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Corky found himself waist deep in murky swamp water. Surrounding him was a tangled jungle, stretching as far as the eye could see in all directions. A steamy fog carried the stench of marsh gas, and everywhere were the battered and moss-covered remnants of civilization. Here a bombed-out city bus, sunken in the swamp, now carried water moccasins as its only passengers; there, the blasted corner of a once mighty glass skyscraper ripped through the ceiling of willow branches and housed only nervous little monkeys.

Corky discovered that he was scowling, and chewing the end of a cigar. He took the cigar out of his mouth and stopped scowling. He noticed his hand was painted camouflage, and moreover, whoever had applied it had done a sloppy job and smeared some of it on the cuff of his nice Thunderwood pledge sweater. He had a belt on, too, with pouches and things and all kinds of weapon accessories in little compartments. He had on some big machine gun, probably the kind that's supposed to be mounted on a tank, but really cool guys would carry it themselves to look tough. Probably, if you had some little lightweight machine gun, and were handy with it, you could whip it around and mess up the tough guy who was still trying to swing his huge tank gun into position; but the tough guy had the dignity and respect commanded by Looking Tough. As did Corky, now.

Hewlett had the top three inches of his head sticking out of the swamp, and the only thing on him that wasn't green were his eyes, and they were looking around back and forth. Finally he raised his head the rest of the way up and breathed.

"Did that look cool?" asked Hewlett. "I've seen guys do that in movies. It sure looks cool."

Hewlett was shirtless, except for a flak jacket and his tie, so his ribs were showing, and he looked like a kid trying on his dad's army stuff. Noticing this, he suddenly realized that he did not look cool, and certainly could not compete with Corky's Looking Tough, and so said:

"Hey."

"What?"

"How come you get that big gigantic thing, and all I get is this?" Hewlett brandished a small machete.

A voice shouted:

"Shut up!"

Corky and Hewlett turned, and saw the top half of a swamp bush standing up. It wasn't really a whole bush, just part of a bush that some big muscly guy had turned into a hat. Here and there were other guys, one floating like a log, another up in a tree, another disguised as a piece of junk; and all were taking cover.

"What?" yelled Hewlett.

"Take cover, and shut up."

Corky and Hewlett slogged over to a big willow and crouched in a shadowy part of its trunk that was all hollow.

"Who does that guy think he is?" said Hewlett. "Giving me orders. I ought to go teach him a lesson."

“Never mind who he *thinks* he is,” said Corky, “who *is* he? And what are we doing in this place?” Corky paused a moment to reflect on the smoothness of that segue. He said it again, under his breath, and savored the sweet taste it left on his tongue.

“Check your digital watch,” said Hewlett.

“The time is 16:30.”

“Number one,” said Hewlett, “I don’t care if you have the cool tank gun, only guys in the chess club, or the audio club, or who play Dungeons & Dragons, use military time; and I won’t be smeared by hearing it given to me, thereby implying that I would expect or condone an answer in military time. Number two, I wanted to know what year it is.”

“But we seem to be in a military situation, and I only wanted to fit in. We want these fellows to like us.”

“The year!”

Corky pressed a couple of beeping buttons.

“2122.”

“Twenty one twenty two...” repeated Hewlett, because he didn't know what else to say.

“And we’re in the Eastern Standard time zone.”

Hewlett slapped Corky upside the head for giving him Digital Watch Guy information. Corky decided that since everything he said seemed to be not nice to Hewlett, he would say nothing at all. Like his mother had taught him. Actually, instead of such useful lessons, Corky’s mother would usually just slap him upside the head for most any reason.

“Take cover,” shouted the big guy with the bush on his head.

Corky and Hewlett looked at each other: take cover from what? The jungle seemed peaceful enough...

And then, faint strains of music drifted through the swamp. But what kind of music? It was still too dim to tell.

“What is that?” asked Hewlett. “It sounds like...”

But he was cut short by the flash of an explosion only a few hundred yards away. Some men shouted in the distance.

“Maybe we should get out of here,” said Corky.

“No you don’t. The machine brought us here for some reason. We’re staying until we find that brunette.”

The music was clearer now. A happy bass line could be discerned, and the faint boom-chuck of rhythm guitar...

The flash of another blast, more shouting, and an unearthly bright red glow came round the corner of a grove only fifty yards away.

“I know that song,” said Hewlett. “It’s—”

Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head burst forth triumphantly, the lead played by a psychedelic mandolin, and accompanied by free-thinking guitars. Simultaneously, a brilliant red orb of light floated into view, with a grinning smiley face painted on it, followed by a yellow one, and then a blue...

“It’s the Happy Smileys!” screamed one of the soldiers, who splashed through the swamp in full retreat. Sparkling dust scattered from the Happy Smileys, and everywhere it landed, a flower grew.

A devastating shock from a concussion grenade knocked Corky and Hewlett back. The man with the bush on his head pulled the pin from another and hurled it into the path of the Happy Smileys, and a second later, the water burst skyward with a tremendous crack, and the blue Smiley was atomized.

A cheer rose, and machine gun fire opened up. The remaining Happy Smileys drifted on, meandering aimlessly through the men, scattering love and happiness, and rainbows and tie-dyed patterns; grenades were fired, a mighty willow

was hit, and exploded in a billow of flame, and several soldiers hurtled out of it on fire.

Corky seemed to automatically know which thing to pull back on his tank gun, which he did, and jumped out from behind their tree. A Happy Smiley was straight ahead; with a shout, which made his voice crack in the middle and sound all embarrassing, he fired the mighty gun. The big thing clattered and rang, and tree limbs got chopped off all over the place, and guys dived for cover, and the big guy with the bush on his head was trapped between the two Happy Smileys, and was shielding himself from the impending sparkly dust; Corky's stream of bullets ripped the surface of the water all around the guy, chewed up the trunk of a tree and cut through the red Smiley. The Happy Smiley popped, and sounded like a champagne cork, and little tatters of it dribbled down into the water.

The yellow Happy Smiley wavered for a moment, then reversed course and went happily drifting back the way it had come. All the surviving soldiers jumped out from hiding and gave chase. Bullets flew all around the Happy Smiley; explosions flashed everywhere, but it drifted away faster and faster, and soon only the faint music could be heard, and it was right at Corky's favorite part of the song, too; but now it was gone, and peace was restored to the swamp.

The men cheered again. The big guy with the bush on his head slogged over to Corky and Hewlett, took off his bush and grinned. He was shaved all bald, and had noserings and things, and half of his head was tattooed like the red side of a lightning bolt, and the other half was blue, just like the Grateful Dead skull. Hewlett figured the guy was probably a loser, because the only people who would hang out with someone like him were those whom Hewlett deemed losers: people who had long hair, or beards, or Volkswagen buses, or motorcycles, or who converted their bodies into Jerry Garcia shrines. Hewlett reflected that with his machete, he could probably take Jerry.

“Nice work, soldier,” said the Grateful Dead guy to Corky. Corky seemed to know that this was Sergeant Brom Thorn, and that he could kick your ass. Guys like Brom Thorn never actually kick anyone’s ass, but they threaten to all the time, and probably ride the razor’s edge of threatening everyone just enough to make them scared, but never enough to make them actually try your threat on for size. Now here was something about Brom Thorn that Hewlett could identify with, but of course could never admit it, because as he thought before, with his machete, he could probably take Jerry Garcia. Unless Jerry had a machete too, or a pocket knife, or...anything; in which case Hewlett would eye Jerry threateningly, and touch his machete against his cheek, as if pretending to shave with it; and if Jerry took him up on his threat, Hewlett could always run around behind Corky and make him use his tank gun.

Clearly, Hewlett concluded, weakness was not to be shown to Brom Thorn.

Brom Thorn bit the end off a cigar and jammed it in Corky’s mouth. Hewlett sloshed forward and was about to tell Brom that he could take Jerry Garcia with his machete, when Brom stepped around in front of Corky to light the cigar. Brom would not typically notice someone like Hewlett, and that held true now. Before Hewlett could open his mouth, Brom had stepped on him and crunched him underwater.

“Thank you,” said Corky, as the end of the cigar glowed red.

“That was a hell of a shot, fatso. There’s an extra shot of turpentine for you tonight.”

Eyes fixed on the speck of flame on the cigar, Corky began to tremble. Hopefully it would go out before he had to breathe.

“What’s the matter? Draw. Don’t want to waste a two ammo case cigar.” Brom dipped a hand in the swamp water and splashed a gallon or two liberally on

Corky's stomach. The sudden chill forced Corky to suck in a huge breath. He coughed immediately on the smoke, firing the cigar into Brom's nostril.

For part of a minute, Brom stood in great shock, studying his new nasal appendage. Then he began to rumble.

Corky prepared for death.

Brom Thorn erupted with volumes of belly laugh. He clapped a hand on Corky's back and wandered away, the cigar still stuck in his nostril, chortling about how "a good laugh adds years to your life."

"Move it out," roared Brom Thorn, and the surviving soldiers fell into line.

Corky and Hewlett looked around for something to "move out," but nothing was apparent. "What does he mean?" asked Corky.

"You're the one with the military time; don't you know?"

Corky pushed another beeping button or two on his watch. Hewlett slapped it down.

"Let's just follow those guys, and do what they do."

This plan was agreeable, and so they started off. The platoon trudged through the swamp for several hours, and everywhere loomed the same remnants of whatever ancient city left its bones here. They came to a cracked and overgrown elevated turnpike, and the platoon was able to climb onto solid dry ground for the first time.

"This looks like the midtown onramp for the 74 turnpike," said Corky. "I wonder what could have happened."

"The 74 turnpike never had Happy Smileys floating down the carpool lane."

"What are the Happy Smileys?"

"They're technical, Corky. I'll explain them to you later."

Corky had some crazy uncle named Jim who always used to say he'd "explain later." Jim was the family's "weird old uncle," who didn't seem to be related to

anyone directly, but was someone's brother-in-law, and never got married, and never had a job, or lived anywhere, or owned his own clothes. Corky's mattress was about nine generations old, and whenever Corky was bad, his mom told him that it was the mattress that "Uncle Jim had died on." Anyway, Uncle Jim would always stick a hose in Corky's mouth, and tell him to hold it there, and if Corky asked why, Uncle Jim said he'd "explain later." Then he ran and turned the water on full blast and changed Corky into a blowfish. Or once, Uncle Jim told Corky to climb a big elm tree and hold it steady while he chopped it down, and he would "explain why later." Corky did as he was told, but the police came and gave Uncle Jim a white sweatshirt, so Corky never got to find out why his uncle wanted the tree chopped down.

"What's the matter with him?" asked Brom Thorn. The platoon was gathered around Corky, who was drooling.

"He's having a childhood memory," explained Hewlett. "He'll snap out of it in a minute, and apologize."

"Poor little fatso," said Brom Thorn. "I had a childhood memory once. I used to get mistreated by the family's crazy uncle."

"You had a crazy uncle too?" asked Hewlett. "I thought I was the only one."

Several members of the platoon said that their families also had crazy uncles.

"Did they have something weird they did with their bodies, like having a fake leg, or a glass eye, or being double jointed, or unusually flatulent?"

Most did.

Brom Thorn wiped a tear away. "When I was five, my crazy uncle told me that the Grateful Dead tattoo on my face made me different from the other kids."

The pathos of Brom's story struck at Hewlett's heartstrings. He felt a knot in his throat. "My crazy uncle always told me to open my mouth for a piece of candy, but instead he spit tobacco in."

Most of the soldiers were sobbing out loud now. Sorrowful strains of old Streisand songs added depth to a mutually therapeutic outpouring of emotion.

Brom Thorn shook his tattooed head, slapped his forehead and rubbed his eyes. He looked around suspiciously. Then he grabbed the nearest guy and hissed:

“Soldier, are you in touch with your feelings?”

The soldier, crying wholeheartedly, nodded through the tears and wailing.

“I thought so,” roared Brom, and out came his machine gun. He racked it and put it to his shoulder.

“Violence?” cried Hewlett. “That never solves anything, friend.”

Brom shoved him aside and squeezed the trigger. The gun rang, spitting empties everywhere. As one, the platoon begged Brom to put down his torch of burning and take up a hammer for building.

POP!—and shreds of a Happy Smiley came drifting down from the sky. Brom dropped his empty clip and pounded in a fresh one.

“Got the yellow one,” said Brom Thorn.

The soldiers shook their heads, wondered where they were, and looked around. Corky came back to the world of the living, and before he could apologize, Brom laid a hand on his shoulder and said softly:

“We almost lost you there, buddy.”

Hewlett felt like retching. He now knew for certain that he could take Jerry Garcia with his machete.

Brom yelled “Move it out” again and everyone shouldered their equipment and continued along the turnpike. Corky and Hewlett, again unable to detect what they were expected to move out, exchanged a knowing wink and slyly followed what everyone else was doing. They trudged along for an hour or more, with a good view of the wrecked skyline. Many of the skyscrapers were at least mostly intact, but completely overgrown. The ceilings had collapsed in the low industrial buildings,

filled now with willows and swamp water. New World monkeys howled in the distance, and as the sun got lower, the horizon turned an unearthly green.

Finally the platoon climbed down some vines onto dry ground. Beneath the turnpike, campfires crackled and more soldiers milled about. Huge supply crates were stacked, mechanics worked on swamp buggies and air boats, mess lines were in operation, and a makeshift radio tower beeped with Morse code.

"Morse code," said Corky. "I recognize it from Cub Scouts."

"That means these guys are about a thousand years behind the rest of the civilized world. I bet they all have 8-track tape decks."

"Perhaps the Morse Code radio tower is just there for ambiance. It does lend a sense of wearisome futility to the camp."

Brom Thorn clapped a hand on Corky's back. "You gents catch some grub; fall-in's at four thirty." And away he went.

"Grub?" said Hewlett.

"Fall-in?" said Corky.

No explanation was apparent, so the subject was dropped.

A roar of cheers erupted from the far end of camp. Corky and Hewlett wandered toward it. Big gruff guys were in the way, and roughly ignored the boys as they shouldered past. Hewlett noticed that the bigger and gruffer the guy, the more deliberately he did not relax his shoulder as he brushed by. If the guy was *really* big and gruff, he would apparently tense his shoulder muscles to impart a good solid blow to Hewlett, and then purposely act like he didn't notice. Hewlett assumed a brusque facial expression, but it had little effect. Hewlett noticed that Corky seemed to be getting bumped quite a bit less than he was.

"Hey Corky," said Hewlett, "that big gun must be getting pretty heavy by now."

"It sure is."

“Perhaps you’d allow me to carry it for you.”

“Oh, thank you, Hewlett.”

Corky undid some straps and clips and things, and transferred the heavy artillery piece to Hewlett. Hewlett’s eyes flamed joyfully. He gripped the weapon comfortably, and scowled. They started off toward the cheering again.

Immediately, Corky was hit by several gruff shoulders. One guy even took a couple sidesteps toward Corky to be sure he struck him, keeping his eyes looking straight ahead where he was going, of course. Corky felt bad that he seemed to be getting in everyone’s way, but at least those he bumped into were all polite enough not to say anything.

A vast ball of flame billowed into the sky, followed by a loud thump. A guy went somersaulting through the air, and everyone cheered some more. Corky and Hewlett arrived at the back of a dense crowd of soldiers, but couldn’t see what was going on. Hewlett snarled, and forced his way in a body or two, and everyone saw his gun and so let him on through. “Oh,” Hewlett figured they were saying, “he has that big gun. He’s probably a pretty tough guy. He’s all right, let him through. He’s one of us.”

Actually they had a better reason for letting him through, but Hewlett didn’t know that yet.

Corky had less luck. He stood on his tiptoes, first behind one guy, then behind another, but could see nothing at all. He remembered a trick he learned in grammar school. He hoched up a bunch of gross stuff in the back of his throat, then sneezed it all into his hands. Then he drew his hands a couple inches out from his face so that strings were hanging down.

“Excuse me,” said Corky, and immediately received an avenue like the Red Sea. Corky strolled directly to a front row seat without hindrance.

It was a dirt clearing, well lighted, scattered with dismembered portions of bodies. In the middle was some martial arts Kung Fu guy with no shirt on, going through some little routine, like he had bees in his big floppy Kung Fu pants. He finished his little routine by picking up a weapon that was like a bunch of sticks tied together with little chains. He flung it around his body like a juggler, then launched up into the air, flipped around a bunch and landed with a shout.

Corky applauded and shouted "Here here!" but stopped clapping when he saw the mess that was all over his hands now. The guys around him stared, moved away a bit, and were all quiet. Corky sheepishly took out his handkerchief.

"Oh, gross!" said someone.

"What?" asked Corky.

"This guy has a *handkerchief*."

All the gruff soldiers went "Eeewww" and squeezed even further away from Corky.

The Kung Fu guy picked up a gallon canister of turpentine, drank the last few gulps...or rather, some of them; the rest ran down his chin...crushed the canister in his fist and tossed it aside. Then he strode around arrogantly, motioning for anyone to come out and be next.

Corky raised his hand to volunteer, but as had been his lot in life since childhood, someone else always got picked.

The guy standing in front of Hewlett had several teeth, but even more hand grenades. He took two in each hand, like a tennis player holding extra balls, and advanced into the clearing.

The crowd cheered, and the Kung Fu guy whirled to face him.

The Kung Fu guy started some low pitched growl as he took a special grip on his chained stick thing, and started to swing it around; his growl got higher and louder, developing into a whine; and the chained stick thing swung in faster and

bigger circles round his head. The grenade guy pulled a pin with his teeth, let the handle pop out, and he and the Kung Fu guy slowly circled each other, neither daring to get any closer to the other. Suddenly the grenade guy tossed his weapon; the Kung Fu guy batted it aside with his chained stick thing, and the live grenade went out over left field and burst in the crowd, hurling silhouetted bodies through the air like rag dolls.

A mighty cheer went up.

The grenade guy did some little somersault past the Kung Fu guy, as if it would throw him off, which it never does, although guys on TV seem to do it all the time. Another pin was pulled, although this time another one of his remaining teeth stayed with the pin. He took only the slightest pause to wince sadly, but that pause was enough. The chained stick thing smacked him smartly atop the head, the world spun, and the grenade guy's face thumped into the ground.

The screams from the crowd were deafening. The Kung Fu guy swung his stick thing crazily, lost in the hysterics of the moment. It was at this point that numerous muscular arms shoved Hewlett into the ring.

The Kung Fu guy's eyes flashed red and he charged Hewlett madly, even before Hewlett fully realized where he was. Hewlett turned a full circle, and everywhere he looked, he saw buff soldier guys swinging their fists in the air, going "Woo woo woo" like orangutans.

Corky's eyes were the only part of his face visible behind the handkerchief, and they got really wide when he saw Hewlett out in the ring.

The Kung Fu guy leaped, like a springing leopard, and Hewlett observed that the target appeared to be himself. Instinct made Hewlett start to turn and run and cry, but he mastered it instantly, and fumbled for the big gun's trigger. Out of the corner of his eye, a human form on the turnpike above peeked out from behind a jeep, and there was a muzzle flash. Just as Hewlett found his trigger, the Kung Fu

guy burst apart in mid-air, and Hewlett stepped aside to let the remainders land in a heap where he had been standing.

“Far out,” said Hewlett.

Hats and turpentine cans were thrown into the air; the cheer was loud and heartfelt. Hewlett was a hero. He grinned with just the corner of his mouth, because he didn't want to look like this was any big deal to him. Hewlett wanted people to think that this was all in a day's work to him, and boring and ordinary. He just hoped nobody else had seen the person up on the turnpike.

He did what he imagined was the Michael Jackson moonwalk, but it looked really stupid because he had no idea how to do it, but these guys didn't know any better so they cheered even louder. Hewlett swung the big gun toward a fuel dump, cut loose a couple rounds, and a vast explosion sent huge volumes of kerosene flames billowing into the air.

The soldiers had never seen such a show. Playboy bunnies could not have compared with it.

Hewlett sent a line of bullets popping into the ground in front of the crowd. They dove for cover, and the debris rained on them like glory.

Some of those jeeps on the turnpike above seemed like good subjects for entertainment, so Hewlett tossed a barrage their way. One of them exploded really cool, but the other, even better, burst into flames and toppled off the turnpike into the crowd, and then exploded. Once again, guys flew through the air on fire. Their joy was complete.

But then, inexplicably, the cheering, shouting, gunfire, and turpentine chugging stopped. It was so quiet, you could hear the last empty shells drop.

Hewlett looked around. The crowd was silent; only the breeze carried away the smoke.

Corky wondered what was up. The soldier closest to him wore an expression of dreaded respect, as one facing the devil himself. An expression that told of years of horrors, but nothing that could compare to this. An expression that was so clear in its meaning, Corky could tell what the guy ate for breakfast three Tuesdays ago, and what he named his dog when he was six.

“Western omelet,” mumbled Corky incoherently, “and...I believe...Topsy.”

“Huh?” asked the guy.

“What’s going on?” said Corky.

“It’s...I hesitate to speak the name...the Supreme Warrior.”

Hewlett looked around the clearing, but saw no one. Then he spotted the Warrior. Up on the turnpike, black against the roaring flame of the first jeep, stood a form. The Supreme Warrior stood motionless, hands on his hips, and waited to make sure he had everyone’s attention (because some of the men were still giggling and passing notes in the rear of the crowd, and hadn’t noticed him yet).

Hewlett was not afraid. A guy who stood that way was just like Brom Thorn; everyone thought he was tough, but he’d probably had never had to prove it. And this time, Hewlett had Corky’s big gun.

The Supreme Warrior jumped all the way to the ground, a good twenty five or thirty feet, and landed solidly without putting a hand down.

“That theory’s out,” said Hewlett. “He *can* kick my ass.” Hewlett hunted for a switch on the gun that might ensure it was ready to fire, but he had no clue. He checked his stance. All set. Partially set. As set as he was going to be. It was Corky’s gun; why wasn’t Corky doing this?

The Supreme Warrior started toward Hewlett, taking patient, measured steps. He was no more than average size, and being unable to look the part of Supreme Warrior based on vastness and musculature, he had sought other avenues. His solution included, mainly, a helmet, not unlike what you might find on a medieval

knight, except futuristic. It was pretty cool, and had some nifty eye slit to look through, and was probably all full of electronics and stuff. He also wore a full suit of blue and gray camouflage, and had every kind of pocket and pouch, and knee pads and elbow pads, and about fifty little zippers, and a digital display that probably meant something. There were little lights all over the Supreme Warrior, indicating that he was at Full Power, or maybe indicating that his air conditioning was turned on, or perhaps that he was a theater usher. Whatever the lights meant, the Supreme Warrior stopped ten feet from Hewlett.

Hewlett narrowed his eyes and nodded. He thought this made him look In Charge. And looking In Charge, Hewlett had learned, was often more valuable than actually being In Charge.

"I bet you have a digital watch," said Hewlett. "I know your type."

The Supreme Warrior was motionless. A couple lights blinked on and off, like a Christmas tree, but that was all.

"Maybe you'd like to wrestle this gun away from me," offered Hewlett, and snickered when the Supreme Warrior made no response.

Hewlett felt more In Charge now than ever. He laughed, sort of, like a single little "Ha," which he intended to indicate that the Supreme Warrior was lamer than he'd thought.

"Or maybe," said Hewlett, and took a step or two forward, "I should put a big hole right through your middle. Right next to your digital display."

"That's a Westinghouse..." came the Supreme Warrior's husky, electronically synthesized voice.

"What?"

"...And you've had your fifteen hundred."

Something in the Supreme Warrior's tone told Hewlett that he might no longer be In Charge. He became aware of a low, rhythmic chant beginning from the crowd.

Corky was as caught up in the moment as anyone; more so in fact, because he was so gullible and naïve. He was chanting too, and it went a little like this:

*Smash him, trash him
Eat him up for lunch,
Bash and thrash him
It thrills us all a bunch.*

The Supreme Warrior took a step toward Hewlett. Hewlett narrowed his eyes and nodded again, but it was a mere ruse; he had no real hope of being In Charge again. He put his finger on the trigger.

The Supreme Warrior took another step. The chant grew in intensity...

A bead of sweat rolled down to the tip of Hewlett's nose, and hung there, and tickled, and was the last thing Hewlett wanted to deal with, because to scrunch up his face and make it drip off, would be to lose his In Charge expression. So he put up with the tickle.

Corky jumped up and down, with the rest of the crowd, who shook their fists, and drank their turpentine, and fired their guns in the air, beat on each other and shouted:

*Smash him, trash him
Eat him up for lunch,
Bash and thrash him
It thrills us all a bunch.*

Hewlett looked at the Supreme Warrior, at Corky, at the crowd, at his Westinghouse tank gun, at his spastic and sweaty trigger finger, and back at the Supreme Warrior, who lifted his foot to take another step. Hewlett pulled the trigger.

Bink!

The Supreme Warrior slapped a hand on the tank gun and yanked it from Hewlett's body, straps and all. He took a fresh clip out of one of his many pouches and pockets, slammed it into the gun, turned it on Hewlett and shouted:

"Bang!"

The world went dark, and Hewlett knew nothing more.

The men around Corky went wild, and most of them charged the Supreme Warrior. The first were cut down with the gun, others got closer and the Supreme Warrior beat them over the head with it, or jumped in the air and flipped upside down and knocked their heads together, or spun around and kicked them, or whirled and tossed one guy into several others. Corky ran out there with everyone else, occasionally ducking to avoid the odd hurled body. He found Hewlett in the center of the melee, passed out on the ground. Corky hefted him onto his shoulder and jogged out of the ring. When Corky jogged, the most of his stomach bounced up and down twice as much as the rest of him, and made an entertaining spectacle.

Now Brom Thorn strode into the picture. He grabbed the first couple of guys and tossed them aside, and shouted until everyone could hear him, and made everyone knock it off and hit the sack. He yelled at the Supreme Warrior for making such a big mess, and detailed a couple guys to clean everything up. Then, as everyone dispersed, Brom picked up a turpentine canister, shook it, gulped down the last quart or so, crushed it in his hand like a Real Man and tossed it over his shoulder.

Corky laid Hewlett down behind some supply sheds and fanned him with his handkerchief.

"Oh," said Hewlett, his eyes still shut, "what's that smell?"

Corky looked at his handkerchief, and discarded it into an empty fuel drum.

"Corky," said Hewlett, "did I win? Did I kick his ass?"

"Yes. You were amazing."

Hewlett stood and checked his body for damage. "I seem to have come through it all right. Corky, I think it's time you dug up some dinner and a place to sleep for your champion."

"I was going to sleep in the jungle," said Corky. "There's a comfortable tuft of ferns just over there, with a spring of fresh water, and even a rock for privacy. You're welcome to join me."

Hewlett assumed a pained expression, the way jerks do when they're trying to make you feel bad for being wrong. He slowly shook his head in despair, and appealed heavenward. "Corky," he began at last, "these people do not seek out comfort, privacy, fresh water, perfumed bath soaps. They will not respect you if you gingerly puff baby powder on your face each morning."

Corky was going to interrupt and mention the place that anatomy *required* him to gingerly puff baby powder, but held his tongue.

"We must demonstrate that we shun comforts," Hewlett continued. "That we reject convenience, hygiene, sanitation. That we will not simply lay ourselves down anywhere to sleep, when rest can be had at great difficulty, and in maximum discomfort."

"Oh," said Corky, and questioned whether he'd had things mixed up his whole life.

"Take this Quonset hut," said Hewlett. "Rude, ugly, doubtless hot inside, full of fungi and spiders and spray painted graffiti. A man would sleep here."

Hewlett banged loudly on the metal door.

"Eat that hand, buddy, or I will," roared a husky voice from inside, that vibrated Corky's stomach.

Hewlett cleared his throat, then assumed his most manly voice: "Sorry, I was looking for the *men's* room."

Corky turned and ran, but Hewlett held him by his collar so he didn't go anywhere.

The metal door slammed open, and there stood a pile of muscle and camouflage paint, with sweaty hair all over the place, and things like hand grenades and ammunition belts draped everywhere. A bristly brow rose, and tiny little shiny eyes looked down on Hewlett.

"A comedian," observed the pile of muscle.

"A sucker, who's sleeping outside tonight," observed Hewlett.

"Those ferns look inviting," observed Corky.

The pile of muscle extended a bulging appendage, probably an arm, and gripped Hewlett, and compressed him so that he swelled out between the muscly fingers, and picked him up, and turned him side to side to examine him.

"This yours?" asked the pile of muscle.

"Yes," said Corky. "Thank you for collecting it for me."

The Pile turned Hewlett upside down, to see if anything spilled out, but nothing did. Then he tapped Hewlett's head against a rock a few times, to see if anything would happen, but nothing did.

"He seems languid and oscitant," rumbled the Pile.

"Yes," said Corky, because he didn't know what either of those words meant, but nevertheless wished to leave a favorable impression upon the Pile, and so thought it well to laugh pleasantly at his jokes.

The Pile found the way Corky's belly jumped up and down as he chortled to be intriguing, so he extended another appendage and compressed Corky as well. Corky was a significantly larger handful, but the Pile picked him up anyway and compared the two together. He tapped them against each other to see what would happen, but nothing did.

Suddenly a chain fell around the upper end of the Pile, and wrapped around the musculature that would correspond to a neck, and the Pile looked up wonderingly to see if it was raining. Then the chain was given a mighty tug, and the Pile crash landed on its back.

The Supreme Warrior climbed out of a pickup truck, detached the chain from the back bumper, and coiled it up as he walked over to the prone Pile. The Pile just lay there, wondering why the jungle looked so much like the sky.

“Open your hands, Fasolt,” said the Supreme Warrior.

The Pile did so. Corky and Hewlett gasped mightily, as each sucked in their first breath in minutes, and crawled away from the Pile on shaky hands.

“Real...men,” stammered Hewlett, in between five gallon breaths, “don’t need to be...rescued.”

“What’s the matter with your voice? Is there something wrong with you?” asked the Supreme Warrior.

“Real...men...talk...this way.”

“I see.” The Supreme Warrior tossed his coil of chain into the back of the pickup, then gave the Pile a kick. “Get out of here, Fasolt. Go back to sleep.”

The shiny little eyes opened wide, then the heavy black brow dipped low and sad. A big scruffy jaw full of yellow teeth and manly bad breath-causing plaque and bacteria stuck out, the Pile stood itself up, and moped into its hut. It turned back once, its eye sparkling with moisture...a tear?

The Supreme Warrior kicked the door shut.

Corky and Hewlett had recovered enough to shakily try to stand. The Supreme Warrior watched them, arms akimbo, as they re-enacted Bambi. Hewlett was able to quiver freely, but Corky, with the extra mass around his midriff, had a shock absorber effect and wasn’t able to look as retarded.

Hewlett narrowed his eyes and stared at the Supreme Warrior. He stood there impressively, arms folded, numerous weapons neatly sheathed for the night, his face hidden behind the enigmatic helmet. Hewlett figured he must be ugly, or maybe had a cleft palate, or had a big birthmark all over his face that looked like Florida, or some big infectious zit right in the middle of his forehead. Or probably he was just a dork, and thought it would impress gullible people to wear a stupid looking helmet. Hewlett tested the theory by looking at Corky: Corky was as impressed as Hewlett had ever seen him; indeed, he even had a thing of drool hanging down. The matter was settled. The Supreme Warrior was just some dork who wore a helmet to impress gullible people. Well, Hewlett wouldn't be one of them.

"You gonna say something," asked Hewlett, "or do I need to teach you another lesson?"

"There are bunkhouses at the south end of camp," said the Supreme Warrior's burly electronic voice, conspicuously ignoring Hewlett's remark. Hewlett realized it, too, and reflected how it's like in movies, where some tough guy says something tough, and then another guy, who's maybe not so tough, tries to act even tougher; but can't think of anything tougher to say, and so ignores the first guy's tough thing, which is the same as saying it was too insignificant to warrant a response.

Hewlett grinned wryly. He now knew that he was tougher than the Supreme Warrior, already known to be a dork.

"We're expecting the Happy Smileys to mount another beautification at dawn tomorrow, so you'd better get some sleep."

"Real men don't sleep in bunkhouses."

"Then I'd invite you to try that tuft of ferns over there," said the Supreme Warrior. "The mutant alligators might be afraid of *real* men."

The Supreme Warrior tossed a couple fifty year old cans of dog food on the ground. "Here's some grub."

Corky and Hewlett looked at the cans hungrily.

The Supreme Warrior took off his helmet, and shook out a shock of short, fluffy blond hair.

He's a namby too, thought Hewlett when he saw the fluffy blond hair.

The fluffy hair fell into place and exposed a chiseled, steely-eyed face with sharp features and perfect teeth.

No, Hewlett realized, he's a *girl!*

"Wipe your friend's drool," she said with a normal girl voice, and snickered slightly as she looked Hewlett head to toe, then whirled and strode off into the night, knowing full well where four eyes were fixed. Then she stopped at the edge of the light, looked back just in time to catch the four eyes dart elsewhere, and said:

"Sweet dreams."