

THE CAVALIER



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THE CAVALIER

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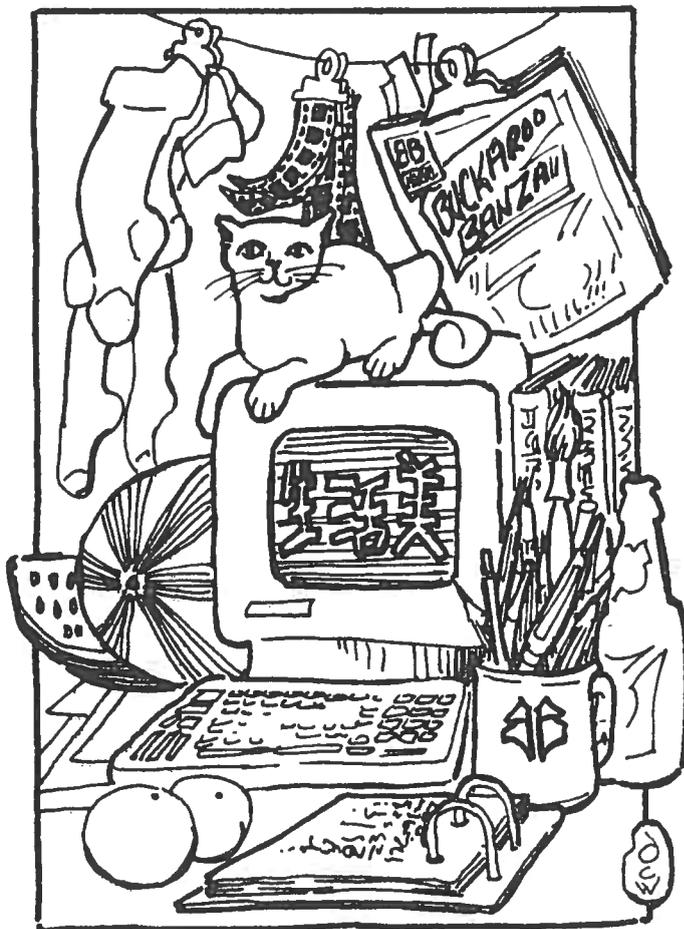
MOVING through MATTER

"Did you ever eat all you can eat and still not be satisfied?"
--Buckaroo Banzai

Not since Star Wars has any movie so screamed at us to DO SOMETHING. The Banzai Institute for Biomedical Engineering and Strategic Information is a haven for creative research and expression. It is populated by fascinating characters--some of whom we saw in the movie, some of whom we met in the novelization and other written material, and a potentially infinite collection of personages who make up the interns, residents, Blue Blazes and so forth inhabiting the Institute and its environs. The philosophy of the Institute proclaims everything possible, the unexpected to be expected, and each person's individual talents and values to be nourished and encouraged.

This collection of fiction, etc. is only a very small sampling of what could come out of The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai and the Banzai Institute. It represents some ideas of a few people who believe in Buckaroo Banzai enough to work on the Board of Directors of the Blue Blaze Irregulars, the Official Buckaroo Banzai Fan Club. This is not an official publication of the fan club. The problems inherent in publishing a club fanzine, as different from the newsletter, "World Watch One," are insurmountable.

Enough soap box. Buckaroo wouldn't approve. So what is this thing, The Cavalier? These stories represent a cross-section of possible Banzai themes: background on the characters we've met, follow-up on situations and ideas presented in the movie, and speculation and invention on who and what else might be going on behind those gates in New Brunswick. Most of these stories came about because characters kept walking in



the door, knocking on our heads and announcing, "I belong at the Institute and I'm going to tell you why."

You will notice that these stories represent varied viewpoints on the Banzai universe. Denise and Lori's Institute is one very personal to the characters we met in the movie--and includes a post-8th Dimension Rawhide. Our (Fern and Carol's) Institute is a much broader, rambling campus of people, somewhat more in line with the novelization. The main thing to remember is that just as each of us took what we were given and extrapolated from there, every reader's idea of 'what happened before' and 'what happened after' is equally valid--indeed, perhaps even more valid for each of you, since your idea is what 'works' for you.

A prime example of this is the last story in The Cavalier, the only story not generated 'in-house,' as it were. Anne Elizabeth Zeek and Sara Campbell, two Blue Blazes, had very different answers and a very different approach to many of the questions left open by the movie. The style of the story will be very familiar to those devotees of Earl Mac Rauch's novel. Suffice it to say that we 'stopped press' to include this story. . .

Those readers familiar with our previous endeavors will notice that this zine looks and reads nothing like anything we've done before. That's because Buckaroo Banzai is like nothing we've ever encountered before, and we tried to match its unique character with a zine something out of the ordinary. Otherwise, things are much as they have been--this is our tenth year on East 53rd Street, we are still always writing/drawing/making music about one thing or another, and three felines still take turns sleeping on top of the computer.

A word on nicknames: Any coincidence of monikers among the Directors of the Blue Blaze Irregulars and the characters in these stories are purely for the purpose of confusing the daylights out of everyone who has to deal with us personally (you should have heard Catnip when she first met the 'other' Sunshine. . .) and should not be construed as in any way indicative of anything else. (Have we confused you thoroughly? Good. Then we have also confounded the minions of Hanoi Xan, who read these publications to gain inside information about the Institute!)

Until the next time we get the urge to go bother Steve-the-Printer again. . . Remember, no matter where you go, there you are!

-- Fern "Sunshine" Marder
Carol "D.J." Walske

Once Upon a Time

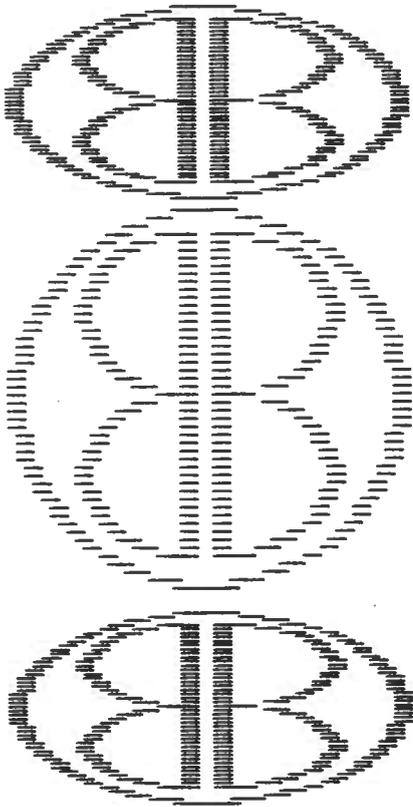
The big kid with the curly, sandy-brown hair watched in fascination as the tall lanky foreign kid wiped out the three gang-types who had been hounding him. He moved fast and gracefully, combining Eastern martial arts with good old-fashioned Western fists. He had considered joining in the fray, but the stranger seemed to be more than able to take care of himself.

Now, as a half-dozen more leather-jacketed gang members moved in slowly, the observer came out from his vantage point in the back doorway of the packing plant where he worked after school. He wondered why they went after this guy. He shrugged. The Diablos didn't need a reason to make trouble. He walked determinedly toward the group.

The victorious fighter stood ready, his arms raised and forward, his hands constantly moving in what seemed to be a ritual pattern of some sort. He needn't have worried. The gang had simply come forward to retrieve their comrades, who lay in varying degrees of consciousness on the ground. He looked expectantly at the approaching intruder.

"You all right?" the local boy drawled. His square face had a kindly look, but there was something in the body language that let you know that you didn't want to get on his bad side.

The black-haired youth in the fighter's stance may have relaxed an iota. "You are not with them?" he queried back. His voice was low, the words careful, the dialect, the nondescript American English of one who had lived or traveled in various parts of the country--indeed, the world.



by Fern Marder

The bigger kid shook his head. "I figured ya might need a hand, with all of them coming at you at once." He smiled an easy, friendly smile. "I gotta to tell ya, I ain't never seen anyone fight like that. You're something else. You okay?" he asked again.

"Yes, fine," came the reply, though the speaker now rubbed his left shoulder as he allowed himself normal posture. The vivid blue eyes under the shock of black over the forehead were startling. "Thank you," he said, with both relief and surprise. "I haven't found too many friendly people in this town."

"I've seen you at school. You're the new kid, the one with the..." he caught himself before he said something embarrassing.

It was finished for him in a tone of wry exasperation. "The one with the weird name? I am Buckaroo Banzai."

"I sympathize. I gotta five part handle that begins bad and ends worse.

My friends call me Rawhide." He held out a hand.

Buckaroo Banzai took it in both of his. He grinned. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Rawhide."

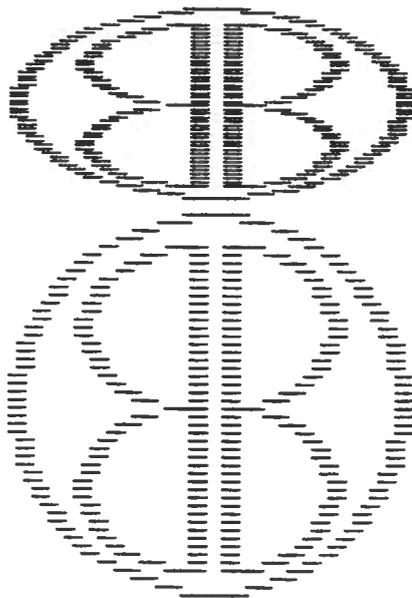
Twenty years later Buckaroo Banzai and Rawhide were lying on the grass by the Institute's pond, having just run their daily five. Buckaroo didn't look at his friend as he asked, "Are you planning to go to the reunion?"

"Huh?"

"Our high school reunion. It's next month. Are you planning to go?"

"Are you kidding?" Rawhide sat up and stared at Buckaroo. "No way. You?"

Buckaroo shook his head. "I've got only one pleasant memory of that place," he said smiling at the Texan, "and that's right here."



Through a Glass Darkly

by Fern Marder

They call him Downtown. But anyone who knew the City would definitely label him 'Uptown.' The only thing sharper than the crease in his black dress slacks was the look in his almost-black eyes.

He was meticulous about everything. His clothes. His so-carefully trimmed beard. His walking stick, always at hand. The company he kept. His Queen's English. How did he end up at the Institute anyway? But then Buckaroo Banzai's reputation was equally meticulous, in a different way.

His specialty was listed as Parapsychology. Psychic phenomena. Realizing the impossible. Magic.

Hmmm. Magic.

He had a way with the ladies, always charming, no, debonair. The men at the Institute found him somewhat less forthcoming. He regarded the interns with a disdain one would otherwise reserve for a heap of garbage on a sidewalk. He tolerated Perfect Tommy, calling him "Tommy" only, appreciating, if not sharing, the blond engineer's taste in new wave fashion. Tommy wears white; Downtown wears black. Hmmm.

Someone had the ill tact to suggest that it was a good thing that Rawhide never knew him, because the laid-back Texan could never stand 'city slickers.' Downtown was slick all right. Only he could return from survival maneuvers with top grades and not a speck of mud on his boots.



He had appeared one night at Artie's Artery. Created quite a stir. You don't get a lot of tuxedos and evening capes at Artie's. He had a front table, of course. Spent the whole set staring at Buckaroo Banzai. So much so that it caught Perfect Tommy's attention. Tommy danced over to the edge of the stage and whispered instructions to a Blue Blaze who signaled his partner and took up a nonchalant but watchful position beside the 'penguin.' Even Buckaroo found it hard to ignore him, acknowledging the stranger's nod at the close of the set with a tilt of his head and a gesture toward the dressing room at the rear of the club. After Tommy recovered from his shock at this, he arranged a Blue Blaze escort for the man.

Despite all protests, Buckaroo met with him alone. To this day, none of us really know what transpired--though it's a good bet that Tommy has a fair idea. Buckaroo caught up with us on the bus, the tall, dark Britisher in tow.

"This is Edmund St. James. He'll be riding with us," was all the boss said.

The man in evening dress arranged himself carefully in a seat in the rec area. He extracted--Downtown never just puts or takes or does--a pair of gold-rimmed dark glasses from the inner pocket of his cloak and put them on. Thus having shielded himself from our bewildered stares and the lights above, he allowed his brow to wrinkle slightly, as it might in concentration, and fell into an easy sleep. His chest rose and fell slightly, in harmony with the gentle motion of the bus as it hummed up the highway.

It would have served him right if he'd snored. As it transpired, a pothole caught at 55 mph caused the bus to lurch--and the ebony walking stick to fall from its position propped against his leg. It clattered

delightfully as it rolled across the floor to hit Tommy in the foot. Tommy wasn't letting this man out of his sight, even asleep. Edmund St. James woke up with a start.

"Blast!" he said, snatching the glasses from his face and looking around agitatedly.

Tommy picked up the cane and, without warning, tossed it in its owner's direction. "Lose something, Downtown?"

The cane seemed to be drawn directly to its master's hand. St. James hardly moved to catch it. He inspected it, rubbing annoyedly at a scratch on the knob of a handle. "Thank you," he pronounced.

"You planning to sleep all the way to Boston?" Tommy ventured.

"I had considered it. But your public highways do not wish to oblige," St. James said evenly. "You are Tommy."

"Perfect Tommy."

A slight frown. "Indeed. . ."

"You live here, or are you just passing through, Downtown?"

"That remains to be seen." St. James leaned back in his chair once again and replaced the sunglasses. Tommy had been dismissed.

At about three in the morning, just past Hartford, Edmund St. James awoke. The lights in the room had been dimmed. He pocketed the glasses. Taking the walking stick into his carefully manicured hand, he stood and headed for the door.

Tommy was not asleep, just dozing. His booted foot shot out across

the aisle, stopping St. James. "Going somewhere, Downtown?"

Six-footer looked down on seated six-footer, enjoying the momentary advantage. He tried stepping over Tommy's leg, prompting the Cavalier to spring to his feet and plant himself in the man's way.

Buckaroo Banzai is a brilliant man, with a thousand ideas in his head at once. It would be useful, sometimes, if he remembered to let us in on some of them. It would avoid a few embarrassing moments. . .

Tommy crashed into his chair as he fell. He had not even seen the move. He was not even sure of what had hit him--hand, arm, walking stick? He watched as the black-garbed figure brushed a speck of lint from its jacket as it walked out the door. Tommy got up and ran to the doorway, just in time to see Buckaroo Banzai close his door behind St. James.

"Damn," muttered Tommy, rubbing his right hip. He limped over to Buckaroo's room and banged on the door.

After a moment, the boss opened it. Obviously agitated, he didn't seem to notice Tommy's discomfort. "Oh, good. Perfect Tommy, go up front and tell Fred to turn off I-95 at the next exit and take local roads from there to the Massachusetts line."

"What?"

"Hurry!" Buckaroo closed the door, with St. James still inside his room.

At four, the World Watch One radio lines crackled with the news that an explosion at a chemical plant on Huntington Road, just within the Connecticut border, had sent a shower

of flaming debris across the road, injuring six people in four vehicles. Residents of the area were being evacuated as a precaution against the rapidly spreading cloud of caustic fumes.

The bus arrived on the scene twenty minutes after the blast. Sharing their inhale-filters with the local firemen, Reno, Perfect Tommy and some of the Blue Blazes joined the search and rescue parties digging through the rubble for trapped workers. Buckaroo Banzai and New Jersey headed straight for the makeshift hospital station that had been established within a ring of ambulances.

It occurred to Perfect Tommy to wonder where Downtown was in all the chaos. He almost didn't recognize the newcomer, now dressed in protective Team Banzai overalls, working with Reno's team. But you couldn't miss that face. Every so often, Tommy would look over at him. He realized that, every so often, Downtown would lean over and say something to one of the firemen, who would, after a moment's hesitation, change the place he was digging. And Reno's team was having a lot more success at finding people than was Tommy's.

It's a terrible thing when your conscience is at odds with your pride. Tommy finally called over to the other team on his radio, the only way to be heard over the din. "Hey, Reno."

"What's up, Perfect Tommy?"

"What's going on with Downtown?"

"He says he can tell where the trapped men are. So far he's been pretty much on target."

Perfect Tommy grimaced. There was more than a touch of sarcasm in his response. "Well, if you can spare him, send him over here. We're getting nowhere."

"Will do." Reno waved over at Tommy as they both put away their go-phones.

A few minutes later, Downtown ran across the compound to Tommy's side of the wreckage. He paused and closed his eyes, then squatted down and touched his right hand to the ground. When he rose it was to move quickly to each of the diggers, issuing instructions which no one wanted to accept. He moved toward Perfect Tommy with obvious reluctance.

"They're digging in the wrong place," Downtown said flatly.

Tommy scowled, then turned and called to those working with him. "Hey, he told you to move. So move." He looked back at Downtown, as he headed in the direction of the new location, some twenty feet away. "You'd better be right."

Tommy's team reached the last ten trapped maintenance people five minutes before another round of explosions rocked the area, forcing rescue operations to cease.

The bus arrived in Boston five hours behind schedule.

"Who is this guy, Buckaroo?"

Perfect Tommy paced around the small space of B. Banzai's room on the bus. Reno and New Jersey sat in the chairs to one side, watching their young anxious friend.

The boss himself sat cross-legged on his bed-mat. "He's a scientist," Buckaroo said in his customarily quiet voice.

"Well, I think he's dangerous."

Reno chuckled. "To you maybe," he said.

"What about to Buckaroo?" Tommy countered.

Reno looked over at the subject of Tommy's concern, who didn't look concerned at all.

"I'll admit I don't completely understand all of Downtown's talents," said Buckaroo. "That's why he's here. He's agreed to allow us to study him, while he's at the Institute studying parapsychological phenomena."

New Jersey shifted uneasily in his seat. "Are you saying that you believe in all these things he says he can do?"

"You saw him last night. His accuracy record on clairvoyance tests cannot be ignored. Besides," here Buckaroo paused to look at PR man Reno, "his stage act will make a great opener for the band."

"Thank you," said the British voice at the previously closed door. Downtown came in and bowed slightly to Buckaroo Banzai. "Sorry to intrude, but you must understand that, if you are going to talk about me, I am going to know what you are saying. It is infinitely more polite--for both of us--if you would refrain from speaking behind my back, as it were, and thus not force me to eavesdrop."

Buckaroo granted him a small deference. "My apologies."

For the first time that any of the Cavaliers had seen--one cannot speak for the boss--Downtown smiled.

It is important to note what a drastic change this makes in the man's appearance. The staid, almost stern demeanor of Edmund St. James, his Victorian bearing and Edwardian style, his dark, handsome features. . .all of this composure is utterly destroyed by the wide grin, the deep laugh lines, the flash of white teeth. For most

people, the doorway to the soul is the eyes; for this man, it has to be his smile. For truly it is the warmth of Downtown's easy friendship, mirrored in that wonderful smile, that endeared him so quickly to our hearts. If you can forgive his outward semblance of perfection--but then we learned to deal with that long ago, with Tommy.

Speaking of Tommy, to return to my story, the tall blond man in the blue-and-grey plaid suit, every bit as coordinated and elegant as the man in black at whom all were staring, did not give his colleagues long to appreciate this transformation. Instead, he blurted out, "You trying to tell us you know what we were saying about you--but you weren't just listening at the door."

The smile vanished, the ice returned. "That is correct." Thereupon he proceeded to recite, verbatim, the part of their conversation that pertained to him, including Reno's whispered comment to New Jersey about Tommy's just being upset because Downtown had knocked him on his rear end. When he concluded, he added, "I also have an excellent memory."

"Yeah, and he's modest, too," mumbled Perfect Tommy.

The show went well at the Cage, just outside Boston. The college crowd loved the Cavaliers. But the real talk of the evening was the opening act. After doing some standard disclosures of the contents of the pockets of various patrons--including the serial numbers on two twenty-dollar bills in the purse of a red-headed co-ed--Downtown proceeded to tell some out-of-towners exactly where they grew up, went to school, and so forth. As many of the students knew one another, they amazedly vouched for the accuracy of the numerous histories.

Needless to say, this particular display made a number of the Cavaliers very nervous. Privacy was an absolutely guaranteed right at the Institute. None of them were about to give that up to a mind-reading show-off.

The piece de resistance was Downtown's predictions of several students' grades on their just-concluded mid-year examinations. He invited those students to write to him, care of the Institute, and report on his accuracy. He even promised to send five dollars each to any student who sent him a copy of his exam, proving the prediction wrong.

Perfect Tommy grimaced. If Downtown was accepting mail at the Institute, he obviously was planning to stay a while. He was glad when Downtown relinquished the stage to the band. As far as he was concerned, it was a good thing the man wasn't musically inclined.

Back in New Jersey two days later, Downtown wasted no time in setting up a parapsych lab in a vacant office that had been used for interviewing candidates. Mornings were spent with him testing willing subjects from among the ranks of Institute personnel. He had said he wanted a cross-section--apprentices and Blue Blazes through senior residents and Cavaliers--and he got one. In fact, he got more volunteers than his small set-up could handle and he started screening his subjects for greatest diversity in age, background, and so forth.

Afternoons, Buckaroo Banzai and New Jersey, sometimes together, sometimes separately, would test Downtown. His accuracy on direct examination was truly remarkable. But what most interested the two doctors was Downtown's predictions, or rather, premonitions of world events.

"Good morning, gentlemen," he said, coming into the dining room one day, and sitting down at the Cavaliers' table uninvited. He turned to Buckaroo, who sat at the head--or foot, depending on your perspective--of the table. "Can we do anything about evacuating a mining town in Mexico?" he asked calmly.

Several people choked on their scrambled eggs. Buckaroo, ever in control, simply lowered his fork. "Which town, when and why?"

"San Miguel de los Molinos. By tomorrow afternoon, I believe. There is going to be a terrible earthquake." With that, Downtown began to dig into his bacon and eggs.

As usual, when the matter concerned Edmund St. James, Perfect Tommy spoke up first. "Now wait a minute. You want us to arrange to move a whole town full of people because you think. . ."

The black-haired man at the end of the table cut him off. "Are you sure, Downtown?"

The Englishman started to stiffen and then visibly made himself relax. He had learned that when Buckaroo Banzai asks such a question, it is purely out of necessity, and without the slightest hint of sarcasm. He replied levelly, "It was a very strong impression. I would say," he paused for calculation, not hesitation, "97% probability."

"Reno. . ."

"Yeah, Boss." The amiable saxophone player had been taking this all in with mixed concern and amusement. It would take a while before he could react to a declaration of impending disaster--maybe--at the breakfast table.

"Put in a call to the American

Consulate in Mexico City. I'll want to talk to Ambassador Franklin."

Tommy stared incredulously at his leader, who was steadfastly ignoring him.

Reno pushed back his chair. "It's only five in the morning over there, Buckaroo."

"That's all right," Buckaroo said.

"It'll make him take us seriously," New Jersey interjected.

Buckaroo smiled at his former classmate. "Sidney, you get to wake up the director of the local Red Cross or WHO office out there."

"Right." The tall, thin doctor in fringed shirt and blue jeans followed Reno out of the dining room.

"You'd best go with them, Downtown. They're going to need whatever details you can give them." Buckaroo looked apologetically at Downtown's half-eaten breakfast. The psychic carefully folded his napkin and set it down beside his plate. He took his mug of tea with him as he left.

B. Banzai studied the young blond Cavalier who sat petulantly playing with his food. Perfect Tommy looked up at him, then away, deciding that he really couldn't face the look in Buckaroo's eyes. There was nothing worse than seeing the almost sad cloud of disapproval in those riveting blue eyes.

"Are you up to calling the Mexican Blue Blazes, or should I put Pecos on it?" Buckaroo said quietly, with a glance over at the last remaining member of the breakfast party.

As was her custom, Pecos had been listening to the goings-on, staying out of the politics. What she thought

of Downtown or his abilities was her business. She was perfectly content to trust to Buckaroo Banzai's judgment, in this as in so many other things over the years she had been at the Institute.

Tommy looked up sharply, both angry and hurt. "You don't have to lean on me!"

Pecos stood up. "I'll be checking specimens in the bio lab if you need me, Buckaroo," she said hastily and vanished.

Buckaroo was staring at his so rarely insubordinate young colleague. The diplomat that was Buckaroo Banzai knew the time had passed for letting Tommy settle his own differences with Downtown. "I didn't mean to impugn your efficiency, Perfect Tommy. I just don't want to involve you in something you don't feel is. . ."

"Aw, hell, Buckaroo," Tommy said, a pleading tone in his voice, "it's not like that. If you really think we should do this, fine, I'm with you all the way. I just don't understand why everyone is suddenly treating this guy like he's some kind of god."

"I think you're exaggerating."

"No, I'm not," insisted the younger man. "Ever since he showed up, everyone's taking his word for everything. He's got every Blue Blaze and intern eating out of the palm of his hand--or wishing they could. He's been throwing his weight around in the gym, too. Where'd he learn to fight like that, anyway?"

The light of dawn shone in Buckaroo Banzai's eyes. "With his mental abilities, Downtown is able to anticipate his opponents' moves and react accordingly."

"But that's not fair."

"Who ever said life was always fair," Buckaroo almost whispered. Tommy instantly regretted the turn of the conversation. However, Buckaroo went on, speaking seriously, earnestly. "Downtown has a gift that could be--has been--badly exploited. He's been looking for some way to develop his talents in a way that would be meaningful. If he were really as bad as you make him sound, he'd be out there taking advantage of people, not helping us study how to bring out similar talents in others."

"He did a lot of research on us before he approached me at Artie's that night. Someone with his talents usually spends the better part of his life feeling frustrated because either no one believes in him or those who do can't take any meaningful action on what he sees." Buckaroo leaned forward, toward Perfect Tommy. "He needs us as much as our effectiveness is increased by having him here."

Tommy shifted uneasily. He wasn't sure he bought the image of Downtown the Downtrodden, but he was beginning to see Buckaroo's point. "So we give him time to settle down and, meanwhile, show him that we're willing to trust his, er, visions?"

Buckaroo's smile was a welcome sight for Perfect Tommy. The blond man stood up slowly. "I guess I'd better get on the Marconi and wake up Blue Blazes."

B. Banzai rose and followed him out the door.

The Institute was a very busy place for the next twenty-four hours, arranging with the necessary authorities and their own people to protect the inhabitants of San Miguel de los Molinos. Needless to say, it was only the word and reputation of Buckaroo

Banzai that produced the requisite speed and compliance.

Everything was ready by dawn. The atmosphere in the bunkhouse was tense. No one knew whether they were supposed to be praying that Downtown was right or wrong. Obviously, the Institute would have some pretty heavy mud slung its way if nothing happened. But no one really wanted to hope for an earthquake, either.

The first word came over the World Watch lines at 5:00 p.m., E.S.T. Tremors were beginning to be felt in San Miguel and the surrounding area. The Richter scale hit seven an hour later. The silver mines of San Miguel collapsed and all but the few stone buildings of the town--the school, the church--were rocked by the ensuing movement of the ground.

As the television news carried the story, the members of Team Banzai watched in fascinated horror and relieved pride as they learned that only a handful of people--those who refused to leave--had been injured and that the waiting fire fighters and national troops soon had matters as much under control as one might ever have in a time of natural disaster.

Perfect Tommy wandered out of the common room. So, Downtown had been right after all. Thank goodness Buckaroo had seen fit to act on his advice. Tommy went downstairs and out the front door. He needed to get some air.

He walked around the back of the main building and headed toward the orchard. He was struck by an odd sound coming from the garage area, however, and decided to investigate.

There, sitting on a pile of discarded tires was Downtown. He looked up as Tommy approached--it being impossible for anyone to sneak up on him. He was crying.

Tommy stopped short when he realized Downtown's distress. For an instant he considered just leaving him alone, but something made him take a few more steps toward the unhappy man in black. "Are you all right," he asked lamely.

Downtown shook his head. His accent was even thicker for the tears in his voice. "Sure. I'm all right. I'm always all right. It's always someone else whose whole world crumbles around him." He looked up at Tommy, who now stood about two feet from him. "You are so lucky. You only get to help people and have people grateful to you. You never have to feel the pain." He looked down again and his shoulders shook.

Tommy reached out a tentative hand and laid it on Downtown's arm. "Hey, man, we couldn't have done anything if you hadn't told us to go out there."

"A bearer of bad tales, that's what I am," Downtown declared. He again raised his head to Perfect Tommy, an ironic look in his eyes. "Have you ever noticed that the English language has a lot of negative words but not a lot of positive ones? So many words for anger and hatred and fear and pain, but so few words for love or kindness. People are that way, too. They react so strongly to negative things, but how many love as deeply as they know anger or pain?"

Both men thought of Buckaroo Banzai, the most selfless, generous individual one would ever likely meet in a lifetime. The man that had drawn them both to this place to share in the mission of the Banzai Institute. The shared realization made them both smile uneasily.

Downtown continued. "The world is the same way. You feel the bad things so strongly. The volcano erupting. The airplane crash." He

looked imploringly at Perfect Tommy. "Just once I would like to have a premonition and look at someone and say, 'You're going to fall in love today.'"

Tommy took Downtown by the shoulders and pulled him forward. The blond man held the dark form close and found that he, too, was crying. Then, as Tommy realized that Downtown had calmed a bit, he said carefully, "You did have a good premonition."

The dark head looked up. "Oh?"

"Something told to you come here."

Downtown considered this a while. Then, slowly, his face brightened and he gave Perfect Tommy a big grin. It was the first Tommy had seen of the warm glow that we've now come to expect from Edmund St. James and it startled him so that he laughed out loud. Downtown decided that that was probably a good idea and started to laugh with him.

When they both stopped, they looked at each other a bit foolishly. Downtown shook his head. He was never again going to be able to play Mr. Debonair around Perfect Tommy. Then again, he wasn't sure he wanted to. "You know, I'm sorry I got you into trouble with Buckaroo."

"What do you mean?"

"This morning, at breakfast. You argued with Buckaroo over me."

Tommy frowned. "He told you that?"

Downtown sighed. "Didn't have to. You were talking about me, remember? And you were angry." He paused, trying to find a way to explain it better. "You were broadcasting at me."

"You mean you heard all of that?" Tommy blurted out, his anger rising again. Then he realized just how uncomfortable it must have been for Downtown to have to 'listen' to people complain about him. Perfect Tommy looked at him sheepishly. "I'm sorry about some of the things I said."

"No, you were right, in a way. I have been 'throwing my weight around,' as you put it. Everyone here is so good at whatever they do, I guess I've been trying to prove I belong here."

Tommy groaned. "You're pretty darn good at what you do, too."

"Yes, but I can't sing, I can't play music, I can't dance. . ."

Downtown and Tommy started to laugh again. And knew that they would spend a lot more of their time laughing together than feuding from then on.



West of the Pecos

by Lori Oberscheven

She sat at the bar and sipped her water, watching the man whose companion had left a moment before. Leaning back in his chair, he laid his napkin on the table and lit a cigarette.

She turned back to her glass, created a dozen reasons not to approach the man, smiled wryly at her nervousness. She had initially dismissed the idea with her recently acquired cynicism, reconsidered it at first dispassionately, then with growing excitement. Looking toward him again, she thought over the possibilities.

Her shift had been nearly done when the two men had entered, requesting a table toward the back of the restaurant. She'd guessed who they were immediately--it hadn't been difficult. Cowboy get-up was common enough in this place, although the taller man's attire wasn't exactly standard Southwest. But the blond's style was an odd combination of prep and punk, more new wave than New Mexico. She was amused by the long looks the locals gave the pair.

They hadn't acknowledged the stares of the afternoon regulars; they had ordered tequila and dinners of carne asada and rice. No more than a half-dozen words had been spoken in the course of the meal. But as the blond rose to leave, the other had said something in a low voice which visibly annoyed the younger man. He held up his hand, nodding, as if to

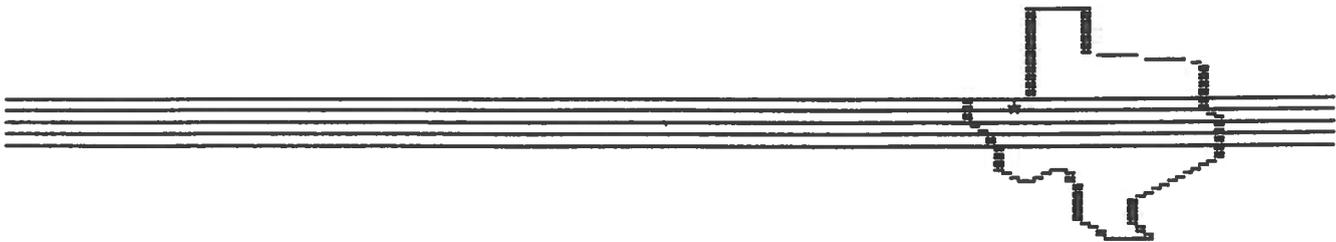
say he'd heard it all before. Mouth set tight, fatigue showing in dark circles under his eyes, he had slipped on his sunglasses and walked out into the afternoon glare. The cowboy had scratched his three-day beard, lack of sleep evident on his face as well, and watched him go.

She had made the decision to leave some time ago, having nothing to hold her, nothing to lose by leaving this town. Its slow, dusty charm had worn into suffocating boredom; its isolation now seeming more a prison than a sanctuary. Lack of purpose had left an emptiness that new places and people did little toward filling.

Escaping the confines of a middle-class existence to the questioning of ideals that college had brought, she completed school believing herself enlightened, and had set out to enlighten others. But she found herself surrounded by those all too willing to accept the existing order rather than change it; by others wanting to use her talents to exploit the seas she loved and sought to protect. Taking the few things precious to her, she had escaped again, to the plains and the swamps and the places in between. She had seen much, but had surrendered to apathy along the way.

"Can I talk to you a minute?"

He looked up at the slight blond



woman. He had expected this; she had watched them, although not rudely, since they had entered. Motioning for her to sit, he lowered himself back onto his chair.

"What can I do for you?"

She slipped into the empty seat. "How does one apply? To the Institute." Pushing the plate in front of her to one side, she rested her forearms on the table and looked straight into his eyes.

He met her gaze. "Usually in writing." He immediately regretted the remark as unnecessarily flip.

She didn't seem to notice. "The address? And what do you need to know?" Her voice was soft but nonsense in tone.

"I'll need something to write on." He studied her as she took a pad from the pocket of the bartender's apron she wore. Her face and build were delicate, almost fragile, but he sensed a resilience that her appearance belied. She tore a single sheet from the order pad and handed it to him with a pen.

"Experience. Why you'd like to join up." He wrote in a slow easy scrawl as he spoke. "Interests. It's up to you what you put in, what you leave out. Qualifications--"

"I'm a marine biologist."

He looked at her, allowed himself a small smile. "A little far from the water, aren't you?"

She stared at him a moment and decided his question was not intended as cruel. She chose not to answer it anyway. "I also play harmonica."

He considered her response, then finished writing and handed the paper back to her. "Drop us a line. Someone will be in touch, either way."

She looked at the address before carefully folding it, then back at the man across the table. He was watching as someone approached.

The blond who had left earlier glanced at her, a quick up-and-down, before addressing his companion. "No time for extracurricular pursuits, right?" His tone was sarcastic. "Bus is pulling out." He crossed his arms and waited.

The cowboy pressed his hat down a little further on his head and rose. "Write that letter." He laid her pen in front of her and walked toward the door. The blond watched him a moment, then turned back to her.

"Later," he muttered, and moved off to where the cowboy stood waiting for him.

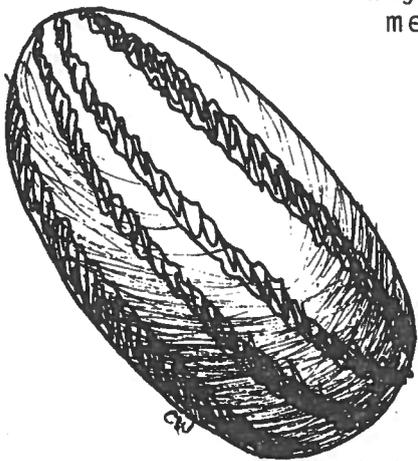
She watched the door close behind them, tapped the folded paper on the table and smiled. 'No,' she thought, 'not later. Sooner than you think.'

A SEEDY STORY

by Carol Walske

"Today Reno and Perfect Tommy have asked for space on the special agenda," said Buckaroo. "It'll be a bit of a squeeze, but I think we can manage."

Reno grinned at that and didn't bother standing up. Staff meetings varied from wildly informal to mock-formal, with Robert's Rules of Disorder carefully observed. "Thanks. Actually, you should give all the blame, or credit, to Tommy. All I did was mention to him that the BBI's were running a contest on 'why is there a watermelon there?' He took it from there."



"What do you mean, a contest?" interrupted New Jersey. "I never did find out the answer to that, you know?"

Perfect Tommy did stand up, but then Tommy probably wanted to display his latest attempt at haute couture. The jacket was linen and Italian; the pants were wool and Bond Street. Actually, one of his pants creases was ever so slightly off. "Reno thought that question posed a good exercise in imagination. So I decided to put it to our own inmates, encourage them to show off their

little grey cells. We got some interesting responses. Most of them run along the lines of 'there is no watermelon there.' After all, nothing is what it seems to be, right? I brought some of the more innovative ones to read aloud."

"Read on," said Buckaroo. "It is a rather existential query, isn't it?"

"But is any of them the real answer?" asked New Jersey plaintively.

"You can blame this first one on Billy," said Tommy. He picked up a green and white striped paper with holes punched down either side and began to read, in a fair imitation of Billy's mannerisms:

'It's real simple. It's a computer. The white pits are the chips (Z8088's, in case anyone wants to know) and black pits comprise the ROM, RAM, BIOS, tiny-C, and LISP. To boot, just cut out a nice wedge. Eat. Spit the pits out on a pile of your latest printouts. The arrangement they make will solve any equation or those programs you just can't debug. (Warning!: leaving the pits around too long may produce bugs of a different order.)

(Submitted by Billy)

This was fairly well received, even by those who weren't into computer jargon. Tommy looked pleased, as if the tribute was for him, and continued happily. "I like the next one--brief and to the point."

'It's a hokey-folksy green Lectroid singer: John Cougar Watermellencamp.'
(Submitted by The Argentine)

"You also like The Argentine," commented Reno. "No playing favorites, Tommy."

Tommy favored him with a disdainful look and picked up the next entry. His tone became scholarly, almost didactic.

'Like the human faces on the red Lectroids, the 'watermelon' is of questionable reality. In fact, it is in some measure a test. A recent party of visiting Senators and their aides failed entirely to see the large green manifestation. As somebody later pointed out, this was decidedly curious, since so many governmental decision-makers are all too well versed in manipulation and illusion. The watermelon is, quite simply, not there. It had been there--about six months ago--but was consumed one hot summer day by avaricious interns. Since its presence had been established, many people were subsequently unsure of its continued existence or non-existence within those loci. So the watermelon manifestation evolved, as do most things, into an experiment: the sustained creation of illusion. Every apprentice and junior science intern is now required to spend at least one hour (senior interns and residents may do this during sleep) fervently conceiving and maintaining the visual characteristics of a watermelon. That this experiment in psychic concentration and perception (although one of my colleagues contends that it may be mass hypnosis) is successful was admirably borne out by our East Coast cowpoke Dr. Sidney "New Jersey" Zwibel.'

(Submitted by Doc Savage)

"Does that imply I'm psychic, or what?" inquired New Jersey. "It really was there, wasn't it? It wasn't just some kind of ILM special effect?"

"Yeah, right, the Millennium Watermelon," said Tommy with a grin. "Or a Genesis Effect. Come to think of it, I've got a response right here"--he hunted among his handful of papers--"that fits right in with that idea."

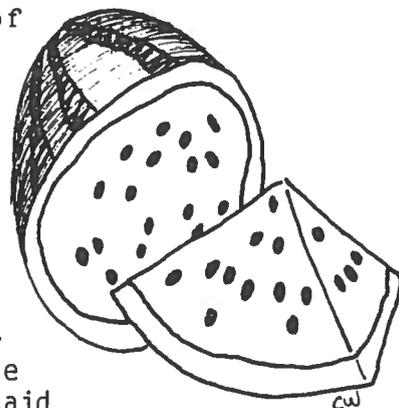
'Pssst. Psssst, New Jersey, come over here and I'll tell you the real story. Ssshhh, keep it down! Some government might be listening. Neither the Russians nor the Pentagon has forgiven us yet for the Lectroids. They blame us, y'see? It's not our fault aliens like us. Word's been getting around in the solar system, and in a couple of neighboring star systems, and we're now one of the 'must-see' places in some of the more highfalutin' star tour guides. What am I talking about? It's a spaceship! It's fulla little people who look just like watermelon seeds with pink gunk around them. One of those weird biological coincidences, I guess. They showed us their travel guide, a full-color brochure of the places to visit while on Earth. Disneyworld and the Banzai Institute are right up at the top of the list.'

(Submitted by Joaquin Kolodny)

"Disneyworld?" protested Pinky. "Over us?"

"Oh, Disneyworld's high-value entertainment," said Buckaroo. "And, you must admit, an unparalleled educational experience for a non-human. I'd like to see what an alien would pick out as the 'Seven Wonders of the World.'"

"Next one's a little more down-to-earth," said Tommy, above the inevitable groans. "Although not entirely."



'It's not a watermelon: it's a soap bubble. After we solved the Problem of the Lead Balloon That Wouldn't Fly, we turned our attention to the Quickly Disappearing Soap Bubble. We proposed to increase the lifespan of a bubble beyond its usual five nanoseconds and increase what Ion and I dub the 'Popability Threshold.' Our efforts were so successful that we had watermelons, pumpkins, acorn squashes, and honeydews floating all over the place. Some of them have been spotted as far away as East Brunswick. We managed to pin one of them down finally for further experimentation. Next problem: How to Stop People from Eating the Soap Bubbles.'

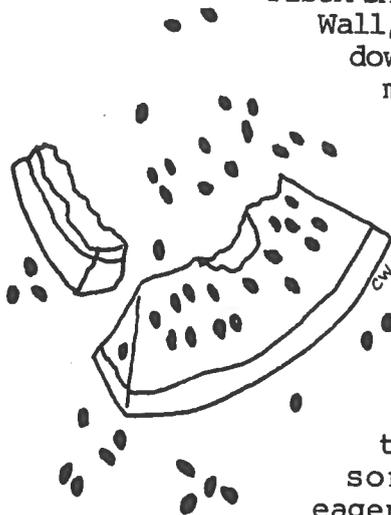
(Submitted by the Deadly Diode Duo, Phy. Lab. 2)

"Nobody would own up to this one. It was scribbled in pencil on the back of a bag of mulch. Somebody had pinned an extra piece of paper on the top, a title, apparently."

SIC TRANSIT GLORIA
PISUM SATIVUM

Wall, y'know, sometimes down here the 'sperimints git a lil' confused, y'know, all mixed up like cornflakes and milk and blueberries in the morning. I dunno. Seems to me t'ain't natch'ral to mess with Mom Nature, but that's jest what some of our lil' eager-beaver students done gone and did. Seems

there's this stuff called you-rainy-um that does *wieyd weiyd* strange things to people, plants, govermint, anythin'. Somebody got ahold of some of this ray-dio-active stuff and snuck it into our back-kitchen peapod patch. Wall, y'all wouldn't believe what started growin' back there! Funny-lookin' peas, yellow peas, blue peas,



striped peas, pease porridge hot, pease porridge cold, sweet'n'sourpeas, blackpeas, peanuts, chickpeas, Burpee's, and giant peas. GIANT peas. HUMONGOUS peas. Came pea-pickin' time and we jest hadda see what kinda fodder those GIANT peas made. Imagine bein' able to feed a whole plantation on a handfulla peas? You could send some to Ethiopea. Wall, we tried to eat one. Tried. You couldn't. Couldn't even get into it. We tried boilin' one. A whole week we boiled one. People kept comin' thru the shed 'n askin' what the heck we were doin' to the big green ball. Nuthin' happened, I mean nuthin' a-tall. Hammers, chisels, nuthin' could get thru its skin. Somebody got cute and suggested an East o' Texas Chainsaw Pea-Massacree. Wall, somebody finally 'membered the heavyduty press in the basement fizzix lab. That's what New Jersey saw, the pea in the poke. Coupla days later we finally got around to turnin' the screws. Wall, y'know, sure was funny afterwards, but not for the people in the basement fizzix lab. They sure did look a sight. A peatiful sight. The pea went and bust all over 'em! Anybody want any split pea soup?'

"That's a real nice rendition, Tommy; you make a fine Uncle Remus," commented Reno. "But what's the title mean?"

"Doesn't anyone get a proper education anymore?" asked Tommy, rhetorically, one hopes. "It basically means 'thus passes away the glory of the pea'--Pisum Sativum being the pea's botanic name."

"Since when do you know botanic nomenclature? Furthermore, I'll bet the only Latin you know is the ig-Pay atin-Lay kind," Pecos retorted. "Did you write it, P.--or is that Pea--Tommy?"

"Hell no," came the indignant answer. "Me write that kinda pseudo-quasi country-hick-hillbilly talk?"

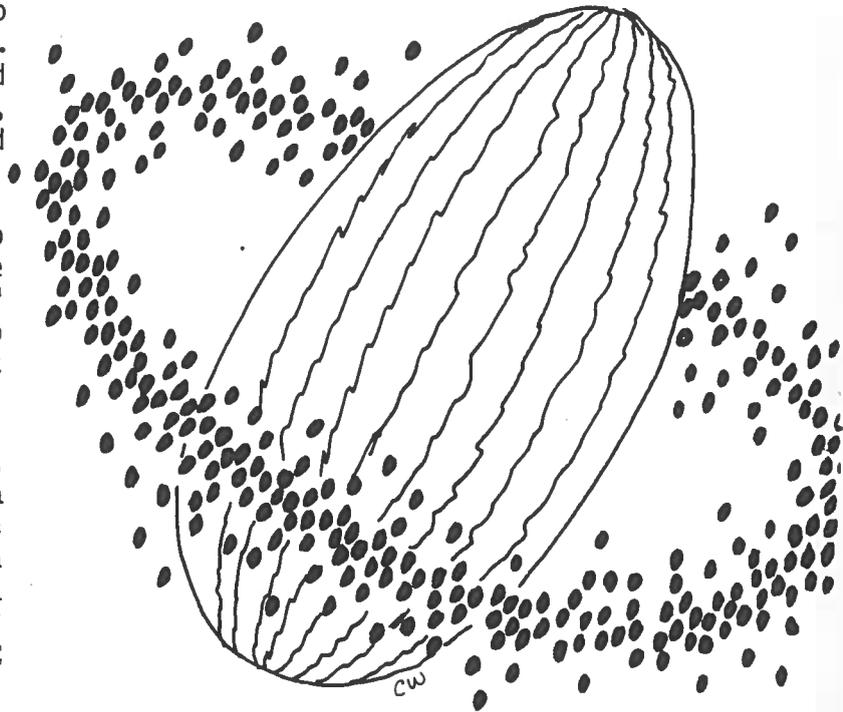
"You've certainly got the accent for it."

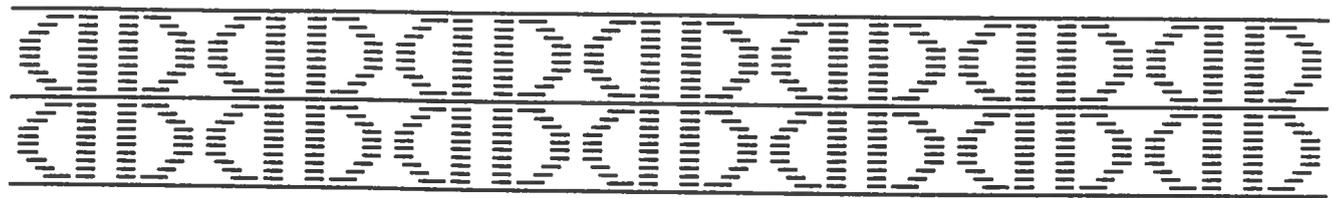
During this typical Pecos-Tommy altercation the Boss was observed to scribble rapidly on a piece of paper. Looking inscrutable, he folded it and passed it along to Perfect Tommy, who, after a final glare at Pecos, picked the missive up and unfolded it.

The blond one was observed to laugh. "We've just gotten a late entry in the 'name-that-watermelon' competition," he remarked. "Seems to me the true answer is also the best one."

'We don't know what it is, or rather, what it will be. It arrived in a basket left outside the gates. It was much smaller then. It was wrapped in a soft blue blanket and came with a message composed from words cut out of a newspaper. They read simply: "TAKE CARE OF MY BABY. THANK YOU."

(Submitted by Buckaroo Banzai)





Spread a Little Happiness

by Fern Marder

Sunshine laughed at himself in the mirror. Tousled brown hair. A face that could as easily look handsome as plain. About a week's growth of beard. Team Banzai tee-shirt. Big grin. He hadn't felt so good in years.

He'd run into Buckaroo Banzai at The Blue Note in the Village some eight months before. They'd both appreciated the band and had gotten to talking about music. He hadn't known a lot about either Buckaroo Banzai or the Hong Kong Cavaliers and, indeed, the names hadn't even come up in their conversation. What had come up was that they both enjoyed playing jazz as much as they enjoyed listening to it. He'd taken Buckaroo's card without really looking at it and heard himself say he'd call to maybe set up a jam session.

He'd been down on his luck. Or maybe he'd walked out on it. To all appearances, he should have been on top of the world. Talented. Successful. Wealthy. Add a 'very' to all of those. And totally dissatisfied with life. He thrived on challenges and on learning new things. And the world just didn't seem willing to let him do what he wanted to do. . . No, that's not fair. It's more that he didn't know what he next wanted to do, he just knew that he didn't want to continue in the same rut he was in.

Getting to know Buckaroo Banzai was a real eye-opener. A renowned neurosurgeon who, for a time, had walked away from that career to devote himself to a new discipline, that of particle physics. Oh, how Sunshine could relate to that! And now had arranged his life in such a way as to reap the spiritual benefits of both those challenges and more, and also make an extraordinary contribution to the world at large. Buckaroo Banzai had definitely created a heaven for himself on Earth.

The amazing thing was that he was so willing to share it with others. And with so few strings attached.

Sunshine still didn't know what had made him dial the number on the card. Maybe it was the 'Banzai Institute for Biomedical Engineering and Strategic Engineering' (now there was a strange mouthful) on one side of the card and the 'Buckaroo Banzai and the Hong Kong Cavaliers--Band Available for Club Dates' on the other. Anyone with a name like Buckaroo Banzai couldn't be all bad. He'd dialed.

He hadn't been the same since.

He'd spent hours walking the grounds of the Institute, pouring out his soul to a man he barely knew. A man who seemed to understand him better than the millions who claimed

to know and love him. They talked about stagnation. They talked about the treachery of publicity. They talked about needing more from life. They talked about the right of the individual to grow.

He'd ended up in love with an idea. The fundamental philosophy behind the Banzai Institute. Who you have been and what you have done are only meaningful insofar as they define who you are and where you are going. No names. No histories. No reputations to live up, or down, to. Every person accepted for what he or she is now and will become.

They'd talked about the science of music and the physics of sound. And suddenly the possibility of learning about what made sound into music and electronics into sound, the possibility of using that knowledge to perhaps create new instruments to produce new sounds. . . Suddenly there was a purpose to life again.

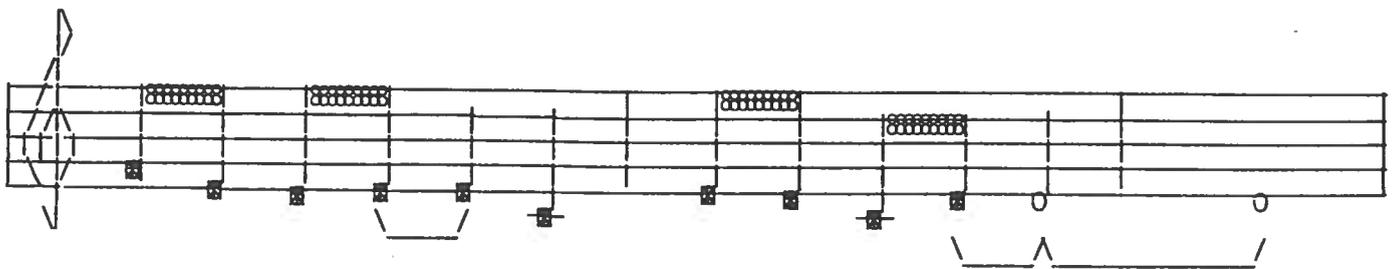
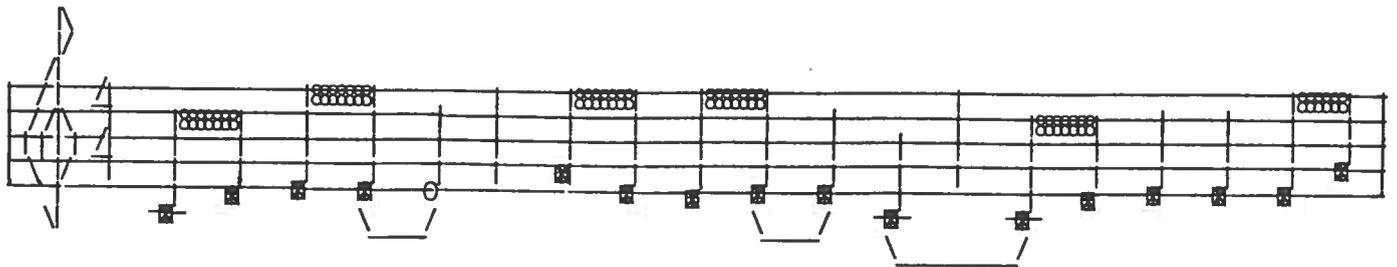
They'd caught up with the Cavaliers in the Institute's music studio. "Gentlemen," Buckaroo had said, "this is Sunshine. He plays jazz and rock." Sunshine had started at the name, but said nothing at the time.

He'd played with the band that afternoon. Guitar. Bass. Piano. Sax. And, after a few hours, when he was drunk enough on the music they were making, he had sung. For the first time in maybe six months, he had sung. And the quality of his voice had stunned his listeners. He was a fine musician, but he was a marvelous singer.

Later, he'd taken Buckaroo aside. "Sunshine?"

Buckaroo had laughed and said simply, "You look like you need some."

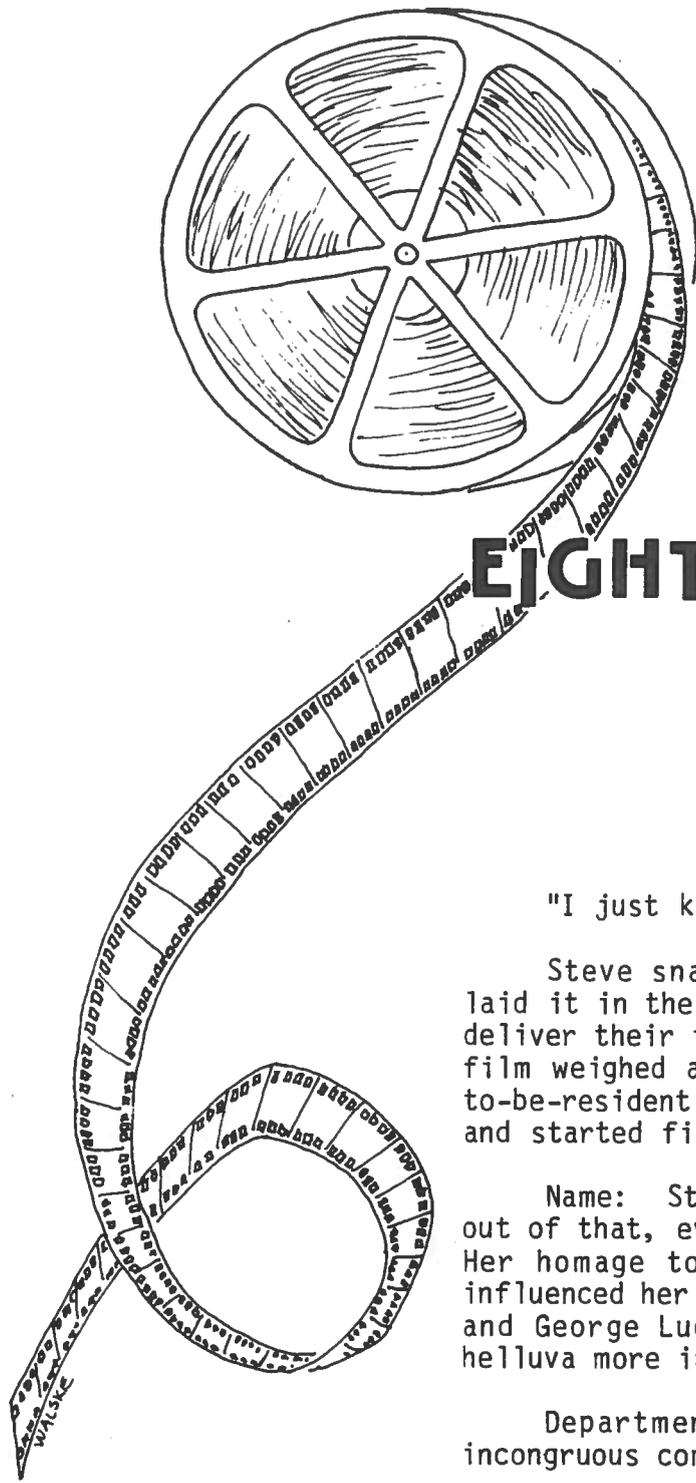
Sunshine. That would take some getting used to. He smiled at Buckaroo. "No, I think I've found some."



TOKEN LECTROID PAGE

John Aid * John Alpha Ralpa * John Amazing Grace * John Anklebiter * John Any Requests * John Appleseed * John Bambi * John Be With You * John Beagleman * John Betamax * John Big Bang * John Big Berries * John Bimbo * John Black Lagoon * John Blurb * John Bon Bon * John Burger King * John Burp * John Busy Signal * John Byanyothername * John Cactus Thrower * John Cat Copier * John Cement Mixer * John G. Clef * John Cold Pizza * John Come Lately * John Corndog * John Coupon * John Daisy Wheel * John Dancing Soup * John Date of Birth * John Dead Dog Party * John Dear * John Dickandharry * John Dirt Counter * John Dr. Good Sex * John Dog Police * John Domestic Short Hair * John Doorknob * John Dove Bar * John Dow Jones Industrials * John Downtown Mice * John Dragon Breath * John Eat at Joe's * John Egg Zipper * John Elbow Room * John Electric Grass * John Elephant Bow * John Equalizer * John Eraser-head * John Ethnic * John R. Ewing * John Ewok * John Expletive Deleted * John Extra Cheese * John Fabulously Wealthy * John Fanzine * John Feather Mechanic * John Feelgood * John Fernando Valley * John Floppy Disk * John Fluffy the Fruitbat * John Flushing Queens * John French Fly * John Frogwasher * John Gentleman * John Goes to Hollywood * John B. Goode * John Gotobed * John Great Pumpkin * John Grinch * John Grotty * John Haircut * John Hancock * John Hollandaise * John Hoopla * John Hostess Corporation * John Houseandamortgage * John Hype * John Ick * John Itchy Pockets * John Ivory Tower * John Jacuzzi * John Jockey Shorts * John John-Boy * John Jumping Socks * John Kilohurts * John Klingon * John Krooshul Missing Serkit * John Kumquat * John Leaping Lizards * John Le Bon * John Litterbox * John Little John * John Little Strummerboy * John Long Silver * John Lookalike * John Madeintaiwan * John Makemyday * John Mahvelous * John Many Paws * John Plectrum * John Plop Plop Fizz Fizz * John Polyp Chaser * John Pomegranate * John Post Awful * John Potty * John Pretty Teeth * John Princeling * John Pubcrawler * John Q. Public * John Racing Stripe * John Redshirt * John Roach Coach * John RocknRoll * John Root Canal * John Rotten * John Roughcut * John Rug Polisher * John Running Nose * John Safety Dance * John Sanitary Engineer * John Scratchsniff * John Screaming * John Scrod * John Sheep Dip * John B. Sloop * John Smalltalk * John Smith * John Sneaker * John Soap Opera * John Squeaky Clean * John Spoonrest * John Stir Fry * John Streaker * John Sweetpea * John Syzygy * John Takeanumber * John Tarzan Boy * John Taxi Thinker * John Teenie Beanie * John Three Hole * John Tinkerbelle * John Too Bad * John Too-Many-Johns * John TV * John Twinkietoes * John Twisted Blister * John Ten-Car Garage * John Typeface * John Uary * John Upjohn * John Used Kleenex * John Valley Girl * John Vinyl Junkie * John Vitameatavegamin * John Vulcan * John Walking Yarn * John Wallbanger * John Water Closet * John Weeping Willow * John Weird * John Wesley Hardon * John Wet Galoshes * John Whiteout * John Whoopi Purple * John Wiggle * John Wind Chill Factor * John Withholding * John Woebegone * John Worm Delivery * John Wrong Number * John Xan * John Yawn * John Yellow Pages * John Yin Yang * John Yoda * John Yo-yo * John Zap * John Zebra Dot





A CLOSE ENCOUNTER OF THE

EIGHTH DIMENSION

or The Intern Strikes Back

"I just know they're gonna kill me."

Steve snapped closed the last canister and laid it in the carton. Had anyone else ever had to deliver their thesis on a hand truck? Six reels of film weighed a whole lot. The intern-hoping-soon-to-be-resident picked up the thesis registry form and started filling it out.

Name: Steven George. Steve still got a kick out of that, even after two years at the Institute. Her homage to the two filmmakers who had most influenced her career decision: Steven Spielberg and George Lucas. Besides, Steven George was a helluva more interesting name than Susan Jones.

Department(s): Security and PR. A rather incongruous combination, no?

Thesis advisor: Perfect Tommy--well, sort of. Actually, one of the marks of successful completion of this project was doing it without Perfect Tommy's finding out just what it was that she was doing. A security test, she'd called it in her thesis plan. Proof that she could both carry out a project in absolute secrecy and--here was the tricky part they didn't know about yet--proof that she knew enough about Institute security to breach that security repeatedly and effectively.

by Fern Marder
&
Carol Walske

But that now seemed like such an insignificant part of her project. The issue of security had become the mere jumping-off point for a massive undertaking which touched on the entire Institute--which was why her thesis now fit equally well into the Arts Department, Sunshine's domain. Yeah, they were gonna kill her. . .

Presentation format: Motion picture and attendant papers. A lot of papers.

Title. . .

There was a knock at Steve's door. It was MacIntosh with the hand truck.

Steve hurriedly completed the form. She reached for the Scotch tape and affixed the form to the top of her carton. She and MacIntosh lowered the box from desk to hand truck and, carefully negotiating the littered path from desk to door, wheeled the hand truck out into the corridor.

"Thanks, Mac. I owe you," Steve said. "I'll bring the wheelie back to your storeroom as soon as I'm done."

The plaid-garbed handyman with the Blue Blaze cap looked at her a bit skeptically. "You sure you can handle this thing?"

"Yeah, and you too," Steve said with a grin. She wouldn't have minded the fact that the Institute seemed to attract an unusual number of basketball-player-size people if they didn't take so many opportunities to remind her that she was only five-four.

Before Mac could respond, Steve turned and headed for Perfect Tommy's office. She wondered if anyone had ever been expelled for successful completion of a thesis.

To Steve's chagrin, Tommy simply looked at the box, took the form off

the top and said, "Thanks. Now why don't you deliver that to the projection room? I'll have a look at it first thing tomorrow morning."

"Yeah. Sure." Darn Tommy anyway. He was just the type to enjoy making her stew overnight. She glanced at Tommy over her shoulder as she left his office. How could anyone that good-looking be so thoroughly obnoxious sometimes?

Steve wandered over to Sunshine's 'part of town.' That is, she crossed the compound from the main building to the converted barn that now housed the new recording studio, linguistics labs, darkroom--and Steve's fledgling film works.

She smiled to think of Sunshine--but then that was the whole idea, wasn't it? Sunshine brought light into people's lives. Steve had heard rumors that this hadn't always been the case. It saddened her to think that this bubble of energy and joy had once been a truly somber character.

Steve let herself in the door of what they officially called the Arts building and went down the corridor to the sound lab. Good. The red light was off--no experiments underway that precluded entrance.

"Sunshine?" she called, coming around a synthesizer bank. "Are you in here?"

"Hello," the British voice responded. "Over here."

Steve followed the voice around and between the computers, amplifiers and Lord only knew what else in the lab. She finally glimpsed the tousled brown hair above a screen that looked ominously like a hospital read-out panel but, fortunately, was not.

Twinkling green-hazel eyes looked up. "Come have a listen," Sunshine invited, extending a pair of headphones.

Steve accepted the extra ears and found herself listening to some wonderfully eerie notes. "Reed pipes?" she asked. Sunshine shook his head. "Wind chimes of some sort?" she offered. Sunshine laughed. Steve removed the headphones.

"Just me and my new toy," he said, grinning.

Sunshine had somewhat recently been given stewardship of this new division of the Institute. Only fitting, since he had instigated it. To say that he was pleased by this turn of events was an understatement. Steve was the first intern to be working on a project in his domain. Also, there was enough room in the Arts barn for a film lab, one of the few things lacking in the common house.

"Do you mean to say those sounds were all synthesized?" Sunshine nodded. "It's gotten to the point where I can't trust anything," she joked.

"You can always trust me," Sunshine said a bit more seriously than Steve would have expected. He eyed her speculatively. "Have you done the deed?"

She nodded. "I just came from Perfect Tommy's office. The bastard didn't even look inside the box. He just picked up the paperwork and sent me away."

"Isn't it better that he deal with it when he's in the proper mood?"

"You have a point there."

"Don't look and sound so doleful. I keep telling you, Steve," Sunshine said in his best English schoolmaster's tone, "you're not going to get into trouble. I wouldn't have stayed here if Buckaroo Banzai and Perfect Tommy were the kind of people who couldn't appreciate the work you've done and the points your thesis makes."

"But. . ."

"No buts."

"But--"

"Steve." Sunshine came forward to her and squeezed her shoulders. "I like you a lot and I admire your work, but do you really think I'd risk everything I've found here just to do a soundtrack for your movie?"

Steve tried to look down. He didn't let her, lifting her chin with his hand. "I'm not trying to make you feel guilty," he said quickly. "I believe in these people, and I'm certain you do, too. Otherwise you wouldn't care so much about this whole thing, would you?"

"I know." Steve managed a shy smile. "It's just that now that it's done I wonder why I ever started this crazy project. I mean, why couldn't I just do a straight thesis like everyone else? You know, like designing a new surveillance system or something. Why did I have to be so damned 'innovative'?"

Sunshine raised his eyebrows and said with mock gravity, "Because you're a member of Team Banzai." He added a sly smile. "That's what makes you good enough to be an Institute resident."

"Yes, sir."

Sunshine put his arms around Steve and drew her against him. She relaxed and hugged him back. Bless Sunshine. He was new enough at the Institute to remember what it was like to be a nervous recruit but settled in enough to be believed when he took the Institute line. Sigh.

Perfect Tommy sat in the darkened screening room. He signaled to the Blue Blaze in the projection booth and picked up a notepad. Why did he have

to have 'creative' interns? He'd seen a lot of unusual projects come in, but this was the first time he'd even been faced with grading a film.

The screen came alive with a bright graphic display of one of the Banzai Institute's logos. 'Classy,' Tommy thought. The music came alive and Tommy settled into his seat, preparing for the real thing. He wasn't prepared for what he saw.

As the film unwound, he realized that he was looking not at any created image, but at real life--the kind of footage he got from the security cameras the Institute used. As his own image came on the screen, talking to the one and only Reno, Tommy inched forward in his seat.

He watched for perhaps fifteen minutes. Then, convinced that what he was seeing had undoubtedly come, somehow, from security footage--albeit masterfully edited and transferred to 35mm film--he signaled again. "Kill it, Pete."

The screen went dark and the room lights came up. Tommy didn't know where this motion picture was going, but he did know two things: first, he didn't like the implication that a mere intern knew more about internal security systems than he did, and, second, he did want Buckaroo and the other Cavaliers around to help him deal with this thing.

Perfect Tommy and Rawhide had installed the new surveillance system about two years ago. It started out as a security measure in the labs and the garage. Then, one morning, Professor Hikita came into the dining room extremely agitated. Something about an overzealous Blue Blaze having washed a blackboard. Tommy pointed out that the blackboard was directly opposite one of the security cameras and that he hadn't 'killed' yesterday's footage yet. Sure enough, the Professor's formulae were clearly visible on the videotape.

There was a lot of discussion on the subject of maximum return of this security system. Before long, most of the work rooms, gyms, rec rooms, kitchen, and just about every other public area had been 'bugged' with cameras and mikes to record theories randomly discussed or music composed away from the studio. All you had to do was let Rawhide, Pinky, or Perfect Tommy know within forty-eight hours that you wanted to see the film from a particular set of cameras and you could rescue what would otherwise have been lost moments of creativity.

Buckaroo started a new trend when he asked to have his private rooms rigged. He claimed that, in this way, if he woke up with a good idea, all he'd have to do was start talking out loud about it and not even turn on the light or reach for pen and paper. Professor Hikita thought this sounded like a good idea and, eventually, a number of other residents were requesting in on the set-up.

It was decided that each such individual would be responsible for 'scrubbing' the previous day's tape--both for privacy and so that Security wasn't spending a lot of time at it. Rawhide took care of Buckaroo's cameras. Each lab team took care of its own. Public area cameras were checked by Pinky's security people. All film was kept locked up and coded. Only Rawhide and Perfect Tommy--and, one assumed, Buckaroo--had all of the keys. Trust was presumed. Confidentiality was the byword.

So what the hell was going on?

Phones started ringing all through the Institute. Trying to set up a meeting of all the Cavaliers--and a few extra people besides--for other than band practice or Friday staff meetings was no small feat. It took Mrs. Johnson two hours of going back and forth to set it up. For her trouble, she got invited to attend the

screening.

Only one person tried to get out of the meeting altogether. "I know all about the film," Sunshine had said, "I've already seen it."

This, reported back to Perfect Tommy, produced an angry call back--unusual, as Tommy and Sunshine were particular friends.

"What do you mean 'you've seen it'?" Tommy had squeaked.

Sunshine held the phone away from his ear. "I helped Steve put together the soundtrack." He was determined not to sound defensive. "What's wrong with it?"

"Do you have any idea where that footage came from?"

"Why don't you ask Steve?"

"I intend to." With that, Tommy had clicked off, without actually eliciting the desired promise of attendance.

Before the meeting, Sunshine happened to deliberately run into Steve. His first comment was entirely too flippant for her taste. "It seems a hot new movie opened hereabouts this morning. A bit too hot for the local MPAA to handle."

Expletive deleted.

Sunshine laughed. "I'm sorry; I shouldn't tease you."

"What happened?"

Her British friend took her arm reassuringly. "Nothing really, yet. But I thought you should know that Perfect Tommy's called a meeting of Buckaroo, the Cavaliers, and a couple of extraneous types like me, to show your film."

"Great. He didn't give you any idea of what he thought of it?"

Sunshine shook his head. "We mostly haggled about the fact that I'd seen it already. I've decided to go to the screening, as long as I'm invited."

She didn't have to voice the question that was written all over her face.

"Yes," Sunshine said, laughing, "I'll tell you what happens--unless they swear us all to secrecy."

"Well, Perfect Tommy, this is your meeting," Buckaroo said, taking a seat next to Peggy, in the second row of the screening room.

Tommy looked a trifle sheepish. It had occurred to him about an hour after he'd sounded the alarm that he had, perhaps, overreacted. He'd returned to the little theater and run the movie through to the end. He still wanted everyone present to see it, but now for at least a dozen additional reasons.

"Thanks for coming, everybody. What you're going to watch is the thesis project of Steven George. I don't want to give you any preconceptions, but I think I should warn you that parts of it may upset some of you on various grounds." Tommy glanced at Peggy Banzai. She probably shouldn't be here, but it was too late to withdraw the invitation.

"Sounds dangerous," drawled Reno. "What are we gonna see?"

"You can answer that for yourself, man." Standing against the wall, Tommy reached over and turned off the lights. He raised his voice so as to be heard back in the projection booth. "Okay, roll it."

A transcript of the audio tape from the screening room, made the next

day at both Perfect Tommy and Buckaroo's request, yielded some amusing insights, not least of which was that no one could keep quiet during the viewing. It was then decided that the transcript be included, with a few clarifying annotations, with the grading of Steve's thesis.

The opening, with its Team Banzai colors, skillful graphics, met with general approval.

PECOS

I like the designs. Maybe she should work on a video for the Cavaliers.

PERFECT TOMMY

Just wait.

RENO

Sunshine's been holdin' out on us again. He gets to mix the next album.

The desert view was met with puzzled speculation, and then cheers at the sight of the Jet Car and scurrying personnel. Everyone recognized this instantly. It'd been covered by every network in the country and quite a few overseas, and had spawned at least three documentaries. Everyone settled in to enjoy familiar history--only to be brought up short by a quick jump in scene.

NEW JERSEY

Jesus, that's me. How'd I get in here?

RENO

We film all of Buckaroo's tricky operations, Doc. Couple of medical schools use them for teaching purposes.

BUCKAROO

(a whisper) Rawhide...

HIKITA

When the fault alarm came on, we should have changed to alternative three. Next time.

MRS. JOHNSON

Look at that strange blue. Neat special effects.

RENO

Those aren't special effects, Mrs. J. That's the real thing. Welcome to the eighth dimension.

BILLY

I'm glad it wasn't me in that car...

PERFECT TOMMY

That's why you're still an intern, Billy.

MANY VOICES

(fast and jumbled) What the hell? Where'd this stuff come from? But that's not Lizardo. It looks enough like him to be his brother. Heaven forbid. Look at all that junk. What the hell is he doing? Is this some kind of a joke? Look, over there on the wall--Lectroid pictures. Billy, turn up the sound, I can't hear myself think.

HIKITA

'Laugh while you can, monkey boy?' That is not Emilio.

PEGGY

No, but it is John Whorfin.

PINKY

Wait a minute, who took a videocam to the club?

RENO

I set it up with Artie. We--

PERFECT TOMMY

If I'd known there was a camera backstage, I'd've posed for it.

MRS. JOHNSON

That's okay, Tommy, you got to pose for the mirror--as usual.

RENO

As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted, I thought it might be useful to watch ourselves. Or maybe use some behind-the-scenes for publicity. But then, well, you know...it

didn't seem appropriate. But I swear, I locked it all up.

BILLY

Guess we've got a expert burglar on the premises.

PEGGY

(very slowly) You mean it's all here.

RENO

I dunno. I ended up giving a dupe of the film from Artie's to New Brunswick's Finest to sort everything out.

PEGGY

Oh, no. I don't think I want to watch this.

BUCKAROO

Tommy, how much is really here?

PERFECT TOMMY

It's bad in spots, but it shouldn't embarrass anyone.

PECOS

I don't believe I'm seeing all this. I mean, it's like I wasn't away.

RENO

Boy, do we sound awful.

PERFECT TOMMY

Speak for yourself, man.

SUNSHINE

Actually, you sounded worse. I overdubbed the music when I mixed the soundtrack.

Silence, as only the sounds of the movie--a piano, Buckaroo's voice, a gunshot, chaos--are heard. There was almost a collective sigh of relief as Lizardo's demented face reappeared.

HIKITA

I do not think I approve of ridiculing a sick man. What happened to Emilio Lizardo was not his fault.

BUCKAROO

Better levity than serious exploitation, Hikita-san. Besides, the actor is obviously having a very good time.

BILLY

Yeah, if he'd played this straight, he'd be Darth Vader.

RENO

Hey, Boss, you were the one who wanted the camera in your quarters on the bus.

Much unintelligible whispering between Buckaroo and Peggy Banzai.

PINKY

(laughing) Didn't know you were old enough to know about Mr. Wizard, Tommy.

MRS. JOHNSON

Who the hell are they? Where'd Steve get such good doubles?

NEW JERSEY

I did not dress up like that!

RENO

You did think I was Pecos.

PECOS

I think I've been insulted.

BILLY

Tommy's the one who looks insulted.

PERFECT TOMMY

That's not me.

PINKY

Who'd she bribe at the jail?

BUCKAROO

(quietly) That's not real, either, Pinky.

PECOS

Ooooh, my god, Perfect Tommy.

PERFECT TOMMY

Shut up.

The mood changed each time the film returned to actual footage. Everyone seemed more comfortable watching themselves than watching actors portraying themselves.

NEW JERSEY

Now we're back for real. I remember watching the press conference on the news.

RENO

Hey, Tommy, how'd you know McKinley was going to turn out to be such a pain? You were onto him way before the rest of us.

PERFECT TOMMY

Discerning taste.

BILLY

Wait, there's the other Buckaroo again, in the phone booth.

PECOS

Who is he?

PEGGY

Looks good enough to be the real thing.

BUCKAROO

No comment.

PERFECT TOMMY

According to the credits at the end, it's an actor named Peter Weller.

BUCKAROO

I think I would like to meet this Peter Weller.

MRS. JOHNSON

I want to meet the Perfect Tommy clone.

SEVERAL VOICES

You would.

PEGGY

The ships are beautiful, like sea creatures. Is she trying to tell us something about our favorite sushi fan?

NEW JERSEY

How'd they get Lectroids in the conference room?

BILLY

The ones in the weird ship are better. Right--they're the good guys, aren't

they?

BUCKAROO

Some pretty neat editing in here.

PECOS

Oh, Reno!

SEVERAL VOICES

It's Buckaroo Banzai!

BILLY

Those Lectroid masks are something else. Wonder if she'd lend me one for Halloween.

RENO

Where'd Steve get all the actors?

SUNSHINE

(with mock pride) I was three different Lectroids at Yoyodyne. I even tried to eat a barbecued Twinkie.

PINKY

Hey, this is a funny movie.

PEGGY

I never thought I'd laugh at a Lectroid.

Silence for a while as those assembled watched the movie fill in the details of what had happened to Buckaroo, out in the wilds of New Jersey.

PECOS

Cute kid. Scooter Lindley, right?

BUCKAROO

That room looks just like yours, Tommy. . .except yours has more posters.

NEW JERSEY

This thing cuts back and forth so fast, I'm not sure I can keep up with it.

RENO

That's 'cause you're still new at this, Doc.

PINKY

That guy even sounds like you, Professor.

SEVERAL VOICES

It's your hand, Buckaroo!

BILLY

Oh, hell, it's the cloddy cop again.
Let's go back to the good stuff.

Cheers rose each time point of view
shifted to the Institute. By this
time, what they were watching had
become a real movie to them--not just
someone's thesis project.

MRS. JOHNSON

Oh, wow, it's me!

PINKY

See, Mrs. Johnson was the only one who
knew from the start it was Peggy.

BUCKAROO

Not the only one.

RENO

Hey-hey, the Boss fights dirty.

PERFECT TOMMY

Now, there's no need to be mean.

PEGGY

Look out!

BUCKAROO

It's not me, Peggy.

NEW JERSEY

Nice catch. Why are you always in the
right place at the right time, Buck-
aroo?

BILLY

Hey, my turn!

PERFECT TOMMY

Yeah, you're gorgeous.

PECOS

Who's the guy in the snazzy jacket?

MANY VOICES

John Parker!

BILLY

Isn't it dangerous showing us doing
this stuff?

MANY VOICES

John, John, John, John, John!

PECOS

Bravo, New Jersey.

PEGGY

Poor Sam.

RENO

Oh, no, you don't suppose she. . .
Tommy?

PERFECT TOMMY

It's pretty bad.

PEGGY

What are you talking about?

SUNSHINE

You'll see.

Applause rose as Buckaroo arrived.
Someone later commented that this was
much better than watching home movies.

MRS. JOHNSON

See, I told you he steals lollipops.

NEW JERSEY

She had a nasty tongue for such a
beautiful lady.

BUCKAROO

This is an invaluable record.

RENO

A yellow one?

BUCKAROO

I thought all this stuff was gone.

There was an audible gasp from Peggy
and a moan from Buckaroo as the cam-
era's eye moved onto decidedly sensi-
tive territory.

PEGGY

Oh, no! That's not fair.

RENO

Good thing you don't have cameras in
the john, Buckaroo.

BILLY

Don't say 'John.'

BUCKAROO

Is there much more of this scene?

SUNSHINE

No.

BUCKAROO

Good.

PERFECT TOMMY

Not really. . .not given what's next.

SEVERAL VOICES

Huh?

Silence in the audience as Rawhide's voice is heard in the movie.

PEGGY

(tearful) Dear R'ide.

PERFECT TOMMY

Should I stop the film?

BUCKAROO

No. We went on, just as he told us to. We go on.

PINKY

It's bad seeing it again this way.

BUCKAROO

(softly; surprised) I think he'd have been pleased.

There was conspicuously less chatter during the next short while, with only a comment or two interrupting the soundtrack.

RENO

Bad time to cut to the comic relief.

MRS. JOHNSON

I don't think the President would be too pleased to see this.

PERFECT TOMMY

Tough. Steve picked 'em perfectly. The other guy's got McKinley down to a slimy T.

BUCKAROO

Now, now. . .

There were laughs and admiring commentary on how well Steve had depicted Yoyodyne's rococo interiors.

NEW JERSEY

That guy playing Lizardo deserves an Academy Award. He's hysterical.

PEGGY

I, for one, don't find him funny at all.

NEW JERSEY

Sorry, I. . .

PEGGY

Just kidding. He's terrific. Which is more than I'll say for me.

BUCKAROO

You're a lot prettier than she is.

CHORUS

(laughing) The short form!

MRS. JOHNSON

Did Yoyodyne really look like that?

BILLY

This is a lot cleaner. And in a movie you don't get the stink.

PECOS

They look like a real bunch of jerks.

NEW JERSEY

Dangerous jerks.

RENO

Steve wrote this thing? It's great!

SUNSHINE

Actually, she got a fair amount of assistance from you, Reno.

RENO

What? Me?

SUNSHINE

You chronicled these events in both comic book form and novel, remember?

PECOS

Somehow I get the feeling we shouldn't be laughing at Whorfin.

BUCKAROO

The only alternative would make a pretty good horror movie.

PEGGY

I don't care if it is a movie, it gives me the creeps.

SEVERAL VOICES

Ouch.

MRS. JOHNSON

That's a pretty wild-looking contraption.

PINKY

Well, maybe the real one wasn't quite that Rube Goldberg. . .

MRS. JOHNSON

Wait, you mean they really...?

SEVERAL VOICES

Hush!

PECOS

That creep. I knew I hated government types.

NEW JERSEY

Yeah, Scooter!

Lots of hoots and hollers and giving of advice on how to--and not to--fly a thermopod. Finally, a big cheer.

BILLY

We have an unfair advantage--we know he made it.

PEGGY

Serves you right, Tommy.

PERFECT TOMMY

Hey, I was the the one who ended up driving him back in the Jet Car, remember?

RENO

Can't imagine why. . .

PEGGY

Wait a minute, there isn't any more, is there?

PERFECT TOMMY

Just watch.

BUCKAROO

What were you saying about embarrassing people, Tommy?

PECOS

This thing's too well edited. You lose all the good parts.

CHORUS

So what. Big deal!

PINKY

Where'd the video come from?

NEW JERSEY

What am I doing in a Cavaliers music video?

RENO

Wait. It isn't us. It's all the other guys.

BILLY

Who cares. It's a great video.

SUNSHINE

Steve wants to shoot the real thing someday.

PERFECT TOMMY

Lights.

In the Institute's small theater, the lights were turned back on and the projector was turned off. Everyone generally stretched and shifted in their seats. Except for Buckaroo and Peggy, who were holding one another quietly. Tommy had a bad feeling that he was going to hear it from Buckaroo--for not either warning them or asking Buckaroo if Peggy should see the film with everyone else around.

Perfect Tommy waited a few moments, then, looking around the room, said, "Well, what do you think?" He allowed the room to explode. Then, "Buckaroo?"

Buckaroo stood up and turned to face most of the group. Slowly, they

quieted down. Then, obviously not able to hold it in any longer, he broke into a huge grin. "I think we make a pretty funny movie." The group began to cheer and buzz again. The boss held up one hand. "Now, now, let's simmer down. Okay. We all agree that Steve has made a good movie. But does that make a good thesis?"

Reno raised his hand. Buckaroo nodded at him. Reno shrugged. "Then again, does it matter?" General laughter. He continued, "No, I'm serious. Steve's made a darn good movie, she's obviously got a flair for observation, organizing images. . ."

"Whoa," cautioned Buckaroo. "I don't think that this is the time to analyze Steve's work, one way or another. There are also a number of other rather serious issues raised by this thing that need to be dealt with on another level." A few people shifted uncomfortably. Peggy, who had been looking up intently at Buckaroo, bent her head.

"I tend to agree with Tommy," Buckaroo continued, "that, under the circumstances, the thesis commentary committee should be expanded to include everyone in this room, with the possible exception of you, Sunshine." He looked apologetically at the British musicologist.

"As to that, I really wouldn't feel right making any kind of judgment on the project, or on Steve's residency. . .all things considered," Sunshine replied. This brought a laugh from those assembled.

"And you guys are always kidding me," put in Perfect Tommy. "Those two have been in collusion all this time."

"This is entirely Steve's project," insisted Sunshine.

"She sure poked holes in our security," commented Reno.

As decorum appeared to be fleeting, Buckaroo interceded. "As I was saying," he began with his voice raised, then paused to allow quiet to settle. "You'll all be issued copies of Steve's written material. Those who are obliged to read all of it know who you are, the rest can feel free to read as much or as little as you want. But I want everyone to have some kind of written comment in to Mrs. Johnson by tomorrow night."

Groans. Several snide versions of "Yes, Boss."

Buckaroo half smiled. "Come now, work is the most fun we ever have."

"Not paperwork," Pecos chimed in.

"Red tape," Billy added.

The boss let his friends jibe him for a minute, then said, "Just to prove that I'm not totally a slave driver, I intend to watch the film again tonight. Any of you are welcome to join me." He paused. "Unlike some people," he looked over at Perfect Tommy, "I'll provide popcorn."

"All right!" "Way to go!"

"As for the question of the film's, er, pedigree," Buckaroo said, "Perfect Tommy and I will investigate and let everyone know what's going on at Thursday's thesis committee meeting." He glanced at Tommy. "That it?"

"That's it," Tommy agreed.

"Okay." He smiled, raising his hands in a gesture of dismissal. As Tommy also moved to leave, Buckaroo added, "You I want to see."

"Somehow I had that feeling."

Buckaroo Banzai sat on the corner of his desk, looking at Perfect Tommy, sitting opposite him in an armchair.

"She hit fifteen cameras in three different buildings and the bus every night for more than two weeks and no one noticed."

Tommy fidgeted. "We were busy," he drawled. His accent always seemed most pronounced when he was particularly pleased or particularly uneasy. "We had a lot of other things on our minds."

"You knew that the PR part of her project was to make a film and the Security part of it involved breaching security in some way and you didn't figure out what she was up to or try to complicate the issue in any way?"

"Well, I spoke to Rawhide about it when it first came up and we started talking about it, but, well, then we all got involved in the Jet Car and setting up for the test and then the Lectroids. . ."

Buckaroo sighed. "Do you have any idea where the rest of the film is? The stuff she didn't put in the movie?"

Tommy shook his head. "She obviously duped the tapes and then put them back so no one would notice anything wrong. Then she must have augmented the parts she decided to use. I suppose she still has the rest on videotape somewhere. Unless she erased the parts she didn't need," he added hopefully.

"That doesn't sound either efficient or likely until after the whole issue of the project was resolved."

"You have a point there."

Buckaroo stood up and walked around the desk. He picked up one of the documents Steve had provided and flipped through it, finding the page he remembered as being pertinent. "She says it was particularly easy to get into the garage the week before the Jet Car test, because with everyone working late on it, the full night

security rig was never turned on."

Tommy bristled. "There were people in the garage with the Jet Car practically at all times, as of three weeks before the test. Nothing could have happened to it."

"Not to it," Buckaroo pointed for emphasis, "but to records and tape that could have been of interest to all sorts of people. John Whorfin, for instance."

"Whorfin was still locked up in the loony bin."

"Fortunately," Buckaroo countered. "He might not have been."

Tommy looked down as he considered that. "I'm sure that Steve got into all the places she did because everyone recognized her and figured it was all right. I mean she'd been here for about nine months at that point and hadn't given anyone any reason to suspect her of anything strange."

"Precisely the point she makes on page 37 of her Security 'how to.' She could have been up to anything and no one questioned her." Buckaroo found the line he wanted and read aloud, "The Institute is a place of trust, which is one of its most ingratiating features to those who are here or who wish to come here. However, there comes a time when trust and security will clash. I was gratified to discover that my reputation was so good and horrified to learn just how much rope that gave me to hang myself or anyone else on. I came and went as I pleased before the Jet Car test because all anyone thought I was doing was making a movie about the Jet Car. After the test, security at the garage was even more lax. I hardly need to point out that the red Lectroids entered the area, did damage to the Jet Car and. . ."

"I know." Tommy didn't need Buckaroo to read him Steve's account of Sam's death. It was bad enough

she'd put it in the movie. He got up and paced over to Buckaroo's desk. "You know that the timing on this thing makes it look a lot worse than it would otherwise."

"Of course it does. I'm glad it does. Otherwise we might have missed just how important this document"-- Buckaroo dropped it back onto the desk--"really is."

Tommy tried to change the subject, by picking up the pile of Steve's thesis documents. "Have you gone through any of the other pieces?" he asked.

Buckaroo nodded. "Of course. I read them last night. They're quite impressive, not that I pretend to understand the one on film enhancement techniques and special effects and so forth. That's one I want to talk to Sunshine and Reno about."

"Yeah, me too." Perfect Tommy looked inquiringly at Buckaroo. "You haven't really said what you think of the film itself."

Buckaroo raised his eyebrows in amusement. "That would be telling. But then you haven't said, either."

Oh well. Tommy grinned. "I'll tell if you tell."

Acquiescing to the children's game, Buckaroo grinned back. "Deal. When it isn't too close to home, it's a really fine movie. It's got a little bit of everything you'd look for--humor, tension, excitement--of course I'm partial to the subject matter."

Tommy laughed both in agreement and in relief. "Yeah, I really liked it, too. It's worth my five bucks in a theater."

"I trust your written commentary will go into a little more detail."

"I've got fifteen pages of notes

already," said Tommy. "Steve's supposed to see me on Thursday afternoon to get my thesis appraisal. You want to be there, Boss?"

Buckaroo considered this, then nodded, without indicating any of his thought processes. "Yes. Yes, I would."

Thesis committee meetings ranged from the dry and terribly technical to fast and furious debate over points made. This meeting was simply riotous. Everyone had seen the film at least twice, and a few people, who shall remain nameless, had managed to sneak in five viewings or so already.

All those called upon for written commentary had gone far beyond the norm. As Buckaroo remarked, one of their problems was the plethora of material. He also delivered a mild rebuke to his people about the unfocused nature of many of the reviews. Some debate ensued over how difficult it was to fairly and succinctly judge something so close to each of them. Buckaroo granted the truth of this, and then proceeded to put each committee member on the spot by asking for a verbal precis. "I hope I don't need to remind any of you," he said with mock officiousness, "that precis means precise and to the point."

The meeting sobered up quickly. Pecos was allowed the longest commentary, since she hadn't been at the Institute during the timeframe of the film. Her remarks brought it into a sharpened perspective for everyone, her review being unprejudiced yet wholly knowledgeable. Peggy's summary was also fascinating, as some measure of her confusion as Penny affected her still when she looked back on that time. Pinky had some cogent comments to make about grounds security and the value of Steve's suggestions for improvement.

"Reno, you want to give us a

summary?"

The saxophonist was caught by surprise. "Uh--yeah, Buckaroo, sorry. I was just making notes on distribution and marketing possibilities."

A wave of intrigued murmurs spread around the table. "Of this thesis project?" asked Peggy, shocked.

"This film," said Reno firmly. "Two things, Buckaroo. As a device for conveying the message of the Banzai Institute and the evil in the world--and out of it--the project can't be faulted. Second: the film does fulfill the thesis' goal of demonstrating security weaknesses, but I've gotta say that the intern sorta lost track of that purpose in the final product."

"Do you feel that the thesis suffers, then?" asked Buckaroo.

"Hell no," answered Reno with a laugh. "I'd just like to know at what point she gave up on just documenting security strengths and weaknesses and decided to go for the best all-around product she could deliver. If nobody else wants her, I'll take her as a resident in PR."

"Since you brought it up, we ready for a vote?" Buckaroo looked around the table. Each resident and/or Cavalier present indicated their assent, and, moments later, the consensus was complete.

Steve arrived at Tommy's office a good bit before she needed to. The blond Cavalier greeted her with a lift of the eyebrow and a knowing grin. "Nervous, Lucas?"

She frowned but let the name pass. Maybe it was a good omen. "Yes, I am," she said defiantly.

Tommy merely gave her a patronizing little smile, then returned his

attention to a circuitry schematic. Steve didn't feel like being ignored. "I know I'm early," she said, "but could we possibly get started, Tommy?"

"We're waiting for Buckaroo."

She permitted herself a very small gulp. That was either very good or very bad. She wasn't going to let herself fall into pessimism today; Sunshine would never forgive her. He had regaled her with his account of the reactions to the movie and some of his own reactions to seeing it in full in the company of those who'd been a part of it. She'd been tickled and pleased at the viewpoints he'd given her, but she also knew that the movie was only the most blatant tip of the iceberg of her thesis.

Buckaroo arrived promptly at the digital flicker of 3:00 p.m. "All rise for the opening of the Grand Inquisition," he said as he walked in.

Tommy grinned but didn't move; Steve laughed gratefully and found herself relaxing in the boss's warm magic presence. There were unusual unforeseeable complications in making a film, especially one that involved heroic action. People and their deeds tended to loom larger than life, and though Steve had tried to keep a balanced perspective, and even inject a bit of humor on that very topic into the movie itself, it remained difficult to think of Buckaroo Banzai without a certain amount of disbelieving awe.

Buckaroo moved a chair a few feet and sat down. His position was such that the three of them made an equilateral triangle, rather than the more typical array which would pit two against one. Steve had a feeling it would take a while before she stopped looking at things compositionally.

"Have you started?" asked Buckaroo of Tommy.

"No."

"Then do so."

"Okay." Tommy unearthed a rubber-banded pile which Steve recognized immediately as the hefty, written portions of her thesis plus a lot of extraneous pages on top. He pulled free a paper-clipped section, which Steve could see was covered in Tommy's own very small and almost indecipherable handwriting. "You've got not one but two theses here, Steve. My first question is: why didn't you let me or anyone else know about the splitting of your project?"

This was a perfectly valid question, one that Sunshine, in fact, had asked frequently in the past. Trouble was, Steve had kept giving herself different answers. Today she settled for the two most honest ones. "At first, the movie was just a document of security. Then it started growing into an insiders' view of what was a very tangled-up time. I didn't know I could ever pull it together into something coherent," she confessed. "Then, after a while, it became too much. . .well, fun to see if I could pull it off in secret. Security, you know."

"Considering that you refer to the involvement of several score Blue Blazes here, and in Texas and California, I'd say your security is better than ours," commented Buckaroo.

Tommy scowled. "Yes. On that subject, as much as it goes against the grain for me to say so, I appreciate your precise descriptions of how you helped yourself to the security footage. You've got quite a burglar's manual here. Your specific recommendations on beefing up Institute security are well made, comprehensive, and by and large viable. I'll discuss implementation with you some other time. But the one thing you don't address is the theoretical issue of security: how much is enough, and how much is too much?"

"Wouldn't that be a topic in

itself for a whole other more philosophical thesis?" Steve asked. "I did consider it, though I didn't put my thinking down on paper. It's a whole policy issue."

"Would you mind ruminating now out loud?" put in Buckaroo, quietly.

Informal it was, but this session was also proving to be inquisitorial enough to make Steve start to sweat. She thought it was bloomin' ruddy cheek for a mere intern to comment on basic Institute policies, but neither could she turn down a direct invitation from the boss.

"I tried to define a middle ground between overarmed, militaristic and underarmed, foolishly vulnerable," she said. "And between covert and overt, trusting and paranoid."

"And where does the Institute lie, Steve?" asked Buckaroo.

"Well, on the one hand, the public image is of a peaceful research institute with a reputation for slightly off-the-wall methods and outlook. That's overt. Such a place needs very little in the way of security, except in terms of research protection and laboratory sanctity.

"But there's a whole covert world here, too, which the public is starting to get inklings of, especially given the media attention to Yoyodyne. Also, you've never made any secret of being a bunch of roving adventurers. But you have always very carefully deemphasized--even hidden--the full concept behind strike teams, our diplomatic and political status in various countries around the world, and the occasional delicate job for the U.S. or other government." Steve paused. "It's the image of the claws curled within the cat's paw. There, but not obvious."

"That's the tightrope we try to walk," said Perfect Tommy. "Having perceived and understood that much,

how do you cope with it? You've forgotten one fairly sizable factor, by the way, which has a lot to do with shaping our defenses."

"I put that into another category all by itself," she responded, rather tartly. "The World Crime League. It doesn't fall into overt or covert territory; it's today's original sin, inescapable and a part of everyone's lives. It's just fundamental to the Institute's makeup to try to fight that."

"If our strike teams didn't already exist, Xan would make their development necessary," said Tommy.

His tone was unusually approving, and Steve felt embarrassed and pleased that her opinions were being treated so kindly. "I guess I'm not telling you anything you don't already know."

"You're putting it very well," said Buckaroo. "You may find yourself on a diplomatic mission on behalf of the Institute someday."

At that, Steve did blush, and hurriedly returned to the question Tommy had raised. "So once you establish that you have to be both defended and ready to attack, the question is how. The Institute seems to be divided on that issue: one answer for internal defenses and a different one for offense, strike teams, that is. I decided to address the issue of internal security because that was the only area where I could find any flaws. It seemed to me that we, here, are somewhat undefended."

She looked from Buckaroo to Tommy, but neither of them jumped on her or even seemed disturbed by that statement. Encouraged, she continued, "I know that you wouldn't want the Institute to become some little beleaguered island of weapons and security devices; that could turn us into a mini police state."

"I don't think the City of New

Brunswick would approve," drawled Tommy.

"I wouldn't expect anyone here to live and work in such an atmosphere," said Buckaroo.

"But we are vulnerable here, to Xan's people, and I think we're more vulnerable now that people know that we do these kinds of things, offensive operations, I mean. It'll be a long time before we can live down Yoyodyne." Steve looked at them almost pleadingly. "We're in more danger now just because the public knows we're armed. I wouldn't want anything to happen to the Cavaliers or to anyone here because of some fool's desire to test our defenses. Do you see what I'm saying?"

Tommy had a rather strange look on his face; he glanced over to Buckaroo in what seemed to be half-ashamed inquiry. Buckaroo smiled slightly, reassuringly, back at him, leaving Steve wondering just what she'd missed.

"I see what you're saying," Tommy said. "It's a valuable point."

"Yes," said Buckaroo. "Steve, how would you like to join our Security core? I think we'll need some policy revision, and I'd like you to be a part of that."

Steve restrained an overwhelming impulse to jump up and hug both of them. She collected her composure and answered carefully, "I'd be honored, Buckaroo."

"Well, that covers the security thesis," said Tommy. He gazed at Steve with a definitely provoking gleam. "That wasn't so bad, now, was it?"

It was amazing how fast one could go from wanting to hug a person to needing to hit said person. Buckaroo intervened with a welcome digression. "I'm starved," he said. No surprise

this; the boss was famished twelve times a day. "How 'bout some refreshment?"

Steve stood up. "I'll be glad to go get something for you."

"Not so fast," said Tommy. "You tryin' to run away before we're done with you? You're under interrogation here. I'll put a call out to some lazy Blue Blaze."

Buckaroo passed a humorously resigned glance to Steve, at which she almost giggled. Tommy obviously needed his fit of obnoxiousness after being serious for such a long stretch. They settled on what they'd like to eat, and Tommy called down to the kitchen.

Food provided a welcome interlude. It gave Steve a chance to realize that they were going to make her a resident after all. Surely that was implicit in Buckaroo's invitation to be part of the Security team. She allowed herself to glow over this while she ate a salad and listened to Buckaroo and Tommy haggling over guitar technicals. Then she recalled that the more difficult session by far was yet to come, and her pleasure hit the deck with a bump. Her film meant more to her than Institute security, as awful as that was to admit. She really wasn't sure she had the fortitude to face any questioning on it at all.

Buckaroo finished his meal with cheese and an apple, right down to the seeds, then wiped his fingers clean and looked at the other two. Tommy was still happily dismembering the carcass of a chicken. "You ready, Tommy?"

"Sure," said he, with his mouth full. "You wanted to know what she did with the rest of the film. The sensitive stuff, like you and--"

"Tommy, don't talk with your mouth full and your mind empty,"

interrupted Buckaroo with unusual, but forgivable, asperity. He shared his exasperation in a glance to Steve. "Such tact."

Steve was secretly amused, but she hid it. "It's a viable concern," she said cautiously. "I want to assure you, Buckaroo, and I guess I should have figured out a way to tell you this earlier, that I didn't see anything I really shouldn't have. I knew pretty much what segments of film I wanted from what times of the day, and I didn't look past that."

"What about aboard the bus?" queried Tommy, with perhaps excessive interest. "You know, at the end of the movie."

"You trying to become Peeping Tommy, Perfect Tommy?"

Steve couldn't hold back her giggle, this time. "It was too dark," she said, then added virtuously, "Besides, I cut the footage at that point."

"Thanks," said Tommy. "The boss was worried."

"Next time," said Buckaroo with remarkable patience, "make sure to include some footage out of Tommy's room. I'm sure his multitudinous female fans would be thrilled."

"I," said Tommy arrogantly, "know how to turn cameras off."

'Next time,' Steve was thinking. What 'next time'?

"Something a little more serious and germane," said Buckaroo. "Tell me, Steve, what are your intentions or hopes for your film? There's nothing on that in your thesis."

Time to stick her neck out and discover if it was going to get chopped off. "I thought to donate it to the Institute," she said, straight away, because she'd rehearsed this,

"for whatever use you see fit. My personal recommendation is that you then take it in whatever form you want and distribute it publicly."

"Ah," said Buckaroo. "Then the style of the film, commercial rather than documentary, is intentional."

"Yes." Steve was encouraged by the fact that he seemingly had no trouble accepting this. "I also hoped that you could use it as a fundraising item, like anything else out of PR."

"If nothing else, a training film for Blue Blaze recruits," muttered Tommy. "I gotta ask: where'd you get those actors?"

Buckaroo laughed, and so did Steve. "Blue Blazes helped by turning up possibilities," she replied. "And I've still got a lot of friends in California. Actually, the resemblances have a lot to do with makeup, angles, and lighting. They all got the biggest kick out of playing you guys--a couple of them are even Blue Blazes."

"You also had to do quite a bit in the way of set production and effects," said Buckaroo. "I skimmed the details--I don't pretend to understand them--of making and inserting the special effects, but nowhere did I find a discussion of costs."

"I was going to ask about that myself." Tommy looked narrowly at Steve. "She hasn't been drawing heavily out of thesis funds, to my knowledge."

Neither of them had to add: films cost plenty. She knew, and they knew, and they knew she knew they knew, and so forth down that chain to the waiting question.

"I called in a lot of favors," she said, and immediately heard and winced at the nervousness in her voice. "And of course the Blue Blazes are marvelous; they won't accept money

even if you throw it at them. Everyone was appallingly generous."

"Steve," said Tommy, "cut the smoke screen."

She felt herself coloring. "The bulk of it was a donation."

"How much?" demanded Tommy.

"From whom?" Buckaroo asked, concerned. "Why didn't you come to us?"

"That would have meant blowing my security," said Steve. "It really didn't cost as much as you think." They weren't going to let her get away with that, she could see, and besides, it would have to come out sooner or later. "The donation did come from someone here," she added sheepishly. "From Sunshine. And I paid what I could out of my own pockets, of course."

"Oho," commented Tommy. "Stinging Sunshine. Ulterior motives, huh?"

"Tommy," said Buckaroo quietly. The note of warning in his voice was quite enough to squash Tommy for a little while. "That's extremely generous, but we will certainly pay him back. The film is an Institute project. I also will insist on seeing your budget."

Steve wished Sunshine were here. "He said you'd say something like that, Buckaroo. I didn't want to take the money from him either, but he insisted."

Fortunately Buckaroo plainly realized that to pursue this with her would only imbed her more firmly in the middle of an obviously difficult situation. "I'll speak to him."

Steve had the feeling that would be one argument Buckaroo might just lose. The British muso had been more than vehement on the subject with her, claiming that money was for spending and that he could spend his in any way

he pleased.

"You see, Steve," said Tommy, and she could tell immediately that she didn't want to hear the rest of his undoubtedly edifying thought, "the buck stops here."

This was accompanied with a flourish and a grin. Buckaroo and Steve looked at each other and exchanged sounds of protest and revulsion. "Seriously, Boss," Tommy went on, "if we market this publicly, we can pay back Sunshine, give Steve a percentage, and maybe use the extra revenue to do something more for the Arts department."

"Market it?" Steve repeated incredulously. "Would you really?"

"That is your own recommendation," Buckaroo answered, amused. "Why not: do you have any second thoughts about your product?"

Steve didn't feel this was an overly fair question, but she didn't feel like saying so to Buckaroo Banzai. She had no way of knowing what the response had been to her little movie. Then she admitted that what other people felt should have no effect on her own work. "I might cut a few seconds here and there," she said at last. "Just fussing, probably."

"And otherwise?"

"Otherwise, no: I have no second thoughts. I'll stand by my work." She was pleased with the way that sounded, confident and brave. Then she blew it by giving Buckaroo a wistful, hopeful look. "I did it for all of you and all the creativity here."

"Good," said Buckaroo. "It

shows. And I for one am grateful."

"I could've done with a few more closeups," said Tommy.

Buckaroo and Steve both gave Tommy the laugh he was expecting. Sometimes the blond Cavalier was reassuring because he was so--well, Perfect Tommy. You could always count on him for a certain kind of response; Steve figured he did it on purpose. On this occasion Steve was sure he'd done it on purpose to prevent what was likely to be a quite maudlin reaction from her.

"You'll find some interesting reactions on your film from the people who were involved," said Buckaroo, indicating her thesis. "I'd like you to go over them, consider if you want to make any additions or revisions, then come back to me, Tommy, and Reno, and we'll talk about inflicting 'Across the Eighth Dimension' on the world." He grinned at her. "You can also consider whether you want to root your residency in PR and Security, in both of which camps you're both wanted and needed, or split your talents between them."

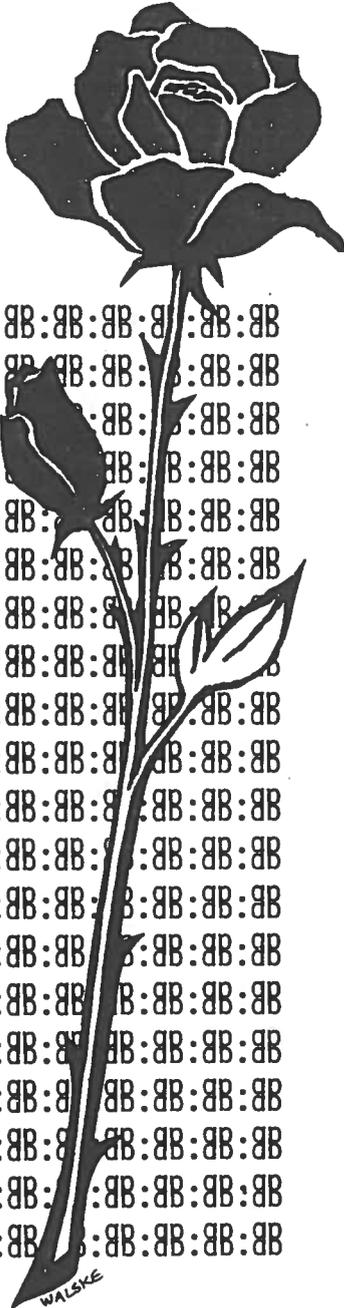
"Split," she said immediately, happily. "I've definitely got a few more films to make. With yours and her permission, there's Peggy's story. But the movie I really want to make next is you guys breaking up the World Crime League."

"Isn't that a little premature?" inquired Tommy.

"Of course not," said Buckaroo. "She films it, and we show it to Xan, who keels over from heart failure. End of story."

A ROSE by any Other Name

by Denise Tathwell



The Church of Saint John the Divine in New York City was crowded with anxious guests as the wedding of the year drew closer. The marriage of B. Banzai to Miss Peggy Simpson had graced the social calendars of many a celebrity. Speculation concerning the smallest of details covered the tabloids. It was inevitable that such an occasion would bring about public attention, something the intended groom had discouraged.

Rawhide tugged at the collar of his tuxedo, feeling suffocated by the clothing and environment. Being best man was not his forte, but Buckaroo's request could not be denied. It was the least he could do for his best friend.

Checking the contents of his pocket for the tenth time, Rawhide felt the small velvet-covered box. It contained Buckaroo's gift to Peggy, a simple golden wedding band. It reminded him of the ring he had given his wife, many years ago. The thoughts brought back a flood of memories, quickly damped as Reno walked through the door.

"It reads like a Who's Who out there," Reno spoke as he entered the changing room. This newest member of the Hong Kong Cavaliers was still adjusting to his newfound celebrity. Totally new to the bright lights and adulation, he vowed not to acknowledge their false import.

Reno scanned the room, noting the piles of telegrams sent from well-wishers unable to attend. Buckaroo had struggled to keep the ceremony small, but Peggy's desire for a formal wedding increased the size and prestige. He glanced from the bureau to the

full-size mirror situated in the corner. Perfect Tommy, resplendent in his formal attire, inspected every line of fabric. What else could be said, he was Perfect Tommy.

"Well, I'm ready," Tommy stated. "What are we waiting for?"

"The groom," Reno answered. "Where is Buckaroo anyway?"

Peggy Simpson sat quietly at her dressing table, glancing at the mirror before her. Her long white gown was enhanced by the multitude of flowers that surrounded the suite. This was the day she had long dreamed of. The day she would be joined forever with her love.

Lost in thought, Peggy closed her eyes, listening to the muted musical chords which filled the sanctuary. Soon she would be Mrs. Banzai, a thought which made her smile.

She opened her eyes slowly, catching the reflection of someone standing behind her. With a mixture of surprise and delight, she turned to face the intruder.

"Buckaroo, what are you doing here? Don't you know it's bad luck to see the bride?"

"Says who?" Banzai smiled as he approached his fiancée. "You look beautiful."

Peggy blushed slightly, unable to stay angry a minute longer.

"I wanted to talk to you a minute," Buckaroo said as he pulled up a chair and sat down.

"Now?" Peggy laughed softly. "We're about to get married."

"Exactly," Banzai responded seriously.

Peggy half reflected his serious tone. "You're not having second thoughts, Buckaroo?"

Buckaroo smiled slightly as he reached out, taking Peggy's hands. "No. I just want to be sure you know what you're getting into."

Peggy squeezed his hands affectionately. "Listen to me, Buckaroo Banzai. I love you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Don't you think I know by now what I'm getting myself into?"

"I know you've seen a lot, but taking this step will change things for both of us."

"Right, that's why we're doing this." Peggy smiled warmly and leaned forward, embracing her soon-to-be husband.

It was then that they heard a knock at the door and an exasperated Pecos entered the room. "Rawhide thought you might be here." Pecos placed her hands on her hips. "You two did want to get married today? Yes?"

"Yes." Peggy nodded joyfully as Buckaroo stood, offering her his hand. Two happier people did not exist.

The ceremony was beautifully simple, culminating with the introduction of Dr. and Mrs. Banzai. Well-wishers filed by the happy couple offering their congratulations. The Hong Kong Cavaliers stood by, enjoying the festivities but additionally scanning the crowd. God forbid anything untoward should happen, but if it did, they were prepared.

Captain Happen, an old acquaintance of the Institute, approached

Rawhide, champagne glass in hand. It was evident that this glass was not his first. "So, Banzai finally got himself hitched. Couldn't have been to a nicer lady."

Rawhide nodded agreement but remained silent. Although a brilliant scientist, this man had always rubbed him the wrong way.

"Guess things will be a little different on the home front," the captain remarked.

"How so?" Rawhide asked, annoyed.

"Well, you know. Different personnel and all." He spotted another group of acquaintances. "Gotta go. Been nice talking to you, Rawhide."

Rawhide reserved comment and watched Captain Happen navigate into the crowd.

Pecos stood silently at the edge of the sanctuary. The wedding party had broken up, allowing her the freedom to wander. She scanned the crowd, secretly hoping Reno would catch her eye and join her. Instead she spotted a figure, unusually clad for a wedding in that it wore black. Black robes, to be exact, and it was pacing as if in an acute stage of agitation. She felt drawn to this person, who was obviously in distress.

"Excuse me," she stated carefully. "Are you all right?" Pecos approached the figure, its back turned away. "I don't mean to pry, but you look upset."

"Upset?" The individual turned, a black veil covering even his facial features. "No, my dear. I was just waiting for someone. You need not be concerned."

Pecos shifted nervously. There was something strange about this person. "Well, would you like to sit

down a while? I'm sure your friend can find you if you sit at the tables." It was difficult to judge the age of the figure with whom she spoke.

"No, thank you. You're very kind. I must be off." The mystery turned to leave. "It was a lovely wedding, wasn't it?"

All Pecos could do was nod as she watched the black robes being swallowed up by the crowd. The din of the surrounding conversations tunneled as all thoughts sharpened around their exchange. 'It was almost mystical,' Pecos thought, slightly shaken by the experience.

A hand touched her shoulder, causing her to jump. She spun around to catch the surprised expression of Reno. An uneasy moment stretched between them.

"Sorry," Reno replied. "Didn't mean to startle you."

"No, it's okay." She attempted to regain her composure. "Did you want something?"

"Ah, yes," he started. Why was it so difficult to talk to this woman? Was it because he was secretly attracted to her yet unsure what tack to take? "Buckaroo and Peggy are leaving soon. Thought you'd want to be there."

"Thanks, Reno, I do." She smiled brightly, melting away her friend's hesitation. Reno offered her his hand as they returned to the center of the room.

Peggy and Buckaroo had separated slightly, each talking with a different group of people. The air was electric with excitement and anticipation. Outside, a large group of fans awaited a glimpse of the newlyweds. A white limousine parked in front of the

sanctuary stood ready to whisk Dr. and Mrs. Banzai to a secret location. All plans had flowed smoothly and soon the social event of the year would come to a close.

Peggy bent down and whispered into her husband's ear. "Honey, I'm going to change. Only be a few minutes."

"That's too many minutes too long," Buckaroo whispered back, smiling.

Peggy's eyes sparkled as she bent down and kissed him gently. "Be right back." She turned and left his line of sight. Buckaroo turned back to his friends, realizing how lucky he was.

Peggy passed the Team Banzai sentries outside the changing room and entered alone. The room was just as she had left it; only now she was Mrs. Buckaroo Banzai. With great joy, she sat at the dressing table and removed her veil.

Out of the corner of one eye, she spied a lovely bouquet of yellow roses. "I don't remember those before," she mused as she rose and walked across the room. "Wonder who they're from?" She bent over to smell the roses, only to inhale a fragrance which burned her senses and suffocated her thoughts.

Buckaroo spoke to his friends with the comfort of camaraderie. The Cavaliers were his family and his best friends. A disturbance turned their

attention from humor to curiosity. A group of people had gathered to the side of the sanctuary. A flurry of activity befitting distress was felt, and Buckaroo wondered if someone had been hurt. Wanting to offer aid if needed, he and the Cavaliers made their way toward the crowd.

Pecos turned toward the disturbance; a ghostly chill touched her soul. The memory of the black-robed figure stood before her, causing her heart to pound as she crossed the room.

Buckaroo quickened his pace as he saw the location of the commotion. The changing room doors were open as Team Banzai Security flooded in from all directions. His heart skipped several beats as he felt evil penetrate the air. "Peggy!" He pushed through the crowd, stopping at the opened door.

There, still in her wedding dress, lay his bride. Deathly still, he didn't need the confirmation Rawhide's eyes conveyed. She was gone. All the people he had loved most in the universe had been taken away. A universe now cold and empty.

Outside the sanctuary, a black-robed figure watched as the news spread. Peggy Banzai dead of unknown causes. He reached into his cloak and symbolically crushed a solitary yellow rose. His task complete, he turned and walked away from the Church of Saint John. A light rain had begun to fall.

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THE PEGGY PARADOX

by Fern Marder

If all wishes were gratified, many dreams would be destroyed. Ah, but perhaps one wish. . .

Penny Priddy lay sleeping in the arms of Buckaroo Banzai. Buckaroo held her gently but strongly, lending comfort and protection. Four times in the five days since Yoyodyne, she had ended up here in his room in the bunkhouse, seeking solace from the headaches and nightmares that had plagued her.

The first night, she had slept in the guest room where Mrs. Johnson had left her. Buckaroo now suspected that that night's peace was more the product of sheer exhaustion than true rest. The second night, he had heard her wandering around downstairs and had found her rummaging in the kitchen. They had spoken for a while, she describing her evil dreams, he listening, trying to reassure her that they were a logical outgrowth of her ordeal at the hands of John Whorfin's minions. She had wept. He had comforted her. At dawn, they had retreated to his room as the more early-rising residents of the Institute sought out their morning coffee.

After that, she had come to him nightly, frightened, upset, in pain. Both physically and mentally. The headaches pursued her now, day and night. Nothing either Buckaroo or New

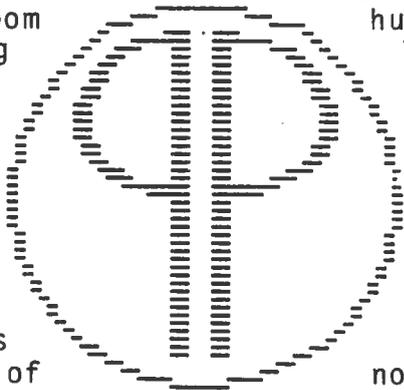
Jersey prescribed seemed to relieve them for more than an hour or two.

Buckaroo stroked her blonde hair and sighed. It was somewhat ironic for him to be worried about someone else's insomnia. He, himself, rarely slept more than a few hours a night since. . . He looked at the now dormant figure and, involuntarily, hugged her closer to him. Tears crept into his eyes.

Penny stirred and he loosed his hold on her. Just as well. Even if she were Peggy's sister, he had no right to impose his feelings on her. She looked on him as a friend. Perhaps more. No, he must not even think about it. The moment of intimacy they'd shared upon her reawakening in his room on the Cavaliers' bus could too easily have been only the natural physical and emotional release of two people who had faced death and celebrated life together. It was not her fault that she looked so incredibly like his beloved Peggy. Nor was it her obligation to fill Peggy's place for him.

Penny shifted restlessly again and moaned. In her sleep, she began to shake her head, slowly first, then more violently. Buckaroo tried to hold her still against him, but realized he had no choice but to awaken her.

"Penny," he said, shaking her



gently but firmly. "Penny, wake up."

She cried out, though still not fully awake. "No, don't, don't, please. . ." She pulled away from Buckaroo, falling back against the bed mat. Finally awake at the impact, she stared at him, wide-eyed.

He laid a hand on her shoulder. "It's all right. You're safe. No one will hurt you here," he murmured.

After a few seconds, Penny relaxed. She reached to touch his hand and smiled weakly. "I did it again, didn't I?" she asked.

He nodded. "More bad dreams? Do you want to tell me about them?"

"No. I'm sure that, by now, you think I'm crazy--and I'm driving you crazy--without my compounding it by telling you mad stories about dark tunnels and spooky voices."

She looked into his eyes and started to. . . what? Sit up? Reach for him? Buckaroo would never know. In an instant her warm gaze was shattered by a look of agony. She screamed, clutching her head in both hands, then fell back against the bed, unconscious.

Four hours later, Doctors Buckaroo Banzai and Sidney Zwibel sat arguing in Buckaroo's office in the Institute infirmary.

"Unless we can get a reading while she's having a seizure," New Jersey was saying, "we can't be absolutely sure of what's normal and what isn't."

"And I'm telling you we can't wait any longer," Buckaroo countered.

"We can't take the chance that the next seizure won't kill her."

"An erratic EEG isn't enough to go on." New Jersey was emphatic, counting off points on his fingers. "The X-rays are negative. The CAT scan is negative. The hormone levels give too many conflicting indications."

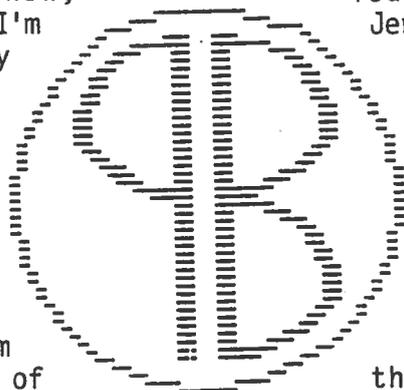
Buckaroo was in no mood for prevarications from the newest member of Team Banzai. "Sidney, if Penny doesn't regain consciousness in two hours, I am going to operate. If you don't want to help, that's entirely up to you."

New Jersey swallowed noisily. Buckaroo couldn't repress a smile. "You'd want me in there?" New Jersey asked hesitantly.

"I told you we needed you. I wasn't kidding." Buckaroo spoke earnestly about something he deeply believed. "If you can't handle the abstract obligation of owing your talents to humanity, consider a more concrete situation: the Institute needs another fully competent neurosurgeon and is willing to train one, whether that training is a question of broadening technical knowledge--or confidence."

He paused, realizing that he was making New Jersey increasingly uncomfortable, but no closer to understanding. "If you watch me enough times, and if I watch you enough times, someday you've got to get to the point where you don't need me there and I don't feel I have to watch you."

New Jersey took a moment to digest this, then said carefully, "Buckaroo, have you considered that it's a basic rule of every medical association in the world that no doctor



should operate on a member of his own family or on someone he's particularly, well, close to?"

Banzai hardly blinked. "Are you volunteering?"

New Jersey opened his mouth--either to say something, or simply in shock--then closed it again. Finally he said, simply, "No," then added, "but I'll be there to watch."

Buckaroo nodded slowly. "Thanks, Sidney."

The great question, of course, was where to begin? An absence of hard data made it all the more necessary to rely on the educated intuition of Buckaroo Banzai. The cerebral disturbance appeared to be wide-reaching, centering first in one area of the brain, then in another. The members of the operating team debated the possibilities in the scrub room and could only agree on one thing: they trusted to the skill of the surgeon to find a way to solve the problem.

Dr. Banzai himself wasn't present for this discussion; New Jersey told him about it later. Buckaroo had gone to see about Penny's pre-op preparation personally.

He'd asked to be alone with her for a few minutes. He'd stared down at the still form on the hospital bed wondering whether New Jersey didn't have a point after all. What would he do if Penny died? How would he ever be able to live with watching her die under his hands? But, then, how could he not try to help her? Who else could he trust with so great a task? How could he ever live with himself if he gave this single, most important

operation into another's hands? He could not.

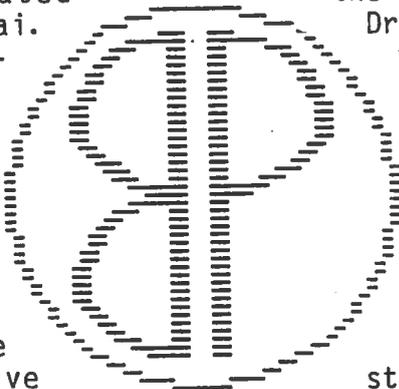
Buckaroo Banzai leaned over and kissed Penny Priddy deeply. He cradled her head in his hands--those hands that had saved so many lives--and pressed her cheek against his own. "I love you," he whispered, for that instant grateful that she could not hear those words he would not have dared to say to her awake.

As he left, he gave a few special instructions to the nurse called Catnip, then hurried to change his clothes and scrub up.

To the obvious surprise of the others in the operating room, Dr. Banzai's first request was for a small, light scalpel. Turning his patient's head to one side, the surgeon made a tiny incision--opening a most precise scar to be found behind Penny's ear. As the doctor retracted the skin at the opening, he forcefully restrained an urge to stiffen, lest it cause undesirable movement of his hands. However, he did uncharacteristically curse in Japanese.

There below the skin, virtually grafted to the bone, was a small, well, object (for at the time, no one could say precisely what it was). Dr. Banzai used a laser to sever the foreign object from natural tissue. Then he resealed the opening, determined to match the skill of the first surgeon--whoever that might have been--in leaving almost no mark on his patient.

The process was swiftly repeated, removing a similar item from the other side of Penny's head. The two items were on their way to the labs--one next door to biomed, one down the hall



to physical sciences--long before the patient was wheeled into the recovery room.

"Dr. Banzai, Professor Hikita is looking for you." Catnip had come silently into the recovery room where Buckaroo sat watching as Penny continued to lay motionless, two hours after surgery. She smiled sympathetically. "I'll call you if there's any change."

Buckaroo stood up and headed for the door. He glanced back at the bed, then looked at Catnip. "Thank you," was all he said.

He hurried to the phys sci lab. "What have you found, Hikita-san?" he asked, coming in the door. He was not surprised to find Perfect Tommy and New Jersey among those present.

"Ah, Buckaroo," Hikita said, turning from the lab table. "Come, look at this."

Buckaroo complied, looking into the magnifying viewer on the professor's work-table. There, beneath the light and high-powered lenses, was a micro-circuitry board.

Hikita spoke in his accented staccato. "It comprises a receiver and transmitter. Highly sophisticated. Remarkable design."

Perhaps anywhere but the Institute, Perfect Tommy's light southern drawl would have jarred the listener as he picked up the professor's Japanese-accented commentary. "The reason you couldn't find it is that it was encased in a shell made of some totally new compound. It's obviously resistant to detection by all your medical scanners. It'll take us a

while to figure out just what it's actually made of."

"It apparently receives signals from some outside source and transmits them as electronic impulses directly to the brain," added New Jersey.

Buckaroo took this all in as he examined the device. Then he turned to face the others. "Do we know how it works?"

The professor shook his head. "Not as yet. You see, the problem is that it is apparently malfunctioning. It is giving off random, erratic signals. However, I can detect no physical damage to the device." Hikita glanced into the viewer again. "I would theorize that it has been short-circuited. It is as though a great burst of electricity had passed through it."

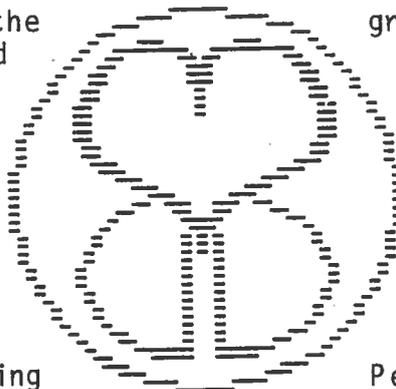
"Maybe that's when Penny passed out?" speculated New Jersey.

Buckaroo Banzai knew better. A surge of electricity. Like the one which had passed from him to Penny. A spark of life. Little did either of them know that that spark would carry further significance as well. Buckaroo said simply, "I don't think so."

They were interrupted by a voice over the general intercom, calm yet betraying urgency. "Buckaroo Banzai to recovery. Dr. Banzai, please report to the recovery room."

Buckaroo almost knocked over Perfect Tommy as he fled the lab. New Jersey followed, barely a stride behind him.

Buckaroo Banzai burst into the recovery room, heart pounding, fearing



the worst. Instead, he faced the wonderful sight of his patient sitting up, arguing with Catnip about something. They stopped as he entered.

"Buckaroo," both women said as one.

Ignoring the agitated nurse, Buckaroo moved gladly into the outstretched arms of the blonde woman in the bed. They hugged. They kissed.

"What's happened, Buckaroo? Where am I? Who is Penny Priddy?" She fairly spat the name.

Buckaroo stared dumbfounded at the woman in his arms.

Catnip's quiet voice behind them broke the silence. "That's why I sent for you, Dr. Banzai."

"Buckaroo?"

Did he dare think it? Much less speak it aloud after all they'd been through? "Peggy?" he ventured. "Peggy, is it you?"

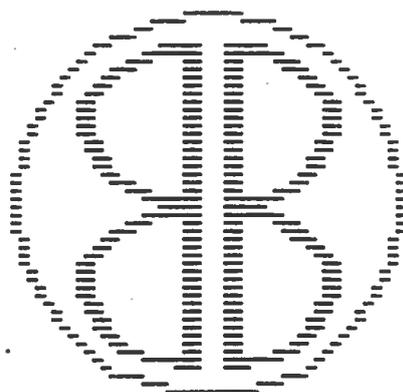
Peggy Simpson Banzai looked hurt and bewildered. "Of course it's me. Who else should it be?"

Choking back tears, Buckaroo turned to Catnip and New Jersey, who now stood beside her, having entered the room shortly after Buckaroo. "Would you leave us alone, please?"

Neither of them looked happy at the prospect. Nevertheless, they turned toward the door. "We'll be right outside," New Jersey said as he closed it behind them.

Buckaroo Banzai knew that it would be some time before he could explain to Peggy that nearly four years and a lot of history had passed since she 'fell asleep' in the changing room of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. He didn't know just how he was going to do it. But he did know that he would enjoy every moment.

The only reason for time is so everything doesn't happen at once.



NOTES

by Carol Walske

T

Perfect Tommy looked around furtively one more time as he loaded the file into his favorite PC terminal. It was after two o'clock in the morning in the studio room of the bunkhouse. There was no one around of course--hadn't been the last five times he'd checked, either. What he was doing wasn't illegal, but. . .

O

Tommy shared responsibility for security with Reno. And as a Cavalier and trainer of interns he did have a perfect right to have personal information about said interns.

Y

He wished he'd seen the file before the applicant had been accepted. After the Institute mainframe weeded out the loonies and obvious impossibles, apprentice and intern files were split up by category of discipline and parceled out to residents and Cavaliers for review. Tommy hadn't ever seen this intern's file--it had fallen into the biology department.

O

His fingers pressed certain keys in swift combinations as he tried some of the recent internal access codes. In between keystrokes he dipped into the box of Fiddle Faddle which someone had thoughtfully left some of. He wished that this operation didn't feel so much like cracking a safe. Billy Travers could have done it in five minutes. It would take him at least ten.

L

In point of fact, the time lapse was 13 minutes 06 seconds by Tommy's very fine waterproof bulletproof possibly 100 proof

digital. The master record file came up, indexed by name. Real name. When a new apprentice or intern started at the Institute, he or she chose a name. Part of the Institute tradition of privacy and ideal of judging a person by what they are and do, not what they were and did.

However, Tommy had a pretty good idea of what the real, non-Institute name should be, so he picked out a particular file and accessed it. He sighed in guilty relief when the data-file came up on the screen.

Yes. It was the right person with the right background. Right hometown, right high school; right parents' names. He groaned. How did she know he was here? How could she have found out? He didn't think he was just being paranoid. A week ago, he had started up a new session of small-arms training, and she had been among the newcomers to his class. All week she had been staring at him and going out of her way to find ways to ask questions and talk to him.

Tommy was impressed by the specs on her background. She'd accomplished a lot in her twenty-two years. Accepted at MIT at sixteen. One year's sabbatical-summer internship at Genentech. A minor in sociology and two articles published at age eighteen on cultural patterns in the South. All sorts of awards and honors. H'mmm. Brown belt karate and 1st Jumper in the Cambridge Equestrian Club.

Tommy wasn't even aware the door had opened until he was greeted with a pleased duet of "Oooh, Per-fect Tommy!" He whirled to see Sunshine and Steven George, arm in arm, coming up behind him. He tried to blank the screen, hit the wrong key, and succeeded only in freezing the keyboard--and therefore what was displayed for all to see.

The two were intoxicated, obviously. That didn't keep them from catching on. Steve had the irrational

quickness of a person filled with alcohol. "Sneaking into interns' files? "Well, of all the nerve--"

"Lower your voice," said Tommy irritably, stabbing at escape and control keys. Nothing worked. "It's none of your business."

"It's Peanut's," Sunshine said, not very coherently, peering at the green screen.

"Antoinette McCormick?" Steve said, making a face. "Poor kid."

Sunshine nodded in agreement. "Peanut is what she asked to be called here. Bio. Ge-genetics, I think. She's in my kendo class."

"She must be attractive," stated Steve.

"Right," confirmed Sunshine. "How'd you know?"

"Tommy wouldn't be interested otherwise, would he? I think I'd better let D.J. know Tommy's sampling the market again. She'll at least want equal time."

"This's got nothing to do with D.J. Would you two take your cross-talk act somewhere else?" Tommy snapped. Ah. At last. The screen magically cleared. "I have work to do. And this is confidential information."

"Oh, work," Sunshine said, as if that made everything clear. "At three bloody o'clock in the ruddy morning. I see. Yes, of course."

"Would--you--go--away!"

They didn't, of course. The two sat down together on the piano bench, swaying a little, and Sunshine began to play. Steve knocked his left hand off the keys and put her own left hand down instead. Both of them thought this method of playing piano very funny, for there rose much inebriated

giggling between distinctly-out-of-phase music.

Tommy gave up when they began singing. It was all the worse when it turned out to be 'Message in a Bottle,' as written by The Police but certainly not as ever performed by them. At another time he would have appreciated the ironies more, perhaps even asked if Sunshine was referring to a wine or a champagne bottle, perhaps even joined in himself. But when Sunshine quavered in his impossibly high tenor the slightly paraphrased line "A year has passed since I hit this no-oo-o-ote--", Tommy cursed, heaping dire imprecations upon him, and started trying to get out of the datafile without altering it or leaving a trace. He had the information he needed.

The young Cavalier made the mistake of not acting on his new, ill-gotten information, aside from stewing over it all the following day. 'Mistake' because he allowed himself to be looked at by Peanut during his afternoon small-arms class and even went so far as to single her out for a little personalized instruction. She seemed to appreciate this attention. Far more than Perfect Tommy realized, until it was too late and he'd made a fool of himself.

Tommy finished off his afternoon class, after his students trooped out, with his own workout, a constantly changing routine stressing reaction time and flexibility. Then he headed for the showers, during which he contemplated his choices for the evening, particularly in the critical matter of attire.

There were others in the changing room, and the communal shower had several occupants. Tommy chose to wait for one of the private shower stalls. He had just gotten the water suitably hot and was lathering on the soap when he sensed the intrusion. He

whirled around at the sliding sound of the frosted door, and was flabbergasted to see Peanut.

She was wearing one of the smallest and best tailored bikinis he'd ever seen--he was something of a connoisseur--and bore a three-cornered smile and a defiant tilt to her chin. Even as he gaped at her, she reached up and calmly unhooked her bikini top, then hung it over the wall. No tan line. "Move over, would you please?" she said. "You've got all the water." And she moved toward him, hands reaching for the lower half of her clothing.

As Tommy berated himself for later, his reaction time, even though he'd just been working out, was lamentably slow. His first instinct had been to look. However, at that move of hers, he let out a yelp and grabbed her arm. His hand, soapy, slipped right off as she automatically pulled away. He finally found his voice. "What the hell're you doing in my shower?"

Tommy had never before witnessed it, but Peanut had a dimpling smile, which, combined with a certain evil gleam in wide dark eyes, conspired to make her appear shamelessly provocative. In fact, the look was hauntingly familiar, but he couldn't for the moment imagine why--until it occurred to him that he'd seen that look on his own face. "Whatever you like," she said quite matter-of-factly, and again reached for the remaining scrap of her clothing.

Embarrassment and something new--modesty--were now rushing in to complete Tommy's confusion. He again grabbed for her arms, wishing he could do that with his back turned, and once again slipped, but deterred her. "Don't do that," he exclaimed. "And put your top back on. What am I saying? Get the hell outta my shower!"

She stopped--thank God for small favors--and looked at him. The water

was streaming down both of them, but she still had her poise. "Why?"

From her point of view, a perfectly logical question. And, under almost any other circumstances, Tommy would have been delighted to meet this young woman's boldness. Now, it just represented the ultimate in frustration, and helpless anger joined in with the rest of his surging emotions. "Because I said so," he growled. He grabbed for her bra, which fortunately did not slip out of his hands, and thrust it at her. "Now get out before I pick you up and throw you out!"

She held her ground a few seconds longer, clearly disappointed and puzzled, but also unafraid. As he advanced on her menacingly, she tossed her head scornfully. "All right, if you insist. Your loss, Mister Perfect Tommy." She slipped back into her top with charming unselfconsciousness and stalked out.

Obviously, their altercation had been anything but noiseless, and the changing room undoubtedly still had people in it--men, actually; the women's facilities were next door. Since Peanut could hardly get out unnoticed or unquestioned--no matter how she had managed to get in--she obviously decided to take advantage of whoever-was-out-there's attention. Perfect Tommy closed his eyes in stricken mortification as he heard her declare in a calm and carrying voice, "Despite all you may have heard to the contrary, boys, Perfect Tommy is not only a prude, but rude, to boot." Such self-possession was staggering, and Tommy leaned against the wall of the shower, face upturned to the water, and moaned.

He put off the inevitable as long as possible, but he couldn't put it off forever. Besides, his ego was smarting from the laughs and risible commentary he was catching snatches of. He finished his shower, stepped out of it determinedly--and then discovered that the little wretch had

stolen his towel.

Dripping and seething, he walked to the doorway separating showers from changing room and felt the sudden weight of eight fascinated gazes. "If somebody would hand me a towel," he said levelly, "I'd very much appreciate it."

"What's the matter, Tommy," said an impertinent intern whose name escaped Tommy's recall, "she turn out to be too much for you to handle?"

"Nice amount to handle," observed someone else. "And how," came another offering.

No one made so much as a gesture toward the towels. Tommy elected to drip his way in offended dignity to the pile. As he did, the before-mentioned pert intern commented, "Cat got your tongue, Perfect Tommy? Or don't you like being assaulted by peanuts?"

"More like raw peanuts, ha ha," put in some wit, chuckling salaciously. "Maybe he prefers peanut butter."

Tommy grabbed a towel, swung around and glared at the pert intern and the wit. "If you know what's good for you, you'll shut up now," he snarled. "And keep a civil tongue about the lady."

Those in the room exchanged shocked glances, and one of them muttered, "Whoa now, too heavy, man." Perfect Tommy didn't give a damn. He dried down, dressed, and departed in dudgeon.

Later that same evening, Tommy poked his head into the Institute sound studio. As he had expected, D.J. was indeed sitting in one corner playing with the broadcast system. "Hey," he called. "You stiffing me tonight?"

Startled, D.J. swiveled around in her chair. "Hey, nice jacket," she said. "I'm sorry; I haven't looked at the time in a while. Give me ten minutes to get dressed?"

Tommy was indeed pleased with his new jacket, an informal but terribly well-cut, broad-shouldered, multi-zippered item, its colors cream accented by bold graphics in black and blue. His pants were black and he wore a doubled silver link belt. He came over to her and put his hands on her shoulders. "I'll forgive your forgetfulness since you've got such good taste," he teased. "You'll need fifteen minutes if you're going to wear the black and silver. Which you should."

"Since you put it that way, how can I refuse?" One of the reasons Tommy and D.J. got along so well together was that they both had such strong ideas on clothing. They didn't always agree, but Tommy appreciated D.J.'s artistic sense, and D.J. appreciated the fact that Tommy knew every innovative designer and tailor in New York City. She put down her earphones and stood up. "Want to come help?"

Tommy was surveying the current 'playlist.' Somehow D.J. had gotten herself the job of occasional disk jockey--hence partly the nickname--for the Institute. She had eclectic tastes in music and a near-eidetic memory for whatever she'd ever heard. In her copious spare time--Institute standard time system, known as CST--she put together tapes for broadcast over the PA system. These tapes included requests from staff. "Quiet Riot?" questioned Tommy in tones of revulsion and outrage. "Judas Priest? I take back what I said about your taste."

"You don't think I picked all that garbage, do you? I was hoping you could explain to me why there are a whole bunch of interns who just lap up the heavy metal stuff. I finally agreed to play some--but it's not

going on till midnight, and I'm warning everybody beforehand."

"Who made the requests?" She named some names, and Tommy nodded. "Yeah. They're all fairly new at weapons and survival training. I've seen it before, come to think of it. Lotta interns go through these cravings for heavy metal and sword-and-sorcery movies for a while. Not just the guys, either."

"Do you suppose they feel the need to wallow in some adolescent macho symbology? Could be a good topic for a sociology thesis," said the intern who herself was currently working on three of them. "I never had that problem."

"Talent," said Tommy. "Let's go."

Once in D.J.'s room, Tommy took the black dress from her closet and laid it out on the bed for her. "Cat hairs," he complained, brushing at the fabric.

"Well, if you'd keep your kittens to yourself, I wouldn't have that problem, would I?"

"I can't help it if I'm universally loved." Tommy helped himself to D.J.'s jewelry box, pulling out a silver and turquoise necklace. He turned around and saw that she'd just pulled off her work shirt. He emitted a sound of approval and approached her. "Let me see how this looks around your neck, darlin'." He raised the necklace and then carefully positioned it at the base of her throat, then linked his arms around her and pulled her close. "I like it."

"Thank you," she said, returning his embrace. "This could slow up the getting dressed process, you know."

"Let it."

Thus proving that there are one or two things in life more important

than clothing to Perfect Tommy. Several long sighing minutes later they pulled apart. "I'm getting hungry, so you'd better finish dressing," said Tommy, returning to the practical world. "There's a new cafe in Soho I want to check out tonight."

D.J. got into her black dress, which looked striking with her blond hair and fair skin. "Say, Tommy," she said pensively, "can I ask you a personal question?"

He paused in the middle of re-combing his hair and looked at her in the mirror's reflection. "You can ask, D.J."

"What happened between you and Peanut this afternoon?"

Tommy threw down the comb and turned around. "Who the hell told you about that?"

"Peanut."

His expression was eloquent with astonishment and faintly defensive embarrassment. "I didn't even think you knew her."

D.J. smiled at him reassuringly. "I don't. It was really funny, actually. She came by the studio, just the way you did--made a request for some U2 and R.E.M. songs, which I thought showed good taste, by the way. Then she asked me flat out if I thought she'd approached you the wrong way by barging in on your shower."

Tommy groaned and sank down onto the bed. "She asked you." He paused, then sighed in resignation. "Did she tell you exactly what she did?"

"Mm-hmm. To put it kindly, she's one of the most forthright people I've ever met. And when you consider the competition--yourself included, o perfect one--that's saying a lot." At Tommy's pained expression, D.J. made a comforting sound and joined him on the

bed. "I think I like her. She reminds me of you."

Tommy jumped up off the bed. "What makes you say that?"

She glanced at him in surprise. "Hey, calm down. She's brash, self-confident, and very direct--just like you. Look, I didn't mean to get you upset or delay things; I just thought it was funny and wanted to get your side."

He considered her thoughtfully for a moment, then favored her with a very terse rendition of what had happened from his point of view. "It was damn-all embarrassing," he finished in an aggrieved tone.

"Why?"

"Why?" Tommy repeated, amazed that she should need to ask. "Because she's--" He stopped and hurriedly changed course. "Well, hell, she invaded the guys' locker room in the gym in the smallest bikini you ever saw--"

"Good design and fit?"

He scowled. "Yes, as a matter of fact. And then she invaded my shower and started stripping right in front of me!"

"But if she wasn't embarrassed, why should you be?" D.J. asked reasonably. She waited a moment, but no answer was forthcoming from the man, who was standing with his mouth hanging slightly open. This example of Tommy's losing his vaunted cool was rare, but D.J. let it pass. She continued cheerfully.

"I told Peanut I thought it was a pretty good idea, myself, except that I wouldn't have chosen a public shower. But I really couldn't give her a good answer for why you--ah--spurned her attentions."

"Don't sound so goddamn gothic."

"You were acting pretty gothic-- for you. Don't avoid the issue."

"There's no issue," Tommy said. "Now are we going to dinner or not?"

D.J. was surprised at his abruptness, but it was nothing to her beyond a good joke. She took his arm. "Sure, let's go."

There were very few things Perfect Tommy procrastinated about; he liked getting things done, immediately if not sooner. But in this particular situation he couldn't see any way out. So he put it off.

However, Peanut was still in his weapons class, and was doing a very good job of giving him the freeze-out. And all the people asking him why he was so irritable lately, and the people who'd gotten wind of the shower scene making supposedly witty remarks, were driving him to distraction.

After a few days of this Tommy stopped Peanut on her way out of his class. "I'd like to talk to you," he said. "In private."

The self-confidence he'd already had occasion to notice in Peanut contributed greatly to an air of hauteur that was positively aristocratic. On a detached level, Tommy admired this, and wondered how she'd cultivated it.

"What about?" she inquired.

Tommy hedged for a minute. "Something personal."

Her chin rose. "You blew it once. Why should I agree now?"

He repressed a groan. "Look, what I want to talk to you about has nothing to do with the other day--" He stopped, since that was patently false. "Well, okay, yes it does, but only indirectly."

"What a miracle of clarity."

His temper got lost so fast Tommy hardly noticed that it had gone. "Goddamnit, stop being so bitchy! You remind me of Annabel!"

She froze, and so did Tommy. His words echoed in his ears.

"Annabel," repeated Peanut softly. "Annabel who, pray tell?"

Tommy said nothing. He didn't dare.

Peanut gazed at him and then began to speak slowly, almost pensively. "I've got a sister named Annabel. Now, you might know that if you've been prying into my background somehow. But how would you know she's a right bitch--except from personal experience?"

"Could we get out of here?" asked Tommy, rather desperately. "Go someplace private, where we can talk, like I asked before?"

"Yeah, I think we'd better. You really put your foot in it this time, didn't you, Perfect Tommy?"

The man didn't appreciate having this pointed out to him, but he couldn't deny it.

Tommy's spirits lifted a little outside, because it was June, and the Institute's acres were sunlit and serene. His anger and self-recriminations dissipated, leaving him feeling merely foolish. He went past the stables and to the area by the stream where Buckaroo and Hikita-san had created a half-wild Japanese garden.

The Cavalier stopped on a bridge spanning a curve of water and swung around to face her. "I have been in your file," he confessed. "I wanted to make sure of who you were."

"You know my family?" It was almost more of a statement than a

question.

Tommy took a deep breath. "My name's McCormick too."

He received faint gratification from the fact that she was as non-plussed as he had been in the shower. He felt her studying his face, but apparently she didn't quite get the full connection.

"You?" she said incredulously. "You're related to me? Perfect Tommy McCormick?"

That sounded as awful as Tommy had always known it would--more awful, since this was the first time he'd ever heard it spoken by another person. As she seemed about to go on, he held up one hand.

"Toni--" She stopped, as he'd expected, stopped by her old nickname. He felt courage fail him for a moment, then said hesitantly, "You had a brother once."

Tommy had the impression everything stopped: the breeze, the flowing stream, even the Earth's rotation, but it's possible he was overreacting.

"Oh, my God." She looked around a little unsteadily. "Can we go sit down somewhere?"

Tommy led the way to a stone bench under some willow trees. Having said it, he was now feeling much calmer. Nothing was ever quite as bad as anticipation.

They sat down. After a few minutes, he, who was quite used to and even liked being stared at, averted his face from her rapt gaze. It was too disconcerting.

"You're serious, aren't you?"

"You think I'd joke about something like this?" Tommy retorted. "I've tried to forget I even had a family."

"Thanks," she said in a small voice.

He turned to her and grabbed her hands. "Hey, I don't mean you. You were only about ten when I last saw you. That was a long time ago."

Peanut pulled her hands back. "Which means you don't even remember me, or don't want to."

"Sure I do; I thought you were a rotten little brat," said Tommy with an attempt at a laugh. "Who melted my sneakers in the oven one day? Who tried to stow away in my car before a Saturday night date? Who got in the way on all my experiments?"

A chuckle escaped her, but then her bewilderment returned. "But what happened? You just disappeared, and Mom and Dad got upset, then mad, and then wouldn't talk about you anymore. Why haven't you been in touch?"

Tommy shook his head. "Toni, you just asked a couple of questions that could take me weeks to answer." He ran his hands through his hair in his agitation. "Hell. I figured you would've forgotten me."

"No," she said gravely. "I didn't forget you. I looked up to you, D.T."

"Well, that's as it should be," began Tommy, but he was cut off by her exclamation.

"That's where you got the Tommy from--from D.T., isn't it?" She swiveled around on the bench and grabbed him. "Oh my God--you're Perfect Tommy!"

He laughed outright. "You just noticed?"

"I've been following the Cavaliers--and especially you--for years! How did you become Perfect Tommy?"

"Don't sound so incredulous," he

chided. "Is it so impossible?"

"Yes," she said. "Just look at you; you're not D.T. How long have you been at the Institute? How'd you get here?"

"It's been about five years," admitted Tommy. "You know, you're asking a whole lot of personal questions, brat. We frown on that around here."

"You're ducking the issue," she said. "It's not fair. You've looked in my file--you know all about me." Peanut's expression became suddenly accusing. "Just when did you figure out who I was?"

"I had my suspicions," said Tommy. "I had just confirmed them the day before you invaded my shower."

Remarkably, she didn't blush; but she did cover her face for a moment and then snickered. When she looked up again her eyes were filled with wicked mirth. "No wonder you were so upset!"

"Don't you have any morals, Peanut?"

"No," she said cheerfully. "You know what they say--sex begins at home."

This was a little more outrageous than even Tommy had bargained for. "Toni!" He saw that she was laughing at him. "Tell me, have you been dis-owned yet? The parents thought I was

pretty obstreperous."

"Mother gave up on me a long time ago." Peanut smiled reminiscently. "You should have been at my deb ball. Just before the first dance, I went to the ladies' room, then came back out in jeans and a T-shirt. That about killed diplomatic relations between Mom and me."

"Well, as far as I'm concerned, I don't have any parents."

Peanut eyed Tommy doubtfully, clearly dismayed by the edge in his voice. But then he said graciously, "I don't think you, however, will be too much of a discredit to me."

"Up yours! What makes you think you're good for my reputation? Or that I want people to compare the two of us all the time?"

"You'd suffer on that, wouldn't you?" He faced her glare complacently. "See, you can't one-up me on being obnoxious, kid, I've had years of fieldwork."

"Incipient senility," muttered Peanut. She suddenly grabbed her brother by the shoulders, twisting him around to face her. She hugged him exuberantly. "Oh God, Tommy, this is going to be wonderful! Apart we're each geniuses, of course, but together we're out of this world!"

"No," Tommy shot back, "we're Perfect."

THE BANZAI INSTITUTE
for Biomedical Engineering and Strategic Information

RESIDENCY CANDIDATE EVALUATION FORM:
CRITIQUE

CANDIDATE:

Rejoice

FIELD:

Sociology

TO THE EVALUATOR:

Apart from the grading of the candidate's technical performance and physical abilities please use the space below for any observations or comments you feel are pertinent to the candidate's consideration for residency. Include particular strengths and weaknesses, possible future directions, attitudes and idiosyncracies. This is your chance to be totally subjective.

TO THE COMMITTEE:

These comments may be either the most or least important information you use in making your decision. Remember, you are not the only person who will have to live with the candidate, if accepted. This evaluator will, also.

He appeared on our doorstep one day. A ray of light dressed in black. I suppose it was a kindness, for if he were wearing bright colors he would have undoubtedly blown us all over, or blinded us completely. He was a quiet sort of man. Until you looked into the fire of his eyes, until you heard his words, the music of his soul.

He's a little thing, not a lot more than five-and-a-half feet tall. Not short. Small. Perfectly proportioned in the compact. The hair so dark as to be almost black, but you knew it was brown by the way it caught the light. Long, down past his shoulders in the back, but short about the face so as not to hide the slightest expression. The eyes. . . I was amazed to realize that his eyes were blue, for most of the time you'd swear they were black. So piercing they can be, and yet a moment later, be laughing. The face doesn't smile often, but when it does it is the whole face, and not just the mouth, that smiles.

As it turned out, he was an Irishman. Proud of it, but not in the way some throw it around. He was what he was. He said once that being Irish in these troubled times gave one a greater consciousness of--and conscience for--the needs and troubles of others. He'd been long enough in England and the States, though, to sound mostly Irish, but then again, not quite.

We tried a number of names on him. Leprechaun. Too obvious, and it annoyed him--we still use it, sometimes, to bring him back to reality. Boy. Too long a story to go into here, but it didn't stick for more than a week. Black. He did most always wear black, but as soon as we started calling him that he began to wear white, the only color he ever seemed to wear besides black.

We asked him if there was something he'd like to be called. He said only that he'd had a nickname all his life which now suited him as badly as the name given him by his parents. Besides, he said, one of the things he was most looking forward to upon meeting the Cavaliers was having us give him a new name.

(CONTINUE ON REVERSE)

Other than that, he was about as different from the rest of us as you could imagine. For one thing, he was delighted by his own history, invited questions about his past. His one concern was that he'd promised his wife that, within a month or two, he'd figure out a way to get her into the Institute, as he didn't want to live 'off-campus' and she wasn't, herself, a scientist, technician, or otherwise obvious intern material. Green arrived five weeks later, joining the Blue Blazes in the quartermaster and commissary areas.

The man, himself, was a sociologist, a brilliant one. At twenty-four, he'd already taught at the university level for two years, while taking a doctorate at Oxford. He'd started doing field work at fourteen. Kept dropping out of formal classes to investigate this group or that. Said it gave his friends a chance to catch up to him in school. His specialty, as befitted his background, was the results of cross-cultural conflict in urban settings. He also played a mean guitar, sang and wrote music. He'd come to us on a recommendation that at the Banzai Institute, he would not be bored.

He and Buckaroo took to each other like two halves of the same soul. Buckaroo, delighted to have a social scientist with whom to discuss cultural patterns and differences, was obviously tickled that our intelligent vacuum cleaner seemed determined to learn everything from everyone as soon as possible. It frightened us to realize that, in his new friend, Buckaroo Banzai had come closest to finding someone equal to his potential. In the Institute he hoped to find the means to realize that potential.

On the other hand, he and Buckaroo were totally different and this, too, no doubt drew our leader to his new charge. The weight of the problems resting on the shoulders--and in the heart--of Buckaroo Banzai would have broken a lesser man in a moment. He had learned, through discipline, to deal with his torments and present to the rest of the world that calm and reserve that is his reputation.

Not so our small wonder. What he felt, the world knew. His passions were great, as were his expressions thereof. His temper fiery--but don't ever suggest that this came with his heritage--he believed in causes, the latest of which was, of course, the Banzai Institute. New-intern fervor took on new meaning with our diminutive Irishman. He adored our mission and his part in it, desperate to learn immediately those physical arts required of those of us who go out with the Strike Teams on special missions.

(CONTINUE ON SEPARATE SHEET IF NECESSARY)

RECOMMENDATION: ACCEPT: ✓	CONTINUE INTERNSHIP:	REJECT:
DOES THIS CANDIDATE HAVE CAVALIER POTENTIAL?	YES: ✓	NO:
DATE: 4/29	EVALUATOR SIGNATURE: Reno	

Vocal on his likes in music, literature and theater and on his dislike for empty-headed do-gooders, people who did not fulfill their obligations and politicians in general, rare was the night that he did not engage in a heated--not always controversial, simply fervent--discussion of something with someone.

On the other hand, he seemed to be totally at peace within himself. He had reached some kind of spiritual equilibrium several years before which had left him content with faith, nature and his place in this world. His fires could burn so fiercely because they were unable to scar the gentleness of the man's relationship with the universe. When, after some human tragedy reported on the nightly news had sent him into righteous furor, he would vanish for a time, he would return to us not simply calmed, as Buckaroo does after meditation, but truly revitalized.

All attempts at getting him to share with us his technique proved futile. He would say only that if one could not find it within oneself, then he could not put it there. But he did, despite himself. For as much as his rages would incite us to want to save the world, so, too, would his joyous glow infect us.

We came to call him Rejoice.

(Retrieved from the archives by Fern Marder)

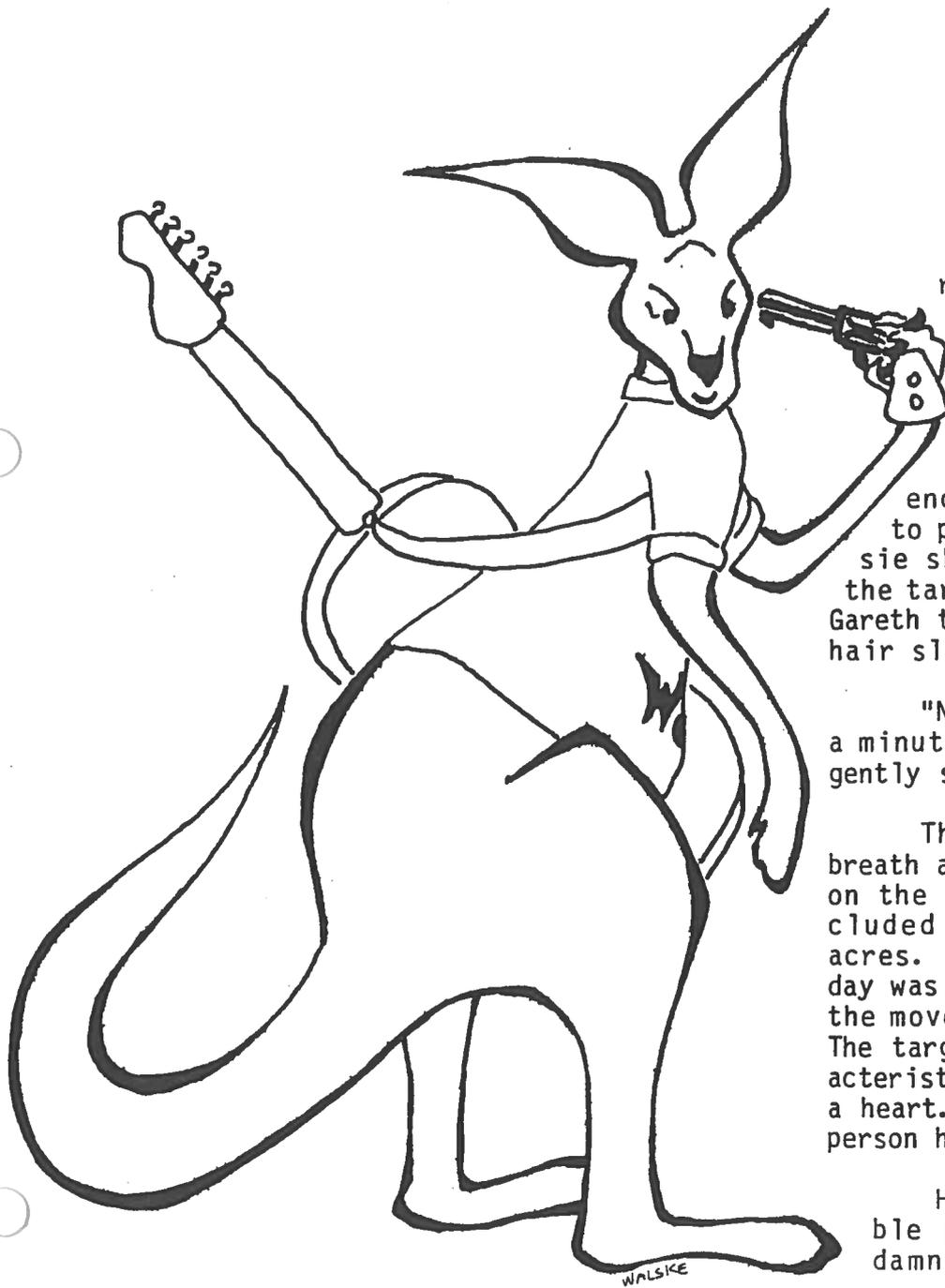


That was the River

by Fern Marder

and

Carol Walske



Gareth took the gun in his right hand, wrapped his left hand around it in the way he'd been shown many a time before, and raised his arms to shoulder height.

"That's fine," Pecos said encouragingly. "You might want to push back your bangs, you Aussie sheepdog, so that you can see the target." Somewhat impatiently, Gareth tossed his head, relocating the hair slightly.

"Now pull back the safety, take a minute to aim carefully, then just gently squeeze the trigger."

The young intern took a deep breath and eyed the target. They were on the weapons range in a well secluded section of the Institute's acres. No one else was about. The day was grey and quiet, the only sound the movements of wind through trees. The target kept taking on human characteristics to Gareth's gaze: a face, a heart. Symbolically it was another person he was to shoot at.

His shoulders shook. The tremble passed to his hands. "God-damnit, I can't!" He felt like

throwing the gun to the ground, but had learned too much respect for the weapon. The young Australian turned to Pecos, misery and anger mixing uncomfortably in him. "I can't. I won't, Pecos. I just don't believe in them."

The Cavalier looked sympathetic but sounded harassed. "Then what do you do when faced by someone holding a gun?"

Gareth let the weapon slide from his grasp until just the butt rested between his fingertips. "I'll duck. Or I'll get zapped. I don't care!"

Pecos seemed to be groping for both patience and understanding. This was now the fourth or fifth rerun of this weapons trial, and both of them were exploring the limits of their tolerance. "Okay. You've already made the point that it's your life, granted. What if it's someone else's? Buckaroo Banzai, for instance. Or your mother. Or whoever."

Gareth sat down, crossing his legs under him. He laid down the gun and picked up three long wisps of grass. He began to plait them, one over the other. His long curly hair obscured his face. "I suppose, if that happened, I'd find out whether or not I'm really Mel Gibson," he answered. "Either I'd make the valiant sacrifice or run away. I don't know."

"If you're put into a life and death situation, Gareth, it's a little too late to think through the philosophy of the whole thing."

"Why are we getting melodramatic? Who's to say it'd ever come up?"

"Around here? All right, you haven't been here very long. Believe me, such things arise all too frequently."

"Then I won't be a part of them."

"It's usually not a matter of choice!" Pecos sighed. "Oh, what the heck. All that aside, it happens to be an aspect of life that people should come to terms with. Not to mention that it's also required training here."

"You and your bloody rules again," said Gareth. He stood up. "I'm not interested in learning how to use a gun."

"Then you'd better talk to Buckaroo Banzai, not me."

Gareth held out his twist of greenery. He'd plucked a wildflower off a weed and wound it into his braid. "Effin' flower power," he said, and laughed.

That was not the beginning.

The show must go on, right?

Hong Kong Cavaliers gig at the Up All Night Ballroom in Irvington, New Jersey. At third encore, specifically. The band came back out on a darkened stage and started playing 'If You Was Me and I Was You'--only to discover that our piano player had been mysteriously transformed into someone other than Sunshine.

Piano and other keyboards are set up at stage rear left, on line with Pecos' drumkit. And the stranger had emerged last and was encircled by the tiers of keyboards. The dead giveaway was the music, obviously. Sunshine was a perfectly competent keyboardist and wonderful vocalist. This guy was a helluva vocalist and keyboard player. A string of piano notes with a flutter of arpeggios assaulted our ears, accompanied by a husky tenor that moved from sweet clarity to raw edgy passion.

Well. The second guitar faltered, the bass bloinged, the saxes squeaked, and the drums and lead guitar kept on going. That pulled us back together. The second guitar got heavy metal-ish, and its owner signaled Blue Blazes to do something. What we did was finish out the encore. We had our pride and the music to salvage. Our guest artiste carried through beautifully.

Buckaroo, who had kept his cool, seemed amused by the whole thing. At the end of the applause he thanked the audience, then added, "And thanks also to our guest, Mr. 'Don't Shoot Me, I'm Only the Piano Player.' Good night." The crowd cheered and clapped some more, the band took the boss' cue to be cool, and we trooped offstage to appease our curiosity.

That was the start of it all. There had been a previous encounter. Mrs. Johnson took one look at our guest and said, "You again!" Inquiry revealed that the young man had wandered into the reception area one particularly busy morning and was handed our intro literature and an application form. The intro lit disappeared, but the form stayed--innovatively filled out with drawings of cows and cactuses and fences and a rhyming and rather obscene ballad entitled 'Bedtime for Banzai.'

He never did fill out any forms. All our knowledge of Gareth Surname-Unknown comes from what he is and does. And such tidbits about prior experiences that he embellishes his conversation with--not that most of those tidbits can be believed. Then again, who knows?

"I don't like paths and forms and procedures," said Gareth that first night after the gig, on the bus

returning to New Brunswick. He had mentioned his interest in the Banzai Institute and why he had chosen such a novel approach of drawing our attention. "It seems to me that an Institute which prides itself on its lack of regulations and--what d'y'call it? --infrastructure, that's the horrible word, should have found some way around forms and application processes."

Turns out the young musician, who claimed expertise on piano and other keyboards, acoustic, electric, six- and twelve-string guitar, and vocals, had collared Sunshine between the end of the set and our first encore. He'd pleaded to be given a chance and that the best audition-cum-test was performance. Sunshine, possibly remembering his own early days of struggle, acquiesced.

Buckaroo was willing to treat any topic seriously. "We do need some form of reference--sorry, no pun intended--for our applicants. What would you do instead?"

Gareth was Australian, judging by his accent. He was slouched in a seat, hands jammed into jeans pockets, ten-gallon hat riding low on his forehead, bangs and long brown hair hiding his eyes and much of his face. Someone later reported his eyes to be brown, but this may be just idle rumor.

"Auditions," he said. "Personal interaction."

"We don't have the time to offer that opportunity to everyone who applies to the Institute," said Buckaroo.

"Then you're automatically rejecting someone like me--no education, no credentials, no references." The young man sounded rather pleased at this self-description.

"You've brought yourself to our attention in a way we can't exactly ignore," said Buckaroo dryly. "You took a chance, and it worked. You seem to want to be a part of the Institute. What are your interests? Why have you come to us?"

"Why not? I've heard tell you believe in freedoms. My interests are life, the universe, and everything," answered the stranger with a laugh. "Do I really have to tell you what I can and can't do? Why should you believe my say-so? Wouldn't it be better for you to see them in action?"

Sunshine chuckled. Tommy looked affronted at this display of gall; Pecos was looking the newcomer over with a fascinated gaze. There was a reluctant smile of respect on Buckaroo's face.

"I can promise that I will make myself useful," added the Australian.

"You're asking, frankly, for quite a lot," said the boss. "Can you give me any reason why we should leap for the bait?"

Gareth grinned. "No. None at all. Just consider that it's a similar leap of faith for me."

Buckaroo didn't look at any of us. Probably he realized we'd all tell him not to take such a ridiculous proposition seriously. "All right," he said. "You've got a deal. Revocable at any time by either side."

He made himself useful all right. Gareth almost immediately acquired care and training of the horses. They liked him and he them. The Institute didn't keep much of a stable--just a half-dozen horses. Buckaroo rode, as did Pecos, who, though she was part Chinese, rode like a Comanche, bareback and without stirrups. Some of

the interns and Blue Blazes had some horseback experience, but the high upkeep and expense didn't warrant a larger equine outlay.

Buckaroo, decorously riding English-style, came past the far paddock one day and reined in to watch his young Australian guest. Two of the Institute's horses were sturdy little Morgans partially trained for cattle handling. Gareth was taking one of them through an intensive workout--switchback turns, standing jumps, quick stops from a gallop.

The roan was dark with sweat and occasionally snorted his displeasure at this uncommon treatment. Gareth was stillness and patience. His hair was tied back on his neck, his cowboy hat low, almost down to his eyebrows, shadowing a face remote with concentration. His gear was Western. The only feature to spoil the total effect was the rider's jersey, which displayed a rather degenerate-looking animal playing an electric guitar, above the legend: 'Wombat Rock.'

Buckaroo waited until Gareth had finished the exercise and was just walking his mount. "Morning."

"Good morning," said the Australian. He brought his horse over to the fence and proceeded to walk him in small figure-eights near where Buckaroo sat. "If I don't keep Grumpy here moving, he might just roll he over doon and dee," he said. "He's a bit out of practice, isn't he?"

"More than a bit," agreed Buckaroo. "His former trainer is dead." A small pause. "Where'd you learn to ride like that?"

"Queensland." A quick sidelong look. "You'd probably not've heard of the particular patch of it."

"Dunbar Station?" Buckaroo hazarded, naming a ranch covering several

million acres in the northwest of Australia.

That got him a quick smile. "Rutland Plains. Not bad a guess. But it's helicopters they herd cattle with on Dunbar, not horses."

"So you're one of the real cowboys."

"Yes," replied Gareth. "I haven't been out to your American West yet to find out if you've got any left here."

"A few," said Buckaroo with a reminiscent smile. "Unlike many cowboys, you don't ride armed."

So Pecos had relayed his inhibitions to the boss. "I never found the need."

"You're lucky," the boss said pensively. "What did you do for protection against snakes, the big predators and such? Or, if you were out alone and found a steer near death, what would you do?"

The Australian gave Buckaroo a long enigmatic look. "I think it's time to take Grumpy back in, get him a rubdown." He brought the horse out of the paddock and relatched the gate. They took the route back to the stable at a walk. "It happens I've made myself expert with a boomerang," said Gareth. "It's a very versatile weapon."

"Then you have no particular grievance against the concept of weapons."

"No," admitted Gareth. "But a gun is an impersonal weapon that anyone can wield badly."

"That's true," said Buckaroo. "We attempt to teach when not to use a gun, or any other weapon for that matter."

Gareth was intrigued by this viewpoint. "Oh? Is that why you don't--"

"Go armed except for circumstances that require it. Yes."

"But how do you determine which circumstances are extraordinary?"

"By making a moral judgment," answered Buckaroo. "By making a commitment to be prepared for violent measures and then hoping that you won't have to enforce them. Knowledge, skill, and preparation are the three points crucial to anyone's use of any weapon, particularly a firearm which has such potential for destruction."

"And all for nothing when some fool steals it away from you and uses it to shoot up a subway car at rush hour," said Gareth.

Buckaroo had suggested that, even if he didn't take the weapons practical, Gareth might at least attend the weapons psych and history classes. These were taught on a rotating basis by all of the Cavaliers.

Gareth was fine until he found himself faced with Pecos again. Bad memories and all that. The lady Cavalier decided to take the bull by the horns, or perhaps the kangaroo by its. . .well, never mind. One afternoon, Pecos headed out to the stable, intending to ride her favorite horse Qume (he'd been called Diablo as a colt, but the name no longer suited the mild-mannered steed). She found Gareth in the barn, giving Qume a good brushing.

"You're spoiling the heck out of him," she chided. "Pretty soon you won't let any of us ride for fear of marring the finish."

Gareth acknowledged this with a grin. "I'd given up on anyone wanting the horses today."

Pecos reached into her pocket and produced a couple of sugarlumps. She offered one to the horse, who took it, giving her a nuzzle for her trouble.

"Eh, what about me?" Gareth asked in an affronted tone.

"What about you?"

"Have you got another?"

"It's not any better for you than it is for him." Pecos held out her hand, revealing three more white cubes.

Gareth took one, set it between his teeth and neatly chomped it in half before popping the pieces into his mouth. "Don't mind if I do," he said.

Pecos shook her head, giving the last two cubes to Qume. "I suppose you eat your oatmeal raw, too," she said.

"No. But carrots are nice." She shot him a look. He laughed. "I'd always remember to bring something for my horse, but then leave my sandwich on the table. It's all in what you get used to." Pecos got a definite "aha" look on her face. Gareth noticed it and quickly finished grooming the horse. "If you give me a call when you get back, I'll come down and take care of him."

"No need," Pecos replied, "I'm quite able to, you know." Gareth shrugged and moved for the door. Pecos continued, "Besides, I want to talk to you."

Gareth paused with his hand on the latch. He looked around. "About what?"

Pecos didn't respond immediately and Gareth was obliged to turn around and come back into the barn. Pecos had hoisted herself up onto the edge of the hay bin, her long legs dangling in their cowboy boots. Gareth plunked himself down on a stool near the door. He said again, "What about?"

"I was glad to see you in my class yesterday."

"I wasn't."

"Why not? Perfect Tommy said that you had some interesting things to add to his discussions. That you made people think."

Gareth just shrugged again, saying nothing.

"You do know that if you wanted a different firearms instructor, that could be arranged."

"How did you become a guns expert?" Gareth asked abruptly. "A gun is such an ugly thing to begin with, much less in the hands of a lady."

Pecos looked startled. "I don't know if I should be flattered or miffed. I didn't figure you for a chauvinist."

"I'm not. But I figure that a lot of the people around while you grew up might have been. How did someone like you get into something like this?"

"I didn't till I came here. But I had seen plenty of them in use on the streets and I didn't like the fact that they frightened me."

"I'm not afraid of them," Gareth was quick to put in. He got a baleful look from Pecos.

"Sometimes it's not the thing itself, but what it can do that frightens. I needed to find out what

it was like to hold a gun, to use one, to try to figure out why anyone would want or need to."

"You'd rather be knowledgeable and deadly than ignorant and innocent."

Pecos considered this a moment, then nodded. "Yeah--although innocence is an awfully loaded word. I guess that's the heart of it here--before we do anything, be it adventure or research, we want people to find out about what they're doing, why, and what the consequences are. But it doesn't just stop there. You still have to go out and do it to really understand."

"Have you ever used your gun against someone?"

Pecos seemed to be fighting an urge to look down. Instead, she stared at Gareth. "Yes. A couple of times."

"Did you ever kill someone?"

"One of Hanoi Xan's death dwarves."

"And, of course, you're going to tell me that a member of Team Banzai inarguably deserved to live and the death dwarf--whatever that may be--by definition, deserved to die."

"He was trying to strangle Jacques Cousteau."

"Oh."

"But that's not the point," Pecos continued. "It's not learning how to kill someone or even how to decide if you should kill. Most of it is learning to use your weapon so expertly that you could stop someone without killing. Learning not to aim for the head or the heart. Learning what motivates people using weapons--so maybe you can second-guess them,

defuse their attack, or get their weapon away from them. That's why we teach other forms of defense and attack besides firearms."

"So why do some people here go armed all of the time, while others--like Dr. Banzai and Professor Hikita--don't?"

Pecos smiled. "Those of us who are very adept and who can be trusted to use a gun wisely go armed. Buckaroo and Professor Hikita can take care of themselves without overt weapons. Also, quite frankly, any one of us would give our lives to protect them."

"That's a whole 'nother issue."

"Yes, it is, so don't get into it now. Those people who fall 'in between' aren't encouraged to carry arms. No one's inviting you to walk around the Institute with a gun at your hip every minute of every day."

"I wouldn't," interjected Gareth.

Pecos scowled at him. "Stop interrupting me while I'm being didactic. We're trying to set it up so, in the right place and at the right time, you wouldn't be lost with a gun in your hand. Sometimes it's the least likely person, like you," she paused, then added, "or me, who because they resist weapons, turn out to learn the most about them and how they really are and aren't supposed to be used."

"That's all well and good," said Gareth. "But I think one of my fears is the temptation to use one."

"You mean like all those horrible stories where the guy, in a fit of temper, grabs up the gun and kills his wife or kid?"

"What a gruesome illustration."

"It happens," said Pecos with a grimace. "But there's a pretty valid argument which says that type of person will pick up whatever is at hand--gun, bottle, umbrella, oversize book. The gun has the greatest potential for fatality, which is its greatest liability. But the real point is the emotional and intellectual position of the wielder."

"Back to individual responsibility," sighed Gareth.

Pecos suddenly attacked him with her stare. "Exactly!"

"Which implies that my refusal to learn how to fire a gun is irresponsible."

The Cavalier smiled at him. "You said it, not me, Gareth. I like your logic."

"And if I learn? Can I then choose not to wear or use a gun?"

"Once you have the education to make an informed judgment, yes. No one's going to force the use of force upon you."

"Damn kind of you," Gareth muttered. "All right, Pecos, I'll try."

Gareth soon discovered, first, that his expertise with a boomerang did nothing to hurt his aim and, second, that the sooner you could pass the various firearms tests, the sooner you could put away your firearm. A short month later, the reluctant gunslinger was out on overnight practice maneuvers with Pecos, Perfect Tommy and a dozen other recent arrivals like himself.

The one pleasant aspect of survival outings was that they most always ended with a cookout, campfire and fun. This particular night, the

moon was full, the wind warm and the participants a bit giddy on a successful trial, a beautiful night and a case of beer.

"Tell us about the Australian Outback," someone had said.

That was more than enough for Gareth to spin a web on.

"It's where the Australian In-front isn't," he said instantly. "It's where the bull dust gets so thick and fine a lorry can drown in it and never be heard from again, until, one day, the wallabies can be seen playing with odd-shaped bits of bone and steel. The winds blow the dust and sand in swirls around the termite mounds, which can grow taller than a man. I saw their city once--strange shapes of the sort that stalk architects' dreams. No one knows if their insect civilization has electricity yet, but some people have reported seeing the mounds glow strangely by night.

"Elsewhere the kangaroos congregate, to dance by dawn when the sound of Brisbane's discos' dance-mixes wafts down to them on the wind. The gold-furred joeys have single horns a-middle their foreheads. We call them popcorns. The horns are pierced with holes, through which the wind blows like flutes and oboes. When they can, the popcorns cluster around television aerials, laying their horns upon them to tune in the broadcasts. Sesame Street is a favorite.

"Few people know it, but the duck-billed platypus is one of the oldest of animals and can speak, when coaxed with a riddle or an ethnic joke. The platypus saw the dinosaurs come and go, and knows that the reason for their disappearance is that time-travelers from the far future kept coming back to find out what had happened to them. The dinosaurs got irritated and left on a comet whose

tail happened to brush over the face of the Earth, thus also creating the Ice Age.

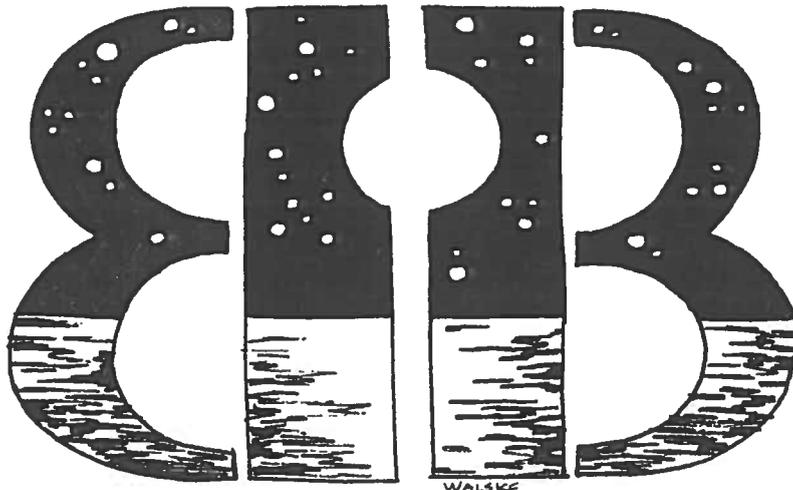
"If we ever get to the depths of the great glaciers of Iceland, we'll find the song at the heart of the world that will make the recording industry die overnight. All the radio stations will play that one song and all the choirs and skinheads and punk rockers and Muzakmakers will sing that one song. And when all the world sings with one voice, then..."

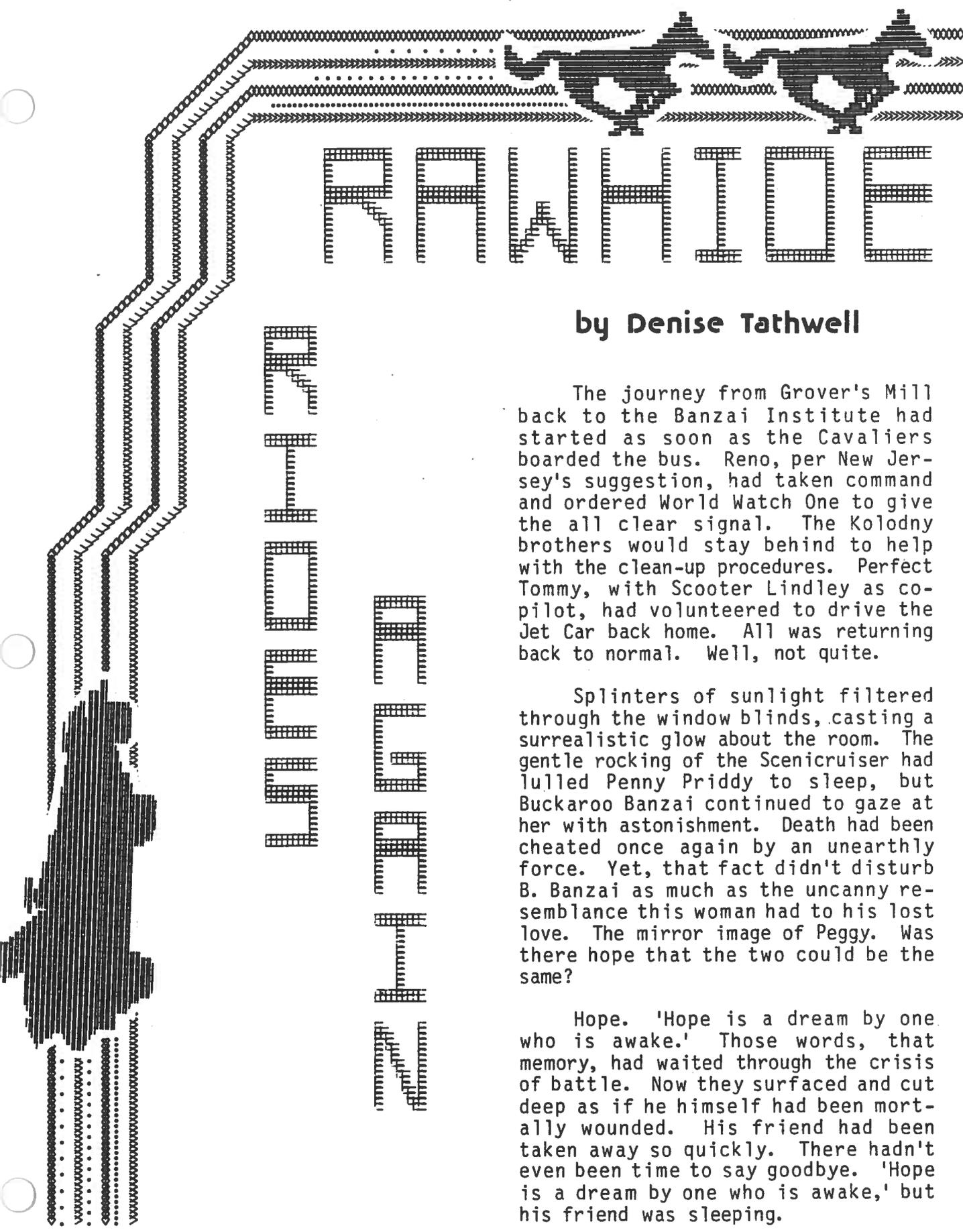
Gareth paused. He had his audience. Some were skeptical, some were

amused, some were entranced. But they all awaited the unfolding of his cosmology.

"Then, for the realists, we'll all have sore throats. But we will also know each other and ourselves, and people will be able to stop hating and misunderstanding. We will understand all the animals and the fishes and the trees and even the weeds and the bugs, and everyone will die of starvation because there's nothing that may be eaten. But that act of racial immolation will bring transcendence and all souls' awakening."

. . .THIS IS THE SEA





RANAHIE

by Denise Tathwell

The journey from Grover's Mill back to the Banzai Institute had started as soon as the Cavaliers boarded the bus. Reno, per New Jersey's suggestion, had taken command and ordered World Watch One to give the all clear signal. The Kolodny brothers would stay behind to help with the clean-up procedures. Perfect Tommy, with Scooter Lindley as co-pilot, had volunteered to drive the Jet Car back home. All was returning back to normal. Well, not quite.

Splinters of sunlight filtered through the window blinds, casting a surrealistic glow about the room. The gentle rocking of the Scenicruiser had lulled Penny Priddy to sleep, but Buckaroo Banzai continued to gaze at her with astonishment. Death had been cheated once again by an unearthly force. Yet, that fact didn't disturb B. Banzai as much as the uncanny resemblance this woman had to his lost love. The mirror image of Peggy. Was there hope that the two could be the same?

Hope. 'Hope is a dream by one who is awake.' Those words, that memory, had waited through the crisis of battle. Now they surfaced and cut deep as if he himself had been mortally wounded. His friend had been taken away so quickly. There hadn't even been time to say goodbye. 'Hope is a dream by one who is awake,' but his friend was sleeping.

Dr. Sidney Zwibel, alias New Jersey, paced the tiny corridor outside Buckaroo's room. It's difficult to pace in the close confines of a bus, but New Jersey had somehow forgotten that uncomfortable fact. He hadn't seen his colleague since they had boarded the bus and he was becoming concerned. Even the great Buckaroo Banzai was human and had a breaking point. It had been one hell of a day.

New Jersey gathered his determination and approached the closed door only to lose his nerve right outside. Maybe Buckaroo needed more time alone. No, B. Banzai kept encouraging his friends to follow their instincts and New Jersey felt his friend was in trouble.

The door opened with great ease, for on the other side, staring into New Jersey's eyes, was the cause of his concern. Dr. Zwibel had no idea what to say next.

Banzai gave a slight, sideways smile as he whispered, "Sid, you OK? How's everybody else?"

"Ah, fine. We're headed back to the Institute. Reno's taken care of everything." Another pause. "Are you OK?"

"Yeah, sure, sure," whispered Banzai. He glanced back into the room, then spoke softly. "I'd better call the President back, explain more fully. Tell Big Norse to get him on the horn. I'll be right there."

New Jersey frowned. Why were they whispering? He spoke a little louder. "Reno's already talked to him, and he said he'd get back to you. Something about internal security."

Banzai attempted to keep his voice down and implored New Jersey to do the same. "Shhh, you'll wake her up."

Wake her up?! New Jersey's fears had been confirmed. Best thing now was to get his friend out of that room and to the front of the bus. If only he had. . .

Buckaroo interrupted his train of thought. "Just a minute," he said hurriedly, then turned and walked back into the room. New Jersey couldn't resist and followed him just inside the door. What he saw next caused the color to drain from his face and the room to spin. The minutes-before dead Penny Priddy was breathing and sighed softly as she turned in her sleep. Buckaroo gently covered her body with another blanket and stood silently.

New Jersey stared unmoving as if fantasy was testing his state of reality. It wasn't until he heard the hurried footsteps outside the door did he turn his head. Reno, still grimy from the assault on Yoyodyne, was approaching rapidly. His expression was grim.

Buckaroo had also heard footsteps, and, knowing they belonged to Reno, came to join New Jersey at the door. "What's wrong?"

"Something weird," Reno answered. "We just got a call from the Institute. It was Mrs. Johnson. She was pretty shaken."

"About what?" Buckaroo asked.

"Don't know. She insists on speaking to you."

For Mrs. Johnson to be upset, it had to be something really big. Mrs. Johnson had been a pillar of strength even when her husband, Flyboy, had died. Buckaroo grabbed a clean jacket and spoke as he moved. "Let's go."

The nerve center of the bus was World Watch One. From here, all areas of the world, and recently the universe, could be contacted and

information dispensed. Big Norse sat at the controls, eyes intent on the instruments before her. Buckaroo had noticed a change in her behavior since the death of Rawhide. It was as if she had crawled back inside herself, becoming quiet and overly logical. He'd have to see what he could do to help, once things had calmed down.

Big Norse spoke as the trio approached. "I've got the Institute on line one, Buckaroo." She leaned forward and activated the controls. "Stand by."

B. Banzai reached for the microphone and calmly started to speak. "Mrs. Johnson? You wanted to talk to me?"

The voice that came over the airwaves was choked with emotion. "Buckaroo, is that you?"

"Yes, Mrs. Johnson. Is there something I can help you with?"

"When will you and the guys be back?"

Buckaroo glanced around for an answer. He himself had lost track of time. Reno held up five fingers. "We'll be there in five minutes. Perfect Tommy should be there by now. Is there something you need to tell me?"

Silence answered for a few moments, then a somewhat calmer voice began to relay her story. "I was downstairs in the basement, you know, like I usually am. And, well, I heard something."

"Heard, Mrs. Johnson?"

"Yes, heard. At first I thought it was my imagination, but when it happened a second time, I realized it was real."

"What did you hear?"

"A voice. A familiar voice. I alerted security but they didn't find anyone who shouldn't be there. Anyone who could talk, I mean." There was another long silence. "Buckaroo, I did hear something."

"I don't doubt you, Mrs. Johnson. We'll be there in a few minutes. World Watch out." Dr. Banzai frowned, then turned toward Reno. "Put the Institute on alert. Contact Perfect Tommy and tell him to meet us at the cryogenic chamber." He rose quickly without further comment and walked toward the back of the bus.

All were concerned, but New Jersey could contain his curiosity no longer. "What's wrong? What's going on?"

No one made a move to explain, so New Jersey confronted Reno. "What about it, Reno, fill me in."

Reno finished relaying instructions, gave a deep sigh and turned to face the confused physician. "Have you ever been in the basement of the biomedical section?" New Jersey shook his head. "It houses the cryogenic units. Perfect Tommy had been working on a more efficient cooling mechanism for the Jet Car many years ago and teamed up with Buckaroo, for other than automotive reasons."

Reno's explanation was interrupted by the sound of the scenicruiser's doors opening. They were obviously home. Reno stood wearily. "Bottom line. Our cryogenic units house several individuals--including Mrs. Johnson's husband and Rawhide."

"Rawhide?" New Jersey whispered, his voice somehow lost in his throat. Now he remembered something which at the time seemed natural. After Rawhide's death, Buckaroo had moved to Perfect Tommy and spoken to him quietly. New Jersey had thought words

of comfort and mutual grieving were being exchanged. He now realized that they must have been discussing the Cryogenic units and Rawhide's fate. The import of these facts was staggering.

The activity around him increased as Team Banzai Security entered the bus and the Cavaliers began to disembark. New Jersey stood unmoving, still caught up with his thoughts concerning the illusions of life and death. Not until B. Banzai himself approached did the here and now zoom into field. "Come on, Sidney," Buckaroo replied, "I'm going to need your help." With that, Dr. Sidney Zwibel joined his colleague and friend on yet another strange adventure.

The Institute appeared deceptively peaceful. Twilight had descended, bringing with it the promise of rest after a long day's work. This night, however, would bring little sleep to the people who called the Banzai Institute home.

Reno, New Jersey and Buckaroo entered the side door, expecting to see an anxious Mrs. Johnson. They instead found a note informing them of her location. They moved with all haste to the bowels of the Institute. The basement where the cryogenic chambers lay.

Mrs. Johnson paced in front of the security door which read: "Medical personnel only. Do not disturb." This warning was in fact intended for outsiders, government types who might be conducted on a special tour. Several heads of state have been privileged to visit the usually restricted areas of the Banzai Institute. They are shown only experiments that might benefit all levels of mankind and excluded from ideas vulnerable in their embryo states. Such was the Cryogenic Section. Although certainly not illegal, a desire to minimize

undue speculation and publicity kept the project shrouded in secrecy.

Perfect Tommy watched Mrs. Johnson pace in front of him. He himself stood relaxed, composed, every fiber of his clothing in perfect alignment. There had been time between arriving in the Jet Car and the security alert to shower and change. He was in stark contrast to his friends who now entered the corridor which led to the basement. Their battle-weary clothing still mirrored the activity surrounding Grover's Mill.

Buckaroo spoke first. "Mrs. Johnson." She turned and faced her mentor. "Tell me what you heard."

She hesitated for a brief second, then with true conviction replied, "In there." She nodded toward the door. "In there amongst the soft humming of machinery. . .I heard Rawhide call out to me."

Buckaroo didn't flinch but instead calmly asked, "What did he say?"

"He just called my name. The same way I heard Peggy right after. . . right after. . ." She stopped, unable to continue the sentence. Buckaroo remembered vividly the death of his wife and Mrs. Johnson's insistence that Peggy wasn't gone. Perhaps she wasn't and perhaps Mrs. Johnson had heard Rawhide speak. Mrs. Johnson's gift of clairvoyance was well known, and Buckaroo believed the possibility of all events until proved otherwise.

"Reno," Buckaroo requested, "get me a hard copy of Rawhide's cryo readings over the last couple of hours."

"Right," Reno answered and quickly left the group.

"Mrs. Johnson. Have the recovery team put on standby. I want them

assembled fast if what I think has happened has happened."

Perfect Tommy, New Jersey and Dr. Banzai were left alone outside the cryogenic chamber. All three silent and intent on what might lay behind those doors. Buckaroo made the first move, quietly saying, "Let's go."

The semi-lit room which housed the sleeping units was an eerie sight, at least for the untrained eye. A soft blue light bathed the area surrounding six off-white canisters which circled the room. They housed six individuals, one of them being Rawhide.

Medical readouts were displayed on the side of each unit along with the individual's name and date of 'death.' Perfect Tommy went directly to the engineering portion of the system while Drs. Banzai and Zwibel attended to the medical readouts.

Rawhide's upper torso was visible through the transparent faceplate. He looked surprisingly peaceful within his frozen cocoon. Anyone not familiar with the facts might assume he was just sleeping.

"Everything looks normal," Buckaroo commented quietly as he studied the panels. The lights danced on his glasses, creating intricate red and blue patterns.

New Jersey straightened and glanced from his sleeping friend to Buckaroo's intense expression. His concentration was interrupted by Reno's footsteps and the delivery of the computer printouts.

Banzai scanned the readings carefully as the others looked on. Finally he spoke. "See. Here and here." He pointed to several wavy lines on a graph. "Variations from the norm."

"What does that mean?" New Jersey questioned quietly.

"It means," Buckaroo said, dropping his gaze from the readouts and peered into the transparent glass at his friend, "that things are not always as they appear."

It was at that auspicious moment that something strange and wonderful began to transpire. Lifesign readings jumped off the scale. Alarms rang throughout the chamber, exchanging the peaceful blue light with a fire red.

New Jersey managed to divorce himself from the surrounding din and glanced at the medical displays. Was that a wave on the EKG monitor? Yes! "Buckaroo! Did you see that?!"

Indeed he did. His friend was making the slow climb from frozen death to--life? Perfect Tommy had already communicated with the medical staff and the recovery team was on the way. 'Hope is a dream by one who is awake.' Rawhide was waking up.

Was it the Lectroids from Planet 10 that caused the spark of life to return to Rawhide's body? 'We'll never know,' Banzai mused as he sat at the breakfast table. It had been a long night in surgery bringing his friend back to 98.6.

New Jersey sat slumped over in a chair next to Banzai's. Buckaroo smiled slightly as he thought about his surgeon friend and the confidence he had attained. Poor Sid would have one hell of a neckache when he woke up.

"Dr. Banzai?" Buckaroo looked up from his tea at one of the recovery team members. "You wanted to be informed of any change."

"Ah, yes. Thank you." Deciding not to awaken New Jersey, he got up and walked toward the infirmary.

The constant rhythm of the EKG monitors filled the room as Dr. Banzai entered. Rawhide lay quietly, eyes shut, as the staff silently attended to his needs. He was breathing on his own now, the waxen color gone from his skin. Buckaroo glanced at the readouts then stood close by his friend.

"Rawhide? Hey, you old cowpoke, wake up."

At first there was no response, then slowly, Rawhide's eyelids began to open. Only a fraction at first, as if the lights were too much for him to bear.

Buckaroo gestured to lower the brightness and encouraged his friend once again. "Rawhide. You've slept long enough. Time to wake up."

This time Rawhide's eyes opened wide, staring straight ahead. Buckaroo suppressed the urge to embrace his friend, to shout his joy. Instead he simply laid his hand on Rawhide's and whispered, "Welcome home."

The weary traveler turned his head toward his physician and friend. "Where in hades am I?"

"The infirmary. You had. . .an accident. Do you remember?"

"I remember something. I was having a nightmare about spiders."

'Spiders,' Banzai mused. A good analogy to what had 'killed' Rawhide. "How do you feel, my friend?"

"Tired. Think I'll get some shut-eye." With that, Rawhide closed his eyes and floated back to normal sleep.

Buckaroo felt strangely elated,

as if a giant weight had been lifted from his shoulders. God, he was tired. As he turned from his friend, he saw New Jersey standing outside the door. Had Sidney observed their exchange and chosen not to interrupt? Wearily Banzai straightened and headed toward the door.

"Well?" Sidney questioned as Buckaroo approached. "Is he OK?"

"He appears to be." Buckaroo faced his colleague and allowed himself to relax. "Get some rest, Sidney, you look beat." Banzai briefly touched New Jersey's shoulder, then continued down the hall.

"You'd better get some rest too, Buckaroo," New Jersey answered back.

Buckaroo didn't turn around. He just continued down the corridor, moving his hand to the nape of his neck, and replied, "Yeah, soon."

The morning sun filtered through the kitchen windows, causing a pleasant glow to fill the room. Sleepy individuals entered, obtained their personal preferences of breakfast food and sat around the table.

Reno poured himself a cup of coffee and glanced sideways toward Perfect Tommy. A box of Rice Krispies in hand, Perfect Tommy carefully poured himself a bowl. Then, with expertise, poured the milk so that the rice reached the edge of the bowl but not over. Inwardly pleased, he said to no one in particular, "Talent."

Reno just shook his head and joined Big Nose and Professor Hikita at the table. "Anybody seen Penny?" Reno inquired.

"She's in the infirmary sleeping," Big Nose offered. Although outwardly relaxed, within, Big Nose

was screaming with anxiety. She knew, they all knew that Rawhide had been taken to the infirmary by the recovery team. His fate, however, was a mystery, at least to her. It was then that she felt someone behind her. 'Who's there?' she thought, and was about to turn around when Perfect Tommy spoke.

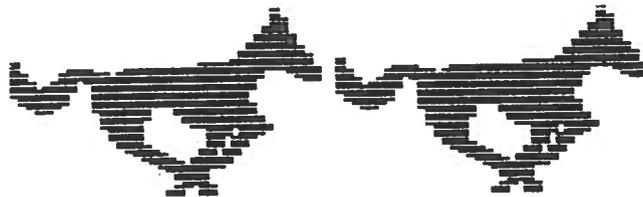
"Morning, Buck," the blond Cavalier said. "Breakfast?" he asked, holding up the box of Rice Krispies.

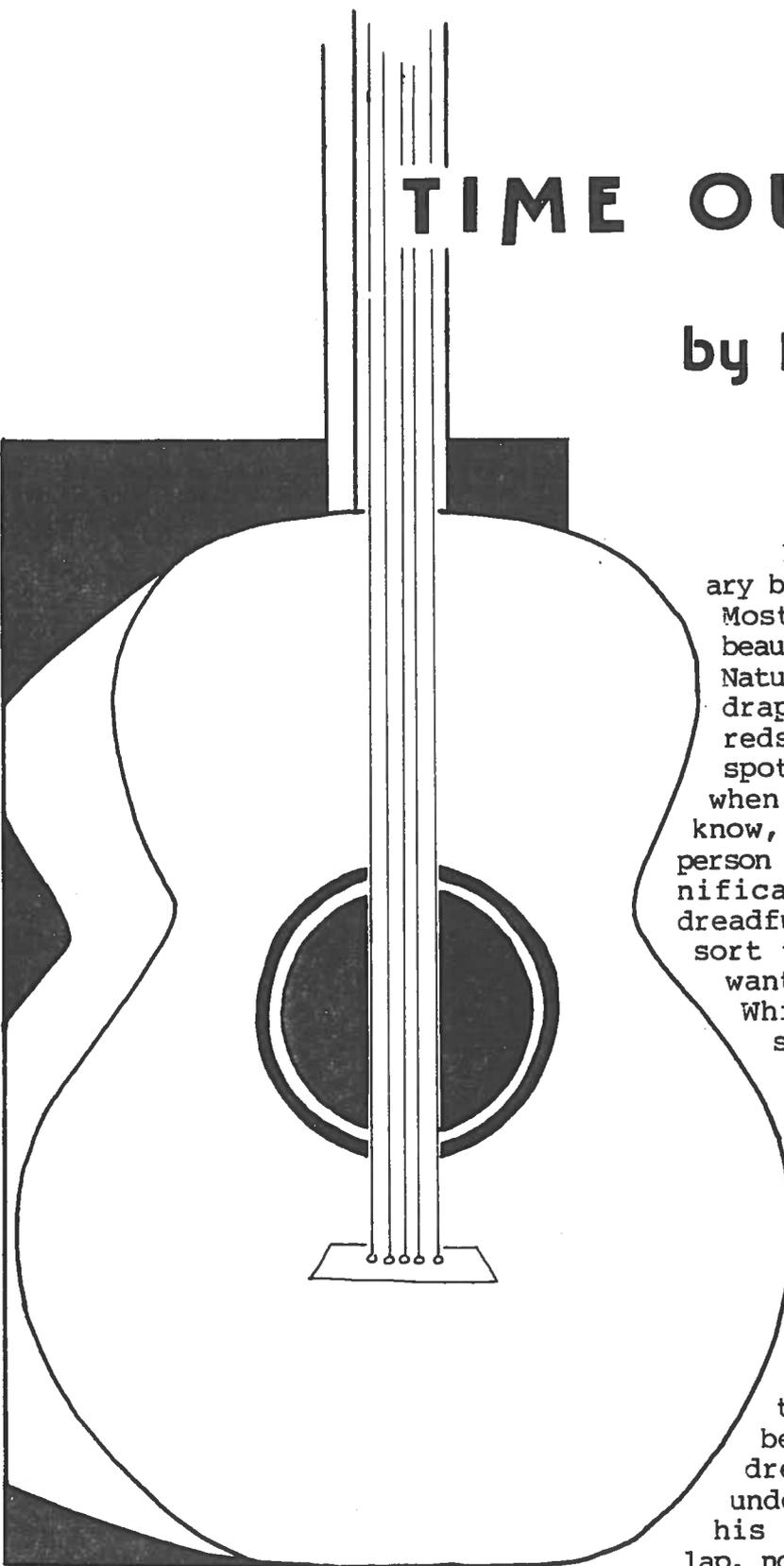
"No, thanks." Buckaroo placed both hands on Big Norse's shoulders. "I have something to tell you all." He paused. "Rawhide is alive. He's well, although still weak. No visitors yet." Big Norse closed her eyes and felt Buckaroo gently tighten his grip. Tension drained up and out of her body.

Professor Hikita, who had raised Buckaroo, saw not the grown man before him but the vulnerability of a searching child. He poured another cup of tea and gestured to the empty chair beside him. "Buckaroo. Have a cup of tea."

"Arigato, Hikita-san, but I'm going to sleep. Relax today, my friends. You've earned it." With that, he turned and headed toward his quarters.

Alone once again, Buckaroo Banzai reviewed the last 48 hours. Strange indeed how fate twisted lives without warning. Now as he drifted into twilight sleep, the images of Peggy and Rawhide lightened his dreams. Things indeed were not as they seemed.





TIME OUT

by Fern Marder

Behind the Institute's infirm-ary building is a small wooded area. Mostly maples, it is absolutely beautiful in the fall, when Mother Nature's decorating squad hangs new drapes and carpeting of brilliant reds and golds. It is the perfect spot for someone to go and wander when they want to be alone--you know, when the significant other person in your life becomes less significant, or right after a truly dreadful exam, or when you need to sort things out, or just when you want to be out in the beautiful. Which means, of course, that it sometimes gets quite crowded...

On this particular day, not long after he had joined the Institute, the young Australian intern had come out prepared to stay a while. He'd brought blanket, guitar, notepad, and a bag of jelly beans and wore a warm red Team Banzai running suit. He parked under a big old tree, the kind that kids like to hide behind when counting to a hundred. Now with blanket partly under him and partly draped over his shoulders, he sat, guitar in lap, noodling on a song idea.

WALSKE

What he didn't know was that at the Institute, like everywhere else, the walls have ears--especially if your wall happens to be the bark of a tree.

His song idea intent on dying about six chords into the song, he let his pencil drop and cut into something that might put him in the right writing frame of mind. He started up one of his current favorite songs, "The Bridge."

Several lines into the chorus he stopped abruptly. He was given to running whole orchestrations in his mind, but this time he could have sworn he actually heard a harmony. But it had stopped when he had. Shaking his head, he started up the chorus again, only to again hear harmoniously contrasting notes on the wind. This time he cut off right in the middle of a word--and, sure enough, the echo completed not just that word, but the next as well, before stopping.

The slender, mopsy-haired singer stood up and looked around. Nothing. He walked behind the tree. Still nothing. Then he heard someone giggling. Dropping out of the branches of the tree was a short dark-haired young man dressed all in black--rather striking against the red and yellow leaves into which he fell.

"Well hello," the intruder said, getting up and brushing himself off. "I didn't think anyone over here even knew about Cactus World News. Makes me feel at home." Not an unusual comment to be offered in a soft Irish brogue.

"A good band's universal," said the Aussie. "How long have you been up there?"

"Since after lunch. That's a right nice guitar--may I see it?"

The singer nodded and handed over his instrument. "Do you play?"

"Yes, but I probably shouldn't."

"Well, you sing quite well. Have you sung with a band?"

This produced lilting laughter. "I don't think the choirmaster at St. Catherine's would approve of that description. He did once tell me that my voice was possibly better suited to something that would let me cut loose every so often, though. And you?"

"Here and there. Nothing regular."

"I liked what you were doing before you started up 'The Bridge.'" He handed back the guitar, which he had been strumming softly, trying a few chords. "Would you show me?"

After a moment's hesitation, the red-shirted fellow took the guitar and started playing. "I was thinking of something like this," he said and began to sing a bit of melody.

His Irish companion listened intently, nodding his head in time with the music. When it ended, he immediately begged, "Do it again." His wish was granted. This time, when the composer stopped, the listener picked up the 'song,' doing a sort of variant verse and then a bridge back to the original melody.

The two young music makers grinned broadly at one another. Then the guitarist looked down, almost sadly.

"Hey, what's the matter?" his new friend asked.

"Oh, just reminded me of good times. . ."

"Your accent tells me you're a good way from home. Is that a problem?"

The Australian shook his head. "No. Just too long between good times. I haven't found too many here yet." He looked up, smiling

wryly. "You don't sound like you grew up next door either."

"Dublin. Compared to you, that's next door. Have you got a name?"

"Gareth."

"A good old Irish name. Pleased to meet you, Sir Gareth."

"No King Arthur jokes," Gareth warned.

"You won't get any jokes from me." A pause. "They call me Rejoice." This got him a look somewhere between 'Oh my God' and 'Oh sure.' But it wasn't polite to ask. Certainly not right away.

"You make a joyful noise, Rejoice."

"Hey, watch that."

"No, really. You're the best news I've had since I got here."

"I sort of gathered you came out here to be alone. That's why I didn't come right down."

Gareth frowned. "And what brought you out here, hiding up a tree?"

Rejoice winced, then confessed, "Well, not every day is terrific."

"Do tell."

Rejoice laughed. "All right. I got into a fight with my wife."

"You're married? To someone here?" Gareth was obviously incredulous.

"Yeah. She's a Blue Blaze. I said something about her starting to sound like a Yank and she really got upset."

"Oh. So she's here but she's not from here."

Rejoice realized what Gareth was driving at. "No. She's Irish, too. We were married before we came here. This is a lovely place to visit, but I'm not sure I want to live with it."

It was Gareth's turn to laugh. "I guess that's been one of my problems. Seeing Blue Blazes around the world really gives you the impression that the Institute is more of an international place," said the man who'd traveled from the other side of the world. "Sure, there are people from all over—like us, and I've run into a couple of Brits and so forth and there's an obvious Oriental presence—and you do hear a lot of different languages, but, culturally, this place is awfully American. You know, Rice Krispies and Southern fried chicken."

"What is it that Dr. Banzai always says: 'Things are never what they appear to be, but things are always exactly what they are.'"

"Right. Like trees that sing!" They both laughed.

"You know, sociologically, the American thing makes perfect sense."

"Oh?" The Aussie looked definitely skeptical.

"The United States is a combination of people from all over, speaking all different languages, living together in a very hybrid culture that is so distinctive that the rest of the world perceives the result as a single entity known as 'American.'"

"That sounds reasonable. No wonder Americans are all mixed up."

The Irish scholar leaned forward intently now. "Consider this: choosing people from all over the U.S. gives you the same sort of differences as, say, picking people from all different parts of Europe. The Institute, by taking a cross-section from around the country and all around the world, has created in microcosm what

happened across this continent. A community of cross-cultures resulting in an overall 'American' feel."

Gareth looked somewhat overwhelmed. "What did you say you were studying?"

"Sociology." Rejoice shrugged. "Sorry."

"That's okay, but can you give me that in 'people'?"

"I'll try." The Irishman hesitated. "Buckaroo Banzai is the quintessential American, combining recent foreign influences from his Japanese father, with already assimilated foreign influences, represented by his Texan mother—who was herself perhaps only a first or second generation citizen. The Institute is just variations on a Banzai theme."

"Being logical doesn't make it any easier to live with," Gareth said, after thinking a moment.

"Well, I tried. So what are you studying?"

Gareth grinned. "I'm studying math and Dr. Banzai is studying me."

"How so?"

"Well, I can do stuff in my head that people aren't supposed to be able to do. So I made a deal with Dr. Banzai that if I could stay here and mess around with some theories and play some music, he could give me any tests he wanted to."

"Sounds like a pretty fair deal. I wonder. . ." Rejoice got a wicked gleam in his bright blue eyes. "Could we make a deal for some stat work? I really hate having to waste time correlating data, but I've never had any way out of it."

"No big deal. Just show me what you need."

"But I'd feel obliged to compensate you in some way."

They both reached for the last jelly bean at the same time. After a couple of go-rounds on the theme of "you take it/no, you take it," the Australian tossed it high in the air and caught it in his mouth. "It was my bag, after all," he said between chews. He looked back up at the sky. "Hell, it's getting late. You want to continue this over dinner?"

"If you like. What I'd really like to do is grab some sandwiches and go somewhere we can play around with that song. . ."

"That gives me an idea," Gareth said as he got up and started collecting his blanket. "I'm going to go crazy just playing for trees--and tree-climbers--and the Cavaliers really aren't my cup of tea. Would you consider a payback in music?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"Well, I was serious when I asked if you'd sung seriously before. I'd really like to do something, maybe get a band together."

Rejoice shrugged. "I never really considered it. I've got some friends who play in a band back home, but there never seemed to be the time for me to do anything with it."

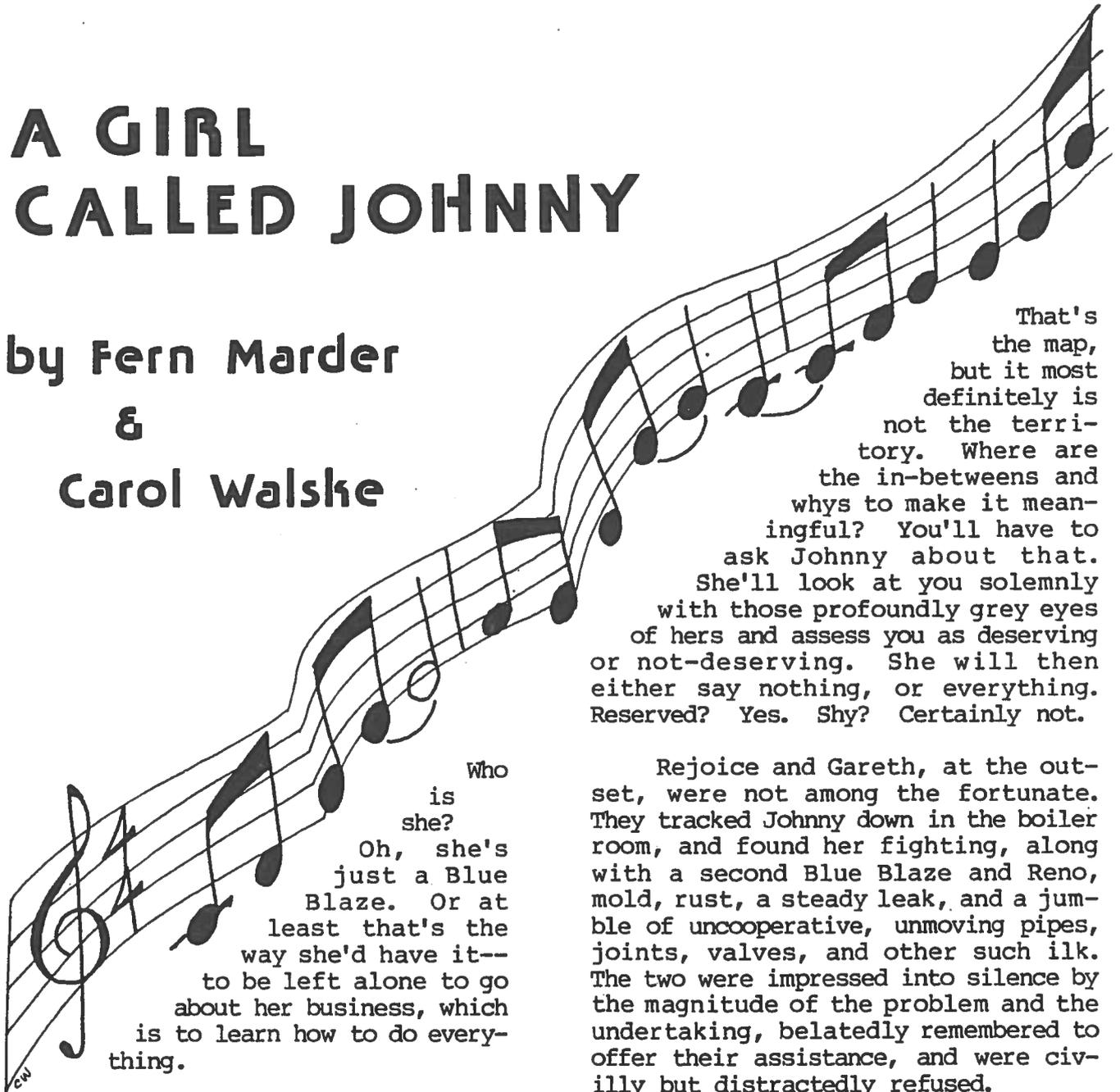
"But if I'm saving you stat time. . ."

The two music lovers looked at each other as though they'd just discovered the answer to all the world's troubles.

As they headed back toward the main house, Rejoice kicked up a bunch of leaves. He paused thoughtfully, watching them fall around him. "Gee, I think my wife knows a British Blue Blaze who plays bass. . ."

A GIRL CALLED JOHNNY

by Fern Marder
&
Carol Walske



Who
is
she?
Oh, she's
just a Blue
Blaze. Or at
least that's the
way she'd have it--
to be left alone to go
about her business, which
is to learn how to do every-
thing.

But take the name. Is Johnny a suitable appellation for a girl who seeks obscurity and the quiet backwaters? No. Of course not.

Consider: a proper, even refined upbringing near London's Hampstead Heath. A few O-Levels, a solid education. Then: one day she ups and chucks it all, fleeing first to the Channel Islands, then somehow to the United States. Point of entry: New York City. Current location: New Brunswick, New Jersey.

That's the map, but it most definitely is not the territory. Where are the in-betweens and whys to make it meaningful? You'll have to ask Johnny about that. She'll look at you solemnly with those profoundly grey eyes of hers and assess you as deserving or not-deserving. She will then either say nothing, or everything. Reserved? Yes. Shy? Certainly not.

Rejoice and Gareth, at the outset, were not among the fortunate. They tracked Johnny down in the boiler room, and found her fighting, along with a second Blue Blaze and Reno, mold, rust, a steady leak, and a jumble of uncooperative, unmoving pipes, joints, valves, and other such ilk. The two were impressed into silence by the magnitude of the problem and the undertaking, belatedly remembered to offer their assistance, and were civilly but distractedly refused.

Rejoice was not one to consider timing and relevancy. Whatever was important needed to be said, right on the spot. "You're Johnny, aren't you?" he asked of the young woman partially visible between water tank and pipes. "Green says you play bass guitar. How would you like to make some music with us?"

The young woman pushed back her long brown hair--she had it pulled back in a ponytail, but it was the

escaping kind of hair—leaving streaks of water and rust on her face, and briefly looked over the two intruders. She said two words. I regret to report that her comment would be painful to tender eyes, and will therefore not reproduce it here.

The plumbing job finally completed, Johnny cleaned up and changed. The dining room was chiefly empty of food by the time she got there, so she went to the kitchen to scrounge. Fortunately, her friend and Rejoice's wife Green was there, stirring an obviously Irish stew. She took pity on Johnny and got her some ham and cheese.

"Thanks," said Johnny. "Say, what kind of music do Rejoice and--and, oh, I don't know the Aussie's name make?"

"Loud music," replied Green with a laugh. "His name's Gareth."

"Rock music?" ventured Johnny.

"Progressive," amended the Irishwoman. She licked meditatively at her stirring spoon. "Rejoice and Gareth both like their guitar sound tapestried, up in the higher reaches, like U2's Edge or Big Country's Stuart Adamson. Bass and beat that form the backbone of a song, a rhythm not so much danceable or funk, but maybe a touch of African or reggae. Keyboards used for texture and accent. Overall, music destined to show off good strong vocals and harmonies. D'you know what I mean?"

"Wow," said Johnny. "Thanks for the detailed critique."

Green dimpled. "I've been a stringer for the NME," she confessed. "I've heard and written up more awful bands in Dublin and Belfast pubs than you can throw a plectrum at!"

"Rejoice and Gareth've got a band?"

"They're trying to put together a band. After all, they can't do it all themselves, as much as they'd probably like to." Green glanced from her pot over at Johnny. "I mentioned to Rejoice that you played bass."

"Oh."

"You don't mind, do you?"

"Girls in bands usually don't get much of a chance," said Johnny bluntly. "They're let in a group to pout prettily or dance in the background and go 'ooh-woo-wooh' behind the lead singer."

"Rejoice will judge you for music expertise and his ability to work with you professionally," said Green firmly. "I think he and Gareth are trying to work out a song together, down in the studio. Why don't you go check them out?"

Johnny found the two musicians out in the hallway running from the sound studio to the various design shops. They had food, guitar, guitar case, a tape recorder and music paper scattered around them, all in a quiet corridor that stretched away from nowhere to somewhere and back.

She had heard them a good bit away, and smiled at what they were singing--Dylan's "Knockin' on Heaven's Door." Apparently they had some musical taste. Then they started another song, one which brought a softening smile to Johnny's face. She waited until the appropriate moment, then stepped around the corner.

"Because the night belongs to lovers; because the night belongs to life; because the night--"

The Irishman and the Australian looked up as they realized their chorus had a chorus, a female one, throaty and mellow both. Johnny came toward them and sat down on the floor, tucking her feet neatly under herself. She finished out the song, word-perfect.

"Patti Smith or the Boss?" she asked eagerly when they were done.

"Patti Smith, Rimbaud, and A Season in Hell," replied Gareth.

She nodded excitedly. "I heard her at a London club; I was underage and got drunk and got sick—"

"It was her and Dylan made me want to write songs and not just live a know-nothin' dustrider—"

"My introduction to Tom Verlaine and Television—"

They'd spoken almost simultaneously, Johnny slightly ahead, Rejoice slightly behind, then each drew back, then all of them laughed.

"Why aren't you in the studio?" inquired the young woman.

"Reno's putting together a 'lie-down-and-wiggle mix' 12" version of the Cavs' 'Neuroboogie Blues,'" said Rejoice. "And 'e doesn't like people watchin' 'im at the soundboard and askin' questions."

"I don't much like the Hong Kong Cavaliers' music," said Johnny. "But I'm still living in 1976. It's still The Clash and The Jam for me. Well, I do like Big Audio Dynamite now--and the Dead Kennedys and Hoodoo Gurus."

This was clearly a challenge. "It's U2 for me," Rejoice declared. "In fact, I'm prejudiced, I'll take almost any Irish band--there's all sorts of good ones right now."

"I like Echo and the Bunnymen, The Pretenders, The Waterboys," added in Gareth. "The Chameleons, too."

"But there's room enough for all kinds of musical tastes here," commented the Irishman. "We thought to let a few more of them out where people can hear them."

Gareth agreed with that on guitar, his fingers pulling out a few major chords. "One of the nicest things about being here is the way music cuts across all the disciplines and all the jargon and all the gobbledygook."

"That's because it's art and science both," said Rejoice. "Primitive or sophisticated, or both; a mass of instruments and electronic effects, or one voice raised clearly. Such a simple thing, really, a good song. An expression of soul."

"Poetic," said Gareth. Impossible to tell if he was being snide or sincere. "When you consider that covers Barbara Streisand to Iron Maiden—"

The other two laughed. "So play me something of yours," said Johnny.

Gareth and Rejoice exchanged a look and a nod. Then the Aussie strummed into the song he and the Irishman had started putting together the day they'd met. Now a week or so old, it was beginning to sound like something. Rejoice happily embroidered harmonies, Gareth introduced a brief guitar solo. They ended, almost simultaneously, and grinned at each other and at their audience.

"I like that," said Johnny.

"You needn't sound so surprised," accused Gareth.

"Well, it needs work. It's a bit soft in spots."

"I hear you play bass," said Rejoice.

"How can you hear it--I 'aven't got one," retorted Johnny. "But you need a bass player, don't you?"

"We'll listen to auditions," Gareth said warily, and was rewarded with a glare.

"Let's go borrow Pinky's bass, or one of the old beat-up ones in the studio," said Rejoice, immediately getting up.

The Londoner looked offended. "No way. Those aren't basses; those are fat-stringed stretched-neck guitars. And why should I use someone's cast-off?"

"Picky, aren't you?" said Gareth.

She gave him and his admittedly the-worse-for-wear guitar a withering glance. "Some of us have taste."

"So where do we find you a bass?" said Rejoice. "I don't suppose you're rich enough to just go out and splurge, are you? No, just a thought. We're goin' t'be a proper garage band, we are. Drums made from tins, cigar-box guitars, and amplifiers from portable-radio speakers."

During this verbosity Johnny had obviously caught the glimmer of an idea, rejected it, then came back, reexamined it and found it good. "I know where to find a bass," she said. "Sunshine's got one."

"He's got several. One problem," replied Gareth. "They all happen to belong to him."

"Well, I'm not talkin' about nickin' it off 'im, am I?" Johnny retorted righteously. Her accent seemed to deepen at whim. "He's got enough to lend me one. He's got one that's the perfect combination of bass

guitar and trad standup bass."

"Not his special standup cutaway bass?" questioned Rejoice. "The one there's only about a dozen of in the whole world?"

"Yeah, that's the one."

"He'd never lend that one to you!" protested the Irishman. "He loves it like a father loves a son. I'll bet it sits next his bed. No, he'd never let you touch it--he doesn't even know you."

"Who says he has to know?" said Johnny, sweeping up from the floor to her feet. Some of her gestures were almost balletic in their grace. "He'd be out of his room right now, wouldn'te?"

"Right," said Gareth. "Bloody kind of you, helpin' yourself to his fancy bass."

"Blinkin' poofter," said the Londoner, with an exaggerated accent that mimicked the Australian's, and took off down the corridor. The two young men looked at each other in resigned dismay for a moment, then left everything, except Gareth's precious guitar which remained slung around his neck, and headed after her.

Trouble was, Sunshine's room was as irresistible as catnip. Gareth descended on Sunshine's portable Effanel studio-in-a-suitcase with cries of delight, while Rejoice stared at all the intricate, sophisticated, expensive, and beautiful equipment the British vocalist just had carelessly lying around. Sunshine had also equipped a whole studio in the arts building, yet had enough left over to make his room look like a sound and music expo at the Coliseum.

Johnny found the bass and plugged it in. She plucked the low string and let a long note growl into the air.

"Oh God that's beautiful," she sighed. "Now just listen to this." She began playing the bass line to "Every Breath You Take."

Rejoice had sense enough to turn the volume down, for the instrument had the power to shiver windows and make carpets creep. But it obviously still had the power to summon its rightful owner.

"Wot's all this then? You look like a bunch of children muckin' about in the mud," said a direfully familiar voice.

They jumped. Sunshine stepped into the room, put hands curled into fists on hips, and glared at the interlopers. His tone was icy.

"Someone forgot to tell me they were holding a gig in my room with my instruments, didn't they now?"

"Come and join us," said Johnny, recovering her poise while the other two merely stood looking guilty. "You play a pretty fair bass, don't you?" A faint moan emerged from someone; it might have been Rejoice.

"Do I know this person?" Sunshine inquired, eyeing Rejoice, but pointing at the female. "Should I be civilized and merely tell her to get her effin' paws off my bleedin' bass, or shall I do what I want to do?"

"What do you want to do?" asked a too-inquisitive Rejoice.

"I'm going to strangle her with the G-string!"

"Hers or yours?" inquired Gareth in an undertone.

As Sunshine advanced upon her, she held the bass away from her. "I'm Johnny," she said. "And you don't want to beat on me because I've got no

sense of rhythm. I'm also a masochist."

Sunshine stopped in his tracks and closed his eyes, a pained expression on his face. He then very deliberately took his bass away from Johnny, checking it briefly to be sure that no damage had been done.

As soon as her hands were free, Johnny started to sidle away from Sunshine and toward the door.

"Hold it!" She did. "Nobody goes anywhere."

Sunshine enforced his command with a menacing look from under evilly angled eyebrows. He set the bass back in its accustomed corner, then turned and purposefully stalked toward the three who were sort of huddled near the foot of the bed.

"Sit down," he demanded. They did, all at once, making the bed rock violently. Sunshine barely was able to rescue the guitar he'd left leaning against the head of the bed.

He studied his three captives for a moment. "You," he said, pointing at Rejoice, "you know better than this." The finger moved to accuse Gareth, "You should know better." He let his gaze fall on Johnny. "Which leads me to believe that this fiasco was your idea. Hmmm?"

Johnny grinned. "I had every confidence that you would have exactly the kind of equipment we needed."

"And the fact that it was behind my door didn't deter you in the slightest?"

"The door wasn't locked."

"Doors aren't around here--because we should be able to trust one another."

"I thought it was because everyone shared everything at the Institute." For one brief moment, Johnny managed to look totally innocent.

Sunshine scowled. "Just what do you 'need' my equipment for?"

The three of them stumbled over one another trying to explain--without actually telling him anything--that they wanted to make some music together.

Sunshine tried to make some sense of all this. "I think what you're not saying is that you're trying to get a band together but have neither the instruments nor all of the players you need to pull it off."

Gareth nodded cautiously. "You might put it that way."

"If I didn't think that it was about time that someone thought to do something like this, I'd march the lot of you down to Buckaroo's office and have you hauled out of here altogether." He let this sink in and gleefully watched the three of them cringe before him. "On the other hand, one of the reasons I have all

these toys around is that I need some inspiration."

"Exactly," Johnny chimed in. "That's what we're looking for, too." This got her a sharp look each from her two cohorts.

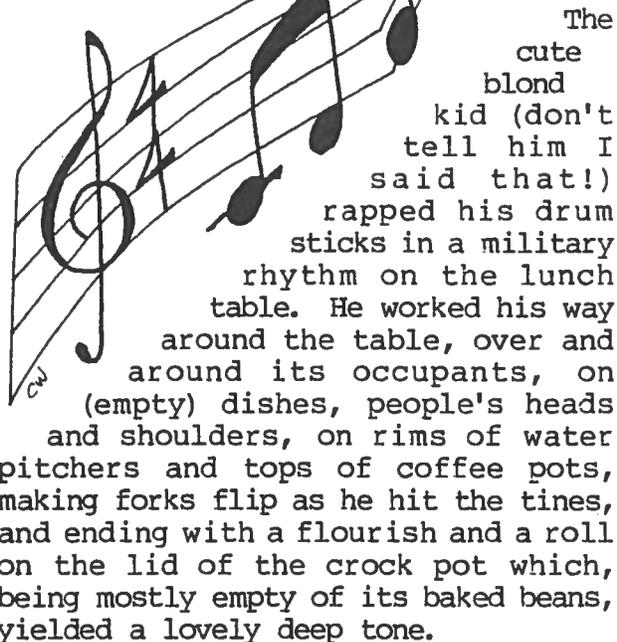
It was impossible to gauge Sunshine's reaction to Johnny's sustained gall. His face remained forbidding as he considered this, and then his expression was transformed by a grin. A sweetly sulphurous one. "I've got an offer for you. If you want to use some of my instruments, that's fine--provided I'm around when you do it. I want a piece of this action."

Now taking in--or should that be being taken in by?--a senior Institute staff member wasn't exactly what Rejoice and Gareth had had in mind. Then again, it might prove awfully interesting, and the rewards in opportunities and experience were awfully tempting. However, they never got the chance to discuss it, as Johnny bounced up off the bed and proffered a hand toward Sunshine.

"Deal," she said.

THE YOUNG ONES

by Fern Marder



The
cute
blond
kid (don't
tell him I
said that!)
rapped his drum
sticks in a military
rhythm on the lunch
table. He worked his way
around the table, over and
around its occupants, on
(empty) dishes, people's heads
and shoulders, on rims of water
pitchers and tops of coffee pots,
making forks flip as he hit the tines,
and ending with a flourish and a roll
on the lid of the crock pot which,
being mostly empty of its baked beans,
yielded a lovely deep tone.

After a round of mixed applause and calls of "show-off," the noisy intruder looked around with a grin. "I hear you folks need a drummer," he said brightly.

"Oh
you
do, do
you?" said
the mopy-
haired fellow
called Gareth.

Johnny, the lone girl at the far end of the table, looked up at the newcomer, then at Gareth. "I'm sure someone told me when I first got here that I could forget about this guy, 'cause he was terribly shy. . ." The boy colored remarkably.

The one known as Rejoice was staring at the drummer as though trying to see beyond the face and bravura. Bright blue eyes met bright blue eyes. For a second it seemed as though everyone stopped breathing. Then Rejoice stood up and extended a hand. "What's your name?"

"Larry," the boy said. He switched his drumsticks to his left hand in order to shake Rejoice's right.

"Larry," hooted the girl with the boy's name, "how original!"

"Good Lord, and he's a Yank," added Gareth in his Aussie Strine, as he looked from the British Johnny to Irish Rejoice.

Rejoice pulled an empty chair over from an adjoining table. "At least he sounds Boston," he said with a grin. "That's marginally passable." He indicated for the speechless Larry to sit down.

Johnny pressed on, "Yeah, and he's fair." Larry looked around, realizing that, indeed, the three others were strikingly dark-haired.

"What of it?" chimed in yet another British voice, coming up behind her. Mousy brown bangs framed Sunshine's green eyes. He looked at Larry somewhat skeptically. "Methinks he might not come by it naturally, at that."

The poor victim dropped his sticks with a forceful 'whap' on the table. Sunshine walked around to his side of the table and proffered a hand. "I'm Sunshine. I'm going to be playing keyboards for this establishment." They shook hands.

It took a moment for everyone to scrunch their chairs over to make room for yet another addition at the table. But, once settled, Sunshine introduced the band, for courtesies all around. "Gareth is our lead guitar. Johnny plays bass. Rejoice is singing lead--darn him." The others laughed.

"Sunshine still can't bear to have been voted second-best singer in this group," commented Gareth.

"You can't afford to talk," Sunshine shot back. "You came in third."

Johnny had that 'bright idea' look on her face. "Do you sing, Larry? Maybe we can drop him to fourth."

Larry had been studying Sunshine, as if trying to figure something out. "No," he said somewhat distractedly, "I only play drums." He finally gave in to his curiosity, asking, "Aren't you one of the Cavaliers?"

It was Sunshine's turn to laugh. "Yes, I am. So?"

"Well, I'd heard that one of the reasons this band got started was

'cause you guys"--he glanced at Johnny--"er, folks, couldn't break into the Hong Kong Cavaliers' line-up. I know I'm a distant fourth in line for drums."

Rejoice indicated that he wanted to answer that one. "You see, Sunshine discovered that there are Cavaliers and Cavaliers. He's a Cavalier by Institute training and musical virtuosity, but even he loses on seniority." He paused as Gareth patted Sunshine sympathetically on the head. "New Jersey plays piano, Pinky plays bass, Reno plays the sax, Dr. Banzai and Perfect Tommy both play guitar and sing. Sunshine only gets to play when someone's out of town."

Sunshine shrugged. "My biggest problem is convincing the Cavaliers that this whole thing wasn't my idea. You know Tommy and Reno still aren't too thrilled about this whole endeavor. Actually, I almost got shut out again, since they already had guitar and bass and Rejoice." (An interesting way of putting that, don't you think?) He looked at Larry and grinned. "The one thing I won't play in public is drums, so I guess you're elected."

It took a moment for this last to sink in. Then Larry let out a sort of war whoop, grabbed up his drumsticks and played a long, lovely roll to a crescendo on the edge of the table. "By the way, does this band have a name yet?"

The four other band members looked wickedly from one to the other. Finally, Johnny asked, "Do you ever watch MTV on Sunday nights?" Larry indicated he did not. "Well, you see, there's this British show called 'The Young Ones' that's really weird."

"It's about these four crazy mismatched college student roommates," put in Gareth. "And it's terribly irreverent."

Rejoice nodded in agreement. "They don't worry about the usual conventions on acceptable language or subject matter. . ."

"Or slander or politics or good taste. . ." added Sunshine.

"Or decibel level," concluded Gareth. "And they play New Music on the show."

Johnny reclaimed the fore. "Anyway, we figured that since we were, well, sort of students, and mostly British. . ."

"Hey, watch that," snapped the Aussie guitarist.

"What with adding a Yank, it isn't even accurate anymore," Rejoice pointed out.

"All right, all right," said Johnny. "Also, we're a lot younger band than the Cavaliers. Except for Sunshine, of course," she looked overly sympathetically at the single over-thirty member of the group, "but we figured that if the Cavs could have

Perfect Tommy as a token New Wave young person, we could put up with an over-the-hill—"

Sunshine stood up menacingly. "You. With the mouth. You know who'd win if we ever actually held a bass audition, so mind your tongue." He sat down very deliberately, as the other band members laughed heartily.

Larry shook his head, obviously having a hard time keeping up with all the crosstalk. "I think I may have missed something here. Can we run some of this back? Is there a band on this TV show, on 'The Young Ones'?"

This time the laugh was at Larry's expense. Finally, Rejoice pronounced, "No, Larry. We are The Young Ones."

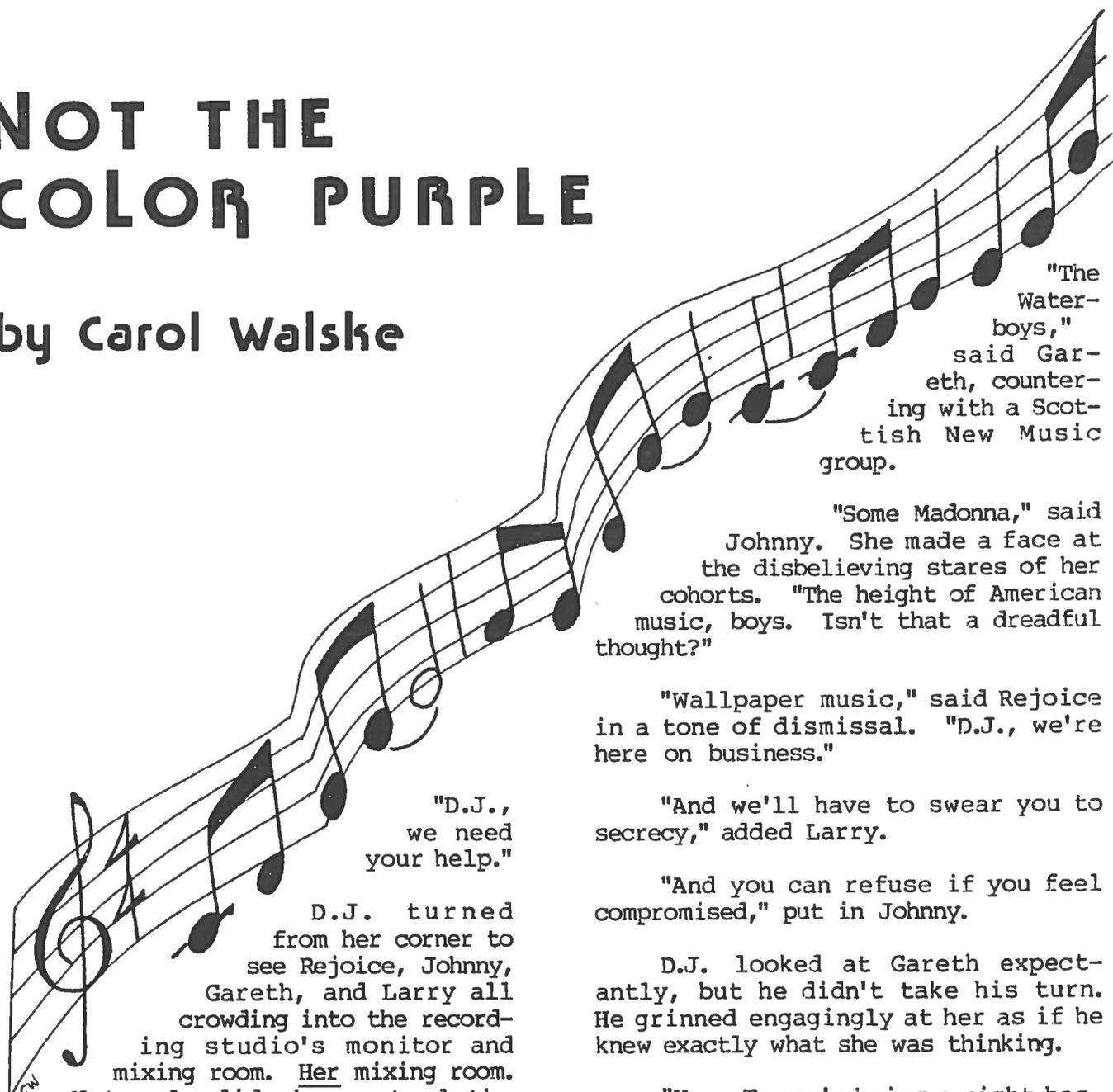
The newcomer considered this for a moment, then said, more to himself than to anyone else, "Irreverent. . .bad taste. . .loud. . . Not exactly the Institute's reputation."

"Come now," scoffed Sunshine. "Always expect the unexpected."



NOT THE COLOR PURPLE

by Carol Walske



"D.J.,
we need
your help."

D.J. turned from her corner to see Rejoice, Johnny, Gareth, and Larry all crowding into the recording studio's monitor and mixing room. Her mixing room. Not only did she control the Institute's audio input from here, but she'd also decided it was the best spot for her to work, mostly undisturbed, on her thesis. "Is this a delegation to complain about the playlist?"

Larry perched on the strip of counter running the length of the soundboard, almost squashing the 60Khz and 40Khz levers. "Yeah, this Arcadia and A-ha stuff is pure crap. Let's have some Del Fuegos," he suggested, naming an 'underground' Boston band.

"The Water-boys," said Gareth, countering with a Scottish New Music group.

"Some Madonna," said Johnny. She made a face at the disbelieving stares of her cohorts. "The height of American music, boys. Isn't that a dreadful thought?"

"Wallpaper music," said Rejoice in a tone of dismissal. "D.J., we're here on business."

"And we'll have to swear you to secrecy," added Larry.

"And you can refuse if you feel compromised," put in Johnny.

D.J. looked at Gareth expectantly, but he didn't take his turn. He grinned engagingly at her as if he knew exactly what she was thinking.

"Your Tommy's being a right bastard," said Rejoice. "He's--"

"Don't call him 'my' Tommy."

"Ever since Buckaroo invited us to open for the Cavaliers at The Bottom Line in New York City and at their favorite bar, you know, the Vein--"

"Artie's Artery," said Gareth.

"Canton's Capillary," interjected Larry.

Rejoice kept on determinedly,

since the only way to follow a conversation in this group was to shout the rest of them down. That was why he was lead vocalist, of course, he was the loudest. "He's been coming around to our rehearsals, throwin' his weight around. Commenting on everything from Gareth's guitar riffs to Larry's cymbals to my singing."

"You notice he hasn't said anything to Sunshine," said Johnny.

"He knows he dare not!" Rejoice retorted. "Now, I don't understand why Sunshine just sits there and lets Tommy mouth off, I mean, Sunshine has more talent and experience in his little finger than does Imperfect Tommy—"

"Sunshine said he was used to that in his old group, his bandmates and manager being the managing types," said Johnny. "He doesn't even hear Tommy."

"Yes, but Sunshine's the only one qualified to give us that kind of criticism, so I don't know where Tommy gets off doing that in front of him," Rejoice continued hotly.

"Tommy likes throwing his weight around," said his devoted paramour. "He's also feeling a little paternal toward this young new music band, if you can imagine that of Tommy, and not showing it well. You want me to tell him to lay off?"

"Yeah," said Johnny. "Not meaning to get overly personal, D.J., but we need the kind of access to Perfect Tommy that only you can provide. . ."

Mornings were bad, that was a fact of life, but Tommy didn't remember the last time he'd felt quite so awful. He reached for solace—only to discover that she wasn't there. This was provoking enough to make him open his eyes, a little, and peer at the other half of his bed. Yes, empty.

God he felt disgusting. His mouth was coated with some substance last spotted on a New York sidewalk, and his head felt like a roach motel. An inhabited one.

Groaning a bit didn't help, since there was no one around to sympathize. Tommy summoned up those world-famous reflexes of his and dragged himself out of bed. He was vaguely aware of the topography reaching up and making him stumble, but his only real thought was to get to the bathroom and into some cold water. Brutal, but effective.

He didn't look at the bathroom mirror on his way into the shower—no sense fooling around with the Medusa myth—but he did look upon wrapping up in favorite Claridge's Hotel towel. It was green. The mirror was bright green, covered with a thick layer of paint. There were drips and blobs all over the place, making the lavatory look like a set for a low-budget monster movie. Anthony Perkins versus The Blob.

Touching the stuff proved it to be dry. Tommy grimaced his annoyance and stalked out of the euphemism, only to stop dead as the full wonder of his room burst upon his wakened senses. No wonder he'd had trouble with the architecture on his way out of bed. "Jesus H. Christ, who the hell did this?"

The room was a shambles. Cross Times Square on New Year's Eve with the St. Patrick's Day Parade down Fifth Avenue, put them into a ten-by-twenty room, and you have a fair approximation of the carnage. Maybe a touch of post-Christmas sales, too. The predominant colors were green and red. His dresser mirror had been painted green in sympathy with the water closet one. Green paint on his window. Green and red streamers dangled decadently from the ceiling and walls. The walls were also spotted with green paper shamrocks and bright red hearts—St. Valentine's Day

Massacre? A touch of patriotism was provided by a bunch of paper flags, American and British, sitting in an ice bucket. There were bottles all over the floor. All of them empty, damnit. Scattered confetti of various colors. A suggestive bra hanging from his closet doorknob. That made him go over and yank open his closet door, but his clothes, thank God, looked untouched.

He dressed slowly, in attire that expressed his feelings--slashes of red and black and extravagant sartorial statements. Shamrocks, huh? And Union Jacks. That pointed a couple of fingers. All that was missing, in terms of signatures, were a stuffed kangaroo or two and some Boston baked beans.

Halfway down the corridor, Tommy met Buckaroo. Even for the boss, he couldn't muster much more than a surly hello.

"Good morning," Buckaroo responded cheerfully. He gave Tommy a smiling once-over glance. "You sound as if you didn't sleep too well. Cheer up--I hear there are fresh strawberries and bananas this morning."

"Uh," Tommy grunted. "No limes?"

A quizzical look. "Not that I know of. Why?"

"They're green."

"Oranges are quite often green," responded Buckaroo. "We could find you some of them, if you like."

Pecos and Reno emerged together from their room at that point, creating a small traffic problem. Between the "Good mornings" and "How are yous" both of them stared at Tommy, then looked at each other for a moment of wordless communication.

"Interesting choice of colors, Tommy," commented Pecos. "You are

feeling daring, aren't you?"

"You're always up late," said Tommy. He was too used to her baiting him on his apparel to even notice it. "Did you hear any commotion coming from my room last night, see anyone coming and going carrying a lot of junk?"

"If we ever listened to what goes on in your room," said Reno, "we'd never get any sleep or any work done."

Tommy grunted again, disgruntledly, and they proceeded downstairs to the dining hall.

Tommy was used to attracting attention--a major motive for his modus vivendi--but he himself realized that this morning was different from all other mornings. For one thing, The Young Ones were all ostentatiously absent. So was D.J., whom Tommy also suspected of having a hand and a foot in this affair. His last night's cup of cocoa--drunk in D.J.'s company--had to have been spiked.

He began to wonder if Those Youthful Personages hadn't told the whole Institute of their deed. How else to account for the stares, grins and whispers drifting in his direction? He treated them all, however, with his usual debonair savoir-faire.

Black coffee helped his disposition, as did the chaser of three eggs, strawberries, sausage, bacon, and a gooey Danish. So when Rejoice, Johnny, Gareth, Larry, Sunshine, and D.J. all finally trooped in, protectively moving together, Tommy was inclined to regard them with an only mildly jaundiced eye. They hadn't, after all, messed with his wardrobe.

Nothing shy or defensive about their approach. After collecting food, the sextet made directly for his table and sat down with bright and cheerful greetings.

"I understand you had a party last night," Tommy commented. "It's not polite not to invite the person whose room you're wrecking."

"Oh, you were there," said Johnny, letting a small chortle escape.

"Yeah, you got so foxed so fast you passed out," added Gareth.

Tommy raised one eyebrow. "Indeed."

"You make a rotten Vulcan, Tommy," commented D.J. "How are you feeling this morning? Slightly hung-over?"

"Just slightly," he agreed sourly. "I don't think I like the way you mix drinks, D.J."

"It's not the mix, it's the delivery," offered Sunshine.

"Were you at the party last night?" challenged Tommy.

"We were all there in spirit," replied the sunny one.

"Ethylated spirits," said Larry.

"I must say, 'ee's takin' this rather well, isn't ee?" said a Cockney-flavored Rejoice.

"Oh, Tommy's a good sport," said D.J., in a rather hopeful tone.

"Damn kind of you."

"There is the possibility that the full ramifications haven't hit him," said Sunshine. This crypticism was met with a crossfire of meaningful glances and giggles, of the kind that are always so irritating for the outsider to watch.

"Oh God, we didn't really consider that, did we?" inquired Johnny. She gave Tommy a look. "I wonder. . ."

"Ramifications?" Tommy demanded.

"He could just be playing it cool," said D.J.

"Maybe he likes the change," suggested Gareth.

Tommy had a sudden awful premonition that the mirrors in his room had been painted over for more than one reason. For a moment he was torn between the need to run out and find a mirror and the urge to murder his companions--for whatever they'd done. However, self-confidence--might one say towering self-centeredness?--was good for something.

"If you self-appointed gadflies are finished with your breakfasts," pronounced the young Cavalier, his cool so thick you could see the condensation, "you can come upstairs and start cleaning up my room."

"Sure," said Johnny. "For certain considerations, we'll even tell Steve not to print the film she took last night of you getting your hair dyed green."

Just barely, Tommy refrained from tearing out some of his closely cropped locks, not only to see if such a thing could be true, but to get rid of the evidence. A potentially painful process, however. The others were laughing, probably at the agonized horror on his face, and he wanted to leap up and commit the kind of mayhem that leads to two-inch headlines and tasteless photos in The National Enquirer.

"I do believe he hadn't realized it yet," said Sunshine. "It's all right, Tommy, it's really quite an attractive color."

"Green?" said Tommy, the word coming out as if it was something new in his vocabulary. "Would you like to reconsider and tell me this is a great big joke?"

Johnny, who had sat down on Tommy's left, reached up, and before he could pull away, plucked out a hair from his perfect head and let it drop on the table in front of him. "We don't know yet if in the autumn it'll turn brown and fall out," she said, laughter bubbling under her words.

Tommy stared at the hair. Normally, it would have disappeared against the light-wood grain of the table, but its bright cheerful green hue could not be ignored.

"Here, have a look," said Larry, pulling a hand mirror out of his pocket and passing it down to Tommy. "We got it very even, not splotchy at all."

Tommy took the mirror warily. His eyes hove into view, and then a horizon of green like a band of astro-turf appeared. "Oh, God," he groaned, before he could stop himself. In what must be a first occasion, he wished that he didn't have to see himself. It wasn't a pale green. It wasn't a nice subdued green. It wasn't the kind of decorous green that sits quietly in a corner and behaves itself. It was a loud, raucous green, the kind that finds itself making lots of noise on St. Patrick's Day and causing bar brawls.

They were all laughing at him. Nearby tables were intrigued, too, by the morning's free spectacle. Perfect Tommy put down the mirror and glared at Rejoice. "Was the color your idea?"

"No, I wanted it to be purple," said the Irishman.

Tommy shuddered. Maybe there were worse things than being green. He looked around at all of them. Expressions ranged from the demure and innocent to smugly wicked to outright gleeful. "You drugged me, dyed my hair Shamrock Green, had a party and trashed my room," he said, trying to swallow all of that at once. "All

right, cute, very cute. You just decided I needed a change, huh? You thought I needed a new image, right?"

"It's in honor of your flamboyance," said Sunshine.

"All of you," said Tommy, "are gonna die. Your next survival course is gonna be so tough you'll wish you'd never been born. I'm gonna send you all naked into the New Jersey swamps--yeah, you'd better believe there are swamps in New Jersey--and send in special commando reinforcements of malaria-bearing mosquitoes, poisonous snakes and stinking marsh gas. I'm gonna--"

Rejoice began a very familiar refrain. "Green, green was our Tommy's hair, and--" He was partly drowned out as Sunshine began singing a Muppets song, one of Kermit's.

"Excuse me," said a voice, a voice that was trying to stifle its laughter.

The singing stopped abruptly. It was Mrs. Johnson, who does sometimes get up during the morning hours. Despite her evident amusement at the goings-on, she tried to sound businesslike. "Tommy, I hate to interrupt you during breakfast, but a guy with the great name of Carlos Roger Chin-Fong MacKenzie just called from Manhattan. He wants to see you today."

Tommy jumped up, almost knocking over his chair. "Chin's coming here? When?"

"No, he said he can't make it out; he's got a plane to catch out of Kennedy. He can see you in the City between about 10:00 and 11:30. He'll be at the NYU Computer Center if you want to reach him."

"Holy guacamole, of course I do!" Tommy looked at his watch. There was time to make it up to the City, a good chunk of time if he hurried. "Mrs. J., do me a favor, call him and tell

him I'll meet him at NYU just as fast as I can get there."

"Without breaking any speed limits," added Mrs. Johnson. "Okay, I'll pass it on."

"Who's Carlos Roger Chin-Fong MacKenzie?" asked Rejoice. "I like the heritage implicit in his name."

"Only the best jet propulsion specialist in the world, next to me," Tommy answered, his tone scornful that anyone should not know such a thing. "We've been trying to get together for about six months now."

"You mind taking passengers into town?" asked D.J. "I'd like to pick up the British music press and some new import singles."

"Whenever possible, I put down the British music press," interjected Sunshine.

"And they've been returning the favor for years," commented Johnny with a laugh. "Too bad I've got a lab to clean. I'd like to see whether the average, notoriously blase New Yorker will react to our green-headed wonder."

"Oh, hell!" This time Tommy did briefly clutch at his hair. He glared at the assembled peanut gallery, who were all obviously enjoying his predicament.

Irresolution held him in one place for a moment, and then the appeal of going for broke won out. "I don't know why I should be your chauffeur," the no-longer blond one said to D.J., "considering I don't even like you right at the moment, but you'd better be ready, 'cause I'm leaving in five minutes."

As Tommy left the table, he was actually rather more pleased than otherwise by Rejoice's comment: "And

'asn't 'ee got bollocks then?"

Both Tommy and D.J. spent a thoroughly enjoyable morning in Manhattan --Tommy in particular. Carlos Roger Chin-Fong MacKenzie was not only knowledgeable and forthcoming but effusive with praise for the Jet Car's trials and successes. When Cavalier and intern met at their favorite ice cream and sandwich parlor near NYU, Tommy was so pleased as to actually treat D.J. to lunch. So what if it was a mere five bucks.

D.J., who was full of music news, and intent on both her ice cream and the new Cactus World News single, didn't even broach this morning's inauspicious beginnings. Tommy did.

"Good thing I changed my clothes," he commented, through a mouthful of whipped cream and almonds. "You'd be amazed at the compliments I've been getting."

D.J. blinked, but said only, "That's one of the things I've always admired about you, Tommy--your humility. Did you have to beat off the autograph hunters again?"

"Quite a few of them." They were in a window booth, Tommy situated so he could look kitty-corner across the street at one of New York's more famous music clubs, The Bottom Line. Even as Tommy spoke, a quite unnaturally burgundy-red-hued, spiky-haired lass went by and gave him the high sign.

"Actually, it's a real challenge dressing up to green hair," he continued. "There's not many people could pull it off."

"That's true," said D.J. "Aren't you glad we did it, then?"

He scowled. "Don't push your luck, D.J. But I might keep it for a couple of weeks."

SAINT PATRICK'S DAY

by Fern Marder



"What do you mean, he plays violin?" Tommy's tone couldn't have been more scathing. "We're a rock 'n roll band, not the New York Philharmonic."

Rejoice tried to be patient. He just nodded and said again, "My friend plays rock violin."

This time even Buckaroo smiled. "Just what did you have in mind for your friend and us to do?"

Rejoice could look remarkably pathetic when he was exasperated. "Play music together. Pat's going to be in New York for a few days--he's touring with his regular band. I invited him to come out and play with The Young Ones and I thought you'd

find it interesting to try out a different sound with the Cavaliers, while you had the chance."

Tommy looked thoroughly disgusted. Buckaroo, amused. Pinky, utterly disbelieving.

Reno took his feet down from the coffee table in the rec room where they were having their informal meeting. Having been drafted as PR man for the fledgling band that had cropped up as a New Wave answer to the Hong Kong Cavaliers, he was used to, well, unusual ideas coming out of the theretofore idle dance studio. But violins? "This guy's coming all the way from Ireland to play electric violin in a dance club in the City?" he asked in a rhetorical tone. "So he must be pretty good, right?" He gestured positively. "And he's gonna be here anyway. So we kill an afternoon," he concluded with a shrug.

Rejoice winced. 'Killing time' was not the kindest way to look at a novel musical and sociological experiment.

Buckaroo put a sympathetic arm around the young Irishman's shoulders. He knew what it was to have too original an idea. "We're all," he glanced meaningfully at Perfect Tommy, "looking forward to meeting your friend Patrick and hearing him play. I'm sure that once the music gets rolling

we'll all get into the spirit of the occasion."

The last thing Rejoice needed was the chorus of "I told you so's" that he got from his fellows.

The Young Ones were flaked out around the dance gym: Rejoice lay dejectedly on his back, monopolizing one of the benches next to the door. Gareth sat cross-legged on the floor, cradling his modified acoustic twelve-string, the mathematician occasionally hitting a note or two that must have made sense to him in a greater, yet-secret scheme of rhythm or melody. Blue Blaze bassist Johnny was using the spare time to stretch her legs at the barre--as long as it was there, she tended to put it to use between songs, generally showing up for practice in leotard and leg warmers, to the general appreciation of the guys in the band. Sunshine, at thirty-five the old man of the otherwise 'young' ones, sat on a swivel stool with his back resting against the old upright piano that had prompted them to invade these quarters in the first place. Larry, recently dubbed 'Yank' by the members of the otherwise non-American band, stood tapping his drumsticks on the window, which conveniently overlooked one of the ag fields where he had a tomato experiment coming up.

Rejoice looked around the room. "All right. So they laughed. We'll show them when Pat gets here."

Gareth looked up from his noodling. "So far the only one who's shown the slightest interest in the Dragon's Teeth gig at the Ritz has been D.J. She got real excited when she found out you knew those guys from when you were at Trinity."

Johnny grinned. "Yeah. She told me she's been trying to get Tommy to take her, but would probably end up hitching a ride with us." Johnny had made fast friends with the Institute's

walking music encyclopedia when they discovered a mutual interest in collecting early British punk memorabilia.

Larry turned away from the window to face them. "D.J.'s also the only who really seems to understand what the hell we're trying to do here, anyway."

"Now, now. No need to be mean," Sunshine said in his best Buckaroo Banzai tone. A Cavalier himself, Sunshine was the only one of them who had been at the Institute long enough to understand when and why the generally open-minded and adventurous Institute seniors occasionally drew back from a challenge. He had been privy to a staff meeting earlier that week and knew that the Boss and Co. had a number of other things on their minds and were going to need band time to simply cut loose, without worrying about being particularly social or innovative. "You did your bit--you let them know Pat and the guys were coming and you invited them to time-share."

"If they're not interested, that's all the more time we can spend with your friends," Gareth added, accenting his point with a hard-struck chord. "Look, I've got a psych class at 4:30--are we gonna play or not?"

Rejoice stood up and stretched. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. As he let it out, a look of peace came over him and the corners of his mouth turned up in a little smile. Nothing to settle one in the world as the prospect of music.

Larry tapped Rejoice on the head with his sticks as he crossed to his drumkit. Sunshine swung around to face his keyboard and Johnny pulled first a long sweatshirt and then her bass strap over her head.

"Two, three, four. . ."

The Dragon's Teeth had something of a reputation as musos. Each of the seven band members played three or four different instruments and the lead singer-cum-lead guitar player-cum-songwriter had an uncanny knack for arranging the perfect blend of sounds for them.

But the real attraction was Patrick O'Brennan and his violins. He had quite a collection of them, actually, ranging from simple modified acoustics--the way acoustic guitars can be rigged--to electronic wonders whose only relationship to a normal violin was the fact that they tucked under one's chin.

Just before the band had left Dublin for Philadelphia, Pat had jotted off a note to the only two people he knew in the States. The last thing either he or the band had expected was to visit the Banzai Institute. What, after all, were they to do at a think tank in New Brunswick, New Jersey for four days? Then again, they had to kill time between the New York City gig on Monday and Hartford on Thursday (Wednesday in Rochester had to be cancelled when the club in question ran afoul of the local Board of Health)?

Rejoice hadn't had the chance to write to Patrick and company and tell them about The Young Ones. He'd just sent a cable saying "Come!"

It was Sunshine who ended up meeting the bus at the gate on Monday morning, his younger cohorts all being tied up in classes and labs of one sort or another. The Dragon's Teeth party were rather startled to be greeted by the well-known Cavalier, who saw to it that they were properly settled in the smaller of the guesthouses. With each of The Young Ones sponsoring two or three Dragon's Teeth, they spared Rejoice the rigmarole of getting permission for twelve guests all at once, what with

the band and road crew. Green, Rejoice's wife, swapped her usual morning kitchen duty for a guesthouse prep stint, so the visitors had at least one familiar face to welcome them. Hugs and messages all around left Sunshine somewhat at a loss, so he busied himself with unloading suitcases from the bus.

By lunchtime, the rest of the band had gathered for the rather involved introductions, as Johnny, Gareth and Larry met Patrick, Shane, Feargal, Bryan, Cathal, Maire, and Stanley. Stanley?

"I'd never have guessed this band was Irish," chided Gareth as he digested the names.

Pat laughed. "Well, we can't all have such cosmopolitan acquaintances as our friends over here."

"It's a good thing I've got Larry," said Rejoice, "or these blokes'd have the band celebrating the Queen Mum's Birthday, or something."

Larry didn't look particularly brightened by this distinction. In fact, he looked a bit pained. "Now I've got a whole 'nother bunch who I can't understand. I have better luck in Chinatown."

A chorus of "there, theres," didn't help.

Gareth meanwhile had wandered over to the corner of the sitting room, and was glancing over the assortment of luggage, some musical, some not. He eyed an unusually shaped case and, barely waiting for Feargal's "Sure" that answered his "May I?", opened the dark brown lid to reveal an old, worn mandolin. With an appreciative sigh, he lifted the instrument out of its shelter and gently brushed his fingers over the strings, just touching them enough to make each one vibrate lightly so he could check the tuning. Delighted with the sound, he curled up on the floor, his back to a

synthesizer case against the wall, and began to play softly to himself. It was impossible to say whether he'd ever played the mandolin before or simply knew instinctively how to coax a lovely song out of its history.

He hardly noticed Maire uncover an Irish harp from an unlikely looking receptacle and begin to play along with the improvised melody. Case by case, the pile that surrounded Gareth diminished. Shane pulled out a guitar, only to hand it over to Sunshine and retrieve another for himself and one for Johnny. Patrick plucked at the strings of a white violin, adding a pizzicato counterpoint to the more mellow strums. A keyboard was suspended between two hassocks and a lamp disconnected to provide Cathal some energy. The clear bell tones of Feargal's flute floated over the top of the melody. For lack of guitar or bass, Bryan added the eerie undercurrents of an oboe. Stanley and Larry happily shared a collection of small drums, handing over sticks and woodblock to Rejoice and Green.

They played together wordlessly for perhaps fifteen minutes. Then, first very low, as though not to disturb the flow of instrumentation, then stronger as the magic of the moment overcame his hesitation, Rejoice began to sing. It began as a hum, then an 'ah.' Then there were words. He was later to swear he had no idea where they came from. Words about sharing and warmth. Words about friends. The simple melody grew to fullness as Gareth, Sunshine, Maire and Shane joined in support and harmony.

Thank God Cathal had the presence of mind to hit the 'record' and condenser mike switches on the synthesizer.

During the third or fourth repeated chorus, Rejoice raised one hand for all to see. He counted time with his index finger through to the end of the chorus and then gave the cut sign. The group actually ended the song

within five or six notes of one another. There was stunned silence for a second or two; then, the melodious aura of the room was shattered by war whoops, laughter and cries of "all riiiiiiight."

"That was incredible." "What a great line." "How'd you get that bass line out of a twelve-string?" "Can you show me that chord you used back on the middle verse?" "That was a wild syncopation—maybe a bit much for this song, but I'd love to steal it someday." "That's a lot of voice to come out of such a small body!"

When the din subsided a bit, someone realized there was a knocking at the door. Johnny went out to the hall to see who it was and promptly returned with a broadly smiling Buckaroo Banzai in tow.

"Forgive my intrusion," he began, "but I felt obliged to confess that you've been eavesdropped on. Not that that was difficult, with the windows open." Buckaroo walked over to the sitting room windows and drew back the curtains which shielded the room from the porch that ran around the front end of the guesthouse.

The assembled musicians were amazed to see, out on the patio, a whole collection of interns, Blue Blazes, Cavaliers—and the five Irish roadies who had gone in search of some food and had decided to munch outside in the sun and enjoy the music. There were perhaps two dozen of them in all, parked on the railing and steps or just leaning against the awning support posts. Shane, who was closest to the window, peered out, only to draw a loud cheer and some applause. He pulled back from the window in embarrassed surprise.

"My goodness," he said. "What's going on out there?"

Buckaroo laughed. "Word filtered back to the main house that there was a chorus of raucous angels making

heavenly music out at the guesthouse, so some of us came out to see what was happening. We were joined by the track team, who happened to be running by on practice." He paused and extended a hand toward Shane. "By the way, I'm Buckaroo Banzai. Welcome to the Institute."

Shane excitedly accepted the handshake. "Thank you. Thank you for letting us come. I'm Shane Mahoney." He quickly introduced the other visitors, who managed to trip over each other and the instruments in their eagerness to stand up and shake the hand of Dr. Buckaroo Banzai.

Buckaroo greeted Pat with particular warmth. "Rejoice has been telling us a lot about you. We're very glad you decided to visit him--and us."

"So am I," replied Pat with a grin. "But then we knew this place had to be special when Rejoice disappeared on us." He glanced over to Rejoice, who was sitting on the arm of a big stuffed chair, his arm around Green, who sat in the chair itself. Patrick had the look of someone who had just, very pleasantly, solved a puzzle.

"And what's that look to mean?" Rejoice asked, his accent definitely stronger for being around his compatriots.

"Well, the name'd been bothering me since that first letter you'd sent, you know, giving me your new address," Pat said. "But I'm beginning to see that this is a place where anyone creative can, well, rejoice."

The intern colored deeply, making his blue eyes all the more startling. "There's a good feeling here, if only you let yourself be a part of it," he said seriously. Then, brightening, he added, "Speaking of being a part of things, hadn't we better go out and introduce you to your audience?"

The sight of two scenicruisers parked at right angles to one another on the corner of 11th Street and 3rd Avenue didn't attract any attention from the neighborhood locals. The Institute party attending the gig at the Ritz grew rapidly as word had traveled that "these guys are GOOD." They were twenty-five strong, including all of the Cavaliers, even the still slightly skeptical Perfect Tommy.

The Dragon's Teeth set was uplifting and exciting. A hard rock beat belied the tones of the orchestral instruments. Electric guitars and bass throbbed as woodwinds and lighter strings wove a gossamer pattern on which the lyrics rode. Pat's violins echoed Shane's voice--the strident tones of political statement or the frolic of unicorns' magic. They brought the house down that night, playing everything from soft ballads to rousing dance numbers that had the floor shaking in time to their beat.

As the band came out for a second encore, Shane went to his microphone and said, "We'd like to dedicate this next song to some new friends who traveled in from New Jersey to be with us tonight. It's a new song we just learned, so bear with us if it's a bit on the raw side." With that, he picked up the mandolin that had sat all night on top of the piano, and began to play a delicate strain that was picked up by the others. As the music built in both speed and intensity, Shane and Maire sang Rejoice's lyrics to a slightly more structured version of the melody they'd all dabbled in that afternoon. The crowd left humming the song and wondering aloud why they'd never heard it on the radio.

On the way back to New Brunswick, members of the Dragon's Teeth crew rode on the Team Banzai bus, and vice versa. On the black and gold bus, Reno and Pecos talked excitedly with

Patrick and Maire about the possibility of not only trying violin with the Cavaliers, but harp and bells, as well. Even the walking blond mouth had to admit that it was not only possible, but desirable, to cross rock music with 'traditional' instruments. Meanwhile, on the green bus with the cartoon of Saint George in the window, D.J. huddled with Feargal and Cathal, catching up on the latest Irish bands and who was doing what, while Shane and Buckaroo earnestly discussed the Troubles in Northern Ireland. And everyone was looking forward to the Hong Kong Cavalier's open jam session, suddenly scheduled for Tuesday, after a barbecue dinner.

Friday morning came all too quickly. The many hours of music and conversation seemed all too short, especially to Rejoice and Patrick, who had had precious little time to catch up on mutual friends and the new turns in each of their lives.

"The more I see of this place, the more amazing it seems," Patrick marveled. "They've got everyone doing nineteen things at once, and yet everyone is so incredibly calm and organized."

Rejoice smiled. His feet dangled over the edge on Patrick's bed as he watched his friend pack his bag. "They encourage you to do as much as you can--no, as much as you want to do, in as many fields as you like, so long as you accomplish something. You know how they say that in New Music you can talk about any subject and use any kind of sound to make your statement? Well, this place really runs on New Expressionism--you can make your statement in any combination of sciences or arts. All they ask is that

you be willing to share your knowledge and skills with others and lend your talents to the common cause when necessary."

Patrick shook his head. "Can you just hear what the Deans at Trinity would say if they knew that their boy genius was spending half his time in physical training and playing in a rock band, instead of full-time research and teaching?" Years of friendship and pubcrawling gave Rejoice's one-time classmate the right to tease the class valedictorian.

"Hey, they didn't approve of my getting married either. Worried that I'd get home-bound and not want to go off on field studies any more." Rejoice laughed and spread his arms wide as if to say 'just look around.' "You notice how home-bound I got."

Patrick laughed with him. His own music professors had been suitably horrified to discover that their classically trained violinist was more interested in making new sounds than playing old ones. "I'm glad you wandered far enough to find this place. For myself, I'm happy to be able to wander in music. . ."

"Playing everything with as many different people as possible," Rejoice finished for him. "But I need to stretch in places I'd never be allowed to back home."

"Somehow I think Buckaroo Banzai had people like you in mind when he set up this place." Patrick snapped the suitcase lid shut. "Remember Voltaire?"

Rejoice thought a moment, then nodded. "You're right. He's right. 'All is for the best, in the best of all possible worlds.'"

Keep a Candle Burning

by Denise Tathwell

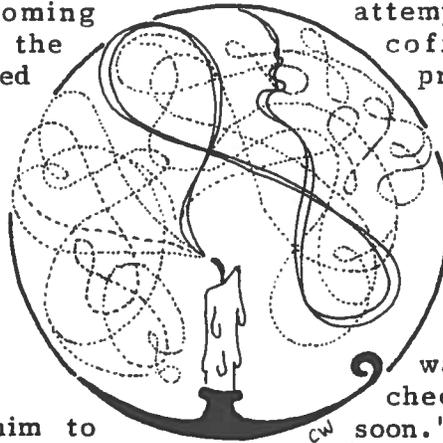
Reno was frustrated. This usually patient man was becoming increasingly impatient as the hours dragged by. He glanced at his watch for the hundredth time, painfully noting that only minutes had passed. Gone was his ability to concentrate. Pushing himself away from his desk, he started to wander the halls of the Institute.

His travels brought him to the kitchen, where Mrs. Johnson was quietly sipping her tea. Although it was almost noon, the day had just begun for the Institute's archivist.

Mrs. Johnson looked up from the paper as Reno meandered toward the coffee pot. "Morning, Reno," she said brightly.

"Morning," Reno replied with less enthusiasm. Grabbing a clean coffee cup, he began to pour the scalding liquid. Unfortunately, the coffee missed its mark, burning Reno's hand. "Damn!" he groaned as he started running cold water over the burn.

"You okay?" Mrs. Johnson asked.



"Yeah," Reno replied as he attempted once again to pour the coffee. "Guess I'm a little preoccupied this morning."

"Would it have anything to do with the return of the Calypso team?" Mrs. Johnson asked, knowing full well it did. Reno's attachment to Pecos, one of the Calypso party, was common knowledge. "Well, cheer up, Reno, she'll be home soon."

"Yeah, I know," Reno replied while pulling up a chair. "I can't help feeling like something else is going to happen. Something that will prevent them arriving safe and sound."

"Like what?"

"Don't know exactly." Reno took another sip of coffee, then deliberately changed the subject. "Has Penny called from Wyoming yet?"

Mrs. Johnson nodded. "Early this morning. Big Norse said she sounded good, sends her love. Hope she finds what she's looking for." Penny Priddy

had left the Institute for her home in Wyoming. She said it was something she felt compelled to do, and Buckaroo had hesitantly agreed. The tiny scars found behind her ears were still a mystery, but life was full of mysteries.

"By the way," Mrs. Johnson continued, "Rawhide was looking for you. Have you seen him lately?"

"Not this morning. Last night he and Buckaroo were having a 'discussion' concerning the trip up north. If Rawhide's still here, I guess Buckaroo won."

Mrs. Johnson shook her head. "Rawhide wanted to go to the Blue Blaze assembly in Boston?" Reno nodded. "My God, it's only been a couple of days since his. . .since he returned to us."

"He kept insisting he was well enough to go along and Buckaroo was just as adamant that he was not."

Reno was about to continue the conversation when he heard a commotion from the direction of the garage. He was about to investigate when Perfect Tommy walked in. "Buckaroo's cat is having kittens," he complained, "in the Jet Car!"

"Literally or figuratively?" Reno asked, trying not to laugh.

Tommy glanced back at him, annoyed. "Come on, you guys, this is serious," the youngest member of the Cavaliers stuttered, on the edge of nervousness. "Would you at least come and help me. . .uh, help me--"

"Help you do what, Tommy?" Reno prompted. "Buckaroo's cat doesn't need any help." Reno could see that his friend was at a loss for words and action. Taking pity on Perfect Tommy, he got up and moved toward the door. "Come on, let's see what we can do."

"Maybe I should have asked New Jersey," Tommy muttered as he followed Reno through the kitchen door.

Meanwhile on the other side of the world, the evil Hanoi Xan plotted his next scheme. The failure of Dr. Emilio Lizardo had sent him into fits of rage, but that was history now. Now he felt assured that his enemy, the great Buckaroo Banzai, would soon be pulled down to join his long-dead parents. It was just a matter of time.

"My Lord." Xan glanced down at the individual that groveled at his feet. "My Lord, the death dwarves have returned. What is your will?"

Xan grinned his maniacal grin, pointing a grimy finger at his servant. "Erase their memories and dispose of them as you will."

"Yes, my Lord. Success to your magnificent plan and to the destruction of Buckaroo Banzai." Lo Pep raised his eyes toward his leader. Xan motioned him to stand.

"It had better succeed, Pep, for I am holding you responsible."

Lo Pep shuddered slightly but held his ground. "All is proceeding as expected, my Lord. The Calypso team is returning to the Banzai Institute as we speak. They will serve us well. I vow my life to you and to the completion of your plan."

"Yes, I know." Xan's inch-long fingernails tapped on his throne. "The destruction of my arch-enemy--and all he treasures." Xan started to laugh as he pictured the destruction of what he hated most. The laughter grew in volume and echoed throughout the cave. The vibrations of pure evil.

The day continued at a normal pace, and soon the bus arrived carrying Pecos and the Calypso team. Reno was hesitant at first, but once he saw his friends, all anxiety seemed to melt away.

Pecos approached him quickly. Her blond hair, lightened by the sun and dried by the harsh sea wind, moved in disarray as she ran. She hugged Reno with enthusiasm, only pulling away when she spied his injured arm. "What happened to you?" she challenged.

Reno just smiled and attempted levity. "I got in the way of one of Buckaroo's swords."

"Sure you did," Pecos fired back. "Buckaroo wouldn't be that careless."

"You're right," Reno replied honestly. "Look, we'll have a lot of time for question-and-answer. Right now I just want to be near you." An unusually long pause hung in the air. "Okay?"

Pecos smiled. "Okay. Didn't mean to sound so harsh. We've all been under a lot of tension lately. Hard to believe we made it home." She looked up to see individuals welcoming the travelers back to the Institute. She had dreamt of scenes like this during the worst of her captivity, what she could remember, that is. She scanned the crowd to locate familiar faces. "Where's Buckaroo?"

"Away on business," Reno answered. "He'll be back this evening. He did want to be here, but, you know Buckaroo, duty before pleasure."

"Yeah, I know." Her expression clouded briefly to a somber, pensive mood. It lifted quickly as she looked up at Reno. "I missed everyone, but especially you, Reno." She hugged him again, more gently this time.

She brightened immediately as she spied Rawhide and a tall stranger who

followed him closely. Pecos turned to face her long-time companion. "Good to see you, Cowboy. Who's your friend?"

Rawhide tipped his hat slightly, then turned to New Jersey. "Pecos, this is our newest recruit, Dr. Sidney Zwibel."

"New Jersey to my friends," the doctor added.

"Nice to meet you, New Jersey," Pecos said warmly, shaking his hand with a firm grasp. "Welcome aboard to this eclectic society."

New Jersey smiled shyly. How could he have mistaken anyone else for Pecos? This woman, although known to him only through stories, was proving true to image. She had been described as a hard-driving, hard-pushing, brilliant member of the Hong Kong Cavaliers. A fast and true friend, or, if crossed, a formidable enemy.

Pecos eyed Rawhide more closely. "God, what happened while I was gone? Reno's arm, and you look pale as a ghost, Rawhide. Is it my imagination, or has some cosmic force descended while I was fishing?"

Without either letting on how close she was or answering her questions, Reno suggested they all move inside and start the debriefing procedure. Pecos reluctantly agreed, admitting how tired she was and anxious to get the paperwork out of the way. However, she demanded to know what had happened in her absence at the earliest opportunity. Reno agreed and, taking her hand, escorted her into the safe confines of their home.

Evening was melting into night as the stars pierced the sky. A cool breeze rustled the flowers and bushes which surrounded the back porch. A lone figure sat quietly, hunched low as if in meditation. The only hint of

identity was a cowboy hat, pushed forward to obscure the features. Occasionally the silence was disturbed by music coming from the rehearsal studio or laughter from people inside. Neither prompted this individual to move or join in on the activities. He was content to keep still and absorb the peacefulness surrounding him.

"Hey, Rawhide, nice night, huh?" Reno had emerged from the house, not expecting to find anyone, but pleased to see his friend.

Rawhide straightened, pushing his hat away from his face. His pensive mood was reflected in his expression.

"Yeah, Reno, nice," he answered quietly.

Reno approached slowly. "Listen, I'm sorry for busting in on you. If you'd like to be alone, I'll just. . ."

"No, Reno, pull up a chair and sit down. Just enjoying the sunset."

Reno obliged, sitting beside his friend. Another outburst of laughter emerged from the music studio.

"Sounds like they're having a good time," Rawhide commented as he shifted his weight, stretching out his long legs.

"Yeah. Perfect Tommy decided to have an impromptu jam session, with a musician of one. No wonder they're laughing." Reno chuckled softly.

"Tommy's a good kid," Rawhide responded, cutting Reno's laughter.

"Sure he is, just a little crazy at times."

"So are we all," Rawhide answered.

"True." Reno realized that his friend wasn't in the mood to joke. He decided to meet the situation head on.

"Listen, Rawhide, if there's something bothering you, something you'd like to get off your chest. . . maybe you'd feel better talking about it. Maybe it'll help."

Rawhide didn't answer immediately. Reno tried to gauge his expression but the encroaching night made that difficult. Finally Rawhide spoke. "Ever notice how quiet it gets at sunset?"

Reno paused, wondering what Rawhide was really trying to say. "Can't say I've given it much thought."

"I hadn't either, 'til now. We take so much for granted." Rawhide spoke softly, almost to himself.

Reno agreed but remained silent, hoping his friend would continue to talk. Buckaroo had warned everyone that this would be a tough time for Rawhide. The cowboy's resurrection from cryogenic death had left him physically healthy--but the mind was a more fragile object. Rawhide was tough as a mule, though, and would pull through.

"Well," Rawhide continued, pushing himself forward in the chair, "think I'll go find Buckaroo, discuss tomorrow's schedule."

As if on cue, Buckaroo Banzai emerged from the back door. "Speak of the devil," Reno offered.

"Hi, guys. Feel like a little music? I think Tommy could use the support." Buckaroo was himself relaxed, composed, smiling as he greeted his friends.

"Why not," Rawhide answered. "Yeah, sounds good."

"Great!" Buckaroo grinned, patting Rawhide on the shoulder.

Reno had to smile. "Let's rock 'n' roll!"

Morning broke with a spectacular sunrise. A gentle rain had cleared the air and every bird within a mile of the Institute issued in the new day. Even if one had wanted to sleep in, the sunshine pried through closed blinds and encouraged activity.

Perfect Tommy was doing his best to ignore the birds, the sunshine and the knowledge that it was time to get up. Grabbing a pillow, he covered his eyes, hoping the darkness would lull him back to sleep. That took care of the brightness, but what about those damn birds! Birds made him think about cats. Cats made him think of kittens and kittens made him think . . . MEOW. No, this couldn't be happening. Peeking around the pillow, he saw Buckaroo's cat, infant kitten in tow.

He was tempted to throw both mother and baby off the bed, but the sight was too compelling even for Perfect Tommy. Tenderly he reached forward, retrieving the protesting kitten and bringing it close. Mama cat, apparently satisfied with her baby's safety, turned and left the room, presumably to retrieve the rest of her litter. 'So much for sleeping in,' Tommy mused as he crawled out of bed.

The table was a hub of activity. Reno, Rawhide, New Jersey and Buckaroo Banzai sat eating breakfast and digesting a number of different newspapers from around the world. It was tradition for all to gather at breakfast to discuss the day's planned activities. Reno had just arrived and started with The New York Times.

A comfortable silence stretched around the table until Reno turned to page two. There in the bottom right corner was a heading that read: 'Secretary of Defense Resigns.' Reno chuckled softly. "Hey, did you see this about our friend John?"

"Which one?" New Jersey questioned between bites of Rice Krispies.

"Our former Secretary of Defense. Seems he requested an extended leave of absence," Reno answered while he poured himself a cup of coffee. "It's nice to wake up to good news once in a while." Reno glanced at Buckaroo, who wasn't sharing in the levity of the moment. His face was drawn, his expression grim.

Reno observed that Buckaroo was reading a newspaper from the Philippines. The Philippine Islands were close to Sabah, located at the northern tip of Borneo. Sabah, where his great enemy ruled. The enemy who had vowed to kill him.

Dr. Banzai cleared his throat and folded the paper shut. "It was just a matter of time before he plotted his next dastardly deed."

New Jersey reached for the paper but discovered it was written in an Indonesian language, one Sidney Zwibel had not yet mastered. "Who?" New Jersey questioned.

"Hanoi Xan," Rawhide put in. "The boss of the World Crime League."

New Jersey, who was new to Team Banzai, frowned at his own ignorance. "You mean the guy in the comic books? He's real?"

"He's real all right. We've got the scars to prove it." Rawhide shifted uncomfortably in his chair, remembering their last clash with Xan.

"What does the paper say?" New Jersey leaned forward with anticipation.

Buckaroo quoted with picture-perfect memory. "Strange lights in the sky and violent atmospheric disturbances were reported in the mountains of Sabah. No explanations were given."

"Couldn't that be an act of nature, thunder and lightning perhaps?"

Rawhide picked up the paper and paraphrased the article. "The atmospheric disturbances caused havoc with communications as far as China and the Soviet Union." He laid the paper back on the table. "I call that weird."

"I call that trouble," Reno added as he poured himself another cup of coffee.

"Perhaps," Buckaroo responded thoughtfully. "But, we have other things to talk about. Reno, how are the arrangements for next week's concert coming?"

"No problems. I've been in contact with the organizers in Los Angeles. It's still a go." Reno spoke of a benefit concert scheduled in California to raise money for the starving people in third world countries. The Hong Kong Cavaliers were among the celebrities planning to attend. It was also reported that international government figures had vowed to attend and show their interest.

"Good, then we start rehearsals this afternoon, right?"

"That's the plan. We're going to set up this morning, cook up some new stuff." Reno glanced around the table. "Where's Tommy? He's usually up by now. Guess he decided to sleep in."

"Guess again," Tommy answered as he entered the kitchen and walked toward the table. "Your cat, Buckaroo, moonlights as an alarm clock!"

"My cat, Tommy?" Buckaroo smiled. "She's adopted you."

"Yeah." Tommy reached across the table, grabbing the box of Rice Krispies in front of New Jersey. He elected to stand, balancing bowl and milk.

"You going to join us?" Buckaroo questioned.

Tommy shook his head. "This is take out," he responded between bites of cereal. "I'll meet you guys in the studio." With that he turned, breakfast in hand, and left the room.

"Guess we'd better saddle up," Rawhide said as he downed the rest of his coffee. New Jersey followed suit, leaving Reno and Buckaroo alone. The silence stretched across the table until Buckaroo spoke.

"Where's Pecos this morning?"

"I don't know. She was up before dawn. She couldn't sleep, decided to go for a walk." Reno hadn't looked up at his friend and continued to gaze into his empty coffee cup.

Buckaroo shifted in his chair. "Reno, it's none of my business, but, if you'd like to talk. . ."

Reno looked up. "She's changed, Buckaroo."

"Changed? How?"

"I don't know. I mean, she's so distant, preoccupied."

"Maybe you're not giving her a chance, Reno. She has been through an ordeal."

"I know, but we've been through worse than this. No, something's definitely wrong." Reno finished talking and looked straight at his friend.

"Would you like me to speak to her? I really haven't had an opportunity to welcome her home."

Reno nodded. "Yeah, you've known her longer than I. Maybe she'll open up to you. God knows I've tried."

"No problem," Buckaroo answered. He stood and started to clear away the breakfast dishes.

"Thanks," Reno replied, pushing himself away from the table. "Well, gotta go. See you this afternoon then."

"Right, I'll be there." Buckaroo continued with the dishes but his thoughts were a thousand miles away in the caves of Sabah. He could almost taste Xan's presence in the air around him. Something was about to happen; he could feel it. A cold chill ran down his back. The chill of death.

The mornings usually teemed with activity at the Banzai Institute, and this morning was no different. Several field experiments were in progress which included the testing of alternative food sources. Perfect Tommy's 'super melon' was still being tested in the Physics lab. Tommy was trying to create a thick-skinned watermelon that could be air-dropped into third world countries. The main problem now seemed to be how to extract the food after the melon had been dropped.*

Tommy, however, was not at the test site. He and the other Cavaliers were in the music studio, setting up for that afternoon's rehearsal. Rawhide sat at his piano, working on a new selection slated to debut at next week's concert. Reno sat away from the others, quietly cleaning his sax and secretly missing Pecos. Something was wrong, but he need not worry. Buckaroo had the gift of being able to reach those he spoke to. If anyone could get through to Pecos, B. Banzai surely would.

Buckaroo had no idea where Pecos had wandered. He had checked her room, the labs, and she was nowhere to be found.

There was one last place to be explored. He left the confines of the house and started to walk the grounds surrounding the Institute.

A subtle breeze caused the trees to sway and the sunlight to change patterns on the ground. Pecos had always enjoyed this area of the woods and it was here that he expected her to be. Buckaroo knew that people tended to seek the simple, the uncomplicated when deeply troubled.

Buckaroo's suspicions proved true, for under a tall oak stood a lone figure. Her back toward him, she gazed skyward as if asking questions of this aged monolith. Buckaroo approached but she seemed not to notice his presence. He remained silent for a few moments before breaking the spell.

"If this great oak could speak, what would it say?" Buckaroo asked as Pecos slowly turned to face her mentor. "That it has seen a hundred seasons come and go. That many other beings have rested beneath its branches. It might also tell us that our span on this planet is short, so we should grab each precious moment." Banzai continued to walk closer to Pecos, noticing her eyes were red, rimmed with tears. "A life too short to be cluttered by despair." He reached toward her arms, now crossed protectively in front of her body. "Let me help," he said quietly.

Pecos stood silently a few moments before accepting the shelter of her friend's understanding. She hugged him gently, surrendering to another's strength. Finally she spoke. "God, I missed you. The whole time we were held captive, I thought of you and the others. Death didn't frighten me as much as the thought of never seeing you again."

Buckaroo continued to hold her. "Sometimes we don't realize how fortunate we are until things are taken away. We are fortunate to have each other."

Pecos lifted her head and smiled through tears. "You're right. I don't know why I'm acting like this."

*From an idea by Rick Richter.

It's not like me, you know."

"Come on," Buckaroo answered. "Let's walk."

They started to walk with no particular destination in mind. Clusters of butterflies darted along the path as the bright sunshine warmed the air. Pecos spoke first. "Why do I feel this way, Buckaroo? So lost, and, I don't know, confused."

"I think it's only natural to be somewhat disoriented after a crisis."

"Yes, but I've been through worse spots before. I can't even remember walking out here this morning." Pecos struggled, truly disturbed by the emotions she was having. The constant pounding in the front of her head didn't help either.

"You're being too hard on yourself, Pecos. Relax and unwind for a day or so. If you're still feeling troubled then, perhaps we can do something else. You and Reno could get away for a day, if you'd like."

"Reno." She took a deep breath. "I was pretty cold with him last night. He was so--understanding."

"Reno loves you very much, Pecos. He's concerned," Buckaroo stated as they approached the back of the Institute.

"I know, and I love him too. Guess I should find him, let him know I'm all right."

"Are you? All right, I mean?" Buckaroo stopped walking and looked at her intently.

"Yes," she said with conviction. "I'm fine, better. Thanks."

A half-smile played on Buckaroo's lips. "Anytime. Listen, the guys are waiting for me at the studio. Why don't you come along? Grab your harmonica and join in."

"Sounds great! I'll meet you there." Pecos smiled as she spoke. She could see the recording studio from where they stood, music already coming from inside. It felt like home.

Suddenly, a thunderous roar ripped the air as she saw the studio flash red. Flames sprang up as fire from the explosion danced on the damaged buildings. She began to run toward the blaze but all seemed to be moving in slow motion. She saw Buckaroo running toward the studio but refused to believe this was really happening. Her friends were behind that wall of flames.

The first thing Rawhide became aware of was smoke. Thick smoke which hurt his lungs and caused his eyes to tear. Then he felt someone shake him, challenging his reality. It was Perfect Tommy. His face was streaked with black, his voice hoarse. "Rawhide, you okay?"

"Okay, Tommy." Rawhide was surprised his searing lungs allowed him to speak. "How's everybody else?"

Rawhide and Tommy moved quickly around the damaged room, locating an undamaged Billy. "Where's Reno?" Tommy asked as he frantically scanned the area.

They moved to where Reno had been sitting, away from the others, and, it appeared, closer to the explosion. They found him in a pile of rubble. Rawhide bent low and felt for a pulse. "He's alive. Go get help."

Billy left quickly but help was already on the way. As luck would have it, several interns had been close by and now were battling the flames. Soon the black smoke turned to white.

"We've got to get him out of here," Tommy declared as he began to

lift away debris from Reno's body.

"No, we don't move him unless we have to. Let's wait for Buckaroo."

"I'm here," Buckaroo answered, appearing as if by magic. He leaned down and began to examine Reno. Without looking up from his task, he spoke. "You guys okay? Anybody else hurt?"

"We're okay. Billy's gone for help," Rawhide replied.

"How is he?" Tommy asked impatiently. Seeing Reno laying so deathly still brought back memories of just a few days past. The waxen image of Rawhide still burned in his brain.

"I think he'll be okay, but we've got to get him out of here," Buckaroo replied as he noticed several others enter the open doorway. One of those individuals was New Jersey. "Sidney, good. I'm going to need your help."

Dr. Sidney Zwibel quickly moved toward the group. The two physicians moved swiftly but efficiently, stabilizing Reno before they moved him to the infirmary.

All this time Pecos stood in mute horror as she watched the scenes before her. She felt as if she was sleepwalking through someone else's nightmare. But this wasn't a dream. How could this have happened?

The corridor outside the infirmary was crowded with concerned on-lookers. Inside, Buckaroo and New Jersey still worked on the injured Reno. Rawhide sat quietly next to Pecos while Tommy paced nervously in front of them. The youngest member of the Cavaliers wasn't one who liked being left on the sidelines.

"What's taking so long?" Tommy demanded as he looked through the small windows separating the two rooms.

"Relax. Reno's in the best hands," Rawhide answered confidently, taking one of Pecos' clenched fists. "He'll be all right."

Pecos attempted to smile but was distracted when Buckaroo and New Jersey walked through the door. Immediately on her feet, she lacked the courage to speak.

Buckaroo smiled wearily. "He's okay. A nasty concussion, few broken ribs, but he'll live."

"I want to see him." Pecos moved past Rawhide to Buckaroo.

"He's unconscious, Pecos," New Jersey offered, realizing it would make little difference.

"I don't care, I want to be with him."

"All right. Jersey, would you take her in? I've got some things to do." B. Banzai was already concentrating on the next problem, his expression grim.

Pecos quickly left the group, allowing Buckaroo to speak freely. "All right. What happened?"

"Damned if we know, Buckaroo," Tommy said. "One minute we were jamming, and the next--bang!"

"Let's go outside, see if we can dig up anything," Buckaroo replied. "Tommy, go find Al and tell him to meet us at the studio. If it was a bomb and not something internal, he'll know."

Tommy moved off quickly, leaving B. Banzai and Rawhide alone. Buckaroo's long-time friend read his chief's mind. "Hanoi Xan?"

"Who else?" Buckaroo answered. "Let's go."

At the studio it was quickly ascertained that the explosion was caused by a crude incendiary device. Pieces of a homemade bomb were found, causing Buckaroo to put the Institute on alert. The clean-up procedures were well supervised, freeing Buckaroo to return to the infirmary to check on his friend.

Upon entering the medical area he observed Pecos, sitting beside Reno's bed. Her posture was a study in tension as she leaned forward, her back to the door. Silently he approached the bed and laid his hands on her shoulders.

She jumped slightly, then turned to face the intruder. "Buckaroo, you startled me."

"Sorry," Banzai replied gently. "How's he doing?"

Pecos turned her attention back to the bed. "He woke up once, smiled and asked if I was okay. Me! Can you believe it?"

Buckaroo smiled slightly. "Yeah." A moment's pause. "Are you?"

"I'm fine, now that I know Reno's okay." She straightened, rubbing her temples in hopes of easing her constant headache.

The action did not go unnoticed, and Buckaroo reached forward to restrain her hands. "Lean back a minute. Close your eyes." She complied while Buckaroo skillfully placed his fingers to key pressure points on her skull. Pecos could feel the pain ebbing and the tension leave her body. "Better?" Buckaroo asked after several minutes.

Pecos continued to relax, not opening her eyes. "Uh-huh," she whispered.

"Come on. I want you to go lie down. Reno wouldn't want you to sit here worrying," Buckaroo urged.

Pecos reached up, taking hold of her friend's hands. "You're right and I am tired." She turned her attention back to Reno. "How long will he be laid up here?"

"If I know Reno, not long enough." Buckaroo moved to stand close to the bed.

Pecos stood, stretching slightly. "He'll stay here as long as he has to, even if I have to sit on him."

Buckaroo smiled. "That I'd like to see." Pecos returned his smile, then, turning, kissed Reno gently, feeling at peace once again. Maybe things were back to normal.

The hour was late. Subtle signs of fatigue were showing in each of the individuals who sat around the table. Dinner had been simple due to the crisis and everyone's lack of appetite. The pieces of the puzzle had been well debated but a mystery still persisted. Who had planted the bomb and for what ultimate purpose?

Buckaroo leaned back in his chair and observed his friends. Perfect Tommy was reluctantly babysitting the kittens, who seemed quite content to sleep in his lap. Mrs. Johnson and New Jersey talked quietly while Rawhide cleared the table. They were all awaiting a group of new interns, one of whom had been on early security duty. He may have seen someone or might be able to shed new light on activities in the pre-dawn hours.

"Mrs. Johnson." Buckaroo leaned toward the table and poured himself a cup of tea. "Did you take Pecos some dinner?"

"Yeah, but she didn't answer when I knocked. Guess she was still sleeping," the Institute's archivist replied. "I left the tray outside her door."

"She was pretty wiped out between one thing and another. I'll check on her later." Banzai glanced up to see several young men and women enter the kitchen. He recognized each by name, remembering that they had just arrived a few days earlier. They had been out in the field all day long and looked exhausted.

"You wanted to see us, Buckaroo?" A young blond-haired lad by the name of David spoke first.

"Yes. Were any of you on duty this morning in the area of the recording studio?"

"I was," came a response toward the back of the group. The intern approached the table with slight nervousness.

"Kevin, isn't it?" Buckaroo asked, not really needing confirmation. "Did you see anyone or anything unusual this morning?"

"No," the boy answered slowly, thoughtfully, looking down as if the answer was written on the floor. "Wait a minute." He started again, this time looking straight at his leader. "I did see someone walking around the studio about 4:30. I didn't think it strange though--a lot of us were up."

"Can you describe him?" New Jersey asked, impatient for any new clues.

"Her. It was a woman. She was thin, about 5'4", blond hair. She was just walking, but didn't acknowledge me when I wished her good morning."

"Was she doing anything besides walking? Did you notice any other activity?" Buckaroo kept his voice calm despite his racing heartbeat.

"I just saw her for a few minutes. I had no idea how long she'd been there. At the time it didn't bear reporting. Perhaps I should

have." The young man dropped his stare, realizing he may have seen something important and did not react.

"No," Buckaroo replied. "You had no reason for suspicion. Thank you, Kevin, you've been a great help."

The boy nodded, turned and joined his comrades as they retreated from the kitchen.

"Well, at least we have something new to go on." New Jersey spoke first.

"Yes," Buckaroo responded slowly, looking around the table. "I think we all know who that description fits."

"Pecos wouldn't do such a thing," Mrs. Johnson challenged. "You've known her longer than all of us, Buckaroo. She isn't capable of that type of violence. Violence against her family, and Reno."

"No, I agree with you, Mrs. Johnson. She isn't capable, but perhaps she isn't responsible for her own actions. Maybe someone else is controlling her."

"What?" New Jersey asked. "You mean she's been brainwashed or something?"

"Or something," Buckaroo added softly. It all began to fit into place. The headaches, the erratic behavior. Her memory loss this morning. He stood with one quick motion. "I'm going to check on her, see if we can get to the bottom of this. Rawhide, would you come with me, please?"

Rawhide nodded, silently joining Buckaroo as they moved to the upper level of the Institute.

The dinner tray Mrs. Johnson had left still sat outside the door. Buckaroo knocked several times, with increasing urgency. "Pecos? Open the

door, please. I'd like to speak to you."

The only answer was silence, so Buckaroo tried the door. It was unlocked. Slowly, he opened the door, only to be greeted by an empty room. A single candle flickered on the windowsill, casting shadows throughout the room. It was a haunting sight.

Buckaroo and Rawhide entered, moving slowly as they neared the bed. Several items of clothing lay haphazardly across the bed along with Pecos' travel bag. It looked as if she was unpacking or perhaps packing when she left the room.

The candle flickered low in its container as it neared the end of its life. It was a tradition of the couple to leave a candle burning in the window when one of them was absent.

Rawhide caught a reflection of something bright on the bed and reached out toward it. What he saw caused a confused rush of emotions. "Why would she want to make a bomb to destroy all she loves?" he whispered.

"I don't think she's responsible," Buckaroo answered, half to himself, as he glanced around the room. There, next to a picture of Reno and Pecos, was a note. It was addressed to Reno, but Banzai felt the situation was urgent enough to breach privacy. He dialed up the lights and read aloud the note.

"My darling Reno. I cannot believe what is happening to me. I have been made to do a terrible thing against my will. I cannot remain here to endanger lives further. I feel driven to leave and cannot explain the reason. Just know that I would rather die than to hurt you, or the others.

"Why do I feel close to Peggy at this moment? Is it impending death or something else? All I know, my love,

is that I cannot go on like this. I must leave. Stay safe. Love, Pecos."

Banzai dropped his gaze from the letter and stared out into the cold blackness of night. The white smoke from the now-extinct candle danced on the windowsill like a ghost.

Rawhide's voice broke the spell. "I'll have Security comb the grounds. Where do you think she'll go?"

Buckaroo carefully folded the note, his eyes falling once again to the picture of Reno and Pecos at the bedside. "Wherever her destination, she won't be alone. This is the work of Hanoi Xan. I feel it."

"Then we've got to find her. The thought of what that madman might do to her. . ." Rawhide's mind conjured up the images of death and torture that followed the shadow of Buckaroo's great enemy. A more evil individual in this universe did not exist.

"We'll find her, all right. I just hope it isn't too late." Banzai shut off the lights and they left the darkened, silent room.

Pecos continued her steady pace down the darkened highway. The stars and a half moon were her only light, and she failed to feel the cold wind that rustled the trees. She was numb to everything around her. The persistent headache and the knowledge that she was out of control drove her forward.

Deep down inside she knew this was all wrong. When she discovered the explosive devices, she should have gone directly to Buckaroo. She knew she had rigged the explosion, yet, until now, had no recollection. It was only now that the evidence was available that a strange dream-like memory began to surface. The thought made her quicken her pace.

Behind her, the sound of a car approaching caused her stride to falter. Bright headlights illuminated the road as the car passed and made the curve. She thought little of the vehicle until she rounded the curve and noticed the car had stopped.

The auto had come to rest in the middle of the road and a black-robed figure stood by an open door. It motioned her forward, the clothing obscuring all features. Pecos knew that it was wrong to approach, yet she felt driven, compelled to enter. Her legs began to move as if being controlled by another. She climbed in the car, hearing the door slam, and darkness enveloped her body.

"Gone! What do you mean, she's gone? What happened?" Reno's agitation was certainly expected but nevertheless painful to the bearer of bad news.

Banzai sat next to Reno's sickbed, attempting to calm his friend. "We have Security combing the area and Tommy put out the alert to all Blue Blaze Irregulars. We'll find her."

Reno felt helpless, tied to his injuries and acknowledging the great danger to his fiancée. He attempted to rise only to be blocked by a wall of pain. Buckaroo didn't flinch, although he was tempted to put forward a restraining hand.

"Why would she do something like this?" Reno said thoughtfully. Buckaroo didn't reply, but Reno saw his jaw muscles tighten and knew he suspected something. "What?" he challenged. "Tell me."

"I don't have any proof, Reno, but I believe something happened aboard the Calypso. Something was done to Pecos and perhaps the others while the death dwarves held them captive."

"You mean Hanoi Xan is involved?" Reno asked, not really needing an answer.

Buckaroo nodded slowly.

Reno lay quiet a moment, letting the information wash over his body. Then, with grim determination, he attempted to rise. "I've got to find her. If Xan has her, she's as good as dead."

"Reno, you shouldn't get up." Buckaroo intercepted verbally, yet restrained any physical movement.

Reno shot back angrily, "You're not my keeper, Buckaroo!" The effort exhausted him and he had no choice but to ease back down.

"No one should be anyone's keeper, friend," Banzai responded with slow and soft words.

Reno nodded, realizing his limited capabilities. He sighed deeply. "All right. I'll stay here tonight, but I want to be kept posted."

"It's a deal." Banzai now allowed himself to reach forward, resting his hand on Reno's shoulder. "Try and get some rest."

"Yeah, sure," Reno responded in a depressed tone. Despite his resistance, his eyes felt exceedingly heavy and begged to be closed.

Buckaroo glanced down at his friend, feeling totally exhausted. He forced himself to stand, as he caught sight of New Jersey at the door. His colleague stood quietly, waiting for Buckaroo to join him.

"Well?" Banzai asked when they were outside the room. "Anything?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all, Buckaroo. They all check out fine."

"Did you use the CAT scan?" New

Jersey nodded. "And you found nothing? No foreign objects?"

"Like I said, the other members of the Calypso team are clean. At least physically."

Buckaroo rubbed his bloodshot eyes, tried to regain focus. "Then Pecos was the only target. And he has her."

New Jersey remained silent. After receiving a detailed description of Hanoi Xan from Rawhide, little could be said to ease his friend's distress.

"Come on," Buckaroo motioned. "Let's go check World Watch One, see if there's any new news. Then, I think we should all try and get some rest. I have a feeling sleep isn't going to get top priority in the next few days."

New Jersey nodded, agreeing with his friend's plan. Come to think of it, he hadn't rested much since joining Team Banzai. A decision, however, that he did not regret. He hoped his feelings would not change in the days to come.

No one slept well that night. Although the physical presence of Pecos was absent, her spirit moved in the minds of those who attempted sleep. Each Cavalier could reach back and conjure up scenes involving Hanoi Xan and his followers. It was the stuff of which nightmares were made.

The morning sunlight was almost a relief as the night's tossing and turning ended. Sleepy individuals made their way downstairs, most still in robe and slippers. Buckaroo had anticipated early risers and had fresh coffee, tea, and blueberry muffins waiting. He himself had felt the need for a morning walk and was just returning as the others sat down.

Buckaroo observed his friends as he shed his outer coat and approached the breakfast table. "Did anyone get any sleep?"

"Some," Rawhide commented, sitting down next to Perfect Tommy.

"A little," Tommy muttered, eyes still half shut.

"Well," Banzai interjected, "maybe you can take a nap on the plane."

All stopped what they were doing and turned a questioning stare at their chief.

"Where are we going?" New Jersey inquired.

"Los Angeles," Buckaroo answered as he pulled up a chair and sat down next to Rawhide. "If I'm right, and I believe I am, that's where we'll find Pecos."

"Los Angeles? Why do you think she's there?" New Jersey asked.

"I have. . .a feeling," Buckaroo said slowly, thoughtfully. "And, I know Hanoi Xan. He knows we are scheduled for that benefit concert and you know how much he wants me dead. Where better than a confusing, noisy environment surrounded with celebrities and government figures?"

"Then why walk into a trap? If you think he's going to be there, why go at all?" New Jersey was becoming frustrated.

"Because if I don't, we'll never see Pecos again. She's the key, the focal point. He knows I'll come because of her."

Mrs. Johnson, who almost never rose before noon, raised her eyes from her coffee cup and spoke. "What do you think happened to Pecos, Buckaroo? If it is Xan controlling her, how?"

"Remember Captain Happen at the seance for Peggy?" Banzai responded. All but New Jersey nodded. "Upon autopsy we found a control device that had been planted in his brain. I believe that is what happened to Pecos aboard the Calypso. She is not responsible for her actions."

"So, we go to Los Angeles and do--what?" Jersey asked.

"Look for clues. Keep our ears and eyes open, rehearse," Buckaroo answered quietly.

"What about a Blue Blaze Strike Team?" Tommy put forth, anxiously.

"No, Tommy, not yet. Not 'til we have some hard facts." Banzai smiled at his friend's eagerness for action. "I've contacted the Jet Propulsion Lab concerning the use of their communication system until World Watch One reaches the coast." He glanced around the table. "Any questions?"

"Yeah, just one." All heads turned toward the door and the individual who spoke. "When do we leave?" Reno stepped closer to the table.

"What are you doing out of bed?" Dr. Zwibel asked.

"It's morning, isn't it? I'm not one for sleeping in," Reno calmly replied as he carefully sat down. "Would someone please pass the coffee pot?"

Buckaroo reached forward, retrieving a mug and filling it with java. He placed it in front of Reno, refusing to sanction his action but not denying his liberty.

"How's your head?" Mrs. Johnson asked.

"Well, I've felt better, but it's nothing I can't live with." Reno sipped the steaming liquid. He turned to Buckaroo. "What's the plan?"

"We leave at noon. I've arranged extra storage for our gear." Buckaroo glanced around the table. "Any questions?"

No one replied until Tommy spoke. "California, here we come."

The trip west and the days leading up to the concert went smoothly, yielding no clues, however. Indeed, there was no evidence to support Buckaroo's theory that Hanoi Xan lurked somewhere in the shadows. Bands arrived one by one as the stage was set for Friday's concert.

Even though days were filled with rehearsals, there had been some time off. Perfect Tommy journeyed to Anaheim and now proudly displayed his Mickey Mouse shirt. He had been seen that morning laying down plans to build a mini Space Mountain in back of the Institute. Buckaroo kept quiet, hoping Tommy would lose interest before returning to New Jersey.

The only one not taking time off to relax was Reno. Understandable, yes, nevertheless distressing to his friends. He would awaken, go for a walk around the hotel, and return depressed. There had been no trace of the individuals they hoped to find. It was becoming frustrating. Yet, what else could be done?

Buckaroo gathered everyone into the living room off their suite. "All right," he started as soon as everyone was seated. "Is everything set for tomorrow?"

Rawhide leaned back in his chair. "We'll have all entrances and exits watched closely. The L.A. chapter of the Blue Blazes will be out in force."

Buckaroo nodded his approval, holding up his Go-Phone. "They did a little research back at the Institute and came up with something that might

help. Each of your Go-Phones has been modified to receive a certain high-frequency signal."

"Signals from the implant?" Reno asked.

Buckaroo nodded. "Professor Hikita discovered the frequencies from the device that was used on Captain Happen. It's a very specific range so there shouldn't be any false alarms." After a long pause, he asked, "Any questions?" There were none, so he continued. "One last thing. We all know what Xan is capable of. He may just want me, or, he may have plans to take a few others to kingdom come. Any details, anything that doesn't feel right, communicate with the rest of the group."

The Cavaliers nodded their understanding. "Okay, that's it. Let's all try and get a good night's sleep."

The party was about to break up when there was a knock at the door. Rawhide answered the summons, returning with a parcel which he handed to its intended owner. "Special Delivery, Buckaroo," Rawhide pronounced. "For your eyes only."

Banzai accepted the business-size envelope, opening it with one quick motion. It was devoid of any written material; however, something definitely had been sent. Buckaroo inverted the envelope, causing a small shiny object to fall into his palm. All eyes were on the mystery. Buckaroo carefully lifted the object into view. A solitary gold heart dangled at the end of a delicate chain.

No one spoke as Buckaroo glanced up from the golden charm, knowing who would claim it if she were here. He looked up to the agonized eyes of Reno.

"I gave that to Pecos last year at Christmas," Reno remarked. "You were right, Buckaroo. She is here, somewhere." With grim determination

he started toward the door. "I've got to find her!"

Banzai maintained his position but called out to his friend. "Not tonight, Reno. You won't find her tonight."

Reno turned from the door, anger accenting his words. "I'll search every corner of this city if I have to."

Buckaroo held his ground. "You've already done that without success. I promise you, we'll see Pecos tomorrow, one way or another." Reno didn't move. "Think, Reno. Xan won't let you spoil his party. Tomorrow. Tomorrow will come quickly enough."

Reno continued to stare until he realized the truth in his leader's words. Patience was becoming more difficult to cultivate as the finale approached. All he felt was numb, drained. "You're right," he said quietly. "I'm sorry for losing my temper. It's just. . ."

"Perfectly understandable, my friend. Come on, let's all hit the sack. Okay?"

All nodded reluctantly as they retreated to their individual rooms.

The day that all had been looking forward to, and dreading, arrived with a flurry of activity. The morning flew by in preparation for the evening's concert. Coordination of the largest group of Blue Blaze Irregulars, the Los Angeles chapter, flowed with the ease of expert organization. Every possible contingency was mapped out in hopes of heading off Xan's mysterious plot.

The bus arrived at the L.A. Coliseum a little before 3:00. Usually all inside the scenicruiser would be excited and anxious to display their

syncopated brand of music. This afternoon, however, each individual sat quietly, barely noticing the crowd of enthusiastic fans. They knew that they were not simply entering a Coliseum, but a coliseum set for battle.

The evening descended too quickly as the gates opened and excited fans flooded into the Coliseum. The stage, which dominated one end of the field, was a spectacular sight to behold. Bathed in blue light, a metallic peace sign hung majestically in the background. Peace, something this planet desperately needed.

The backstage area teemed with activity. The invited groups mingled with one another, splashing color and music into the environment. The Hong Kong Cavaliers participated in the camaraderie, ever aware of those around them, their Go-Phones set to receive the awaited signal.

"I'm going for a walk," Tommy said as he gently put down his guitar.

"You'll get eaten alive out there, man," Pinky Carruthers stated quickly. "You're Perfect Tommy."

Tommy nodded without conceit, just fact. "I know." He donned a pair of sunglasses and removed Rawhide's hat from his unsuspecting friend's head. "I'm undercover."

"You'll be underground if you don't give me back my hat," Rawhide drawled.

"I'm going to get a hotdog. Be right back." Tommy quickly moved to the exit before Rawhide could retrieve his property. Sometimes that kid went too far.

The undercover musician moved carefully through a sea of excited fans. Rawhide's much-too-big hat covered Tommy's platinum blond hair, giving him a feeling of security. In fact, he rather enjoyed being out and among the people.

Still bathing in the glory of secrecy, he obtained his desired snack and started back through the crowd. It was then that he saw red out of the corner of one eye, realizing quickly that it was the alert signal from his Go-Phone. He reached for the communication device, taking his attention away from the constant flow of the crowd. Realizing his mistake too late, he collided with the individual directly in front of him, spilling his food. Muttering under his breath, Tommy faced the offender, only to be taken aback. All he noticed were two piercing blue eyes and the barrel of a gun aimed directly at his chest.

"Well, where is he?" Buckaroo asked in irritation.

"He went for a hotdog," Reno answered. "It's cool, he'll be back soon. You know Tommy, never a dull moment."

"That's what I'm afraid of." Banzai picked up his guitar and began to tune his instrument.

He was distracted by the Go-Phone attached to his belt. Activating the controls, he received the message that Tommy was returning with urgent news. As if on cue, Tommy rejoined his friends.

"I've seen her!" Perfect Tommy exclaimed between rapid breaths. "Pecos is here!"

"Where?" Reno jumped to his feet and confronted his friend.

"She's gone, man. Disappeared as if by magic. Swallowed up by the crowd."

"Did she say anything to you, Tommy?" Buckaroo asked.

"Yeah. It was really weird." Tommy was out of breath and clearly agitated by the confrontation. "She

has a gun. Could have blown me away but she didn't. She just stared for a minute and said, 'Peace be with you.'

"That's it? She didn't say anything else?" Reno grabbed Tommy's arm.

"No. That's all. Then she disappeared into the crowd. I alerted Security; they're searching the area now."

"Okay," Buckaroo said as he set down his guitar. "We spread out in pairs and search the backstage area as planned. Communicate if you suspect anything, even if it's a gut feeling." Banzai was interrupted by the sound of loud music, coming from the direction of the stage. The concert had begun. "Be careful," Buckaroo implored, exchanging glances with his friends before they separated to search for their misguided companion.

The muted roar of the crowd could be heard beneath the bleachers in the backstage area. The artificial lights flickered above the cold concrete walls, giving the impression of a tomb. Reno and Buckaroo had joined forces as they scanned the area to the extreme back of the stage. Each beat of the music above drove nails into exposed nerve endings. Each blind corner promised the danger of gunfire and perhaps death.

Suddenly there was the flashing of red lights, alerting Reno and Banzai that Pecos was near. Their Go-Phones emitted a staccato red alert signal. They stood directly in front of two separate tunnels. An old line of dialogue flashed into Banzai's mind. "Two tunnels, two of us, we separate."

Reno nodded, remembering that the tunnels joined into a common passageway that led outside the Coliseum. After communicating their location and

intentions with the others, they entered the semi-lit passages. Guns at readiness, each made their way to the light at the end of the tunnel.

'Almost there,' Reno thought as he quickened his pace. The alert signal echoed and the red glow flashed off the damp walls. He could feel the hair on the back of his neck stand up as he felt a presence before him. This was the moment he had been dreading. Their moment of destiny.

Pecos stood stiffly in front of Reno, gun pointed unwavering at his heart. Her eyes were sharp, clear, but with the clarity of a person gone mad. Banzai emerged from the other tunnel and was halted by the same haunting sight.

"Pecos." Reno started forward. "It's me. Try to remember."

"Don't move," came the cold harsh answer. "I will kill you."

Reno halted, not doubting her words. Pecos' eyes darted to each of the individuals before her. A stalemate had occurred, just as Hanoi Xan had planned. Either Reno or Buckaroo could disarm Pecos but not before one had been killed.

Buckaroo very slowly reached into his pocket, retrieving the gold charm. She noticed his movements and cocked the gun.

"I have something of yours, Pecos. Something very dear." He dangled the necklace out for her to see. "Do you remember receiving it?" Buckaroo kept his words soft, almost hypnotic.

At first she didn't acknowledge his statement. Then, slowly she looked from the necklace to Reno.

"Last Christmas, in the woods. It was snowing. Remember?" Reno questioned.

"Yes," she quietly responded. The gun was still poised for action. "I remember. But it doesn't matter. Nothing matters."

"You matter to me, Pecos. Without you, life would be empty. Can't you see that?" Reno replied honestly.

Pecos blinked several times, the color draining from her face. Buckaroo noticed movement beyond her and spied a black-robed figure lurking in the shadows. Hanoi Xan!

"It's too late." She spoke again. "I've killed us all in the name of peace. I'm sorry." Reno saw her turn the gun away from him as she pointed the weapon toward her head. Instinctively Reno dove toward her as the sound of gunfire echoed through the universe.

The sound of the gun touched the ears of every member of Team Banzai as they approached the tunnel. 'Had they arrived too late?' Tommy wondered as they plunged into the semidarkness of the passageways.

Buckaroo bent in close to Reno and Pecos. His heart slammed against his chest as he ascertained their condition. Both were unharmed by the bullet that impacted on the wall close by. Pecos was unconscious, but alive.

The sound of approaching reinforcements turned Buckaroo's attention away from his friends. He knew that Xan had retreated with the sound of gunfire and was probably completing his set plan. They were still in danger.

"Oh my God!" New Jersey spoke first. "Is she dead?"

"Not yet," Banzai answered quickly. "Contact USC Medical Center and tell them we're bringing her in. They're expecting you." He spoke directly to his colleague. "You've got to remove that implant."

In that moment, New Jersey discovered just how much a member of Team Banzai he'd become. A month ago he'd have said "Me?" Instead, he replied without hesitation, "Right, Buckaroo."

Banzai disengaged himself from the huddle and stood, checking his firearm. "Reno, you stay with Jersey."

Reno stood, painfully noting that his recently damaged ribs had begun to ache again. "Where are you going, Buckaroo?"

"To prevent an explosion that could wipe out half the people in the Coliseum," Banzai answered. "Come on." He motioned the others to follow, leaving Reno and New Jersey to take care of Pecos.

The stage was charged with music and lights. The lights created brilliant patterns on the peace sign which dominated the stage. The audience roared with delight as they responded to the visuals before them.

"Peace be with you," Buckaroo heard repeatedly in his brain. The symbol of that precious word would be the death of them all if he couldn't carry out his task.

Arriving at the back of the stage, Perfect Tommy could contain his curiosity no longer. "What is it, Buckaroo?"

Buckaroo examined the controls that lead from the bottom of the peace sign. "If I'm correct, this structure is a giant explosive device planted by Hanoi Xan. We've got to disarm it."

Banzai traced the cables from the sign to a control box situated stage left. He gently opened the box to observe two wires and a flashing red light. Pull the correct wire and the bomb would disarm. Pull the wrong one and. . .

There was a huge explosion as fireworks painted the sky. Splashes of colors caused the crowd to roar with appreciation. Night was transformed briefly into day as the fireworks illuminated the sky.

The group of exhausted Cavaliers went unnoticed as they appeared from around the stage. Buckaroo glanced skyward past the fireworks to the stars. Luck had been on their side once again. At last, he allowed himself to relax and enjoy the light show which danced on high.

Pecos sat up in bed, her head still partially covered with bandages from the operation. Reno sat at her side, holding her hand and enjoying her company. The room was filled with flowers, transforming the drab hospital environment with joy. Pecos smiled warmly as she noticed her friends enter the room.

"Morning, Buckaroo," she greeted cheerfully. "Have you come to spring me from this prison?"

"You look good," Banzai replied. "How do you feel?"

"What a boring question, Buckaroo. Can't you come up with something more inventive?" Pecos had to laugh.

"Sorry," Banzai replied. "Comes with the territory."

"I feel great! Anxious to go home." Pecos suddenly became serious. "Have I thanked you all for what you did?"

"Only about a hundred times," Tommy reminded her.

"Well, here's a hundred and one-- thanks."

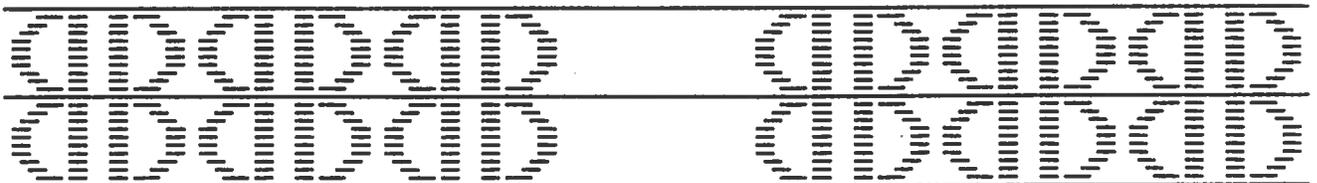
"What are friends for?" Rawhide moved closer to the bed, symbolically drawing everyone closer.

"Feel up to a little journey?" Buckaroo asked.

"As long as it's not on a ship. I've sworn off ocean voyages for a while," Pecos answered.

Banzai smiled. "No, I was thinking more of a plane ride back East. Mrs. Johnson is getting tired of taking care of Tommy's kittens."

Everyone chuckled, except Tommy of course. "Let's go home," Buckaroo said as he glanced around the bed at his friends. Xan had been temporarily defeated and Pecos was back safe and sound. Their universe was at peace once again, and anything seemed possible.



glanced at the clock and realized that the feet must belong to Rawhide. That he had risen before the sun was not unusual. Besides giving him a chance to organize the day's responsibilities and review any overnight developments, he seemed to enjoy the quiet time alone while the rest of the residence slept.

Pecos looked at the empty half of the bed, reminding herself that Reno would only be gone two days. The thought caused a vague feeling of anxiety, an almost physical discomfort. She swung her legs over the edge of the bed. With one hand gripping the headboard she slowly stood, relieved to find the action caused only a mild thumping in her head, rather than the pain she had anticipated. Hearing noise from the kitchen below, she chided herself for the unease she felt. 'This is your home,' she thought. 'And these are your friends.'

The sky was turning from gray to pink as she scuffed down the hall to the stairs. The door to Tommy's room stood open--he wasn't home yet--and although a light burned in the computer room, the second floor of the house was silent. Railing in hand, Pecos made her way down the steps past several stacks of books and magazines. Dubbed the 'library annex' by Buckaroo, the stairs provided an unfortunately convenient parcel drop between front door and kitchen or den. Now able to smell coffee, she crossed the entryway and made her way through the formal dining room to the kitchen.

Rawhide, coffee in hand, was just seating himself at the table. Looking up from a stack of papers, he nodded as she entered.

"Mornin'. How's the head?"

Yawning, she reached for a coffee cup and filled it. "Better. And you?"

"Just dandy."

Pecos opened the refrigerator door and peered in, moving things aside to see to the back. "Anything good to eat in here?"

"Nothing unusual." He sipped his coffee, turning pages.

"Whose blueberries?"

"Tommy's."

Mouthing a silent 'oh' and finding nothing else to her liking, she closed the refrigerator door. Rawhide remained silent, studying what appeared to be a letter. Her gaze wandered out the kitchen window.

Outside, the perimeter lights were shutting off in sequence. Two dark-jacketed interns, part of night security, slowly made their rounds in the grainy morning light. Pecos watched until they disappeared around the corner of the garage.

"Buckaroo up yet?"

"He's around somewhere. Probably out for a walk." He looked up at her. "Anything important?"

She shook her head and sat at the table. "Not really." She watched Rawhide read, then re-read one of his papers. "What's that you've got there?"

"Band requests. You'd think we were the most popular band in the country the way these things have been comin' in here the last few weeks."

Pecos smiled ironically and took a sip of her coffee. "As they say, isn't it great to be loved?"

She didn't expect the startled, curious look she got in response. She didn't have the chance to pursue it for, at that moment, Buckaroo Banzai entered, having indeed just returned from his morning constitutional.

"Are you two all right?"

Both Rawhide and Pecos were glad for the interruption of their awkwardness. They assured Buckaroo that there was nothing wrong, that they both felt fine this morning.

Their friend and mentor simply raised an eyebrow and went to pour himself a cup of tea. Rawhide gathered up his papers and stood up. "I'd better take these someplace useful--like the garbage dump."

"Wait. . ." It was hard to get Rawhide to stop moving once he'd set his feet to it. Pecos sighed as she watched the tall Texan leave the kitchen.

B. Banzai laid a surgeon's steady hand on Pecos' shoulder. She looked up at him. She couldn't know what her expression was, but it obviously conveyed more than she'd meant. Buckaroo set his tea down and put his arms around her, cradling her head against him.

She leaned into the comfort for a moment, shutting her eyes and giving in to a wash of emotions that she'd not even consciously been holding back. And Buckaroo was perfectly attuned to her, for he let go of her at precisely the moment she was about to draw away.

He set himself down in the chair vacated by Rawhide. As he sipped his tea and smiled at her over the cup, Pecos felt her tight-wound nerves slowly relax. "What a nice way to say good morning," she offered. "Sorry I've been so tense."

"You're still feeling the effects of everything that happened to you. And every so often it's going to catch up with you. That's perfectly reasonable."

"It may be reasonable, but it sure isn't comfortable."

"I know. And it isn't comfortable having Reno away. . ."

"Is it that obvious?" She pushed her chair back and directed an irritated gaze at Buckaroo. It was not the boss she was irritated at. "Hell. I need something to do."

Buckaroo's tea must have gotten quite cold, for he was rotating the cup gently, watching the liquid swirl and break, the wave-patterns form and reform. "You mean besides writing up the Calypso expedition."

With total irrelevancy, Pecos asked, "Have you ever considered all the social functions attached to tea and coffee? Or how they become required props for so many interactions? I suppose you must have. The Japanese have practically codified tea and its social uses."

She paused. He looked intrigued by the tangent but remained silent, waiting. "I can't write about it yet," she stated. She tried to soften her brusqueness. "It's bad enough reliving it at night. I can't yet bring myself to relive it in detail, consciously, to write it up."

B. Banzai sat still, looking right at her, and yet not at her at all. Then he reached out and put his hand over hers. "I think I know just the thing," he said. "Ask Perfect Tommy whether the Yoyodyne clean-up team could use some help."

"You mean actually go down there?"

He grinned, but for no reason that she could see. "If necessary. Why not?"

"Yeah," she said. "Why not indeed."

Rawhide headed up to the Cavaliers' common room--that haphazard collation of furniture and equipment, musical and electronic, and ever-changing array of books that served as

workroom, committee room and place to flake out.

He was surprised to hear the soft tinkling of piano keys as he neared the door. Who was up this early and playing--make that trying to play--his piano? ('His piano?' He wondered what he was getting possessive about.) He walked in softly to find New Jersey trying to master the Hong Kong Cavaliers' unofficial theme song.

"Well, howdy."

The answering crash of notes as hands dropped on keys must have awakened anyone yet trying to sleep. The tall doctor rose, almost knocking over the piano stool. "Good morning." Silence created an awkward little pause. "How're you feeling?"

"Pretty good. You?"

"I'd feel better if I could figure out why these chords change like this."

Rawhide half-smiled. Putting his papers down, he slid around behind the piano and settled himself in his usual place. It felt good to pour some of his energy into the keys.

New Jersey pulled over another chair. He leaned over, parking his elbows on his knees. For the next fifteen minutes he watched and listened intently.

Rawhide came out of his musical reverie and finished a run with a flourish. "Just like that."

"Unnh. . .I don't think so. Not for me, anyway."

Rawhide looked him over. "Do you play keyboard or synth?"

"I've never even seen a synthesizer up close. I played piano seriously as a kid, but not since." His shoulders lifted briefly. "I guess it shows."

"I'm glad you're a better surgeon than you are a piano player." Rawhide laughed his warm deep laugh. Then he looked a bit embarrassed. "Sorry. Didn't mean for that to come out like that."

It was New Jersey's turn to laugh, nervously. "That's okay. I'd have to agree with you."

Rawhide felt uncomfortable about responding to that, but the silence forced him to put words into it. Albeit awkward words. "Yeah, but if it weren't for you, I. . ."

"If it weren't for Buckaroo," New Jersey corrected hastily. "I just happened to have had the honor of assisting him. If that made any difference, I'm just glad it worked."

"Yeah." Rawhide pushed the stool back from the piano and stretched out his legs. "Me too."

New Jersey nodded at the size-fourteen shoes below the 40-inch inseam. "That's one of the reasons I gave up studying the piano. Playing basketball was a lot more comfortable."

The two large men both laughed. The sound eased the air between them a bit, but it opened another silence. The conversation was beginning to sound like some childhood piano exercise, full of gaps and wrong chords and starting-overs.

Rawhide found himself studying the medico. When New Jersey met his gaze, he said tentatively, "I guess you'll be joining Buckaroo's main medical team."

New Jersey hesitated. "Yes, but I'm not sure exactly what that means. The Jet Car and now these interplanetary doings seem to be taking up most of Buckaroo's time these days."

"Buckaroo'd like to have forty work-hours a day. He feels torn,

sometimes, between medicine and physics." Rawhide smiled wryly. "Seems to me another neurosurgeon around is just what the doctor ordered."

New Jersey looked glad and eager. Amazing, the mobile and revealing expression that man had. "If I could even take on a couple of the things he does, I figure we'd both be way ahead in the game."

"Yeah. I guess we all try to find a way to pick up for him."

New Jersey uttered a sound of protest. "You've got what--three careers? You're not just some pinch-hitter."

Rawhide almost laughed at this gesture of someone going to bat for him so fervently. "We all pinch-hit for everybody, around here."

Pecos discovered she didn't need to go to Yoyodyne, for Yoyodyne had come to the Institute. The government had abdicated all responsibility for that embarrassing display of wasted Uncle Sam-dollars and was trying to blot the Lectroid facility out of existence. Literally. Throwing down the buildings and seeding the land with salt was about the size of it, until Buckaroo had stepped in and asked for salvage rights. The government, in its typically clumsy eagerness to be helpful, responded with dump trucks. The roads from Grover's Mill to the Institute were a-roar with multi-ton vehicles bearing not frankincense and myrrh but the contents of Yoyodyne Propulsion Systems ('We Employ Equal Opportunities').

It looked like the trucks had come in the east-gate driveway, upended their loads, and took off again. Pecos found Tommy and a bevy of Blue Blazes buzzing around this freshly made topography. She approached him, marveling at his coordinated work-clothes, designed so that even the

spots and splashes of dirt looked good.

"This a garage sale, or has the Institute been zoned for a garbage dump?"

Perfect Tommy looked around and gave her a scowl. "Very funny. You try sifting through seven tons of garbage."

"That's exactly what I'm here to do."

"Right." Tommy jumped forward to a pile and caught a lava lamp just before it crashed to the ground. He held it up with a grimace, shook his head as if to say, 'why bother?' and tossed it back on a pile. It didn't break.

"No, really," said Pecos.

"Haven't you got something else to do?" asked Tommy irritably. "You've got your own ways of doing things, and they've usually got nothin' to do with mine."

"Say, Tommy," yelled a Blue Blaze. "There's food in here! A whole crate fulla wheat germ and granola bars and pearl millet. All kinds of healthy shit."

"Can't be. All Lectroids eat're Fritos and Twinkies," said another Blaze.

"Must be food for their pet cockroaches," offered yet another.

"Turn 'em over to the kitchen," said Tommy. "Now, if you find any Fritos, keep them on a side for us."

Pecos was watching the goings-on with a grin. "You should be glad to get the chance to order me around, Tommy. Doesn't happen very often."

The blond gave her a look that defied analysis. Honestly, he was getting as good at that as Buckaroo.

It made her feel uncomfortable. "No," he said. "You don't take anybody's advice or orders without an argument."

Pecos took a moment to swallow this picture of herself. "Right now I'm just looking to be a drone in the hive, Tommy. Just point me in the right direction."

He shrugged acceptance. "Will do. Welcome to Yoyodyne Surplus Stores."

The sun was sliding its egg-yolk way down the sky when Rawhide wandered out to find Tommy and crew still sorting and scavenging. It was beginning to look like a Salvation Army drop-off center, as depicted by Hieronymus Bosch and Paul Klee, working on peyote highs and hangover lows. "Hey, Tommy," called the cowboy. "How come there's no gas in the Saab?"

Tommy appeared from behind a Daliesque pile of fake-fur upholstered TV sets. A bold stripe of dirt adorned his left cheekbone. Give him dark hair, a little more make-up, he'd look just like Adam Ant. "You talkin' to me?"

"Yeah, I'm talkin' to you," Rawhide replied, matching Tommy's shade of insolence. "Who else? Who else just loves squeezin' the last coupla drops out of the tank? Or are you just too stingy to stop and fill up?"

"S'better for the car to keep the gas fresh," retorted Tommy.

"Horse manure. What do you think it is, milk or something? This time you didn't even leave enough for us to get the car to the nearest gas station."

A number of the Blue Blazes had stopped working and had drawn close to hear the altercation. The ones who kept working, which included Pecos,

continued their sorting and porting, but with visibly cocked ears. Tommy, unappreciative of this attention, got defensive. "So? We've got gas."

"That's supposed to be for the emergency generators, Tommy."

"Hey, lay off! You take a lot on yourself, you know? Why don't you go count your petty cash or something? You're good at pinching the pennies-- 'n' emptying ash trays 'n' pickin' up beer cans--well, I'm all grown up now and I don't need a mother anymore."

"Fine," said Rawhide. "Then I don't need to tell you again to keep the gas tank at least a gallon above empty. I won't tell you there's shrimp Creole and homestyle Texas chili for dinner in fifteen minutes, either."

"Hell!" Tommy expostulated. His agitation soared from Cantonese up to Szechuan. He pivoted to face his crew. "Okay, guys, stop and clean-up time. Upstairs shower is mine, understand?" And he dropped the bowling pin he'd been holding and took off for the house.

As Rawhide, bemused, watched this hasty departure, Pecos came out of the mountains to join him. "Hi," she said, brushing her hands against her jeans. "That perpetual adolescent. You never know whether to laugh at him or hit him. I've been thinking that all day."

"He been riding people hard?" His frown was part concern, part annoyance.

"This job's put him in a bad skin. Don't pay him any mind."

"Generally don't," said Rawhide laconically.

"Ironic he should jump on you about handling details," Pecos commented. "Maybe because he's been

finding out all day that he's totally incapable of dealing with the thirty-three lavalamps and the fifty-six lefthanded coffee mugs and the thirteen empty bags of Fritos versus the eleven big and six small full bags of Fritos. . .you know. The rest of us were all having a lot of fun organizing this stuff, but Tommy was just frustrated."

"You know what his room looks like."

Rawhide's remark was rhetorical; Tommy's live-in mess (except for his closet and dresser, which were impeccably maintained) was infamous. Reno had once let in three white mice, and Tommy hadn't noticed for three days. Rawhide added, "Maybe you should send him back to his cars and circuits and take over here yourself."

"Me? I've got a report to start." Pecos stopped, wondering what idiot had uttered those words. She rummaged around, discovered that her subconscious had been ticking over all day and that a mob of thoughts and feelings was marching around her head, clamoring for riot and revolution. After a day's hard labor the beast was ready to come out. How absurdly simple.

"We'd better head in for dinner," said Rawhide. "I helped season the chili myself, so you don't want to miss it." Together, they started walking leisurely back toward the house.

Pecos left off gingerly prodding

at her emotions and refocused. Hot damn, how to make a sunset extra-beautiful, a touch of air pollution and reopened eyes. "I don't know why Tommy got this job at all," she said to her friend. "You'd be much better at it."

"Like keepin' track of petty cash?" Rawhide said, his smile all crooked.

"Yeah. Who else would handle all the details if you weren't around? Tommy? Ha. Buckaroo? Reno? Me?"

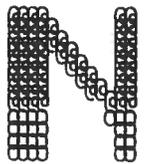
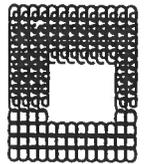
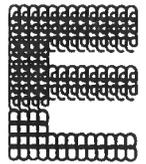
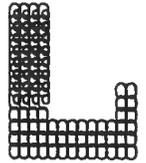
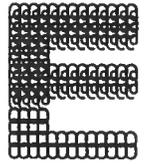
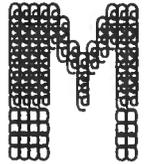
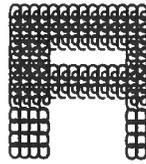
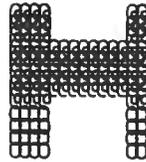
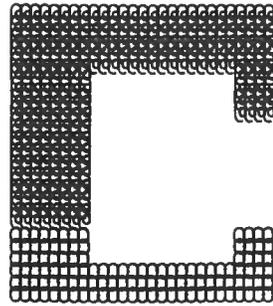
Rawhide was reminded of the chaos he'd discovered in the Institute books, the laundry, and kitchen and scientific supplies. He'd found what he'd spent the last week or so recovering his full health for. A Rawhide-sized mess. "Like you said before, isn't it nice to be loved?"

"Yeah, I think it is," said Pecos, her tone wavering between pleased surprise and amusement at the sometimes very fine line between cynicism and idealism.

"Yeah," affirmed Rawhide. "You know, we missed Yoyodyne, and look what happened." He gave a wave back in the general direction of the garbage dump. "I don't know how the team got along without us that day."

Pecos appeared much struck by this. "You've definitely got something there." They grinned at each other. They both knew they meant 'that day, or any other' but who needed to say it.

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by Carol Walske

I am Nine: I earn my right to existence in service to Hanoi Xan, His Sublimity the Pivot of Mystery, the Face that is No Face, the Herald of Peace and the New Order, lord of we who Walk in the Hidden Ways. His inexorable will and inscrutable thoughts guide me.

I dedicate this to him . To stimulate recall when I am back in the Inner Fastness, I make a few marks on the waterproof tablet I carry at my belt. I write in the Secret Tongue, decipherable only to the Select. My Lord Xan will want each step and turn, each instant of this Quest iterated for his full savoring. As do I. The fulfillment of the Enemy's death at my unworthy hands will be warm, richer than woman or wine.

Fortunate that the Enemy's laboratories require industrial water and sewage handling systems. I make my entry to the Institute through a comfortably large access tunnel. Then a vertical duct, which debouches into a spacious chamber filled with water treatment/recycling equipment that I regret not having the time to look over. I strip out of damp and evil-smelling wetsuit, unpack from its plastic sheathing and put together Armalite, then hide all traces of my arrival. Two minutes' deft work. I am ready.

The map provided me of the Institute grounds proves correct. As fleeting and silent as wind-driven shadow around buildings and over rooftop I find the way to my

target's lair. I am conscious of elation, nerves and blood and pulse all singing overlapping harmonies of anticipation, risk, danger and death. My Lord Xan will be proud and pleased and I will be heightened in his sight. But I am letting anticipation become avarice, which too easily can become bloodlust. Coolness and stealth and cunning must be my only laws until it is done.

I rest for a while at roof's edge ten feet above the Enemy's bedroom window. Though it is the Hour of Dreams, there are lights and some faint susurrations of noise and movement along the row of windows below me. I wait for a timeless interval in the hunter's crouch, thoughtfully stroking my gun and contemplating death.

How sweet to kill a man. It brings a moment of supreme power. For those few seconds the victim is mine, we two locked in an intimacy closer than man and woman. I take his soul and for an instant tremble on the brink of knowing all his thoughts and memories and emotions. Then he is gone, and I am enriched by a life.

All is now still below. I check the security of grappling hook and nylon rope, then lower myself hand over hand, soft-boots finding crevices in the brick face of the wall. The window is open to the breeze and curtains hang to the floor inside the room. I smile at this omen of simplicity and step onto the windowsill, maintaining the silence that is the god of the night.

Seconds later I am within the Enemy's space. The window rises without a protest and the curtains hide me from view. I take a moment to let sight adjust to the dimmer, softer contours of night within the lair.

Across from the window I see the Enemy's bed and a form recumbent there. I do not doubt that it is He who bears my Lord Xan's Oath of Death.

The range is too far for strict accuracy with my weapon. With utmost stealth I move along the wall framing the window, then along the wall perpendicular to the head of the bed.

He is asleep. I release safety catch and aim at his heart. Suddenly his eyes open and I look into black eyes that take my gaze down into his soul. I waste a second in startled hesitation.

"Hold it!" A voice and a body coming from behind, then almost simultaneous the dull heavy explosions of two guns. Mine is first, winging toward the Enemy.

A bullet pierces my right arm just above my elbow, throwing my shot awry. As I fire again at the Enemy and spin to face my rearward assailant, a second bullet burrows into my right hip, striking bone. I do not acknowledge it or the first one. But to my shame my hand trembles as I fire. The attacker--which my memory-voice tells me is none other than the legendary Rawhide--hurls himself into my space and wrests the gun from my malfunctioning hand. I am diminished. I draw knife to left hand and strike at him. My tiger-blows are still fast; I draw his blood and smile.

But others are crowding in on me now and I reluctantly admit my peril. I pull free of one's clutch and kick at another while brandishing knife quick-silver at the Rawhide. He gets past my guard, for which I do not excuse myself, takes advantage of superior height and weight and my--black woe to confess it--growing weakness and throws me to the floor. I elect the only possible payment left to me, plucking a deathstar from its pouch on my belt. Before I can even touch it to skin it is snatched away from me. I am pinned to the floor by many hands. I struggle, but faintness and shame seize me. As they search for and strip me of weapons and gear, the chaos of noise and motion around me begins to focus.

"Are you sure you're all right, Buckaroo?" This is the Rawhide's voice, I am sure of it, filled with love and shaken worry.

The Enemy is still alive, hatefully so. His response is calm, reassuring, warm. A shiver of despair and dishonor shakes me.

"It went right through me, Rawhide, and I can feel it's clean. Are you okay? And would you mind telling me what you're doing in my bedroom at this hour of the morning?"

"I'm fine." A trace of uneasiness. "When we got tipped off this morning that we might expect some kinda attack, I...I felt I should--"

"I know what you felt, and I'm grateful." The Enemy sounds amused. "Well, my luck's still holding, I guess. Let me--"

"You've got the luck of a litter of leprechauns!" Explosive interruption. "I've put Security on alert. Some of 'em are on their way here right now--"

"Thanks, Pecos." Rawhide. "Have 'em make sure this guy's the only intruder, would you? And--"

A different voice. "--I've summoned a med team. Doc Savage is on his way."

I can feel my consciousness slipping. I fight to keep it, fighting for scraps of information.

"Excuse me, folks, but could you give our wounded--visitor--some air? Let me through. Please."

"Buckaroo, be careful--"

"Don't worry, Kid Cody. What's done is done, and now is a different moment."

I grasp at alertness and open my eyes just as the Enemy kneels beside

me. He is pale and concerned and bears an improvised bandage over left breast. Impossible to tell how effective my efforts to injure him. I make one more violent effort to throw off the hands that hold me. I fail.

"Feisty little bastard, isn't he?" remarks someone.

"Fast, too," drawls the Rawhide.

Buckaroo Banzai lays a hand on my arm and I shudder. To my outrage, his face softens into a smile. "Relax," he says. "We mean you no harm here. You'll be all right."

BB

BB

Awakening brings pain and drug-fogged fear. I spend a long slow interval trying to rouse my mind to alertness and to bring my body's reactions under control. My attempts are mostly futile. I seesaw between pain and shame for a time. I finally find an uneasy balance, a truce between will and feeling as I acknowledge that weakness will not permit me to act.

It is more difficult to report my thought-patterns and reactions now. Shadows of failure besiege me. I am trapped, kept alive undoubtedly for questioning. I spend useless moments in self-blame and a prayer for quick death before I can reimpose control. I cannot fail. I will not. I must try again.

BB

BB

It is the Hour of Deep Sleep before the sun's rise. Getting out of bed takes longer than it should. I judge that it has been only three days since I failed my mission. I admit to my body's weakness and a slowness and confusion of mind. All the more reason to try again now, while the Enemy has no possible reason to believe that I might still be a threat.

Once standing I blank out the message of pain and inconvenience from hip and thigh, the deadness of upper right arm. It is harder to break through the barriers of lingering medication and an unnatural slowness of thought and reaction. I flex muscles, and move softly toward the window. Two stories below, one story above. I dare not try that route. I move to the door. It is not locked. I ease it open an inch and look out. I see a corridor, a door opposite. No one in sight. I pull the door open the minimum necessary and slide out between door and frame. I wait for a minute outside, listening, surveying. Lights are still on in the corridor, warm yellow ones. I step softly, favoring my right hip, down the hall toward the door marked 'Stairs.'

"Going somewhere?" draws a deep voice behind me.

Controlling my surprise at being taken unawares, I turn to see the Rawhide emerging from a doorway. He looks me over impassively. I wait for anger or hostility or punishment.

"If I were you, I wouldn't be putting weight on that hip. You'll do nothin' but hurt it."

For a moment I study him, but he is armed, and his seemingly negligent stance belies the quickness I have witnessed in him. I stay where I am, trying to see my way out.

"You looking to go any place in particular?" He ambles toward me and stops just out of my range. Not that I feel fool enough to attack him. I do not comprehend his casual, almost gentle demeanor; but I can recall without even dipping into deep memory a dozen incidents documenting his abilities as a warrior. "Come on, let's go back to your room."

Resigned, I turned back toward my prison. The Rawhide falls into step,

panther-soft, two paces behind and beside me. "Quiet, aren't you?"

Frustration goads my reply. "Why should I talk to you?"

The big man shrugs. "No reason at all. On the other hand, no reason why not."

"I have a duty to fulfill. You have no part in it; it has nothing to do with you." As we reach my room, he pushes the door open. I enter, determined to put him out of my thoughts. "You're not even alive."

His eyebrows rise. "Sure not. But as far as your duty goes--" He gestures inside the room. "Get back into bed, or the doc'll be unhappy with both of us."

I admit I hesitated, wanting him to complete his thought. The Rawhide stands just within the doorway. Despite my resolve I glance back at him inquiringly. He puts his hands on his hips, shifting into a relaxed, spread-leg stance. "Well, it's none of my business of course, but how do you justify still tryin' to kill a man who just doctored you?"

Something of my startlement must show, for he smiles grimly. "Yeah, right after you shot him. You figure it out."

BB

BB

It is late morning, and I wake from a ray of sunlight laying heat across my pillow. At some time in the night after my foray, I must have suffered a visit from nurse or doctor, for my bandages are changed and my head and mouth feel cottony with drugs.

As I turn my face from the sunshine I see Buckaroo Banzai, a cool blue shadow in a chair ten feet from my bed. I move to rise but suffer a wave of dizziness.

Buckaroo Banzai looks up from the papers in his lap. He wears a sling and has been writing with left hand with ease. He smiles at me, puts pen away in breast pocket and stands up. "Good morning."

Resentment makes me want to berate him for being alive and walking. My aim had been very poor. I remember all past failed attempts on his death and wonder briefly if he has a source of protection beyond science or reason. But I think I am just trying to rationalize my own failure. Today I am weak, looking for escape, for surcease. The pain in my head is increasing. I wish my tormentor were not here.

"How are you feeling?"

The question is perfectly solicitous and a perfect irritation. I stare at him unblinking, trying to focus my hatred. I am angered that he has the arrogance to visit me unguarded.

The Enemy stands at my bedside, just out of my reach. I think he knows that I have judged this, for he looks down on me with a strange wry smile. "I wish you could believe that I have no desire to harm you. I'd let you go if I wasn't certain that you'd just keep trying to kill me until you got yourself killed."

I say nothing. No point in confirming that one of us should already be dead. I should not have to listen to this. I try to block him out, but that proves impossible. I have no control over my mind today.

"But what a waste that would be," the halfbreed said meditatively. "Don't you feel like a--a lemming, perhaps, sometimes? Do you have no other purpose except to kill me?"

"My purpose is to serve Lord Xan."

"Why?"

"There is no 'why.' You might as well ask 'why life?'"

"Or why death?" He shifts, moving a little closer. "I can accept that you want mine, but why your own?"

I see no particular reason to answer him, except that as he grows more interested in what I have to say he might lower his defenses. "I have no right to life except as Lord Xan grants it. But death is the one prerogative I have to exercise over myself. And others."

"Not over others," he answers. "And suicide is too often a scared or sick person's alternative to coping."

There is no easy answer to that, especially to an Enemy who has foolishly pledged his life to 'saving' others. I decide to turn this to my advantage; I allow pain to come into my expression, then close eyes and shudder. It proves very easy to imitate suffering.

As he moves closer I seize my chance, or try to; I hit him in the chest, aiming for where I must have shot him, and am rewarded with a whistle of indrawn breath and slowed reaction. I propel myself off the bed, fingers of left hand held stiff for a jabbing blow, striking at his neck. But pain unfeigned seizes me, a surge of pain in my head that blazes through my body along all the lightspeed courses of the nervous system.

I cry out. This assault has come from within, not from anything the Enemy has done. I cannot reestablish control. Buckaroo Banzai takes hold of me and tries to intervene, and I am incapable of doing anything to hinder him or help myself. Sickness overwhelms me and I voluntarily seek unconsciousness. Failure claims me again; and, this time, my own body's betrayal.

BB

BB

"Wake up. Hey, wake up, mate."

I struggled, and the hands gently pressing my shoulders instantly released me. I opened my eyes and tried to bring the swirling world into focus.

"I'm sorry to wake you, but you were apparently having a nightmare." The voice was accented, British in flavor, concerned and kind.

I saw a young black woman, a nurse I guessed, and a small windowless room painted in creamy yellow. The bed beneath me was obviously a hospital bed. "Where am I?" I asked, frightened by the bandages I could feel on my arm and right hip. "Who are you?"

She had busied herself with something on a bedside table to my left. She turned to me with a wet cloth and a slight, questioning frown. "You're in the infirmary of the Banzai Institute. I'm called Blackjack."

"The Banzai Institute? What's that?" She reached for me with calm restraint when I restlessly tried to move. "What's happened to me? Where am I?"

The frown deepened. "Relax, boyo. You really don't remember?" She hesitated, then said, "You're recovering from gunshot wounds."

I stared at her. Something flickered in and out of my mind like a snake of ill omen. "How-- Why--"

Blackjack had moved to an intercom set in the wall by the door. A voice answered indistinguishably. "Marcos, could you tell Doc Savage--or Rawhide--that Blackjack wants him? In our star patient's room."

She came back toward me. She looked small, competent, and worried. "You're in New Brunswick, New Jersey. You're healing nicely. You should be starting physical therapy in a day or

two, and you'll soon be able to take showers, with assistance."

"But how did I get shot?" I couldn't remember, which scared me. I couldn't remember anything. For a moment I held an image of a dirty wet neon-lit street, a bar and a dubious deal made between half-filled glasses and a scattering of nuts, paper currency, and ashes on a bartop. Since the scene was meaningless to me, irrelevant, it fled away into the locked recesses of memory.

The door opened and the Rawhide came in. One swift glance summed up the room. "What's up?"

She said something to him in a low tone which I didn't hear. I looked at him with hostility. He seemed to have been appointed as my watchdog.

He approached the bed with his usual casual stroll. "You've got some questions?"

"I have none. You're the ones with the questions."

"He's back," said the nurse. "His voice is even different now. Rawhide, I am not going barmy, but I swear that--" A glance in my direction stopped her short. "Maybe I'll be able to explain after you hear the tape."

My irritation was mixing with puzzlement; the Rawhide simply looked mystified. Blackjack--where had I learned her name?--tipped a hand in my direction and declared, "Just before you came in, Rawhide, our patient was inquiring as to where he was and how he'd gotten himself shot. His questions, believe me, were quite sincere."

Both my enemy and I looked at her in surprise. After a moment I rejected what she had said as some new ploy in undermining my guard. But the Rawhide said thoughtfully, "I'd like

to talk to you when you go off-duty, Blackjack. Maybe sooner, if you can swing it."

BB

BB

Consciousness comes between spells of madness. What are they doing to me? It must be drugs. They pretend to treat me well--I am fed, kept clean, my injuries treated daily --treatment I have never before encountered. Hanoi Xan believes that warriors must learn to recover from wounds without aid. But the enemy is simultaneously trying to poison me with strange evil brews. It must be. They are looking for a way to split my mind open like a melon bursting out its seeds. I can fight sometimes. Now, for this brief moment of coherence--partial coherence. I fight for control, for willpower over my consciousness. But I can't even see what has happened to me these last few days. The memories are chaotic, lunatic, bright flashes of impossible thoughts and events. No waking memories, no knowledge of light or dark or food or sleep.

I feel sure they have been tampering with my memories. I see places and people with the full flavor of recollection and experience but know that I cannot have been in those places, cannot have known those people. I seem to be someone else at those times, someone with different feelings and thoughts. What are they doing to me? What are they trying to make of me?

BB

BB

"Here. Drink this."

The words and voice were infinitely soothing. I took the cup from the man and swallowed thirstily. I felt drenched in sweat.

"More?"

"No." I looked up into the man--the doctor's--eyes, which were a clear and vivid blue. "Thank you. What hospital is this? It's a hospital, isn't it? I've been hurt."

"Yes, you have. There was an accident. Do you remember?" I shook my head, and he gave a curious kind of sigh. He turned, pulled a chair forward to bedside, and sat down. Briefly he turned and made a hand sign to the nurse, who nodded and slipped out the door. I noticed for the first time that the man wore a blue sling around right arm and shoulder, the sight of which disturbed me for some reason. "I'm Dr. Banzai. What's your name?"

This became a surprisingly frightening question as I could find no answer to it. "I...don't remember...I can't think--"

"Relax. It'll come back." He paused. "What's the last thing you do remember?"

"A room of stone walls." Without even thinking I said this, then stopped. I knew it was true but there were no memories attached. Just feelings. Strong feelings exuding from the very shape and chill greyness of the ribbed stone of the wall. Like a cave, it felt. The image started to grow as I focused on it. Lights. I was falling into lights hanging from black wires twisted across the stone ceiling. Always falling, although I could feel the straps that held me down. The image brought horror and loathing that propelled me off the bed, until the pain in my right arm and Dr. Banzai's swift intervention stopped me.

I reached with left hand for the pain above my right elbow. "You'd best leave that alone," said the doctor. "It's healing well but shouldn't take that kind of applied pressure yet. What did you see?"

It took a minute before I could

bring myself to speak of it calmly. "A room. Several doctors. . .or scientists. I have an impression that they keep asking questions or keep telling me things. I can remember drugs. . .and being sick a lot." I looked up at him. "What's happened to me?"

During the silence that followed I could almost see him considering what to say. "Please tell me, Doctor--"

He spread his hands and smiled in a totally disarming fashion. "To tell the truth, I don't know much. But I'm pretty sure you've been conditioned." He looked for my reaction, but I didn't have anything to give him except a fear that I didn't want to reveal. "When you came here, your gear included food concentrates. We're still analyzing them. They contain some kind of hypnotic-hallucinogenic compound."

He was raising more blank spaces and questions than I knew how to deal with. "But where'd I come from? Who would have given me those things?"

To my surprise he leaned forward and grasped my left hand. He spoke gently, gravely. "I have an answer to that. But it will either mean nothing to you or awaken something that neither of us can cope with right now."

"I don't understand."

"It's as if you carry multiple personalities. One usually remains in charge, but sometimes just a word can trigger an entire personality transformation. For now, we'd like to avoid that. Fortunately, your conscious self--that's you--seems to be avoiding that too."

I didn't know what he was talking about. My uneasiness prevented me from asking certain obvious questions; I was sure I didn't want the answers yet, even if he had them. So many

questions. "So what do I do now? What can I do?"

Dr. Banzai smiled, somewhat sadly. "Try to remember."

BB

BB

Over the next few days Blackjack took me through physical therapy, and I began to discover what my body would and wouldn't do yet. The small, entirely too tough nurse, however, seemed pleased. "You're in quite good shape," she said at the end of one long session. "I wouldn't have let you go a whole hour otherwise."

"Thank you for the wholly undeserved kindness." I pulled on the ends of the towel hanging around my neck and swung my legs over the edge of the table. I liked Blackjack. She was bouncy and competent, and friendly during a time when all other visitors to my bedside--Doc Savage, various other medical persons--had seemed distant, even hostile, for no reason that I could tell. "Can I ask a couple more questions today?"

When she smiled her assent, I chose carefully. "How long have I been in the hospital?"

Some of her good humor seemed to fade. "Three weeks."

"But I'm still not supposed to ask how I got shot, am I?" The nurse's face instantly settled into professional impassivity. I tried to reassure her as well as myself. "Don't worry; I don't even want to ask it. Just trying to think back to that scares me. It's like there's a shadow blocking the way."

Half under her breath, she commented, "There is."

I chose to let this pass. "One more. Why are you called Blackjack?"

She gave me a unexpectedly impish

smile which lit her eyes with green. "I cheat at cards a lot. Quite compulsively. Pecos and Doc Savage won't play for money with me anymore." She sobered quickly. "I wish you had a name."

I shook my head. "I still can't remember." My lack of memories had become like a dull toothache. Ignorable, but present.

"Then we'll just have to give you one, shan't we?" She looked at me whimsically. "Cat, I think."

I couldn't help smiling. "Why 'Cat'?"

"The cat who walks alone. Very quiet, reserved. And you have nine lives--or at least five."

"What do you mean?"

"That's two more questions already." Blackjack glanced at a wall clock, which indicated some two hours past noon. "Besides, I have to get you back to your room. . .Cat. It'll have to wait."

I reached out and grasped her arm, lightly. She looked down as if surprised that I had touched her. "Please. You're just trying to put me off."

Her expression was both chagrined and amused. "And when did you turn into a bloody mindreader? And I wish you wouldn't pick up on my speech patterns that way. Come on back to your room, O Cat of no tail, and I'll see if I can't spare you a few more minutes. I do have other duties, you know."

"But none so interesting."

She sighed. "Ancient Chinese curse: 'May you live in interesting times.'"

On the way back to my room I tried to focus on the past three

weeks. . .and before. I couldn't begin to fill in the passage of time. 'Three weeks' was a meaningless phrase when all I could remember were about four days.

I paused and looked at Blackjack. "Do you have a mirror?"

Her eyebrows rose. "I can get you a hand-held one, if you like." At my nod, she sent me on to my room. A few minutes later--I could feel myself trying to pin down time so it couldn't get away from me--she reappeared.

I sat down on the edge of my bed and looked at the reflection. As I had suspected, out in the hall, the person I saw didn't agree with my self-image. Curly brown hair, dark brown eyes. . .but much too thin in the face, too old.

I put the mirror down onto the bedside table. "How old am I?"

"How old do you think you are?"

I shook my head. My mind still wouldn't touch numbers or dates. "I don't know. Younger."

She nodded matter-of-factly. "I'd say you were physically about twenty-two, twenty-three."

"I couldn't possibly be!"

The short black nurse laughed. "Do you feel as if you're verging on senility, Kitten? Lie down and let me have a look at your hip."

I submitted. "Don't call me 'Kitten.'"

"All right, Tomcat," she replied cheerfully. "Why do you feel you should be younger?"

"I don't know. It just feels like too many years."

Blackjack said nothing more while completing her examination. She was

swift and gentle, and I could assure her with perfect truth that my right hip wasn't hurting anymore. She let me sit up and herself perched on the edge of my bed, which surprised and pleased me.

"You are younger, Cat. I'd say you were about nineteen, emotionally and psychologically."

"How?"

"You've been. . .sharing time with several other people. I think what I'm talking to now may be the core personality. But you haven't held control very often over the past several years."

"Core personality?"

"Your memories have been sealed away somehow, somewhere, with medication and possibly with hypnosis. But there is a core self. It was overlaid with different memories and slightly different personae."

"But that's programming!"

My outrage was met with a firm hand pushing me back down on the bed and a response filled with compassion. "Steady down, Cat. But yes, you could say that."

"And I'm the core? I don't understand. I've got no control over all those--other people. I've got no memories."

"No, not yet. You're the, the--" Blackjack paused. "The framework. The skeleton. You're the only one who remembers the stone cave room with the doctors. Your worst memory," she said sympathetically, "your worst fear. The place where you kept losing yourself--your self--to a new personality. Does this make any sense?"

I couldn't speak. Mocking shadows--memories? people?--surged through my thoughts, scattering them. Whenever I thought about those--those

others--my grasp of myself seemed so tenuous, so frail.

"Who did this to me?"

She looked at me with a quiet gravity that I was learning to trust implicitly. "I'm not ready to answer that question just yet, Cat."

After a moment, I nodded my acceptance. "So how do I get my memories back?"

"I think they'll come back as the core personality reasserts itself more and more. You have two major problems to beware: takeover by other. . . personae, and distinguishing what memories belong to whom." After a moment she reached out to clasp my shoulder. "Cheer up, Cat. We know about the others now, especially the dark one that you're understandably scared of, but I think you've managed to squash him down into some subconscious level. Besides, he's very easy to spot." She attempted a smile, which came out somewhat rueful.

"He's a--" I didn't have any words for the disgusted loathing that rose up in me at thought of the malevolent shadow that seemed to block off all my memories. "He's a pompous, vicious little strutter. He can't be me. I won't let him out."

"Don't worry. He's apparently the one most dependent on the foul drugs that were used on you." She smiled at me reassuringly. "I like your other selves rather better. There's Jean-Michel, a rather smooth and charming Frenchman or Belgian, I'm not sure which, who seems to have an unfortunate talent for smuggling drugs and munitions. Then there's young Simon, a self-proclaimed London street punk, who has experience throughout the Mediterranean, particularly Egypt and Libya. He doesn't talk about himself. The fourth gentleman--and that's the total number we've been able to find so far--doesn't have or

won't give a name. He seems to be a smartass southern American kid."

"How did you find all of this out?"

"You've been all of them, at times," Blackjack replied. "Your body and mind both have been going through withdrawal. I've been learning how to tell your... personae apart."

I couldn't keep the anguish out of my voice. "But who am I?"

"I don't know. But we'll help you all we can to find out."

BB

BB

Being in the bathroom undoubtedly saved my life. It was late, perhaps three in the morning--a wakeful time for me, filled with remnants of disturbing dreams and all the unanswered questions.

Coming back down the hall from the bathroom, I hesitated outside my door. Something was wrong. My subconscious had picked up some distant alert--some soft sound, perhaps, or that rare premonition of personal danger. With all the care and silence I could muster, I opened the door and hit the light switch. Light flooded the room, and the figure by my bed jerked upright with a curse in a strange tongue.

The sight of the bright knife and the Asian face forced a moment of sickening, shaking dizziness. A disorientation as profound as if the room had suddenly tilted sideways grabbed me, and by the time I had mastered it, the intruder had leaped to the attack. I knew him: Li Aku, Deathdancer, assassin of Lord Xan.

The knife scored a furrow across my left forearm, outflung in desperate defense. My confusion of mind had momentarily made me slow. Anger came

to my aid, and I struck his arm away before he could smite again with the blade.

"Betrayer," he whispered, in the ancient Mongol tongue reawakened by Xan. "Eater of enemy offal, crawling, cowardly, slime-licking--"

His words were punctuated by the flashing of his knife. I pretended to take a misstep, took the blow again on left arm, and kicked him just below the right kneecap. He tried to stifle an outcry, staggered, and fell as he lost his balance on his remaining good leg. He kept hold of the knife, and was coming back to his feet as I kicked out again. The knife went flying.

A killer the likes of the Death-dancer had more than one weapon, but by the time he was rearmed I had possession of his blade. I sidestepped a flying shuriken, its glittering points no doubt curare-edged.

Li Aku held a second knife, a short brittle-looking spike of a blade. I judged it, too, to be poisoned. He had come with only the silent death-dealers, and now he was looking for a quick end.

The quick end was his. After a brief flurry of feint, strike and parry, I threw all my strength and speed into the fray and proved to him that I was the better fighter. I swept aside his attempt at a blow, and drove in close and gave his knife back to him up under the ribs. His dagger grazed past my nightshirt as he made a final effort to sell his life with meaning. I grabbed the weapon and tossed it aside, then watched death claim the man.

The sight brought a surge of turmoil that was harder to confront than had been the combat itself. It washed through me, adding to the distress of my hip and arm and striving lungs. All the doubling of thought and image that I had managed to ignore

during the fight returned renewed in force. I couldn't stand for the sudden weakness in my legs and the alienness of my body. I folded to the floor, catching myself on my hands. Then I surrendered to the dark.

BB

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Awareness returned joltingly, painfully. I emitted an incoherent sound as I felt hands quickly and without particular gentleness treating my newest injuries.

"Well, whaddya know, our schizo is back among us."

The voice and hands belonged to Kid Cody, med intern. I tried to pull away from his touch. Another voice rumbled softly. Rawhide's. "Take it easy, Kid Cody." He knelt down beside me. "You okay?"

A jumble of memories spilled over me like a cloud of choking grit. A transposition of images, of places and people. Xan. Buckaroo Banzai. Enemy, savior. Li Aku. Comrade, enemy. I struggled. "Let me up!"

"Let him go, Cody." Rawhide helped me to my feet. My wounds were relatively minor; I pushed them out of my mind. The door to my room was hooked open. A few feet from me were two more med attendants, setting up a collapsible stretcher. By them was a sheet-covered form.

Rawhide nodded at the form. "Who is he? You know him, don't you?"

I walked to the body, knelt, and threw back the sheet. Thin Asian face, sparse hair, sunken cheeks. I felt a moment of triumph that I had managed to kill the Deathdancer. Then, from another viewpoint, came a kind of horrified pity that Li Aku had died still Xan's slave. The two feelings clashed in war for a moment, and then I accepted them both as true.

I stood up. "His name is Li Aku. He was sent here by Xan. I killed him. I want to see Buckaroo Banzai."

Rawhide's gaze was thoughtful, puzzled, as it rested on me. "Sent here for what?"

"What do you think?" The numbness of my thoughts was fading rapidly. "I want to see Buckaroo Banzai."

"So you can try again?" jeered Kid Cody. "What's the matter, this guy remind you that you hadn't finished your job?"

I turned and launched myself at the mocker. He went down under me with a cry of indignant pain, then tried to fight back. He was no match for the training I had undergone in the Fortress. But then hands pulled me off him, Rawhide and a med attendant. Kid Cody regained his feet, looking both sulky and abashed.

I tried to throw off Rawhide's grasp. "Goddamnit, I want to see Dr. Banzai! Let me go!"

"You're seeing him. Gentlemen, I think brawling in the hospital is a little unseemly. Particularly at this young hour of the morning."

Kid Cody jumped as if he'd been goosed, then colored guiltily. Even Rawhide seemed to tense for a split second. Then he let go of me and smiled as if we'd just been having a pleasant conversation. "Morning, Buckaroo. Sorry you got disturbed."

Entering the room was Buckaroo Banzai himself, flanked by Reno. His brows knit together at the sight ahead of him. "Reno woke me up out of a sound sleep to see if I was all right."

"Aw, boss--" said the short swarthy man who had followed Dr. Banzai into the room.

"No, Reno, I'm glad you did." Buckaroo Banzai glanced at the stretcher, then at me. His tone was mild. "What happened?"

I went forward to the doctor. Reno was obviously only too ready to keep me away from his friend and leader, but Buckaroo Banzai stood his ground, regarding me with a compassionate, quizzical expression.

I raised one hand, then realized I didn't have the right to touch him. "I want to apologize." His eyebrows rose at my declaration. "You saved my life and allowed me to keep it after I had tried to kill you. I'm sorry I did. I'm glad I failed."

His grin blossomed. Reno looked startled, and Rawhide revealed a slow smile of respect that warmed me. "So am I," Buckaroo admitted ruefully. His gaze focused on the fresh traces of injuries. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." I glanced over at the stretcher again. "I killed him." It was hard to say that. "He was Li Aku, assassin, much higher in the hierarchy than I was in the Fortress of Xan. He came here to dispose of me and try to complete the quest. Obviously Xan now counts me an enemy."

"How many guys did he send this time?" put in Kid Cody. "Now that he's got two of you to get rid of."

"I'm sure the house is clean," interjected Reno, looking shamefaced. "But then I swore nobody could get in, not after last time--" He stopped, with a dubious glance from me to Buckaroo Banzai.

"Your security systems are a joke," I said. "You make the mistakes of sticking to a routine and trusting to the basic worth of human nature."

"What the hell do you know about it?"

"He got in," said Rawhide, a savor of amusement in his voice.

"I can help you make your security better," I said. I fixed all my attention on Buckaroo Banzai. It was abruptly, overwhelmingly inconceivable that I had ever tried to kill him. "I want to do something in return for all your . . . gifts."

Buckaroo extended his hand, which after a moment's hesitation and gratitude, I took. "Welcome," he said. "I think you have a name now?"

My pleasure faded. "At the Fortress I was Nine," I replied. "And here Blackjack calls me Cat."

"No other name?" he asked.

"No." I shook my head, but felt a certain measure of hope. "Not yet."

BB

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"I like it," said Blackjack, circling me. "I really do."

I eyed myself in the mirror. Blackjack, who had been more than kind, had dug up some odd clothing for me, which included a black Team Banzai T-shirt which I alternately was delighted by or ashamed that I didn't have the right to wear. She had also --at my pleading--given me a haircut.

"You'll fit right in now, Cat," she commented. "I think we made a good job of it."

I studied the reflection. Dark curly hair, black T-shirt, blue jeans --an ordinary young American. Apparently. "You made a good job of me." I turned, took Blackjack by the shoulders, and kissed her full on the mouth. She reacted in surprise for the moment, then responded cheerfully. I let her go and offered, "Thank you."

Her expression was startled, a little amused. "You're very welcome."

She paused. "You know the way to your new room, Cat?"

"I think so." I had been given a clean bill of health by Buckaroo Banzai himself and had been invited to move into an intern's cubicle. He had put it in such a nice way that I didn't feel ashamed of accepting--for a while. We had both sidestepped the whole question of my future. It was still too much tied up in my past.

"I'd come with you myself if I hadn't a lab to finish by four o'clock," said Blackjack.

"I'll miss you, Blackjack."

This time she was the one to reach out and hug me--compassionately, comfortingly. "And where do you think you're going so far away?"

"It's just that. . .well, I don't know anyone. I don't belong here."

The nurse looked at me in mild rebuke. "No one will shut you out here, Cat. Only you can shut yourself out from everyone else."

BB

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My appearance into the daily life of the Institute passed mostly unremarked, which surprised and disappointed me a little. I was accepted. No one went out of his way to seek friendship, but neither did anyone avoid me. There was a sink-or-swim, casual way of life to the Banzai Institute that fascinated and lured me. I read all the background on the Institute that I could find and tried to make headway through some of the technical abstracts published by its researchers.

It wasn't easy being both 'Cat' and 'Nine.' There were days when their peace became an uneasy truce which trickled into open conflict. Nine was a primitive person who lived on the darker passions. He was also

an unthinking, dutiful, arrogant bastard. He was part of me--I accepted that--but I didn't like him, didn't feel comfortable knowing that I had been so easily shaped into a killer. There were times I fought integration as strongly as he seemed to.

Nine had memories. Cat still didn't. Just flashes which seemed more like dreams. I was given first a journal and then a portable computer was set up in my room--a computer which, after a brief orientation from an electronics wizard by the name of Eight-bit, I realized I knew how to use. It came to me that the 'Simon' in my past knew about devices of all kinds and that I could share his skills if not all his memories yet.

I started putting down everything I knew, concentrating on the Fortress and what I knew of Xan's operations. This was painful but rewarding. Rewarding because it locked down missing time, locked down facts which I could give to Buckaroo as attempts at payment. He didn't see them that way, but I did.

I also had the hope that, by assaulting it with data, I could back my ignorance into a corner and take it apart bit by bit. Blackjack, who I discovered had experience in psychotherapy--which figured--was working with me, trying to help me bring out the others and integrate them. It was slow work. After about a week out of the hospital, I had a feeling that I was a sort of Institute project that--in particular--Buckaroo Banzai, Blackjack, and Rawhide were eager to help solve. I was only too glad of their interest and support.

BB

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The card game had started off with Blackjack promising not to cheat, but this proved to be too mundane. So we switched over to a free-for-all gin game with fake money borrowed from

some old board game, and everyone agreed to cheat as much as possible, but without getting caught in the act.

'Everyone' was me, Blackjack, Rawhide and Kid Cody. Cody was turning into a friend. A few days after Li Aku's intrusion, he had come to apologize. I had the suspicion that Rawhide or someone had given him a set-down, but whatever the cause, he was awkward and sincere. He also was flatteringly interested in my fighting skills, so we worked out in the gym occasionally, during odd hours.

Blackjack was given the first deal. She approached the deck with all the solemnity and reverence of a croupier in a casino, and proceeded to show off what she could do with the mere act of shuffling. Like a magician doing sleight-of-hand tricks, she rapidly and with easy dexterity flashed aces at us, cut and re-cut showing the same card each time, and, finally, shuffled the deck one-handed. She won that game within a few draws.

"Pity this isn't real money," she said as she raked in the kitty. Minimum bet ten thousand per hand. "I could set up my own casino. Who needs Las Vegas or--God forbid--Atlantic City?"

"The Mafia'd shut you down right fast," said Rawhide, sipping a beer.

"Oh, I figured on staffing my security with Blue Blazes and you guys. Or maybe I'd set it up so crooked that the house never won. The Mafia wouldn't be interested in a casino that didn't net its usual 300 percent profit."

"Naw, they'd just wait outside the door and fleece the patrons," said Cody. "Maybe we could have the IRS lurking right nearby to turn right around and fleece them."

Blackjack looked up at the ceiling. "Oh, Robin Hood, where are we when we need you?"

"We'll take them on some day," said Cody.

When my turn came to deal I realized with a flare of excited surprise that I knew at least as much about the fine art of cheating as did Blackjack. Without deigning to show off, I set up the game the way I wanted it and ginned after two discards.

Blackjack eyed me speculatively as she pushed forty thousand dollars over to my side of the table. "Lucky, aren't you?"

"Évidemment," I answered. Noticing the almost-empty wine bottle, I tapped my glass questioningly. "Il n'y a plus de vin?"

"Not for you," said Blackjack, and deftly moved away my glass. "Ce n'est pas poli parler à langue étrangère chez les copains, Jean-Michel."

I gave her an ironic deference. "Return my wine, gamine, and I will speak as much English as you like."

The other two were staring at me, which I found rude. As both Kid Cody and Blackjack started to speak at once, the opening of the door distracted all of us.

Buckaroo and Peggy Simpson walked in arm-in-arm. They had obviously been out for the evening, probably to Manhattan. Buckaroo was debonair in a tuxedo and Peggy was elegant and alluring in a black silk dress. I rose, which neither of the other two was gentlemanly enough to do. Buckaroo's fiancée gave me a questioning look and a hesitant smile.

"What are you guys still doing up?" Buckaroo said as they approached us. We had set up a card table in the lounge nearest the main kitchen. He eyed the remains of our repast. "Did you leave anything edible in the fridge?"

"There's tuna fish," said Rawhide.

It came to me with an irresistible force why Buckaroo Banzai looked so familiar tonight. I had always prided myself on my memory of faces. "Je vous ai rencontré à Monte Carlo," I interrupted, then recalled my manners. "Excusez-moi--excuse me. I saw you at a baccarat table in Monte Carlo. You were winning." I gave Peggy a nod. "You were wearing red and white that evening, mademoiselle. A bit brash."

Now they were all looking at me oddly. After a moment, Dr. Banzai asked, "When was this?"

"Springtime, May, I believe. 1978, perhaps."

"Last year," murmured Buckaroo.

"The conference on particle accelerators that was really just an excuse for people to take a vacation in Monte Carlo," said Peggy.

"Do you recall why you were there?" Buckaroo asked me, pleasantly.

"A bit of business, Monsieur, a bit of pleasure. I always try to mix the two." I recalled further what my business had been with regard to him. Something made me speak it aloud before I could stop myself. "I photographed the contents of your briefcase that night." As soon as it was out, I looked around, bewildered, wondering at the strange way I was acting and talking. "What am I saying?"

"Holy shit," breathed Kid Cody. "Listen to--look at the change!"

"You were saying that you photographed the contents of my briefcase," repeated Buckaroo calmly. His gaze held me. "Can you tell me more?"

I could. Amazingly, I could. As

the smooth and supercilious Jean-Michel streamed into my consciousness, I held onto the single memory, focusing on the tangible facts to maintain my bearings. "I let myself into your hotel room while you were out and got into your briefcase," I said. I could feel my face turning red at saying this in front of all these people. "I didn't take anything. I don't even remember what was in it. Xan sent me." I realized the ramifications of what I was divulging. "Oh, hell. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Buckaroo."

Buckaroo opened his mouth, apparently thought better of it, and closed it again. Blackjack intervened. "Cat, do you know what happened before? I mean, it was obviously Jean-Michel, yet he was reacting as if he knew us all."

"Yeah, I..." I wasn't sure how to explain. "He came out but I was still there, kind of. He knew whatever I knew. It was weird."

"And do you now know what he knows?"

"Uh, yeah. Yes, I do."

"You're blushing again," said Blackjack, provokingly. I scowled at her, but all she did was grin affectionately.

"Are you all right?" asked Buckaroo. "Any disorientation?"

"No, I'm okay." I looked at him and felt a wash of guilt all over again. "I think so, anyway."

"And then there were three," murmured Rawhide.

I stared at him, rocked by the succinct statement. "Integration." I leaned back, oblivious to the others for minutes while my mind explored a whole new vista of experience and feeling. For the moment I didn't know what age I was or what I was or where I had been, but then it all simply

fell into place like a jigsaw puzzle.

"I should have recognized you," said Peggy. She sounded chagrined. "You got me a glass of champagne. Taittinger. Some of the best I've ever tasted."

"Jean-Michel is worlds apart from Cat," said Blackjack. "Appearance, age, movement, behavior, mode of speech, the works. I'd be surprised if you had recognized him. Our chameleon is very good at changing his spots."

"We just saw that," said Kid Cody. "I still don't believe what I saw, and I sure don't believe the French accent! What a con artist."

I was starting to feel embarrassed again. "Tu peux te foutre."

Buckaroo laughed, and so did Blackjack. "Jean-Michel!" exclaimed Peggy, clearly pretending to be shocked. "That's not polite."

"Am I supposed to take a good guess at what you just told me to do?" Cody asked, sourly.

I stood up, and made a little bow to Peggy, then to Blackjack. "My apologies, mes belles. Some of me is not quite as cultured as he--they--excuse my pronouns--should be." I shot a glance at Kid Cody. "Regrettably, that applies also to some unmentionable persons at this table."

"Cat, your accents are starting to all mix together," teased Blackjack.

"One more and you'll have a whole bridge team," said Rawhide.

"Must be a bit crowded in your bed at night," said Peggy impishly. Buckaroo gave her a wondering, amused glance, and she sidled up closer to him and slipped her arm around his waist.

I looked at them, all five of them, an unaccustomed emotion welling up in my throat, filling me with gladness. "You guys are wonderful. What'd I do to deserve this break?"

"The Banzai Home for Stray Cats," said Buckaroo, laughing. Peggy and Rawhide groaned. His grin and warm gaze rested on me for a moment, and I felt moved beyond words. "Say, folks, I'm still starving. If you'll give me and Peggy about two minutes to change, I propose we adjourn to one of the all-nighters around here for some food, drink...and good company."

We all readily agreed. Buckaroo and Peggy went away, and we started cleaning up the table. I relaxed, opening myself up to a whole vista of memories that ranged all over Europe and encompassed all sorts of different skills. Jean-Michel was much more of a person than Nine, certainly a superficially more agreeable person. It was working. The pieces were coming together. It was all just a matter of time and patience.

BB

BB

"Is Cat somewhere in here?"

I was vaguely aware of my name being raised, but the question was answered by someone else in the shop before I could respond. "You might try looking over in the far right corner, Boss, under the spare generator."

I scrambled out when I heard the word 'Boss' and grabbed a rag. Sam gave me a quizzical grin and kept on working.

"What are you doing back here?"

Though Buckaroo's tone was interested, even amused, I suddenly felt as if I'd been intruding where I shouldn't. I turned my attention to removing some of the dirt from under my fingernails. "Just looking."

"He's a pretty darn good looker," interjected Sam. "He found the problem in ten minutes."

"I was just trying to help," I said. "I like machinery."

"And electronics," commented Buckaroo. "Eight-bit mentioned the way you helped rig the phone system into the mainframe. He wanted to thank you. So do I."

I relaxed at that. "I'm trying to explore what I know by doing," I confessed. "So far I haven't blown anything up."

Unexpectedly, he grinned. "That's a pretty good description for how this place runs sometimes. You mind coming by my office when you have a chance?"

I looked down at Sam, who nodded agreeably. I liked Sam--there wasn't anything he didn't know about mechanics and inventive solutions. "Just give me a few minutes to wash up."

Buckaroo waited while I cleaned up. It worried me a little that he'd come himself to summon me to his office. On the way there, though, all he wanted to talk about was the tardiness of the next ice age and how to foresee its onset. I had learned in my relatively few encounters with Buckaroo Banzai that he was fascinated by everything and anything, and he shared his inquisitiveness with an enthusiasm that was contagious.

Once in his office, Buckaroo picked an envelope off a cluttered desk and handed it to me. I was relieved when he didn't enforce formality by going behind his desk to sit down; instead, he perched on the windowsill in the sunlight, after moving aside a stack of journals.

I sat down on the couch and spread out the contents of the envelope. It held a motley collection of telexes, grey microfiche copies, faxes

and a whole sheaf of paper marked 'CONFIDENTIAL COPY--DESTROY SOONEST.'

I glanced up at Buckaroo. "Records from Interpol, the Surete, New Scotland Yard, and the CIA," he said succinctly. "Go ahead, read them."

There were two arrest records, several 'wanted' listings, and various pieces of personal dossiers. It didn't take me many seconds to realize that they all pertained to me.

"Arrested for opium processing and smuggling in Turkey," Buckaroo commented, meditatively. "Nasty prisons they have there. Arrested in Cairo for theft and sabotage of military communications equipment. Equally nasty prisons. Abbreviated terms in both cases, probably by intervention of Xan's network."

He didn't sound accusing, angry, or even repulsed. Just mildly intrigued. I was horrified. "I don't remember any of that," I protested. I had found a paper from the French Surete, in French and then translated on a separate page into English. I didn't stop to appreciate the fact that I could now read both language versions with equal ease. I held this up.

"It says here that I'm still wanted on a murder charge in Marseilles." I paused, and the memory slowly took shape in my conscious. It was Jean-Michel's. I felt compelled to share it out loud. "I remember the situation, but only in pieces. I don't remember the event--the supposed crime--at all, only the questioning by the French police and my escape from custody." I looked at Buckaroo with a frown. "It's as if parts of my memory were cut out afterward! Is that possible?"

He nodded. "Xan has obviously developed a method of compartmentalizing memories. He seemingly didn't want to give you knowledge of your 'mishaps.' Maybe he felt it would

take the edge off your capabilities."

"I'm tired of hearing what Xan did or didn't do to my brain! Why me? Why did he have to change me so much, why did he have to bury my memories?" I stopped abruptly as my mind suggested an answer, then continued, with an attempt at calm, "The more different people I was, the harder it'd be for police and so forth to trace me or prove things."

Buckaroo nodded. "Xan would also find it easier working with a . . . 'fresh slate.' You'll notice that Interpol alone suspects one assumed identity. No one put it together that this might all be background on one and the same person."

I leafed through some more notes. "How can this all be true?" It was really a rhetorical question, an irrational wish to make it all go away.

"Some of it is clearly speculation," he pointed out, "and other parts are suspicion not evidence."

I looked up at him, astonished by his kindness. "You don't need to soften it," I said, with more bitterness than I meant to show. "If even a quarter of this is true I'm a felon and a murderer and who knows what else besides."

"Xan created that felon," Buckaroo corrected, gently.

"But I still did the deeds!" I went back and found the 'wanted.' "I'm supposed to go stand trial!"

Buckaroo asked sharply, "Would you?"

For the moment I stared at him. "Of course not!" Then I added hastily, "I mean--I don't want to. I would if you wanted me to."

It was his turn to respond with startled silence. Then, quietly: "I'm not your master."

I let that statement lie. "Well, I'd rather not go stand trial for something I don't even remember doing."

"Mental disturbance is considered a perfectly valid plea," he remarked.

"Innocence through insanity? I don't know if I believe in that."

"Think about it," Buckaroo suggested: "At your leisure." He must have noticed my sudden change of expression, for he said quickly, "What's wrong?"

There was no way but to ask it baldly. "Are you going to turn me in?"

"No."

"Why not?"

His mouth twitched. "Do you want me to? I don't consider you a criminal. You might also say I don't believe in prisons."

"But do you want me to leave?"

Buckaroo looked startled, then honestly dismayed. "Leave the Institute? Why?"

I was having as hard a time expressing my point of view as he was in following it. "Well. . .you know, harboring a criminal and all that. Why'd you dig up all this stuff on me?"

"To give you a frame of reference for your recollections."

I hadn't expected so reasonable an answer. "Oh." I had to ask. "No other reason?"

He became intent and very quiet. "Cat, your background doesn't matter here. I know you look at me, still feeling guilt for the way in which we met, and believe that it couldn't possibly be so seemingly easy to

escape atonement. Like most people, but perhaps more because of Xan, you come from a system that operates by conformity and punishment. Here, we do our best not to. Misdeeds are most often just mistakes. We don't hold people accountable for past mistakes. We try to help people grow, improve--in their own self-image, of course." Buckaroo stopped and smiled warmly. "Would you like to stay here?"

The magnitude of that question coming on top of such a succinct and perilous philosophy was more than I could immediately handle. I found myself floundering. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"I don't belong here. I'm not any kind of scientist or researcher."

"What do you think you are, Cat?"

I had to look down. "I don't know. But I know some of the things I've been, and I don't like any of them."

"What do you want to be?"

He was gazing at me in all seriousness. I put off giving him an answer for a moment or two, but the extra time didn't help any. I finally shook my head. "I want to be whole. Then I can start to go forward."

"Do both," said Buckaroo. "Stay here. We want to help, if we can. Judging by some of what I've heard already, you seem to have a lot of different talents. Find out about them, the way you have with Sam and Eight-bit. You'll find people exploring most every field in some way here, and most of them are glad of assistance or inquiry."

He was giving me too much. I couldn't accept it. After a moment, haltingly, I said so. Then, bluntly because I knew no other way, "I haven't done anything for you, or for the Institute. I haven't earned your

offer." Something in his expression, almost distress, made me add, "I would, if I knew how."

"Cat--" Buckaroo sighed. "No, I can't say that." He rubbed his face with one hand and looked at me briefly through his fingers. "I have two answers for you. One is philosophical and boils down to a belief that payment--a cynical, material concept--can't be made for moral, intellectual, spiritual issues.

"But I don't think you're ready to buy that idea just yet, so I'll give you the second, material answer," he went on. "You've given me information of enormous value about Hanoi Xan and his Fortress. In removing the one you called Li Aku, you prevented an attempt on my life and possibly on other lives as well. I also consider the change in your persona, the integration and diminishment of Nine, for instance, just plain rewarding to watch. And you've already made yourself useful in other ways."

There was no escape from his eloquence. "I can really stay?"

"Do you really think we'd send you away?" Buckaroo countered.

I raised my hands in glad submission. "You've cornered me." He grinned. "I only hope I can find some way of repaying--um, no, of showing my gratitude."

BB

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"I understand you've been working out in the gym," said Rawhide, setting down first his lunch tray and then himself at my table in the main dining room. It was mid-afternoon and the place was nearly empty. "You care to try out for any of the training classes?"

I looked at him in surprise. "I thought they were all full up. Besides, I didn't think I could."

"Don't see why not. Right now we've got classes running in kendo, tai chi, hand-to-hand, yoga, small arms, and, of course, our home-grown survival course. People can join in anytime. Do you remember what kinda physical training you've had?"

"I remember what I learned in the Fortress," I answered. "I'm an expert marksman and knife fighter. The physical discipline I practice was simply referred to as the path. It's a mixture of all kinds of skills. I also seem to know some form of karate."

Rawhide nodded. "Okay, think we'd like to test you out. You met Sammy yet? Sammy Rye?" At my sign of dissent, he went on, "He's got a pretty varied, unconventional background himself. He tests interns."

"Is he good?"

Rawhide favored me with a somehow provoking grin. "You might say that."

The event was set for two days later. Several people expressed an interest in coming to watch, some out of curiosity, some out of a real interest in Xan's training methods. I was perfectly agreeable to having an audience. One of Nine's few helpful traits was his supreme self-confidence.

I was given a Blue Blaze training outfit, loose and light, for the occasion. Dark blue, of course. When I got to the gym we'd chosen, I found several people already there--Buckaroo, Rawhide, Reno, Pecos, Blackjack, two people I didn't know yet. Since neither of these came forward, I assumed neither was Sammy Rye.

A few minutes later the door opened to admit one more person. A short, squat, formidable-looking man that I guessed immediately was Sammy Rye. His ancestry was obviously mixed --Caucasian coloring and body structure contrasting with black almond eyes and straight black hair.

I waited for him beside the mat. He came forward, all a-grin, and thrust out a large right paw. "Sammy Rye," he said, nodding to himself, pleased and happy. His English was very slightly accented. "Your discipline?"

The heel and side of his hand was hard and ridged with callus. I gripped it briefly and let go. "They call me Cat," I replied. I didn't know what to make of this man's obvious jubilation. "I'm a fighter."

His smile actually broadened. "Fair enough. You do warmups yet?"

"No."

We spent the next ten minutes warming up, each of us sizing up the other. I confessed to myself that I was nervous about his size and so concentrated on speed and reflex exercises.

He bowed to me when he finished, and took a stance near the middle of the mat. "We first do throws, three of them. Then holds, then blocks. Then you try on me your killing moves. Okay?"

"Fine."

I very quickly discovered that I was dealing with someone who probably could have disabled everyone in the room while sitting down taking a nap. He won the first two throws. Almost by chance, I won the third.

We bowed to each other at the end of the set. Pecos came forward and silently handed us each thick towels. Sammy grinned at me. "Why you still have both ears?"

"What?"

"You were bravo of Xan, right?"

I felt a flare of anger that he could joke about that. "No," I said grimly. "I was an assassin."

"Oh," he said, as if that clarified everything. "Higher rank, no doubt."

I tried to be annoyed but somehow couldn't. His good humor was too infectious. "I'm ready."

When we started in again I sawed from envy to pure admiration. At first I felt humiliated that he was besting me. Then I began to watch his reactions, his swift countermoves to my unorthodox attacks, his timing and restraint. He obviously possessed great strength, yet he exercised superb delicacy of control. It became a pleasure to face him. I forgot about showing off my own skills and concentrated on the artistry of the fight.

I did poorly on holds, because of his size and power, but better on blocks. When he invited me to take the offensive and demonstrate the killing moves I'd been taught, I let Nine take control. I had discovered how to do this without losing any part of my conscious self to Nine. But he was still a distinct enough personality that he retained better command over the skills that were peculiarly his.

I was pleased to take the attack, knowing that I was better at striking than defending. I also had the full measure of Sammy Rye now and knew that, in actual battle, I might have a chance of surviving. I proceeded to 'kill' him three times out of five attempts.

When we separated for the final time we were both soaked with sweat. I was beginning to feel winded and realized that my convalescence was still costing me in stamina. Sammy, who didn't look in the least bit tired, bowed formally from the waist. I returned the deference, taking care to bow more deeply than he had. As I straightened, he grasped my right hand and wrist and grinned. "Potential," he said. "You have potential."

Coming from anyone else I would have probably taken that as an insult. I picked up my towel and rubbed my face and neck. "Thank you."

"Why do you fight like several people at once?"

I was astonished. I looked at him and saw interest coupled with intuition in his wise eyes. "That's a long story," I said. One that I couldn't deal with right then. I took a deep breath and turned to our audience. Curiously enough, I was feeling neither proud nor humble about the demonstration. Just content.

Buckaroo was standing at the edge of the mat, hands on his hips, his face oddly expressionless. The others looked much the same. Even Blackjack.

I looked uncertainly from Sammy Rye to Buckaroo. "What's the matter?" I was beginning to wonder if everybody at the Institute wasn't as good as--or better--than Sammy. "Didn't I do okay?"

Buckaroo looked around. "Well, ladies, gentlemen? What do you think?"

"Looks pretty good to me," said Reno laconically. He glanced at Pecos, who simply nodded.

"I think we've got an interesting problem," said Rawhide. "Who's the student and who's the teacher?"

"I see what you mean," said Buckaroo. He turned his gaze on me. "Cat, would you be willing to teach a class in this?"

I stared at him. "Teach? Me? I'm looking to learn--I don't know half of what he--" I gestured at Sammy, who grinned. "--What he knows!"

"Which makes you better than 'most everybody," said Pecos.

I just looked at her. Buckaroo laughed. "Forgive us for a little deception, Cat. Our friend Sammy Rye here is a former professional sumo wrestler, 7th Dan Black Belt Tae Kwon Doh, and sometime sensei of the foremost Kyoto ryu. He comes in occasionally to test our. . .special students."

I glanced at Sammy, who bowed formally while still grinning broadly. This made for an odd, but pleasing, combination. "A Master," I said incredulously. "To test me?"

"I don't underestimate the efficacy of Xan's teaching," said Buckaroo. "And Rawhide, Cody, and I have all had a chance to observe your skills first-hand."

I reddened, and silently cursed a fair complexion. "You see, we can't put you in any of the hand-to-hand classes, unless you want to brush up on form," continued Buckaroo. "You're as good as any of our teachers--most of us here are the teachers."

"If he does start a class, I'm signing up now," said Pecos.

"I would teach you, if you want," offered Sammy Rye. "I am mostly retired now, but there are a few I will teach. In New York City, on Sullivan Street."

Everyone was silent at that. I looked at him, realized my mouth was hanging open, and closed it. Then, quietly, I managed, "I'd like that very much. I'd be honored." The impact of all this hit me suddenly, and I think I actually jumped. "You want me to teach this? I'd love to teach any of you! But I don't know if I'll be any good at passing it on to others. And I still want to learn kendo. You'll really let me teach at the Institute?"

They were all laughing, but with me not at me. "Yes," said Buckaroo. "I'll be one of your students."

"If he's staff, he goes on salary," said Rawhide. "Blue Blaze, Boss?"

"You don't have to pay me anything," I interrupted. "Just call me an apprentice or something. I want to learn. I don't know if I'll ever get to be a Cavalier, but I want to be one, anyway. I want to do something, anything! Positive things, not negative ones."

I stopped. When I looked around a little self-consciously, all I saw was understanding and encouragement. I turned to Sammy Rye, who was looking on with his seemingly unshakable happiness. "Thank you," I said. "I'm very glad I had the chance to meet you."

"I will look forward to teaching you, young one." His grin widened at my automatic wince. "Get in touch with me when ready."

"I will," I promised.

BB

BB

But they did put me on salary after all, both Buckaroo and Rawhide insisting on it. The clinching argument was Rawhide's, reminding me that I'd need money if only to get into Manhattan and pay Sammy Rye. So I was suddenly an 'official' member of Team Banzai. Not that it was any different now. I'd been accepted a while before, only I hadn't realized it, or maybe I'd been fighting it because it just didn't seem possible.

I still had my moments of disbelief, especially on days when I thought too much about my past, my ignorance, what had been done to me by Xan. But at the Institute it was impossible to stay depressed for long. There was too much to do. And fighting off dismay was the happy disbelief that kept hitting me, the realization that I'd been given a once-in-a-lifetime chance to take some part in a

creative renaissance. These people were idealistic fools, crazy positive believers, and they were turning me into one too.

I also got to start teaching my new class. It didn't have a name, it was just Cat's fighting class, and about thirty people wanted to be in it immediately. I candidly told Buckaroo that he couldn't be in the sessions because I didn't have the nerve to teach him of all people; he laughed a lot and offered me a bargain which I found irresistible: I taught him my skills, he taught me iaido. Rawhide ended up in my first course, with Pecos, and Kid Cody, and seven others. Twice a week. A session that I began by dreading but started to look forward to because it became so much fun.

It took me less than a week to discover that I had no affinity for any aspect of biology, medicine, or chemistry. Two additional days proved that I could happily dive into astronomy or astrophysics. But I wasn't quite sure if I was ready to immerse myself in such a--for now, given the lack of a coherent space program--such a theoretical science. The 'soft sciences'--sociology, anthropology, economics, etc.--were intriguing and entertaining but not very tangible.

I wasn't too surprised, and neither was anybody else, to find myself spending more and more time in the engineering and computer science labs. I helped Sam repair things, watched Johnny Two-time try to design things like smart mousetraps and hammers that couldn't hit one's thumb, and got real excited by Eight-bit's demonstration of an engineering design program she was working on in the mainframe.

It was here, from Sam, that I first learned about the Jet Car. He was hunched over a strew of diagrams and was swearing fluently and inventively at them.

I approached him. "What's up?"

He had been so intent that he jumped, sending a half-filled cup of coffee spilling over his work. In between curses and apologies, I helped him clean up. But most of his pages were now artfully decorated with mild brown splotches.

"That's all it needed," he said gloomily. "A caffeine christening. Well, it wasn't gonna fly anyway."

I picked up the top sheet, a neat rendering of some kind of ground vehicle. "I can draw it," continued Sam, "but I just can't feel it. I need a model--except we're not ready for that."

I hardly heard him, having gotten all caught up in a rough drawing of a jet engine and its housing. "What is this thing?" I asked, trying to decipher notes scribbled up the side, in between the coffee stains.

"It's a jet engine in a car," said Sam. "At least, it will be someday."

"What for?"

We were interrupted by the door's opening. Reno, who liked to tinker but candidly confessed he was no engineer, came in and grinned hello. "Built any perpetual-motion machines yet this morning?"

"I'll settle for the occasional motion of one Jet Car," said Sam.

I had managed to decode some of the notes. "If you're talking several thousand pounds of thrust here, you're gonna blow the engine right out of the car if you build it this way."

Reno gave me and the drawing a suddenly interested look. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. 'Course, a lot depends on the materials you use."

Reno glanced at Sam questioningly, who shrugged. "This is the

first he's seen of it."

"You seem to know what you're talking about," said Reno to me.

"Sure," I said impatiently. "I built a rocket engine once."

"Oh yeah?"

I was irritated, then recognized that the tone wasn't skepticism but amazement. "Something you sort of forgot to tell us about," added the dark Cavalier.

I was abruptly surrounded by the smells and feel of an old barn, the sight of scrap metal littered around me, the feel of tools in my hands. "It's something I just remembered," I said slowly. The memory didn't extend much further, just to the knowledge that it was only one occasion out of many. "I get the feeling I've been trying to build things all my life."

"Any formal engineering background that you recollect?"

I reluctantly shook my head and smiled ruefully. "I get just bits and pieces when I get anything at all. Half the time I think my brain and I are on different wavelengths. I don't remember yet. I just know I can do this. But what are you trying to build this thing for?"

Sam and Reno exchanged glances, then Sam nodded. "I think we might need him, Reno. We sure need something."

"Not something everybody knows about," Reno explained to me. "For a whole lot of reasons, so keep this under your hair. The Boss wants to go through solid matter."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. Don't ask me to explain the physics. He's trying to build a gizmo that'll punch a temporary hole. We need to build a vehicle that'll go

fast enough to get through the matter before the atoms close up and mash the car and whoever's in it."

This sounded fascinating--and totally off the wall, but that was nothing unusual. I seized on the one thing that sounded factual. "How fast is fast enough?"

Totally deadpan, Sam answered: "Oh, 500 or 600 miles an hour should do fine."

"Right. 600 miles an hour." I stared into the distance, excited, tantalized, trying to envision such a vehicle. "Your biggest problem is trying to keep it smaller than a jet plane. At least, I assume you want it compact."

"The smaller the better," said Reno. "You catch on pretty fast."

"I want to work on it," I declared. "I want to know everything there is to know about it."

Reno's face eased into a grin. "Think I'd better let Buckaroo know we've got a new member of the Jet Car Team."

I blinked. "Uh, thanks."

"Always glad for fresh input," he responded.

BB

BB

I didn't get to the Institute studio until about nine o'clock that evening. I hesitated outside, not sure if I wanted to disturb the Cavaliers already at work, but I also didn't want to pass up the invitation Reno had extended. He had indicated they were trying out some new songs Rawhide had written. I hadn't yet had the chance to hear the Hong Kong Cavaliers, except on tape.

I opened the door as quietly as Nine knew how and slipped into the

room. The music was compelling. It was jaunty and powerful, complex and light. I stood in a corner and listened. I might as well have shouted or danced for all the attention I was paid. The five musicians were tight and enrapt, weaving five distinct threads into a sound that lifted them together into one frail ever-changing entity.

Rawhide was providing the melody on the piano, his fingers finding infinite variations on syncopated rhythms. Buckaroo played an electric twelve-string guitar with sure deftness, following Rawhide's lead yet providing underlying melodies of his own. Pecos was the drummer, lost behind a kit that included long slender drums and huge skin snares which spoke of Asia and Africa. Two horns: Reno with a tenor sax and Seattle Stew on an alto.

They were all too obviously creating music, jamming together for the pure pleasure and united individuality of it. I was seized by conflicting emotions. I felt envious, bereft, resentful. But something overrode all that with a power that I could not even touch or identify. I finally named it: hunger, love.

Without conscious volition I drifted toward the stage, keeping to the side. The back wall, covered with posters and photos and mementos of the Hong Kong Cavaliers' performances, also supported a clutter of music stands, cases, and old, well-worn instruments. My hand reached out for an acoustical guitar. For a moment I hesitated, as a voice in my mind questioned the action, but the music swept me back into the dream and I picked up the guitar and slipped the strap over my head.

The bridge of the guitar had at some time been broken and had been set back in place with glue and reinforcing tape. I tentatively plucked a string, then winced at its sharp sound. Softly, so as not to disturb

the others, I tuned the strings. Some surge of doubt made me look around at the musicians, but they were as intent and focused as only good artists can be. I looked long and wonderingly at Buckaroo Banzai. His eyes were half-closed as he searched out a complicated riff that wandered at a fifth's harmony above the melody line. I could not call him technically expert. But the music he pulled out was evocative, layered with subtleties and poignant feelings. He was an artist, not a technician; he played for pleasure and mood, not mathematic accuracy.

I found my fingers on the strings, my left hand all of itself doing the fingerwork on the neck for the proper chords. I perched on a stool some eight feet behind the five on the stage, looked down at the guitar and forgot that anyone was even in the same room with me. I didn't stop to question how I knew to play; I knew the dream would be broken if I did.

I played. The music took me out of myself. I didn't know who I was or what I was. For the moment the intricate placement of sound and rhythm balanced me, holding me as secure and pure as the deepest of meditations. On some level I was aware when the others stopped, but I was lost in the flow and needs of the sound. I didn't question my seemingly impossible dexterity, or the source of the emerging melodies. I didn't think at all. I had found a haven at last.

I don't know how I fell from the focus. Between one instant and another I felt external sensations resume control: the feel of my fingers on the guitar, the weight of it around my neck, the lonely and disturbing quality of sound emanating from the instrument, the discomfort of being the nexus of attention. I faltered. I stopped.

They were all staring at me. Then Buckaroo Banzai lifted his hands away from his guitar and, mesmerizing

gaze directed full on me, very deliberately began to clap. No one else did. They were all frozen, poised between astonishment and wonder. I glanced down at the guitar hanging so naturally around my neck and shoulders.

The applause stopped. I touched the six coiled strands of steel and nylon. They vibrated. The instrument seemed a live thing in my hands. My fingers groped along the neck, but the places they had found so confidently and easily were gone. The guitar thrummed hollowly under my hands, waiting for guidance, for release. I plucked the lowest string and it made an angry buzzing sound, no, noise. I grabbed the neck, drew my head out from under the broad leather strap, and abruptly hurled it down. It made an ugly cracking sound which I echoed, unwittingly, unwillingly, as tears welled in my eyes and the sounds of frustration and angry grief were forced from my throat.

The others came toward me, exuding concern and compassion. I wanted their comfort and friendship, but I--we--all of me--couldn't face them. Not right now. I stood up, managed huskily, "Sorry about the guitar," and pushed past them and out the door.

BB

BB

A need to hide and at the same time escape from my own mind drove me from my room to the lab in Engineering where the 'Jet Car Team' convened. The door was locked, and I didn't have my key, but that only provided me with a few moments' obstacle. "Goddamn cat burglar," I muttered at myself. I opened the door and put on the light.

I was grateful that Eight-bit had taught me about her developing engineering design program, because it made the ideas spilling out of my head a joy to translate into reality. I found the design for heat diffusion from the engine and made radical

changes in less than five minutes. I couldn't make my designs as neat and efficient as Sam could, but he would see them and know how to refine them. I went on to put in some new parameters for metal stress and engine speed response, then set to work on the steering and braking system.

It was so easy now. I'd rebuilt my first car at 12 and had accumulated a whole barnful of machinery and equipment by age 15. That was the year I--well, D.T.--had built the rocket engine, the trial firing of which had almost gotten me disowned. The Jet Car was almost visible to me now. Once I did some research in metallurgy and state-of-the-art circuitry, I'd be ready to build a working model. I knew I could do it.

I was so deep in concentration that I didn't realize I had a visitor until I heard movement behind my chair. I whirled around to see Blackjack, who eyed me with some trepidation and concern.

"I'm sorry to startle you," she said. "You didn't answer when I knocked on the lab door. I thought I'd wait until you were done."

"What are you doing here at--" I looked up at the wall clock and was irritated to find that it was after midnight. I'd meant to be long gone already. "I really don't need you checking up on me all the time."

Instead of getting mad, she frowned at me in puzzlement. "You've changed again. Who are you?" She then saw, obviously for the first time, the backpack and other gear I'd collected from my room and stashed under the table by my feet. "And where do you think you're going?"

"What business is it of yours?"

Blackjack looked momentarily distressed. Then she said evenly, "If nothing else, you're still my patient --whoever you may be. It certainly

isn't Cat, is it now?"

"I'm me," I answered defiantly. "And you can stop prying." I got up and picked up backpack, belatedly remembered to exit the program and turn off the computer, then tried to go past Blackjack. Tried. She reached out and grasped my shoulders. Her grip was very strong and I couldn't break it without hurting her.

"Don't be a young idiot. Where do you think you're running to? That won't do you or us any good at all."

"I'm not running! I've got someplace to go."

"Are you coming back?"

Her question stung like an accusation. "Why should I tell you?"

"What's gotten into you? Why are you fighting me?"

"You're the one getting in my way," I retorted. "Why do you keep meddling--what'd you come down here for, anyway? Someone tell you that I made a fool of myself in the studio? Why can't you leave me alone?"

Her hands dropped from my shoulders. "'Making a fool of yourself' is not what I heard from anyone." She sounded stunned, bewildered. "I thought you might want some company, Cat. There's none of us here mean to meddle."

"You may not mean to, but you have! I haven't got a life of my own here; it belongs to all of you! You've found out everything--you know so much about me--you've done everything but crawl inside my head the way Xan did. For all you talk about privacy and independence here, I haven't got any!"

"In many ways you're quite right," Blackjack said softly, her eyes stricken. "And I can't tell you how sorry I am for that."

Her comment was as deflating to my anger as a splash of cold water. Before I could recover my composure, she stepped aside, and tried to speak calmly. "Do whatever you need to do, Cat. I'd rather help you here, but I won't stand in your way if you have to go."

I gave her a questioning, side-long glance, then determinedly walked past her and out the door. Twenty feet down the hall was a door leading out of the building, which I opened.

It was pitch dark outside, the air hot and heavy, motionless. With my hand on the doorframe I stopped and looked back.

Blackjack was leaning on the door to the lab, looking unhappy, compassionate, frustrated. At my gaze she reached again for impassivity and largely failed. "If you decide not to come back, could you at least tell us where you are?"

I didn't trust my voice all of a sudden, so I simply nodded. I wasn't at all prepared for her to go on. "If nothing else, would you still be willing to give advice on the Jet Car? I know the others will miss your input."

The Jet Car. I thought about how much I'd just done tonight, and how much there still was to do. I thought about wanting to feel the vehicle take shape under my hands. For a moment I vacillated, then let the door swing closed.

Blackjack was watching me closely, warily, but she said nothing. I didn't know what to say either. I was angry, relieved, confused. I didn't even know what to think. Only one clear emotion emerged. "The Jet Car," I said, half-snarling, "is mine. It's gonna be mine, 'cause no one else can build the damn thing."

Still the nurse said nothing, but there was a gleam lurking in her eyes that I didn't like. "Goddamnit,

Blackjack, you trapped me!"

"I haven't done anything of the sort," she replied, with a flash of her usual spirit. "I just asked myself which you'd better respond to: an appeal to your talents, or an appeal to your better side."

I eyed her with suspicion. "What do you mean, my better side?"

"The fact that you'd miss us, and we'd miss you," Blackjack stated. She came toward me. "Cat, I wouldn't ever try to chain you, or hold you down. We're here to help, if we can, if it's wanted. Not to interfere or to pry."

I dropped my gear at my feet and sighed. "Giving me my freedom is as effective a chain as any, Blackjack. It gives one responsibility, and responsibility includes keeping obligations."

She looked at me admiringly. "That sounds like something Buckaroo would say."

"He probably did," I replied glumly. "He's the philosopher." I reached out and took hold of her, then drew her close. She linked hands around my waist and responded warmly. "I'm sorry, Blackjack. Childish--selfish--call me what you want, they're all accurate."

"Mercurial," she offered with a smile. "Speaking of which, who are you?"

I paused for a moment, then fell back on honesty. "I don't know yet." I tightened my hold suddenly. "Blackjack, are you free right now to go into the City with me?"

She blinked. "Into Manhattan--tonight?"

"Yeah. There's something I need to check out."

"It's after midnight, Cat."

"So? And stop calling me Cat." I looked at her expectantly. "Well?"

"Sure. Why not?" Her expression was wary but intrigued. "I might point out that I have nothing else to call you, Chameleon."

I thought about that for a moment, then shrugged. "D.T. will do for now."

"D.T." She repeated this thoughtfully, watching me all the while like a psych observing a psycho. "Righto."

"I suppose you need a half an hour or so to get ready?"

"You're asking for it, me boyo," she remarked. "Five minutes. Come with me and time me if you like."

An hour later we were in New York City, in the East Village. A New Brunswick car service that gave cut rates to Institute people had brought us into town. I hadn't felt like talking. Blackjack left me alone and chatted with the driver, whom she knew slightly.

Blackjack looked around us. We were at Astor Place, across from the big cube sculpture and the Engineering Building of Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art. On a hot Thursday night in July, plenty of people were drifting languidly about.

"It's your game, D.T.," said Blackjack. "You mind if I ask what we're doing here? I'm not pushing, mind. Just curious."

I stuck my hands in my jeans pockets and nodded at the school building. "I wanted to see if my memories were real," I said softly. "It seems they are."

Blackjack was never slow to extrapolate from few data. "You went to Cooper Union?" she asked in amazement. When I nodded, she took hold of my arm

and drew me close, then gazed up at me in wonder and gladness. "Total recall?"

I felt a little uncomfortable. "As far as I can tell."

"That's wonderful! How?"

That I wasn't going to answer. It still hurt to think about music, the way it had come and gone in my life. "I'm looking for a bar," I said. "I don't know its name--I don't think it even had a name. It's somewhere near Cooper."

"Right. There are only about 700 bars near here, Cat." She dimpled at my glare. "Sorry--D.T. Would it be overly inquisitive of me to ask what that stands for besides delirium tremens?"

"Yes. It would be."

"Oh. Pity. Well, pick a direction, then. You can buy me a drink at the first bar."

We spent the next two hours crisscrossing from street to street, looking for one small nameless bar. I could visualize its interior but not the outside, could remember the setting and the weather and the time but not the address.

On Fifth Street between Second Avenue and the Bowery I knew I'd found the right block by the sudden coursing of memory. Seven years' passage had brought the block, with its dilapidated brownstones and scattered garbage, to a point of desolation that made me and Blackjack instinctively shrink toward one another.

"What a bleak neighborhood," murmured Blackjack. "There's no future here, you can feel it. Just a futility of waiting."

She spoke with unusual bitterness, her tone suggesting the sight evoked painful memories of her own. I

linked my arm through hers and gestured down the block at a dirty neon sign over a doorway. We went toward it, past the curious, vaguely hostile gazes of the people sitting on stoops or at curbside. "You're forgetting something," I said softly. "They have escape. Through TV, alcohol and drugs." Blackjack gave me an odd look, but said nothing.

The bar was open. We went in. The bartender gave us a disinterested glance when we walked in, then resumed his conversation with a man at the far end of the bar, under the inevitable TV playing the inevitable game. There were a few other people in the bar, scattered among the small tables in the back. They all stopped talking and looked up at our entrance.

We didn't belong there, that was obvious. It was hard to tell what their hostility centered on--me for being white, Blackjack for being black and female, the two of us being together, the two strangers intruding on their territory. Maybe all of the above. While I was eyeing the men in the back, Blackjack stepped up to the bar and ordered two beers with cool equanimity.

It was an altogether repellent place, smelling of spilled alcohol and stale smoke. But I had to accept it, since it was in my memories--barely changed now, just older.

Blackjack was looking around carefully, quick wary glances. People had resumed their conversations, but the tone of the small dingy bar remained tense. She sidled closer to me and spoke, her words barely audible. "This the place you were looking for? I don't think much of your taste."

"Seven years ago I didn't know what taste was," I muttered. I was about to go on, but one of the guys from the back was approaching us. There was something in his walk I didn't like. I straightened up from leaning against the bar.

The man didn't look at me; he seemed merely to be heading for the front door. As he passed by, though, he jostled my elbow, sending my beer spilling, splashing me, Blackjack. I jumped back and threw the mug down. "Hey, watch what you're doing!"

He turned toward me. He had a sharp, thin face and bright dark eyes. "Why don't you get out of the way, man?"

I looked sidelong at Blackjack, who was calm but poised for action. She gave me a 'caution' look which I didn't need. I asked softly, "You looking for trouble?"

"You an asshole, man?"

Two glances showed me that the bartender was deeply interested in his ball game and the other five men in the back more or less openly anticipating a fight. One of them I judged to be the rat-face's partner, by his watchfulness of me and Blackjack and apparent eagerness to participate. I turned to confront Rat-face squarely. "Not as big a one as you, man."

Blackjack's quick warning was redundant; I had already seen the knife. The bartender made a half-hearted noise of protest which no one heeded. Rat-face was holding the weapon badly; I sidestepped a swipe, moved in and grabbed his right wrist. The noise of another scuffle and a sudden sound of pain almost made me break my hold. I blocked a kick and wrenched back Rat-face's thumb, twisting the knife out of his grip. I backed off, but showed him I was ready to use the blade if he tried another attack.

Blackjack was holding Rat-face's partner in a near-unbreakable policeman's grip. The man was sullen; she was calm. The guys in the back looked vaguely surprised at the way things had turned out.

The barman was unsurprised, still

disinterested, but he seemed to feel that some comment was expected of him. "If yer wanna fight, do it outside," he said dourly.

I eyed my attacker. He was looking baffled, sulky. He was glancing from me to Blackjack with hatred, but obviously he had no inclination to try again. "Let's go," I said to Blackjack.

The two trailed us to the door, but slowly. I opened it and ushered Blackjack out, then glanced back. "If you want your knife back, you can look for it in the sewer," I commented, and closed the door on them. An unimaginative obscenity followed me out.

Blackjack was rubbing her palms together, jerkily, plainly trying to rid herself of excess adrenaline and revulsion. She watched without comment as I found a drain to drop the knife into, then joined me as I waited for her.

"You do nice work," I said. "You okay?" I took a final eyeful of the bar, then headed across the street. Very few people were still out. We headed for the end of the block at a brisk pace.

"Yeah, sure," she said, with untoward grimness. "You might've warned me you were expecting a fight."

"Didn't you see it coming the minute we walked in?"

"I might've chosen not to walk in, mightn't I? You like to fight. I don't."

I was surprised, and, after a moment, ashamed. "I'm sorry," I offered. "But thanks for being there. I suspect your being so capable in hand-to-hand stopped it from going any further than it did."

"They probably thought me a bloody narc," she said laconically. "They must be more than a little

puzzled right now." She caught my startled look and added, "Your comment was a pretty good giveaway, D.T. Not to mention that it was obviously no normal bar. Now I think you owe me an explanation."

We had by this time reached Sixth Street and Astor Place, which was better lit, more populous, and much friendlier in feel. "I think I owe you some ice cream," I responded. "There used to be an all-night coffee shop right near here."

"Let's hope we don't have to die for a cup of coffee," she murmured.

Over one strawberry shake and one chocolate sundae in a quiet booth we both relaxed. "As you gathered for yourself, there were more deals being made in that bar than drinking," I said softly. "And it doesn't seem to have changed at all in seven years."

"Seven years." Blackjack repeated thoughtfully. "Pre-Xan?"

"You make it sound like an architectural period, you know, like pre-modernism." I tried to maintain the light tone. "Yes. That bar's where I got recruited by Hanoi Xan."

She let out her breath in a soft whistle. "There? How?"

For a few moments I sought solace in ice cream. I had accepted the facts but I found saying them aloud very difficult. It was a little easier when I thought of referring to that piece of history in the third person--he was, after all, a different person from me. "D.T. was the naive young jerk who started this whole mess," I began. "He got into a lot of trouble at Cooper, including drugs--'cause he liked the money and the excitement. Only he didn't play that game straight either, and ran afoul of the professionals. One of those professionals, who turned out to work for Hanoi Xan, offered him a job before he got, well, killed."

"And D.T. took him up on it."

"Yeah. You know, it sounded pretty good at the time, besides being a way of getting out of a mess. Travel--exotic locations--new languages--unusual jobs--exciting career opportunities, all that crap." I made a disgusted gesture. "I swallowed it, though. Except--except I couldn't stay on their good side, either, and I guess that's what made them decide I might be better as zombie material." I stopped, realizing my change in pronoun. And then I couldn't say anymore.

Blackjack was silent for a space, an interval that allowed me to recover my composure. Then she asked softly, "Why are you telling me this? You don't have to--though I'm grateful."

"That's partly why." I attempted a crooked smile. "Besides, it's good therapy, isn't it?"

"Usually," she agreed cautiously. "More important is how you feel about what you told me."

I shrugged. "It was something I did, so I guess I've got to live with it. That's my only feeling right now."

I was glad when she nodded and didn't pass any kind of judgment. Then her whole expression lightened with amusement. "So the smartass Southern kid I met one day during your convalescence was D.T.! You mind telling me where you come from, D.T.?"

I ignored the question. "You mean while I was suffering through Nine's paranoia? How--when?"

"You were also going through drug withdrawal," Blackjack corrected. "Everyone was coming out, in little bits and pieces. At first I thought the drug had induced schizophrenic hallucinations, but clear, coherent patterns emerged." She paused and

gazed at me consideringly. "We've never talked of this, you know."

"I know, but I think it's past the point of being dangerous to my growing psyche, Blackjack."

"Like I said: smartass," she muttered. "I suppose you're right, since you claim to have reached integration--or at least complete recall. I was wrong when I said that Cat was your core personality. He was actually more of a mediator in your subconscious, if that makes any sense. The rational psyche. He--"

"Blackjack, would you shelve the psychological gobbledygook? It makes my head hurt. And you haven't answered my question."

She made a face at me. "I only met D.T. twice. A young rebellious adolescent with a sizable but easily bruised ego. Is that what you wanted to hear? I didn't think so."

"It's not fair that you met him before I did. You know, it's weird--now that I can look back, see where I've been and what I've done, it doesn't affect me," I said, thinking out loud. "Are they all part of me--am I the total of them? I donno. I feel like--I still feel sort of remote."

Blackjack was watching me narrowly. "Do you resent what happened to you?"

"Hell, yes. Who wouldn't? Damn it, I wasn't given any choice!" As the words reverberated, I quieted down but said angrily, "And I'm well aware that everything that happened to me was my own stupid fault--my initial choice to begin with. I don't--"

Blackjack laid her hand on my arm. "Don't look for fault or guilt, D.T.; it really doesn't matter. What does matter is you--now. Here, today, complete."

"Incomplete," I corrected. "You know that as well as I do."

BB

BB

For the next few weeks I practically lived in the Engineering lab. I'd always been fascinated by cars and rockets, and the Jet Car was the perfect blend of both. At least, I was going to make it perfect. The idea was brilliant; the materials were available; there was time, room, and money enough to do all the R&D I could want. It was a dream project, one that as time went by I started to feel was tailor-made for me.

Not that I deluded myself that the Jet Car belonged to me. I learned a little about its history, the development of the oscillation overthrust. I didn't have enough math and physics background yet to fully comprehend or work on the integration of overthrust and engine. That was still Buckaroo and Professor Hikita's territory. But the vehicle itself was becoming my territory, especially when both Sam and Johnny Two-time came to me and placed their skills at my disposal. We had a very amicable relationship. We all agreed that they were both better engineers--although I warned them to look out as I acquired hands-on experience--but that I had the better intuition and inventiveness.

I did take time out for my unorthodox fighting class and to eat, although I soon found that my stomach would remind me of hunger at the oddest hours, which meant that I didn't run into many people. Blackjack, who was in the habit of dropping by the lab at about two in the morning to drag me off to bed, gently teased me about avoiding people, and I confessed--to her I could say almost anything--that that was perfectly true. She accused me of hiding in my work, but that I denied. Work was a release for years of frustrated creativity, and perhaps a path to a better future.

My other outlet was the personal training I shared three days a week with Buckaroo--he teaching me iaido, I teaching him my odd mix of combat skills. He was a superb teacher. I wasn't, but he made up for that by being the perfect student. In between exercises and discipline, we talked about everything and nothing. We explored the theories of martial arts as well as their practice, the Eastern and Western views of physical skills. It was a wonderful time. My background never even came up, except indirectly.

I was surprised when Buckaroo showed up in the lab one night. I mean, he was constantly showing up, excited by what we were doing, quick to offer suggestions and refinements in the math. But he had never before shown up at dinnertime--but then, I already knew that his eating habits were as strange as mine. Rather soberly, he invited me to view a piece of film from out of the archives.

The footage was from the 1954 Jet Car test. Rawhide's voice-over explanation provided the confirmation of what my sight and brain were already telling me. I sat in horrified silence until the mention of Hanoi Xan, which shocked me into an involuntary sound of protest.

The projector ran around empty, clicking, until I found the presence of mind to turn it off. Then I went back to sit down by Buckaroo, who was plainly as stirred by it as I was.

"You hadn't known about that," he said, after a while. It was a completely flat question.

I shook my head. "I just knew there'd been a previous test. I'm sorry, Buckaroo." I couldn't help feeling he'd just trusted me with a grief normally only shared with family. I bit my lip to keep from asking a host of questions which were none of my business and began to know how Blackjack felt, dealing with me.

He heaved a sigh and stood up, then went over to dismantle the screen and its stand. I rewound the piece of film and put it away in its canister. "I didn't show you that to dredge up some sad family history, or, heaven forfend, remind you of Xan," he commented. "I want you to know the full history of this hope, and what you're up against. Forty years, off and on, of experimentation and a range of rather profound personal commitments. With rather mixed results."

"You wouldn't be working on it if you didn't think it possible," I declared.

His expression was rueful, self-deprecating. "To most I'm an incurable dreamer."

"Well, I'm not, and I say it's possible!"

Buckaroo's normal good humor returned with his laugh. "Thank you for the voice of reality. Let's go back to the lab."

Back in the lab I showed him Sam's latest drawings, rendered just that afternoon. He insisted on my pointing out each change and what it meant, then asked what design changes I had that hadn't been committed to paper or screen yet. Then he started asking me about contingencies and failsafes and built-in problem prevention, then my ideas on test design and models. It became something of a test. He asked for time projections, which I wasn't really able to give him. He started talking about materials and physics, at which point I stopped him, readily confessing my ignorance in certain areas.

"Hikita-san or I will be glad to coach you in some of the physics," he suggested.

"Haven't both of you got enough to do already? Just show me the right books and the right questions, and I'll figure it out on my own time."

Buckaroo smiled. "That's one route. We also have a kind of reciprocal arrangement with Princeton, if you'd care to study there."

"I doubt they'd take me, Buckaroo."

"Why not? Blackjack mentioned you went to Cooper Union."

"Only for a little while," I replied. "You might say I flunked out--so I couldn't exactly use that as any kind of credential. Frankly, any transcript I might provide would look like hell."

"You must've been pretty young when you got accepted at Cooper," he mused.

I smiled a little. "Yeah, fifteen."

He grinned back at me. "Isn't starting college at that age a horror? The professors, at best, treat you as gingerly as a hothouse flower and the students simply don't treat you at all."

In one sentence he'd managed to put one bad year at Cooper into an entirely new perspective. I swallowed this, then had no trouble saying, "It doesn't help when your parents don't understand either."

He nodded sympathetically and thankfully didn't pursue the subject. "Well, however you choose to explore what you need to learn is up to you. Now. Going back to speculation. What time frame do you envision? You must have some feeling for what should happen when."

"Time isn't one of my best friends, Buckaroo," I said wryly, "but okay. I want to have the overall design of the car, then detailed schematics for its components, then backup or auxiliary designs for if something doesn't work according to the alpha concept. Since that's the kind of

stuff I really like doing, I could spend at least six months on it--but could probably accomplish it in four."

"Make it six or more," he said. "The designs have to integrate the overthrunder, which you'll need to learn more about."

"Okay. Then I see us working on models, and that's where I see the project splitting for a while. I think the engine should be built, separately, and tested, and same for the rest of the car, before we ever get the two together. And I really don't know how long that'll take, Buckaroo. It could take years."

Buckaroo nodded. "Don't sound so dejected. It will take years."

His ready acceptance of that was reassuring. "Johnny'll probably concentrate on the engine, since propellants are one of his specialties, so you'll have to ask him about time. Sam and I are going to build the car. I think it could take me six months just on the steering and braking system." A voice in the back of my mind interjected with a snide comment, and I added hastily, "If you want my help on this, of course, and if you want me hanging around that long."

He threw back his head and laughed joyously, then reached out and gripped my shoulder so hard I winced. "I'm sorry, I'm not laughing at you," he managed, between diminishing chuckles. He let out another laugh. "Well, I guess I am, in a way. No offense meant. You absolutely slay me. D.T., how would you like to accept an Institute residency?"

I stared. "Res-- Are you serious?"

He instantly wiped the laughter from his expression. "Perfectly serious."

"But--I haven't been here that

long, I haven't studied--I don't know--"

The boss raised one hand. "Whoa with the haven'ts and the don'ts. I don't want to hear those. What you have done is make an extremely important contribution in a very short time to one of the Institute's pet projects."

"But--apprenticeship, internsh--"

"Since you didn't arrive here by any of the routine methods, D.T., how could you expect to come up through any normal means?" he asked, half seriously, half whimsically. "The best guidelines are those that are flexible. As far as I'm concerned, what you've already done amounts to a successful intern's thesis, and you've just outlined your resident's plan of work--what do you think I was cross-examining you for? If you want to nit-pick, I suppose you could say that, if the Jet Car doesn't work, we get to kick you out."

He was teasing; I was stunned, unable to speak. He went on. "I've already spoken to Hikita-san, Sam and Johnny, Eight-bit. They all concur."

I shook my head in disbelief, but he held up his finger and gave me an admonishing look. "This is the craziest place," I said finally, "and you're the craziest one of the bunch. What can I say, since you won't let me disagree with you?"

"How about 'yes'?" he suggested.

"I set myself up for that, didn't I?" I stared at him, looking for and finding reassurance, optimism, and commitment in his gaze. "Buckaroo--if you're sure--I think I'd like that more than anything in the world."

"Bit of a long yes, but I think I get your gist."

His tone was absolutely deadpan.

I aimed a blow at him, which he knocked aside without even appearing to notice. "Do you want your party tonight?" he asked.

"Party?"

"We'll use almost anything as a good excuse for a party, but a new resident's a better excuse than most. You get to pick the food, the spirits, even the place if you don't want it held here."

"It's already nine o'clock," I pointed out. "Tomorrow--I guess. I think I need a little time to let this sink in, Buckaroo."

He grinned. "Just as long as you don't forget to come."

"I won't." Impulsively I grabbed him and hugged him. "Thank you, Buckaroo."

BB

BB

The next morning I went into Manhattan with a large sum of money--my salary had been accumulating nicely since I had nothing really to buy--and managed to spend it all in less than three hours. Then I had to use the car service rather than the train to get me home, because I couldn't manage all the packages.

The first person I ran into back at the Institute happened to be Rawhide, himself on his way in the front door. He stopped dead and gave me a long, leisurely once-over from the tips of my new suede boots to the ends of my roots. "Didn't know we had any pinto ponies roaming around loose," he remarked.

I laughed. "You don't like the hair?"

His gaze was dubious. "Sorta looks like one of those guys who paint the white lines down the middle of the

street made a mistake and ran over your head."

"Aw, you just don't know what's jazzy," I retorted, inwardly quite pleased with my new blond streak. He shook his head, then helped me to my room with my packages--without commenting on the unmistakable shape of one of them.

The party was set for 7:30. At seven I took one last satisfied look at myself in a mirror, pleased at the way I'd manage to coordinate white, azure, red, and gray. Another long look convinced me that I was all there--that, for a change, I and my reflection were at peace with one another. My inner selves, it seemed, had no problems with my attempts at forging a new identity.

On my way out, I remembered to pick up one of my purchases, and headed over to the west wing to Buckaroo's room. Naturally, he wasn't there. Pecos, whom I ran into in the hall, after she complimented me on my looks, informed me she'd last seen him stealing food in the kitchen.

Sure enough, the Boss and one of the cooks--a refugee from Benihana--were reducing a gorgeous, ten-pound tuna to woebegone pink slivers. When Buckaroo saw me, his eyes widened; then he grinned in welcome and held out a pink sliver wrapped in dark green seaweed.

"Nuh-uh," I said with a shudder. "The only way I'll eat raw fish is after about two bottles of raw sake."

"Another benighted barbarian," he sighed. He waved the hand that held the cleaver expressively. "Nice jacket. Miyake?"

"Out of my price range, and I'm still learning, anyway, about what's new." I wasn't surprised that he'd noticed, since Buckaroo was one of the few people at the Institute whom I

considered to have impeccable sartorial taste. "Buckaroo, if you could stop playing with that axe for a minute and unsushi your hands, I've got something to give you."

He obligingly washed his hands and came away from the chopping table. I brought forward the case I was holding and lifted it. "To replace the one I broke in the studio," I said.

He looked at me with a frown, then took the case over to a clean unused countertop and opened it. "A Fender," he said quietly, his fingers touching the strings, the polished white surface. "I can't accept this."

"Sure you can, Buckaroo, it's easy."

"D.T., I'd forgotten that poor old guitar even existed. All you did was put it out of its misery."

"Buckaroo, how come you're so fond of giving magnanimously to others but don't want to accept any gifts in return? That's not fair."

His eyebrows rose. "That isn't my intention. The world gives me so much every day that all I try to do is equalize the balance. If you're serious about wanting to give me this, I'll try to accept it with grace. Thank you." Buckaroo directed a suddenly intent look upon me. "Would you play it for us tonight, D.T.?"

I could feel myself stiffen almost instinctively. I was annoyed and dismayed that he would ask that, then realized that he probably knew exactly what he was doing. "I'll think about it. Don't push your luck."

Buckaroo smiled provokingly. "Why not? Life is for taking chances."

"You're full of good ones tonight, aren't you, Buckaroo? You should be writing them down."

His grin broadened. "The tao of epigrams is that they be spontaneous." Before I could even begin to respond to this morsel of wisdom, Buckaroo turned aside. "Hey, Muffin. Is the second batch of kumiss chilled yet?"

"Yeah, Boss--you want some?" At Buckaroo's nod and two upraised fingers, the big man rather inappropriately named Muffin brought over two heavy mugs filled with some liquid that looked thicker than cream but thinner than yogurt.

I took the mug proffered to me and eyed it suspiciously. "Try it," said Buckaroo. "Then you too will be able to sprout epigrams and aphorisms."

"What is it?"

He didn't answer, just gestured. I took a sip, then almost spit it out as Buckaroo said genially, "It's fermented mare's milk." He laughed at my undoubtedly horrified expression and raised his mug in a toast. "To our newest resident." When I hesitated, he added, "You can't refuse to drink to yourself, D.T."

"Fermented mare's milk?" I repeated incredulously, then steeled myself, raised the mug and took another swallow. After I got over cringing, I discovered that it was surprisingly good--smooth and rich, aromatic and pungent.

Buckaroo regarded me with a smile. "You'd be surprised how fast it grows on you."

"So this is where you've been hiding!" I turned around and held the mug safely out of reach just in time to receive a frontal assault from Blackjack, who threw her arms around me and kissed me. With her were Rawhide and Peggy, who stood looking on in amusement. When she let go she scrutinized me carefully. "Where's the earring and the studded wristband, D.T.?"

"I thought you at least would appreciate what I did," I said, feigning a wounded tone.

"Oh, I do," she said warmly. "Whose idea was it--Simon's? No, he'd have done something much more radical, like dye the hair blue. I love the clothes."

I laughed, then admitted, "You might say it was Simon tempered by Jean-Michel--you name-dropper. How am I ever going to be just me singular if you keep on referring to me in the plural?"

She acknowledged this, then said plaintively, "It would help if you had a better name, something more evocative than D.T. But I'm getting sidetracked. Congratulations--and why didn't you tell me?"

Rawhide and Peggy, who'd gotten themselves some of the kumiss, closed in on me now, Rawhide pushing a filled mug into Blackjack's hands. "Welcome," said Peggy softly. "I'm so glad things have turned out so well for you; you deserve it. I wish all of Xan's bravos could find a new life." She was quite in earnest. I nodded, a little embarrassed.

"Glad to have you as one of the team," put in Rawhide, with a smile that made me feel included as part of some very special family. "Speaking of which, most everyone's out in the dining room already."

"Demolishing the food, no doubt," said Buckaroo. "Let's go!"

Some of the tables had been taken away and others moved together to clear a large space in the dining room. Long tables laden with food and drink lined one wall; people were already two and three deep here. Many people were still streaming in.

The Institute's parties were legendary, because everybody at them worked so hard to have a good time.

Concentrated into one place, the Institute's spirit of community overflowed and brought everyone together in a rare fusion of individuality and creativity. It also provided an opportunity for people who worked in totally different fields--mechanics and botany, genetic engineering and plasma physics, for instance--to interact and exchange ideas. Some of the most fruitful inventions had risen out of unusual meetings at parties. At the very least, all the conversations, which were constantly changing, were euphoric and stimulating. It also had something to do with the kumiss and other beverages floating their way to the heads of the people gathered.

I was startled and more than a little gratified to discover how many of the people at the Institute knew me, or knew of me, and came out of their way to congratulate my residency. That attention and the kumiss were a heady combination, which made Pecos warn me at one point to watch out lest something pop. I ignored this. Very special was when Sam, Johnny, and Eight-bit brought me my very own, brand-new official Jet Car Team jacket, which bore a round design with the words 'Team Banzai' emblazoned over a stylized vehicle trailing bright red, orange, and yellow jet streams. Also special was when Rawhide came back and involved me in a discussion of the philosophy of survival and weapons training. Kid Cody was frankly envious but also genuinely pleased for me. Sammy Rye showed up, to my pleased astonishment, and reiterated his invitation to teach me, which I formally accepted.

After the food diminished the party started spreading all over the Institute, and dancing started up in the dining room. I stood, intoxicated in more ways than one, smiling gently and probably foolishly on the crowd, nursing a third mug of kumiss and a bowl of eye-watering chili, letting people ebb and flow in my direction, until Blackjack came and insisted I

join in the dancing. Music from the sublime to the ridiculous, from rock 'n' roll to operatic overtures, was being piped in through four excellent speakers.

I put down my mostly finished food and drink and moved out with Blackjack. I found out immediately that she was a superb dancer. A little out of practice, I discovered that if I tried to remember where I had last gone dancing, or as whom, I tended to get a little confused between D.T.'s, Simon's, and Jean-Michel's styles. When I pointed this out to Blackjack, she laughed, then told me to just close my eyes and go with the flow.

During a slow song she was faster than I at getting in close. Linked together, we gave ourselves to fitting our bodies to the rhythm and melodies of the music and each other. After a timeless interval, but probably only a few minutes, Blackjack looked up at me, grinning. "I knew you'd get your residency," she said. "Probably one of the fastest internships ever."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, really. You may be obnoxious sometimes, and alternately full of yourself and insecure, shy and extroverted, reckless and cautious--"

"Hey," I protested. "You're damaging my psyche."

"--But you're also a little bit of a genius."

"That's more like it," I said proudly, then laughed at her grimace. I hugged her close to me. "I haven't thanked you properly yet, Blackjack." I dropped a kiss on her forehead. "Most of this is all your fault."

Her expression was suddenly transformed by excitement and curiosity. "I wonder-- No. Never mind."

"What?"

"Now who's being inquisitive?"

"I am," I said readily. "I've had a good teacher."

She looked pained. "Well, since it does pertain to you, I'll tell you if you tell me what D.T. stands for."

"That's really been bugging you, hasn't it." I looked around cautiously, and pulled her to one side of the dance floor. "Try not to laugh too hard, or I'll never speak to you again. It's... Detweiler Thomas."

Her expression became a wonder to behold as she struggled to hold back laughter and disbelief. When she finally spoke, a small chortle escaped, which I graciously overlooked. "That's marvelous. Isn't it wonderful what parents think of?"

"Marvelous," I agreed dryly. "Now that you've satisfied your curiosity, how about satisfying mine?"

"Well, I've been looking about for a good thesis. It seems to me that, if you don't mind, and if Doc Savage agrees, that you'd make a perfect topic."

"Huh?"

"Your disparate personalities, your transformation and assimilation," she said. "I just thought of it now, so I really don't know how I'd structure it. Of course I'd let you see the plan as soon as I developed it; I'd be working with you rather closely. Would you mind terribly much? It'd be a bit of an invasion of your privacy."

"You want to do a thesis on me." As I thought about this, I decided I rather liked the idea. "I wouldn't have to tell you every last little detail, would I?"

"Oh, no," she answered. "I'd want a few illustrative examples, but mostly I've got all the evidence I

need from the past four months of dealing with you."

The concept appealed. I trusted and liked Blackjack enormously. "Why not?" I reflected. "I'd like to see your perspective. It almost might help me put things all together once and for all."

"You still feel disjointed?"

I shrugged. "I'm beginning to wonder if it even matters. I suppose I don't know how I should be feeling."

"The day we figure that out," she said, "the shrinks of the world go out of business."

We were disrupted by a commotion in the room. People were pushing aside tables and some Blue Blaze techs were setting up amplifiers and microphones by the baby grand piano by the windows. Then two Blue Blazes walked in with Pecos' drumkit, and we learned from people near us that the Cavaliers had been prevailed upon to perform. Apparently, nobody had wanted to listen to piped-in music all night when the best bar band in New Jersey was around to be listened to.

Once set up, the band launched right into a riotously fast version of their last year's hit single, "Catch the Sunrise." Then came a song I didn't know at all, featuring Peggy as lead vocalist and Buckaroo singing harmony; they dropped out in the middle to let Reno hold the floor with pure sweet sax. Though most people kept right on dancing, I remained standing at the edge of the dance floor, Blackjack to my side.

"Are you okay, D.T.?" she whispered. "You look--sort of--"

I turned to face her. "Sort of what?"

"Blitzed," she said.

I was about to ask what she

expected from someone who had three mugs of kumiss in him when the song ended. Buckaroo grasped the mike and its stand and stepped forward a few paces. "Thanks. As some of you may have noticed, I'm playing a new guitar, which was very generously given to me earlier this evening." His gaze sought out mine and he almost imperceptibly motioned me forward.

After a moment of hesitation, I went. Buckaroo lifted the strap over his head and handed the instrument to me. "Given to me by our newest resident," he added to the audience, smiled at me both encouragingly and challengingly, and stepped back.

Music. Threat and promise both. I couldn't help remembering what had happened the other night in the studio, the awakening to full memory. D.T. had been taught classical piano and violin, which he had hated and only tolerated because a creative music teacher had given him an old guitar. In New York, he'd gotten good at it fast enough to play in some local bars. Then--nothing. It had all been taken away. Simon had reached for music unconsciously, and so had Jean-Michel. Nine of course knew nothing of artistic expression. It made me angry to think of it. Music had always been the perfect release.

I slung the guitar around my neck and checked the tuning, which of course was fine. I edged behind the microphone and raised it an inch. A voice in my head sneered at my caution. I took a firm hold of the mike and glanced over the audience. "Most of you don't know that I play guitar," I said. I paused, and then lingering anger and pride drove me to add, "But the actual fact is, I play guitar like nothin' you've ever heard before."

I bent my head to the Fender and pulled a piece out of D.T.'s repertoire--the Who's 'Pinball Wizard.' It was like an explosion of creative freedom, and I played as if I'd never

put down the guitar. Everyone was silent, then burst into loud approval at the end of a showy run. I looked up and grinned at them, then without respite swung right into 'Light My Fire.' Joy lightened my touch and added a new upbeat, jazzy feel to the song. Music was more than freedom and release; it was fusion. Rawhide's piano joined me first. Then drums and sax, and Peggy on the bass joined in too.

Whistles and stomps greeted the end of this. The dining room was packed, people having returned to hear the Cavaliers' impromptu performance. They'd gotten more than they expected. I recognized, like the drunk who knows he's drunk but doesn't care, that I was feeling real cocky, and that it felt damn good. I glanced at Buckaroo. "You have another guitar, man?"

He nodded. A helpful Blue Blaze picked up Buckaroo's previous favorite guitar, which was leaning against the wall near the piano, and brought it to the boss.

I launched into an intricate, rapid riff, then stopped and looked at Buckaroo expectantly. He grinned and played it back to me, then ran through it again with a stepped-up tempo. In response, I transposed the whole thing up, necessitating some truly arduous fingering. Buckaroo's reply was a little uneven on timing but true on the notes. I speeded up the pace again, then added a syncopation to the plucking. After a moment, when I was sure I had control of it, I looked up triumphantly at Buckaroo, who raised his hands in smiling surrender and bowed. I ended the tune on a furious strum and took a bow myself to the audience, then to the Cavaliers.

When the cheering died down, Buckaroo inquired, "Where'd you learn to play like that--from Jimi Hendrix?"

I laughed. "Nashville, New York, and London," I answered. "I'm a little behind the times, musically.

And I'm a trifle out of practice."

Nobody wanted to believe this. "It's true," I insisted. "I made a couple of mistakes tonight. That was just a warm-up."

"He may not be modest," interjected Buckaroo, "but he can sure deliver." He glanced at me. "Can you sing?"

"Can I sing?" I asked in an outraged tone. "Do cats have kittens? Do peaches have pits?" I glanced around at their skeptical, expectant faces and relented. "Frankly, I'm usually off-key, which irritates the hell out of me, which makes me sing even worse."

"Amazing," drawled Reno. "He's not perfect."

At that line a realization jarred in my mind, and I looked at Buckaroo and asked bluntly, "Would you have a place for me in the Cavaliers, Buckaroo?"

His reply was to look inquiringly from the band members to the audience. Clapping and cheers rose up, and Pecos beat out a drumroll. I myself gazed at each member of the Hong Kong Cavaliers, and saw only amused affection and welcome.

"Sounds unanimous," said Buckaroo happily. "Welcome to the Cavaliers, D.T."

I shook my head at him. "D.T. doesn't exist anymore," I declared.

"The name," I stopped and looked around, savoring the effect, "is Perfect Tommy."

Never let it be said that Institute people were shy. My pronouncement was greeted with laughter, cheers, catcalls, and mock disgust. At least I hoped it was mock disgust. I watched Blackjack blink at the name, then nod quite matter-of-factly as if she wasn't surprised. I was gratified.

"Tommy," repeated Buckaroo. I couldn't tell what he was thinking. "Perfect Tommy."

I played a harmonic chord progression and gazed back at him in mingled exuberance and impudent conceit. "That's right," I agreed. The expression 'full of oneself' had never been more apt. I was all there, all the pieces in place, finally at balance between differing points of view and contradictory traits. And music was the key--for it, too, could be made up of strikingly disparate elements, dissonances that could be made to work together creatively. "You contesting its suitability?"

"Oh, no," he said, all wide-eyed innocence. "Better a name you can live up to." Buckaroo strolled over to my side and put his arm around my shoulders, then grinned at me and the collected Institute. "I would say that our newest resident is a perfect example--" He paused at the groans. "--A perfect example that no one is who he seems to be, yet is exactly who he is."

Postscript

by Fern Marder

Johannesburg
November 11

Dear Tommy,

I hope this finds you well. Please forgive my having left without saying "good-bye" to you. You were in New York City when the message came about my brother's having been arrested. There was a connecting flight out of Newark and suddenly I knew the time had come for me to go. I did so want to explain everything to you--there just was no time.

Speaking of time, the only reason I have the chance to write now is that the shoe is on the other foot, in a manner of speaking, both literally and figuratively. I'm hindered by a broken leg--just a simple fracture, nothing serious. A souvenir of last week's demonstration (or should I say riot. Yes, it was a riot, not the 'civil disturbance caused by scattered dissidents' as the powers-that-be would have it). I now understand all too well how incredibly restless you must have felt in that hospital bed. I wish we were together so you could say "I told you so."

Anyway, we're trying to get Arthur and several others released from prison. If we can't get them released before the charges go to court I fear we'll never see any of them again.

Tommy, sometimes I feel this whole country is being run by Hanoi Xan. I'm ashamed to admit I'd forgotten just how horrible it was and is. I think I was living in Paradise all my years at the Institute. I cannot imagine anywhere that is so totally the opposite of life here. I know you're probably thinking, "so why did you go back?" But you've been at the Institute long enough to know the answer to that. The more I saw and heard and learned from Buckaroo about caring for people and quality of life, the more I knew that someday I would have to return home to try to help. I don't know how much I can do, but I have to try.

I've found some Blue Blazes, whites, of course, but who understand and try to bridge this senseless gap of color. They help us get news of what is going on around the world. It's heartening to know that people are finally waking up to what has been happening here all this time.

I've got to go now. Someone's come in with a little boy who was hurt in the street fighting. Doctors are few, and so I've been doing some things I'm not sure Buckaroo would approve of a nurse

doing (especially one who herself is injured!). But even he would say it has to be done by someone, and if there's no better person, then that someone is you. The Blazes help me to get supplies. We're mostly working out of U.S. surplus packaged disaster hospitals. I'm glad they exist--but I can't help comparing these 1950's leftovers with what I used to have.

Give my best to everyone, especially Buckaroo. Take care of yourself. If you can. . .if you want to, write to the Blue Blazes, they'll get your letter to me.

Love,

Blackjack

BB

BB

BB

Perfect Tommy put the letter down and carefully, even meticulously, folded it and replaced it in the scuffed and worn envelope. If there was ever a time for a full-fledged strike team. . .

BB

BB

BB

BUCKAROO BANZAI and the Return from HELL

by Anne Elizabeth Zeek
and Sara Campbell

Foreword

Gentle Readers:

It has been forcibly brought home to me that I have been derelict in my duties as official biographer and raconteur of the adventures and life of the brave, daring, intrepid B. Banzai, in that my relating to you the tale of B. Banzai's defeat of the evil Lord John Whorfin and his Red Lectroids from Planet Ten did not, in fact, give you the whole story. As both Pecos and Mrs. Johnson have pointed out, "Reno, what's well begun should be well done."

Here, then, is the rest of the tale.

As is our usual practice in these matters, no one involved in the production of the 'novel' you now hold in your hand will ever realize a penny's worth of profit from the sales of the finished product. Rather, all 'profits' above cost will be donated to the World Fund for Hunger and Poverty, administered through the UN and one of the most worthy undertakings of that noble and globe-spanning, yet frequently maligned, governing body.

The facts and events herein depicted, no matter how seemingly farfetched or impossible, really occurred. The only instances where there may be any error are in the depiction of those



events to which I was not personally privy. Yet even here, my goal has been, as always, to reflect that universal and overall Truth that is more accurate than any mere recitation of flat facts could ever be. To this end, I have reconstructed the actions and words of others with as much verisimilitude as possible, given a background in which a naturally keen understanding of the underlying motivations of others has been enhanced by the intensive and in-depth multifaceted psychological training demanded by B. Banzai of his followers.

Additionally, in those few instances where I was not an actual participant in the creation of History, I have depended on the memories of events as recalled by those individuals actually taking part in the action therein developing. In almost all such instances I have been able to find at least one, or even more, eyewitness whose integrity is beyond reproach or doubt, and whose perspective on events which I myself could not attend for one reason or another--usually for the simple expedient that we at the Banzai Institute, despite rumors to the contrary, have not as yet developed the means by which to be in two places at the same time--has enabled me to present to you, gentle reader, a fully rounded picture of those events which occurred but a few short months ago, yet which have already exerted so certain a centrifugal force on the future development of this planet that we may safely predict all future history will, in some way, be marked by the adventures of B. Banzai in that shadowy underworld which floats beneath four of our western states, an underworld which no one, save Hanoi Xan, that most nefarious of Criminal Masterminds, knew of before the events I am about to impart to you.

As always, I am thankful to those without whom I could not have prepared this manuscript: Mrs. Johnson, archivist of the Banzai Institute; Perfect Tommy, mathematician extraordinaire, whose intricate theoretical computations, translated into reality, allowed

B. Banzai to seek for his missing treasure in the hidden world of Shayol; the Blue Blaze Irregulars, many of whom gave unstintingly of their time and skills to ensure our success in this venture (I have discovered, through my participation in all the shared adventures in which I have been privileged to take part since I was first fortunate enough to be recruited for the Hong Kong Cavaliers by B. Banzai himself, that the major difference between Good and Evil is that Good is always eager to share its fortune and success but that Evil is singularly selfish and devouring, keeping all things to itself--or, in almost all instances that I am aware of, to Xan!); and, of course, Penny Priddy, whose capture and--but enough. We will talk of that later.

For now, gentle reader, read, relax, and enjoy, knowing that, because of the bravery of B. Banzai and his loyal followers, among whom I am proud to be counted, you will never have to face the dangers of Shayol.

Chapter One: The Fickle Finger of Fate Strikes Again

There are several members of the press whom we at the Banzai Institute refer to as "B. Banzai Watchers." These are those certain representatives of the Fourth Estate who, since that time but a few short years ago when B. Banzai first burst across the scientific firmament like a shooting star, but rather more permanent in his ultimate effect on the proceedings of the world than is such an evanescent occurrence as a 'shooting star,' have perceived it to be almost a divinely inspired mission in life to report on B. Banzai's every undertaking, even the most insignificant and minutely routine action upon which he embarks. It is possible, therefore, to imagine into what feverish torrents of activity were thrown these minions of the world press by the events of the twelfth and thirteenth of June just past, the events

described in my last novel, The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai Across the Eighth Dimension.

In all probability, however, the worst headline to greet us was that which appeared in the Weekly Interrogator, that scurrilous and jejune example of yellow journalism which is published by one of B. Banzai's most dedicated detractors, the wealthy munitions mogul and newspaper nabob, Rumour Purdock. WOMAN RAISED FROM THE DEAD!! banner headlines screamed, closely followed by other headlines which shouted to even the most casual reader who passed, BUCKAROO BANZAI'S KISS OF LIFE REVIVES WOMAN TORTURED TO DEATH BY ALIENS FROM PLANET TEN!! The gullible reader was then exhorted to 'read all about it' on pages three, four, and five of the then-current issue of what I can only refer to, with all due apologies to accredited and responsible journalists, as that 'rag,' the Interrogator.

I originally purchased a copy of the Weekly Interrogator prepared to be mildly amused by what I anticipated to be their misreporting of the facts. I brought the paper back with me to the 'bunkhouse,' as the top floor of the Banzai Institute for Biomedical Engineering and Strategic Information, where the members of the Hong Kong Cavaliers are privileged to have their living quarters, is called. I thought I would read the stories about B. Banzai, laugh moderately, and perhaps, if I found the articles to be of sufficient interest, I would share them with Perfect Tommy, or New Jersey, or some others of the Institute.

To this end, I settled down in my favorite easy chair and began perusing the Interrogator. The articles which accompanied the aforementioned headlines were about par for the course for such an inferior product as the Weekly Interrogator: full of misquotes, sly allusions to events to which the author, one Hazeldine M'Keigh, had no means whatever of being privy, tawdry speculations regarding B. Banzai's new-found 'skill' (his so-called ability to

raise the dead), and outrightly--not to mention outrageously--libelous mis-statements of fact.

In short, the stories which I read that evening in the Interrogator stretched even my well-known patience to the breaking point.

With a mighty heave, I pushed myself up from my chair and strode across the room to the computer console positioned against the far wall. "Look at that," I animadverted to Perfect Tommy, throwing my copy of the Interrogator down in front of him as he sat as captive to his mathematical formulations. "Is Buckaroo Banzai to have no rest, no surcease from the constant carping of small minds? Must these petty-minded journalists turn everything that is most precious to him into a three days' wonder? Into a circus of grotesqueries for the amusement of all and sundry? Is nothing sacred to these pusillanimous purveyors of today's paltry penny-dreadfuls?"

Perfect Tommy scarcely glanced at the newspaper--if I can indeed grace the likes of the Weekly Interrogator with so honored a sobriquet as that--in front of him. "You still reading that junk, Reno?" he questioned before feeding a new calculation into the panel in front of him. "I would think you had something better to do with your time." He bit his lip thoughtfully, then typed another equation onto his keyboard. I knew the signs. He was about to declare me, and anyone else, save for B. Banzai, who might interrupt his new-found studies, persona non grata.

Before he could lose himself in the intricate and abstract world of higher mathematics--a world in which he seemed sometimes more at home than in this world of living, breathing beings (I can no longer insularly refer only to 'people,' not since the inhabitants of Planet Ten have made themselves known to us)--I pointed to the two most damaging headlines, those which I earlier recounted to you. "Don't you realize the significance of these headlines, Perfect Tommy?" I shook the

flimsy news-sheets in his face. "This could mean Big Trouble for Buckaroo Banzai!"

Perfect Tommy condescended to glance at the newspaper I still dangled in front of his face. An unholy gleam lit his eyes, and, almost, I regretted the noble impulse which had led me to share my disquietude with this strangely unsocialized mathematical genius. "Hazeldine's got you on the run again, has she?" he chortled in gloating tones.

I turned away from him. The fact that Ms. M'Keigh has chosen to 'review' each of my books has nothing to do with my poor opinion of her journalistic skills. Stiffly I replied, "I don't know what you're referring to. But if that's all you're going to say--" I faced him once more, mutely pleading for understanding.

Perfect Tommy frowned. "Hey, Reno, you really are upset about this, aren't you?" He took the Weekly Interrogator from my hands and perused the offending articles. When he finished--not a very long time since Tommy, like all members of the Institute, was a speed reader--he looked up at me, an inquiring expression on his face. "I don't understand why you're so upset, Reno. The true story will be carried in all the major newspapers of the country and will be on all the major networks. In addition, Buckaroo has already made arrangements to appear on 'Firing Line,' on the David Letterman show, and on the 'Nelson-Lerner Reports.' Add to that the fact that you're writing a new book. So why are you so worried about this article? Sure, it's filled with inconsistencies, but you know what Buckaroo always says: 'Even the biggest lie is valuable if it encourages someone to seek the truth.' Don't you think that that's what will happen here? Hazeldine's loyal readers will be so inspired by her highly purple prose they'll want to find out more--and then they'll get the real story."

With these brave words, meant to

bring some solace to my aching spirits, Perfect Tommy tossed the Weekly Interrogator into the waste basket next to his desk. "I know that Ms. M'Keigh's rather flippant attitude toward the truth bothers you--but I really think that this time you're worried about nothing."

Slowly, I shook my head. "Perfect Tommy, Buckaroo was planning on releasing information about the oscillation overthruster, about the Eighth Dimension, about Planet Ten, about the Nova Police--even about Lord John Whorfin and his black-hearted though red-skinned cohorts. But the one thing he was not intending to make public was the fact that Penny Priddy was returned from the dead by his kiss." I paused, held Perfect Tommy's gaze with my own before continuing. "Can't you imagine the effect these headlines will have on Hanoi Xan, Tommy?"

Chapter Two: A Crime Lord Hears of B. Banzai's Victory

It is difficult indeed for those of us who have elected to follow the rational teaching of B. Banzai to imagine with just what degree of furious incredulity, seething astonishment, and envious hatred, Hanoi Xan must have greeted the news of B. Banzai's triply successful venture: the conquest of other dimensions, the delivery of Earth from total destruction following the defeat of the Red Lectroid invaders from the 10th planet, and the restoration to life of Penny Priddy.

Xan's vast criminal network spread out from Sabah, the lost cave city in the mountain-jungles of Malaysia, to encompass the entire world. Not a continent, not a nation, not a floating speck in the middle of the ocean was free of the malignant influence of this villainous super-intelligence, this fallen archangel in human form.

We know that Xan, through the miracle of satellite broadcast

television, was aware of the success of the overthruster almost as soon as was B. Banzai. Unlike the rest of the world, however, Xan was also aware of some of the most immediate ramifications of B. Banzai's conquest of the 8th dimension. For, as I have already detailed at some length in Adventures Across the Eighth Dimension, Xan was aware of the existence of that nefarious, bedeviled creature of duality, Dr. Emilio Lizardo/Lord John Whorfin; indeed, it was only through the workings of Xan's criminal empire that Lord John Whorfin, the bestially evil leader of the Red Lectroids, was set free from the Trenton Home for the Criminally Insane in which, trapped in the body of Dr. Emilio Lizardo, that militant Red Lectroid had been held a prisoner since 1939.

And how did Whorfin, that inhuman purveyor of pain and degradation, repay Xan? By killing the agent of his escape, Lo Pep, the most intelligent and able of Xan's lieutenants. Great, indeed, burned the flame of Xan's hatred that day. And for once, this hatred was directed at another being than B. Banzai.

We have rescued and rehabilitated some of Xan's minions since the time of which I am speaking, and Mrs. Johnson has carefully preserved in the archival library of the Institute, against some future time when a knowledge of the workings of Evil's ways and means may help to preserve life, their memories of their time of servitude.

As recounted in Extradition to Hell, B. Banzai himself has been to Sabah. We know through his firsthand experience, therefore, the wonders of that city-state deep in the mountain-jungle caves. Looted treasures and precious artifacts from every nation on the face of the Earth, assassins and thugs of every race and racial mixture, helpless and hapless victims of Xan's mad quest for vengeance and power; all are gathered in the cavernous Throne Room of His Sublimity the Pivot of Mystery, the Hinge of Fate of All the Asias, the mystic teacher of the Hidden

Ways of Cruelty and Delight, Xan himself.

Knowledge of Lo Pep's death was transmitted to Xan's stronghold instantaneously when the subcutaneous radio transmitter-receiver lodged just above his aide's medulla oblongata slowed and then ceased functioning.

XAN: Ceased to function?

TECHNICIAN: (trembling in fear that Xan, in his wrath, will, like the emperors and god-lings of old, destroy the messenger who brings ill news) Yes, mighty Xan. Lo Pep is dead.

XAN: It is the madman, Lizardo. (Xan's fury is tightly controlled. He burns with a cold incandescence.) Could Lizardo have joined forces with Buckaroo Banzai? (Gesturing regally, Xan orders lowered from the ceiling a computer-enhanced map of the East Coast of the United States. He studies with particular interest the area around New Brunswick.) Has the Passion Flower of Forgetfulness been delivered to Banzai?

PSYCHOLOGIST: (coming forward from the throng eternally clustered around Xan's throne) Banzai plucked the precious bud last night, Your Devotedness, but does not appear affected by the poisoned perfume. Our spies say he is going forward with his plans for a press conference to announce his conquest of the inner world.

XAN: (hypnotic eyes narrowing) The vessel chosen for our revenge--has it been injured in any way?

PSYCHOLOGIST: (bowing so low his head touches the ground in front of Xan) The delivery of the chosen vessel went as smoothly as a well oiled pendulum slicing through tender flesh. Just as you anticipated, Your Sublime

Insidiousness, Banzai took possession of the precious bud and has put it under the protection of the Hong Kong Cavaliers.

XAN: (turning to the technician once more) There must be no slip-up this time. Do you understand?

TECHNICIAN: (wondering at his own daring) Forgive me, Your Divine Malignancy, but if the subject is destroyed by others?

XAN: (gently) You, as well as anyone else responsible, will contemplate my disappointment in the arms of the Mother of a Thousand Painful Deaths.

Xan determined to play a waiting game. Convinced by B. Banzai's spectacular defeat of the barrier of solid matter that the strange tale spun him by Lizardo/Whorfin--a tale of an army from another world stranded on this comparatively backward and primitive planet--was true, he waited to see if the renegade Italian scientist had gained enough control over his interplanetary 'guest' to seek the help of his old compatriot, Dr. Hikita, and of that fellow scientist's protegee, Buckaroo Banzai. Xan's agents reported to him on the actions of Lizardo and B. Banzai after the madman's escape from the relative sanctuary of the Trenton Home for the Criminally Insane. These actions made him consider that perhaps Lizardo was playing a very deep game indeed, that the dual-beinged maniac was determined to make an enemy of himself, Xan, the greatest Crime Lord since the beginning of civilization, as well as B. Banzai, the only person ever born who, conceivably, might, just might be Xan's almost-equal.

As we later learned, Xan was sure that he could, for once, afford to wait. He did not know of the existence of the Nova Police, and so did not know of their demands on B. Banzai. Xan could afford to allow Whorfin the chance to rid him of the inconvenience of B. Banzai's existence. If he

succeeded, so much the better. If he failed, then status quo.

Xan took the news of B. Banzai's victory over Whorfin philosophically enough--for him. He ordered the slaughter of a mere twenty-seven virgins, the torture of no more than thirty-two mining slaves, and the destruction of but seven outlying villages. The news of P. Priddy's 'resurrection,' however, filled him with a fury so ravenous it is to be wondered at that he did not, on the spot, die of apoplexy (thus saving the world from the terrors of Shayol).

The poor technician responsible for tracking Xan's zombies, mind-slaves, death-dwarves, and the like was hauled before his evil master.

"Why was I not informed of the woman's death?" Almost idly, Xan played with a jewelled kris dagger. Plucking a hair from the technician's beard, he sliced it lengthwise once, then yet again. The technician, reading the menace in that subtle gesture, trembled in every limb, and kept his gaze glued to the floor, as though hoping that this display of humility would disarm the great Crime Lord.

"I tried to tell you, most Bestial of Beings, but you waved me away and said, 'Later, after this air battle is over.'"

As is ever the case with arrogance, Xan did not appreciate hearing that an undesirable event was the result of his own actions. If it were possible, his fury waxed even greater, and he motioned forward two mind-slaves (one of them was James II, the King of Traumania, missing for five years and believed by his grieving subjects to be dead at the hands of Slobovian terrorists while, in reality, he had been kidnapped by Xan, and, injected with the nerve poison Talava, turned into a mindless slave of evil; the other was a renowned physicist-politician, also believed dead, whose name I shall not divulge lest worldwide panic erupt at the thought of this woman's being in

Xan's hands--both literally and figuratively).

"Introduce this fool to the embrace of the Mother of a Thousand Deaths and Delights," Xan snarled. Ignoring the screams of the technician as the two slaves dragged him, kicking and struggling, away, Xan reread the article on the verifaxed copy of the front page of the Weekly Interrogator. The printed words had not rearranged themselves since he last read them. They still told him that B. Banzai, that annoying do-gooder and savior of the world, had restored Penny Priddy to life. Xan's slender tapered fingers crushed the verifaxed pages. Did B. Banzai know just how ironic was his resurrection of P. Priddy?

Xan looked across the cavernous audience hall to the huge golden doors which led from the Throne Room. The two mind-slaves, carrying their struggling victim easily in their drugged excess of strength, were just about to leave his presence. He raised his right hand. So complete was Xan's control over his minions that instantaneously, every person in the room, even those who were facing away from him, froze. All then turned to him and bowed low.

Xan pointed to the technician, hanging limply now in the hold of his two captors. "Be sure he dies slowly," Xan said, "and that a videotape is made of his death. It will prove instructive to others." The two mind-slaves accepted Xan's instructions with no show of emotion. Xan nodded, and they left. With a subdued release of relieved breath, the others in the Throne Room returned to what they had been doing before the Evil One had begun to speak.

Turning on his heel, Xan stalked back to his throne. He sat there for several hours, his impassive Mongolian face revealing no hint of what tortuous path his thoughts were taking. Of Xan, B. Banzai has said that his life-long embracing of evil is the greatest single loss to humanity since Shiva

first danced the universe into existence. When Xan was in repose, even one dedicated in every fiber of existence to defiance of the malevolent Lord of Crime could see what B. Banzai meant: Xan's brow was noble, his face ascetic and intelligent; he was extraordinarily handsome--indeed, some would call him beautiful; an expert at every form of martial art and fully trained in the use of both modern and primitive weaponry, the sheathed perfection of his form was evident even as he sat statue-still. Although it was known that Xan was probably over 100 years old, he looked no more than thirty-five (local legend said that Xan renewed himself periodically at the font of life, that he drank his strength from the hearts of his young captives and prisoners). It was in these moments of quiet contemplation, when Xan's usual nervous energy was stilled, that his remarkable resemblance to B. Banzai--a resemblance due perhaps to no more than their shared ancestry, yet a resemblance which may account for the depth of the hatred between them (are not fraternal hatreds the most destructive, the most intensely painful and heated?)--was most pronounced.

The malignant light of crazed genius gradually seeped back into Xan's eyes, and his passing resemblance to B. Banzai disappeared. He roused from his near stupor and clapped his hands once. His majordomo, a huge former sumo wrestler who had been driven from Japan after he willfully injured an opponent in an unsupervised match, instantly appeared at his side. "Bring me a carafe of karakoumiss*," Xan ordered, "--and my daughter."

* As regular readers of these adventures are aware, this is the Mongolian drink of fermented mare's milk, symbolizing the bitterness of life that must be accepted with the sweet, and transcended, which is also highly prized by B. Banzai -- Reno

Chapter Three:
The Best Laid Schemes
of Mice and Men--and B. Banzai--
Gang Aft Agley

Since her miraculous resurrection, Penny Priddy's recovery appeared to be frankly phenomenal. New Jersey, who had had the sad task of alerting B. Banzai of her death, was astonished. "She was truly dead, Reno," he said to me as we sat together in the bunkhouse one evening about four days after the defeat of Lord John Whorfin, an evening which, like the three preceding it, seemed to me altogether too peaceful and uneventful, with no local, national, or international crises calling for B. Banzai's attention. "There was no pulse, no brain wave action, no vital life signs." He frowned and rubbed one long finger thoughtfully alongside his nose. "Here's another strange thing. That perfume Penny wore? Remember how, if you got close to her, it had an almost hypnotic effect?"

I nodded. As I have already detailed elsewhere, during those early days when P. Priddy had first--somehow--become an adjunct of the B. Banzai team, I had been more than suspicious of her, and I had taken every opportunity to keep close to her, determined to discover if she meant some mischief for our chief. On several of these occasions I had found my attention strangely wandering, my mind and will sapped until I felt that, had Penny Priddy asked of me any deed--for good or evil--I would have moved earth and sky to make her happy. "She called it 'I Don't Remember,' and said it was Chinese."

New Jersey's thoughtful frown deepened. "Chinese or not, I've never yet heard of a perfume that fades away completely immediately upon the death of its wearer, Reno."

I stared at him. As he was wont to do when worried or upset, he began to play the piano softly. "All traces disappeared?" I asked incredulously. He didn't answer me in words, but

simply nodded and continued playing the piano. I recognized the tune. It was The Bartered Bride. "But I don't understand, New Jersey. What does all this mean?"

He didn't answer me directly. Rather, he asked if he could see the wedding picture of Peggy and Buckaroo which I keep in my wallet. I handed the picture over to him and he examined it carefully. "Reno, how similar are Peggy and Penny?"

"As like as two peas in a Mendelian experiment," I replied. He didn't respond to my witticism. Instead, he said, "Mrs. Johnson says she mentioned the scars on Penny's scalp to you."

I agreed. "Surgical scars right behind her ears."

"They're not plastic surgery scars," New Jersey brooded. I couldn't understand what he was driving at. For the past three days I'd been increasingly tense, despite--or perhaps even because of--the seeming peacefulness, wondering when and where Hanoi Xan would attack--and attack he would. It would be completely foreign to that monstrous ego to allow B. Banzai to enjoy in untrammelled jubilation the sweet fruits of his victory over Lord John Whorfin and over death. Now New Jersey was trying to bring my attention to bear on yet another problem, the question of Penny Priddy.

"What are you driving at, New Jersey?"

"Reno, did you ever stop to think that Penny could be Peggy? That after Peggy's 'death' her body might have been stolen by Xan?" I started to answer that such thievery by Xan had been Buckaroo's first suspicion, relinquished only when he could find no trace of his dead-yet-missing bride in Sabah, but New Jersey plowed right ahead without waiting for my response. "Think how simple it might have been for him to turn her into one of his radio-controlled slaves. The scars are

certainly appropriately placed. And that perfume--one of his sweetly laid traps for Buckaroo, perhaps? 'I Don't Remember.' How appropriate a name if Peggy's memories were destroyed, leaving room only for Penny, and Penny's manufactured memories."

"Then you don't believe the story of the twin sister, either?" I almost jumped from my skin. I had not heard Perfect Tommy enter the rec room.

New Jersey shrugged, his lugubrious brown eyes reflecting his disquietude. "I don't know, Perfect Tommy. I never knew Peggy, so I don't have any memories to draw on."

Tommy and I exchanged meaningful glances. He raised one brow questioningly and I shrugged, then nodded. He turned purposefully to New Jersey. "At first glance, New Jersey, it would seem that Penny Priddy is, indeed, our lost sister Peggy brought to life again--and this could, of course, be explained away if she were Peggy's long-lost and separated-from-childhood twin sister. On second glance, there are differences between Penny and Peggy--a wilder, more sensuous air about the former, an almost feverish anxiety emanating from her--"

"This is in direct contrast to Peggy?" New Jersey queried in tones of deepest and most clinical interest.

Tommy and I nodded in response to the question. "Peggy was incredibly alive, responsive to every nuance of life, and yet, even with this aura of electrical vitality, she was the most serene and peaceful woman I have ever known," I answered with a reminiscent smile, "and with four former wives--" I ignored Perfect Tommy's derisive snort to blithely continue, "--And three sisters, I assure you, I do know women."

"Penny was like a wild, undisciplined child suddenly thrust in with adults, and cautiously feeling her way," Perfect Tommy ventured. I stared at him, astonished by the depth of his

perceptions. Tommy had never eschewed the company of women, but he had also never been given to a philosophical dissection of his relations with them. "She was incredibly brilliant at times, and at other times seemed almost illiterate, the veriest street waif."

"And Peggy?" New Jersey asked. He had taken a small spiral notepad and a Bic Biro from his wampum belt and was jotting down notes in the typical handwriting of a medical man.

"Peggy was a gentle woman at all times," Tommy intoned reverently. "She was a brilliant theoretical physicist, a world-renowned astronomer, a fourth dan black belt in karate, a Rhodes scholar in pre-Chaucerian poetry, a world-class fencer, and a skilled yachtsman. And yet, she was as truly unaffected and humble as is Buckaroo himself."

New Jersey looked from his notepad to Perfect Tommy, who had, during his impassioned speech, walked across the room to stand in front of Billy's IBM 370. His full attention seemed to be on the last program Billy, our resident computer hacker, had fed into the computer, an intricate war game intended for the final evening trials in Games Theory to be held three weeks hence, during Initiation Week. "Were you in love with her?" New Jersey questioned. Only the expression of deep and sincere concern on his face kept me from wanting to take him to task for asking what might have been a question of prurient interest.

Tommy seemed to have momentarily lost all interest in the Penny/Peggy question, and I took it upon myself to answer New Jersey. "In one way or another, New Jersey, we all loved Peggy. She was as close an approximation to the Ideal Woman as we shall ever find, I am sure. (Let me take a moment here, gentle readers, to digress. One of the tenets that B. Banzai has tried to install in all of his followers is that, in this multi-layered, multifaceted, and multitudinously diverse existence, nothing is

ever certain. I had just rashly stated that something as immeasurable as perfection could be defined by Peggy Banzai, and had implied that she had no equal. Although no one would deny the truth of my comments regarding P. Banzai either now or in the future, I was to have the implications of my statement, that there could be no other like Peggy, challenged inside of the month--and in a way that no one in the Institute, not even Buckaroo or Penny herself, would ever have hazarded a guess to prior to the development of certain events that were, even then, being set in motion by that most nefarious of evil-doers, Hanoi Xan himself. But enough of such divigations. You will share the entire story soon enough, readers. Meanwhile, let me return to the main thrust of this story.) And as such," I assured New Jersey, who had never been privileged to know our sweet Peggy, or bask in the light of her approbation and concern, or thrive in the aura of intellectual stimulation which she somehow carried with her, like a mobile and sentient Alpha-wave inducer, "we could not help but love her. But there was never any hint of jealousy or bitterness that she chose to marry Buckaroo. They were an ideal couple, and, loving them both, we were thrilled at their betrothal."

It worried me that Perfect Tommy, during my entire speech, chose to remain quiet. This was not like our Tommy, who, despite his brilliance and daring in intellectual matters, was sometimes as a child in social situations. I would have anticipated, rather than an almost oppressively unusual silence, that Tommy would have begun a raucous questioning on the state--past, present, and future--of New Jersey's own love life.

From the concerned look on New Jersey's face, I knew that he, too, despite the brevity of his time of acquaintance with us, had inner qualms about the state of Perfect Tommy's mental equilibrium. "Perfect Tommy?" he inquired. "Is there anything you can add to this?"

Perfect Tommy shook himself and turned to us once more. His face was almost placid, but his eyes--his eyes, gentle readers, bore an expression of such deep and lasting sorrow as I had, to that day, seen nowhere but in the eyes of our illustrious chief, B. Banzai, on the day that his bride of hours, Peggy Banzai, was murdered. For the first time I wondered at what hidden depths of despair and suffering were hidden under Perfect Tommy's usually insouciant exterior. And then--I hesitate to report it, readers, lest you lose all faith in me as the Boswell for these merry adventures of B. Banzai and the Hong Kong Cavaliers--then the unworthy thought entered my mind that Perfect Tommy had perhaps loved Peggy not wisely, but too well, and that, perhaps--almost, my pen does not want to write the next words, my fingers do not want to type the next letters. And yet I must, so that certain events still in the future will be clear to you when they happen, events that are, indeed, beyond comprehension if not viewed in the context of the unworthy suspicion that entered my mind, I wish I could say through the manipulation of Hanoi Xan, but which, in reality, entered there through my own human frailty and weakness--perhaps Perfect Tommy would in some way (Forgive me, my own dear brother Tommy!), because of his feelings for Peggy, be open to the blandishments of Hanoi Xan.

My face must have revealed some of the mental perturbation that was inwardly tearing me apart, because Tommy raised a quizzical brow at me. I shook my head, signaling that nothing was wrong (the greatest mistake I have ever made, readers. One word from me, one syllable, and Tommy could have cleared up my misapprehensions. But I, telling myself that I was wrong in my suspicions, did not speak, and the doubts and hesitations returned to haunt me at a later date, a date when I needed all my wits about me and when my doubts almost caused the death of Tommy, and Pecos, and B. Banzai himself) and Tommy once again addressed himself to the question of a comparison between Peggy and Penny.

"To return to the question of Peggy and Penny, New Jersey," Perfect Tommy elaborated, his brows knit with thought, "at third glance, one once again sees the similarities. It's in the subtle things: the tilt of her head when she scores an intricate mathematical point, the way her lips purse when she says 'Buckaroo,' the way her glance slides off to the left when she's thinking about something someone has just said to her, the way she has of looking under her lashes at something she's interested in. . . ." His voice died away. He stared off into the near distance blindly, as though looking at Penny right then and there and seeking desperately for some answer to the conundrum. Was the woman B. Banzai had taken from that tiny cell in Atlantic City truly Peggy Banzai, restored somehow to glorious life, yet burdened with the memories of another--or even, with the false memories of one who had never existed? Was she Penny Priddy, long-lost twin sister of our own now-lost sister Peggy? Or did the Truth lie somewhere else entirely?

Frankly, I feared that we should never know the answer to our puzzle, that which our dear departed Rawhide* had called the "Penny Paradox."

With a weary sigh, New Jersey closed his notepad. "If we cannot yet say with any certainty that Penny is Penny, or Peggy, or someone else entirely, is it safe to have her here, at the Institute? What if her entire *raison d'etre* is to injure Buckaroo?"

"Buckaroo would say to that, 'Think the worst of someone, and that is what you will receive in kind; think the best of them, and you'll receive back even more than that.'" The words came to my lips easily, and I believed them. Had I not seen the truth of them proved by B. Banzai again and again in our battle against Hanoi Xan, when we would time after time be rescued from

complete and utter destruction by even the lowliest of the low's being converted to right-thinking by our invincible leader's example?

But in my heart, all unbeknownst to me, in my heart had the seeds of doubt already been planted, and it was I, and not Perfect Tommy, not Penny Priddy, not even Hanoi Xan himself, who would, in a few short weeks, prove the greatest danger of all time to B. Banzai.

Chapter 4: Wherein the Plot Begins to Thicken

The next several weeks passed, on the surface, as smoothly and quietly as one might want. Nothing required the chief's immediate attention, and he was able to devote his time to several experiments he had been running prior to the Jet Car test (one of these entailed the peaceful application of solar energy to finding a permanent and cheap means of energy such as would, literally, transform the face of the Earth, incidentally wiping out disease and poverty on the side; another was the development of a subterranean machine that could travel as easily through the earth as a submarine moves through water--an application of the science behind the oscillation overthruster such as would allow the penetration of solid matter, but in this dimension, rather than in any other). The strange lull also gave him time to devote to the Annual Review by the Board of Directors of the Institute of the papers of applicants desirous to enter our New Brunswick facility, and to Penny Priddy.

Because so long a time went by with no action from Hanoi Xan, I began to doubt my earlier fears and misapprehensions. "Worry-monger!" I scoured myself, laughing at the doubts I had had about Penny--and Tommy. Relations with that erratic computer genius had been strained for several days after our talk, detailed to you in the

* Rawhide's brave and tragic death is recounted in Adventures Across the Eighth Dimension -- Reno

chapter just past, with the redoubtable New Jersey. But Tommy, despite his great intellect, is essentially a moody child, with a child's capriciousness and need to be in the center of everyone's universe, and within a few days this need for approval led him to ignore the doubt he had sensed in me, and he once again began to confide in me, seeking my aid and assistance in some of the schemes he had under hand.

Thus it was on the warm July day marking the onset of the week of training and tryouts that culminated in Initiation Day. We were all--students, interns, residents, instructors, Cavaliers, and Board members--gathered in the Main Hall of the Institute. B. Banzai, Penny Priddy (who, during the intervening weeks, had been accepted as a post facto member of the Cavaliers, proving herself to be more than knowledgeable in quantum theory and in astrophysics, and, moreover, possessor of a coloratura alto voice and wielder of a mighty mean sax, low and hot), and we Cavaliers were seated on a dais at the front of the room.

In inverse order, B. Banzai announced the names of the successful finalists who had been chosen for the final testing designed to lead to initiation into the Banzai Institute for Biomedical Engineering and Strategic Information. Each of the student-applicant finalists would be paired with a senior resident or with a Cavalier for the last part of the program, a week-long series of all-day games that would test their speed, reflexes, moral mind-set, psychological strengths and weaknesses, citizenship, and general fund of knowledge. Some of our members--my darling Pecos among them--had been dispatched by B. Banzai on various diplomatic and/or scientific research missions, but there were sufficient senior residents and Cavaliers remaining that all of the tentatively accepted applicants would have a suitable partner.

I myself was paired with a young Fiji Islander, a lad who had, in fourteen short years, raised himself from

the mysterious depths of a jungle dweller to the even more arcane level of a university graduate in nuclear chemistry, a field which he had invented himself and which has, through its implications and ramifications, very much interested and thrilled the knowledge-seeking B. Banzai.

Tommy was the last Cavalier to be assigned a partner and, as he looked across the stage at her, the usually voluble young computer genius was uncharacteristically silent. I could not blame him. Even among so gifted a group as was gathered here, this girl's potential was extraordinary. I felt a strange thrill in my deepest heart when our chief, unperturbed even in the face of such genius as this, announced some of the deeds which had won her the opportunity to seek a permanent place with the Hong Kong Cavaliers and the Banzai Institute: already, the mathematical formulae she had introduced to the computer hookup between Washington and Moscow was in the process of coordinating a mutually intelligible third language that promised to end forever the faulty translations that so frequently hazarded lasting peace between the United States and Russia; a medical experiment she had begun playing with at the age of nine was finally showing results, and, after the trillionth generation, she appeared to have succeeded in developing a form of virus that fed on cancerous cells, dying off when a body returned to health; her painstaking and revolutionary archeological theories, originally derided by most of the modern masters, save only B. Banzai, when put to the test, had resulted in the greatest discovery since Schliemann's discovery of Troy, the discovery of the actual location of the lost empire of Mu; she had won a tenth level red belt in karate, forcing the Masters of the Japanese, Chinese, and Korean Karate Associations to honor her ranking by allowing herself to be locked in a room with fifty opponents, ranging from fifth level black belts to tenth dans, and emerging after only twenty-one minutes as the sole victor; she played guitar (classical, twelve-string, double-necked, electric, and

acoustic), tenor and alto sax, piano, and drums, and could sing soprano both with full symphony accompaniment and a capella. In short, she was the very type of student IBM, GM, the Rand Corporation, Los Alamos, Hudson, and the US government try so desperately to worm away from us.

I glanced over at Tommy, wondering if he were impressed by the accomplishments of his future partner. Tommy's eyes had glazed over and he was staring at the young applicant, introduced by B. Banzai only as Miraj, as though she were his veriest hope of heaven. I smiled, remembering fondly that thus had it been for me, also. Chosen by B. Banzai to partner Pecos during my final week of applicant testing, the natural interdependence of partners teamed in situations that, without warning, could suddenly turn into life-or-death scenarios, had blossomed, deepened, grown even more meaningful, until, by the end of Testing Week, a Testing Week turned suddenly very, very real when we found ourselves the prisoners of the Pasha of Three Tails*, Pecos and I had tremulously admitted our all-encompassing and eternal love for one another. Such a situation, I had no doubt, appeared in the making here.

My contemplation of the incipient romance between Perfect Tommy and the brilliant Miraj was broken by the strange actions of Penny Priddy. She suddenly gasped, rose to her feet, and brokenly uttered the words, "Shayol, on the fifth, without fail," all the while pointing a trembling finger toward the tall slender figure of Miraj. P. Priddy's eyes then rolled back in her head and she fell to the floor in a dead faint. New Jersey rushed to her side, chafed her hands, gently slapped her cheeks, and held a vial of smelling salts under her nose. Penny choked and opened her eyes. She looked around the room, but I noticed that her eyes

* The story of the mutual exchange of vows undertaken by Pecos and myself is recounted in Bastardy Proved a Spur -- Reno

passed completely over Miraj, almost as though she did not see her. Gently, B. Banzai and New Jersey led Penny Priddy from the room. A startled murmur broke out when they left, and only Miraj, still standing quietly in the middle of the stage, head humbly bowed in deference to the august personages to whom she had been in the process of being introduced, did not turn to a neighbor to ask what the strange event I have just described to you portended. Nay, there was one other who refrained from useless questioning. Perfect Tommy continued to sit mumchance beside me, never once taking his eyes from Miraj's tall, slender form, or her exotic, blue-eyed, half-Oriental features.

Buckaroo Banzai strode back into the room. Such was the extent of his presence that the room stilled immediately, and he did not have to lift a hand for silence. Ms. Priddy, he announced, had simply fainted, and New Jersey thought it might be a recurrence of some type of jungle fever, one that he wanted to keep under observation for a while but which he did not doubt would have no long-lasting debilitating effect on P. Priddy.

I almost choked and had to reach hurriedly for a glass of water as the full significance of Buckaroo Banzai's words struck me with the force of a mighty blow. Another Penny/Peggy parallelism! It was Peggy who had come down with Bwotani Fever five years ago, shortly after the Affair of the Lost Tribe of the Randalin Rainforest, recounted elsewhere*, wherein she and B. Banzai had astounded the world with their exploits and had completely altered the fields of human anthropology and field psychiatry. Penny, on the other hand, at least from the story that she had told Mrs. Johnson, had, until she came to the wilds of New Jersey, never in her life left the small-town security of Laramie, Wyoming.

* Please see The Hong Kong Cavaliers and the Tree of Infinite Wisdom -- Reno

No one else in the room, however, not even the perspicacious and indomitable B. Banzai, appeared to think that the news about Penny was at all portentous of danger, so I took the nugget of information and stored it away, intending to forget it.

Penny seemed basically restored to health during the next week. I made sure to seek her out, to ascertain that she was indeed feeling better. She smiled when she saw me. "Reno," she flaunted, "have you come to see the elephant?"

I frowned, at a loss to explain her words, afraid that she may have had a relapse. There are no elephants lodged currently at the Institute. A pair of civet-cats, an Alaskan timberwolf, several brace of low-flying geese that have become permanently detoured on their trip south, and all the flora and fauna native to the Jersey Meadows, yes. But elephants? "What elephant?" I riposted cleverly.

Penny reached out to touch my hand. I blinked. For a moment, I thought I could smell a trace of 'I Don't Remember,' the strange Chinese perfume she had worn when she first joined our merry band. Then the faint whiff of exotica dissipated on the wind. "It's just a saying, Reno," Penny whimsied gently. "So many people have been to see me lately I feel like an elephant, or other wild creature, trapped in a zoo."

I am sorry to say that my doubts came surging to the surface once again. "Trapped?" I conundrummed with innate cunning.

She smiled gently, refusing to fall victim to my interrogation. "Did I say trapped? I mean, rather, protected from everything that would harm me." She leaned forward then, kissing me gently on the cheek, and the full flavor of her perfume hit me. It was--my thoughts suddenly spiraled. Dizzy, I begged to be excused from her

presence and sought out New Jersey. By the time I got there, I had almost forgotten the entire incident with Penny and, indeed, why I had sought to see New Jersey in the first place.

And so it might have continued, had not something of dire and earth-shaking consequence occurred on the last night of the Trials.

It had been a remarkably successful week. Of the forty-nine finalist applicants to the Institute, only five had been winnowed out at this stage. The remaining candidates gave promise of forming the most remarkable class of students we had ever accepted at the Institute. Rawhide, the gentle giant who had, along with Peggy, been so much at the heart of the Institute--and in the heart of B. Banzai--would have been exceedingly moved by this fine, upstanding group of candidates. His faith in the Institute, and in its precepts, had never wavered, not even in the face of Xan's most bitter enmity, and he had served as a surrogate 'older brother' for every class of interns since the Institute was formed. I knew the rest of us could never take his place, but with his example to guide us, we would certainly be better than we were.

Other than B. Banzai himself, Rawhide had had the most intimate contact with the nefarious Hanoi Xan. Indeed, on more than one occasion this simple seeker after the truth had single-handedly stood between Xan and his dream of world domination--and his body bore the scars to prove it. But such was his modesty, he would never let me give him the credit he deserved. Let me give it to him now. Sleep well, Rawhide, my friend, and perhaps, as B. Banzai has said, that door you left us by will someday open wide again.

I had not seen much of Perfect Tommy during the final week of testing, and the few times I did manage to glimpse a sight of him across the campus he was with Miraj. Remembering the throes of my own first weeks of love with my darling Pecos, I did not

intrude. I recall once, however, turning to the Seminole Kid, back from another of his death-defying missions*, and saying thoughtfully, "Has Miraj ever been a candidate here before?"

Seminole looked across to where Perfect Tommy and Miraj were sitting under the spreading chestnut tree that stood sentinel outside the Research Lab. He shook his head. "No one could forget such a talented and beautiful candidate, Reno."

I nodded. He was right. Miraj, if she had not been taken with the idea of becoming the most fully rounded person she could be, and so applying to the Institute, could have walked into any Hollywood studio any day of the week, including Sunday, and been hired on the spot, so exotically magnificent was her beauty.

"I think I've seen her somewhere."

Blue Blaze Irregular Pinky Caruthers came up behind us in time to hear my last words. "If you'd ever seen her before," he taunted, "you'd remember where, Pecos or no Pecos."

I studied, as well as I could from a respectful distance, Miraj's high cheekbones, brilliant blue eyes, glossy black hair, and slightly aquiline features. I readily acknowledged the truth of Pinky's statement. Beauty such as hers could never be forgotten, but still-- I shrugged. "I don't know, Pinky. There's something familiar about her." Turning back to Pinky, I tilted my head inquiringly. "Aren't you on duty today? Was there something you wanted?"

"Hunh? Oh, yeah. Buckaroo wants to see you in the Jet Car Lab."

"Did he say what he wanted?"

* To be recounted in a future, as yet unnamed, adventure of the Cavaliers -- Reno

Pinky shook his head. "I didn't ask."

I waved farewell to Seminole and Pinky, and headed off for the Jet Car Lab. Why would our chief want to see me there? Surely, now that we were in the process of adapting the scientific theories behind the Jet Car Drive for peaceful application by all the peoples of the world, there could be no intrigue surrounding the mighty machine?

I entered the Jet Car Lab prepared to find the worst. At first, there appeared to be no one there. Then I saw a pair of feet emerging from the underside of the Jet Car. I walked over. "Buckaroo?"

"Be right with you, Reno." The words were muffled, but clearly expressed by my chief. I waited patiently, content to be a part of the forces encircling this extraordinary man.

At last Buckaroo Banzai pushed himself out from under the Jet Car, wiping his hands on the slightly oily towel looped over the belt knotted at his waist. "Reno," he stated in his usual decisive manner, "I'd like you to go to Washington tomorrow. There's a committee meeting scheduled on--"

I groaned, and B. Banzai looked properly sympathetic. Of all the tasks which fell to the lot of the Cavaliers, Government committee meetings were most probably among the very least appreciated.

"I know, Reno, I know. But there's a sub-sub-sub-committee meeting of the Strategic Armaments and Propaganda Committee, and if we don't have a representative there, I can't promise that Senator Cunningham will be able to prevent the Secretary of Defense from pushing through his latest craze."

"What is it this time," I quipped. "Antigravity devices to render incoming invaders helpless?"

B. Banzai smiled, as I had intended him to. "I only wish it were something that sensible, Reno. Professor Hikita is quite sure he will have the antigrav problem licked shortly. It's just a small matter of adapting the gyroscopic converter from our shavers to larger objects." He shook his head. "No, the Secretary wants to get approval for a billion-dollar appropriation for a Dean machine."

I stared at B. Banzai. "A Dean machine?" I protested. "But every high school freshman knows that such an instrument is naught but a scientifically dressed confidence game, the technological equivalent of a handkerchief drop."

Buckaroo Banzai's smile widened to a grin. "Maybe the Secretary of Defense never completed grammar school," he suggested.

Remembering some of that scurrilous gentleman's schemes, I dared to disagree with the chief. "Personally," I deadpanned, "I don't think he got out of Headstart."

Our pleasant game of Pin-the-Tail-on-the-Secretary-of-Defense was interrupted by a sudden explosion that knocked us from our feet, broke the lab windows, and shook the very ground on which we had hithertofore been standing.

"What the--" In my daze, I was almost blasphemous in B. Banzai's presence.

"That came from the Physics Lab," Buckaroo avowed, scrambling to his feet. "Penny's there."

As though to underscore the words of B. Banzai, Pinky Carruthers staggered into the Jet Car Lab. "Buckaroo, Buckaroo," he panted, lungs laboring under the task he had just set them in racing to us as quickly as he had, "the Lab, it's gone--and there's no sign of Penny!"

Buckaroo Banzai and I stared at the Blue Blaze Irregular. His clothing was torn from the force of the explosion and his face was covered with soot. Nevertheless, he bore himself proudly, aware that he had acted as quickly and correctly as possible in a situation in which there were no easy and right answers.

Buckaroo's eyes sought mine. If I had ever thought I had seen horror or fear on a human face before, I now realized how wrong I was. "No," intoned Buckaroo, and the emotion in his voice would have left unaffected only Hanoi Xan, "not again."

A sudden silence descended on the Jet Car Lab and, at that moment, the telephone on the wall began to ring.

Chapter Five: Storming the Gates of Hell

Sabah. City of mystery, city of shame. City of a thousand earthly delights--and more than ten thousand times ten again as many hellish horrors. Carved out of the heart of the tallest, most inaccessible mountain in Malaysia, Sabah's insidious influence ranged far afield, true. But never was the foul poison of this beautiful, deadly city so bitterly tasted as in the fastness of the Malaysian jungle.

Beautiful maidens scarred hideously by fathers and brothers lest they catch Xan's eye--and not even this saving them from the annual ride of the Black Horde, when Xan's warriors, bravos, and death-dwarves spewed forth from Sabah to seek wives. Virile youths stolen in their prime, used callously in Xan's ceaseless experiments--used, then tossed aside. Villagers, tribesmen, lonely herders and hunters united by a single fear--Xan.

Four strike teams of Cavaliers, Institute residents, and Blue Blaze volunteers stood at the edge of a hidden jungle clearing. Above us loomed

Sabah's menacing mountain. "The villagers hereabouts say that when the wind is right, the cries of the damned, trapped in Sabah, blanket the earth." Drawing a deep breath, Buckaroo Banzai continued. "Their cries, and the stench of the burning bodies of Xan's victims."

How did we come to be here, deep in the mountains of Malaysia, readying to fight Xan's zombie-like death troops? It all began with the explosion at the Research Lab, the sudden disappearance of Penny Priddy--and the telephone call which shattered the preternatural silence which had descended between B. Banzai and myself as we stood in the center of the Jet Car Lab contemplating what this sudden disaster portended for our future.

"Buckaroo Banzai?" the voice on the other end of the line asked.

"Yes," responded B. Banzai. "To whom am I speaking?"

Even I, standing across the room from the telephone, could hear the vile laughter emanating from the telephone's speaker. "I told you, Banzai, I'd see you in Hell. And if you ever want to see Penny Priddy again, that's where you'll come to meet me." The phone then went dead.

I gasped in astonishment. "Lizardo! But--but how?"

B. Banzai frowned. Thankfully, I could see that the ultimate despair in his eyes was gone now, defeated by his firm intention to refuse to surrender to fate in this matter. "I don't think it was Lizardo, Reno. I can't think of any way he could have survived the destruction of the Panther ship."

"Then who--"

"Xan. It must be. We know from Lo Pep's death that he was intimately concerned with Lizardo's escape."

"His escape, yes. But how would he know the words Dr. Lizardo shouted

out to you at the moment of his apparent death?"

Buckaroo Banzai paused for a moment, hesitation clearly printed across his smooth forehead. Then he shrugged. "It would be easy enough, Reno. All he'd need would be an ally within the masses of the Red Lectroids, someone with an open cable to him at the moment of the Panther ship's destruction. Or perhaps Xan had a satellite fix on Dr. Lizardo at the time and eavesdropped that way." Grim determination was etched in every line of Buckaroo Banzai's face and form. "Whatever, it must be Xan, and this message is just another example of his overweening pride and sadism."

Deliberately, I turned a deaf ear to the small, niggling, whining inner voice which suddenly, without warning, whispered in my ear, "And perhaps the ally was one from within our own ranks? Someone who heard the tale of Whorfin's last words from B. Banzai's own lips?"

Within hours of the above, a 'capping' ceremony was held in the audience hall at the Institute. All forty-four of the remaining finalists were sworn into the Institute, and--even in the midst of our concern for P. Priddy and B. Banzai--joyously greeted by the ranks. Apologizing that the usual capping ceremonies would be curtailed, B. Banzai then announced that he would be leading four strike teams on a commando raid on Sabah.

Tommy, never one to take his battles lightly, raised his hand. "The strike teams suffered losses at Yoyodyne, Buckaroo. Will you assign replacements?"

B. Banzai nodded. Almost paternally, he looked out at the forty-four new apprentices. "I know we usually allow our new candidates a week's leave after testing. Most of you will still be able to take advantage of this tradition. But there are some four or five of you who have

established excellent working rapport with members of our strike teams. To take advantage of the trust and camaraderie already established, you will be going with us to Sabah, each assigned to your mentor's team."

The forty-four newest members of the Institute all sat straighter, each clearly wishing to be included in the coming baptism of fire. Only Miraj, 'Yggaru, and two others were named, however, and fifteen minutes later an experimental Nuclear-Powered, Radar-Invisible war plane, fully armed, was enroute to Sabah. Briefing took place aboard the airplane, and was simple and straightforward:

BUCKAROO: (looking at his watch) We should be flying over Sabah at 1500 hours. We'll parachute down to a secret clearing in the jungle and wait for nightfall; then, under cover of darkness, we'll elude the guards at the entrance to the cave and make our way to the Throne Room.

MIRAJ: Prisoners?

BUCKAROO: (An expression of indescribable sorrow flitting across his face) We will, of course, try to take prisoners. If allowed, use soft blows and masers to stun your opponents. (He looks at the sixty of us seated in the body of NP-RI 1. For a precious second, as his gaze brushes across each face turned trustingly toward him, each of us feels a surging renewal of our dedication to this remarkable man.) But I don't want to lose any of you. You have all volunteered to help me in this mission, and my happiness at the successful conclusion of our mission will be diminished should any of you die. So, if forced to, defend yourselves with your Uzis and your projectile knives.

TOMMY: And Xan?

BUCKAROO: (grimly, yet sorrowfully) Leave him to me.

Quickly then, we were divided into four strike forces: Team Chaparral under Perfect Tommy, Team Kiowa under the Seminole Kid, Team Delaware under my own beloved Pecos, who had cut short her scientific expedition to the Valley of Moranjians in order to be with her friends and comrades as we faced Hanoi Xan for what we hoped would be the last time, and Team Apache, under my own command.

Time passed in alternate cycles, sometimes too slowly, sometimes too swiftly. Finally, it was 1430 hours. We drew weapons, defensive clothing, parachutes and survival gear. Before we knew it, we were leaping from the plane, our strike point the small clearing which the I-5 satellite had discovered for us only hours before. Luck was with us, for we all landed on target and there were no injuries such as would have given this expedition the appearance of a jinxing from the very start. Moreover, as the NP-RI circled overhead, Big Norse, our telecommunications intern, who had had most of World Watch One's equipment transferred from the double decker Hong Kong Cavalier bus to the plane, let Buckaroo know all issued Go-phones and locators were working.

The abrupt nightfall of a mountain jungle was soon upon us, and we set out for Sabah. We received our first hint of trouble at the gates. They were open and unguarded.

"It's a trap," Perfect Tommy avowed decisively.

B. Banzai nodded. "Almost definitely. Xan has been expecting me." Boldly, he walked forward. "Let's not disappoint him."

I turned to the others. "'Nobody lives forever,'" I quoted, then set out after our intrepid leader. One by one the others fell into step behind me. I do not know who started it, but soon we

were all whistling, marching in time to the official theme song of the Cavaliers. I could not help noticing that, when he heard our spontaneous salute to all he holds dear, B. Banzai's shoulders straightened and he marched even more briskly toward the gaping, inviting jaws of death, the gates of Sabah.

Like more than half-a-hundred Orpheuses (Orphei???) come to rescue our precious Eurydice, we marched ever downward in a tightening spiral. We were less than fifty meters inside the gates when they slammed shut. Our egress, had we shown cowardly in these last minutes, was now cut off. No one came running after us, however, and we continued downward.

"Buckaroo?" I said uneasily, "I don't like this. They're funneling us exactly where they want us to go." All my instincts rose up in horror at the thought of being trapped like a rat in a water maze.

Buckaroo answered me insouciantly. "Since that's where we want to go, does it matter?"

Reluctantly, I shook my head. "No, I guess not. But--"

Before I could say anything else, the path we were taking suddenly flattened out. Before us were two magnificent bronze doors. Buckaroo, Perfect Tommy, Seminole and I pushed the doors open. Buckaroo performed a perfect roll-out, sprang to his feet, and crouched just inside the entrance to Sabah's great Receiving Room. His brilliant gaze flitted from one corner of the room to the other. He ignored the steaming brazier in the center of the room, the larger than life-size statues of Xan set into niches on the wall, ignored too the piles of gold and silver heaped in the corners. No one was here. Straightening, Buckaroo Banzai motioned us in.

"From here," he said, the magnitude of our mission writ clearly

across his face, "there are five paths to Xan's Throne Room. Follow your prescribed routes and we will rendezvous at Xan's throne at--" He glanced at his watch, then spoke again, "--at 2142 exactly." He paused, then smiled, "and remember," he continued, "the future can be won or lost in the space of time it takes a dandelion seed to land."

Sixty heads nodded agreement. No one had to waste time synchronizing his (or her! My apologies if such brave companions as Pecos, Big Norse and the other distaff members of the Institute and the Blue Blazes are sometimes shortchanged by the English language. Know, therefore, readers, that when I use a male indefinite pronoun in this, or any, of my volumes, there is no sexism intended, only a linguistic pitfall often impossible to avoid when in the throes of writing) watch, since all members of the Institute and of the Blue Blaze Irregulars are, on first being assigned to active duty, given a digital quartz watch which, adjusted to their own biorhythms and electrical impulses, loses only .00000721 nano-seconds per century.

To continue, we separated into our assigned teams. Five doors led from the Receiving Room to the deeper recesses of Sabah. B. Banzai, bravely alone, stepped briskly out through the middle door. Pecos and I, exchanging glances rife with infinite promise and sorrow (when would we ever have another opportunity to share an adventure? How I envied Perfect Tommy in that moment, for desperate though our situation might soon become, had he not Miraj with him?), each led our own strike team out by one of the two left-hand doors.

From comparing notes, I know that, for all four strike teams, their progress to the Throne Room was remarkably similar. To save time, therefore, and to prevent this story from assuming an unwieldy size, I will describe in detail only what happened to my own

strike team.*

The tunnel leading from the Receiving Room was dimly lit with a strange, phosphorescent glow. The walls were narrow and dripping with moisture, the ceiling low and carved from living stone. If we were to be attacked here, there would be very little room in which to maneuver. Fast on my thoughts came a shadow before me. Raising my hand, I silently brought my strike team to a halt. Like a dark shadow himself, 'Yggaru, my young apprentice-partner, slithered forward. Using Arapahoe sign-language (a warrior skill required of all before acceptance to the Banzai Institute is given) he asked me what was wrong. Dipping freely into the signs used for telling myths and legends, I explained my fear that an invisible shadow warrior lurked ahead.

We could not stall here all night, though, especially not when frozen only by the fear of finding a foe. As quietly as we could, the entire strike team slipped down the passageway. A sudden ululating howl pierced the dimness, causing my heart to stop for the space of thirty-seven seconds before it started up again with a jolt, exactly like a kick-started car. The cry came again, and each member of Team Apache responded according to his (that deuced impersonal pronoun again!) nature. Memory Alpha, a Nipponese resident, stopped stark still in his tracks and muttered, "Ghosts only appear in No

* Anyone interested in the exploits of a particular member of our group may feel free to contact me at the Banzai Institute. Unless doing so would present a security leak, I will gladly provide you with any details not herein described. I am, however, unable to account for you any of the adventures of B. Banzai on his solitary journey to the Throne Room. In his typical modesty he has refused to speak of what I am sure were Herculean feats of bravery and derring-do -- Reno

plays, never in real life." Killarney Kate, a red-haired senior resident from the county of the same name who was specializing in field atomics and the transmutation of matter, crossed herself and whispered, "'Tis the banshee, come to warn us of our fate." I almost blush to recount that I myself was so lost to the scientific principles of B. Banzai that I began to wonder uneasily about conquistadores and Montezuma's Revenge.

The howl scraped across our nerves yet a third time, and appearing suddenly in our midst was a huge ninja warrior. The apparition was at least seven feet tall, and swathed in black. Someone behind me giggled, and I heard the whispered comment, "Darth Vader strikes again."

Before I could ask the meaning of this obscure reference, the tall warrior started moving purposefully down the narrow corridor, directly toward us. Arms outstretched before him, the ninja held a gleaming samurai sword in attack position. Having seen Buckaroo Banzai perform seeming magical moves both with a ritual ceremonial sword and with an actual battle sword, I did not even consider laughing at the thought of being challenged by a swordsman when I was armed with an Uzi. I had seen B. Banzai take on an entire field of men armed with Uzis, block every bullet spewed at him like fiery, deadly hornets, then walk laughing from the field, the only sign of his recent exertions being the film of sweat glinting on his usually imperturbable brow. Not, of course, that this warrior was the equal of B. Banzai. Few, if any, were. But he could--and, knowing Xan, probably would--be more than skilled enough to hold us off until we were out of bullets.

Maybe we could throw the warrior off-balance. I slung my Uzi over my shoulder and dragged Old Betsy from under my coat. Perfect Tommy would roar with juvenile pleasure if he should ever discover that I still carried my luckpeace tomahawk around, but it had helped me out of numerous

difficulties since I first found it*, and this might be yet another time for its help.

As I walked forward, I sensed a movement slightly behind me, to my right. I dared risk a glance. Memory Alpha had assumed backup position. I grinned and gave Old Betsy a test flip in my hand when I saw that, somehow, he had stowed his family sword onto the NP-RI with him and was now wielding that, and not his automatic weapon. There was another movement on my left. Almost without risking a look, I knew what I would see: Killarney, hefting a stout shillelagh.

We three closed in on the black-clad ninja. Behind us, I heard the other members of Team Apache forming themselves into a defensive square. Twenty meters separated us from the ninja warrior, then ten meters, then mere centimeters. I held up my hand, directing my team to stop. Reverting to Arapahoe sign language, I gave final instructions to the team.

Killarney, Memory and I screamed our warrior challenge to the ninja in eleven different languages and three dialects, raised our weapons high, and raced the few remaining centimeters directly at our enemy. I cartwheeled over his head, pivoted, and brought my tomahawk down directly on his unprotected neck as Killarney swung her staff at his groin and Memory his sword at the warrior's weapon arm. We hit our marks unerringly--and almost killed one another in the follow-through.

Our weapons no sooner touched the black-clad warrior than he vanished soundlessly, in a puff of smoke. Memory just avoided chopping off my head, Killarney almost took out both myself and Memory, and I sliced open the front of Killarney's jacket before I could swing Old Betsy aside.

We stared at the spot where the

* B. Banzai and the Totem of Death
-- Reno.

ninja had been. Vengeful ancestors or no, I do not believe in ghosts. Nor, I think, do Killarney or Memory, no matter what comments may have been startled out of them on this all-too-strange day. But the day was not over yet, and manifestations of the supernatural continued to appear.

There was a sudden commotion behind us, and we spun around. Where there had been one ninja warrior, now there were two, the second an exact mirror copy of the first, and both were advancing on the rearguard of Team Apache. I, Killarney, and Memory Alpha prepared to attack the ninjas from the rear. New Jersey, still in his complete TV-cowboy regalia, Caspar Lindley, in his official Blue Blaze Irregular blazer, and Moccasin Mike, a psycholinguist doing research at the Institute in Sumerian phrenology and Babylonian psychoanalytic techniques, automatically took the vanguard.

My heart swelled with pride for the members of the team. We were facing what might prove to be the most difficult battle in the history of the Banzai Institute, and yet there were no signs that anyone was even considering abandoning his post, his comrades, or the mission. B. Banzai had trained us, taught us, molded us. Had, in a very real sense, created us. It is this that the names we have given ourselves, or have had given us, mean. I know that the person I was before I became Reno Nevada is gone now, a shadow figure who has moved on to another plane. There is little of Sidney Zwibel in New Jersey--and as our brother New Jersey gains in confidence and understanding of the theories and precepts of life by which we at the Institute live, Sidney will fade away even more.

But this was scarcely the moment for philosophizing. I gave the signal and both teams raced forward. The results this time were dismayingly similar to the results the first time. Caspar, his dark face beaded with sweat, rammed the barrel of his machine gun upward, in a blow that might have ripped the jaw off an ordinary man,

just as I brought my tomahawk down on the same target's head and Moccasin spun, jumped, and kicked at the same ninja's face in the best le savate tradition. We wound up in a sprawled heap on the floor, again narrowly missing killing one another. At the same time, Killarney, Memory, and New Jersey, who had attacked the second warrior, tripped over us and joined us on the ground when, at the very moment they struck, their own target disappeared.

We picked ourselves up and faced the other nine members of our team. Four ninja warriors, each as like as spit to the others, now stood between us and them, twirling their swords in the intricate weaving pattern known as the 'Ballet of the Blue Chrysanthemums.'

The First Cause alone knows how long we may have continued, attacking and dividing our foe, only to be subdivided by him--by them--in turn, had not Caspar Lindley suddenly put a hand on my arm and whispered the cryptic words, "Disneyland, the Haunted House." I stared at him, wondering if his first full-strength mission (the attack on Yoyodyne having been only a holding action, after all) had driven him mad, when the meaning of his statement struck me.

Of course! How could I have been so stupid! These ninja warriors, like the ghosts and spectres that inhabited the Haunted House at the Disneyland amusement park, were holographic images, projected from some hidden camera system by our incomparable host, Hanoi Xan. "Listen, boys and girls," I exhorted my doughty warriors, "they're illusions, mirages thrown out by Hanoi Xan to impede our progress. Don't strike at them, or they'll draw your strength and turn it back on you. If we walk straight through them, they'll not hurt us."

The team members started forward. The gap between the seeming ninjas and the first row of Team Apache narrowed. Soon the veriest hairsbreadth separated

Ironside Ike, on point for Team Apache, from the black-clad warrior he fronted. Ironside took a breath, pushed on--and was knocked to the ground when, instead of the shadow-warrior he had anticipated, he ran into an all-too-solid body!

Shock delaying his reflexes, Ironside Ike proved almost too slow in ducking the downswing of the ninja warrior's sword. Caspar and I exchanged looks of horror. Some of the warriors were false, some were not. How could we tell the difference?

As though acting on my thoughts, New Jersey drew his six-gun and took dead aim at the back of the warrior who had just swung at Ironside, the one who seemed to be real. What happened then, reader, I shall never forget. We knew, from the evidence of our own eyes, from the impact felt by Ironside, that he had fronted a living, too-too-solid, fleshed warrior. We did not lose sight of this ninja, not for a moment. There was no way that one of the shadow warriors could have changed places with him. And yet, now, the bullet fired by New Jersey struck the ninja--and he disappeared! Two more ninja warriors, black-clad as were the others, appeared behind my forces. And, worst of all, New Jersey's bullet--impossible to call back once fired--sped on and struck one of our own troop, Sweet Sassy Sioux, in the arm.

I don't know how long we stood motionless, shocked beyond any thought of action. Long enough, I am sure, that had the fates been against us Hanoi Xan could have destroyed us quickly and surely, where we were.

But that, to the Malignancy of the East, would have been a kindness, and kindness was never the way with Hanoi Xan. Before we could marshal our thoughts and determine how to battle these ninja warriors who so intriguingly had aspects of both the real and the unreal, as though they each had one foot in this universe, and one in the world of dreams, they disappeared. It happened in an instant. One moment

I was staring at a warrior advancing on my small team, wondering how to kill something unkillable, something that could not be touched but yet which, from the evidence, could touch, could even kill, us, the next moment I was staring at blankness. I blinked, wondering if I were hallucinating--and if so, which was the hallucination?

Even as the terrible riddle wrapped itself around me, almost paralyzing me, making me afraid to move, to take an action lest in doing so I condemn some of my companions to death, a cruel laugh filled the corridors.

Hanoi Xan! Toying with us, somehow watching us, enjoying our torments! "Xan!" my defiance clarified forth as, in my fury, I forgot that Xan was B. Banzai's own target, "show yourself, you coward. Fight us directly, and not through your shadow puppets!"

The laughter swelled, filling the corridor, seeming to bounce from the walls and ceilings. I winced from the sound and put my hands over my ears, noticing that the other members of Team Apache did likewise. Just as the laughter peaked, there was an underlying grinding noise added to it, and the floor of the corridor began to quake. A hair's-width crack appeared in the floor, travelled up the walls to the ceiling, met itself overhead. The crack widened and the laughter, if possible, grew louder.

"Reno," cried Caspar, "the floor, it's slanting!"

Sioux, New Jersey's hastily wrapped bandage and sling cradling her injured arm, pointed with her good arm. "The walls, they're caving in!"

They were right. The floor broke apart slowly but inexorably, slanting downward at an ever greater angle.

A deep blackness gaped in front of us. We could not retreat back the way we had come, the ceiling and walls had joined to cut that path off completely. We could try to jump the ever-widening

chasm, reach the other side, and continue on the way we had originally been heading, but every second made that a more impossible leap, as it became more and more difficult to keep our balance on a floor that was coming more and more to resemble the hypotenuse of an oblique triangle much more closely than any self-respecting floor had any right to do.

Well, as B. Banzai always said, "He who does not put his entire future to risk on the whim of a fool, may hesitate to do so for a wise man."

"New Jersey," I queried eagerly, "do you have a riata somewhere about your person?"

"Reno," our newest Cavalier chided, "what self-respecting cowpoke would go anywhere without his lasso?" He withdrew from under his cowhide vest the longest lariat I'd ever been graced to see. Grabbing the rope from him, I fashioned a noose around one end, tying the knot around a grappling hook. This I directed Ironside Ike, our strongest team member, to drive as deeply as possible into the wall behind us.

I studied the receding floor on the opposite end of the fissure in front of us. "Did anyone bring a harpoon or projectile gun?"

No one had. Shamefacedly, Sioux, looking around at all the ancestral weapons in evidence, admitted that she had neglected to bring her bow. Desperately, I turned to Moccasin Mike. "Moccasin, you're our best jumper. It's up to you now." I handed him the rope. "Good luck."

Getting as much of a running leap as possible, Moccasin Mike launched himself across the seeming bottomlessness of the chasm. For a heart-stopping moment it seemed as though not even his jumping abilities (three times Olympic jumper, seven times World Champion) would prove adequate to the task. He seemed to be falling short, to be missing the ledge entirely--

We held our collective breaths, letting go with a coordinated gust when Moccasin reached out a desperate hand and hooked onto the edge of the far side. He hauled himself up, and looked for something to loop the lasso around. One of the huge boulders that had broken loose from the ceiling did the trick, and within seconds we began the dangerous trip. Sweet Sassy Sioux volunteered to stay behind as long as possible, keeping the far side under cover and affording us protection as we made our perilous hand-over-hand journey over the ever-widening chasm. "After all," she pointed out lucidly yet fatalistically, "with only one good arm I have no chance at all to reach the other side." New Jersey, obviously racked with guilt that it was his shot which now put Sioux to risk, immediately volunteered to stay with her. I shook my head. "You two can play cowboys and Indians on your own time," I chortled, hoping to brighten things at this darkest moment with a trace of levity. New Jersey and Sioux smiled, but only barely. Plainly, they had reached the end of their rope.

I motioned Ironside forward. It took less than seven seconds to loop our belts together, forming a carry cradle strong enough that he could transport Sioux across the widening chasm with us. In order, then, the others followed: Killarney Kate, Caspar Lindley, 'Yggaru, New Jersey, Memory Alpha, and the others, until only I remained behind. During all this time the floor continued its downward slant, the walls their unstoppable progress. The rope slackened as the walls closed in, and Moccasin Mike, aided by the team members who had already reached the other side, was forced to pull it more tightly around the big rock, fraying it so badly it threatened to snap at any moment, sending my brave warriors tumbling to their deaths in that all-encompassing black nothingness that lurked below. My fears appeared ungrounded, however, because the rope was still intact when it was my turn to trust my life to that so-slender bridge. I dared not hesitate. Already I could feel the relentless pressure of

the wall on my back, and the floor more closely resembled a vertical than a horizontal plane.

I can tell you from honest experience, gentle readers, that there are moments when one's heart does, indeed, rise in one's throat. That happened to me now, the moment my feet left terra firma (what terra and what firma there had been!).

In abject terror--and I defy anyone in similar circumstances to not be terrified. Being a member of the Hong Kong Cavaliers, after all, does not make one a superhero, invincible and indestructible, but only a motivated member of homo sapiens--I made my way across the bottomless chasm. I remember nothing of the crossing until I was in the welcoming arms of my fellow adventurers.

Chapter Six: Hell Tightens Its Grip

There was only one direction we could take. On this side of the chasm a still partially clear road led straight ahead. I shrugged, and led Team Apache onward. As B. Banzai had said, at least the road led where we wanted to go.

As we continued deeper into the mountainside, occasional screams, as of a soul being tortured beyond endurance, assaulted our ears, but whenever we investigated we could find no source for the excruciating sounds, and soon we were able to close our ears to them. As though judging rightly our level of tolerance, Xan then added a charming fillip to the cries of agony. The voices began to assume familiar timbre and intonation: loved ones, our loved ones. "Reno, help. The pain. Oh gods, the pain." Truly, it was a fiendishly clever siren call that Xan deigned trap us with. I remembered the torture that had killed Penny Priddy, remembered the tales of even worse torture told to B. Banzai, Perfect Tommy, and myself by the beautiful

zombie Le Negrette, tortures made even more hellish and revolting by the flatly cool, calm manner in which Le Negrette recounted them, all emotion, even the memory of emotion, having been barred from her when Xan injected her with the hideous yet life-sustaining nerve-poison Talava. To think of Pecos facing the Mother of a Thousand Deaths and Delights! The thought was impossible to accept. If that piteous cry were indeed Pecos, I would rescue her, I would, I had to, or die in the attempt--

My memories of the next few minutes are hazy. In piecing together the recollections of the other members of Team Apache, and applying the laws of deductive reasoning formulated by B. Banzai, I am of the opinion that Xan had, by this time, began to fill the corridors leading to his Throne Room with an invisible, noxious gas, one that directly affected the synapses of the brain, rendering its victims highly suggestible.

New Jersey tells me he grew terrified when my eyes suddenly glazed, I dropped my Uzi, and crept forward, projectile knife and tomahawk in hand, muttering, "Pecos, I'm coming, hang on." To make matters worse, Killarney Kate, Ironside Ike, and Moccasin Mike, each calling to his or her own particular love, joined suit. "We had one helluva--er, a deuce of a time stopping you guys, let me tell you," New Jersey has since told me. "It took me, Siouxsee, and 'Yggaru to stop you, and as for Ironside--ever try to stop a rhino-tank in full charge?"

I came back to myself with New Jersey slapping my face and shouting for me to, "Wake up, Reno, come on, snap out of it!" Taking a deep breath, I apologized. Nobly, he shrugged off his quick thinking, saying only, "Pecos'd never forgive me if I let anything happen to you." He then smiled and offered his hand. I shook it gladly, thrilled anew by this evidence of capability in our newest recruit to the Cavaliers. Yet once again had B. Banzai chosen well. New Jersey,

that very same recruit who, but a month ago, was so lacking in self-confidence he had needed Buckaroo Banzai's help in a delicate neurosurgical proceeding, was, all unknown to himself, growing almost daily in leadership skills and in the ability to apply in practice those rules he had had no trouble learning 'from the book.' But such is always B. Banzai's way: to recruit where he sees the potential for growth and then to provide the environment in which inner growth can be stimulated to levels unimaginable by the outside world. No, we at the Banzai Institute and those associated with the Blue Blaze Irregulars are not superbeings; we are, simply, men and women who give 150% of ourselves to everything we do, whether work or play.

And now, I reminded myself sheepishly, it was time to devote 150% of our time to saving Penny Priddy from the jaws of Hell, and joining B. Banzai at the Throne Room by 2142 hours.

Once again we set out on the spiral path downward. I wondered how far we had come. Surely the Throne Room could not be that much farther on? Of course, knowing Xan's incredible megalomania, he may have decided to build his Throne Room in the center of the Earth--his criminal genius was such that he could easily solve such a minor problem as the shielding necessary to protect himself from the intense heat, pressure, gravity, and radioactivity levels found there. But no, B. Banzai's briefing had indicated that we would reach the Throne Room in but a few hundred more meters.

Xan's defenses seemed to weaken as we descended still further. Piteous moans of abject agony still shivered across the seemingly endless night, but they no longer held personal involvement for us, and, now that we were awake to Hanoi Xan's devious hypnotic gas, the cries could be thrust from our minds by acts of concentrated will-power. An occasional 'ghost' or two rose from the ground underfoot or drifted out of the walls or ceiling, but they were weak, intangible things

compared to the seemingly indestructible ninja warriors we had faced earlier. These spectres were horrific in appearance--half-rotted corpses, the naked bodies of loved ones bearing signs of the full fury of Xan's revenge against us, luminescent monstrosities from Cthullhu's cairn better left only hinted at--but after the first shock wore off we realized that we could walk right through the apparitions, the only effect being a slight chill and a hint of dampness--oh, and the dank, dismal smell of rusting iron and sulphur.

Killarney dealt the final blow to the paltry phantoms attempting our rout. Twirling her shillelagh so rapidly it looked and sounded like a buzzsaw, she began once more whistling the Banzai March. The rest of us, even Sioux, fell into step.

In great high spirits we came to the end of our journey. The narrow corridor suddenly came to an end and we straggled out into a huge antechamber. There, before us, loomed the golden doors that led to the Throne Room of the Great and Glorious Xan, His Magnificence the Lord of East and West, the Master of North and South, Ruler of the Skies, Emperor of the Infernal Passage, and Chosen of the Gods.

The doors in front of us were a magnificent, yet warped, piece of art. Scenes from every famous--and several not-so-famous--tale of torture and sadism were embossed on them. We started forward across the vast expanse toward the gates, and had almost reached them, when the air was suddenly split by a harsh yelping, as of a thousand angry hellhounds--or an army of Hanqi Xan's infamous death-dwarves. I don't know where they came from--literally, they seemed to spring out of nowhere, to pop up from the ground, fall from the sky, ooze from the very walls around us.

At first, we treated them like more of Xan's spectral army, and that was our mistake. Before we could react to the distressing fact that the death-dwarves and zombies attacking us were all too real, Killarney and Moccasin

had been struck down, both fatally.

We rallied quickly, drawing into a defensive square and facing our attackers on all sides. The death toll for Xan's slaves climbed. It was not that we killed in anger, or even in revenge for our dead comrades. It is, however, impossible to apply B. Banzai's principles of the worth of every man, and the rational ability of one's enemies to accept the inevitable and resign their erroneous stand without bloodshed once the very real probability of their death is revealed to them (a corollary of B. Banzai's 'games theory' of politics, discussed at more length in Across the Eighth Dimension--Reno), when said enemy is coming at one with a five-foot spear, still dripping the blood of a friend, and that spear is raised to pierce one to the heart. At moments like that, reader, even the most rational of beings is likely to respond as I did. Yipping an old Mayan war shout, I raised my tomahawk high and threw it straight at the dwarf who was trying to skewer me. Then I unhooked my Uzi and fired into the milling maelstrom of militant mini-warriors.

Wave after wave of death-dwarves and zombies attacked us. We tried to pacify them, to turn them aside, but they paid no heed to any of the words of proven wisdom we shouted at them. So completely devoid of willpower were they, they would rather die Xan's slaves than live as free beings.

The slaughter was incredible. I do not glory in the telling of it, so easy is it to turn such an uneven battle into either a paean of glorious deeds--and how often has not B. Banzai decried the fact that all too frequently our most glorious poems, our most monumental epic tales, are written to celebrate wholesale murder? Of arms and the man I do not sing, no, nor yet of the wrath of Achilles, though if I would...you see how easy is the temptation to aggrandize war? Even for those of us who would know better--or into such a rote statement of death after death that the reality of the

deaths involved pales on the reader and the tale assumes the imagery of an amusement park shooting gallery.

The battle fought in Xan's antechamber was neither epic nor cartoon. Even though the zombies and death-dwarves had been robbed of their humanity by Xan, each member of Team Apache felt the full burden of their deaths. If only, if only, if only! How many times do we hear that phrase applied to the most trivial of conditions that we want changed? And now every one of us--Sioux, Ironside, 'Yggaru, myself--every single member of Team Apache was burdened by the weight of the most important 'if only' of all. 'If only' we could stop this slaughter, convince the mind-controlled slaves of Xan that they could live free of his cruelty--if only.

By the time the fighting ceased, not a member of Team Apache did not have tears streaming down his or her face. This dreadful slaughter, more than anything that had preceded it, truly convinced us that Xan was, indeed, the most evil being on the face of the Earth. That he could send his own people into senseless death so easily--that was the horror: that another's life (another's soul!) was of so little import to him. . .

We picked our way through the bodies, hoping desperately that there might be some who were still alive, but no. All were dead.

And softly, from the very air around us, came the hideous sound of Xan's laughter.

Grimly then, we faced yet again the gold doors with their horrifying scenes of sado-masochistic pleasure. We pushed them open, and I noticed that I was not the only one to surreptitiously wipe my hands on my jacket tail. It was 2159 hours.

B. Banzai's tale of Sabah had not prepared me for the decadent, twisted splendor of that Throne Room. The golden ceiling glistened at least 300

meters away, and it measured at least half again that distance to the farthest wall. As had been the case in the Receiving Room, untended and unguarded heaps of precious jewels and golden trophies were piled high in mad profusion, and in decidedly haphazard locations. Red velvet and satin swathed the walls from ceiling to floor. Hanging from the ceiling were several crystal globes that seemed, at first, to be randomly placed; closer inspection revealed that from the ceiling depended an elaborate orrery, the movement of each planetary or lunar image correct to within a tenth of a second.

So much did I notice immediately, that and the fact that there were four other doors leading into the Throne Room, one already opened, and one only now opening. I did not have time to examine in any detail the devious splendors and horrible delights of Xan's Throne Room. For, just as I was about to go over to the door now opening (Pecos, perhaps? Tommy or Seminole?), New Jersey grabbed my arm and pointed to the dais at the far end of the hall, the dais on which Xan's Throne sat.

Two figures swayed back and forth, locked in mortal combat: B. Banzai and Hanoi Xan himself!

Even as I recognized the two mighty warriors, the red-clad figure of Xan managed to toss B. Banzai to the ground. "NO!" someone behind me shouted, and I turned to see Perfect Tommy, leading Team Chaparral into the Throne Room. It had been he, indeed, who was behind the second opening door, and right behind him was Miraj.

I gasped in horror when I saw her. Seen like this, in such close proximity to Xan and B. Banzai, it became evident that all three shared not only the same racial stock, but the same blood-line. Miraj, indeed! She had chosen her name well, this lovely viper, for she was that, oh yes, she was that. She was a snare and a delusion, a creature of night and mist and magic, an illusion.

She was indeed a mirage, the daughter of Hanoi Xan--and bitterly, I wondered just how deeply under her spell Tommy had fallen.

What happened then I cannot recall in full detail, but I have drawn on the memories of others to round out this report. My recognition of Miraj was instantaneous. When I became aware again of my surroundings not even a second had passed. B. Banzai still lay on the ground, having just been thrown there by Hanoi Xan, who now, with a mighty heave, pulled his Throne from the floor of the dais and raised it above his head, intending to crush B. Banzai with it. Tommy cried out "NO!" again, and raised his Uzi to aim it. His aim, it seemed to me, wavered, and slowly lowered until it appeared to my horrified eyes that he was taking dead-straight aim--and Tommy, who is our most skilled warrior, never misses--at Buckaroo Banzai.

Had it come to this, then? Had Miraj twisted him so already? Scarcely had I put the thought to words than I raised my own Uzi, and pointed it at Tommy.

Would I have shot? I honestly do not know, reader, but in all truth I think that, at that moment, I was so lost in the quagmire of suspicion that yes, I would have shot my friend, my brother, my ally--and all for the veriest sliver of a doubt. For the fact is, my weapon was primed for shooting, else what happened next would never have happened.

My finger on the trigger, I was suddenly knocked sprawling, and the most beautiful voice in the world shouted, "Reno, you idiot, what the deuce are you doing?" The jolt of the blow triggered the Uzi, and bullets sprayed the ceiling. Before I could answer Pecos, several of the bullets found marks, shattering the crystal orrery globes suspended from the ceiling. Rainbow-hued gas exploded from the orbs to drift over us and my last thought, before the world turned black, was how very, very cold it was.

Chapter Seven: Hanoi Xan, Emperor of the World

I woke groggily, disoriented, the events I have just described jumbled in my brain like ill-fitting puzzle pieces. Had I really tried to shoot Tommy? Had he tried to shoot Buckaroo? Sitting up, I rubbed my sandy eyes with the heel of my hand and peered around the darkened room. The ceiling and walls were but a conventional distance away. Not the Throne Room, therefore. So where. . .

"Take it easy, Reno. You won't be up to full strength for quite a bit yet." The voice was low and husky, quite pleasant to my ears--and not one of the strike force.

"Sally!" I looked at the speaker. It was indeed Silverado Sal, Chief Medical Officer of the Institute. "How did we get home?" Sally didn't answer me right away. Instead, she busied herself with the arcane tasks doctors always perform, checking my pulse, my heart, my eyes, my temperature. Then, as though satisfied I was not dying, she said grimly, "We're not home, Reno. We're in the village of Cholchinas. The entire Institute is in hiding."

"In hiding? But--"

I listened, open-mouthed in shock, while Silverado Sal narrated the story. You who have lived through the horrors Sal now recounted to me, please, be patient. Remember that, when I awoke, I was under the impression that Hanoi Xan's noxious gases had knocked me out for an hour, at the most a day, perhaps. Can you imagine with what horror I learned that the entire strike team had been comatose for six whole weeks?

I felt my cheeks. The stubble there seemed, at most, a 'five o'clock shadow.' Sal, following the direction of my hands, nodded. "Xan's nerve gas slows bodily functions to the point where it is impossible to distinguish between living and dead. Buckaroo seems to think in liquid form it would have a chemical structure very similar

to the venom of the Lectroid spittle-spiders." I reached out my hand to her, so stunned I couldn't even speak. Taking my hand in hers, she gently stroked my forehead. "Reno?"

I swallowed the large lump of fear and hope that had suddenly formed in my throat at her words. "Rawhide?" I quavered.

Sal shook her head. "As soon as Buckaroo realized the similarity, he put a research team onto studying the spittle venom, but so far we've had no luck. The spider-venom seems to be deadly in all cases."

I sank back on my pillow, nodded for her to continue her story. The Institute in hiding? What could have been happening during the time we were trapped in lost Sabah, City of Sin and Mystery?

It did not take Silverado Sal long to tell me what every reader of this volume already knows, that, having succeeded in trapping B. Banzai and the members of the strike team in the great Throne Room at Sabah, Hanoi Xan had set off an explosion intended to trap us there forever. He then moved with his ministers, technicians, warriors, bravos, and servants to a new location, Shayol, a huge, glittering city of untold wealth and beauty, a city which had been built by his forebears in the long-distant past under the western ledge of the North American continent.

"Even before the white man first came to the New World--indeed, some say even before the first red man crossed by the Bering Straits bridge from Eurasia--Shayol has been there," Sal said, "and from there Xan's ancestors consolidated their control over--dare I say it?--over the underworld."

"And Xan is there now?"

Sal nodded. "He moved quickly, and in a few swift strokes has managed to hold the world to ransom." I listened unbelievably as she told me of an explosion set off in California that

triggered the San Andreas fault, of a government forced to abdicate lest the Mongolian madman release nuclear madness on the seven most populous cities of the USA, of a free-loving and free-thinking institute of higher learning, our own Banzai Institute, declared subversive and traitorous to the new regime, its doors closed and its students and staff proscribed. "Only Buckaroo Banzai could have withstood Xan and his new ally," Silverado Sal intoned, "and Xan announced to the world that he had slain B. Banzai like the murdering dog he was."

"Is--" I could not finish the question. B. Banzai dead? It simply could not be. Especially now, when the world was in thrall to such a fiend.

Sal shook her head. "Buckaroo's fine, Reno. The paralytic gases scarcely affected him. He and Miraj revived almost immediately, and found their way to Xan's communication room where they contacted Big Norse, who was able to spot you all by your locators, and who mobilized the Irregulars to dig you out. Then Buckaroo and Miraj synthesized an antidote for the gases--seems Xan was a tricky boyo, and used more than one reagent, so--if just the right combination of drugs, in just the right order of effectiveness, hadn't been administered to you--" Sal shrugged. "I hate to think of the results, Reno. The least of it might have been that, had you woken at all, you'd have been Xan's mind-slaves."

I shuddered, remembering Le Negrette. To be awake, and aware of one's fate as Xan's slave, and yet to be unable to do anything about it. . . "And Miraj helped Buckaroo?"

Silverado Sal nodded. "Buckaroo says he couldn't have done it without her. Xan had dumped most of his computer files and had code-accessed the few remaining. Miraj broke the access codes."

Broke? Or was privy to her father's secrets? What kind of game was the lovely chimera of desire playing?

She could have escaped, returned to her father. Instead, she had helped B. Banzai restore the strike team to life. Had I been wrong about her? Wrong about Tommy? Even more to the point, and a question I should have asked myself sooner, why should I suddenly have doubted B. Banzai's uncanny ability to evaluate the flaws--and the virtues--of those he came into contact with?

Silverado left my side to tend someone on the cot next to me. Turning my head, I could see Ironside, his normally dark skin an ashen grey. I writhed in secret guilt. Mine had been the bullet that brought this nightmare down upon my comrades, and an even worse nightmare upon the world. I closed my eyes against the images conjured by my all-too vivid imagination: the world being trod underfoot by Hanoi Xan, with men, women, and children held up to psychic and psychological blackmail by the arch-fiend.

"Hey there, how's it going?" My eyes flew open. Perfect Tommy, Miraj, and Pecos stood around my cot. I looked from one to the other. Pecos' eyes showed worry, and a deeper pain that I knew reflected her concern over my actions. Miraj also showed concern for me and, disquietingly, an understanding of why I had acted so precipitously, and an understanding and an acceptance if I should reveal her secret to the others. In that moment, as I turned to Perfect Tommy, I knew the ghost of my own unacknowledged doubts and fears had been laid to rest, forever, I hoped. Miraj had been accepted on her own value by B. Banzai--and, I could see, by Perfect Tommy. I do not know how I recognized it, perhaps only from the way Tommy and Miraj stood so close, perhaps from the way their eyes met, but I was sure suddenly that Tommy knew of Miraj's parentage, knew it and transcended this fact to find the woman within, the woman prized by B. Banzai. I hadn't realized Tommy was capable of so accepting, so adult a love. How could I now refuse to accept her?

"Tommy, forgive me?"

Tommy's guileless brown eyes darkened with surprise. "What're you talking about, Reno?" Carefully culling my words, I told him, not of my suspicions about his feelings for Peggy, nor of my doubts concerning Miraj, but rather of the strange paths of illogic that my mind had mistakenly intuited after my exposure to Xan's nerve gas in the corridors of Sabah. "And then I thought I saw you aiming at Buckaroo, Perfect Tommy, and I fired my weapon, shattering the containers for Xan's paralytic reagent."

Tommy nodded. "That nerve gas stuff of Xan's is nothing to fool around with. We almost ran into some problems that way too, but Miraj recognized the symptoms and came up with an antidote." He smiled at me then. "No hard feelings, Reno. But you owe me one."

Hugs and kisses all around, with Pecos whispering, "That was brave, Reno," and Miraj whispering "Thank you" against my lips. I fell asleep then, wondering why the beautiful Miraj should be wearing a scent so like Penny Priddy's?

The members of the strike team recovered quickly. In five days, B. Banzai held a final briefing. I had been so overwhelmed with my own guilt--my actions, kind reader, as you are by now aware, could have destroyed the world as we know it! Could have given Hanoi Xan, that incarnate son of Satan, that cancerous growth upon the face of the planet, complete dominion over all human life!--when I awoke, that I had not really registered Silverado's words carefully.

Hanoi Xan had indeed a new ally, a partner in crime and depravity. Remember the phone call that started us off on this adventure? It had, indeed, been from Lord John Whorfin. The explosion of the Panther ship had had repercussions not foreseen by the Nova Police from Planet Ten. True, Lizardo/Whorfin's oscillation overthrunder had

seemed, at the time, unsuccessful. What we subsequently discovered, however, was that, at the moment of the Red Lectroid ship's demise, the explosion set off by B. Banzai so intensified the overthruster's power that a rift opened to the eighth dimension, and all those Lectroids trapped there by the Nova Police, led by what still remained of their evil overlord, Whorfin, escaped into this dimension. And this Lord Whorfin, cunning, all too sane, and with no human emotions of any kind, was indeed a fitting partner of Hanoi Xan.

Xan himself had been the first to recognize this. Lord Whorfin, the Lectroid Lord Whorfin, had contacted him immediately after his escape from the eighth dimension. This Lord Whorfin was no half-crazed genius trapped in the body of an aging Italian scientist, trapped in turn with the shadow of Whorfin's malignancy dictating every move. This was Lord John Whorfin in every detail, the charismatic leader exiled because he was "more monstrous than Hitler."

Xan, out of curiosity, agreed to see Whorfin. He had not forgotten the death of Lo Pep, and was fully prepared to exact full payment, plus interest, for the inconvenience encompassed by the death of the irredeemable lieutenant. But it did not take Xan long to realize that Whorfin, alive, was a valuable asset.

XAN: You are ambitious, Whorfin. Ambitious beings are dangerous.

WHORFIN: Were I an ambitious man, yes, mighty Xan. But I am concerned only with my own people, and with returning to my own planet.

XAN: (raising one brow, but hiding his disbelief of John Whorfin's disavowal) And the Nova Police?

WHORFIN: They will have left this system, and will be returning to Planet Ten of their own

home system. They think they have destroyed the Red Lectroid menace, so they will have no further interest in Earth. (He shrugs) They are probably not even monitoring this planet anymore.

In the days that followed--as you, faithful reader, have already learned--Xan made good use of his new ally. In Whorfin he recognized a kindred spirit whose appreciation for the subtle refinements of torture and cruelty was almost a match to his own. Xan's petrified slaves became almost inured to the sadistic vagaries of fate which would prompt Xan or Whorfin to single out innocent victims on whom to practice their basest creative acts of maiming and mayhem. (Recordings of these torture sessions were much in demand among Whorfin's Lectroids, providing them with the same esthetic ecstasy as would overtake a cultured Terran listening to a superbly performed Bach, or Mozart, or Beethoven.

And these are the creatures that Xan turned loose on Earth! Promising Whorfin access to the oscillation overthruster once the planet was delivered into his hands, Xan used the Red Lectroids to help subdue the US. It was Whorfin who captured the President and forced the resignation of the US government when he displayed for all major news-networks and press representatives that worthy's broken and torn body. Xan was later glimpsed wearing an Aztec priest's robe formed of the flayed skins of those Senators and Representatives who refused to give him their oath and who were unable to escape before Washington's fall.

The inhabitants of Sabah and its surrounding jungle had had only Xan and his Black Hordes and death-dwarves to fear. America trembled beneath Xan's heel, and against her Xan sent forth his dwarves, his black-clad ninjas, and the Red Lectroids of John Whorfin.

We knew we would have to storm Hanoi Xan's stronghold and defeat these two criminal masterminds if America was

ever to be free again. Pinky Caruthers put the problem neatly. "Buckaroo," he averred, "we would all, any of us here, lay down our lives for you. But where do you want us to do so?"

B. Banzai pulled down a map of the western United States. "Perfect Tommy has been feeding every scrap of intelligence, every reported sighting of the Red or the Black Hordes, every instance of looting, pillaging, rape, and murder, every so-called 'natural' disaster, into his computer." He turned to the young computer genius; Miraj, as always, was sitting at his side, and they were deeply involved in an intense conversation. "Tommy?"

Rising, Tommy crossed over to the map Buckaroo Banzai had pulled down. "All our intelligence points to Shayol as being hidden under these four states." He pointed to Montana, Oregon, Washington, and Idaho.

"Somewhere there must be an access point to the underworld we can use," B. Banzai mused.

Miraj supplied the missing link. "Buckaroo-sama, I think Lord Whorfin himself may have given us a clue. Recall what he said: 'Buckaroo Banzai, I'll see you in Hell.'" She pointed to the map. "I believe, sir, that the town of Hell, Montana, population 372 (+ or - 60 horses, 500 cows, and 30 pigs) is located at __ degrees longitude, __ degrees latitude*."

Eleven hours later we had located the entrance to Shayol. As Miraj had suggested, it was found in the small mountain town of Hell, Montana, and reached by way of an old deserted mine

* The surviving citizens of Hell have since changed the name of that garden spot of the Western world. To protect the innocent, I am not now giving out information as to where to find their town -- Reno

shaft. The people of the hamlet (and the cows, and horses, and pigs) were gone, victims to the desecrations of Xan and Whorfin. Remembering yet again the part, unintentional though it might have been, which I had played in bringing this about, I silently vowed that, if any of the inhabitants of Hell remained still alive, I would sacrifice even my life to return them from Shayol.

After the horrors of Sabah, the road to Shayol was remarkably easy. No horrors affronted us, no screams, no apparitions, no vagrant smells. "He knows we're here," I cautioned B. Banzai during one of our infrequent rest periods on the downward path to Shayol. "He knows and doesn't care." I couldn't understand why our strike force was so small, only 120 warriors. Surely more Blazes than this, more Institute personnel had escaped Xan's roundup?

The chief nodded. "I sent a message to him myself. He and Whorfin are so furious at our escape from Sabah it should give us an advantage." He frowned. "I only hope he never realizes how we escaped." His troubled gaze rested on the ampule of antidote he held in his hand, ready for any emergency use that might suddenly arise. I remembered who had helped him formulate the antidote, and I gasped, "You know who Miraj is!" B. Banzai smiled. "Do you think I wouldn't know one of my own blood, Reno?"

"Then--" I did not dare complete the sentence. Surely B. Banzai was only referring to the common Mongolian heritage he and Xan shared? But Buckaroo was nodding. "My grandfather left his father's house when he realized the evil that lived there," he said quietly. "The house of my grandfather, has, since that time, dedicated itself to ridding the world of the guilt of our blood."

I swallowed the lump of surprise in my throat. I did not think any the less of B. Banzai now that I knew his ancestry. Indeed, if anything, I

respected him all the more. How easily might he, his father, and his grandfather have joined hands with their malignant foresire--wealth and power untold would then have been theirs. Instead, they had chosen to defy Xan, to fight for the underdogs, the victims of their evil ancestor's greed, lust, and craze for control. My blood thrilled anew at this enhanced vision of my chief, and I vowed silently to prove more worthy of him on this mission than I had proved to be in Sabah.

I looked around for Miraj, but could see neither her nor Perfect Tommy. B. Banzai correctly interpreted my interest. "I did not think she should come with us," he vouchsafed. "It would not do for her father to discover her role in all this as yet." Remembering the cruelty of Xan, I shuddered, and could only agree. "She should be all right, though. Perfect Tommy has mobilized a strike team to protect her if--if the need should arise," Buckaroo added.

The narrow corridor we'd been traversing came to an end. Before us sprawled the huge, underground city of Shayol. An artificial sun shone overhead, and the cavernous ceiling to this world-within-a-world loomed so far away it seemed swathed in a hazy blue mist. A wind ruffled my hair and I heard birds chirping. Shayol appeared to be a serene, gilt- and jewel-encrusted wonderland--until one noticed that the one thousand steps leading downward to the gates of the city were lined with crucifixes, and that gibbets decorated every tenth meter of the city walls. Crucifixes and gibbets were occupied, and I silently prayed that I had not found the inhabitants of Hell, Montana.

We marched down the steps to Shayol. At our approach, the city gates opened to reveal a huge public square, completely filled with row upon row of death-dwarves and zombies. They parted, leaving a clear path to the skull-shaped castle which dominated the square. Hanoi Xan and Lord John Whorfin, each flanked by his own minions and ministers, sat on thrones in front

of the castle. Xan's throne was easily the richer, more imposing one. A mar-queen protected Xan and Whorfin from the rays of the artificial sun, and pennons and banners floated in the breeze. The entire display had an air of depraved, decadent heraldry about it, enhanced by the bodies swinging on the gibbets on the city wall, and the expressionless faces of the death-dwarves.

"And does the youngest scion of the House of Xan come to pay titulary respect?"

Imagine, if you can, B. Banzai's voice--that light, charming instrument with which I have known him to sway thousands--imagine that voice devoid of warmth, of love, of laughter. If you can imagine that (and before this moment I could not) you know already the voice of Hanoi Xan.

"Respect?" B. Banzai pondered the question. "I accord you the same respect that all life deserves, Honored Ancestor. All other forms of respect must be earned."

"Why do you waste time with this puppy, Xan?" Lord John Whorfin growled huskily. "Kill him now. Him, his woman, and these paltry Blue Blazes!" He spit his contempt of B. Banzai. The spittle-spider barely cleared Xan's long red brocade kimono, and the human sneered in disgust and lifted his hem from danger, then crushed the venomous spider underfoot. I wondered at his lack of concern over the danger of the spider, then remembered Silverado Sal's telling me that Buckaroo and Miraj had discovered the spider's venom was remarkably similar to the nerve-gas used by Xan. Had Xan accomplished that which the indomitable John Parker, brave lieutenant of Queen John Emdall, had believed to be impossible? Had he found an antidote for the spiders? Alas, too late for our dear Rawhide!

"We will do this at my pace, Whorfin. It is a parent's right to punish an erring child." Whorfin nodded grudgingly. I shuddered. Having discovered from our studies of the papers

left behind at Yoyodyne exactly what perversions the Red Lectroids thought pleasurable, I did not want to even begin to conceive what these life-hating aliens would consider punishment. "Son of Xan," the Overlord of Earthly Terror and Infernal Pleasure intoned, "I have called you here to answer for your sins."

B. Banzai blinked in surprise. "In the first place, Xan," he chided gently, "I am the son of Masado Banzai, who is in turn the son of Hirohito Banzai, and who, in his turn severed all relation with the House of Xan. And in the second place, it is I who have come here to task you for your sins."

I could see Xan swell with wrath. I do not think that anyone, save perhaps his son, B. Banzai's grandfather, had ever defied him to his face before. "Enough!" he proclaimed in a voice that filled all Shayol. "The trial will commence."

What followed was a complete mockery, a shamble of justice perverted. Xan produced 'witness' after 'witness' who testified to B. Banzai's crimes and offenses against the grand and malignant reign of Xan. And what were the crimes? Justice, love of his fellow humans, pity, care, concern, and empathy--in short, Buckaroo Banzai took upon himself the cloak of common humanity and it was this which now inspired Xan to rant, frothing in his vile hatred, against the 'sin' of his 'viperous offspring.'

The final 'witness' was brought forward. Smiling a smile so cold it would freeze the very stars from their courses, Xan announced in gelid tones, "You do remember Ms. Penny Priddy, do you not, young one?" The ice of his smile quickened to a cutting edge. "But perhaps you know her more intimately as Peggy Banzai?" Buckaroo swayed as the full import of Xan's words struck him to the heart. Instinctively, I--and the Blue Blazes behind me--moved closer to him, mutely

offering him--and Peggy, our lost sister now regained--support.

Xan gloated. In horrifying detail he recounted how his agents had sent poisoned roses to Peggy on the day of her marriage to B. Banzai, how they had then stolen her body from its grave and brought it to him. Xan, by his very nature twisted beyond description, almost beyond redemption (although B. Banzai, from his great store of love holds that anyone, even Lucifer himself, can be saved through the power of love and that no one is beyond redemption), could not keep from twisting the knife. He went on to describe the pain and torture he had subjected Peggy to, and the fiendish way he had transformed Peggy to Penny. During his story Peggy stood silently beside him, eyes straight ahead and no expression on her face. Had we found her only to have lost her? How Xan must hate her, and Buckaroo!

All the bits and pieces to the puzzle that was Hanoi Xan suddenly came together in my mind. Mirror images, bright knight and dark shadow--B. Banzai and Xan had been preordained to fight this battle from the beginning of time. And it was inevitable that Peggy Banzai would be the battlefield; Xan must have hated Peggy even more than he hated his great-grandson, for his hatred of her was pure and undefiled, while his hatred of Buckaroo was contaminated by his own perverted form of love. Because he loved Buckaroo, but could never be in Buckaroo reborn, he hated. And Peggy, and Peggy's love, which more than any single thing, save his own nature, kept Buckaroo Banzai free of Xan's sphere--Xan's hatred of her must surpass all else!

Xan, his fiendish tale almost done, held up a small radio-transmitter. "And it is on this, son of my son's son, that the woman's life, sanity, and soul all depend."

Buckaroo clenched his jaw and, for a heart-stopping moment, I feared he had lost all sense of fear and was

about to attack Xan. At that moment, however, a clear female voice rang out. "No longer, Honored Father." The army of death-dwarves parted once more and Miraj strode forward. She looked magnificent, a true Mongolian princess in every line of her body. I thrilled with pride for Perfect Tommy's chosen love. She was a woman fit to defy any villain, human or satanic. But where had she come from? And how had she evaded Perfect Tommy's protective custody? I looked around surreptitiously, but could find no sign of Tommy. My puzzlement grew.

Miraj reached the dais on which her father was holding court. She mounted the stairs. Disdainfully, she held out her hand to him. "I think you'll recognize these. I removed them from Peggy Banzai this morning." With that, she dropped two small radio-receivers at her father's feet.

"You, you--" Xan sputtered angrily, shocked to the core at his daughter's defiance of him. I could not help but think that Xan was indeed having troubles with his offspring. Perhaps it was in the genes? Furious, unable to express his wrath in words, Xan struck Miraj. His slap rocked her backwards, but she did not fall and stood her ground.

Buckaroo had regained control of his temper. Momentarily ignoring Xan, he held out his hand to Peggy. A spontaneous cheer broke from the strike team when Peggy gave a little shake and came to sudden, miraculous life. She winked at Miraj, then held her hand out to B. Banzai, who crossed to her at once. They stood there, not even touching save for the clasp of their hands, not speaking, even; yet anyone with eyes to see could see they shared a world of their own making in that moment. So it was for me with Pecos. I turned from them, not wanting to intrude, and caught Miraj's eye. She smiled, and I knew in that moment that she and Tommy shared the same ability to be together without words, without touch. Almost, I pitied Xan. I did

not doubt he had been training Miraj for years to be his secret weapon in the Cavaliers--and now, just as he had lost Hirohito, and Masado, and Buckaroo to love, so had he lost his daughter.

"Why waste time, Xan?" Lord Whorfin grated. "Kill them now. Kill them all."

Buckaroo Banzai, exchanging a knowing smile with Miraj, calmly countered the Red Lectroid. "I think not, Whorfin. Your reign here, yours and Xan's, is over."

Xan had by now regained his calm. He raised a brow questioningly, and the resemblance between the three of them, Xan, Miraj, and B. Banzai, was undebatable. Xan and B. Banzai stood on two sides of the dais, confronting one another like avenging spirits of good and ill. Between them were Miraj and Peggy, each, in her own way, an ideal woman. Yet it was to the two men one's eyes were inevitably drawn. Both stood over six feet tall, and looked to be of an age, seeming more like twins than like great-grandfather and offspring. Xan was wearing rich, royal trappings and a shaman's crown, B. Banzai his commando outfit and a ritual headband. Yet the same regal bearing, the same noble features faced each other now across a chasm of hatred, which, because of Xan's immutable rancor, could never be bridged. So must it have been when Lucifer and Michael faced one another at the gates of heaven.

"Your pride, my son, almost matches mine. Do you really think to defeat my armies with six score of warriors?"

"And half of those mere females," husked Whorfin. "Stop this waste of time. Kill them. You promised I could sack Detroit after Banzai's death."

"I will kill him," Xan avowed. He held up a hand for attention. "Buckaroo Banzai is mine," he menaced. "I will flay alive anyone who deprives me of his death."

Buckaroo Banzai smiled quietly, and I observed that even a gentle smile from that family could convey danger. Perhaps, indeed, there was a touch--just a touch--of great-granddad in him? "I repeat. Xan, Whorfin, your days are numbered."

Xan was not worried, but I could see he was perplexed. So was I. Had our adventures driven B. Banzai insane? Where did his self-confidence spring from? As though in answer, Buckaroo moved away from Peggy and clapped his hands once, sharply.

"You will come with me, Lord John Whorfin," directed a familiar, precisely accented voice. Along with everyone else inside the courtyard walls, I spun and stared up at the city walls. John Parker, the Black Lectroid Military Overlord and Planetary Protector of the Nova Police, stood there in his silver security officer uniform. He hefted a silver-toned alien weapon. "In the name of Queen John Emdall I place you and your minions under arrest."

Whorfin crouched low. "You and what army, John Parker?"

John Parker smiled. Whorfin's words acted like a signal. Immediately, an army of Black Lectroid Nova Police and Blue Blaze Irregulars, led by Perfect Tommy, appeared atop the walls of Shayol. They surrounded the entire city. I could scarcely believe my eyes. So this was why Buckaroo Banzai's strike force had numbered only 120 warriors! But how-- "Of course," I shouted as I figured it all. Big Norse! Buckaroo had had her contact the Nova Police and the Blazes. And Xan and Whorfin, in their arrogance, had never even considered such a move. They had been so busy concentrating on Buckaroo's march to Shayol they had not realized that another army might be also invading their territory. And no wonder B. Banzai had announced his arrival to Xan. Talk about misdirection. Perfect Tommy and John Parker, I

surmised*, had been an advance team led to Shayol via another, secret route by Miraj. They had reached the city undetected and had stationed themselves around it while she, ever--at least, as far as Xan knew--her father's obedient daughter, had reported to him and had 'warned' him of Buckaroo's coming. Given the run of the city by Xan, she had then been able to rescue Peggy and coordinate our rescue.

For a moment I thought all could be easily and peacefully resolved. I should have known, however, that Evil such as Xan and Whorfin represented would never cede the victory to Good. Xan screamed in fury and drew the ceremonial battle sword and the honor sword at his waist. He advanced on Buckaroo, who backed away. Miraj reached under her long lilac kimono and, in turn, pulled out a sword which I recognized: B. Banzai's family sword. She tossed the sword into the air. B. Banzai reached up, grasped the hilt, and sprang into defensive position. It was a titanic, magnificent battle of perfectly matched opponents. Xan whirled and struck at Buckaroo's knees, but the chief countered the blow and, using his projectile knife as an honor sword, slashed upward, almost catching Xan. Xan jumped back and, in two lightning moves, sliced Buckaroo across the right arm and the chest. Buckaroo parried and then drove forward the attack again. It was an exhibition of such incredible grace and beauty that I almost forgot the danger confronting us from Whorfin and his Lectroids, and from Xan's death dwarves.

I heard clanging and clashing around me and rapid gunfire. Drawing my Uzi, I forced my attention onto staying alive.

John Parker and John Whorfin were confronting one another, and the other Black Lectroids seemed each to have

* I subsequently discovered I was correct in my suppositions -- Reno

chosen his or her particular foe (I noted with interest that battle, for them, seemed to comprise first, glaring at one another, second, pushing and pulling at one another in a mad semblance of wrestling, and finally, trying each to devour the other. I wondered in passing why neither the Red nor the Black Lectroids made use of spittle-spiders in the battle. I later learned that Black Lectroids do not possess the ability to spit out the venomous creatures and that, while I was entranced by the battle between Xan and B. Banzai, John Parker had fired his weapon, a gas cannon, the ammo to which clogged the Red Lectroids' esophageal passages and prevented their spewing forth their deadly projectiles.)

Peggy had, from somewhere, gotten a sword; she and three of Xan's advisors were giving a championship exhibition in fencing. Miraj had stripped down to halter and shorts and was fighting the remaining seven of Xan's advisors in four different karate techniques. Perfect Tommy, fire in his eyes, a smile on his face, and a quip on his lips, leaped onto the dais to stand by his lady. Single-handedly, he held off a team of ninjas intent on capturing Miraj.

Meanwhile, B. Banzai's strike team and the Blue Blaze Army Miraj and Perfect Tommy had led into Shayol were engaging the death-dwarves and Xan's zombies. I felt someone at my back and swung around, Uzi primed. Pecos, her blonde hair flaming about her and her blue-green eyes sparkling, blew me a quick kiss and a wink, then faced the oncoming enemy once more. I faced my own foe with confidence. Pecos would protect my back, as I would hers.

This battle was different than the Battle of Sabah. Somehow, either because of Xan's current preoccupation with B. Banzai or because Miraj had been doing some more tinkering, the death-dwarves and zombies and ninjas were not fighting with the same fury to the death. One by one, as we bested

them, they lay down their arms and weapons and knelt their surrender in the bloody courtyard.

Within twenty minutes Xan's and Whorfin's forces had been soundly defeated. Only Buckaroo and Xan, both sweating profusely, clothes torn to ribbons, bleeding from almost half-a-hundred identical cuts and gashes, still battled on.

Victors and vanquished, all who remained alive, both gathered around the dais. Weary though the two combatants were, it was obvious from the grim determination on both faces that they would battle here until Doomsday if need be.

It was Buckaroo who set in motion the final resolution. He disengaged his sword from Xan's and stepped back several paces. He sheathed his knife. Holding his sword at ready in his left hand, he held out his now-empty right hand. "Come with us, Honored Ancestor. We can help you, can let you be all you can be."

Xan stopped battling and stared at B. Banzai. "You are mad," he snarled.

"Mad?" his great-grandson asked. He gestured slightly and immediately Peggy was at his side. "Am I mad to love?" He glanced around. "Does this look like madness to you, Great-grandfather?"

I looked around the great courtyard and grinned as the impact of B. Banzai's words struck me. Buckaroo and Peggy, Miraj and Perfect Tommy, New Jersey and Sweet Sassy Sioux, me--Reno Nevada--and Pecos. No matter where the eye lit, there were Blazes and Cavaliers who had fought as partners, as a team. In my joy I laughed aloud, and Buckaroo, seeing I understood, laughed too. "You cannot win, Xan," I shouted. "Look at us. No matter what you have done to us, we love. You lost your son to love, Xan, and his son, and his. Now you've lost your daughter, the tool you've honed so carefully for revenge.

You can never win, Xan--unless you, too, can surrender to love."

Xan screamed inchoately and dove forward, straight at Buckaroo Banzai. Buckaroo raised his sword defensively, and it appeared impossible for Xan to turn aside in time to avoid impaling himself.

"No!" shouted Miraj. At her feet lay seven stunned opponents; by her side was Perfect Tommy. She pulled a blood-red pellet from a pouch at her waist and tossed it between Xan and B. Banzai. A flare, a puff of smoke, the sound of rushing wind. When all cleared, Xan had disappeared.

Miraj faced B. Banzai. "I am sorry, Buckaroo-sama. But he is my father. And perhaps, some day--"

B. Banzai stared at Miraj. Then he returned her bow and said gently, "I understand, Miraj-san." So inevitable did the granting of the honorific (which, by Japanese tradition, would not be granted to a woman) appear to be, that no one reacted to it, other than Miraj herself, who blinked and started to protest. Buckaroo overrode her to continue, "My doors are open to you always." Miraj nodded; taking another pellet from her pouch, she left as swiftly as had her father. Her voice carried back to us on the wind. "Good-bye."

Solemnly, then, both saddened and exhilarated, we set about freeing Shayol and the United States of America. I could not help wondering what Hazeldine M'Keigh of the Weekly Interrogator would be writing about these events in just a few days.

Epilogue: The Gift of Love

A month had passed since Shayol, and in that time we had received no word from Miraj. There were some hints and rumors that Xan had surfaced in

Limehouse and was organizing London's underworld, but no one could prove anything.

Tommy had adjusted well. He was sure it was only a matter of time before Miraj returned to him, and he was willing to wait.

We were walking across the campus one night when Perfect Tommy stopped short and sniffed the air.

"Tommy?"

"Miraj!"

I grabbed his arm. "What do you mean?"

"It's her perfume," Tommy responded, dragging me toward the crypt in the basement of the Institute's all-denominational chapel. He pushed open the door. A rush of chill air hit our faces. "Miraj?" Tommy called.

"I'm here," a voice called gently from the shadows. We entered the crypt. Miraj was standing next to Rawhide's coffin. For some reason, she had opened it and was staring down at him. I followed her gaze, half-dreading what I might see. Though the crypt was kept cold, enough time had passed that our brother might have begun to decompose. But he didn't look dead, only sleeping.

"I can't stay, Tommy. My father-- I must return to him."

"He'll kill you."

She smiled gently. "My father knows that I love you, and you love me. He will not kill me. What punishment is in that?" Reaching out, she gently caressed Rawhide's face. "I wish I could have known him. You all think so very highly of him." Then she looked up again. "I cannot stay. And though I want more than my life to promise to return, I cannot. I do not know if I will ever be free to join you." She came toward us. Gently, she kissed me

on the cheek, pressed a golden coin into my hand. "You will know when to use this, Reno," she whispered. Then she turned to Perfect Tommy. Hands on each side of his face, she gazed into his eyes. "What is it the poet said? 'I could not love you half so much, loved I not honor more'? I love you more than life, Tommy, but not more than my honor." She kissed him then, a gentle farewell kiss. Backing away, she blew him another kiss. Then her expression lightened and she smiled

gaily. "By the way, Tommy, I've left you a farewell present. I hope you enjoy it!"

With that, she once again pulled her disappearing act. Tommy and I stared at one another. Before either of us could say anything, however, there was a sound behind us in the crypt, the sound of someone sitting up. "Hey guys," said a hauntingly familiar voice, "what in Hades am I doing here?"

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