baracus stood in stony silence, trying not to look guilty. The truth was, the minute he had completed the horrific act he had realized how cruel it was. Murdock had been shoving that damn tank in his face, demanding attention when all the sergeant wanted was to be left alone. His temper snapped and the next thing he knew the pilot was sobbing and shrieking in disbelief.

Now the big man was growing resentful of the other’s carrying-on, which added to the guilt. “Shut up, fool! It’s only a fish!” But he held no conviction in his voice.

Hannibal frowned at him in disapproval. “That’s enough, Sergeant.” Then, turning to the others, he added. “Face, why don’t you take Murdock into the other room.”

Peck had an expression on his face that clearly said “I told you so,” but rather than saying anything he merely wrapped a comforting arm around his friend, leading him away. The colonel waited a moment until the door had been closed behind them before turning back to the offender.

He thought a moment before he spoke, trying to decide exactly what to say. He rarely had to reprimand Baracus and was more than a little cautious about what course of action he should take. Obviously all the recent changes in their lifestyles had affected the big man more than he was willing to admit.

“How’d it taste?”

B.A. looked up sharply from the floor.

The white-haired man continued pleasantly, “I’m assuming you had some reason for eating Murdock’s pet. Whole *and* still breathing. Some delicacy I haven’t heard of?”

The memory of the struggling animal in his mouth made the sergeant turn a lovely shade of green. “I didn’t mean it . . .” he finally managed.

“I don’t think I’m the one you should be telling that to,” the colonel admonished gently, taking a seat on a weight machine.

The other remained silent, thinking it over. Apologize to Murdock? That was a new concept. One he wasn’t sure he could handle.

“Why don’t you tell me what it is that’s really bothering you?”

“My mama.”

Hannibal raised an eyebrow at this. “What about her?”

The sergeant glared at him. “She must be thinkin’ I’s dead! At least before I could write, now . . .”

Smith suddenly understood, cursing himself for not thinking of this sooner. Of course B.A. would be upset about his mother! They had always been so close, even during the last fifteen years while they were on the run. He hadn’t even considered the hardship this new

deal was putting on him. The rest of the Team had no family to speak of.

"I guess I just been cranky, not bein' able to let her know I's all right an' all," the larger man continued, his sadness more apparent.

"B.A.," the colonel began as gently as possible, "you know you can't contact her. If word got out—"

"Yeah, I know," he cut in suddenly, having no patience for the same arguments he had been going over himself. "Doesn't make it any easier, though." And with that, he ended the conversation, clamming up and turning his full attention to the weights.

When Hannibal finally made his way back into the living room, Face was still consoling a snuffling Murdock.

"Why? Why did this have to happen? He was so young!" the captain moaned, blowing his nose loudly on a Kleenex. "He just survived that *prison*, only to be eaten by an ugly mudsucker! It's so unfair . . ."

"There, there, Murdock." The lieutenant patted him reassuringly on the noggin. "I'm sure he didn't suffer." He looked up for help as the colonel entered.

"How you doin', Captain?" Smith asked.

Murdock gulped, struggling to regain his composure. "I'll be okay, Colonel. I have to be strong for the little guy."

"Good, 'cause I got a plan . . ." And he proceeded to detail it for them.

Frankie rubbed the towel over his wet hair as he pushed back the sliding glass door and entered the house from the patio. "Okay, guys, I really think I'm ready now."

It was when he didn't receive any response that he finally uncovered his head and took a look around.

Not a soul in sight.

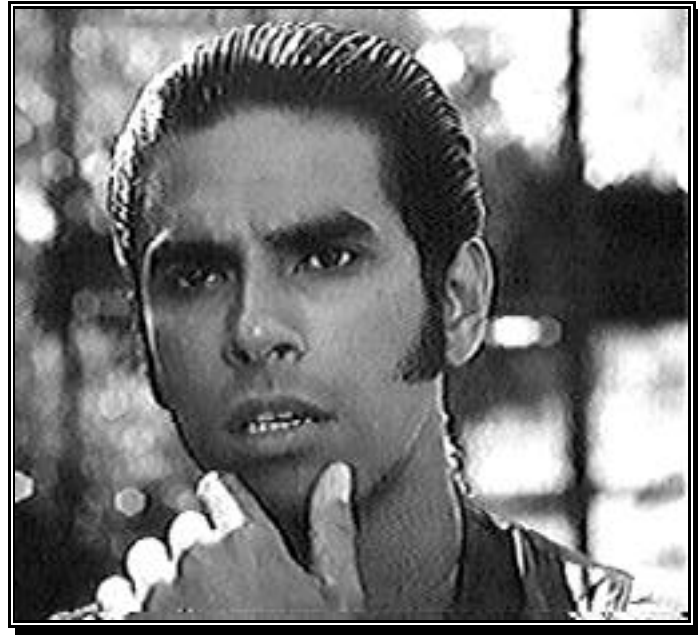
For a moment, Frankie panicked. Where was everyone? Did they escape without him?

Then he told himself there was nothing to worry about. Most likely they were just trying to teach him some exercise, playing a game with him. Hide and seek!

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," Santana called. With cautious steps, he tiptoed as quietly as possible, checking every imaginable hiding space he could think of.

He was about to search another room when a slight movement behind the floor-length window curtains caught his attention. Frankie smiled to himself as he made his way carefully toward them. The guys really didn't give him enough credit, he decided.

When he was finally a short distance away, he launched himself into the air. The resounding crash



could be heard throughout the house as curtain rod, fabric, and a rocking chair fell to the floor along with their attacker.

"Mr. Santana." Frankie quickly disentangled himself, enough for him to make out the sight of Stockwell and two men standing over him, staring down. "Might I ask why you are molesting the furniture?"

Frankie blushed as he felt a cool breeze from the ajar window. "Um, I tripped," he fibbed, quickly standing up and brushing off his clothes.

"Indeed. Perhaps you can tell me where the others have gone."

"Gone?"

Stockwell was becoming annoyed by Frankie's dumbfounded expression, not realizing it was, in fact, genuine. "I have been informed by my operatives that Colonel Smith and his men are no longer on the premises. Somehow, they managed to escape." By now, Santana was beginning to visibly squirm under Stockwell's scrutinizing glare. "The question is: where are they now?"

The swarm of bobbing heads surrounded the large man excitedly as the other three figures quietly slipped away, unnoticed. The woman who ran the local youth center told them the kids had never been so elated as when they spotted the muscular dark man emerging from the black van with its red stripe.

"Looks like your idea worked, Colonel," Peck whispered as they took in the scene from a few feet away.

"I think we've all been feeling a little homesick lately, Face." Hannibal lit another cigar before continuing. "B.A. just needed to be amongst familiar surroundings, that's all."

"Look at that mudsucker!" Murdock exclaimed happily. "He's positively glowing!"

And he was right. In the center of the miniature mob, B.A. was patiently answering each child's

question, taking the time to explain things thoroughly. The look on the little faces was one of total admiration.

As if he felt their gazes upon him, B.A. suddenly looked up at the rest of his Team. For a brief moment, his expression was unreadable and Hannibal began to wonder if perhaps his initial assumption had been incorrect. His doubt passed when a huge grin lit up B.A.'s face and he gave a slight nod of thanks.

"Is that real gold?" The tiny, disbelieving voice interrupted the connection, and soon Baracus was swallowed back up by the youngsters.

"Well," Smith said, turning back to the others with a satisfied smile, "all's well that ends well, right, guys?"

A thought struck Murdock as they continued toward the van. "Do you think we should have said something to Frankie before we left?" he asked sheepishly.

"We did him a favor putting him in charge of the house like that." Face pulled back the sliding door of their vehicle. "He should thank us!" And if the con man had his way, Santana would by the time he got through with him. He could just imagine how grateful the other would be once the lieutenant "corrected" his attitude.

Suddenly, the guys were interrupted by loud cries for help a short distance down the unfamiliar street, a panicked voice that seemed to shatter the air.

They could not ignore it. "What do you say, guys? One more time?" Hannibal asked, already jumping into the passenger's seat.

"Maybe we should grab B.A." Peck grew nervous at the sight of Murdock jumping behind the wheel.

"Come on, Lieutenant," Hannibal commanded as he slammed his door and hung out the open window. "This'll be a piece of cake."

Face complied grumpily. "I hate when he says that . . ." he muttered to himself, the back door sliding shut over his words as the van sped off.

Able 13 (or was it 14?) returned to the living room from his mission, having searched the large house for the third time for any trace of the missing team. Needless to say, he found none, making his report to his employer a difficult one. "I'm sorry, sir." He stood stiffly next to the couch, staring straight ahead rather than making eye contact with either of the two figures that remained seated. "Smith and the others appear to have made a clean escape."

"Very well." General Stockwell shifted in the plush sofa, the action as much of an indication of his irritation as he was willing to show. So, the A-Team had backed out of their deal after all. It appeared they were not as trustworthy as he had believed.

However, it did strike him as odd that they would leave Santana behind, and it did appear as if they had. Thirty minutes of interrogation had yielded no new information, besides an admitted fear of the dark. Stockwell glanced at where Frankie sat watching cartoons on the set. The general could only assume Smith was an avid believer in the old expression "You're only as strong as your weakest link."

It was then that Stockwell noticed that Able 13 had not moved from his side. "Is there something more?" he asked impatiently.

"Yes, General. It's just that . . . well . . ." It was an odd occurrence for a trained associate to be struck with such hesitation. It was almost as if he were embarrassed by the information he had. "I discovered this. In Smith's room. It was wedged into the mirror over his dresser."

Frankie pulled his attention away from the Pink Panther long enough to glance at the white piece of paper Stockwell was handed, asking curiously, "What is it?"

"It's a note from the colonel."

"Well, what does it say?"

Stockwell's glare was fierce, even through the tinted glasses. "It says, 'Went out for a breath of fresh air. Be back before the cows come home.'"

"See! I told you they're coming back." Frankie smiled confidently, reclining into the couch.

"We'll see." The general pulled a cell phone out of the inner pocket of his jacket and started to dial. "Carla," he spoke to his assistant via the phone connection a few moments later. "I need you to get in touch with Able 5 and Able 6. Find out the exact location of the 'leather tiger'."

"The leather tiger?" Frankie questioned as Stockwell was put on hold.

"Go ahead." The older man ignored him as Carla came back on the line.

"How long? Keep me apprised." When he had hung up and put the phone away again he finally afforded Santana a stern look. "It seems Mr. Murdock has been missing for some time as well."

"You don't say . . ."

Stockwell either missed the other's guilty expression or chose to ignore it. "I hope your friends are enjoying themselves, Mr. Santana," he said, standing up and making his way toward the exit, "because if they're not back in the next two hours, our deal is off, and so is their pardon."

Bullets sprayed through the air, ricocheting off the street's cement, causing them to crouch behind the parked van. "Now can we call B.A.?"

Hannibal ignored Face's desperate plea as he glanced around the back of their vehicle. So much for rescuing the victim. The guys had pulled up, with tires squealing, next to the large, gray car, systematically blocking it from its intended getaway route.

The only blemish that marred their perfect rescue attempt (for it was obvious that the four slime balls were attempting to kidnap an old man from his own vehicle) was that they had discovered too late that Stockwell's men had apparently removed the weapons from the back of the van. But the bad guys didn't know that. They kept shooting up the van as the hostage was thrown into the car.

"I'm open for suggestions," Hannibal admitted, looking to first Face, then Murdock.

The crazy man shrugged. "Play dead?"

B.A. was enjoying himself.

He looked around the small, dimly lit bar and growled menacingly at the customers. When he noticed the two nearest to him flinch, he immediately made his way over to them, smashing everything in his path. “Whatch ya lookin’ at, suckas?” he demanded, his face mere inches from theirs.

They were still shaking their heads and mumbling “nothing” when he picked the two up at the same time and threw them across to the other side of the bar. The big man turned back to the remaining patrons. “Anyone else gotta problem?”

He smiled in response to their silence. “Good.” Grabbing a pitcher of beer, he began to drink . . .

The ringing of the limousine’s phone brought General Stockwell’s mind back to reality.

It was only Carla. It always was. If it ever turned out to be anyone else, he would probably drop the phone in surprise. As it happened, she had no news on the Team, but was calling to confirm an appointment. “Is anything wrong, General?” she asked from the other end of the line, her neutral voice tinted with a touch of concern. As much as could be expected.

“No. I was just imagining what our wayward friends are up to . . .”

Back at the youth center, the real B.A. was still trying to keep up with all the children when he heard the gunfire off in the distance. A quick look around told him that both the Team and the van were gone. His buddies were in trouble without him.

Again.

“Sorry, kids, I gotta go.”

The wave of disappointed groans made him feel terrible. “Do you have to, B.A.?” one little girl, Sharice, pleaded with large eyes.

“Yeah, I do.” Why did he always feel like he was running out on the kids? “Some friends of mine are in trouble. Remember what I told ya about always bein’ there when your friends need ya?”

Three bodies lay on the ground, unmoving, when the bad guy poked his head around the van blocking their escape. “We got them!” he called triumphantly to the others and stepped with more confidence around the other side.

A second one appeared, more brutal than the first. “Then get this heap of junk out of the way so we can get out of here!” he commanded before disappearing again.

“Right!” The first one, obviously the youngest, began stepping around the figures toward the driver’s seat. When he opened the door he paused.

No keys.

He glanced back at the bodies, apprehensive about what he knew he must do. Mustering up his courage, he stepped toward the nearest, the one with the leather jacket and baseball cap, and began patting him down in search of the keys.

The lack of blood he saw suddenly struck him as odd.

Along with Murdock’s fist.

“Boo!” the captain cried, now standing over his victim. “Haven’t you ever seen a ghost?”

“How about a poltergeist?” Hannibal quipped as he and Face stood as well.

The youngster’s eyes rolled back into his head and he passed out cold.

Still on the other end of the phone, Carla considered Stockwell’s statement. “You think the A-Team is using this opportunity to run amok?”

“Oh, I’m sure of it.” The general watched as the lush Virginia landscape passed by his tinted windows. “In fact, I think we can assume that Mr. Murdock is off somewhere trying to convince people he’s playing with his imaginary friends . . .”

The fighting had begun.

In the quiet suburban street, fists were flying faster than birds. Murdock ducked, just narrowly missing the punch the larger man had thrown at him, and delivered his own to the other’s gut. It did no good. The man was B.A.-size material. He actually smiled at the captain’s attempt.

When the humor faded, he lifted Murdock up as if he weighed nothing and tossed him onto a well-manicured lawn.

“. . . Peck is, more than likely, chasing after every skirt in sight . . .”

The long, slender leg jabbed out at him, a fraction of an inch from his head as he just managed to jump aside. Face was starting to wonder why God had it out for him. Imagine his luck in getting stuck fighting the only female “bad guy”—and one who knew karate, no less! He would have switched for Murdock’s killer brute any day. For now, he just concentrated on blocking each shot and desperately brainstormed on how to subdue the woman without actually having to physically harm her.

“And the colonel?”

Stockwell smiled. “He’s sitting back enjoying a cigar.”

“But he does that even under surveillance,” Carla reminded him. “Why would he jeopardize his pardon for that?”

“To prove a point. It doesn’t matter what he does while he’s out, it’s that he *is* out. He’s letting us know that the A-Team is his team, and they always will be.”

Hannibal grimaced as the bullet barely grazed his right rib. He was lucky he had noticed the small gun his opponent had pulled out before it was too late. Not that it didn’t hurt.

Mustering up the remainder of his energy, he launched himself at the other, managing to knock the pistol away. "It's not nice to shoot people." One large cuff to the jaw and the kidnapper was down for the count. "Don't you know you're supposed to aim beside them? That way, you just scare them a little. Much more effective." The rush that had been keeping him going died down, and Hannibal carefully slid down to the ground, clutching his injured side.

At that moment, B.A. came running around the corner at full speed. It only took him a second to assess the situation before he threw himself at Murdock's huge attacker. One, two, three punches and the ogre was unconscious by the time the captain was pulling himself up off the lawn. Face immediately, gratefully, turned over his share of the fight to Baracus. The big man stood unmoving as the woman kicked at him in desperation, trying to find a weakness.

Behind her, the pilot wandered over and dangled the keys to the gray car suggestively in front of Face with a smile. The lieutenant nodded in understanding. "Hey, B.A.!" they called in unison, flinging the trunk open. In one swift motion, B.A. grabbed the girl's leg at the next opportunity and tipped her backwards into the tight compartment. The lid was unceremoniously slammed shut.

"How can I ever repay you?" the old man asked as Murdock helped him out of the car. "I was just on my way to the police station to report a crime their boss committed when they tried to run me off the road!" He watched with satisfaction as the sergeant began to tie up the criminals. "I don't know what would have happened if the four of you hadn't shown up."

Murdock smiled reassuringly. "Well, you don't have to worry about that anymore, sir. Someone must have called the police by now, so they should be on the way. All we ask is that you forget you ever saw us."

"Consider it done."

B.A. finished tying up the first kidnapper, who was just starting to come around, and moved on to the next. Without a second thought, the old man walked up to his attacker, leaned down and punched him in the head. "That'll teach you to pick on your elders!" he hollered down at the once-again unconscious body.

Face was the first to notice the colonel, sitting on the ground, his back pressed against the van for support. "Hannibal, are you all right?" He knelt down beside him, trying to get a better look at the wound.

"I'm fine, I'm fine. It's nothing serious." He cringed slightly as Peck helped him to his feet. "Just a scratch."

Whatever sarcastic comment the junior officer was planning to deliver in response was forgotten as the sound of sirens suddenly pierced the air. "B.A., Murdock, let's go!" Hannibal called over his shoulder as he was helped toward their vehicle.

"Hey, man! Whatcha do to my van!" The shrieked voice belonged to B.A. as he caught his first glimpse of the extensive damage done to the driver's side.

"Nothing a good paint job won't fix!"

Baracus took a halfhearted swing at the captain as he skipped past, his full energy not in it. He stared in

shock at the numerous bullet holes, mentally calculating the damage.

"Step on it, B.A.!" Face hollered from inside the van where the other three were already secured. "Unless you want to be looking at the view from behind bars again!"

"Just be grateful the tires didn't get shot out," Murdock added as the sergeant finally slid in behind the wheel and slammed the ignition into drive. They left behind the grateful victim holding a gun on his kidnappers until the police could arrive.

"Well, that went pretty well, don't you think?"

Hannibal's forced grin wasn't fooling anyone. "B.A., you think you can find a doctor's office around here?" Peck asked, grabbing a clean rag and pressing it against Hannibal's side.

"Sure thing."

"Now, Face, I told you, it's not that bad. Certainly not anything worth getting spotted over."

The con man ignored his commander's complaints. When it came to Smith, virtually the only father figure he had ever had, he wasn't willing to take any risks. "Our first aid kit is gone. We need some bandages and to clean up that nice little scratch you got yourself."

Murdock noticed his friend's typical over-anxious demeanor and decided to try and cheer him up. "Don't worry, Facey, things could always get worse!"

As if on cue, the carphone began to ring.

There was a moment of silence as everyone stared at the ringing object (even B.A. who, more than likely, should have been focusing on the road) with an air of distrust. "You opened your mouth, you answer it!" Face challenged the pilot.

"Technically, Hannibal's injured, so that puts you in charge," came the retort. "You answer it."

"Well in that case, I'm ordering you to."

The phone continued to ring.

"While you two continue to squabble, I'll get it." Hannibal made a grab for the phone, switching to his best southern drawl. "Hello, Bubba's Bait and Tackle, how may I help you?" There was a pause as the others waited anxiously.

B.A. swerved slightly to avoid a parked car he hadn't noticed in his preoccupation.

"Yeah, kid, what's up?" Hannibal dropped any pretense of a false identity, indicating to the others that it could only be one person.

"Frankie," B.A. groaned.

"And you said something about things not getting any worse?" Peck accused Murdock, who could only shrug helplessly.

"Bad news, guys." Hannibal proclaimed, hanging up the receiver. "That was Frankie. He said if we don't get back to the house in the next hour and a half, Stockwell's canceling our deal. We lose our pardons, and it's back to being outlaws."

No one said anything out loud, but each member couldn't help thinking that maybe that wasn't such a bad alternative. To go back to the way things used to be? There were worse options. But at the risk of losing possibly their only shot at freedom?

The van continued to roll through Virginia.

Natasha Palermo was straightening up one of the small examining rooms in her private medical practice when she became aware of the sharp ringing coming from the building's waiting room down the hall. Odd that someone was using the service bell since, as far as she knew, Teresa was already at the reception desk. Must be something serious, she reasoned and made for the doorway.

"What is all the commotion?" she asked, flabbergasted as she came upon the scene. The room was empty except for the three figures: Teresa, her faithful receptionist, who appeared to be desperately trying to control the situation, and two men she'd never seen before but appeared to be caught up in some sort of debate.

Her friend looked up in relief. "I'm sorry, Doctor, but these gentlemen—"

"Are you Dr. Palermo?" interrupted the taller of the two, an urgent expression on his face.

"Yes."

"You have to help my brother!"

"Your brother?" the doctor asked in confusion.

The second, slightly more handsome man (in her opinion), shrugged helplessly as she turned to him. There appeared to be nothing the matter with him physically, but that didn't seem to be stopping his brother from worrying.

"There's something terribly wrong! I can feel it!"

Teresa was already asking the question before Natasha could get out the words. "Feel it? What do you mean?"

"We're twins!" exclaimed the more animated of the two. "Can't you tell?" he asked, bouncing over until he was right next to his "brother".

The women stared at them in disbelief.

"Fraternal," Face clarified, watching as their expressions changed in understanding. "But we're very close."

"I'm not sure I understand what the problem is . . ." Natasha began.

"Pain! I feel pain!" Murdock screamed suddenly, clutching at his head in agony.

"Yes, well, you see, Walter here believes that he can sense when something's wrong with me," Face explained calmly, seemingly oblivious to the captain's discomfort. "It's quite remarkable. Why, when I had to have surgery for my—"

"Vasectomy," piped up the pilot helpfully.

Face glared at him. "Er, actually I was going to say appendix . . ." He smiled charmingly at the woman. "Walter felt the same pain I was going through."

"Interesting. Well, why don't I check you both out and see what we can find." The doctor gestured for them to follow her down the hall toward the examining rooms. Murdock was left in the first with explicit instructions to change into an examination gown before she closed the door and escorted Peck to the next.

"So, tell me. What is it exactly that you do for a living, Mr. . . ." Natasha asked, her voice trailing off as she glanced at the briefcase he had brought with him.

She just prayed he wasn't an insurance salesman.

"Brooks. James Brooks." The charming smile grew as he leaned against the counter. "And I work in publishing."

"Well, Mr. Brooks, why don't you change as well while I—"

"Please, call me Jim," interrupted Face. "I feel there's something I need to confess."

She looked at him skeptically. "Which is?"

Face sighed, trying hard to project an embarrassed expression. "There's really nothing wrong with me."

"Oh?"

"It's Walter I'm worried about. He gets it in his head that we share this . . . bond." He lowered his voice to a conspiratorial level. "The truth of the matter is, we're not even related."

"But, I thought . . ."

"Walter's adopted. My parents never had the heart to tell him."

"Oh, my. That's terrible!" Natasha looked toward the door. "What can I do to help?"

"Just humor him. Check him over to make sure there's nothing really the matter." The engaging smile was back. "I'd appreciate it very much."

"No, you don't understand! It's coming from right *here*."

Natasha sighed in frustration as her patient once again indicated his left temple. She had been struggling with him over the same thing for the last five minutes. "And I told you, Mr. Brooks, there's no physical reason why you should be experiencing any pain. You've suffered no trauma, you have no illnesses—there's nothing to collaborate with the symptoms you're giving me."

"Walter" opened his mouth as if he was about to protest further, when he suddenly clamped it shut. "Okay," he said much more quietly now, gathering up his clothing.

The doctor looked bewildered as her gaze swung around the tiny room. She was surprised even further when she noticed the other Brooks brother standing in the open doorway. How long had he been there watching? She had assumed he was still waiting for her in the other room.

"All set?" he asked his brother, who was still dressed in the paper gown.

Apparently, it didn't bother the captain. "I'll meet you in the car," stated Walter simply. As if nothing out of the ordinary had happened, he walked out of the room and toward the exit with his head held high.

"Is he going to be all right?" was all she could think to ask.

"Oh, sure. He just needs to vent some job-related stress from time to time," Face assured her, already making a hasty retreat of his own. "He'll be fine."

"What does he do?"

"He's a postal worker."

Hannibal glanced at his watch as his lieutenant

hopped into the van. "You're getting slow, Face."

Peck grunted as B.A. pulled away from the corner and out into the street. "Do you want things done fast or right?" He placed the briefcase across his lap and popped the lid, exposing an assortment of medical supplies. "Perfection takes time."

"That pretty doctor had nothin' to do with it at all," added Murdock in support.

"Ah . . . the truth is revealed." Hannibal smiled knowingly as Face glared at H.M. in total exasperation.

The sergeant behind the wheel turned onto a highway, happening to catch a glimpse in the rearview mirror. "Fool! Whatch you doin' dressed like that?" he demanded of Murdock who sat in the back with the other two.

The pilot looked down at himself, seeing nothing inappropriate with the paper examining gown he still wore. "The doctor told me to put it on."

"Murdock," Face broke into the conversation, more composed, "why didn't you change back before we left?"

"I don't know. It's comfortable. Reminds me of the V.A." The brown eyes turned puppy dog sad. "I miss that place sometimes."

"Now I know that sucka's crazy."

Hannibal patted his captain's shoulder reassuringly before turning his attention to the driver. "B.A., why don't you pull off at this rest area."

The big man followed the colonel's suggestion, bringing the van to a halt in a quiet, shady area with its own abandoned picnic table and grill. The guys all climbed out, Hannibal with a minimal amount of help, refusing anything more than a hand down the step.

"Well, why don't you have a seat," Peck said to his commander, patting the tabletop, "and let me get started on that wound of yours."

For a few minutes, the lieutenant worked in silence, cleaning the scratch and bandaging it up while Hannibal idly smoked a cigar. B.A. passed the time examining the beat up van and Murdock, having first changed, appeared to be snoozing under a tree close by.

"Forty-five minutes."

Face thought for a moment that he had spoken his thoughts aloud until he realized Hannibal had actually been the one to break the silence.

"You're thinking about it too." It wasn't a question.

Hannibal nodded anyway, lost in thought. "We did make a promise . . ."

"Yes, but Stockwell's the one threatening to go back on his end of the deal," reasoned the younger man. He tore off the last strip of adhesive tape and stepped back to examine his work. "No more suicide missions."

"No more surveillance."

A slow grin spread across Templeton's features. "Adios, Frankie."

Hannibal found himself smiling for a moment as he slipped his shirt back on that had been removed during Face's medical ministrations. By the time he was done buttoning it he was more serious. "There's no chance we'd ever see those pardons."

Silence reigned again as they both mentally

weighed the pros and cons. The same arguments they had first made when the general had appeared with his offer.

And one on which Hannibal knew they could never make a definite decision.

"You got a quarter?" he asked Face suddenly.

Peck dug in his pocket before handing over the change.

"Heads we go back, tails we head out of town."

The silver object flew up into the air, continuously flipping on its course until gravity decided it had had enough and reversed its direction. Hannibal caught it in one hand and covered it protectively with the other.

Slowly, he pulled the top hand away and forced a peek. Face looked over his shoulder.

The younger man's expression remained unreadable. "Two out of three?"

Hannibal shook his head, jumping off the table he had been sitting on and wincing as the injured side made itself known. "Come on. Let's grab Murdock and B.A. and see what they think."

Frankie was pacing as he had never paced before. A very distinct line was beginning to appear on the living room carpet as he continued to march from the front door to the back hall and vice versa. He worried that the guys hadn't taken his warning seriously, Hannibal having hung up on him before he could get any information out of him. He worried that they wouldn't make it back in time.

Most of all, he worried that he would be left behind at Stockwell's mercy.

"What have you got for me, Mr. Santana?"

Speak of the devil, thought Frankie as he looked up to find the general making his entrance into the house. "Ah, General! How nice to see you again . . . so soon."

"Quit stalling, Santana, are they here or not?"

"Well, I . . . uh . . ."

It appeared to Stockwell that if he wanted to find anything out he would not be getting it from Santana. Pushing past him, the general headed directly for Colonel Smith's room.

When he threw open the door he narrowly missed being hit in the head by an air-born dart. "Oh hi, Stockwell." Hannibal grinned at him from the bed where he lay, already aiming yet another missile at the board. "Care for a game?"

"I think we've had enough of those for one day, Colonel," Stockwell said shortly, turning to open another door across the hall.

Peck looked up from the book he had been reading and smiled smugly.

"General, what brings you by?" He tried the next room and spotted B.A. lifting dumbbells, scowling up at him.

"And Mr. Murdock?" Stockwell demanded, finding himself once again in the colonel's room.

His answer was the sound of a flushing toilet. The captain appeared a moment later, wiping his hands on a towel as he exited the bathroom. "I see." Stockwell knew when he had been beaten. "Make sure you men

are all rested up for tomorrow,” he said simply, trying to save as much composure as possible, “I have a mission scheduled for you and I don’t want your little . . . excursion today interfering.” With that, he turned on his heel and left, passing Frankie on the way.

“Hey, all right! You guys made it back!” cheered Santana as B.A., Murdock, and Face joined him to stand outside Hannibal’s open doorway. “I was starting to worry!”

“Actually, Frankie, we were out getting something for you.”

He looked at Peck skeptically. “Really?”

“See this?” The lieutenant asked, holding up the scrap of paper the doctor had written her telephone number on for him. “This is called motivation.”

Santana stared at him blankly, uncomprehending.

Peck continued, “I’ll give you this phone number,” he snatched it away before the other could take it, “after you’re able to make it off the property.” Face smiled as they watched Frankie scurry down the hall in determination. “That should take care of him for a while.” He put the scrap of paper securely back in his pocket.

“Well, guys,” Hannibal managed to make it to his feet with only the slightest discomfort from his protesting side. “Looks like this is home . . . at least for a while.”

“As long as I ain’t sharin’ a room with this fool,” B.A. jerked his thumb toward Murdock, “I can live with it.”

“But, B.A., what about all the things you said in the park?”

The big man stared at him, mortified. “Whatcha talkin’ about, sucka? I didn’t say nothin’!”

“You apologized for swallowing lil’ B.A.!” the pilot continued, to the obvious amusement of the other two.

“Did not!”

“Sure you did! Don’t you remember? Said you felt real bad about the whole thing and were going to get me a new fish—”

Murdock’s prattle was cut off as B.A. took a swipe at him, causing him to duck. The pilot grinned and announced, “It’s good to have the old mudsucker back!” before he was subsequently chased out into the backyard by the large black man.

“Colonel?” Face called, noticing that Hannibal had turned and was closely examining something near his dresser mirror.

Ever so carefully, the other pulled out the smallest of hidden cameras from the wall. He shook his head. He had to admit that Stockwell never gave up.

“Goodnight, General,” Smith said to the object before snapping the cord, deactivating the device.

In his limo, Stockwell watched as the small monitoring screen fell blank. The corners of his mouth turned upward into a smile. “Goodnight, Colonel Smith. I’ll see you in the morning.”



What's In A Name?

by Irene Snyder Schwarting

Hunt Stockwell sifted through the piles of documents on his desk with considerably more interest than he had expected to have. What had begun as a fairly routine personnel investigation had turned into an intriguing puzzle, and now that the pieces were coming together he was finding that they told a fascinating story.

Templeton Peck's military file ended with his arrest, conviction and execution for murder of his commanding officer. Stockwell put those documents aside; he knew that story by heart. The gaps in the rest of the file were much more interesting. The file began with young Peck's enlistment in ROTC as a student in California in 1967, then skipped to his transfer to the combat zone in Da Nang in 1968. Less than three months after the transfer, the file noted that he received a purple heart and commendation for meritorious conduct as a junior lieutenant under the command of one John "Hannibal" Smith.

Stockwell raised an eyebrow. Even during the peak of the war, the army was not in the habit of making soldiers straight out of basic training into Green Beret lieutenants. The stellar rise of the young Lieutenant Peck was a remarkable demonstration of his talents at beating the system. The extraordinary circumstances surrounding Peck's transfer were justification by themselves for Smith's keeping the young man under his wing. It had taken Stockwell inordinate amounts of effort to uncover and interpret the clever subterfuge Peck had evidently worked out to convince his C.O. to circumvent all sorts of standard procedures to get him out of one unit and into another.

What puzzled Stockwell, however, was that there was no explanation for *why* young Peck had arranged his own transfer out of the administrative pool and into an elite combat unit. He was a competent clerk, and staying at H.Q. was as safe a place as any in the combat zone. His childhood records from the orphanage and schools in Los Angeles described him as a cautious, somewhat conservative young man, with a healthy sense of self-preservation and a constant weather-eye out for trouble. Why would such a character suddenly get himself transferred to a unit with one of the highest mortality rates in the war?

Stockwell disliked inconsistencies, and it irritated him that he was unable to explain this one. He pulled out the documents that had taken him the longest to find, and tried to figure out how, and why, Peck had managed his transfer to Smith's unit.

Corporal T. Peck stood at attention beside his desk in H.Q. as the ranking officers entered. "At ease, corporal." Colonel Fulbright had little interest in the doings of junior noncoms. Peck recognized the other man with the colonel immediately: Colonel Samuel

Morrison, C.O. of the Special Forces unit Peck was determined to get into. He hadn't enlisted—scammed the transfer to Da Nang, just to shuffle papers around. He wanted to get into the action, anything, to get Leslie off his mind. Besides, working at H.Q., although it gave him a big edge, wasn't quite enough.

Corporal Peck was tired of saluting everybody who walked by. He needed a commission, he needed a transfer, and he needed combat experience. Morrison was the way to get all three. Peck returned to his work, filling out requisitions with half his attention while he eavesdropped shamelessly on the officers' conversation. The colonel was apparently relating some story regarding his reckless youth.

"So I never did find out what became of her," he told Fulbright as he poured himself a cup of coffee. "I didn't know what to do at first, and then when I finally decided to bite the bullet and tell her what happened to my brother, she hauled off and slapped me one. Told me she could care less what happened to him, and I had no business bothering her, never to come near her again. Never did see her again."

He chuckled at the reminiscence, and Fulbright also laughed politely. Peck thought he sounded as if someone was strangling him. "So what became of the baby, Sam? Did your brother ever find out?"

"No, never did. Katherine denied anything had happened. Told me she had no kids, and acted like she was insulted I'd asked, as if I hadn't seen her eight months preggers. Never did find out what became of the kid. Reckon she gave it up for adoption, that was about the only thing a respectable girl could do in those days. Somewhere in California there's probably a little Morrison boy running around."

"Or girl."

"Could be. I never tried to find out. Enough bastards in my family already, eh, Bull?" He gave Fulbright a comradely slap on the back. "No, though now I wish I had. Kid's, what, eighteen by now? Hell, for all I know he could have been drafted already."

"Could be."

That was the edge Corporal Peck needed. Shortly thereafter, an "original" birth certificate was "discovered" by some unspecified father at the Angel's Guardian orphanage, claiming that Peck's birth name was actually "Holmes Morrison". The record was still not entirely clear, but the files acknowledging the revision to the corporal's records were all officially approved and signed. Although he continued to go by the same name by which he had been known ever since entering the orphanage at the age of five, Peck had apparently played on the colonel's avuncular affection enough to arrange a transfer out of the clerk pool into one of the most elite combat units in Vietnam, and a battlefield commission

to lieutenant all at the tender age of eighteen.

Stockwell shuffled through the pieces, noting with admiration the thoroughness with which Peck, working long-distance from Vietnam, was able to recreate his own history and persona. The story held up for several months, long enough for Peck to receive his commission and garner significant respect as Smith's supply and intelligence officer. He was already well decorated by the time the military completed its investigation into the orphanage records and discovered that the real Holmes Morrison, a boy a few years older than Peck, died of polio at the age of thirteen. The discovery of the subterfuge did not, however, interfere with the stellar career of Lieutenant Peck.

"There seems to be some confusion in your records, nephew Peck," Morrison said casually.

Peck looked up from the drinks he was pouring. He, Smith, and Morrison were relaxing in the colonel's office, celebrating the successful completion of the latest mission. "Confusion, sir?"

"Yes . . . you know how the army hates to have its records be incomplete, so they've been working on untangling your name mixup. Ah, thank you." He took an appreciative sip from his drink.

"Well, that's great," Peck said. "I have to say, it surprised me that the orphanage had such sloppy record-keeping. You would think they would be more careful about keeping track of the kids." He winced as he shifted his weight, carefully lifting his bandaged leg to rest it on an empty chair.

"Doing okay, there, Lieutenant? That's quite a hole in your knee," Morrison asked solicitously.

"Oh, it's fine, sir. That Cong general got off one lucky shot before we could take him down. All in the line of duty." Peck's expression was positively angelic.

"I've already sent in the paperwork on that one, you'll be getting your Purple Heart soon," Morrison assured him. "Whatever your name might be."

"So what's the mixup?" Smith asked. He was sprawled comfortably across the sofa, apparently concentrating on his cigar, but he watched his lieutenant carefully. He had not missed the guilty expression that flashed across the young man's face when Morrison mentioned the army's investigation.

"Well, it seems that not only is there a birth certificate for my brother's son, but they've also discovered a death certificate. Holmes Morrison died seven years ago, at the age of thirteen, of polio. You seem to have made a remarkable recovery." He looked at Peck expectantly.

Peck grinned weakly. "Er . . . well, sir . . . I don't know what to say."

"Puzzling, isn't it? I'm not really asking you to explain it," the colonel assured the young man. "I dare say you were a bit young to be that conniving at the time, eh? Still, it's interesting."

"Probably just another mixup in the orphanage records," Smith drawled lazily. "Hell, it was, what, fifteen, twenty years ago? They're probably still sifting through the old records. I'm sure it will all become clear soon enough, though. Probably your name was

something similar, and somebody misread somebody else's handwriting, or something like that."

"Too bad, though," Morrison mused, "I was hoping to introduce you to the family next time we get some leave." At that moment, the phone rang. "Damn, that'll be new orders coming in. Will you gentlemen excuse me?"

Smith and Peck made their exit quickly, the younger man limping heavily on his crutches. As they headed back to the jeep, Smith looked at his lieutenant shrewdly. "You're good, kid, really good. No way this last mission coulda come off if you hadn't pulled some sharp moves back there outside of Que Sahn." He paused significantly, but Peck was apparently concentrating on maneuvering up the stairs on crutches and did not respond. "It would be really awkward to have you get transferred to the stockade on forgery grounds, wouldn't it?"

Now Peck did look up, startled. "I don't follow you, Hannibal."

Hannibal continued smoothly. "If you're gonna pull a stunt like that 'Holmes Morrison' routine, you can't leave any loose ends behind. The army's just too good at following paper trails. You're good, but you still need to work on covering your tracks if you're gonna stay in my unit."

"Huh?"

Hannibal grinned wickedly. "And don't try that wide-eyed innocence on me, not ever. If we're gonna work together, you better figure that out right now. I'll help you get outta this one, but you don't ever try to scam me. You're not *that* good, kid."

The orphanage must have been run by Jesuits, Stockwell decided dryly, looking at the convoluted paper trail his research had uncovered. Between the genuine mixup regarding young Peck's arrival at the orphanage, and the further confusion generated when Peck changed his name temporarily to Morrison, and the fact that the priests and sisters seemed to be unwilling on principle to answer direct questions on the children under their care, it had taken his agents weeks to untangle the situation. The army, apparently, had eventually given up on the question. The critical documents were a "corrected" birth certificate demonstrating that Peck was originally named "Morrison Holmes", and an explanatory letter sent by one Father McGill to Colonel Morrison apologizing for the mixup with the late Holmes Morrison.

There was some further questioning into the matter, but it appeared the investigation had eventually been terminated, possibly by Smith's influence. Certainly Smith's scrawled signature was on all the later documents. As far as the Army was concerned, Templeton Peck he was when he enlisted, and Templeton Peck he remained. Whether that was the name he was born with was still unclear, but Stockwell's work had successfully uncovered that he was originally admitted to the orphanage under that name. Father McGill's records described the boy's arrival: five years old, dirty and disheveled, clutching a children's book like a talisman. He had been brought to the orphanage by

what McGill described as a young “professional woman” named Kit.

“Where are we going?”

“You’re going to a place that will keep you outta trouble, let you grow up safe.”

He pulled away from her, suddenly frightened.

“You turning me in to the cops, Kit?”

“No. I promise, no cops. These people will take care of you. No cops.”

“Then who?”

Kit hesitated. “It’s like a big family. Lots of fathers, sisters, a mother, whole bunch of other kids to play with. All the food you want to eat, your own bed, clean clothes.”

The boy’s stomach was growling. “I’m hungry now. How much further is it?”

Kit looked up at the sign above the massive stone arch. “Sacred Heart Orphanage.” “Right here. Now listen, you just go on up there and knock. Tell them you ain’t got no parents, and they’ll take care of you.”

“Aren’t you coming with me?”

Kit hesitated. “All right. Come on.”

The boy held her hand as she led him up the walk and rapped on the door. As the echoes of the knock faded into the building, a whiff of glorious food smells came to his hungry nose. After a moment, the door opened and a tall man in a black robe came out. “Yes? Can I help you?” His voice was so kindly that it broke the dam and the tears began to trickle down the boy’s dirty cheeks.

“This kid, he ain’t got no parents,” Kit said.

“And he’s got no place to live, and nothin’ to eat.”

“He is your son?” the priest asked calmly.

Kit shook her head firmly. “Nah, he ain’t mine. I said, he got no parents. He’s an orphan, okay? And this is an orphanage, right? You guys gotta feed him, take care of him. That’s your job.”

The boy looked up at her with tears in his eyes.

“Kit, don’t leave me—”

“It’ll be okay, kid. They’ll take care of you here. Give you a better life than the streets, I promise.” She glared at the priest, daring him to disagree.

The priest nodded. “We will. Are you sure he—”

Look, Father, I gotta get back to work. Just . . . just make sure he’s okay. He’s a good kid.” Kit leaned down, gave the boy a hasty hug and a kiss, then hurried away. As the click-clack of her heels faded into the distance, Father David McGill reached out and took the boy’s hand. “What’s your name, son?”

The boy drew himself to his full height, snuffling back sobs.

“Templeton. Templeton Peck.” He clutched his tattered book to his chest.

“Very well. I will find out what you wish to know. In the meantime, concentrate on the mission.” Stockwell put the phone down irritably. He neither knew nor cared whether A.J. Bancroft was telling the truth. If it were anyone else, he would simply have made an arbitrary decision: yes, Bancroft is Peck’s

father, or no, he is not, and gotten back to more serious concerns. It was risky, however, to lie to Murdock. The crazy pilot had a disturbing talent for picking up on deceptions. The risk that he would destroy Bancroft’s diary if he thought Stockwell was being dishonest was too high. And if he didn’t destroy it, but read it or the A-Team chose to keep it to themselves . . . well, that wouldn’t do at all.

It shouldn’t take long to find out the true answer, given that he had the starting point Bancroft provided. Stockwell already had the birth certificate noting the entry into the world of young Richard Bancroft, first-born son of A.J. and Samantha. And the documentation from the priest on the boy who called himself Templeton Peck was consistent: hair and eyes matched, and about the right age. But there were thousands of boys who fit the description, and no more reason to think Templeton was Richard than any other boy. Why did Bancroft think so? The key was the mother, Stockwell decided. Find the mother, and you find the son.

With a few keystrokes on his computer and some curt instructions to his assistant, Stockwell started his investigation into the murky early history of Templeton Peck. Although the army had never been able to complete the child Peck’s records to account for the interval prior to his arrival at the orphanage, Stockwell had considerably more resources at his command. The marriage licence, the birth certificate, and the divorce documents were easy to find. Richard Bancroft made his appearance some four months after his parents were married, Stockwell noticed, leaving him with little doubt about the motivation for the wedding. Less than a year later, A.J. filed for divorce, leaving Samantha and little Richard alone. Samantha resumed her maiden name, but did not go back to her family in Alabama—instead she moved to Los Angeles.

Sam Brenner stalked from one end of the bus terminal to the other, torn between alternatives. Others in the terminal stayed away from the slender young woman with the suitcase in one hand and the infant boy on her hip. One man had already been verbally eviscerated when he dared to interrupt her thoughts; the other passengers in the terminal feared the next assault might not be verbal. Sam, deep in her thoughts, didn’t notice.

At one level it was an easy decision, she knew. She had no friends, no money, no home, and a baby to feed. The most sensible thing to do was go back to Barlow Creek and throw herself on Allen’s mercy. Though she hadn’t spoken to her brother in five years, he wouldn’t turn her away, would he? He and Beth would be willing to put her up, for a while. Though their house wasn’t the biggest, and they had little Raymond already, who was keeping their hands full, so they probably would not appreciate another two mouths to feed. It would be humiliating to go back to Barlow Creek hat in hand, but was it worth it? Could she swallow her pride that much?

Her grip on the baby tightened as she pictured Allen’s response to her return, and he began to cry. “Shush, shush, Alvin,” she soothed him, slowing her furious pace to a gentle, rocking stroll. The name still

felt strange in her mouth, but she was determined to forget everything to do with that bastard ex-husband. She'd thrown his money at him, left behind everything he'd given her. Even his name. And no child of hers was going to bear his name either, or his father's name. She'd never liked "Richard" as a name anyway. And A.J.'s parents had never forgiven her for marrying their son, ruining his prospects. Who needed them? She and Alvin were going to do just fine by themselves. They didn't need Allen and Beth, or A.J., or anybody. Couldn't trust anybody but herself; didn't need anybody but herself. And she certainly didn't need Barlow Creek. She would make a new life for herself, with Alvin. She was going to be fine.

With sudden determination she hurried over to the ticket counter. "One ticket for Los Angeles, please."

Stockwell looked thoughtfully at the faded, tattered bus tickets. Samantha and Alvin Brenner disappeared shortly after they moved to L.A., but Stockwell's agents had included a possible alias, Sam Brennan. Comparing pictures and handwriting, Stockwell decided that the Brenner woman had legally changed her name to Brennan, possibly to avoid being tracked either by her family or her ex-husband. Ms. Brennan had a strong stubborn streak which kept her from returning home, although her situation in California declined rapidly.

Proud, stubborn, and determined to maintain her independence at a time when a single woman was limited in the ways she could support herself and a child, she eventually became a streetwalker. She and the baby remained in California, and, as far as anyone could determine, she never returned to or even contacted the rest of her family in Barlow Creek. The L.A. police knew her well, however, as she rapidly acquired a stack of arrest warrants and convictions for various petty crimes: mostly shoplifting, pickpocketing and solicitation, under a variety of aliases. Ms. Brennan changed identities like other women changed clothes.

"Like mother, like son," Stockwell mused aloud. He leafed through the most recent documents to arrive on his overheating fax machine. Sam Brennan's file terminated abruptly, as if she had dropped off the face of the earth, and there were no mentions of a child. Stockwell leafed through the records of other street residents from the neighborhood, looking for some clue as to what became of Sam, or any mention of a son. There were two other streetwalkers who were booked fairly regularly from that neighborhood, and a man described as "sales manager" who was probably their pimp. Stockwell wondered if those individuals knew what had become of Samantha, or of her son.

Alvin carefully dumped the last of the cereal into his bowl. He'd run out of milk the day before and was getting very tired of cereal, but Mommy hadn't come home yet to fix anything different. He was sick of cereal, and bored, and becoming scared, because Mommy was never gone so long. He wanted to go outside and play, but Mommy had yelled at him so much last

time he went out when she wasn't home that he was afraid to. He didn't like it when she yelled. "Don't you ever go out with somebody you don't know!" she'd shouted when all he did was go to the store with Mr. Wong who lived downstairs. "You can't trust him! Don't you ever go out with strangers! Don't you know how much he could hurt you?"

And it was worse when she cried, and held him so tightly he couldn't breathe. "You can't ever trust other people, Alvie," she whispered. "Don't believe what they tell you. Everybody in the world wants something from you, and you can't let them take advantage of you. Don't ever trust anything but your own feelings. Your heart will tell you what's right."

Alvin didn't understand what she was talking about, but he promised anyway. "I won't, Mommy." Then she hugged him and then they sat down and she read to him from his favorite book.

But now he was lonely and bored. And Mommy still wasn't home. And there wasn't any cereal left. Finally, Alvin combed his hair (always look neat, it makes people like you, Mommy said) and went out of the apartment to find her. Under his arm he carried his new book, *Charlotte's Web*, so Mommy could read it to him.

He went down the street in the direction Mommy always went when she got dressed up pretty to go to work. When he got to the corner he looked both ways before he crossed the street—a handsome young boy, tall for his five years, with almost white blond hair and bright blue eyes, in second-hand clothes and sneakers that already had holes in the toes. Farther down the street, he saw some women in the same sort of pretty clothes Mommy wore, and went to ask them if they knew where she was.

"Please ma'am," he asked the first lady, "do you know where my Mommy is?"

Kit Chavez (already two years on the streets, and almost old enough to vote) looked down at the kid with some amusement. "What're you doin' downtown, kid?"

"I'm looking for my Mommy," Alvin said seriously. "She didn't come home and I ran out of cereal."

Marissa Sweetheart (her name was really Schawet-ski, but nobody in L.A. knew that) saw the kid and came wandering over. "What's up, Kit?"

"Kid's looking for his mom." Kit knelt down, awkward in her high boots, to look Alvin in the eye. "What's your name, kid?"

"Alvin."

"Hey, that must be Sam's kid," Marissa said, surprised.

"Damn, I didn't know he was so old."

"Me neither." Kit got to her feet and lowered her voice, not intending her words for the kid. "What's he gonna do? Sam ain't gonna come back home, that's for sure."

"Poor kid. Man, that's rough. Nobody knew."

"What's he gonna do? We can't leave him here."

"You wanna take him home? You ain't gonna get many customers you got a kid in the house."

"Geez, I don't know." Kit looked around.

"Maybe we should take him to the cops."

Alvin looked up, frightened. Cops were bad people. The last time Mommy was gone, the cops took her away and wouldn't let her come home for hours and hours. He began to sidle away from the ladies.

"Hey, where you goin', kid?" Kit asked.

"I don't want to go to the cops," Alvin said, his chin coming up and a stubborn look coming into his eyes. "I want my Mommy."

Han Wong came by at that moment. "Ladies, ladies, we're supposed to be earning money here, not babysitting."

"Han, this is Sam's kid," Kit explained.

"I know." Wong shrugged and turned to go.

"Han, wait!" Kit knelt down to Alvin's level again. "Al, you stay right here, okay? We'll be right back." Leaving Alvin alone, she and Marissa chased Wong down the block. "What are we supposed to do with this kid?"

"I don't know. I don't care. Not my problem. But if you two don't get back to work, you will be my problem. Kaphish?"

Slapping them both on the ass, he turned on his heel and set out on his own business.

"Goddamn bastard," Kit snarled. "Somebody get me a pimp with a heart."

Marissa laughed dryly. "If that ain't a contradiction in terms . . . hey, look." She pointed. Alvin, bored, had picked up three pebbles from the street and was tossing them into the air in a high-arcing circle. "The kid can juggle."

A nicely dressed couple passed by, noses in the air as they passed the two prostitutes. As they neared the kid, however, they both smiled. The man reached into his pocket and tossed a few coins to the kid. Without missing a throw, Alvin caught the coins and replaced the rocks with them. The flying quarters glittered in the early-evening lamplight.

Kit nudged Marissa. "D'you see that? Hey, this kid might be a good draw."

So if Samantha's son didn't disappear along with his mother, might he have remained in the neighborhood? Stockwell ordered a search of the child-custody records from that time. Sure enough, police files contained a picture of a boy of approximately the right age being taken during a general raid on the neighborhood, a few months after the last official mention of Samantha. Stockwell looked at the faded brown photograph, taken when the boy was arrested. His face was dirty, his fair hair long and tangled, and even so young there was a wary expression in his eyes. Stockwell compared the photo to one taken at Peck's arrest. The expression was the same.

The boy gave his name as "Alvin". Someone had scrawled a second name in, with the note that it was the last name suggested by one of the prostitutes. Stockwell squinted at the faded, almost illegible documents. It was a short word, and he could almost swear that the name began with "F", but a later transcription by a more decorous police clerk noted that the boy's full name was Alvin Peck. Stockwell looked back and forth between the documents, slightly amused. It could begin

with "P", he supposed.

Evidently the name Kit Chavez had originally provided for the boy was deemed inappropriate by police clerks of the mid-50s. Nowadays, Stockwell reflected, the boy would probably have been stuck with Chavez's recommendation.

He noticed with dry humor the arresting officer's remarks that they could not charge him with truancy because he was too young to be in school. For lack of other disposition, the boy was transferred to a foster home, in which he remained . . . Stockwell checked a different pile of records . . . almost thirty-six hours.

Regular bedtimes did not seem to appeal to him, and he disliked his foster parents. He ran away the day after arriving at the home, after first emptying his foster father's wallet, and returned to the streets.

For some time after departing the foster home, the child seemed to disappear from official notice. The next documentation he was able to find was another police report, this time for pickpocketing. He was not sentenced, however. For some reason that Stockwell could not discern, his victim declined to press charges, and the boy was released, apparently on his own five-year-old recognizance. Stockwell looked back thoughtfully at the last picture in the file. The intervening six months had not been kind to the boy. He had grown taller, but thinner, and his eyes were ominously large in his thin face. Still, there was a definite charm to his cherubic expression, a wide-eyed innocence that, Stockwell could imagine, instantly inspired trust. His clothes were tattered and dirty, but he still clutched his battered copy of *Charlotte's Web* as if his life depended on it.

So far the evidence was all consistent, but there was still no concrete connection between Alvin Brenner/Peck and Templeton Peck. How did the young pickpocket become the con artist? Stockwell assigned a pair of agents to investigate the other possible associates of the boy's childhood, the prostitutes Kit Chavez and Marissa Sweetheart, and the pimp Wong. In the meantime, there were more pressing affairs demanding his attention. Bancroft's diaries were going to cause a conflagration in Washington, and Stockwell needed to prepare the ground so as best to take advantage of it.

Only hours later, Murdock called back. "He's dead, Stockwell."

"To whom do you refer, Captain?"

"A.J., of course. Coming here to see Ellen and Face was his last request."

"Do you have the diary?"

"Hannibal has it. You knew he was dying, didn't you, Stockwell?"

Stockwell did not bother to respond to the obvious. "Very well. Return to Washington. I will meet you and Colonel Smith at 1300 hours to receive the diary."

"No, you won't, Stockwell. You owe me and Face some information first, remember? I think we'll just hold onto this precious book for a while longer."



“Are you blackmailing me, Captain Murdock?”

“Not at all, General. This is a simple business transaction. You give us the information, we’ll give you the diary.”

Stockwell glanced at the clock. “It takes time to conduct an investigation of this nature, Captain, and I need that information this afternoon.”

“Yes, I seem to recall that there’s a congressional subcommittee meeting today that this diary might bear on. Pity about that.” Murdock’s tone was carelessly disinterested.

The A-Team had read Bancroft’s diary. That was unfortunate, but not surprising. Stockwell revised his policy accordingly. “Don’t play games with me, Murdock. I do not intend to allow Edwards to be appointed.”

“This is not a game, General!” Murdock’s voice held a deadly rationality that Stockwell knew better than to bluff against. “Ellen has already agreed to take the diary to Washington this afternoon and present it to the committee. That should suffice to prevent the appointment from going through. As soon as you get the information for Face, we’ll give you the rest of it.”

“Very well. I am running down the last few leads now. I will call you this evening with the answer.”

Stockwell returned from the committee meeting feeling extremely pleased. Ellen Bancroft’s presentation would certainly stall matters long enough for him to get the rest of the diary and put it to use. And by taking the credit for delivering her father’s diary, she drew attention away from him and the A-Team, which was precisely what he had intended.

Stockwell’s agents had continued to investigate leads from the boy’s childhood, and the final records finally came in, an interview with one Katrina Wilkinson . . . nee’ Kit Chavez. Mrs. Wilkinson was reluctant to be interviewed, the investigating agent had remarked. A few brief notes described her escape from the streets. She married one of her customers, who eventually became a successful broker in LA. She

finished school, had two kids, took up tennis and bridge, and became a pillar of society. Stockwell flipped through the transcript of the interview impatiently, and finally found where she described the boy Alvin. She confirmed that he was the son of Samantha Brennan, and said definitively that Sam had been killed. It was not an uncommon situation, even then. Sam had simply taken the wrong customer to an alley near her regular beat, and had never returned home. Since there was no one to report her missing, no investigation into her disappearance had ever been conducted.

Stockwell compared Kit’s story with police records of the time. An unidentified female body had been found brutally murdered, stuffed into a dumpster around the corner from Brennan’s residence. The photographs were gruesome. Stockwell shook his head sadly. It was just as well that the boy had never learned what became of his mother. So, he ended up in the care of a teenaged hooker, hustling on the streets at the age of five. Not a promising beginning, the general reflected. But at least Kit’s story filled in the last holes, and completed the connections between Alvin and Templeton.

“Al, you can’t keep on out here,” Kit told the kid as they trudged up the street in the rain. “It’s getting towards winter now. You gonna keep on sleeping in doorways forever?”

“What else?” The kid had acquired a serious, very adult manner about him. “I ain’t going to the cops.” The cynical words sounded odd in his high-pitched voice.

“Come on, kid, you’re five years old an’ you been picked up by the cops twice already. You wanna do this for the rest of your life?”

“I’m almost six.” Al stuck his lower lip out in a pout that always got grownups to give him money. Unfortunately for him, Kit was accustomed to it.

“Don’t be trying your faces at me,” she scolded. Jokingly, she reached down and pinched his cheek. Her voice went up in a parody of the matrons who stopped to admire him in his juggling. “Oh, what an *adorable* little face! He’s just as *cute* as can be, isn’t he, Henry?”

Al slapped at her hand, then reached up and pinched her butt. “Hey, beautiful, you wanna date?” he mimicked her customers.

“Knock it off, kid, you can’t afford me.”

Laughing, Al reached up and took her hand instead. “Come *on*, Kit, it’s raining.”

“Exactly. It’s raining, and it’s only gonna get colder nights. You gotta get some new clothes, get used to a real home, get some schooling.”

“I don’t need school. I can read. See?” He opened his book and read aloud, looking at her anxiously.

“Look, you holding it upside down. I been reading that book to you for six months. You ain’t reading, you got it memorized. Damned if I know why you like it so much. Pretty stupid pig if you ask me.”

“But Charlotte took care of him. She was like his mommy. And Templeton was his friend too. If it wasn’t for Templeton and Charlotte they would have killed Wilbur.”

“Geez, kid, you taking a spider and a rat for your

heroes now? You gotta get some more books, learn that there's more to life than Charlotte's Web. You ain't gonna spend your life on the streets."

"I like Charlotte's Web. It's a good book."

"Yeah, but it ain't the only book in the whole world. You know," Kit mused, "some ways you could do worse than having Templeton the Rat for a hero. He's one sharp cookie, that rat is. Knows which side his bread is buttered on."

"What does that mean?"

"Means he knows how to get what he wants. Knows how to play the game, how to beat the rules. You don't see Templeton sleeping in doorways, scrambling for loose change, do you? No sir, he's cozy an' warm, gets first pick at the slops, stays outta the rain. Templeton's got it made. Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"Going to find you a place to stay outta the rain."

"Underneath the slop trough?" Alvin grinned teasingly, dragging her back.

"Something like that. Come on, you little rat."

"Templeton the rat," Alvin announced loudly.

"I'm gonna be Templeton."

"Okay, okay, you're Templeton the rat. You look like a wet rat. An' we stay out here any longer you're gonna be a drowned rat. Now, we're gonna get you into this place for little wet rats that got no parents." They continued up the street, splashing through the puddles.

"Will you stay with me?" Alvin asked suddenly.

"I can't stay with you, they don't let grownups stay there. I'm too big. But there's lots of people there who will take good care of you." They reached the

corner, and Kit looked across the street at the massive stone building that was their destination. "But you gotta be smart for me, okay, Al?"

"I'm Templeton."

"Okay, Templeton. You gotta be a smart rat, okay? Once you get in there, it's gonna be a different game from what you played out here, but it's still a game, and you gotta learn how to win. Don't ever let nobody get the edge on you. Be sharp, and always look out for number one. I'll be thinkin' about you."

"Won't you come visit me?"

Kit hesitated, but she had never lied to the boy before, and wasn't going to start now. "Naw, I prob'ly won't. This ain't much my scene, Temp. No, don't cry. You don't need me with you. You're gonna win this game all by yourself. An' promise me you'll be careful."

"I promise." Hastily wiping his eyes on his sleeve, the boy took her hand and followed her across the street to the orphanage.

Stockwell picked up the phone and dialed a number. It was answered immediately.

"Hello?" Murdock's voice was sharp with impatience and a myriad of questions.

"Captain, I have the information you requested."

"Well, what is it?"

"Yes. A.J. Bancroft is Templeton Peck's father."

Stockwell hung up the phone, closed the files on his desk, and turned to the computer. There was work to be done.



AMY'S BOOK

by Robin L. Ryder

In which Face has a crisis, B.A.'s bad attitude acts up, Frankie hasn't got a clue and Hannibal smokes a cigar.

Two weeks ago:

"So come on, tell me, Murdock . . . was it that awful? I thought I just had a little editing work yet to do on it, but if it's that bad maybe I should just scrap the whole thing—"

"Bad? Amy, no, no, no. It wasn't bad. It was . . . I can't . . ." he gave her an exasperated look, then just jumped up and grabbed her in one of his hugs. "It was wonderful Amy! Absolutely wonderful! The way you captured everything so perfectly, I couldn't believe it. The guys are all gonna love it."

"You really think so?" she asked, still not completely convinced.

"Of course they will! How could they not love it?" He laughed. "Although I think they may be in for a bit of a surprise. Poor Face, he's gonna want to kill me for sure."

"So . . . you're okay with what I said, the stuff about you, and us?"¹

The present:

Hannibal finished reading Amy's book about her time as a member of the A-Team and carefully placed it on the coffee table. Then he smiled, lit a cigar, and thought how nice it was to have her back after all these years. He was just reaching for his coffee cup when the doorbell rang. "Right on time," he muttered and rose to answer the door. "Morning, B.A."

B.A. stomped past him and settled on the couch with a growl.

Hannibal shrugged, shut the door and turned toward B.A. "I take it you've finished Amy's book?"

Templeton Peck paused at the door to Colonel John "Hannibal" Smith's apartment, stabbed a trembling finger at the doorbell and then sagged dejectedly against the door frame. He could hear B.A.'s voice through the door. "That crazy fool be dead. Who do he think he is? Amy like a sister to me. He gonna ruin her life."

"Oh, hi Face, I've been expecting you," Hannibal said as he answered the door. "B.A.'s here too."

"Hannibal, Hannibal . . . I can't believe it. Did you finish Amy's book?" Face exclaimed, his voice rising precipitously up the scale as he stepped into the apartment. "Well, my life is over, just over . . . this

changes everything . . . I don't know how I can go on with my life's work, knowing I've lost my touch."

"Shut up Face, If you think this mean you lost the touch, then you lost it back in 1983. Live with it, sucker," B.A. snarled from the couch where he sat with his arms crossed tightly over his gold jewelry.

"Well. That's easy for you to say. I mean . . . Look B.A., It's not like our lives ever depended on you being able to . . . to . . . oh, Hannibal, what am I going to do?" Face wailed as he collapsed on the opposite end of the couch.

"First of all, Lieutenant, you're going to pull yourself together. Then . . ." Hannibal began just as the telephone's jangle cut into the conversation. "Hold that thought while I get the phone. I'm expecting a call from my agent . . ."

"I get the point, Frankie . . ." Hannibal said, cradling the receiver against his ear, ". . . but, now's not exactly the best time for us to meet a potential client . . . Yes, there's a little problem over here . . . no, no, nothing that you need to worry about. Okay, just stall for a while. We'll be over later . . . I don't know, that depends on how things go here . . . Fine, fine, call Murdock if you need help keeping Marlene entertained until we get there. Yeah, Bye."

"Oh, that's just great. Did you hear that B.A.? 'Marlene.' Hannibal just told Frankie to get Murdock to entertain a potential female client. I'm ruined . . . You might as well just put me out to pasture, send me to the glue factory . . ."

"Shut up, Face, I ain't gonna tell you agin." B.A.'s skin stretched ominously across his already bulging muscles and he clasped his arms more tightly across his chest in an effort to subdue the explosive force that threatened to escape his control.

". . . toss my worn out, shriveled up hide on the trash heap . . ."

"All right, Face, B.A., we've got a potential client to evaluate. Do you think you can pull yourselves together and help out here?" Hannibal asked.

". . . leave me in the desert for the vultures . . ."

"B.A., go get the van. I'll see if I can snap him out of it . . . B.A. . . B.A. . . That's an order, Sergeant . . . Oh, never mind. I'll do it myself." Hannibal grabbed his costume and stamped out the door, leaving Face and B.A. behind.

"Excuse me, ma'am. Could you help an old man across the street? Oof. Sorry about that, my knees aren't what they used to be . . . Oh, no, now look what's happened," the old man cried as the photograph

¹ From "Special Assignment" by N.N. Pellegrini in Plans Scams and Vans #1

slipped from his hands.

"Here, let me help you with that. I don't know what gets into these yuppies. It seems like they're always in a hurry. Why, she nearly ran you down. Who is this? She's beautiful, must be an old picture though, you don't see this kind of glossy black and white on real paper anymore, not since every one went to plastic coated stock. Have to use a ferrotype and lots of pressure to get that kind of gloss. Well, here we are, safely across. Where you headed? I could drop you off if you need a ride."

"Thanks, but I've got my van over here, if you could just give me a hand with the door. And . . . could you give me a boost? It's getting so these seats are just too high off the ground, I can't seem to get in and out like I used to," the old geezer wheezed.

"Sure thing. Here, hold on. Ugh. Whew, that took some effort. Bye now, have a nice day." The Good Sam-aratin waved, tossing back shoulder length, thick, curly hair, and muttered, "Wow, that's one old guy that really should lose some weight. Someone should tell him about the aerobics classes up at the Senior Center. Oh well," (singing) *"I don't want a pickle, I just want to ride my motorcickle."*

The van pulled around the corner and stopped in front of an old warehouse where Frankie waited. "Hey Johnny," he said as the old man walked in. "Where's Face and B.A.?"

"Long story, I had to leave 'em back at my place," said Hannibal, removing pieces of the geezer costume.

"Oh. I'm not going to ask."

"Good idea, now hand me some of that dusting powder."

"Frankie, I'm going to need your help getting these run through LAPD," Hannibal said after lifting the prints from the photograph.

"Is that really necessary, Johnny? I mean, anyone that would help a fat old man across the street and into his van's A-okay with me. Besides, Face has all the contacts over there and I'm due at the studio to interview for a job doing special effects on the latest Chuck Norris movie. Look out, your man Frankie is heading for the big time. Yeah!"

"Look, Frankie, we didn't stay out of the stockade for all those years by letting our guard down just because a client seemed nice. Now, Face is indisposed, and Murdock's got his hands full with . . . what did you say her name was?"

"Marlene . . . Yeah, but we're not wanted anymore, we got our pardon, remember? It doesn't matter if our clients are connected with the law."

"Right, Marlene. And it's not the law I'm worried about. We've put away plenty of bad guys over the years who'd love an opportunity to repay in kind. We need to know if our potential client is associated with them in any way. Now, Face and Murdock are out of the picture. That leaves you."

"Well, if it's so important, why don't *you* do it, Johnny?"

"Because I have to get back over to my place

before Face jumps out a window or B.A. pushes him. That's why."

"Hi, guys." Hannibal lit a cigar as he walked through the door. "Frankie's running the fingerprints now, but I think our client looks good."

". . . Oh, no, this is it, the end . . . Look, B.A., there's another one. You just never think it's going to happen to you. I mean, why would I have ever thought about gray hairs . . . I always thought they made older men look kind of distinguished and helped to make up for the lack of vigor that comes with time . . . no offense Hannibal . . . but I was too busy living in the present to think about tomorrow, and now it's here . . . Oh the folly of youth . . . how could this happen to me . . . and the wrinkles, is that chicken skin? My neck's starting to look like Nancy Reagan's . . . Take a look B.A., Hannibal. . ."

"GRRRRR . . . Hannibal, shut this fool up before I give him a permanent face lift."

If anything, B.A. looked even more tightly wound than he had before Hannibal left. His Mandinka cut hair was on end and blood vessels could be seen dangerously pulsating in the shaved areas. Now, he had his legs clamped together as though it required every ounce of his will power to stay seated. "I mean it Hannibal, if you don't shut him up I will, and it ain't gonna be pretty. I got enough on my mind without havin' to listen to Faceman worry about his looks."

Hannibal looked over at Face, who was standing in front of the mirror obsessively examining every hair on his head. "Has he been like this the whole time I was gone?"

Face's right hand snaked down his side and came to rest on his right buttock ". . . Oh, no. Look at this, is that a sag? When things go, they just all go at once . . . and I've always had such a nice, tight . . ." he turned to better examine the left side, ". . .and here too . . . this is unbearable . . . Hannibal, B.A., look at this," he said, turning so they could get a full view. "What do you think, how bad is it? Squats, that's it . . . Oh, I'm going to need a personal trainer . . . B.A., how many squats do you think I need to do to get this back under control?"

"Face, knock it off. Now, I told Frankie to call as soon as . . . B.A.! What's wrong!" Hannibal exclaimed as B.A. toppled off the couch. "Face . . ."

". . . 100 a day for 3 weeks? No, at least a month, maybe two, once you go over the hill it takes that much longer to get in shape . . . and . . . oh no, this could be a losing battle . . ."

"Face, get a grip," Hannibal said, grabbing him by the shoulders and giving a hard shake "I think B.A.'s had a stroke, his blood pressure must have skyrocketed. I guess Amy's little revelation affected him more strongly than I thought. Come on, help me get him down to the van. I'll drive, you leave a message on Frankie's answering machine so he'll know where to reach us."

Hannibal stood next to B.A.'s bed, with the

telephone's handset pressed against his ear.

"... Right, Frankie... okay... sounds good, just a little problem with littering, back in '67 or '68? I can live with that, hold on while I check it out with Face and B.A. . . . What? oh, yeah, B.A.'s going to be fine, it wasn't a stroke, though his blood pressure did get dangerously high. The doctor said he has to stay overnight for observation. No, don't call Murdock, that would *not* be a good idea right now... Hey guys," Hannibal looked over at B.A., "Frankie says the client had a run-in with the law back in '67 or '68, something about littering and smart-mouthing a police officer... I say we go for it, it's a simple missing persons case, and we could use the money. Whaddya say?"

B.A. closed his eyes and began to snore. Hannibal turned to look at Face who stared in the bathroom mirror, morosely examining the skin under his eyes. "... and the bags, they just get worse and worse..."

"... Uh, Frankie, I think we're in agreement about this one. Set up a meeting with the client for tomorrow afternoon. We'll meet you at Murdock's place first thing in the morning as soon as I check B.A. out of here... No, no, everything is *not* under control, but it will be. I have a plan... No, don't bother to come over. B.A.'s asleep and Face will be too as soon as I can find a nurse to give him a Valium... What's that? Oh, long story... you haven't finished Amy's book yet, have you? Well, you probably wouldn't understand anyway, you really had to be there back then to understand what all the fuss is about now. Okay, tomorrow, 0700 at Murdock's. Bye."

Hannibal turned in time to see Face spin away from the mirror, in a fit of anguish "... Hannibal, Hannibal, look, see that line?... First it's lines, then jowls... your teeth go, and before you know it all you can do is gum your food and drool when the pretty nurse comes by to take your pulse... and... why me? Why now? Just when I thought everything was going my way..."

Hannibal sprinted out the door to the nurses' station. "I need your help in here."

"Oh dear, is Mr. Baracus uncomfortable?"

"No, he seems to be sleeping just fine, it's my other friend, Mr. Peck. I'm afraid all of this has been quite a shock for him and now he's having a panic attack. I was wondering if there was something you could give him to help calm him down. At the rate he's going, I'm worried he may hurt himself. I don't know when he last slept. He was bordering on exhaustion when we came in this afternoon and now he's so jittery I don't think he'll be able to rest tonight."

"I noticed that, and Doctor Morgan also remarked on it. Just a minute and I'll page him... Yes, Doctor Morgan is on his way. He'll meet you in Mr. Baracus' room."

"... Oh no, Hannibal, are these liver spots?" Face whined hysterically, waving his hands in front of Hannibal's face. "Not liver spots. I just don't know how much more I can take..."

"I see what you mean," said Doctor Morgan,

drawing a hypodermic from his case. "He's in quite a state, but this should calm him down pretty quickly... there. All finished Mr. Peck, you should be feeling better any time now. We might as well keep him for observation tonight too. You can check them both out tomorrow morning any time after 6:30. Why don't you go on home and get some rest, we'll call if anything changes."

"Thanks Doc, but I think I'll just stretch out on one of the couches in the waiting room if that's okay. You'll need my help if Mr. Baracus wakes up. He doesn't like hospitals. Oops." Hannibal just managed to catch Face as he pitched forward, his eyes tightly shut and a blissful smile playing across his lips. "Here, help me get sleeping beauty into that bed over there."

"Not now Marlene... I can't be a studmuffin all the time, there are other things in life... mmhm... I promise, just as soon, mmhm... well, if you insist... well, yes, now that you mention it, I have been called irresistible before... Murdock? He's just an amateur... sure, he gets lucky once in a while... I've been coaching him some... mmmhm... I can imagine... the whole afternoon with him... he didn't talk about anything but 'golfball liberation'... umhm... must have been dreadful... well, I'm here now." Face snuggled more deeply into his pillow.

Hannibal smiled. "Now that's more like it," and headed for the waiting room.

"Morning guys, are you two ready to get out of here now?"

"Sure Hannibal," Face said, smiling groggily. "I feel much better. I realize now that I was just overreacting. After having all night to think about it, I'm sure I've still got the old charm. I can't wait to meet Marlene."

"How about you, B.A. How're you feeling?"

"Feelin' pretty mellow, Hannibal. Where we going?"

"To Murdock's. Frankie's going to meet us there and brief us on the new job."

"That's funny, I told Madman we would all be here at 0700," Frankie said beating on the door. "How long have we been standing here anyway?"

"Captain Murdock, open up, we haven't got all day," Hannibal yelled.

"Coming, coming, no need to wake the neighborhood," Murdock's voice sounded faintly through the door. "Just a sec. while I get decent. There." The door opened as Murdock, scantily clad only in boxer shorts, stepped aside to let them in. "What time is it? I was still asleep." He stretched and yawned. "Come on in the kitchen while I put on the coffee." He surreptitiously glanced back at the closed bedroom door as the others trooped into the kitchen. "What's up Colonel, you're lookin' kinda peak-ed, B.A.'s mellow and Face is... Face is face down on the kitchen table."

Hannibal, observing Murdock's glance toward the bedroom, said, "It's okay, Captain, we've all finished Amy's book. That is, all of us except for Frankie.

Cat's out of the bag.”

Murdock gave a puzzled look at Face (who lifted his head and smiled tranquilly) and B.A. (who shrugged and sat down with a mellow grin).

Hannibal lit a cigar, drew a deep breath, and said “They’ve both been drugged, Murdock, I was at the hospital all night with ’em. *You* get to do it next time.”

“Oh. Well then, uh I know Amy’s dying to know what you think about the book. I told her I knew you all would love it, the way she got the feelin’ of those old missions down, but she’ll be wantin’ to hear it from you herself. And you too, Frankie, I mean, since you weren’t there, you can be more objective about it and she told me she *really* wanted feedback from everyone.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll get right on it as soon as we finish this case, promise,” said Frankie. “What is this secret anyway? . . . Never mind, I know, I just have to read the book, and anyway Johnny’s already told me it’s something that I wouldn’t understand now since I wasn’t around back then . . . Oh well, by the way, how did you and Marlene hit it off last night? The way she hopped right up in your lap yesterday, I figured you’d know how to keep her occupied while I went for that interview. And while we’re on the subject, where is she anyway? Isn’t she just about as frisky as . . .”

Murdock cut him off, “She’s in the bedroom, Frankie. Like I told you, it’s a king size bed, there’s plenty of room, though she did keep me up most of the night, she sure does like to snuggle . . . But after I got good and firm sh—Ack! B.A., now B.A. I think you should calm down, it ain’t good for your health to be gettin’ so stressy first thing in the morning . . .” Murdock ran toward the door.

“I cain’t take no more of this, I’m gonna kill you, sucker . . .” B.A. (who had been getting less and less mellow as the conversation wore on) lunged across the table toward Murdock.

“Not before I get my hands on him. Me first.” Face jumped up from the table. “If you call this state of dress ‘decent’ than I don’t want to know what you call having Marlene in your bed when you’re *not* ‘decent’ . . . and the way you’re talking . . . I can’t believe my ears . . . You’re a sick man, Murdock. Did you stop and think how Amy would feel about this if she found out?”

“Yeah, I have always thought of Amy as a sister, Fool, I don’t want to be hearin’ no details about you and this ‘Marlene.’” B.A. and Face both reached for Murdock, who was now cowering behind Hannibal.

The bedroom door opened and Amy stepped out, tying her bathrobe shut. She quietly closed the door behind her and walked toward the commotion. “Well, actually, guys, I didn’t mind at all after Murdock explained the situation to me. It was fun, really, the three of us just rolled around in bed all night long like one



big happy family. That’s why Marlene is still sacked out. We wore her out good, with all that cuddling, didn’t we, babe?” she said as she stepped behind Hannibal and slipped her arm around Murdock’s waist. “Now come on you two, hold it down, I could hear you through the bedroom door. Marlene needs her sleep.”

“So *this* is the secret? Amy and Murdock?” asked Frankie. “What’s the big deal?”

“Oh, so you haven’t finished my book yet?” asked Amy with a puzzled look. “I really want your opinion too, Frankie, I’ve been thinking of you as my objective reader, since everything in the book took place before you joined the team . . . Um, Hannibal, what’s wrong with B.A.? He looks like he’s starting to hyperventilate. And Face doesn’t seem to be doing too well either.”

“ . . . he’s corrupted her . . . can’t believe it . . . *Murdock* . . . who’d have thought it . . . Amy and Marlene . . . one big happy family . . . I’m finished . . . just throw me out with the dishwasher . . .” Face rambled on while B.A. sat with a thud on the living room sofa.

“Amy, get me a paper bag, willya? . . . Oh good, thanks. Here, B.A., breathe into this.” Hannibal held the bag out to B.A.

“Geez, Johnny, has this been going on since yesterday?” Frankie asked. “Is this that ‘little problem’ you alluded to on the phone? Maybe we should just get on with the mission briefing.”

“Yeah, Colonel, I think Frankie’s right for once. Why don’t we just get on with it, maybe Faceman and B.A. will snap out of it once Frankie tells us what this is all about.” Murdock looked nervously back and forth between Amy, Face and B.A.

“Good idea. Murdock, Frankie, help me get B.A. and Face into the van, we’re supposed to meet our client at the warehouse in fifteen minutes. Amy, stay here and hold down the fort. We’ll call if we need any

help.” Hannibal said as they all headed for the door.

The new client/Good Samaritan rode up to the old warehouse in his red '67 Volkswagen micro-bus singing, “. . . *You can get anything you want at Alice's Restaurant . . . 'cepting Alice . . .*”

“. . . mmmmm . . . That's the client? . . . Marlene? . . . mmmmm . . . I can handle it . . . I get it now . . . it's Amy who has two . . . okay, well . . . there's always Alice . . . she sounds like a challenge . . .” mumbled Face, who was tranked out on Valium.

“Not now, Face. We have a mission, remember? I'm really starting to get tired of this. Ugh . . .” Hannibal caught Face just as he collapsed in a heap . . .

“Captain, do something here, would you?” . . . and passed him unceremoniously over to Murdock. “. . . Oh, Hello Arlo. Why don't you give us all some background on Alice to help us get started.”

“Well, okay . . . *You can get any thing you want at Alice's Restaurant . . .* This song is called Alice's Restaurant. It's about Alice and the restaurant. But Alice's Restaurant is not the name of the restaurant, that's just the name of the song. That's why I call the song Alice's Restaurant . . . Now, it all started two Thanksgivings ago, it was two years ago on Thanksgiving when my friend and I went to visit Alice at the restaurant but Alice doesn't live in the restaurant. She lives in the church nearby the restaurant in the bell tower with her husband Ray and the dog . . .”

Twenty-five minutes later, as the last refrain died down, Arlo said, “But now, I can't find Alice. No one knows where she is. And I'm gettin' kinda worried.”

“Well, when and where did you see her last?” asked Murdock, who was now sweating profusely from the strain of propping up Face.

“Um, lets see, it would have been right after they let us out of the jail, and we went back and picked up the trash, and then we had a good Thanksgiving dinner . . . That would have been, oh about 15 years ago, at the restaurant.”

“This is really neat! I mean, I always thought it was just a song . . . and a movie . . . That is, I always hoped that Alice was real . . . I used to *imagine* that she was real . . . when I was in the V.A. I even thought I saw her a couple of times . . . well, this is like a fantasy come true, except that now I realize it was never a fantasy at all—IT WAS REAL!” Murdock (who was momentarily energized by this exciting confluence of fact and fiction) exclaimed happily.

“Two of 'em . . . Two fools! I don't like it Hannibal. This fool here—” B.A. pointed to Arlo, “—has got that fool there—” pointing to Murdock, “—thinkin' that a song/movie is real. There *ain't* no Alice! I got more important things on my mind than messing with two fools . . . Specially since one of em gonna be *dead* once I get my breath back.” The paper bag expanded and contracted around B.A.'s nose and mouth in a violent staccato rhythm, punctuating each word.

“Mmmmm . . . Oh, hi Marlene . . . nice to make your acquaintance . . . mmm, tell me about Alice . . .

does she go for the classic look? . . . ecology? . . . I mean, I'm into fish, I love the whales . . . no, Murdock tried that one once before . . . let's see . . . I'm sure I can get my touch back . . . mmmmm . . .” Face mumbled as he sagged heavily against Murdock's shoulder.

Arlo looked skeptically from B.A., to Face and Murdock, to Hannibal, and finally settled his glance on Frankie who shrugged and said, “Yeah, I don't get it either, but I think it has something to do with Faceman and B.A. having some kind of a problem with Amy and Murdock playing around in bed with Marlene. I don't understand it myself, Murdock assured me there was nothing in his lease . . .”

Hannibal interrupted, “Frankie, can it! We're not making the best impression here. Now, the way I see it is this, first we check out all Alice's old hangouts. Arlo, could you run through that song again, that'll give us some places to start,” he said, singing along as Arlo hit the refrain. “*You can get anything you want at Alice's Restaurant. 'Cepting Alice.*”

“. . . I don't know . . . Could I get Alice? . . . Of course I could . . . I'm just suffering from a temporary setback . . . As soon as we find Alice and she experiences the old Faceman charm . . . well, I'm telling you. Things will be back to normal around here . . .”

Twenty-five minutes later, after the last refrain died down, Murdock shifted uncomfortably. “Uh, Colonel, could we just get on with this? I mean, Faceman's gettin' heavy. My shoulder's startin' to ache. Why don't we get Amy to make some calls and pull in some favors at the newspaper.”

“Good idea Captain, but just let us run through the song one more time. You know, I shoulda been in show business. *You can . . .*”

“Hi everyone. That was quick. Was she there?” Amy asked as Hannibal (cigar in hand) stepped into the apartment followed by B.A. (still clutching his paper bag), Murdock (staggering and breathing heavily as he half carried, half dragged Face along), Frankie (who still hadn't a clue) and finally at the end of the line, Arlo (with Alice). “Oh, I see. So she was.”

“. . . You know . . . that Marlene, he's not so bad after all . . . I could really get to enjoy being around him . . .”

“Faceman, Why do you keep calling Marlene 'He'? You'll hurt her feelings if she hears you,” Murdock whispered while gasping for breath.

“What do you mean? . . . Marlene's not . . . Marlene is a 'she'? . . . no . . . but Marlene looks like a he . . . Marlene *sings* like a he . . . Isn't that facial hair . . . ?”

“What are you talkin' about? You haven't even met her yet. Of course Marlene's a she. You'll see when I introduce you. She's just beautiful, with big brown eyes and long golden blond silky hair. The only thing is I can't seem to keep her out of my lap when she's around.” Murdock, now exhausted, dropped Face at one end of the couch and sat down beside him. “She just seems to *need* a firm c—”

“That's it Fool, you be *dead now!* Amy, I'm sorry sister, but somebody have to look after your

honor. Get you back on track before you mess up your life even worse than you already done, hangin' around with that crazy fool and this 'Marlene'." B.A. started toward Murdock.

"Now wait a minute!" Frankie stepped in. "I know I haven't finished Amy's book, so I don't really get what all the fuss is about. I mean, I don't know the his-tory behind all this animosity, so I'm just gonna be up front and direct. I mean, I know some people don't like animals, and I've heard the stories about B.A. not liking Billy 'cause he was just a pretend dog. But why are you all so upset about Amy and Murdock babysitting Arlo's dog Marlene?"

Stunned, B.A. dropped to the sofa. "Marlene's a dog? A *real* dog?"

". . . as in 'Woof?' . . ." Face sat up and smiled. "I think things are going to be all right after all . . . I mean, well, I thought . . . Um . . . This changes everything . . . Well, okay, right."

"Look everyone, we really can't stay, I just came by to pick up Marlene and to thank you for helping me find Alice," said Arlo as he headed to the bedroom to collect Marlene. "Come on girl, time to go home. 'Bye all."

"Colonel, could I talk to you a minute? In private?" Murdock dragged himself off the sofa and motioned Hannibal toward the kitchen.

"Sure thing, Captain."

"I just wanted to thank you for helpin' out with the guys, I mean, settin' up the distraction with Marlene to take their minds off me and Amy. I didn't want them talkin' to Amy about the book until they'd had time to get used to it. She was so worried that they wouldn't like the way she described the team. I don't think she realized what a shock it would be to B.A. and Face to find out about her and me, but I knew once they had a chance to get used to it then they could think about the rest of the book and give her some good feedback."

"Yeah, I know. I spent a lot of time worrying about what they'd do if they found out back in '83." Hannibal smiled and lit his cigar.

"You knew then?"

"Sure, why do you think I always got her to take you back to the V.A.?"

"Um, Frankie, B.A., Face, I'll be right back. I just want to say good-bye to Arlo and Alice, and Marlene," Amy said as she stepped out the front door.

"Alice, Arlo, wait up! Thanks for helping me out of this jam. I mean, I was really worried about what B.A. and Face and Hannibal would do or say to Murdock when they found out about us . . . I felt sure that if they had a mission to take their mind off it, they'd come around sooner or later. And well, it looks like everything's worked out just fine."

"Hey, no problem, Amy. It was kinda fun watching 'em go off on that wild goose chase looking for Alice. You know, we had a song in the sixties that went like this—'*I get by with a little help from my friends*' . . . Hey Alice, that reminds me, I heard Joe Cocker's in town and if we hurry we might be able to catch him at the Fillmore."

"You know, I still don't get what the big deal was all about," Frankie was saying as Amy returned to the apartment. "I mean, I know Golden Retrievers are kinda big for an apartment, but *come on* B.A. and Face, it was only for a couple of days. And I can't think of anyone who'd do a better job dogsitting than Murdock and Amy here."

"Yeah, well, Frankie, it's a long story. Maybe we'll tell it to you sometime, but right now, if I hurry, I might be able to make it to the Club before Jenny gets off work," Face said checking his watch. "Murdock, Amy, it's been fun. I'll check you later, I really want to talk to you about the book Amy, after I've had more time to think about it."

"Yeah, me too," B.A. said, following Face out the door. "But right now, I've gotta get down to the Center and help the kids set up the new computer network. Why don't we all get together next weekend and go over it?"

"Hey Johnny, get a move on, your agent called while you were in the kitchen with Madman, I told him we'd drop by his office to talk about the script and special effects for the new Gatorella movie." Frankie shooed Hannibal to the door.

"I love it when a plan comes together," Hannibal said quietly as he and Frankie got into the car.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing." Hannibal smiled and lit a fresh cigar.

"I love it when a plan comes together," Murdock and Amy each said under their breath as they sprawled on the sofa in anticipation of a quiet night at home.

WHO KILLED COCK ROBIN?

by Maxi

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Vietnam, Spring 1972

Tommy stood proudly, head up, eyes forward, a slight smirk on his lips in defiance of the chains that bound his wrists and ankles. His hat was pulled low across his brow, and his face was bruised and painfully thin. His uniform was smeared with dirt, mud and something darker, but still he refused to appear less than in control.

"Name?" a guard demanded as he stepped in front of Morgan.

"Morgan, Thomas J. Corporal. US Army. 554-32-4710," he replied, the smile never leaving his face.

"You think there is something here to laugh about?" the junior officer sputtered in heavily accented English.

"I don't know, should I?" Morgan replied, raising an eyebrow slightly.

His comment was rewarded with a rifle butt in his stomach. He fell to the ground, where he was kicked several times before the guards moved on to the next prisoner. Morgan lay gasping for breath a few moments before pulling himself to his feet and back into line. This time, he didn't stand quite so tall, and there was pain in his eyes, but the mocking smile remained.

"Kid, you got a death wish, or you jus' stupid?" B.A. demanded after they were all assigned to the same cell.

"Neither," Tommy replied, rubbing his back where a particularly brutal kick had landed. "I smile when I'm nervous. It's a habit I've never been able to break."

"You better start tryin'. These guys ain't gonna take that as an excuse."

"I noticed," Tommy said dryly.

"I didn't catch what unit you were from, Corporal," Hannibal said, joining the conversation.

"I didn't say, Colonel. You'll excuse me, but I don't know you, and I keep quiet about these things until I know who I am talking to."

"Hannibal Smith," he replied, holding out a hand. "Sergeant Baracus, Lieutenant Peck," he added, pointing around to the others.

"The A-Team." Tommy took the offered hand as best he could with his wrists still shackled. He sounded impressed. "I've heard about you. I never thought . . ."

"Thought what, Corporal?" Hannibal asked.

"That you guys would ever be captured," Tommy finished lamely. "You're like legends."

"Even legends can be outnumbered," Face said. "Hannibal, we are in very big trouble. Colonel Ling runs this place. He's one of Chao's men."

"Don't worry, Face. I'll come up with a plan. Chao couldn't hold us, and neither will one of his stooges."

"It'll take more than a plan to get out of this bloody place," a voice said from the next cell. "Damn, Tommy, is that you? It's been a week, we thought for sure you'd made it."

"Came close, sir," he called back. "I can tell you one thing, don't head directly south. There's a village about ten miles out where the natives are less than friendly. They held me a couple days before I was brought back."

"Thanks for the advice," the officer replied. "Colonel Smith, I'm Colonel Baker, Australian Air Force. Welcome to our humble home."

As the men were getting settled, the hut door flew open, and the camp supervisor strode into the room.

"Morgan!" he shouted.

Tommy stood slowly, hindered by the chains.

"You have embarrassed me for the last time. No one escapes from my prison. No one." He gave a sharp jerk of his head, and Morgan was pulled from the cell and out the door. "The rest of you men need a reminder of who is in charge here. The corporal has volunteered to set the example for you."

He stalked out the door, his men shutting and locking it behind him.

"Damn," Baker swore. "I was afraid something like this would happen."

"Maybe they won't question him," someone suggested.

"They will. Maybe not right away, but they will."

"He's a soldier, Colonel Baker," Hannibal said. "He'll hold up."

"Not bloody likely with this crew. Ling has a talent for getting information he wants, and not caring how he gets it."

"Sounds like Chao," Face remarked quietly.

"And he like 'em young," another voice added.

"Can it, Harvey. Smith, if you come up with a plan to get your men out of here, take the corporal with you."

"I can't make any guarantees, Baker, but we'll try."

"That's all I'm asking."

The lights flickered overhead.

"Damn, lights out. Everyone hit your bunks," Baker ordered. "We'll sort out who's senior tomorrow, Colonel Smith. Till then, rest well."

"Thanks," Hannibal replied. "I'll take the lower bunk," he continued as he turned to the rest of his team. "B.A. you're above me. Face, take the rack above the corporal's. He'll be in no shape to climb when he gets back."

The night was quiet, too quiet for Hannibal's taste. It was quiet enough to hear the low breathing of men in the other cells, their soft mumbling groans as they moved in their sleep. Quiet enough to hear if someone tried to escape. What he needed was a plan solid enough to get his men out safely, and that was going to take time.

The corporal didn't return during the night, and the next morning at muster they found out why. He was sprawled in the dirt, his arms stretched behind him around a post. His hat was gone, and a matted thatch of red hair showed above his pale face. He was pale, but for the blood and fresh bruises that remained as testament to their captors brutality. His head lolled back against the post, and the ropes were all that held him upright.

"All right then," Baker whispered as he moved into formation. "He didn't break."

"How can you tell?" Face whispered back.

"If he'd talked, we'd be watching his execution about now."

The men dropped silent as the guards moved up the line, counting the prisoners.

"Your comrade is being most uncooperative," Colonel Ling announced to the assembled forces. "Until his tongue loosens, he will remain where you see him, without food or water. The rest of you will take half rations."

"They're killin' him by inches, Hannibal," B.A. protested after they were returned to their cell. "We gotta do somethin'. He's just a kid."

"You're right, B.A. he is just a kid, but you're not much older."

"It don't matter. I can take care of myself, an' I got you guys. He ain't got nobody to look out for him."

"We'll get him some water after lights out," Hannibal decided. "Whoever goes is likely to get caught, and equally likely to join him out there . . . or replace him. That's why I'm going by myself."

"You think that's a good idea, Hannibal?" Face objected. "We need you to come up with an escape plan."

"If I play my cards right, I can do a little recon work while I'm at it. I just wish they hadn't blindfolded us when they brought us in here. I'd like to know exactly where we are. Face, start figuring out how to pick these locks."

"Yes sir, Colonel."

Late that night a shadow slipped from the locked barracks, moved down the side of the building and hurried across open ground to where a lone figure was still tied.

"Hey, kid," Hannibal whispered as he slipped into the soldier's shadow. "How you holding up?"

"Colonel Smith?" Morgan whispered, jarred awake by Hannibal's voice behind him. "Is that you?"

"Brought you some water, courtesy of the guys in the block. Drink it slow," he cautioned as he held the small cup to Morgan's lips.

"Thank you, sir," he said when he finished drinking. "You shouldn't have risked it, but thank you."

"Think nothing of it. I felt like a little stroll."

"If they find you here . . ."

"Yeah, I know," Hannibal said, smiling. "Makes for an interesting walk."

"You gotta go back," Morgan said, sounding desperate.

"I will. Just wanted to let you know we were looking out for you. I'll be back tomorrow night. Hang in there."

"I will, sir. It takes more than a little sunstroke to get the best of me."

Hannibal could see the kid's smile was back, as if he was finding his situation completely ludicrous.

He edged away, to where his men were waiting to let him back into the cube.

"You're bloody mad," Colonel Baker hissed as Hannibal slipped in the door. "If they'd caught you out there, they'd have gigged us all."

"But they didn't," Smith said reasonably. "And I have a better idea of the layout here."

"You got a plan?"

"Working on it, B.A.," Hannibal said as he laid back on his bunk. "Just give me some time."

"I thought that half rations would convince you to obey me, but I have been disappointed. Someone in this camp has been aiding this prisoner," Colonel Ling announced several days later, pointing to Morgan. "Someone has gone against my orders and supplied him with food and water. Unless the guilty party steps forward, all men in this compound will have their rations cut off. Now, I am waiting."

In the silence that settled after the colonel's pronouncement, Lieutenant Templeton Peck stepped forward out of line. The muscles of his jaw twitched slightly, he knew what would come of this. He'd been through it before, they all had. They needed the colonel to come up with a plan, and until then, it was in Peck's best interest to keep his commander healthy, regardless of the consequences.

"Take him," the colonel ordered.

Face watched from the darkness as they beat the defenseless soldier, and he tugged at his bonds with an impotent fury. When it seemed the colonel's sadistic tendencies were satisfied, Ling threw the young man

across the desk and loosened his belt.

"You know what comes next, don't you, Yankee boy? We've done this before. I have been most patient with you. I tried to reason with you, but you would not be flexible. You have forced me to do this."

"You're no better than you claim we are," Morgan hissed.

"But I am," Colonel Ling replied. "This is my country."

Peck closed his eyes, but the ropes that held him prevented him from stopping his ears, he heard Morgan's soft cry, and the rhythmic clank of chains as the colonel forced himself on the corporal.

"The next time," Ling said at last, "you will service me on your knees."

"And it'll take a team of surgeons to sew you back together."

Morgan's snarled reply brought a twitch of a smile to Temp's lips, quickly erased by the sound of a sharp blow and then silence.

He watched as the corporal was dragged away, and knew it was his turn under fire.

Face woke on Hannibal's rack, the fire in his ribs matched by a throbbing ache in his head. He rolled over, groaning.

"Welcome back, Lieutenant," Hannibal said quietly, the lightness of his tone masking his concern. "Glad you could join us."

"Where's the corporal?" he asked, glancing over to the empty bunk.

"Not back," B.A. supplied.

"They hit him pretty hard," Peck replied, wincing as his friends helped him sit up. "But he took it. He's one tough kid."

"How 'bout you, Faceman?" B.A. asked. "What are the damages?"

"Couple ribs, one heck of a headache. Nothing I can't live with. Ling's good, but not as thorough as Chao," he replied, rubbing his side. "Colonel . . ."

"Yeah," Hannibal said, squeezing Face's shoulder. "I'm worried too. When we go, he goes with us."

It continued for several days for Hannibal, B.A., Face, and Tommy; one at a time they were taken and questioned. Any sign of weakness was exploited, any method for acquiring information was utilized. Interrogation and starvation became a way of life for them—for all the men—until time melted into a blur of pain and anger.

It was dark, and for a change it was far from silent. Face, Hannibal and B.A. lay awake, listening to the soft cries of their cell mate. He had grown progressively withdrawn of late, the mocking smile replaced by a brooding expression that had them all uneasy. Tommy spent most of his free hours on his bunk, curled around his pillow, hiding his pain.

Face understood, having seen a sample of what the

colonel was doing to the boy, but he wouldn't speak of it; not to Tommy, not to the rest of the team. That kind of pain was personal, something that couldn't be shared, not if a man wanted to keep his dignity, his pride. The anger he felt when he witnessed Tommy's interrogation was intensified when he heard the kid calling out in his sleep. It wasn't fair that the boy's nightmares were filled with it too.

Face suddenly caught a phrase in the corporal's mumbling, and began listening intently.

"Hannibal?" he whispered sharply as he slid off the upper bunk.

"I heard. Try to translate."

"He's saying 'no' a lot. 'No, please, don't. I can't.'"

"What else?"

"He has all the street idioms down; his gutter slang is better than Murdock's. The accent is flawless."

"How could a kid his age be so fluent in Vietnamese?"

"Depends on where he was assigned. He never did say."

"Let me try something," Hannibal said, rolling off his bunk and hunkering down near Tommy's head.

"Das vadanya."

"Das vadanya, comrade," Morgan mumbled back, sounding relieved. "Shtov vvy 'xhotitnye?"

"Sprekenzi deutche?"

"Da. Vas iss los?"

"Cigarette?" Hannibal said, using the German inflection.

"Bitte."

As Face and Hannibal exchanged concerned glances, Morgan lapsed back into Vietnamese.

"No," Face translated. "Oh, God, please don't let them . . . no drugs, please, no drugs . . . I can't . . ."

"Wake him up," Hannibal ordered.

"Tommy," Face said, shaking him by the shoulder. "Wake up, you're having a nightmare."

"What?!" He woke quickly, sitting upright in an instant, eyes wild with fear.

"Nightmare," Face said again. "You were talking in your sleep."

"What did I say?" he asked cautiously.

"It wasn't so much what you said, as the fact that you were speaking Vietnamese like a native."

"I'm good with accents."

"And Russian," Hannibal added, "and German."

"I also speak French, Italian and Japanese."

"What's your point, Colonel?"

"My point, Corporal, is that you have a very broad range of talents for such a young man."

"I'm older than I look."

"Where were you born?"

"Not really sure. I grew up in an orphanage."

"When did you join the Army?"

"Right out of school. After the discipline of the sisters, the military seemed more like summer camp."

"Isn't that the truth," Face agreed ruefully, then added, "Sorry, Hannibal."

"I take it you believe his story."

"Yeah, I do."

"Care to tell me why, Lieutenant?"

"I . . . no," Peck replied, shaking his head. "I'd rather not."

"B.A.? What do you think?"

"Faceman's pretty good at reading people, Hannibal, that's why he's such a great con artist. Got to know people to do that. If he says Tommy's okay, then I believe him."

"Thanks, B.A.," Face said, relieved that he wouldn't have to share the corporal's secret.

"You got a reprieve, kid," Hannibal said. "Now, tell us what you meant by 'no drugs.'"

"God," Tommy ran his fingers through his hair.

"They were going to use drugs on me, to make me talk. They threatened it before—before I escaped the last time. I can't risk . . . I can't let them do that, I have too many secrets to protect."

"That's it then. We're getting out of here."

"Hannibal's got a plan," B.A. proclaimed happily.

"Yeah. I've been listening to the gossip. Tomorrow is a local festival day, a bunch of the guards will be away. Face can pick the locks of the cells just after dark, then get us into the armory. We take what we need, and pull the firing pins from the extra weapons. That leaves only the equipment the duty shift will be carrying. While Face and I are freeing the other prisoners, B.A. and Tommy can get tools and cut open the back fence. We'll split up into separate groups to make the hunting harder for Charlie, then move out. Nice, neat, and simple."

"I have a feeling it's not going to be that easy," Face prophesied.

They had slipped through the wire and were near the edge of the jungle when the first shots rang out. Pandemonium ensued behind them, and they picked up the pace, choosing speed over silence now that they were discovered.

Tommy stumbled as they entered cover, and he cried out. B.A. helped him to his feet, and they hurried on, pushing their way through the thick brush. They traveled for several hours before Hannibal called a short break.

While they were resting, Morgan slid his pants up his leg, wincing as the blood stiffened material peeled away from a gunshot wound. He bound it with a bandanna, wishing he had a way to get the bullet out.

"You okay, Tommy?" B.A. asked with a concerned scowl.

"Don't have much choice," Tommy replied, flashing a grin. "We've gotta keep moving if we want to stay ahead of them."

"Yeah, but we should let Hannibal know you're hit."

"Then what? Slow down the pace? We can't afford to do that, not if we want to escape."

"Ain't your call, man," B.A. decided.

"Hannibal? Tommy's hit. Didn't say nothin' before."

"Couldn't risk slowing us down."

"Not your decision, Corporal. You've kept up till now, so we'll maintain the pace until you tell us otherwise. B.A. take point, Face, cover the rear. I'll

keep Tommy with me."

"But, sir . . ."

"No arguments, Corporal, let's move out."

"It's no good, Colonel," Morgan said several hours later as he eased himself to the ground. "I can't make it any farther."

"Is your leg that bad?" Smith asked, kneeling to examine the injury closely.

"The leg's not the problem, I took a lung shot," Tommy confessed, resting his back against a tree. "I didn't mention it, because there's nothing to be done about it."

"B.A.," Smith asked, "do you think you could carry him?"

"Sure thing, Hannibal. I jus' gotta give Faceman my weapon and it'll be no problem."

"Damn it, Colonel, listen to me," Morgan snapped. "You may be senior in rank, but we both know I'm slowing you down. Take this tag to Sister Louise in the American compound in Saigon. Tell them it's from Brother Thomas." Morgan untied his boot while he talked, sliding a dog-tag off the laces and dropping it into Hannibal's hand.

"I don't leave men behind to be captured."

"You don't have a choice. Give me a pistol to hold them off, then get clear. I was unarmed the last time they caught up with me, but this time I have the advantage. They won't take me again, Colonel," Morgan said calmly.

Hannibal studied the corporal's face a moment, reading what was not being said, and finally nodded. He handed over the pistol, checking to be sure it had plenty of ammo.

"You got seven rounds."

"Then I'll take six with me." The smile was back, both mocking and feral.

"So long, kid," Hannibal said, offering his hand.

"So long, sir. Keep your head down," Morgan replied, shaking his hand.

"Okay, men. Let's move out. Tommy's covering our rear." Hannibal motioned the others forward, and began to push his way through the thicket.

"Colonel," Face started, but the expression on his commander's face was enough to silence him.

Peck and B.A. exchanged glances, then shrugged slightly. They were soldiers, and they knew how to follow orders, even if they didn't particularly like those orders.

They'd traveled less than a mile when a single shot rang out. Hannibal froze a moment, a look of pain crossing his face when he realized there would be no further shots, then continued at a faster pace.

Saigon, several weeks later

"Wish I'd had you scam some civvies," Hannibal commented as they walked through the compound.

Here, their cammies identified them as what they were. Rather than blending in, they were conspicuous,

and it was an uncomfortable feeling for all three men.

"Yeah," Face agreed. "Next time, we'll know better."

"I hope there ain't no next time," B.A. said.

"Let's get this over with," Smith said as they neared the main building.

"Sister Louise?" the receptionist repeated uncertainly. "Are you gentlemen sure you have the name right?"

"That's right," Hannibal said again. "Sister Louise."

"Just a moment, please," she replied, then picked up the telephone and began whispering urgently into it.

"I'm Louis Percy," a man said as he approached a few moments later. "Can I help you . . . gentlemen?"

The gray suit he was wearing told Hannibal what kind of organization they were dealing with.

"CIA? I don't think so. We're looking for Sister Louise."

"I'm Sister Louise," the agent replied, grimacing at the name. "You have a message for me?"

"Yeah. I got a message for you from Brother Thomas."

To Smith's surprise, the man paled, stunned by the reply.

"You'd better come inside," he said, ushering the team down the hall and into his office.

"Drink?" he offered, pouring a large one and gulping it down before pouring for Hannibal and Face. He fixed another for himself, clinging to the glass as if it would keep him calm. "Now, tell me."

"I think Tommy's dead. We were escaping, and he took a couple shots."

"You left—you left Morgan out there? Alone?"

"Sometimes you gotta do things you don't like. It's part of being a soldier," Hannibal replied, still unhappy with his decision.

"What was the message?"

"We're to deliver this."

Smith passed the dog-tag across the desk, where it was studied closely a moment.

"I'll take this to the lab. If you men wouldn't mind waiting? Good," he said in reply to their nod.

"I don't like this, Hannibal," B.A. said, sipping a glass of water. "That guy gives me the creeps."

Twenty minutes, and a couple of cigars later, another man stepped into the office. His manner and bearing were quite different from the first, and they knew he must be the brass of this outfit.

"Colonel Smith? I'm Charles Donaldson. I wanted to thank you personally for delivering Captain Thomas' report."

"You must be mistaken, Donaldson. I brought Corporal Morgan's tag."

"Tommy Morgan was an alias for Morgan Thomas, one of our best field operatives. We knew Morgan had been captured, but didn't know where she was being held."

"She," Hannibal repeated dully.

"You didn't know?" Donaldson sounded surprised. "I knew she was good, but not that good."

"People see what they expect to see. No one expects to find a woman in a POW camp. We thought he was a kid, nineteen or twenty at the outside."

"Morgan was twenty-seven, Colonel Smith, and she knew what she was getting into. She did her job, and did it well. The information you brought us will save lives. Preparations are being made to airlift civilians out as we speak. Captain Thomas' death is quite a blow to our operation, but we're grateful it wasn't in vain. Not only did she collect valuable information, she also exposed a collaborator in our midst. Percy was selling secrets to the Cong, including the names and descriptions of our operatives. We caught him trying to flush the tag down the toilet. He compromised our entire operation. If we had known sooner, she'd still be alive."

"Yeah," Smith agreed, his equilibrium still rocked by the information. "Glad we could help. We need to get out of here, we got a flight waiting."

"Colonel Smith?" the receptionist called as they walked past her desk to leave.

They turned to see she had been crying, eyes puffy and damp, nose blotchy red.

"Thank you for taking care of Morgan for us," she said, managing a smile. "I thought, perhaps, you'd like to see a picture? Here," she offered, holding out a double picture frame.

Hannibal accepted it gingerly. Face and B.A. looking over his shoulder to study the photos.

The snapshot on the left was fuzzy and slightly out of focus, but you could still see her features. She was seated on a motorcycle, but turned sideways to face the camera. She wore blue jeans and a leather jacket, a rifle in the crook of her right arm, a dog on the ground in front of her. Her left hand was extended upward, in a peace sign. Red hair framed her face, and it was easy to recognize Tommy in the mocking grin. The other picture was professionally done, full dress Army uniform, captain's bars glistening in the studio lights. Her smile was toned down, but her brown eyes were filled with amusement.

"We were shocked to hear that Louis was involved with her capture," the receptionist said. "They were engaged, you know, but Morgan put her job ahead of everything, even him. She was so proud of what she was doing, and she loved her work. Thank you for helping her finish it."

"May I?" Hannibal asked, holding up the frame.

She nodded silently, and he folded it closed, then slipped it into his breast pocket, buttoning the flap to keep it safe.

"Come on, guys," he said, turning to go. "Murdock's waiting."

"Hey, Hannibal. We ready?" Murdock asked as they joined him at the small helo-pad.

"Yeah, let's get out of here," he replied, climbing into the back of the chopper with B.A.

"Did you find the Sister?"

"Yeah," Face said when it was plain Hannibal

wasn't in a talking mood. "We found the Sister." He settled in beside Murdock for the ride home.

Murdock continued to babble about inconsequential things most of the way back to their unit, then suddenly began fishing his pockets.

"I almost forgot, Colonel. I got something for you."

"What is it, Murdock?" Hannibal asked, pulling out of his morose thoughts.

"I dunno. Some woman stopped by, asked for you by name. I figured it wasn't a bomb or anything, so I took it."

Murdock handed back a small parcel, wrapped in a blue bandanna.

Smith opened it slowly, gingerly. In these times, anything could be dangerous, even something as innocuous as a bandanna. Inside was a dog-tag, wrapped

in crumpled notepaper.

"Morgan, Thomas," Hannibal read aloud from the tag. "What was this woman like, Murdock?"

"Sorta skinny, short red hair. Thick Russian accent. Great smile though, kinda smile that grows on ya."

"There's a note," Smith said, smoothing the rumpled paper before reading. "'Sorry. Didn't trust my contact. Gone undercover. Thanks for help. Tommy.' Face," he continued, looking toward his lieutenant. "Cigar."

"How you suppose she got out?" B.A. wondered aloud.

"Good planning," Hannibal said, smiling as he puffed on his cigar. "And I sure love it when a plan comes together."

II

Los Angeles, California

August 1994

It was early afternoon, and H.M. Murdock had just passed another round of psych-evals at the Los Angeles, V.A. Hospital. He smiled to himself as he finished washing his hands in the men's room, knowing Amy was waiting for him at home. *Reality has its advantages*, he decided.

Suddenly alarms began blaring through the hospital. *Some poor sucker trying to escape*, he thought, shaking his head as he remembered all the times Face-man had to break him out. He almost missed those days—almost.

He was drying his hands when the door burst open and a woman dashed in, her long red hair wild around her face.

"Shit," she swore as she spun to go.

"Wait," Murdock said, holding up a restraining hand. "In there."

He pointed to one of the stalls, and she dove in, Murdock close at her heels. He swung the door shut behind them, then stood, facing the toilet. The woman crouched on the seat, eyes dancing, her hands covering her mouth to keep back the laughter that threatened to erupt.

The outer door slammed open and someone began pounding on the various stall doors.

"It's taken," Murdock growled. "Try another."

"We're looking for an escaped female inmate."

"Then try the ladies' room. This is the mens' room."

They could hear the orderlies moving around the bathroom, then finally exit.

"Thanks," she said, laughing as she climbed down from her perch. "Morgan Thomas," she added, offering her hand.

"H.M. . . ."

"No, don't tell me. If they catch me, they might make me say who helped. Besides," she dropped into an impression of Blanche Dubois. "Ah've always relied on the kineness a strangahs. Thanks, stranger," she finished in her own voice as she hopped up onto the

window sill.

"No problemo. There's a drain pipe about three feet to the left."

"Thanks."

He watched her disappear, then turned to leave.

"Oye, hey, stranger." Her face reappeared at the window. "What's the date today?"

"August fifth."

"The year, man. What's the year?"

"Ninety-four."

"Over twenty years," she hissed. "Better living through chemistry, my ass."

She disappeared again, and Murdock waited a few minutes to be sure she wasn't going to reappear again. When he was sure she was gone this time, he left the hospital, whistling merrily. Helping someone else dodge the system was almost as much fun as dodging it himself.

Seacouver, Washington

October 1994

"Cuervo 1800, lemon and salt. Killian's chaser."

Though it was still early, Joe set up the order, glancing at his customer briefly before going back to prep work. It was Friday night, and he expected a good crowd. The first game of the hockey season brought people out, and tonight should be no different.

He heard the smack of a shot glass on the bar, and turned to watch as the guy polished off the lemon, then started sipping the beer. There was something about this guy that seemed so damn familiar, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

"You know, Joe, a picture might last longer."

"Huh?" Joe said, realizing he had been staring.

"A picture . . ." He turned, and Joe could see the glint of silver in the man's long red hair and mustache. "This one for example."

He flipped a snapshot, letting it land between them on the bar.

"I must've been twenty-two in this," Joe said, tapping his likeness.

"And what was I?" the stranger asked, pointing to other soldier in the picture.

"Tommy," Joe said, comparing the image with the man sitting across from him. "I'll be damned."

"Probably," Tommy agreed dryly. "Can I buy the bartender a beer?"

"Hell no. I own this place, I'll buy you a beer. Tommy Morgan," he said, shaking his head. "I thought you were dead."

"As Mark Twain once said, 'rumors of my death are highly exaggerated.' I got reassigned, very hush-hush."

"What have you been doing the last twenty years?"

"I've been at the V.A. Hospital in L.A."

"A doctor?"

"Not exactly," Tommy hedged. "More like a resident."

"A resident?" Joe repeated.

"Yeah. In the psych ward."

"The psych ward?"

"I wish you'd stop repeating everything I say. It's really annoying."

"The psych ward? But you're okay now, right? They let you out, right?"

"Uh, yeah, well there is one little technicality."

"What's that?"

"I wasn't 'let out' exactly."

"You escaped from a mental ward?" His voice rose in pitch.

"Why don't you just shout it in the street, Joe. I'm trying to keep a low profile here. I was hoping you'd help me for old time's sake."

"Tommy, I . . ."

Tommy cut him off with a raised hand, and turned toward the door. A few moments later, the door swung open and Duncan stepped in.

"Duncan," Joe said, relieved to have someone else in the room. "This is my friend Tommy Morgan. We served together in Nam."

"MacLeod?" Tommy said, standing as the immortal stepped into the light.

"Sasha?" Duncan answered, hugging his friend. "We rode together with the Czar's army," he explained.

"Which Czar?" Joe asked as he realized what was going on.

"I don't remember," Duncan replied, still smiling. "It was a long time ago. Sasha, what are you doing in Seacouver?"

"Looking up an old friend. I only thought to find Joe. But to find you as well . . . I am doubly blessed."

"So, who are you this life?"

"Until recently, I was Morgan Thomas, though Joe knew me as Tommy Morgan."

"Yeah," Joe agreed. "Who's the V.A. looking for?"

"Morgan Thomas escaped from the mental ward two months ago; she could be anywhere. Tommy Morgan has led a clean life since the army and is under no warrant of any kind. In fact, they don't even know he

exists."

"Wait a minute," Joe said, holding up a hand to silence the conversation. "What do you mean 'she' could be anywhere?"

"Did I forget to mention that?" Tommy smirked at him, then peeled off the false mustache. "That's why Tommy is the best cover. They're looking for a woman."

"Come on, Sasha, I've known you for years," Duncan said. "You're no crazier than the rest of us, so what were you doing in a mental ward?"

"Drugs. Lots of drugs, want them or not. Twenty years can get away from you when you aren't able to pay attention. I spent the last couple of months living in my own little detox hell."

"Why?"

"Long story, Mac," she said, shading her head.

"I've got time, and I'm sure Joe would like to hear as well."

"I'm not sure that's such a good idea," Tommy said. "It could get complicated."

"Joe knows about us," Duncan explained. "He knows what we are."

Tommy eyed his friends, measuring them before he began his narration.

"It started back in 'Nam just before I was captured. I was doing some recon work for the CIA contingent in Saigon. I stumbled across a couple of collaborators. One was just a weasel, looking for some adventure. The other was an immortal, padding his Swiss bank account at the Army's expense. They passed information on my mission, and I was picked up by the Cong. Hannibal Smith and his men pulled off an escape. I let the CIA take care of the mortal—I have some scruples. The Immortal, I dealt with myself . . ."

Vietnam, 1972

"Colonel Morrison? I'm Morgan Thomas."

The colonel's eyes went wide in surprise as she stepped into the light. The glint off her sword sobered him faster than the warning buzz in the back of his skull.

"What can I do for you, Captain?"

"Die would be my first choice," she replied.

"You set me up."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said, glancing around for his weapon.

"I'm sure you don't," she sneered. "Just like you didn't know about the munitions hits last month. Louis Percy was my fiancé, Colonel, and he talks in his sleep."

"Sounds like a personal problem."

"Not anymore. He's in custody, and the Americans have started evacuating. I had your office bugged. I know about the mission to Hanoi, and I know it's a set up to get rid of the A-Team. You plan to kill those men if they make it back, then ship the money to Switzerland. I don't intend to let that happen."

"How do you plan to stop me?"

She held up her sword, smiling.

“... Everyone thought the quickening was an air strike, and I got out in the confusion. The official Army statement said Morrison was shot in the head, and then blamed the A-Team for his murder. When I came forward with the truth, I was declared a section eight and shipped off to the V.A. It was a railroad job on those guys, right from the start, and I was just an inconvenience to be dealt with.”

“Yeah, but they got pardoned years ago,” Joe said. “It’s old news.”

“Not the same,” Tommy said, shaking her head. “Even now, people believe they got away with murder, and I know it isn’t so. If they were to exhume the body, they’d know the truth. Somebody wanted Smith and his men so badly he was willing to commit perjury.”

“Why?”

“What better way to keep a unit together? Keep them under pressure and on the run. The A-Team was the best. They could make anything out of nothing, and they worked together better than any three men I’ve ever seen.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“Set things right, I hope. To do that, I need to find them. And I need help if I’m going back to Vietnam. That’s why I was looking for Joe.”

“Sorry, Tommy. I wouldn’t be much use to you in the jungle,” Joe replied, tapping his artificial legs. “About six months after you disappeared I stepped on a land mine.”

“Ah, Joe,” Tommy’s eyes were filled with sympathy as she reached across the bar to her friend.

“Could’ve happened to anyone,” Joe said with a philosophical shrug. “It was just my turn is all. In fact, that’s how I learned about immortals.”



“The captain,” Tommy supplied.

“Yeah. That’s why you disappeared, isn’t it.”

“We knew each other, yes. He got me transferred to recon work, which is what I wanted in the first place.”

“I’ll go with you,” Duncan offered.

“I need some second story help as well.”

“I think I can get you someone,” Duncan smiled slightly. “Come by the dojo tomorrow evening. I’m upstairs in the loft. I need to get back. See you tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Mac,” Tommy said, holding out a hand. “It’s good to be back among friends,” she concluded, glancing between him and Joe.

“I’ll show Tommy the way to your place. In the meantime, we have some catching up to do. This kid used to play a pretty mean guitar.”

“That was a long time ago, Joe. I’ve been out of it for too long.”

“Just like riding a bicycle,” Joe said, laughing as he poured another Cuervo.

“I never was much good at bicycles, but give me a Harley . . .”

Tommy stepped into the loft room, her hackles rising as she felt the nearness of other immortals.

“Hello?” she called softly.

“Good,” Duncan said, coming out of the bathroom. “You’re here. Sasha, this is . . .”

“What’s she doing here?” two womens’ voices demanded in the same instant.

“I see you two know each other.”

“Don’t you ever get tired of playing boy games?” Amanda demanded as she took in Tommy’s mustache.

“Don’t you get tired of being a boy game?”

Tommy countered, studying Amanda’s slinky attire.

“Nice to know you’re friends,” Duncan commented as he stepped into the living room, leaving the women to work it out.

“Seriously, Duncan. I can’t believe you actually thought I’d let her in on this,” Tommy said as she followed him.

“And I can’t believe you thought I’d help her.”

“You needed someone to do second story work. Amanda is the best, and you know it,” Duncan said to Tommy. He directed his next comment to Amanda. “Sasha—Tommy—is my friend. I promised I’d help. We’re going to Vietnam. I’d like you to go with us. You said you were bored, and this looks like it could provide you with a little excitement. Will you help?”

“Well, since you put it that way . . .”

“You’re right, she is the best . . .”

Both women burst out laughing, then threw their arms around each other in a friendly embrace.

“I’ve missed you, ’manda.”

“Me too, Sash. When this is over, we can do some shopping together.”

“Just as long as you don’t use my credit cards,” Duncan interjected.

"I can't believe it," Amanda complained, not for the first time. "I can't believe even you were stupid enough to hide something inside a foreign embassy."

"I didn't have a lot of choices. They hadn't searched my place yet. When they did, I knew they'd find the documents and tapes. Besides, at the time, this was the American embassy."

"What makes you think it'll still be here?" Duncan asked. "It's been twenty years."

"Come on, Mac, you know bureaucracies. If you stamp something top secret and add a declass/destruction date forty years down the line they'll leave it alone. If they would've found it, they would be afraid to touch it."

"I hate to admit this," Amanda said, "but she's right."

"If it's been moved, there's a code word to get it back, and only I know what it is. If we're lucky, it'll still be where I left it."

"Where might that be? The executive washroom?"

"No. Louis Percy had a safe in his office, hidden behind the paneling. I caught him accessing it. I know how to get to it, but I don't know the combination. I was lucky I got into it the last time. He left it open when he stepped out of the room."

"That's where I come in?" Amanda asked.

"Yeah. I also need help getting past the alarms, I'm sure the new residents have added their own modifications, and I don't know what they are."

"Great. Did you do any planning on this thing?" Amanda said. "I'll have to do everything."

Amanda leaned back in her chair, sighing in frustration, but Duncan could see the gleam in her eye, and he knew she was enjoying herself.

"Do you know the layout of the building?" he asked.

"I've drawn a map," Tommy said, rolling it out across the table. "But this information is over twenty years old."

"It'll have to do."

It was dark as three figures slipped through the embassy corridors. They moved silently through the shadows, working their way down from the upper level.

They paused in a recess as the security guard walked by on his rounds. When the sound of his receding footsteps turned the corner, they continued down the hall.

"In here," Tommy whispered.

Amanda knelt, pulling a lock pick set from her waist pouch. In less than a minute, she had the door open and they were inside. Tommy led the way to a mirrored wall behind the bar.

She ran her gloved fingertips across the smooth glass, seeking something. When she felt a slight depression in one of the mirrors, she pushed in gently, then released. The mirror swung away from the wall, revealing the safe behind it. Tommy stepped aside, giving Amanda access to the front dial.

Amanda pulled a stethoscope from her bag and slipped it on. She pressed the receiver against the front

of the safe and began to slowly rotate the dial. When she found the first number, she gave a smile of satisfaction.

Duncan remained near the door, watching out for any activity that would indicate they had been discovered.

"Piece of cake," Amanda whispered before swinging open the safe door.

She pulled the contents of the safe out, sliding it into the bag Tommy held ready, then closed the door, spinning the dial to lock it. Tommy re-seated the glass panel, and they joined Duncan at the door.

He held up a restraining hand, and the women remained quiet as they heard the sound of approaching footsteps.

"It's here in my office," a male voice was saying in Russian. "I can't believe I forgot it, after all the work that went into it."

"I believe it," a feminine voice replied. "Sending you gloves and a scarf for your birthday is pretty silly."

"My last assignment was Iceland," he explained as he began searching for the key. "My grandmother has trouble keeping track of my moves."

The three Immortals in the room ducked behind the bar, hoping they would not be noticed. They crouched as low as they could as the door swung open and the lights clicked on.

"Would you like a drink?" the man offered.

"I'd like to get home. Just get your things, and let's get out of here."

"They're here on the desk," he said, collecting a package and tucking it under his arm before turning to leave. "Okay, I'm ready."

"It's about time," she complained.

They listened to the voices as the couple moved down the hall, the woman complaining all the way. When they were out of earshot, Tommy and Amanda began to snicker, their bodies shaking with suppressed laughter.

"Will you two come on?" Duncan said, eager to get the hell out of the Embassy.

"Yeah," Amanda said, still gasping.

"Coming," Tommy agreed.

Tommy stood outside the door, clutching a packet of documents and a copy of Amy Allen's best-seller. She had paced the block a couple of times already, nervous for the first time in decades. She knocked on the door, then waited, fighting the urge to run, as she heard footsteps approaching.

The man answering the door was tall and slender, and he wore a T-shirt that read "Surf Nicaragua". Even without the baseball cap she recognized him from the V.A., though his hair was wild, and there was a gray and white sheepdog at his heels. He stood there, studying her intently, taking in the mustache, and long overcoat, as well as the pile of books and papers.

"Can I help you?" he said at last.

"Amy Allen," Tommy managed to sputter out.

"No. H.M. Murdock."

"I mean, I'm looking for Amy Allen."

"Not here. Wrong house. She doesn't do

interviews, no autographs please.”

“Murdock!” a woman’s voice drifted in from the other room. “Don’t be rude. I’m Amy,” she said as she stepped into view.

“Amy Allen?”

“Not anymore,” she replied, smiling. “It’s Amy Murdock.”

“Could I speak with you about your book?”

“Certainly, come in, Mr. . . .”

“Morgan. Thomas Morgan. I was in a prison camp with the A-Team, they helped us all escape.”

“I see,” Amy said, leading the way into a comfortably furnished living room.

After they were settled, Tommy was able to get down to the business at hand.

“I read your book,” she said. “It was a great effort, and it was very accurate, to a point.”

“To a point?”

“Yes. You had the conspiracy theory correct, but there was some information you were missing.”

“What—what might that be?” H.M. asked, defending his wife’s writing.

“Joshua Curtis didn’t kill Colonel Morrison.”

“Yeah? So who did?” he demanded.

“Murdock,” Amy said, trying to silence him.

“Why don’t you take Billy for a walk?”

“No way. Ain’t gonna leave you alone with this guy. Beside, I wanna hear his answer. Who killed Colonel Morrison?”

“I killed him,” Tommy said, feeling the weight of twenty years fall off her shoulders.

Amy and Murdock sat silently for a few moments, staring at their guest in shock as the words penetrated.

When he realized what he had been told, Murdock jumped to his feet and began ranting furiously.

“You got a lot of nerve, comin’ here, saying that. Those guys are my bestest buddies, and they almost died because of you. If it weren’t that they deserve more, I’d kill you myself.”

“You could try,” Tommy agreed. “But I’m pretty hard to kill. If you’ll hear me out, I’ll tell you everything, and give you the proof you need to get the convictions off their records. A pardon isn’t enough, I know that. Saying ‘I’m sorry’ isn’t enough either.”

“Why didn’t you come forward before now?”

Amy asked, taking notes like a consummate reporter.

“I did. I confessed back in ’72, before their first conviction, but someone wanted the A-Team and didn’t care how he got them. I was locked in the mental ward of the V.A. in Los Angeles for over 20 years.”

“Nope,” Murdock shook his head. “I know every guy from 4 West. You weren’t there.”

“I was on 4 South, Mr. Murdock.”

“That’s the women’s wing,” Murdock said, sure he was catching this guy in a lie.

“I know,” Tommy said, before peeling the mustache off. “Hello, stranger.”

“Hey, I remember you! Skeeter, remember I told you about that escapee from the V.A.? This is her. Whatcha been doin’ since you got out?”

“Breaking into the Russian Embassy in Vietnam to get the evidence, hiding from the Army, avoiding the

police. You know, usual things.”

“What have you got here?” Amy asked, tapping the large envelope Tommy brought with her.

“Proof. Audio tape from Hannibal’s meeting with Morrison, originals of the orders, written in Morrison’s own hand. Tape of what really happened when the colonel was killed.”

“I’d like to hear that one,” Murdock said quietly.

“I have an old player in the garage,” Amy said when Tommy pulled out the small reel-to-reel tapes.

“. . . *how do you plan to stop me?*”

Colonel Morrison’s voice was recognizable to the two vets. The sound of clanging was heard, followed by crashes. There was a moment of silence, then repeated explosions.

“I don’t understand,” Amy said, shaking her head. “There was no gunshot. And what was that clanging?”

Tommy hesitated, trying to find a way to explain that would make sense to them.

“Colonel Morrison wasn’t shot, he was beheaded. It’s how we do things.”

“Beheaded,” Amy repeated numbly.

“As in chopped his head off?” Murdock asked, awed. “That’s better than some of the junk I used to come up with. Real original. And who’s this ‘we’ you’re talking about?”

“I have a copy of the original death certificate and official photos from the scene. The ones released at the trial were phony. As for who we are, that’s a long story, and it has to be off the record.”

“Okay,” Amy agreed, setting down her notebook. “Off the record.”

“The most incredible story of my career, and I can’t print it,” Amy moaned.

“Come on, Sugarlips, no one’d believe you anyway,” Murdock soothed. “They’d think my craziness had rubbed off on ya.”

“You believe me?” Tommy asked, relieved.

“People livin’ forever, swords, choppin’ off heads; it’s too outrageous to be made up,” Murdock said. “Trust me, I know crazy, and you ain’t even close.”

“With what I’ve given you, can you get their convictions removed from their records?”

“Yeah,” Amy said, her eyes twinkling with excitement. “Oh, yeah. I can’t wait to tell Hannibal. This is going to be so much fun.”

“Look at that headline,” Face said, holding up the paper. “‘A-Team absolved of wrongdoing. Conspiracy charges levied against CIA.’”

“Yeah,” Hannibal agreed. “I always suspected Stockwell of something, I just couldn’t pin anything on him.”

“He was so nice about our pardons,” Frankie said, “I was ready to keep working for him.”

“He could have strung us along for years,” Hannibal agreed. “Good thing for him I’m in a forgiving mood.”

"Yeah, too bad the Army don't feel the same way," Face said. "I still wanna know 'bout the guy that helped us out. Took long enough to come forward, but at least he tried."

"I don't think that's such a good idea," Murdock said slowly. "You wouldn't believe half what he told Amy an' me."

"Murdock," Amy said, stepping into the room to hand him the portable phone. "It's for you."

"Hello? Yeah . . . you're sure? Okie-dokie," he finished, turning off the phone. "Hey, guys, wanna go to Washington?"

"Okay, Murdock," Face complained as B.A. parked the van. "Tell me what we're doing here again."

"I already tole you, Faceman, we're meetin' a friend."

"Joe's?" Hannibal said. "Why here?"

"Good music?" Murdock guessed. "I dunno. This is where she said to meet."

"She?" Face said, straightening his tie and checking his hair in the side view mirror.

"She's too old for you," Murdock said. "Must be 'bout three hundred or something."

"Very funny, Murdock."

"Man, this fool is startin' again," B.A. complained as they stepped into the bar. "I knew we shoulda brought Amy. Soon as he gets out o her sight, he starts his flabber-jabber."

"Hello, Colonel Smith, I'm glad you could come."

The bar was dim after the bright sunlight outside, and it was difficult for them to see.

"Who's there?" Hannibal asked, squinting to see.

"Tommy Morgan."

"Alias Morgan Thomas, Captain, US Army."

"Among other things, Colonel. Come in and have a drink?"

"I don't drink with people who set me up."

Hannibal's voice was cold and hard.

"Do you drink with people who help clear you?"

"Maybe. I read Amy's article, and the notes she took. Why did you wait so long?"

"I didn't have the A-Team to help me escape from the V.A. mental ward. If I did, I would have been quicker."

"Touché, Captain. How did you break out?"

"Saw the movie *The Deer Hunter*. It brought back a few memories I don't care to repeat. I remembered you, Colonel, and what you did for me in that prison camp. It woke me up. I got angry, and I split."

"What now? You want our undying gratitude?"

"No, not really. I certainly don't expect it."

"Then, exactly what do you want, Miss Thomas?" Face demanded.

"Forgiveness, I suppose. Twenty years is a big chunk out of a man's life. I'm sorry you lost so much because of me."

"Seems to me, you lost that time too."

"You didn't tell," she said, turning to Murdock.

"Amy and I talked it over. Wasn't our secret to tell," Murdock replied, shrugging. "Besides, they

wouldn't have believed me if I did."

"Joe?" she called, "can we get some light?"

"Sure thing, Sasha."

The room slowly brightened around them, until the men were able to see her features clearly.

"You haven't changed a bit. I have photos of you from twenty years ago, and you look exactly the same," Hannibal said before changing the subject. "How did you escape the Cong that day?"

"Just the way you thought I did. As soon as I saw them coming, I blew my own brains out."

"Fascinating," Hannibal said, chewing on his cigar.

"It fascinated the doctors, too. It's probably why they kept me so long. They just couldn't figure out what I am."

"And what's that?"

"Old. Very old," she said wearily.

"Sasha?" Face asked.

"My real name. I was born a long time ago, in what is now part of the ex-Soviet Union."

"You said you grew up in an orphanage," he accused.

"I did. Orthodox nuns were enough to drive anyone to the army, even back then. Look, that isn't—that isn't why I wanted to see you."

"Exactly why did you want to see us?" Hannibal asked.

"For twenty years you were denied the right to live as you pleased. You were hunted and the government probably gave you nothing for your time except a piece of paper saying you're off the hook."

"Your point."

"While you were underground, you worked to help people, like mercenaries, right?"

"Yeah," B.A. agreed. "So?"

"What was your normal rate of pay? What would twenty years have earned you?"

"Lieutenant, you're the numbers man," Hannibal said, turning to Peck.

"Let me see," he replied, pulling out a notepad and calculator. "Twenty years, 365 days is 7300 plus 5 leap days makes 7305 at fifteen hundred a day. Without expenses you're looking at ten million, nine hundred fifty-seven thousand, five hundred dollars. Of course, that's just a rough estimate."

"Of course," Sasha agreed. "Take this number," she added, handing Face a slip of paper. "Please, don't consider it a payoff. I kept some of the money for my twenty years of lost time, though missing the 'disco years' might have been a blessing in disguise."

"This is a phone number in Switzerland," Peck said, frowning slightly.

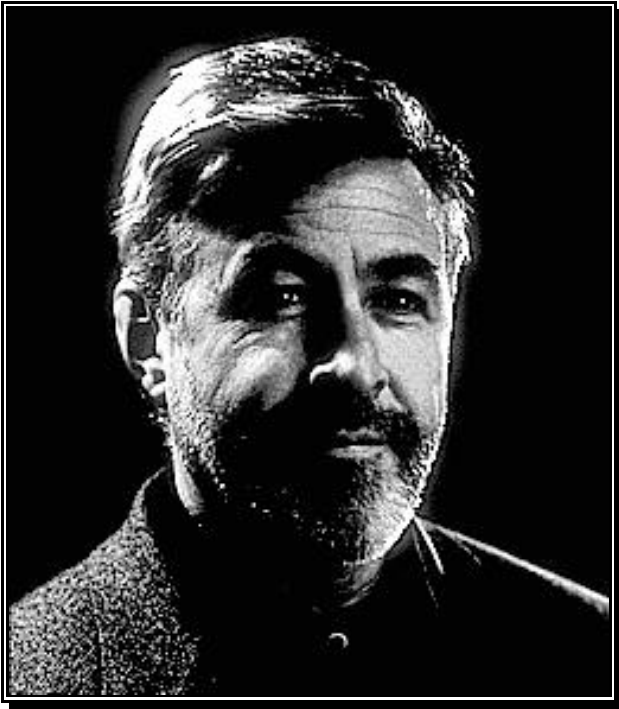
"Yeah," she replied. "The number on the back is for a bank account."

"You killed Morrison for this?" Hannibal asked. "Blood money?"

"No," she said emphatically. "It's not what we do."

"What exactly do you do?"

"We fight, we try to win. Between challenges, we try to enjoy our lives. Morrison cost us *all* a lot of time. He stole your lives, the least he can do is



reimburse you for your time. The money doesn't belong to anyone now. The least we can do is spend it for him."

"Hannibal," Face said, smiling, "I like the way this woman thinks."

Joe's place, later that night . . .

"You gave away fifteen million dollars?" Amanda choked out. "How could you?"

"It was the right thing to do. I kept some, naturally, but only enough to pay for the time Morrison cost me. I really didn't need all that money."

"I think you did the right thing," Joe said, kissing the top of her head before pouring another Cuervo.

"Joe's right," Duncan agreed. "You did the right thing."

"Thanks."

"So what are you going to do now?"

"I thought I'd stick around a while," she replied, resting her head on Joe's shoulder. "Joe offered me a place to stay."

"Yeah," Joe agreed, giving her a small kiss. "We've got a lot of catching up to do."

NIGHTMARE - Hannibal Smith captured! Alone...and in Vietnam once again. Could things possibly get worse? Yes. Stockwell's suicide mission sets off chain reactions totally unexpected. Hannibal meets a nemesis he hasn't seen in 15 years - who has a huge axe to grind with the American Colonel. Finding unexpected MIA's doesn't help. With the Team 1,000 miles away, Hannibal has to delve deep into himself to get through this one, and discovers it may not be enough - discovers things in himself he's not ready for...And then, when it seems hopelessly late to save what's left of him, the Team does - is this still the same man they've known all these years? Just WHAT has to be done to bring back what's left of Smith emotionally? And can they do it? The Team joins with a Cambodian doctor, Maggie Sullivan and an ex-Army medic in Bangkok to do their damndest, while fighting Stockwell and Hannibal's latest overwhelming memories. A suspected love triangle involving Maggie only complicates things further.

NIGHTMARE - approx. 100 page (dbl. sided, 7 pt. print) novella. Adult readers only, age statement MANDATORY. This is not a "/" zine, but does contain elements of graphic POW conditions, sex and male rape. It is a dark, introspective piece, studying the emotional erosion - and strengths - of a man who's "seen it all." For further info, exact price, etc., send SASE to [RITA D. RACTLIFFE, 15500 ERWIN, #297, VAN NUYS, CA 91411](mailto:RITA.D.RACTLIFFE@ERWIN.COM)

DEJA VU - An A-Team Novella. Book Two of the "Nightmare" Trilogy.

He looked at her squarely. "I'm going back, Maggie. I've got to. It isn't just Raskin...there are more POW's back there and I can do something about it." He stood silently, waiting for her reaction.

As the full realization of what he said hit her, she lashed back, stunned. "You can't. Hannibal, you can't. You're too well known in that area now. It would be suicide if you were captured." He looked at her soberly and nodded. "What if you do get caught again? Who'll pick up the pieces? Hannibal, dammit, this is insanity. You can't really mean this!"

Hannibal took her into his arms. "Yes, Maggie, I do...and when you think about it, rationally, you'll see I'm right."

"What if you're hurt - what are we supposed to do then?! Wasn't once enough, goddammit!?"

Her pushed away slightly, looking at her intently. "If I get hurt, or worse...well, we'll just have to live with it."

"You mean I'll have to live with it!" She flung the words furiously at him. Angry, and deeply hurt that he would even consider doing this to her again, she twisted out of his arms and escaped to the sanctuary of the kitchen, damned if she would let him see her frustrated tears...

...Later when his rationale had penetrated and calmed her some, she came back to him. "You wouldn't be the man I love if you did any less. But I'm just so damned scared. You're a wanted man...over there..." Her eyes blinked rapidly, trying to keep the tears from spilling over.

"I'm a wanted man here, Maggie. Not that much difference." He reached down and pulled her up from her crouched position, wrapping his arm around her tenderly, saying nothing, figuring it was best for the moment...

Gathering together his rag-tag ensemble, Hannibal Smith plunges once again into the jungles of Southeast Asia, this time bent on the rescue of throwaway POW's, knowledge of whose existence was brought out by one of their own who managed to escape the US military death squads out for his head. The Team's mission takes them into Thailand, where Doctor Hue rejoins his maverick American friends to aid them in their travels about Cambodia, while laying ghosts of his own to rest. Dodging bandits, drug warlords, Vietnamese and Khmer soldiers, the intrepid band must mount increasing obstacles to even get near their objective, never mind carry it out. And armed with the knowledge that the U.S. Government may be their biggest predator only serves to toughen their resolve to succeed at this mission and finally bring the truth home. However, a devastating bit of knowledge from Vietnam at the end of their trek will change their lives irrevocably.

DEJA VU contemplated for 1998 publishing date. Adult situations and language, age statement over eighteen mandatory. For information or to be put on our mailing list, please send a [SASE to RITA D. RACTLIFFE, 15500 ERWIN, #297, VAN NUYS, CA 91411](mailto:SASE@RITA.D.RACTLIFFE.COM)

The Best Laid Plans...

by Liz Meinert & N.N. Pellegrini

Liz and Nicole sat around Nicole's apartment, bored. "What should we do?" Nicole asked. They had already watched a movie and were more than halfway through their A-Team marathon. Even with their favorite show to entertain them, the two women were growing restless.

Liz grinned evilly. "I have a cunning plan, my lord, that cannot fail," she quoted from Blackadder.

Nicole looked up with interest. "What?"

Liz smirked and pulled out her Swiss army knife. "It's going to take a bit of doing, but I think we can turn your microwave oven into a dimension hopper. Capable of short trips only, I'm afraid."

Nicole sighed. "So we can't go over to the V.A. hospital for a while, huh?"

"Nope." Liz shook her head, then grinned. "But we could always bring it to us . . ."

They exchanged smiles and got to work. Soon Nicole's microwave was unrecognizable. Bits and pieces from other electronics had been hooked to it, and Nicole's computer keyboard was haphazardly strapped to the front.

"Here goes nothing," Liz said, and she flipped the power switch. The microwave hummed with pent-up power. Liz typed "V.A. Hospital, Psych. ward" on the computer keyboard, then, holding her breath, pressed "Enter".

A swirling portal reminiscent of "Sliders" sprang into being. Through it, the two could clearly see Murdock's room at the V.A. They sprang through, ready for action.

"Huh? What?" Murdock mumbled sleepily as he was suddenly awakened. He found himself being tugged out of bed and pulled across the room. Luckily (or unluckily, depending on your point of view) he had been sleeping fully dressed, and grabbed his hat as he was pulled towards the swirling maelstrom.

Liz and Nicole barely managed to pull Murdock through the portal before it snapped closed, the microwave shorting out with a shower of sparks. "Uh-oh," Liz said. But Nicole wasn't worried about her microwave at the moment. She suddenly had her hands full with a fully awake Murdock.

"Where am I? What's going on? You sure don't look like bounty hunters . . . or M.P.s . . ." he trailed off, looking around in confusion.

Nicole exchanged a glance with Liz. "Um . . . you're in my apartment."

Murdock straightened his cap and decided to leave the matter of how he had gotten there for the moment. "Well, kindly let me out." He started for the door.

Liz sprang in front of him and attempted to block the door. "Help me!" she shouted to Nicole. "We can't let him leave, not here!"

Nicole tackled Murdock from behind, and the two of them tumbled to the carpet. Murdock quickly regained his feet, but at that point Liz grabbed the nearest object and threw it at him to distract him. Unfortunately, that object turned out to be Nicole's large cat, Kahlua.

Kahlua yowled and caught Murdock in the chest. Man and cat fell over backwards. Liz jumped on top of him, trying not to squish the cat between them. Murdock was still trying to regain his breath after the cat attack and didn't resist.

"Quick, Nicole!" Liz shouted. "Find something we can tie him up with!" Nicole ran to her bedroom and grabbed the first things that came to hand. A few minutes later, after much struggling, shouts, meowing, hissing and grunting, they had managed to secure the maniac pilot to one of Nicole's chairs . . . with her A-Team curtains.

Breathing hard, Liz turned towards Nicole and asked, "Now what?"

"Yeah, now what—phbt!" Murdock echoed, spitting up a mouthful of Kahlua's fur. The cat was already fully recovered from being used as a projectile and looking for something to eat.

Nicole thought for a moment—certainly, in her more lewd and lusty moments she had thought of *plenty* of things she would have loved to do in such a situation, but suddenly she couldn't actually bring herself to act any of them out . . . yet, at least. "I think I need a drink," she answered, going into the kitchen and pouring out a shot of Tequila. "Hey, maybe we could get him drunk and . . ."

"Erm, maybe not," Murdock insisted. "Y'know, if you have to keep me tied up, couldn't you use something besides these curtains? They smell really funky." He took a better look at the offending fabric and was a bit alarmed to see B.A.'s face plastered all over them. Further examination of the surroundings proved equally bewildering as he spotted a small doll that looked just like B.A. sitting over the computer monitor, and another picture of the mudsucker on what looked like a giant jigsaw puzzle box. There was even a photograph of himself with Socky propped up on the desk. Maybe he was just hallucinating this whole mess, he thought hopefully.

"Sorry, I think the curtains have to stay for now," Liz apologized.

"But what's going on? Why is there all this A-Team stuff around?"

“Oh, that’s cause we built a multi-dimensional travel device with my microwave to come and get you,” Nicole explained. “In this universe, you see, you’re a character on a TV show we’re both crazy about. But the actor who plays you is already married.”

“And besides, he’s only *playing* you—we thought, what could be better than getting the *real* H.M. Murdock! It’s pretty simple, isn’t it?” Liz queried.

Murdock frowned. “No.”

The phone rang. Nicole answered—it was her friend Erik, asking what she was up to. “Well, me and Liz have this really cute guy tied up right now and we’re trying to figure out what to do with him.”

“Gee, sounds like fun,” Erik replied. “Can I come over and help?”

“Mmm . . . I’d don’t think he’s your type, hon.”

Erik sounded disappointed. “Well, have fun, and if you change your mind—”

“Night, Erik.” She hung up the phone quickly and got a second shot of Tequila before rejoining Liz and H.M.

“What *are* we gonna do with him?” Liz pondered.

“You guys didn’t really think this through very well, did you?” asked Murdock.

“Hush,” Nicole scolded him. “Of course we did. We’ve dreamed about doing this for ages. We’re just too nice and too chicken to really rip all your clothes off and molest you.”

Liz added hopefully, “Unless you’d like us to . . .”

“I think I’d like to go home now,” Murdock explained nervously.

“Sorry, the microwave’s shorted out. We can’t send you home until we get a new one,” said Liz.

“Let’s just sit here and admire him for a while,” Nicole suggested with a slight slur. “I mean, we *are* the high priestesses of the Church of Murdock, shouldn’t we just celebrate and worship at the feet of our beloved God?”

“You’re getting drunk,” Liz said. “But, I like the idea anyway.”

And so Murdock endured sitting there, tied to the chair by the smelly old curtains while the two women studied him baseball cap to sneakers and made many critical and embarrassing comments on his anatomy, and only hoped that the rest of the Team would figure out some way of rescuing him . . .

After a while, however, both the women decided that the extended critique and adoration wasn’t completely satisfactory. For one thing Murdock was starting to look more and more worried and uncomfortable. And for another, they couldn’t get a full view of all of his, well, assets while tied up in the curtains—and fully clothed.

“Nah, this just won’t do,” Liz declared with a sigh. “Look at us—we’re torturing the poor baby. We shouldn’t be treating our idol like this.”

“You’re right,” Nicole agreed, sanity returning as the brief alcohol buzz was wearing off. Very softly, she said to Liz, “But we have to convince him to stay here and relax a bit.”

“Don’t worry, I have another plan,” Liz confided. Murdock was watching them with concern, wondering what they were whispering about. Liz said to him finally, “Listen, we don’t want to keep you all wrapped up. We’ll untie you, but you have to promise not to run away again—it’s for your own good, really!”

Murdock sounded dubious. “Uh . . . okay, I promise.”

“Do you promise on Socky and all of his brothers and sisters in sock drawers everywhere?” Nicole pressed.

“And on Thermidor and Herman, and Wally Gator and Billy and all the things Billy’s buried in the back garden at the V.A.?” Liz insisted as well.

Murdock looked at them both in stunned confusion. “How . . . how do you know about Billy? And everything else?”

“We told you—in this universe there’s a TV show all about you guys. That’s how we know all about the Team,” Nicole explained. “Now do you swear on all of the above not to run away again? If you stay we’ll show you some videos of the program to prove it’s true!”

Murdock still wasn’t too sure about this whole situation. He was, after all, still tied to a chair after being dragged out of bed and attacked by the biggest cat he’d ever seen, but it didn’t look like the women truly meant him any harm. Curiosity about this supposed TV show about the Team was getting the better of him as well. “Is it a good show?”

Liz exclaimed, “Oh, it’s the greatest! It’s our absolute favorite show—we were watching it all day before we decided to try to . . . er, find you.”

“Yeah. So, do you promise? Do you?” Nicole asked again eagerly.

“Okay, I promise. Cross my heart—well, cross my heart if I could cross my heart right now.”

Nicole and Liz looked to each other and decided it was okay. Nicole kept her eye on Kahlua, just in case she would be needed for another shot-put toss. Liz walked up to Murdock and slowly untied the curtains. As soon as he was free, Murdock stood up and stretched. He looked longingly at the apartment door, but he *had* promised.

“All right. Let’s see this TV show.” He sat down in front of the TV expectantly.

“Okay.” Nicole went over to the VCR and looked at the tape currently in it. “Let’s see, the next one on this tape is ‘Firing Line’.”

Liz looked frightened. “Uh, let’s try a different tape,” she suggested.

Nicole nodded. “Right.” She got another tape and put it into the VCR.

And so things went for the next few hours. After the initial shock of seeing himself and his buddies on the screen, Murdock found himself enjoying the show—even if it did tend to downplay his own role with the Team, an opinion he found the two women shared. Pleased, he started regaling them with stories about some of his own exploits. Many of them were much more outrageous than had ever been shown on TV—probably because in this universe the scripts never would have made it past the network censors.

“You see, this is why we have to keep you here, until we can get you back home,” Liz was trying to explain to Murdock. “In this universe, violence doesn’t happen as it does on the show—in *your* universe.” For emphasis, they watched a car do a triple-flip off the ramp on the back of a semi, land first on its side and then on the roof. Both passengers stumbled out unharmed. “In this world, something like that happens, and those guys would be dead!”

“Really?” Murdock was amazed. “But car crashes never kill anyone.”

“So you think. And in this world, bad guys with machine guns don’t aim just at tires and concrete. They’ll shoot and actually try to kill you,” Liz continued.

“Unbelievable!”

Nicole pointed out, “Besides that, there’s another problem. Maybe more serious. You see, there’s this other guy Dwight Schultz running around out there right now. Suppose you go outside and run into him on the street—what would happen next?” she pondered. Never mind that Dwight was probably several thousand miles away from Philadelphia at the moment. “We don’t understand what sort of weird physics are going on here. It could be a . . . like a big matter/anti-matter explosion or something. Or like good Kirk and bad Kirk. Or . . .”

“Or the simple fact that women might mistake you for him and mob you because you’re such a big star,” Liz added. “Women less concerned about your safety than us.”

“I—I mean, he’s that big of a star?”

“You bet,” Nicole lied a bit. “All of you guys are big stars now.”

Murdock thought over the implications of all this information, watching a helicopter smash right into a cliff-side, tumble down in a flaming pile of metal and debris, while the pilot climbed out to safety. “He’d be dead right now?” Murdock asked, trying to understand the logic of this strange place.

“Deader than this city on a Sunday evening,” Nicole confirmed.

“Then I guess I probably should stay in here. Doesn’t sound like a very nice place out there.”

“Wise choice. Don’t worry, we’ll take good care of you until we can find a new microwave,” Nicole said, exchanging a satisfied glance with Liz.

After a while, Murdock decided he was hungry and wandered into the kitchen for a bite to eat. Liz took the opportunity to drag Nicole into the bedroom to talk.

“Conference time,” she whispered, and looked worried.

“What is it?” Nicole was busy thinking of ways to turn Murdock’s stories into fanzine material.

“Nicole, what are we going to do? Even if we get another microwave, I don’t know if we can send him back!”

“What do you mean? We did it once.”

“Well, I’m not exactly sure what I did.”

“You’re not?”

“No. I didn’t think it would really work, so I didn’t really bother to pay much attention to what I was doing.”

Nicole took a deep breath. “Oh, boy.”

Before Liz could make the obligatory *Quantum Leap* reference, they were startled by a strangled cry from the front room. Running in, they found Murdock standing by Nicole’s ’zine box, a ’zine open in his hands. He was shaking slightly, and staring at the open book. Liz snuck around to see what the pilot had found so horrifying. “Uh-oh.”

“What is it?” Nicole hurried over to them.

“He found your slash zines.”

Nicole stopped in shock. “Oh dear.”

They both looked nervously at the pilot, who was still looking at a picture of Faceman and himself in a, well, embarrassing position. “What is this?!? What’s going on??? This is *disgusting!*!” He turned and glared at them.

Liz gulped, and pointed at Nicole. “They’re hers,” she proudly defended her friend.

“Er, um . . . well, I mean . . . see, I just collect *everything* that’s out there about the Team—I don’t necessarily *like* or *agree* with how some people may choose to portray you guys . . .” Nicole struggled to explain while not fainting from embarrassment. “I mean, it’s not even a very good likeness of either of you,” she said critically of the picture.

“Neither of us writes anything like that ourselves,” Liz added, quickly getting the ’zine out of Murdock’s hands and digging through the box for something a little more polite. She handed him copies of *Plans Scams and Vans* and the other Sockii Press ’zines. Nicole grew greatly relieved; she *knew* there’d been a good reason she published her slash stuff under a pseudonym! “Here! Look—these are our ’zines. Both of us write lots of nice stories about you.”

“—And you always get the *girl*, too,” Nicole added for clarification. “Well, at least in these,” she added under her breath to herself.

Warily Murdock looked over the titles, flipping through the pages to check the artwork before deciding it was safe to read. “Ooh, *Star Trek!*” he exclaimed, noticing one of the crossover stories. “Do we all get to be on the *Enterprise*?”

“You bet!” Nicole said. “In fact, in this universe, you really *are* on the *Enterprise* already. The actor who’s you on *The A-Team* also had a character on *Star Trek*.”

“Wow, I want to see that,” Murdock said.

“Great, we can watch some of that next on TV. Just give us a few minutes here, H.M.” Liz pulled Nicole back upstairs for another conference. “That was a close one—why do you leave those things sitting out for anyone to see, anyway?”

“Look, they’re all way in the back of the box—and I certainly was never expecting a visit like this! He must have just picked them out because of the bright fluorescent covers,” Nicole decided.

“Well, at least we didn’t *completely* freak him out and have him try to run away again.”

“You were telling me why he might be stuck here,” Nicole changed the subject.

“Right. Like I said, I have no clue how we’re going to recreate things exactly the same way and get him back to the V.A. at the same place and time in his universe where we picked him up. Suppose we’re off by a little bit. He might show up after being missing for a few months—maybe even a year or two! Or worse, maybe into the completely wrong dimension!”

“That would be bad,” Nicole agreed. “In that case, we’d better just keep him here. I’ll take good care of him.”

“I bet. You think you can keep him locked up in this apartment for more than a day or two? We’re talking about the guy who’s always breaking out of the V.A. Hospital! I don’t know how many more times that trick with the cat will work, either.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

“What about when you have to go into lab and work during the week?”

“Look, why do you have to keep ruining my fantasies here? Besides, it’s not going to happen that way, I’m sure. You’re forgetting about the rest of the Team.”

“What about them?”

“Soon enough, they’ll figure out what happened, and B.A. will build his own dimensional-travel device to bring Murdock back. It’ll all work out fine. In fact he’ll probably build a device a helluva lot better than ours. See, they’re all still back in the A-Team La La Land universe where everything works out nice and nifty in the end. They *have* to rescue him! So, in the meantime, we should just make the most of this situation. If you know what I mean.”

“Uh huh. So, how are we gonna get him to get undressed?”

As it happened, Murdock took care of that little problem on his own. They heard another scream from the front room and ran back in, hardly daring to look. Had he found another slash ’zine? Or maybe just the *Chippendale’s* story?

It was actually much worse. He had found the bottle of ammonia Nicole kept under the kitchen sink.

Murdock was sitting on top of the kitchen counter, looking very upset. While they could not smell anything, it was obvious the pilot did.

“Uh-oh,” Liz said again. It was starting to be a very useful phrase. “What if his violent cycle is triggered? We might not be able to handle him.”

Nicole pondered the problem as she warily approached Murdock. “H.M.?” she asked. “Are you okay?”

“NONONONONONO! I’M NOT OKAY!!!!” he shouted. “It’s gonna eat through my shoes!”

Liz grabbed the bottle and ran to the apartment door. “Look, Murdock,” she called, “I’m putting it outside. It won’t be able to get you from outside.” She placed the bottle outside the door and closed it again, then ran back to the kitchen. “It’s all right,” she said, in soothing tones. “Everything’s all right now.”

“It’s safe to come down now,” Nicole added, and held out her hand to him. “See? It’s not eating through my shoes. Come on down.”

The two of them finally coaxed the pilot off the counter. Noticing a small stain on his trousers, Liz got

a truly wicked idea. “Murdock!” she shouted. “What’s that on your pants? Did some ammonia get spilled?”

Nicole looked at her, shocked, then grinned. Murdock looked frantically down at his legs. “Where? Where?!”

Liz pointed. “Right there.”

Murdock yelped and quickly pulled off his pants. They would not come off over his shoes, so he was forced to take those off, too.

Nicole joined in. “Hey, I think there’s some on your jacket.”

“And on your shirt,” Liz added.

The jacket and flannel shirt came off in rapid succession.

“What’s that on your T-shirt?” Nicole wondered, and the T-shirt added to the growing pile of clothes on the floor.

Murdock stood in the middle of the floor, clad only in his baseball cap, socks, and white boxer shorts with red hearts all over them.

“Well, we got him undressed,” Liz murmured to Nicole, as the two of them looked at him. “Now what? Um . . . Nicole?”

Nicole, however, was too busy trying to pick her jaw up off the floor. Liz nudged her hard. “Nicole!”

She managed a small whimper this time. Liz gave a strong yank on her friend’s hair and finally got her attention back . . . mostly. “Huh? Oh, you’re still here, are you.”

Liz realized Nicole was going to be of no help at the moment. Murdock was still in a panic over the ammonia, checking out his arms and hands for any stray drops that might have fallen on his skin while removing the contaminated garments. “Is it gone? Is it all gone now?” he asked.

“Yes, yes, the terrible ammonia is all gone now. Don’t worry, no more ammonia,” she assured him calmly, then moving a few steps closer and asking, “You shouldn’t be scared—would a hug make you feel better?”

Liz didn’t give him much chance to answer beyond, “Uh . . . mayb—” before grabbing him in a big hug.

Nicole, finally coming to her senses (and certainly not planning to let Liz get all the attention), yelled out, “Group hug!” and ran up to grab him from the other side.

Getting another truly evil idea, Liz commenced a tickling attack on Murdock and within seconds all three of them tumbled down onto the floor in a very confused tangle. Of course just as things were looking to get *incredibly* interesting (and beyond the confines of a PG-rated ’zine story), there was a strange rumbling sound and a weird swirl of colors and lights exploded into the middle of the living room. Out of it ran B.A., Face and Hannibal, guns raised and firing madly at the ceiling and the windows. Plaster and shattered glass fell all over everything.

“Don’t you dare hit my art glass collection!” Nicole screamed.

It was then that the newly arrived Team members actually took the time to see exactly where they were—and where exactly Murdock was. “Murdock?!” the three

all exclaimed in shock as they saw him in his presently barely attired state, on the floor with two young women.

“Hey guys!” he answered cheerily as he jumped to his feet, happy to see them. Then he realized why they were all looking at him in horror.

“Uh, I can explain everything,” Nicole, Liz and Murdock all muttered nearly in unison.

“I’ll bet,” Hannibal replied, taking out a cigar and lighting it.

Face shook his head in wonder. “Murdock, all this time, and we never knew . . .” B.A. said nothing at all, as he was often wont to do.

Murdock adjusted his baseball cap, which had gotten knocked partly off during the tickle fight, and said, “Well, see, these two ladies here—” he motioned to Nicole and Liz, who were picking themselves up off the floor “—they built an interdimensional device and plucked me right out of the V.A. Then they tied me up and—”

Nicole cut him off. “We didn’t hurt him, honest. We wouldn’t think about hurting any of you.” Liz was too busy staring at the colonel and Face to help her friend.

“Yeah,” Murdock agreed, “they’re very nice girls.”

“I can see that,” Face muttered.

“Hey, did you know that we’re a TV show here, Colonel? A real live TV show! Pretty neat, huh guys?”

Hannibal was shaking his head in confusion. He picked up Murdock’s clothes and handed them to the pilot. “Here, you can tell us about it while you get dressed.”

Murdock quickly dressed (much to the girls’ dismay), the excitement of seeing his friends having driven all thoughts of ammonia out of his mind, and explained in five minutes what it had taken the two women all afternoon to explain to him. Since the rest of the Team already knew they were in another dimension, it didn’t take long to convince them of the truth.

While they were talking, Nicole and Liz surveyed the wreck that had been Nicole’s apartment. “Boy, the landlord’s gonna be *pissed*,” Liz declared.

Nicole could only nod her head in agreement. Liz grinned at her. “Hey, you don’t wanna let them get away now, do you?”

“No. What do you have in mind?”

“You’ll see.” Liz turned to Hannibal, and, swallowing a knot of fear, decided it was time to talk. “Introductions first. My name’s Liz, and that’s Nicole.”

Hannibal nodded. “You already know who we are, I suppose?”

She nodded. “Colonel John ‘Hannibal’ Smith, Lieutenant Templeton ‘Faceman’ Peck, and Sergeant Bosco ‘B.A.’ Baracus.” At the scowl on B.A.’s face, Liz realized it might have not been such a good idea to give B.A.’s full name. *Oh well, too late now.* “And, Hannibal, I think you owe my friend here for what you did to her apartment.”

Hannibal looked around at the damage, but didn’t seem upset. “What about it? You can fix it up, easy.”

Nicole paled. “Easy? *Easy!* Do you know how much this will cost?”

Murdock added, “Yeah, Colonel, things are different in this universe.”

“Oh.” Hannibal thought for a few seconds.

“Well, there’s nothing we can do about it. Sorry.”

“But there is something,” Liz persisted. “You can take us with you.”

“What?” Hannibal, Face, Murdock, B.A. and Nicole all shouted together.

“You owe it to us—at least to her—to take us with you. When the landlord sees this, he’s gonna call the police because of the bullet holes—if he hasn’t already from the noise. Then, with no evidence of other people, they’ll assume Nicole and I did it. They’d haul us off and toss us in jail for twenty years.” Which wasn’t necessarily true, but she was counting on the fact that they wouldn’t know that. “You can’t let two innocent women sit in jail for twenty years, can you? See, if we go with you, the police will assume it was a kidnapping. Then, when we come back later, we just tell them the kidnapers let us go for some reason. By then, everyone will be so glad to have us back that they won’t care about the apartment.” Liz held her breath and waited.

Hannibal puffed on his cigar and thought for another minute. “Nope,” he said finally. “I feel bad for what might happen, but I can’t take you back with us.”

“But—” Nicole started.

“No buts.” Hannibal’s mind was made up.

“Okay, if that’s the way you feel about it,” Liz sighed, giving up. Nicole looked at her in amazement.

“I’m glad to see you’re finally seeing sense.”

Hannibal turned towards B.A. “Fire it up, B.A.”

“Right, Hannibal.” B.A. pressed a button on a small remote control unit and the vortex exploded into being behind them.

Nicole was upset. “But they can’t go without us, they can’t go! I haven’t even gotten to say good-bye to Murdock!”

Liz grabbed her arm. “Shhhhhh!” she whispered. “Don’t worry, we’re going with them. Trust me.”

“We are?”

“Yes. Just be ready to jump when I say.”

Hannibal finished watching the vortex form and then turned back to them. “Well, it’s been nice meeting you girls, but we have to go.”

Liz nodded farewell. “Nice to meet you.” She elbowed Nicole, who also said, “Bye.” The A-Team then jumped one by one through the portal. As the last member got ready to go through, Liz whispered, “Ready?” Then shouted, “Now!” They jumped at the same moment Faceman went through.

There was a swirling sensation of light and sound, and then they were standing in what looked like an old, abandoned warehouse. A pile of strange machinery was sitting next to them, the vortex generator B.A. had built to rescue Murdock. While the Team recovered themselves, Nicole snatched quickly at an important-looking component of the machine, which promptly came off in her hand. She also tried to do a quick visual inventory of the machine—just in case.

As expected, Hannibal was furious when he saw them. "What are you doing here?"

Liz shrugged. "We must've been standing too close when you went through, and it grabbed us too."

Hannibal didn't believe a word of it. "B.A., send them back."

B.A. grunted, and flipped a switch on the side of the machine. There were a few sparks, a grinding noise, then silence.

"What's wrong?" Hannibal demanded. B.A. bent over the machine and started checking it.

Liz leaned over to Nicole. "Lucky break for us it shorted out, huh, Nicole?"

Nicole smiled and showed Liz the piece she had taken before placing it carefully in her pocket. Liz frowned at it, then grinned as realization struck her. "Good job!"

"Thanks." Nicole tried to keep from laughing as B.A. stood up and wiped his hands on his overalls. "I can't figure it, Hannibal. A main component's missing. Must've burned out when we came back."

"Can you fix it?"

"Yeah, but it'll take me a while."

"How long?"

Before B.A. could answer, they all heard sirens in the distance. Face ran over to the window and looked out. After a few seconds, he ran back to the group.

"Decker!" he reported unhappily.

"Ah, great," Hannibal muttered. "B.A., can you fix it before Decker gets here?"

"No way, Hannibal."

"You can't leave us here for Decker to find!" Nicole said.

"Yeah!" Liz agreed. "We don't exist over here, we have no I.D., no money, we may or may not have doubles and then who knows what they might have done."

Hannibal looked troubled. "They have a point," Face said, and Murdock nodded. Even B.A. looked sad at the thought of leaving two relatively innocent people in Decker's clutches.

Hannibal sighed, and said, "Okay, everybody in the van."

"Yes!" Liz and Nicole shouted, then ran after the departing men. They jumped into the side door of the black-and-red vehicle with a flourish learned from watching their heroes use the same maneuver countless times. The van was already moving as Face closed the door behind them, Nicole quickly squeezing in next to Murdock and Liz landing contentedly in Face's lap.

"Helloooo Nurse!" Liz said in her best *Anima-niacs* impersonation, gazing up into the lieutenant's eyes and smiling. Face fidgeted and attempted to fix his tie. "Oh here, let me . . ." Liz volunteered, straightening the garment and loosening it slightly.

After crashing through the warehouse door and hitting the road, the van lurched around a sharp turn and the sirens were drawing closer. Gunfire was chasing them as well by this point, and Hannibal leaned out the window on his side to return fire at the M.P.s' cars.

"Hey man, they're actually shootin' up my ride!" B.A. exclaimed as gunfire pinged against the vehicle. That seemed odd to the girls, because the bad guys

usually had the courtesy to shoot up cement in this universe. But they were still too wrapped up in the excitement of the chase to think about it.

"I'm scared," Nicole said to Murdock, looking up at him earnestly. "I think I need a hug." Since both girls had been so accommodating to him when he was panicking over the ammonia, he couldn't really refuse to return the favor. She felt much relieved with Murdock's arm around her waist and exchanged a quick wink with Liz.

"Better?" Murdock inquired.

"Much," Nicole replied.

After they had torn through the streets for another few minutes, ran into several fruit and flower stands, nearly collided with a semi and Hannibal had successfully put one of the M.P.s' cars out of commission, Liz commented, "Should be just about time for some road construction or detour signs to come up."

Indeed, just then B.A. took a turn-off onto a highway and was greeted by "Overpass Construction—Use Next Exit" warnings on bright orange and black signs.

"Hey man, how'd you know that?" he demanded.

Liz shrugged. "Pretty standard plot device."

"What're we gonna do now?" B.A. asked Hannibal. The M.P.s were not about to give up the chase yet.

"Go for the overpass," Hannibal, Liz and Nicole all said together. The colonel turned around to frown at the girls.

"Don't blame us, blame the scriptwriters," Nicole said.

The colonel wanted to say something else but by that point B.A. had put pedal firmly to the medal, gunning the van at full speed along the deserted highway. It was hard to see, at this distance, exactly how much of the overpass was out. Even as they drew closer it was difficult to tell if they had a chance of making the jump over the missing section of highway or not.

As they prepared for "take-off" no one spoke, afraid to disturb B.A.'s concentration. The girls simply (and quite happily, mind you) hung on to their protectors of choice even tighter and suppressed screams as the van went airborne. A few stomach churning seconds later and the van landed with a thud, making it across the fallen section of concrete with no doubt only a few inches to spare.

Hannibal watched out the side window and announced to B.A., "No one else tried it. We're home free. I love it—"

"When a plan comes together!" the girls announced.

"Well I don't, man. I think my suspension's shot!" B.A. announced, in tune to the response of his vehicle like no one else. As they continued driving, the ride much bumpier than before, he said, "We may have had to make that foo' jump but the van ain't drivin' too good now. Funny though, 'cause we've done that enough times 'fore without no problems. I gotta check it out 'fore it stops for good and we can't go nowhere."

"I'm sure there's another abandoned warehouse somewhere nearby we can hide out in, right?" Liz asked.

“Will you two—” Hannibal started, but Face interrupted.

“Actually, guys, there *is* one I was scouting out not far from here the other day. Near the docks. Take a left up ahead.”

Another few minutes of driving and then waiting while Face picked the lock and they were inside the warehouse. B.A. was quickly under the van, trying to assess the damage. While they waited for the verdict, Hannibal was taking advantage of the time to really give it to the two ladies that had kidnapped Murdock.

“I don’t care if you *are* our biggest fans—I don’t like kidnapers, and I don’t like the fact that we’re stuck with you right now. Whatever trick you managed to pull so that we couldn’t send you right back to your own ‘universe’ or wherever it is you come from—” he glared at them accusingly but they were both all-innocence—“trust me, you’re going back as soon as we know the military is off our tails and we can go fix the machine.”

“Colonel, they’re actually pretty nice ladies,” Murdock defended them. “They treated me real good—”

“We could see that,” Face remarked.

“No, really! They only kept me tied up for a little while.”

“Was that before or after they got you undressed?” Face inquired.

“I wish . . .” Nicole whispered to Liz. “Oh never mind. Listen—” she spoke up to Hannibal now, “we’re sorry we did what we did and worried you all about Murdock. But we had no intentions of harming him. And I think you should give us a chance. We’re not a pair of floozies with no brains or talent, like Tawnia was—you guys *have* met Tawnia already, right?”

Hannibal, Face and Murdock exchanged puzzled glances. “Er, well, never mind then,” Nicole continued. “Look, I’m an engineer! Got my degree from MIT and everything. I can help with a lot of mechanical things. And Liz here is a great writer and an actor too. With all the scamming you guys do, you could use someone with some real theatrical abilities—to work with Face, naturally.”

“Besides,” Liz added. “You’ve seen already that we can predict what’s going to happen to you guys really well from watching you on TV for so long. Wouldn’t that come in handy when you’re on a job? We could tell you exactly when the bad guy is gonna try to trick you, or when Decker is gonna show up . . .”

“Wait a minute, how did this conversation turn into a recruiting pitch?” Face asked with concern.

B.A. got out from under the van, shaking his head and looking upset. “No good, man. Can fix some of the damage, maybe take another hour or so, but I got a couple bad leaks. Gonna need t’get some replacement parts before she’s up to any heavy drivin’. Otherwise she’ll be leakin’ oil, maybe even gasoline, all over the road.”

Hannibal pulled out a cigar and lit it up, thinking for a minute. Turning to Nicole, he said, “All right, you’re so good at mechanics, see if you can help B.A. get the van up and rolling.”

Nicole smiled. “No problem, Colonel Smith. Not only do I have a degree in engineering, but I spent half my childhood under the hoods of cars with my grandfather. He always said it would come in handy someday—even if I still don’t have a damn driver’s license. But anyway, leaks are my specialty. You’ve got some Teflon Tape, I assume?” she asked B.A. He nodded. “Then I think we’re in business.”

“What, no duct tape?” Liz asked, and Nicole smiled. B.A. frowned, then motioned to Nicole to get to work.

Face took Liz off to one side. “All right. We’re going to need some spare parts for the van. There’s an auto parts store a mile or so, but we’re a little short of cash right now.”

“Like you pay for anything even when you have money.”

“Never mind that. Now, you’re supposed to be an actress?” Liz nodded. “Well, I’ll take you along this time, but just to watch. Do exactly as I tell you, and maybe—just maybe—you’ll learn something useful.” He didn’t sound too hopeful, and Liz glowered at him.

“Okay. I’ll be with you in a sec.” She wandered over to Nicole, and tapped her on the shoulder.

“Nicole, next time I get to sit with Murdock, okay? Faceman’s a real jerk.”

“Well, you knew that already,” Nicole replied.

“Yeah. But he’s a cute jerk. Maybe I can bring him around.”

“At least we haven’t had to put up with Hannibal’s male chauvinism yet.”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure we’ll get it at some point.” Liz smiled. “You know, if they don’t know Tawnia, that means it’s still first or second season. Which means Murdock hasn’t met the vet yet.” She winked at Nicole. “Well, I gotta go help Face with a scam for parts. See ya in a little while.”

“Right.” Nicole turned back to her work, and Liz walked out with Face.

As they were walking down the road, Liz turned to Face. “Do you really hate having us along that much?”

Face had the decency to blush. “Aren’t you gonna ask about what you have to do?”

“No, you’ll tell me when you’re ready, probably right before we go in there.”

He jumped slightly, startled. “That’s really weird, how you do that. Now I know why you get along with Murdock so well.” He grinned. “Tell me, just how, and why, was he undressed? I mean, if it was me, I could understand it, but Murdock?”

Liz sighed. “Modest, aren’t you? Well, Nicole and I like Murdock a lot. We got him undressed by convincing him he had gotten ammonia on his clothes. It was a dirty trick, thinking back on it now. The trouble was, once we had him undressed . . .” She trailed off, uncertain how much she should tell him.

“Yes?” Face’s voice was surprisingly gentle.

“He was standing there, practically naked, like in our wildest fantasies, but then it turned out we were both to chicken to do anything.”

“It looked like you were certainly ‘doing something’ to me.”

“That was just a tickle fight. Perfectly harmless, unfortunately.” She sighed and looked away.

“That’s okay.” Faceman’s voice was soft, almost too soft to be heard. “You know, sometimes when I find myself with a beautiful lady, especially one I’ve had my eye on for a while, I’m not sure what to do either.”

Liz stared in disbelief. “You? Yeah, right. You’d give her some wine, some smooth double-talk, and then take her to bed.”

“Well, yeah, but that’s not really me doing that, that’s whatever persona I happen to be using right then.” Face didn’t know why he was confiding in this stranger, but it felt good to finally talk about some of these things.

Liz nodded. “I certainly know about hiding behind personas. Maybe that’s why I became an actress,” she trailed off, and the two finished their walk in companionable silence.

As they neared the store a while later, Face turned towards her. “Okay, here’s the plan.”

“We’re auto parts inspectors and some of their parts are defective and we have to confiscate them?”

“Would you stop doing that?”

“Sorry.”

“Yes, that’s it exactly. Now keep quiet and let me do the talking.” He sighed, and looked down at his suit and Liz’s jeans and T-shirt. “Not exactly the best outfits for this sort of scam. And I don’t have much in the way of props. No clipboard, nothing.” He pulled out his wallet and managed to find an appropriate business card.

“Don’t worry, it’ll work.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because we need the parts to continue with the episode, and this is the only place to get them. Besides, even when you don’t have any props, it still manages to work.”

“True.” He grinned. “And confidence always helps a performance. Shall we?” He opened the door of the store and walked in.

The scam was going well. Liz played the assistant, recalling exactly what parts they were after for her boss, “Mr. Temple”, and even giving the clerk a stern talking to when he wasn’t inclined to be very helpful. At first, Face glared at her for altering the script, but when it worked, his gaze softened. Soon, Face had all the necessary parts, and was concluding the deal when Liz noticed the nervous looks of the clerks and the two security guards walking towards them.

“Excuse me, Mr. Temple?”

“Not now, Eliza.”

“But, Mr. Temple—”

“I said not now!”

She sighed. “Sir, this is very important.” She grabbed his arm and turned him so he could see the oncoming guards.

“Ah, uh, yes, thank you. Good day,” he told the clerk, and then sotto voice to Liz, “Just walk out nice and easy. Nothing’s wrong.”

“Fly casual?” she whispered back, and he looked at her, puzzled.

As they walked towards the door, the guards picked up their pace. When it became obvious that the guards would intercept them before they reached the door, Face suddenly shouted, “RUN!”

They did. Pandemonium erupted behind them, with guards running and clerks scattering to get out of the way. Once outside the building, Face skittered around the corner and took off for the store’s warehouse. Liz followed at a run, clutching the precious parts to her chest. Once inside the warehouse, they quickly found a place to hide and waited. The guards, who hadn’t seen them duck into the building, assumed they had gone on and kept running. Once everyone was safely away (and he had caught his breath) Face turned towards Liz.

“It has to work, huh?”

“I’ve been thinking about that myself. It should’ve worked. Well, at least we got the parts.” She dumped them into his arms, and, after taking one last look to make sure there was no one around, stood up. Suddenly a horrified expression crossed her face. She thought back on the gunfire and earlier damage to the van, and now how the scam had fallen apart . . . “Oh no! Nicole! The guys! Face, we have to get back there, quickly!”

“Why?”

“Decker might find them!”

“No way, we lost him at the overpass.”

“In your unaltered universe, yes, but not now—look, I don’t have time to explain, I just have a feeling that our being here might be interfering with the way this universe normally works. We gotta get back there now, before it gets any worse!”

Face glanced around the parking lot, and wandered over to a car. “They won’t mind if we just borrow this for a little while,” he said as he picked the lock and hot-wired it. As he peeled out of the parking lot, Liz looked at him.

“You’re gonna have to show me how to do that.”

Faceman turned his head long enough to give her his trademark “sunny day” grin, and Liz felt her heart melt. She sank back against the seat, her worry for her friends temporarily forgotten.

Meanwhile, back at the warehouse, B.A. and Nicole had finished pretty quickly what they could on the van until the parts arrived. She’d even managed to get a few secrets out of B.A. about how he’d kept his dimension-hopper stable. More importantly, she was pretty sure she’d figured out the mechanics of how exactly the hoppers worked, and had a good idea about what they were going to need to do next to get out of the mess they’d created that afternoon.

While they were waiting for Liz and Face to return, Nicole was taking the time to check out some computer and office equipment found in one of the back-rooms of the warehouse (because warehouses the A-Team stumbled into *always* had those crucial useful materials just sitting around). B.A. and Hannibal were checking out their ammo supplies, and Murdock had followed her, curious as to what she was up to.

“See, once you have the CPU and a programmable input device like this—” she lifted the

old Apple IIe console found in the office—“a source of microwave radiation and a device sufficient to create a tachyon burst—” she whipped out the very important bit she’d pilfered off B.A.’s contraption—“there’s not much more to it. Once you’ve made the proper quantum mechanical calculations, at least.” She dumped the guts of the office’s microwave on the table and searched for the proper components she needed to build a new device.

Murdock nodded, brow furrowed in concentration as he watched her work. “You use the Grand Canonical approach to closed-system entropy, with a Fourier Transform solution set to resolve the boundary conditions and determine the proper coordinates?”

“Yeah, exactly! Of course the first time we just told it to head for the V.A. and it worked. But my Mac is a lot more advanced than this old machine so ya gotta crunch through the numbers. Oow!” She jumped back as the computer sparked when she connected the terminal to the gutted microwave, using some tools borrowed from B.A.’s set. When it didn’t all go up in flames, she was satisfied the electrical connections would hold and went back to furiously programming the computer. “Damn good thing I still remember BASIC . . .”

“But why are you trying to build a new device? Once we get the van fixed, we’ll get back to B.A.’s dimension hopper and fix it up to get you gals home.”

“I have a feeling things aren’t going to be that easy. You see, after we brought you to our universe, opening a portal to our reality, I’m now starting to wonder if we didn’t affect things adversely in this universe, too. The van, for instance—we should have made that jump no problem at all in this universe, like B.A. said. We could be bringing the ‘laws’ of our universe into play here with us—and simply going home now probably wouldn’t fix things at this point. I just hope Face and Liz make out okay and get back here before things get too screwed up.”

As if on cue, they heard a car screech to a halt outside. They both got out and ran into the main hall of the warehouse and saw Liz and Face come inside.

“You get the parts?” B.A. was demanding a response from the con artist and aspiring actress.

“Yeah, but it wasn’t easy! The scam fell apart, and we had to run out of there, security guards on our heels. I tell ya,” Face paused to straighten his tie, “it just didn’t feel right. Not to a skilled professional like myself. Should have been—”

“A piece of cake,” Nicole and Liz finished together, exchanging concerned glances that told them they’d both guessed the same thing was happening. While the guys got to work finishing up the van, Nicole led Liz to the back.

“Decker’s gonna be here any minute now, don’t you think?” Liz breathed uneasily.

“Our universe is contaminating theirs—all the rules that have kept them from getting into serious trouble are falling apart—and it’s our fault for first opening the portal.”

“That’s what I was realizing too. So what’re we gonna do?”

“Help me carry this stuff over to the van. I’ve figured out this dimension-hopping business and I think I know where we can get help straightening out the anomalies we’ve caused,” Nicole told Liz.

“Where? We’re taking another dimension jump?”

“Exactly. Think about it—what fictional universe do we know about that deals with spatial/dimensional/temporal anomalies on a daily basis?”

Together they hefted the device into the back of the van, and Liz paused as she realized, “Oh, yeaaaaah . . .”

The Team members didn’t have a chance to ask the girls what in the world they were putting in the van before the sound of wailing sirens and rumbling engines drew near outside.

“Decker?!” B.A. groaned. “Aw man, I thought we lost ’im.”

“Apparently not,” Hannibal replied.

From outside, a familiar gravely voice rumbled, “Give it up, Smith! We know you’re in there and we’ve got you surrounded. You’ve got thirty seconds to come out with your hands up before we tear that place to smithereens.”

“The van in working order now?” Hannibal asked B.A.

“Hope so.” B.A. did not sound entirely convinced, however.

“It better. Everyone inside the van—we’ve got an olive drab party to crash,” Hannibal ordered.

Murdock jumped inside with a whoop of delight. Face followed with a sigh, and B.A. with a growl. “I really hate days like today,” Face said as he slid the door shut, reaching back for a machine gun he was sure he’d need to use once they crashed through the door.

“You girls take cover back there,” Hannibal said humorlessly.

“You’d think he blames us for all of this,” Nicole muttered under her breath.

“Well, he wouldn’t exactly be wrong in thinking that, would he?” Liz countered. “If it wasn’t for us Decker would probably be gone until the end of the episode. That thing ready?”

“Just about,” Nicole said, as she typed in a command sequence. The old computer beeped, and the microwave components began to grumble and hum to life—though no one in the front of the van could hear the noise over the revving of the van’s engine. “Hold on, we need one more thing—something to diffract the vortex field and make it large enough for all of us to pass through at once.”

Liz pulled off a necklace, handing it to Nicole. It had a large crystal pendant on it. “That work?”

“Hope so. Hang on.”

Just then gunfire erupted, and the wheels of the van screeched as they were hurled forward. Nicole dropped the crystal into the center of the distortion field being created in the back of the van, and entered the final coordinates right as the van was about to come in close, personal contact with the warehouse wall.

All that the M.P.s observed from their vantage point outside was a giant flash of light and a crackling of thunder, just as the back wall of the warehouse

exploded and the A-Team van came forth in a cloud of debris. When their eyesight returned, the bewildered M.P.s found that there was no sign of the van, or the A-Team.

“Where are they?!” Decker bellowed, slamming his fist on the hood of his sedan, causing Captain Crane to jump back in horror. “Damn it, Captain! What in God’s name just happened!”

. . . At that moment, on board the USS *Enterprise*, Transporter Chief Miles O’Brien frowned as he started receiving a very peculiar energy surge on the Transporter stage. “What the—” he started to say, but it all happened so fast he didn’t even get the chance to confirm that the readings were accurate. Before his very eyes—and without his barely even breathing on the control console in front of him—the transporter stage came to life, and suddenly a large, peculiar, black vehicle with a red stripe *clonked* down before him.

“O’Brien to Security,” he called into his communicator. “We’ve got . . . um . . . *visitors* in the transporter room.”

Sliding open the door and jumping out excitedly, Nicole and Liz looked around, laughed, and gave each other a triumphant high-five. “We did it!” Liz exclaimed.

“Did what? What did you two do now?” Face asked anxiously, looking around the unfamiliar surroundings with concern.

“Hey, this looks sort of like *Star Trek*,” Murdock said as he stepped out of the van.

O’Brien did a double-take when he saw Murdock. “Lieutenant Barclay?”

“Think of it, now we don’t even have to fight over him!” Nicole whispered to Liz, practically bubbling with excitement now. “Besides, I think I’ll have a better chance with Barclay anyway—we have so much more in common. I bet I can get him out of that shy, neurotic shell of his in no time,” she sighed.

“I bet that’s not all you’ll be trying to get him out of,” Liz responded, but the girls’ private conversation was interrupted when a group of security officers entered the transporter room, Worf in the lead.

“Who are you?” he demanded. “Why have you boarded this Federation vessel without prior clearance?”

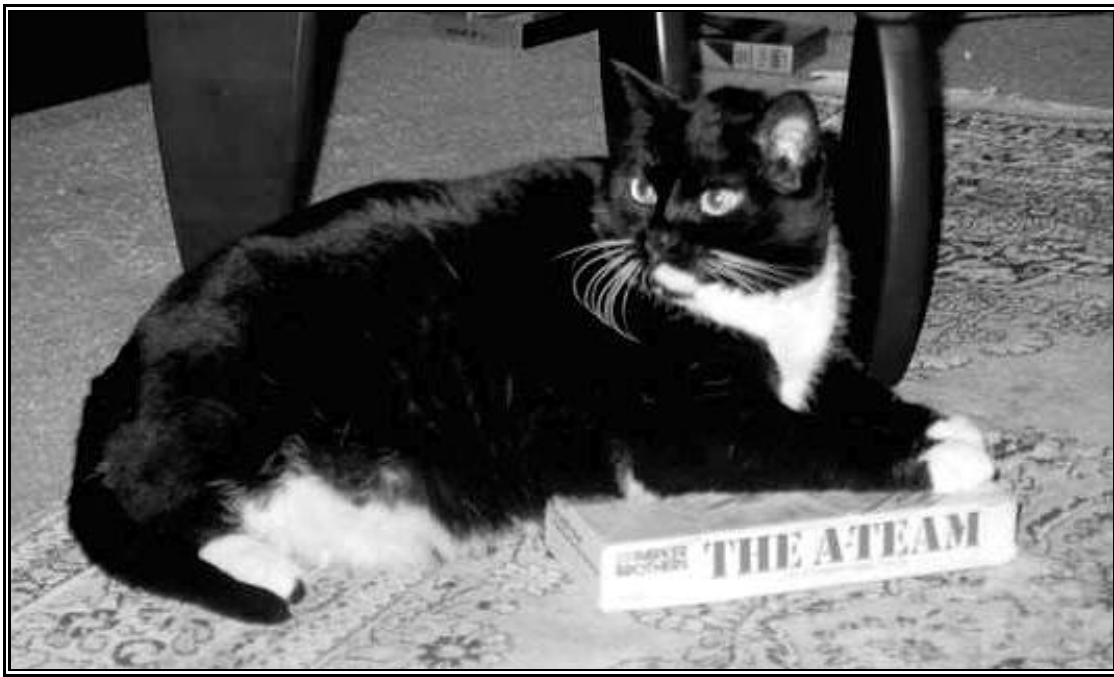
“Umm, bit of an emergency with the space/time continuum, I’m afraid,” Liz explained. “We’re going to need your help setting our universes right again. If you take us to Captain Picard, I’m sure I can explain everything.”

“You’d better,” Hannibal responded from behind her, looking none too happy. “Because you girls are really starting to test my patience.”

“Don’t worry,” Nicole said, “I’ve already written *this* part of the story before.”

“Then you will come with me,” Worf insisted, and the security forces surrounded them and started leading them out of the room.

“You know what?” Liz said to Nicole, knowing that the most fun of the day was still ahead of them. “I just love it when a fantasy comes together!”



In memory of the mighty big Kahlua.

THE EDITOR'S FAMOUS LAST WORDS...

YIKES! Has it really been about three months since I last had to come up with a 'zine editorial? It feels like only yesterday. Of course I am grateful always for the enthusiasm for our A-Team 'zines, it just gets a little overwhelming sometimes, as I never quite imagined I'd be receiving so many submissions on a regular basis--and so many very *good* ones at that! And speaking of good stuff, there is a lot of it in here, IMO. A lot of familiar names returning here with new submissions, and a new writer or two adding some new ideas to the mix.

What else has kept me so busy lately? Well, there is that thing called Graduate School, and the fact that somehow I should be seeing the light at the end of the tunnel sometime soon (or as a professor joked with me the other day, it's more accurate to say that the tunnel itself is in sight right now--we'll see about that light in another few months). As such, I don't know if we'll be keeping up with our proposed printing schedule come later this year, but who knows. I'll stay optimistic for now.

I've also been busy with some on-line fan-fiction activities, including an archive for out-of-print *A-Team* fiction. Thanks to our participating authors for giving me the permission to publish these on-line, and also to the many people who have helped with transcribing all these files! Also, I've been working on a *Babylon 5* fan-fiction site, and I'm really proud of the way it's turned out and some of the great stuff that's there to be read. Maybe someday we'll be able to publish them in a printed format as well.

Coming up next from Sockii Press: it's that time of the year again, Spring will be in the air...and that means love and smut will abound in Whatever Gets You Through the Night #2, our adults-only annual title. I wanted it to be multi-media, but it seems all you gals are writing about is *A-Team* when it comes to the steamy stuff! After that, by early this summer I hope the sequel to the very popular Deadly Maneuvers will be ready as well. Beyond that, it's too early to know which titles will fill up the fastest, but I'm looking forward to getting to all those submitted stories that have been piling up on my desk, and finding out what you've been writing lately. :-)

That said, I'd better get this thing off the hard drive and into the printer! Take care until next time, and remember to always *stay on the jazz!*

sockii, aka nicole

Proofreading assistance provided by Amanda Bogardus, Robin L. Ryder

Graphics by sockii

Thanks to:

Erik, for all the free food & booze and generally being a partner in punting

Rhonda, D., R³, Vicki and all the other Nighthawks for conversations, critiques and coffee, and more other things than I could attempt to remember right now!

THE A-TEAM FAN SOCIETY: The ATFS has been around since the late 80s. Our fanzine BARACUS NEWS is published four times a year. From Issue 17 on the language of the zine will be mainly English, so that foreign fans have the possibility to be part of the fun, too. The zine contains stories, articles on the latest activities of Dirk, Dwight, Mr. T, Melinda Culea, Marla Heasley, Eddie Velez, Robert Vaughn, Stephen J. Cannell, etc. Sure enough, older articles on George or on former movie and film activities of our "heroes" are not missing. Besides that there's a part of a detailed Episode Guide in every issue, a section where you can place an ad if you are looking for Team related material or perhaps pen pals, a place for letters of comment, reviews of books and other fanzines dealing with the series, articles on conventions and much more. The annual membership fee is currently DM 40.- (Airmail) for members inside Europe. Members outside Europe pay DM 40.-/\$26.50 (Surface) or DM 60.-/\$40 (Airmail). Please pay by bank draft or International Money Order (be sure that you carry the fee for this.) The club does accept Eurochecks, but no national checks at all. Members living in America may pay in US Dollars - but send cash through the post at your own risk. For a membership form and further information, write to Sonja Horstmann, Neustadt-Str. 1/ PF 2129, 32355 Pr. Oldendorf, Germany. Email: amyallen@hrz.uni-bielefeld.de.

Also available from Sockii Press...

Please note—any title marked by a * is also available/will be available for on-line downloading in Adobe Acrobat format, for a \$2 shareware fee! For further information on downloading, and also for up-to-the-minute information on all our publications, visit our web site at <http://www.seas.upenn.edu/~pellegrini/sockii.html>.

* **A Team Through Time** - an *A-Team* gen. 'zine with a twist: all alternative universe and "what if" 'zine.

Unbelievable crossovers, time warps, different realities. Our writers had a lot of fun with this one; features stories by Chris Hammell, Jessica Simpson, Andy Nystrom, Kristin Munson, Kiwi Patterson, Rhonda Eudaly, Jackie Giacomo, Jill Ripley. Some stories previously appeared in print or on the internet. Approx. 120 pages. \$10.75 US/Canada; ...

Plans Scams and Vans - our all *A-Team* gen. 'zine, featuring high-quality original fiction and information articles. This series is published currently on a bi-annual basis, and submissions continuously reviewed and accepted.

Issue #1 features fiction by Laura Michaels and N.N. Pellegrini (including a *Star Trek:TNG/A-Team* crossover); an *A-Team* bibliography and book review by Michele Lellouche. Approx. 80 pages. \$10.50 US/Canada; \$12 elsewhere.

***Issue #2** features fiction by Laura Michaels, N.N. Pellegrini (part 1 of an *A-Team/Babylon 5/Galactica* crossover), Liz Meinert (*A-Team/Airwolf*), Irene Schwarting (*A-Team/MASH*), and Christopher Bunting. Approx. 120 pages. \$13.50 US/Canada; \$15.50 Europe; \$ 17.45 elsewhere.

***Issue #3** features fiction by Laura Michaels (*A-Team/Highlander*), Nancy Lynn Wilson, N.N. Pellegrini, Rhonda Eudaly, Irene Schwarting, Natasha McKee; filks and an *A-Team* fan-fiction index. Approx. 120 pages. \$13.50 US/Canada; \$15.50 Europe; \$17.50 elsewhere.

***Issue #4** features fiction by Laura Michaels, N.N. Pellegrini (Part 2 of the *A-Team/Babylon 5/Galactica* crossover), Rhonda Eudaly (*A-Team/The Commish/Quantum Leap*), Chris Hammell (*A-Team/X-Files/Star Trek: TNG*), Katherine Reissman (*A-Team/Remington Steele*), Alana Nichols, Nancy Lynn Wilson, Lisa Deidrich; also an *A-Team* merchandise list. Approx. 150 pages. \$15.75 US/Canada; \$19.25 Europe; \$21 elsewhere.

Deadly Maneuvers is our *A-Team* 'zine which aims for a slightly "grittier" feel than **Plans Scams and Vans**. That is, DM tends to contain more hurt/comfort, romance, war-era stories . . . all themes up to an R-rating considered. This 'zine will be published on a yearly basis, submissions continuously reviewed/accepted for publication.

***Issue #1** features fiction by D. Ferrara, Mary Sauers, Brain Bedard, Jasmine, Amanda Bogardus, Irene Schwarting.

Our most acclaimed publication to date - don't miss out on this one! Approx. 120 pages. 2 stories previously appeared on the internet. \$15.50 US/Canada; \$19 Europe; \$20 elsewhere.

Issue #2 is planned for Summer '98 release and still accepting submissions. So far we have stories by Lynda Craney and Vicki Gill. Still looking for submissions.

Whatever Gets You Through the Night is our multi-media "adult" 'zine series, featuring both straight and slash (m/m and f/f) fiction. From softly romantic tales to explicit erotica, this 'zine aims to feature quality fiction to steam up your windows! This series is continuously reviewing/accepting submissions, although there is no set publication schedule. **AN AGE STATEMENT IS REQUIRED WHEN ORDERING—WILL NOT BE MAILED TO MINORS.**

Issue #1 features fiction by TopLegal (*Star Trek: Voyager & Party of Five- slash*), sidewinder (*A-Team & Babylon 5 - slash*), Amanda Bogardus (*X-Files - straight*), Jasmine (*A-Team - straight*), also *A-Team* slash poetry by Lynda. 80 pages. \$10.00 US/Canada; \$11 Europe; \$12 elsewhere.

Issue #2 is planned for early '98 publication and currently will feature lots of *A-Team* (predominantly slash) by sidewinder, Range Ryder...other contributors expected. We are still accepting submissions.

The A-Files - a one-shot 'zine showcasing *A-Team/X-Files* crossovers. One story each by Irene Schwarting, Brandon Kaohoni, and N.N. Pellegrini (an *A-Team/X-Files/Nowhere Man?? novella*); also an amusing "Degrees of Separation" chart by Michele Lellouche. Approx. 120 pages. \$11.75 US/Canada; \$14.25 Europe; \$15.75 elsewhere.

The Dwight Papers is a planned multi-media fanzine focusing on characters portrayed by Dwight Schultz. That means we want *A-Team*, *Star Trek*... if it features Dwight at all, it's game. Up to an R rating considered. Hoping for mid-'98 publication.

The Screaming 'Zini is a planned *Riptide* 'zine. We are looking for submissions, up to an R-rating (no slash) featuring Nick, Cody, and Boz. Action & humor to h/c---anything goes. No set deadline.

ORDERING INFORMATION: mail all payments to Nicole Pellegrini, 2429 Locust Street #315, Philadelphia PA 19103. Checks/money orders/cash in US denominations *only*--cash mailed at your risk! Postage discounts--email pellegrini@eniac.seas.upenn.edu or send SASE if ordering multiple 'zines at once & get the discounted postage prices!

Submission Information for Sockii Press fanzines . . .

If possible, electronic submissions are greatly appreciated. They can be emailed to pellegrini@eniac.seas.upenn.edu or sockii@aol.com, as either an attached document (Rich Text or Microsoft Word format) or as plain text. Submissions on floppy disk are also accepted; Macintosh format preferred but not required. There is no minimum/maximum length for submissions, although I will be more "discriminating" in what I accept for very long pieces. Authors will be notified on the status of their submissions and/or with requests for any rewrites; the publisher (me) reserves rights to edit works as appropriate for clarity and grammar.

All contributors will receive a free copy of the 'zine their work is contained in for submissions over 5 pages in length AS PRINTED. Shorter submissions will merit a 50% discount. Artwork, poetry, filks, etc. will merit a discount or free-copy, to be determined on a case-by-case basis. Proofreaders will receive a 50% discount on a 'zine. All 'zines are at this time kept in print continuously. All 'zines except Whatever Gets You Through the Night are also made available electronically for internet-based downloading--if you do not wish your works to be accessible in this format, please don't submit. We are sorry but to avoid any difficulties or legal problems, at the present time we are not accepting *Babylon 5*-based material for our print publications. Hopefully in the future we will be able to change this policy. All other fandoms are welcome for multi-media titles and/or as crossovers.

Materials previously published on the internet (on a fiction mailing-list or newsgroup, for instance) *will* be considered for publication in our 'zines--so long as the submitted material is *not* archived on a web-site or otherwise (or if you agree to remove it from an archive site once it has been accepted for publication.) You *must* indicate when submitting materials if it has been published anywhere previously, on-line or otherwise.

Any further questions and concerns, please contact the editor!

THE LURKER'S DEN: An on-line Babylon 5 web'zine.

The Lurker's Den is a brand new site for Babylon 5-based fan-fiction on the web. Submissions are actively sought in all genres and styles of writing. Though this fiction is not published in a paper format, the stories are reviewed, edited, and presented with the same care and attention that we put into all Sockii Press 'zines.

To visit the site and find out more, set your jumpgate coordinates for <http://members.aol.com/bbaracus/lurkden.html>