

- 5 -

Some hours later, a dark and mysterious form crept along through the camp. It peered around the corner, and what it saw sent chills down its spine.

Corky lay amidst the ferns, with his shirt up over his stomach, revealing about an acre of pasty whiteness. He snored like the Seven Dwarfs, all musical like, like someone pulling open an accordion on the inhale, and three people whistling in harmony a descending tone full of vibrato on the exhale, with extra percussion sounds thrown in to give it a snappy rhythm. Empty dog food cans were scattered on the ground around him.

Hewlett was nearby. He had tried to sleep sitting up against a tree, but his head had toppled to one side and his mouth was open so wide it looked like he had a detachable jaw. Some funky green snake was hanging down from the tree and was looking around inside Hewlett's mouth, but probably wasn't finding much that appealed to it. Another snake, of the larger Anaconda variety, had most of Hewlett's leg down its throat and was proceeding upward. Beside him, a mutant alligator was just tying on a bib and licking his chops, with his eyes going around in circles of ecstasy.

The mysterious form stepped into the light. It was the Supreme Warrior. She said:

"Scram!"

The Anaconda turned its eyes to look, furrowed its brow in frustration, and began disgorging Hewlett's leg. The little snake rolled up into the tree limbs, and the mutant alligator took off the bib with a grimace, crumpled it up and threw it down. He laid in the water, stuck his tongue out at her, and floated away.

The Supreme Warrior tiptoed over and reached for Corky's collar, but stopped herself and cautiously reached for his shirt. It grossed her out, but she grabbed it and pulled it down over his repulsive stomach, then quickly wiped her hand on her camouflage suit. She grabbed his collar and snatched his head up.

"Wake up!"

Corky's eyelids fluttered.

"Mom?"

She struck his head against the ground.

"Ouch."

"Wake up. Come here."

She dragged him bodily across the dirt, around a shed and slammed him against the corrugated steel wall. Corky woke up fully now, looked around, and smiled.

"My name's Corky."

"Who cares?"

Corky thought, but could not immediately answer. So instead he asked:

"What's your name?"

The Supreme Warrior was surprised to find herself a bit impressed by the calm and In Charge way that Corky ignored her remark, and proceeded unfazed to interrogate her instead. Nevertheless, she was not about to give the upper hand to this fatso, so she said:

"What's it to you?"

Corky was taken aback. He had never considered this before, and it posed an interesting problem. Just what was someone's name to someone else? The thing they call them by, obviously; but why would the Supreme Warrior ask him that? It seemed inexplicable, but he naturally supposed the Supreme Warrior to be far superior to himself in intellect, so he did his best to answer. To him, her name would be:

"Your name?"

Once again, her hard driven remark had failed to penetrate the defenses of this rock. The Supreme Warrior was definitely impressed now. She had made two deliberate snide remarks, and Corky had swatted both of them aside like flies, and had now, in fact, repeated his question to her with little or no more consternation than the first time. Clearly, Corky was not one to be trifled with.

"Cyndy," she said, defeated. "Spell it with an 'i' and I'll beat the crap out of you."

Corky was agreeable to the terms of her spelling. Perhaps, he thought, they could become friends. In fact, he began to realize that she was attractive.

"Now," she said, getting down to business, "getting down to business."

"My name's Corky," he said again, with a big smile that made you want to dump forty pounds of stomach contents all over the place.

"Yes it is," said Cyndy. "Now tell me, exactly who are you?"

"Corky."

She shook his collar roughly and threw him against the steel shed. A brick fell off the roof and struck him a glancing blow to the cranium.

"Ouch."

"Where did you two come from? I haven't seen you here before, and you've obviously never handled a gun before in your life."

"I'm a student. At Thunderwood College."

Cyndy began to boil. There were no such things as colleges, and she'd never heard of any place called Thunderwood. She threw him to the ground.

"You're lying."

"That's because you threw me down here."

"No, stupid," said Cyndy, and hauled him to his feet with one hand, "I mean there's no such place. Where is it?"

"Just on the other side of the turnpike, and several blocks through the jungle."

"So what are you doing here?"

Corky told her all about the brunette (which she ignored, and gestured by moving her hand around in a circle to get him to move on to something relevant), and the Professor's machine (which she did not believe, and resolved to beat Corky to a pulp), and about how the Poet had offered them—

"You follow the Poet?!"

"We made a deal with him."

"So," said Cyndy, and thrust a large handgun with all sorts of accessories in his face, "you guys are Poetite spies. Just as I thought."

Five minutes later, Corky and Hewlett found themselves being thrown on the floor of Brom Thorn's tent. Brom was just rolling out of bed, and rubbed his eyes, and looked around to see if it was 4am Manly Tai Chi time yet.

"Here they are," said Cyndy, "the two Poetite spies. And we wondered how the Happy Smileys have been so good at finding us lately."

Brom buttoned his shirt and stood looking down at the boys. He had a stern expression. Coupled with the Grateful Dead tattoo on his face, his countenance was formidable.

"Poetite spies," he repeated. Brom rubbed his shaved head and looked at the floor. He paced in a little circle, muttering in disappointment.

He and Cyndy were the only ones in there. Hewlett figured it was dumb of them not to call extra guards or anything; after all, he and Corky were Poetite spies, and might escape. It was also a little humiliating. It was like Brom was saying to him, "Ha, look at you, you wimpy little dipstick, you're so lame that I don't even need any guards." Hewlett would have much rather had the dignity of struggling fiercely against burly captors...as long as they didn't hit him or anything.

"Hewlett," whispered Corky, "we're not really Poetite spies, are we?"

"I don't know about me," Hewlett whispered back, "but *you* sure are. You stole that blue book and gave it to the Poet. Remember?"

"I repented of that."

"A lot Brom Thorn will care about your psycho-religious redemption. He's going to have you for breakfast."

Corky wondered if he would make a good fry.

Brom Thorn pulled a chain to turn on a sickly little light bulb that was about one watt. It was right behind his head, and he probably hung it there to make himself look impressively backlit when he gave speeches and lectures about guns and tough things to idiots. He said:

"More than a century ago, the world was a different place. There were more people, so the guns were spread around more. Not everyone carried two or three."

Cyndy was sickened by thought of wimpy, unarmed people. But she was raised to be a soldier, and so said nothing. Brom continued.

"It wasn't as comfortably warm, neither. So the oceans were sunk down into separate places, instead of swamped up all over, like now. They fought wars from control rooms, not the manly way we do it now. There was different kinds of shoes to wear, too; not just jungle boots. People was free, free to do what they wanted, go where they could go on roads that used to go everyplace. See movies if they wanted. Bust someone's head. Wear whatever shoes they chose."

Hewlett thought that if Brom lost the light bulb, or learned grammar, his speech would be entirely ineffectual.

"But the Poet came and changed all that," continued Brom Thorn. "He published a theory that proved nothing was really like it seemed, only *probably* that way. And he learned to make things like they probably *weren't*. The problem was, the Poet was poetic, you might say, and he thought everything should be...happy. Sweet. Sugar coated."

"Warm and fuzzy," added Cyndy.

"Poignant."

"Overwrought with compassion."

"Misty eyed."

"In touch."

"And now," said Brom Thorn, spreading his arms and stepping onto a footlocker, "the world is plagued by the Happy Smileys, spreading warmth and beauty everywhere, robbing us of our free will to be depressed and violent if we so choose."

Cyndy pulled some lever on a gun that made a frightening metallic sound, and thrust it into Corky's face. "And all because the Poetite spies keep the Poet's theories alive. We can destroy the Happy Smileys, but until the world is once again as it probably should be, they'll just keep coming."

Hewlett was relieved to see that Cyndy had chosen Corky to point the gun at. "You're right," said Hewlett, and sprang to Cyndy's side, "he's not one of us. Corky must be one of those spies."

"Give it up, wimp."

Hewlett gave it up wimpily, and rejoined Corky.

Cyndy kept them covered, and said:

"What should we do with them, Sergeant Thorn?"

Brom Thorn realized that nobody was paying attention to his impressive pose atop the footlocker, and so stepped down. He took up a shiny automatic and began polishing it.

It reminded Corky of the Poet polishing out his pipe bowl. Soldier guys who polished shiny guns never fired them, it seemed. They'd keep one gun to shoot with, and then one for display, which always got polished. If polishing was actually good for a gun, hadn't it best be saved for the one that was to be operational?

"You saved my butt from being beautified in the swamp today," said Brom Thorn to Corky. "Why would a Poetite spy do that?"

To Corky, it was like being asked if it was the first time he had been pregnant. It's the kind of question that bratty little snots will ask you, where no matter how you answer, everyone laughs at you. Only here, everyone would fire heavy assault weapons at him.

"Perhaps a Poetite spy," said Corky, wording his response as carefully as he could, "has no reason to hurt you. Perhaps a Poetite spy would—"

"Corky needed you alive so he could steal secrets from you later," broke in Hewlett. "Now give me clemency."

"Then you confess!"

"No," said Corky, alarmed.

"Yes!" said Hewlett. "Don't you see, Corky? He's trying to trick us into confessing. But if we confess first, then he'd be trying to trick us into *not* confessing."

Once again, Corky marveled at his friend's logic, which was entirely over the head of mere mortals.

"Kill them," Brom told Cyndy, and turned to climb into his bunk.

"What have you got in here?" asked Cyndy, and tried to pull the backpack away from Corky.

"Hold on there," said Hewlett. "That's none of your business."

“That so?” rumbled Brom Thorn, and reached out to take it himself.

Hewlett made a dive for the backpack. It slipped off of Corky and Hewlett landed in the dirt with it. Cyndy pulled out her big automatic (the one with all the accessories) and pulled the slide to chamber a round.

“Freeze!” she shouted.

Obediently, Hewlett froze. “I’m terribly sorry,” he laughed. “I don’t know what came over me. The backpack’s yours. Corky’s yours. Really; I’ll help you take both of them.”

Corky lay on the floor, looking up at Brom Thorn in astonishment. Corky made a funky face that neither Hewlett or Cyndy could interpret, so they looked at Brom to see what caused Corky’s expression.

Brom’s head was completely engulfed in a bright green Happy Smiley. Bolts of terror shot through Cyndy and the boys from the shocking apparition: Brom’s massive body, arms outstretched, torso pulsating, with a bright, happy green balloon head, with the sickening broad smile painted on.

Hewlett sprang to his feet and slapped the gun from Cyndy’s hand. They all fell on top of Corky.